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Adopting a Relational Pedagogy for Academic Library Internships

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This article discusses the benefits of relational pedagogy in academic library internships. Internships provide a unique opportunity for librarians to create a highly relational learning environment based on developing meaningful connections with students, as well as facilitating student-to-student and student-to-profession connections. These types of learning relationships enable a collaborative, highly personal approach to teaching and learning and impart a deeper sense of meaning to the internship experience. The authors share their experiences incorporating relational pedagogy and an ethic of care into their long-standing internship programs for undergraduate and graduate students at West Chester University.

Introduction

Internships are an excellent way to introduce students to the field of academic librarianship. Working one-on-one over the course of an entire semester, interns and their librarian mentors can pursue specialized learning plans that also meet the general learning outcomes within the student's major. As robust examples of high-impact educational practice, internships can also "deepen learning and bring one's values and beliefs into awareness" so that ultimately "students better understand themselves in relation to others and the larger world, and . . . acquire the intellectual tools and ethical grounding to act with confidence for the betterment of the human condition" (Kuh, 2008, p. 17). Despite these potential benefits, supervisors and students often find their experiences disappointing. Librarians with the best intentions often become distracted and disengaged, squandering a teaching opportunity for which they had high hopes. Students, meanwhile, frequently find a highly anticipated experience reduced to, and their individuality subsumed by, the rote tasks of an endless project (Kopp, 2019).

In our roles as Special Collections Librarian and Music Librarian at West Chester University, we have personally hosted more than 15 interns, including those earning credits in history, English, digital humanities, and music, as well as several also enrolled in our campus autism support program. We are well aware of the pitfalls that can turn a promising, and indeed promised, internship experience into a less than fulfilling one.

To offer a program more beneficial to our students, we practice a relational pedagogy that centers the kind of human relationships we have personally found integral to our own professional and scholarly growth. Our experience aligns with Gravett and Winstone (2020), who have shown that while students in higher education commonly value outcomes leading to lucrative employment, they also desire meaningful interpersonal relationships. We strive, therefore, to "model not only admirable patterns of intellectual activity but also desirable ways of interacting with people" (Noddings, 1988, p. 223). Through semester-long dialogue with our interns, we explore what and how we can learn from each other as well as what they can learn in relation with their peers and other professionals.

This article begins by introducing the principles of relational pedagogy. Next, we argue that academic library internships are particularly well-suited for such practice before introducing some unique features of our own internship program in the hope they are useful for other librarians who want to reinvigorate their internships, their interns, and themselves.

What Is Relational Pedagogy?

Arguments for the value of relationships in education have a long history. As Hinsdale (2016) points out, elements of relational pedagogy date to the ancient Greeks while its modern roots include Dewey's (1916) emphasis on cooperation, community, and social learning. Relational pedagogy has drawn from the ethics of care model espoused by feminist educator Nel Noddings (1984), followed by Gilligan (1982), and Martin (1992). Another foundational thread comes from Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT), which began with the pioneering work of Jean Baker Miller (1976) and the Stone Center Theory Group composed of Miller, Judith Jordan, Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey (Jordan et al., 1991). Developed in response to the patriarchal and individualistic Western ethos, RCT recognized the need to form growth-fostering relationships between women, in which members feel a genuine sense of mattering. Similar themes of liberatory practice in relational pedagogy can be traced to the influence of Freire (1970); the critical pedagogy articulated by Giroux (1988) and McLaren (2006); and in the praxis of educators such as bell hooks (1994; 2009). Sidorkin (2000) synthesized several of these theories into what he termed a "pedagogy of relation" that would counter the traditional imbalance of power between teacher and student. In recent years, the framework has expanded to include, for example, Lysaker and Furuness's (2011) "relational, dialogic pedagogy," and more recently the posthuman "pedagogies of mattering" introduced by Gravett et al. (2021). What emerges from these various approaches is a relational pedagogy that calls for relationships between teacher and student as well as students and students as the primary sites of learning, leverages these partnerships for the educational benefit of both teachers and students, and pursues morally-grounded learning outcomes that lead students to become agents of change (Biesta et al., 2004; Hinsdale, 2016; Schoem, 2017).

Relational pedagogy requires more than simply recognizing and avoiding the potentially harmful effects of instructional hierarchies and their attendant displays of dictatorial power, however; it also demands that teachers recognize and abandon subtler practices that can interfere with genuine connections. Teaching, as Biesta (2004) reminds us, is "a social situation, and the effects of teaching result from the activities of the students in and in response to this social situation" (p. 18). In relational pedagogy, teachers create a social situation most conducive to learning when they consciously and intentionally abandon their detached, neutral, or solely professional selves to participate in fully human learning encounters with their students. Educators need not always be intentionally planning, taking steps toward, and directing a series of learning moments. Rather, as Kelchtermans (2009) points out, "teaching—because of

its relational and ethical nature—is also and importantly characterized by passivity, by being exposed to others and thus being vulnerable" (p. 265). A productive learning environment is one in which both teacher and student welcome, listen for, take in, and deeply consider what each other has to share. Learning is enhanced precisely because each partner privileges the other.

Such mutualism is the goal of bell hooks (2009), for whom:

> Engaged pedagogy is vital to any rethinking of education because it holds the promise of full participation on the part of students. Engaged pedagogy establishes a mutual relationship between teacher and students that nurtures the growth of both parties, creating an atmosphere of trust and commitment that is always present when genuine learning happens. Expanding both heart and mind, engaged pedagogy makes us better learners because it asks us to embrace and explore the practice of knowing together, to see intelligence as a resource that can strengthen our common good. (p. 22)

When teachers and students fully participate in such learning encounters, they exhibit the qualities of "growth-fostering relationships" first described by Miller & Stiver (1997). Schwartz (2019) locates the presence of these elements in what she terms "connected teaching," where learning is driven by "energy, knowledge, sense of worth, action, and desire for more connection" (p. 16). Energy is generated during intellectual exchanges when both learners are shown equal respect and encouraged to continually advance creative ideas for consideration or share difficulties or doubts to mutually explore. Knowledge is developed through such vigorous and energized discourse, whether extended over time or during small teaching moments. A sense of worth follows from the attention, respect, and validation shown to students who venture into genuine intellectual discourse with teachers, even when teachers offer challenging feedback that pushes learners to reconsider their ideas or move in new directions. Teachers, likewise, can experience an enhanced sense of self-worth as they witness their own value to, and impact on, the student during the relationship. Action takes place when students progress from points where they otherwise feel intellectually stuck. The relationship provides the means to consider and plan moves the student might make to advance their thinking or project. Finally, the desire for more connection is inspired during relational learning, leading students to seek additional opportunities to replicate the process and its accompanying intellectual and personal rewards.

Relational Pedagogy and the Library Internship

For librarians often permitted only a single session to impart some elementary information literacy skills, opportunities to form meaningful relationships with students can be rare. Recent literature on library instruction, however, includes compelling calls for introducing relational pedagogy to one-shot sessions (Arellano Douglas & Gadsby, 2022; Morin, 2021). Librarians have specifically pointed to research interviews and consultations as receptive forums for relational, care-based teaching (Bruce, 2020; Arellano Douglas, 2018). Arellano Douglas and Gadsby (2022) argue that "care . . . within the context of librarianship is an opportunity to foster growth in others and ourselves through a learning relationship, marked by clear relational roles, boundaries, needs, and expectations on the part of both parties" (p. 811). In their work using Critical Race Theory (CRT) to interrogate injustice in librarianship, Quiñonez, Nataraj, and Olivas (2021) point to the promise of RCT for flattening the hierarchy of power in relationships within the profession. The benefits of RCT across various aspects of librarianship, from onboarding to instructional policy negotiation to department conflict resolution, have also been illustrated by Chiu et al. (2023). Finally, while they do not situate their study within the larger context of relational pedagogy, Bisio et al. (2021) call for an ethics of care model

grounded in radical empathy. They particularly emphasize the need for librarians to develop and demonstrate trust and respect for their interns.

Despite these initial treatments of relational pedagogy in libraries, scholars have yet to fully explore the internship as a site for such practice. Unlike one-shot lessons for visiting classes, or even embedded participation in semester-long courses, internships afford librarians the autonomy to construct their own highly relational learning environment. Interns placed in the campus library and partnered with teacher-librarians have a decided advantage over their peers whose internships are outside academia "since pedagogical practices are often more empathic than standard supervisory" ones (Bisio et al., 2021, p. 6). The one-to-one relationships afforded to students and teachers during an internship are ready antidotes to a higher education where "forces inimical to individual flourishing and collaborative endeavours" are too often prevalent (Taylor et al., 2020, p. 1). As Hinsdale (2016) argues:

> The principles of relational pedagogy are more easily applied in one-on-one teaching situations such as tutoring or mentoring: we can better grasp the relational nature of learning; we can become students of our students' lives and engage in political intersubjectivity; we can take a moment of hesitation to be self-reflective listeners; and we can risk trust without ground. (p. 19)

Furthermore, the flexibility of an internship permits the librarian and student to co-create learning goals and opportunities.

Library Internships at West Chester University

As librarians, we practice a relational pedagogy "based on the assumption that relations have primacy over the isolated self" (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, p. 2). We believe the library internship itself must be a caring, interpersonal relationship in which both teacher and student actively listen to one another, raise and explore questions of meaning and consequence, and pursue self-growth. Like Carr (2000), we contend that teaching "seeks at best to promote the moral, psychological and physical well-being of learners" (p. 9).

As integral partners in pedagogical inquiry and self-examination, we work with interns to identify and co-create learning opportunities of personal significance. Like Lysaker and Furuness (2011), we believe that a "set of relationships—inter, intra, and extra personal—becomes a critical focus in the construction of teaching and learning experiences" (p. 189). Furthermore, we introduce and integrate interns into a variety of relationship-rich networks that foster ongoing personal, professional, and scholarly discourse. Over the course of the program, interns acquire the skills and develop the confidence to practice life-long, relationship-based learning, and become agents of change. By working so closely with our student interns, we mutually benefit from outcomes that are meaningful and rewarding academically, professionally, and personally.

In what follows, we explain how our pedagogy adheres to three fundamental types of relationship: student-librarian, student-student, and student-profession. For each of these relational types, we discuss some of the activities, tasks, and routines designed to enhance the relationship and foster learning within it.

Student-Librarian Relationships

When a student believes and feels they are cared for, and by extension heard, respected, and valued, they can partner with a teacher to learn in ways and toward ends that are substantially more meaningful for each of them. Supervising librarians have "a unique responsibility in how they shape the work environment of their . . . interns" and "this emotional work on the part of supervisors is necessary for even short-term workers to feel that they, and their

contributions, are of value (Bisio et al., 2021, p. 13). In a society that commonly undervalues libraries and librarians, inner strength is essential for professional success. In addition to the interpersonal relationship we establish with students, therefore, we also encourage them to maintain and nourish a strong relationship with themselves. By openly revealing our personal reflections and inner dialogue over the course of our relationship with them, we model how interns might locate fulfillment, empowerment, and moral certainty within themselves.

Perhaps the most significant part of any academic library internship, and the most effective way to shape the work environment, is the weekly, typically hour-long meeting between the intern and mentor. While some of the literature on academic library internships suggests holding regular or weekly meetings, they are typically treated as "check-ins" or opportunities to review progress and set expectations for the coming week (Nutefall, 2012; Bastian & Webber, 2008). In an internship based on relational pedagogy, however, such meetings become extremely significant interactions. By focusing less on expectations and more on the nature of the work we do and why we do it, weekly discussions can reframe the internship experience as a collaboration based on mutual respect and shared exploration. Interacting with, demonstrating care, and showing an interest in student learning can also be accomplished during less formal encounters, such as quick check-ins and other forms of communication (Douglas & Gadsby, 2022; Piorkowski & Scheurer, 2000).

Early in the internship we ask students why they are interested in librarianship and what they hope to learn during their time as interns. We also share information about our own career paths and what drew us to the field. Once interns realize that such discussions need not be strictly business, or task-focused, they become less inhibited about asking questions that are truly meaningful to them. As Dahl (2011) points out, the "curious intern, possibly interested in pursuing a career in librarianship, may need as much information and perspective as work experience" (p. 9). And, according to bell hooks (1994):

> Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive . . . . It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material. (p. 21)

The mentor, therefore, should share details like doubts or challenges faced and overcome, the practicality of required and elective coursework and prior work experiences, mistakes made, successes achieved, and skills and knowledge acquired, all while highlighting any relationships which proved especially valuable to career advancement and professional fulfillment. Molloy and Bearman (2018) call such transparency "intellectual candor" and see it as an essential counterpoint to an incessant pressure to exhibit one's academic credibility. Responding at length validates the student's questions and, more importantly, models both critical self-reflection and the centrality of relationships in learning. It is important to remember, too, that what may seem inconsequential to us could still be significant for the student. Even within the arguably progressive field of librarianship, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other traditionally marginalized populations commonly face unwelcoming environments and attitudes. As mentors, even when merely allies and not members of a marginalized community, it is incumbent on us to be honest with students about these issues.

Sharing our CVs and our scholarly interests is crucial for developing our relationships with students. For many interns, this may be their first experience seeing a professional CV, and the document provides a unique window into our career paths and the library profession in general. Sharing our scholarly accomplishments and discussing the process of creating them also allows interns to go beyond day-to-day tasks and gain insight into the overarching issues that inform our work. This is an important aspect of our role as library faculty at our institution, where all faculty adhere to a teacher-scholar model, developed by each individual department, that defines and makes explicit the links

between our professional activities and scholarship. This document encourages us to bring the research process and its results into the classroom; or, in our case, the library.

Sharing information about our journey as information professionals may also be particularly helpful for students who are unsure of their own career path and may not have a great deal of familiarity with librarianship in general or with specializations, such as music and special collections. Most of our undergraduate music students, for example, have not had experience with an academic music library or even a library music collection before coming to campus, and most are unaware that librarians can specialize in music. Although an interest in pursuing librarianship as a career is not a prerequisite for our internships, providing perspective on our careers, at least, allows interns to envision the possibility. The results can be empowering—several of our interns have used the opportunity as a stepping stone for graduate studies in librarianship, and a few already work in libraries.

Just as we share aspects of our work history and scholarship with interns, we also ask students to help shape their learning experience by pursuing their own interests and perspectives on the field. Ceding curricular autonomy in this way, however, can be difficult. As Cook-Sather (2014) argues, "student-faculty partnership in pedagogical explorations is troublesome because it is at once counterintuitive for many faculty and contradictory to norms in higher education" (p. 189). Since committing in earnest to practicing relational pedagogy, we have become convinced that such mutual planning works. Co-designing internship activities with a music student interested in issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access, for example, led to a series of initiatives to expand and highlight resources related to composers from marginalized groups. Building on this work and the mentoring relationship which enabled it, the intern's graduate thesis explored the role of women in the development of the music program at our institution with one of the authors of this article serving as thesis advisor. Indeed, we now routinely co-create the semester's learning activities, offer a list of "recommended" readings for interns to choose from, and jointly discuss and assess the intellectual progress they are making. More than once, we have also mutually agreed with interns to recalibrate the direction or focus of an internship during the semester. When they sense we respect, trust, and care about them, interns are more comfortable telling us when the experience is not meeting their expectations. Hearing that students are not satisfied with a learning experience can be disappointing for any teacher to hear. When we foreground our care for a student's well-being and educational growth, however, they are more likely to share any frustrations with us sooner rather than later.

Student-Student Relationships

As librarians, we are keenly aware that students are already part of their own respective scholarly communities; that as emerging scholars, they are in dialogue with these communities whenever they produce scholarship of their own. Although interns are not typically part of a class, internships based on relational pedagogy still provide opportunities for dialogue between students. If mentoring more than one intern, weekly meetings provide opportunities for students to learn together and share their questions and perspectives with their peers. These meetings need not be restricted to interns in any one area of the library; we have found that regardless of area, interns can make meaningful connections with each other, based on a shared interest in librarianship. Working with other interns to discover commonalities and differences in diverse areas of the library can be an important learning experience.

The mentor may also consider assigning readings based on the intern's individual area of interest, ask them to record their thoughts in a journal, and share what they have learned during the weekly group meeting. Meetings are also a good time for interns to practice reference assistance; for example, interns can come prepared each week with a research question related to their coursework or other activities outside the internship and spend time helping each other conduct reference interviews and discovering relevant resources. We have also facilitated group projects for interns, such as designing exhibits, that provide opportunities for interns to learn together. In one instance, a pop-up

exhibit at a student ensemble concert allowed interns to work together, and to make connections with the students and faculty director involved with the ensemble.

Interns also build important relationships with student workers who are not interns themselves. As teachers, we stress the value of every student working in the library, whether they are paid undergraduate workers, credit-earning interns, or graduate assistants. When they form relationships with upper-class student employees, for example, interns essentially acquire advisors well-versed in the academic terrain of our university. Despite our best efforts as teachers to create caring relationships with interns, we are never truly their peers. Age differences, life experience, professional status, and other factors will always inhibit our ability to fully connect with interns. Many of the gaps, however, can be filled by supportive fellow students. As teachers, therefore, we should make every effort to endorse these important supplemental relationships.

Mentors can also facilitate opportunities for students to form peer-based learning relationships, in which they provide reference assistance for their peers. Supervisors should also talk to their interns about their academic classes and coursework. This process both demonstrates care and provides insight on potential connections with other students. An intern, for example, in a class involving a research paper or similar component can be a valuable resource for other students. They can take skills acquired during the internship to create research guides, serve as research tutors, or create other reference materials that may be of value to future students.

Our program also encourages students to present what they have accomplished and learned during the internship. Those opportunities may already exist within academic departments; for example, one of the music departments at our institution has a weekly seminar series which provides opportunities for students to present their scholarly and creative work, including internship projects, to other students and faculty in the department.

Student-Profession Relationships

By introducing students to professional practice, the library internship naturally invites additional relationships to its curriculum. We have found it useful to consider the myriad relationships we are a part of as career librarians and consider ways we might practically expose our interns to similar ones. Internships based on relational pedagogy are rich with opportunities to do this. Reading professional literature, as discussed above, helps interns begin to connect their onsite experiences with issues of theory and practice in the field. Interns are also encouraged to participate in appropriate library department and committee meetings and to meet with other librarians in our organization to learn about their work and careers.

To expand this circle of relationships, we ask interns to become familiar with our professional organizations. These groups provide opportunities for interns to have meaningful learning experiences and to make connections beyond our institution; for example, a professional organization's listserv can be an effective learning tool and provide material for discussion during weekly internship meetings. Interns are also encouraged and provided with support to attend our professional organizations' regional and national conferences, either virtually or in person. This experience allows interns to interact and form relationships with people and programs at other institutions, a process that can be facilitated by their internship teacher and deepen the mentoring relationship.

Outside of conferences, we also arrange for interns to meet with colleagues at other institutions. A Zoom meeting or phone call with a librarian who recently achieved their MLS and first professional position can be a powerful learning experience, particularly for interns with an interest in librarianship as a career. For these students, reviewing job postings and discussing specific position descriptions and requirements can be a valuable teaching tool and help deepen the intern's understanding of the field. To make them more familiar with the vast and unusual terminology used in special collections and archives, interns in the department are asked to start a glossary, which grows throughout

the semester as the librarian supplies specific terms or the student encounters them naturally during the course of their experience.

Producing and sharing scholarship, especially when done in collaboration with the internship teacher, is also a highly effective way to connect students with the profession. Like many institutions, joint research with students is valued highly at our university and is considered an exemplar of the departmental teacher-scholar model. Co-authorship of journal publications is certainly an option, although the time constraints of a one- or even two-semester internship may make this type of scholarship difficult to accomplish. Poster presentations are an excellent alternative and may be presented at professional conferences as well as other venues; our institution, for example, has an annual Research and Creative Activity Day each spring that serves as a platform for sharing collaborative research. We also encourage interns to document their work, especially any scholarship, by creating a CV. This may be the first time that interns are asked to do this, and the process is not only valuable for summarizing their accomplishments and experiencing this standard professional practice but also serves as an effective tool for self-evaluation.

We have found, too, that internships may provide students with opportunities to form relationships within professions other than our own. Since our internships are collaborative and strongly focused on each student's interest areas, we ask them to discover and assess resources related to their professional and personal interests. Both authors of this article have published reviews of literature in professional publications; drawing on this experience, interns may be asked to present a review of a book or resource in their interest area. Some relationships, too, may be unexpected; students in both the music library and special collections have formed relationships with scholars unaffiliated with our university during the course of their internship. In special collections, an intern exploring the past ownership, or provenance, of a book printed in 1512 in Paris initiated a long-running correspondence with a European scholar. This type of scholarly networking is central to our own practice, so modeling and expecting it of interns is requisite for fully exposing them to professional practice.

Conclusion

As academic librarians, we have found relational pedagogy a tremendously useful model for reinvigorating our internship program. Though it makes its own unique demands of teacher and student, relational pedagogy provides a framework for achieving an impactful library internship. Such programs offer teaching librarians a chance to examine, experiment with, and assess their praxis in close cooperation with the students they impact. The relational internship exposes students to learning opportunities across a spectrum of relationship types, including teacher-to-student, student-to-student, and student-to-profession. Across these contexts, mentoring librarians can encourage interns to interrogate their professional aspirations and personal values. Hopefully, the practices we have introduced in this article will prove useful to other librarian mentors hoping to invigorate their own internship programs.

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