

Introverts and Library Instruction

Challenges and Strategies

When I first started library school, the idea of teaching never crossed my mind—I pictured myself surrounded by books, not students. But everything changed in the early 2000s, when I was unexpectedly offered my first teaching assignment. At the time, I was working as a part-time reference librarian and eager to secure a permanent position, so I embraced the challenge, not realizing that this moment would shape my academic library career.

As a self-described introvert, teaching was not a skill that came naturally to me, and up to that point, I had been very uncomfortable with public speaking. Although that first class didn't go perfectly, it probably went better than I thought because that first professor invited me back. Teaching became easier over time as I developed confidence and discovered effective strategies for mastering teaching as an introvert.

Introverts and Extroverts

There are many definitions of introversion and extroversion among personality psychologists, with many people exhibiting a blend of introverted and extroverted characteristics depending on the situation. However, certain traits generally distinguish the two groups.¹

- **Level of outside stimulation:** Extroverts enjoy the spotlight, whereas introverts can find it exhausting and outside of their comfort zone.
- **Work styles:** Extroverts are risk takers who are good at making quick, snap decisions. On the other hand, introverts tend to be slow and deliberate in making decisions while also having a strong power of concentration.
- **Social styles:** Extroverts tend to be assertive, dominant, and driven by a need for connection. They dominate conversations, often speaking more than listening. Introverts, by contrast, are typically good listeners who dislike conflict, loathe small talk, and tend to prefer socializing with a small circle of friends or colleagues. They do not enjoy socializing in a large group setting.

These personality traits common to introverts help explain their reluctance to take on teaching roles, which require frequent public speaking and social interaction.

Instructional Challenges for Introverts

Public speaking, and by extension teaching, is particularly challenging for introverts. Teaching requires showing vulnerability and engaging with the audience. In his book *The Introverted Presenter*, Richard Tierney makes the case that a presentation needs to be authentic

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and personal for the audience to connect with the presenter: “To give an effective presentation, you’ll have to expose a bit of yourself. ... Remember the last great talk you heard. The presenter didn’t just report the bare facts; the presenter made it personal. Otherwise, it has no resonance.”² This book made me rethink my perspective. I realized that I could become an effective and impactful library instructor while also embracing my introverted nature.

Vulnerability is inherently challenging for introverts, and public speaking involves stepping outside one’s comfort zone. Although initially it may feel like an act or performance, it is essential to embrace this role, even if it proves exhausting—something I’ve personally experienced after teaching multiple classes. Additionally, procrastination often compounds the challenge as we tend to avoid tasks that we find uncomfortable. Yet delaying preparation will lead to a worse outcome; therefore, disciplined and thorough preparation is critical to achieving successful library instruction.

Teaching anxiety is another obstacle that can be particularly challenging for introverts. Many academic librarians have experienced it at some point in their careers, whether as early career librarians or in new positions with a teaching role. Several issues can contribute to teaching anxiety, including:

- **Imposter phenomenon:** The experience of feeling like a fraud and not knowing what you’re talking about. This may be due to a lack of confidence or content knowledge. The result is a feeling of isolation.³
- **Fear of failure:** Introverts fear looking foolish in front of an audience. However, making mistakes is an essential part of the learning process.
- **Organizational support:** Insufficient organizational support can intensify feelings of inadequacy and undermine confidence.
- **Physical symptoms:** Managing physical symptoms of anxiety is critical. It often helps to talk to others, either an empathetic colleague or seeking out mental health resources at your institution or beyond.

Although teaching can initially feel overwhelming, there are effective techniques to overcome these challenges.

Preparation Strategies

Preparation is crucial to giving a compelling presentation. This process may involve crafting detailed lesson plans, designing engaging and interactive activities, and collaborating closely with faculty. Thorough preparation ensures that instructional sessions run smoothly, maximizes participant engagement, and helps achieve desired learning outcomes. Here are some suggestions to get you started on your teaching journey.

Networking: Reach out to colleagues who may be willing to share lesson plan templates and other resources that have worked for them. These exchanges offer an opportunity to learn from their successful strategies and provide valuable insights for your teaching process.

Peer observations: Request to observe a class session led by one of the teaching librarians in your department. This firsthand observation can offer valuable insights into instructional techniques, classroom management, and student engagement strategies. Approach

colleagues with sensitivity, recognizing that while some may welcome the opportunity to share their teaching practice, others might feel uncomfortable.

Develop a teaching persona: Over time, you will develop what the literature refers to as a teaching persona. In his book *The Craft of University Teaching*, Peter Lindsay devotes a whole chapter to the teaching persona and argues that “people speak differently, listen differently, and move differently when teaching.”⁴ The most powerful and impactful teaching persona is grounded in genuine personality traits. Authenticity is essential and requires frequent self-reflection. The authentic persona enables the instructor to establish meaningful engagement with students in the classroom.

Confidence: The more you teach, the more comfortable you will become, even if teaching is still not a favorite part of your job.

Making mistakes: Rather than fearing or avoiding mistakes, embrace them as valuable opportunities for growth and learning.

Content knowledge: Acknowledge what you don’t know and see each class as an opportunity to expand your knowledge and learn about new topics.

Mentorship: Seek out mentors through a formal mentorship program or identify experienced colleagues within or outside your institution who can provide guidance and support.

Professional development: Explore teaching-focused workshops offered by local, regional, or national organizations to enhance your instructional skills and stay current in the field.

Final Thoughts

It isn’t necessary to transform yourself into an extrovert to be an effective teacher. Rather it is important to remain authentic while emphasizing one’s unique strengths. Thorough preparation is key to success in the classroom; it helps develop confidence and ensures an effective instructional session. There will be successes and failures in the classroom. Embracing mistakes is an important component of the learning process; as teachers, we reflect often on our teaching practices, experimenting with new tools and techniques. Colleagues can provide invaluable insights and support, sharing instructional resources and successful teaching strategies or serving as a mentor. Ongoing professional development is critical for academic librarians, particularly introverts, as it helps build confidence and enhance skills while lessening anxiety. ♪

Notes

1. Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking* (Crown Publishers, 2012).

2. Richard Tierney, *The Introverted Presenter: Ten Steps for Preparing and Delivering Successful Presentations* (Apress, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4842-1088-8>.

3. Jessica Martinez and Meredith Forrey, “Overcoming Imposter Syndrome: The Adventures of Two New Instruction Librarians,” *Reference Services Review* 47, no. 3 (2019): 331–42, <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-03-2019-0021>.

4. Peter Lindsay, “Teaching Personas,” in *The Craft of University Teaching* (University of Toronto Press, 2018), 53–74, <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487517496-005>.

Further Reading and Resources

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