

A shift in education in the 21st century: How effective are graduate internship programs facilitated on the ground?

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Abstract

Graduate education programs are finding the online education arena increasingly exciting. Questions arise however, as to the effectiveness of facilitating internship components of programs that require this component. To examine this concern an online survey was distributed to graduates of a library science program requesting feedback on the online facilitated internship's effectiveness in the development of identified competences for future librarians. The major concern of this article is whether or not online programs are effectively supporting the capstone experience in the development of needed competences. The results of this survey suggest the effectiveness of the online facilitated internship to be positive and point to responsive program improvements to continue to strengthen the online facilitated internship. This article also scans literature regarding necessary competences for school librarians.

Keywords: online teaching, library science curriculum, internships, school librarian competences, distance learning, school librarian perceptions, theory, practice

Introduction

This paper presents research findings from one element of a broader research study, conducted by the author, on the perceptions of competency development within the school librarian internship experience. The original study was conducted at East Carolina University's (ECU) College of Education, Department of Library Science. This program, accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), a national accrediting body for schools, colleges, and departments of education authorized by the U.S. Department of Education, is offered online. Graduates from a five year time period were surveyed. This master's program, delivered entirely online included a capstone experience, the internship, which is the focus of this research. The internships are served at a physical site, under supervision of an approved local site supervisor, with the university support facilitated through on-line means. It is a three-credit-hour course requiring intensive immersion in the specific library and information science field chosen. In order to determine the success of the online facilitated internship for future school librarians, a survey was administered to practicing school librarians who had graduated from the online program.

There are minimal studies published on perceptions of school librarians on their internship experiences (Marek, 2009; Shannon, 2008). Findings from this study may guide the direction of continuous review of the internship program in universities with online programs.

Background and Literature

A review of higher education both nationally and internationally, will show that universities in the 21st century have begun to avail themselves of the many advantages of online education (Marek, 2009). Increasing access to more learners, greater convenience for those learners, access to greater resources including professional experts, and the opportunity to serve an unlimited geographic area are just a few among the many reasons colleges and universities are adopting an online format for education. The school librarian graduate program is often dominated by already employed educators, who are committed to structured days in the classroom, and lends itself well to the evolving online environment. The format makes possible the pursuit of an advanced degree for professionals who could not otherwise participate in structured continued education. Although studies indicate student satisfaction with online learning (Dow, 2008), specific components of the graduate education process demand additional scrutiny.

The journey to a graduate level library science degree for school librarians usually involves both coursework and an internship. Students are better able to assimilate what is learned in coursework more thoroughly when they are able to see it in the real life practice (Ball, 2008). While coursework may be effectively adapted to the online arena, breaking conventional teaching modes and making advantageous use of rapidly expanding technology in allowing teacher and student to communicate, exchange work, pursue evaluation/assessment, and generally provide solid core subject education (Guoying, Shunxing, Jiyue, 2005), there are concerns with the internship component. An internship program, the crucial link between theory and practice, offers the complex activity by which individuals may become critically conscious of themselves as professionals through the totality of their real-life experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991), is perhaps the most difficult component to supervise and facilitate in an online environment.

The internship, the capstone of the library and information science program, serves as the bridge for students to integrate theory with practice, through a range of professional activities, responsibilities, and directed project based experiences (Brown., Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Kirshner & Whitson, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mitchell, 1990). This component of the graduate program has been widely popular and has also, according to the literature, been effective in reducing the divide between academia and practice. Introducing students to the professional field they have studied through experiential learning is the essence of the internship (Brewer & Winston, 2001; Koteles & Haythornthwaite, 2002; Morehead, 1980). Educators, as professionals involved in the preparation of future school librarians, face challenges in providing clear and visible guidance to the students they teach. Online educators have questions as to the effectiveness of this capstone experience facilitated in an online program. Can an online program successfully support site-based internship opportunities for professional growth and practical experience? What do practicing librarians who have experienced an online supported internship say in answer to this concern? These questions were answered in a study examining the library internship experiences of librarians.

The Paradigm Shift: Praxis Supported On-line

Research conducted by the Center for Technology and Learning, through the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Policy and Program Studies Service (2008), points to the feasibility and effectiveness of distance education in general (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). This research further expands the author's premise that online library science programs can also offer effective internship programs as well, successfully integrating theory and practice in the online facilitated environment.

Tools are readily available that enable distance educators to instruct, evaluate, and monitor quality, authentic experiences through which interns may see, experience, and make meaning of the reality of the school librarian experience. Library science professionals in academia are routinely using technology in the graduate program to offer coursework online. University supervisors employ this same or similar technology in guiding, structuring, and shaping internship programs. The continuing

emergence of new technologies should serve to make this process even more effective. Critical to success of the process is optimum use of current technologies to support a distance education program. Program support services, for online students involved in this study, included a technology help desk for technical questions, video and video analysis software. Software facilitating, via internet, online conferencing tools, and a full-time student services manager also provided support. Formats for improved access and communication evolve rapidly, individual's skills vary, and therefore participants had made use of various means of online support. Contact information was posted for every faculty member, readily accessible by students. Additionally the university library offered a wealth of online resources to which students had ready access. Course information was available via Blackboard. Social networking and email were used extensively along with the web-based Blackboard to support and encourage interaction. Electronic portfolios were required from graduates of the internship and were used to assess student understanding, progress, and experience. Varied interactive strategies, audio and visual, afforded participants an opportunity to have community and share experiences in the online environment.

Method

An online survey, assessing participant perceptions of the significance of the online library science internship facilitated program in effectively preparing interns for their future role as professional librarians, was employed to gather data for the study. Perseus, a web-based survey research tool, was used to format the survey which was disseminated through email addresses. Reasons for the study were explained in an email to each participant. There were no risks to the participants in the study. Due to the web-based nature of the survey there was no personal contact between researcher and participant unless participants chose to contact the researcher via email.

From respondents who took the survey, researchers were able to determine how prepared librarians perceived themselves to be for the roles they would fill as professionals as a result of the onsite internship facilitated and supervised by university officials online. The survey, while quantitative in nature also allowed for qualitative response through the inclusion of an open-ended concern and comment section. To more clearly gauge respondents' perceptions, open-ended questions were included because of the recognition that by focusing primarily on quantitative techniques, additional important perceptions could be unreported by participants (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

Participants

The population used for this research was delimited to practicing school librarian graduates of an NCATE accredited online Master in Library Science program from a five year time period. Librarians who had participated in internships within the selected five years would have an accurate recollection of the experience and be able to report accurate perceptions. This population was chosen because the online program required completion of an internship as part of the graduate level library science coursework for earning a Master in Library Science degree. A cumulative database of students and graduates of the program facilitated access to respondents. There were no exclusions based on gender, race, color or any other demographic information. An overall survey return rate of 64% was achieved by using the email address database.

Data Analysis

The survey was designed around three themes. Two of these themes are fundamental for the analysis that provides the foundation for this paper: perceptions of the reality of practice based upon the actual field experience; and perceptions of professional identity as a result of the internship experience. Survey questions were based upon factors that were identified in the literature in regard to the professional role of the school librarian. Additional survey information was collected pertaining to individual demographics, educational/teaching backgrounds, specific year of internship, demographics of schools where employed, positions held while in the position, perceptions of the length and adequacy of the

internship, and the status of the supervisor of the intern onsite. The data from Perseus was downloaded into SPSS for analysis. Qualitative responses were coded to identify common themes.

Table 1

Survey Response by Year of Graduation

Year of Graduation	Number of Graduates	Number of Student Interns Per Year	Number of Responses Survey	Percentage of Graduate Response	Percentage of Intern Response
2002	21	7	6	29%	86%
2003	38	19	9	24%	47%
2004	55	34	8	15%	24%
2005	67	37	12	18%	32%
2006	52	52	27	52%	52%

Survey questions were designed to analyze the impact of the online facilitated internship experience on successful competency development of prospective school librarians. Specifically the questions examined the relationship between the student's perceptions of preparedness and the Library Science Internship experience. Critical background, professional, and demographic questions were included.

Significant school librarian competences

The evolving demands of librarianship including increased accountability, advanced technological skills, improved services for special needs, in addition to ever increasing diversity have compelled those concerned with the library profession to focus on specific competences and skills (Neely & Winston, 1999, Shannon, 2002). Eight themes emerged in a discussion of competences for school librarians from a review of the literature (see Figure 1). Also as a matter of some significance for this study, as the majority of these graduates would likely practice in North Carolina, a review of the North Carolina Media Coordinator's Performance Appraisal Instrument (NCMCPAI, 2003) proved to be closely aligned with these eight themes.

Practicing librarians were asked to report their perceptions in the development of these identified competences through their online internship experience. Survey questions were designed to incorporate each of the following identified competences.

Program administration
Assessment of information needs
Mentoring practices and behaviors in the use of information and instructional technology
Modeling best practices and behaviors in the use of information and instructional technology
Communication
Staff development
Advocacy

Figure 1. Professional School Librarian Competences

Results

Teaching Context

The finding that over 68% of respondents had been classroom teachers prior to the internship experience reflected current literature (Mardis, 07). Of those respondents who were classroom teachers prior to the library internship experience, responses indicated that 28.4% represented primary level teaching

experience, while 25.0% represented intermediate level teaching experience, while only 14.8% had experience as secondary level teachers (see Table 2).

Table 2
Teaching Context Prior to Internship

Response	f	%
Primary	25	28.4
Intermediate	22	25.0
Secondary	13	14.8

Note. N=88

Professional Roles

Respondents were asked to list the professional roles held in their teaching experience. The roles reported were coded and grouped in categories to accommodate for the many different titles used for similar roles, for example, all who reported serving as chair of the School Leadership Team, were grouped with those who reported serving as chair of the School Accreditation Team or School Improvement Team. Similarly those who reported roles as chair of special groups, for example: Battle of the Books, Geography Bee, or Spelling Bee were reported as School Activity Chair. Team Leader was listed by many but there was no clear indication as to what specific position was held, therefore Team Leader responses were grouped with the School Activity Chair responses. All who reported service specifically on Media or Technology team or Media Advisory Board were grouped together. Three major trends relating to librarians' role(s) appeared when examining the coded data.

The first trend exposed a wide variety of activities reported by librarians across all years of graduation coded under the heading of School Activity Chair. The activities represented many of the general programs and concepts that schools routinely support, such as Quiz Bowl, Spelling Bee, new teacher mentors, peer helper programs, and parent teacher organizations. Librarians reported numerous roles and responsibilities under the heading, School Activity Chair, indicating the wide range of involvement school librarians enjoy within the school community.

A second trend that was apparent when examining the data was the role that librarians fill as members of media and technology committees or technology leaders and program advocates. Reported evidence of this trend supported the literature in regard to the creative leadership role and competences of librarians in advocating for the incorporation of technology and all forms of media into the daily program (Phipps, 2005). The involvement indicated by participants in this category was not as great as the involvement indicated in the School Activity Chair category. The literature pointed to the importance of advocacy for one's program through participation on Media and Technology Advisory Boards and Committees and additionally, this area is integrated as a specific focus of the preparatory coursework for librarians. However, respondents in this study are apparently less engaged in membership on advisory boards and committees, indicating a potential need for expanded focus in order to align the preparation of the students more solidly with the mandates of the profession.

Length of Internship

A total of 71.6% of respondents agreed that the internship was adequate for preparation for librarianship with only 8.0% reporting perceptions of inadequacy in terms of length of internship, as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3
Satisfaction with Length of Internship

Response	F	%
Yes	63	71.6
No	7	8.0

Note.

N=88

Table 4
Source of Support for Intern

Response	f	%
Program/university supervisor	44	50.0
Site supervisor	46	52.3
District personnel	16	18.2
Principal	11	12.5
Other	11	12.5

Note. N=88

Support for Intern

An important consideration for the success of an online facilitated internship is linked to the support perceived by participants. Collected data clearly affirmed that program university supervisors and site supervisors had served as the primary sources of support for interns, as reported by 50-52% of respondents to this survey. Further, respondents reported that during the internship they had opportunities to observe site supervisors' role in leading long-range planning, communicating with stakeholders within the school community, performing daily librarian activities, and generally serving as advocates for the library program. Respondents reported that they were able to see the theory taught in coursework applied through the site supervisor's actions in the field. Site supervisors encouraged, involved, and provided opportunities for interns to see the reality of practice. One respondent, however, added, "I had a lot of support from the university (online) during my internship but not from the advising media coordinator," indicating the importance of the communication roles of the university supervisor as well as the site supervisor, as a source of support in the online environment. Overall Table 4 indicates that interns positively perceived the roles of both program/university and site supervision. Additional interaction between site supervisor and university professional could serve as the crucible for strengthening the connection between coursework and the practical experience through more in-depth guidance and involvement. One respondent stated that "it would be nice to have more frequent communication with the university supervisor, with more detailed guidance for what I should be doing to help my intern." Clearly supported in the literature (DeWitt and Rogers, 2009) and further verified in this study, frequent communication between intern and university supervisor is a key component in an online facilitated internship.

Table 4
Source of Support for Intern

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Program/university supervisor	44	50.0
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District personnel	16	18.2
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Competency Development

In reference to skills developed in articulating and defining a vision of the organization, respondents to the survey expressed positively, at over 70% that they could both define and communicate the vision of the media center to stakeholders as a result of their internship experience. Survey respondents'

perception of competences related to program administration, specifically decision making, assessment of information needs and collection development, respondents reported 83.3% agreeing or strongly agreeing, confirming positive findings for the effectiveness of the online program. Results for the competency regarding the intern's perception of ability to organize the library media collection, showed over 80% either agreeing or strongly agreeing. Similarly, the intern's perception of competency in budgetary management and decision making was positive at over 73%. The intern's perception of ability to conduct assessment of school wide needs for the school library media center again showed over 70% either agreeing or strongly agreeing. Survey respondents reported a strong measure of confidence in ability to make informed decisions regarding assessment, collection evaluation, and budgetary decisions gained through the online experience, affirming the effectiveness of the format.

Librarians also expressed confidence in their competence regarding communication, mentoring, and modeling appropriate uses of media resources. Over 80% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed regarding perception of ability to promote the appropriate uses of technology and media center resources through effective communication (via paper, electronic, or public speaking) with staff and administration regarding the school media program activities and events.

One area that librarians' responses were more conservative was in the competency regarding the intern's perception of ability to design staff development and in-service opportunities for faculty. Approximately 60% reported strong agreement in this area. This is reasonable as staff development is often designed by professionals with years of experience upon which to draw.

Similarly, results revealed, regarding intern's perception of ability to participate in regional, state-level, or system level meetings, 63.9% either agreeing or strongly agreeing, while over 25% reported that they did not feel competent in this area. Again this is not surprising, as it is reasonable to conclude that interns may not have had many opportunities, during the defined internship hours, to attend regional, state-level meetings or conferences.

Overwhelmingly interns indicated that they felt prepared for the professional role of a librarian after completing the online facilitated internship. In the areas of making informed decisions in the processes of collection evaluation/development and organizing the collection, respondents reported high levels of confidence. Similarly a number of respondents reported confidence in areas of promoting appropriate uses of resources and technology and also in communicating with staff and administration. Several interns, in the open-ended section, reported receiving encouragement and positive comments which provided the confidence needed to step into the professional position.

Table 5

Professional Identity. *After completing my internship, I felt prepared to ...*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Contribute to long-range planning and goal setting for the media center	(43.1%)	(31.9%)	(9.7%)	(15.3%)	(0%)
Communicate the vision of the media center to stakeholders	(47.2%)	(29.2%)	(12.5%)	(11.1%)	(0%)
Make informed decision in the process of collection	(50%)	(33.3%)	(4.2%)	(12.5%)	(0%)

evaluation and development					
Make informed decisions in the process of organizing the library media collection	(52.8%)	(33.3%)	(5.6%)	(8.3%)	(0%)
Make informed budgetary decisions for the school media center	(36.1%)	(37.5%)	(15.3%)	(11.1%)	(0%)
Conduct assessment of school wide needs for the school library media center	(44.3%)	(32.9%)	(8.6%)	(12.9%)	(1.4%)
Promote the appropriate uses of technology and media center resources	(50%)	(37.5%)	(6.9%)	(5.6%)	(0%)
Communicate with staff and administration regarding the school media program activities and events	(50%)	(36.1%)	(6.9%)	(6.9%)	(0%)
Design staff development and in-service opportunities for faculty	(29.2%)	(36.1%)	(20.8%)	(13.9%)	(0%)
Participate in regional, state-level, or system level meetings	(36.1%)	(27.8%)	(20.8%)	(13.9%)	(1.4%)
Interact with external stakeholders and patrons to communicate the needs of the	(35.5%)	(39.5%)	(11.8%)	(7.9%)	(0%)

school center	media					
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It should be noted by planners of online programs, however, that respondents indicated challenges in their preparation, with 14% reporting strong disagreement, in regard to planning; conducting assessment of school wide needs for the school library media center; and also in participating in regional and state-level meetings. Increased attention to these areas during the course of the internship may be needed.

Positive open-ended comments from respondents generally indicated the significance of the online facilitated internship in the preparation of librarians for school librarianship. Examples of open-ended comments included, “before my internship. I felt completely unprepared. However, after my internship, my confidence level was very high,” and “the hands on experience I got during my internship made it all meaningful for me. My internship showed me that I had what it takes to be a successful school librarian.”

Conclusions and Implications

While few rigorous research studies have been published on the effectiveness of online facilitated internships, the results found in this study were positive. Clearly the internship experience, dependent upon distance facilitation, can support opportunities for professional growth and practical experience. Results from this study reflect the findings from the literature that program change and improvement is an ongoing process in the evolution of online learning (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). Technologies available today are being improved, updated and should serve to make education in the virtual environment even more effective and efficient.

The strong relationship between skills developed in the internship and emphasis of the site supervisor is evident, reinforcing findings from a review of the literature and further validating the theoretical significance of an internship in development of needed competences for librarians. The statistical findings of this study reinforced the significance of the lived internship praxis demonstrating a strong relationship between students’ perceptions of preparedness and the library science internship experience. Insights from open-ended questions seemed consistent with the main findings from the survey sections as well. Even so, a small percentage of open-ended responses indicated that at times librarians felt they could have been involved in more meaningful activities during the internship. This may point to a need for more vigilant interaction and communication on the part of the university supervisor with the site supervisor in guiding the activities during the internship. Overall findings, however, indicated that school librarians believed the internship experience prepared them for their professional roles.

The qualitative and quantitative data collected in this study strongly indicate that an online facilitated internship can be effective and rewarding and further, offer a model for programs to build upon. According to practicing librarians, the internship, facilitated from a distance, as a lived experience, does permit future professionals to see and understand the reality of practice, leading to the development of professional identity. Although respondents reported positively on the subject, this study was limited to one major library science program, therefore replication of the study in other programs is recommended. This study did not address difference in competency development between online programs and onsite programs and that, too, remains an avenue for future study.

In order to provide the most effective online programs possible it is essential that professionals in the field continue to self-assess, evaluate curriculum goals and objectives, and incorporate measures of quality into the assessment as suggested by the literature. This study provides a model by which to do that. As university programs strive to provide authentic experiences for interns poised on the threshold of professional involvement, emerging technologies offer an avenue for further expansion of successful programs.

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