

# “To connect, you have to listen”: Bringing real-world social justice experiences into LIS education

Jacqueline Kociubuk<sup>a</sup>, Kathleen Campana<sup>b</sup>, Michelle H. Martin<sup>c</sup>, and J. Elizabeth Mills<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Information, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

<sup>b</sup>School of Information, Kent State University, USA

<sup>c</sup>School of Information, University of Washington, USA

<sup>d</sup>Webjunction at OCLC, USA

kociubuk@wisc.edu, kcampan2@kent.edu, mmharti@uw.edu, millse@oclc.org

## ABSTRACT

Library and information science (LIS) scholarship has increasingly become aware of disconnects between the traditional curriculum and real-world soft skills employers value in future public library professionals, particularly in regards to being able to engage with underserved communities. To address this gap, MLIS students at two iSchools participated in a field-based social justice assignment that required them to identify an underserved community group they wanted to learn more about, and then collaborate with and interview a member of the group or a community organization that was working with the group. Students completed a written reflection about the experience that the researchers analyzed to understand how a field-based social justice assignment can foster soft skill development for LIS students. Findings indicate that the field-based assignment supported students' development of three soft skills important for both LIS careers and social justice work: cultural competency, communication, and reflexivity.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

curriculum; community engagement; public libraries; education programs/schools.

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

soft skills; field-based experiences; cultural competency; reflexivity; communication.

Copyright 2023 by the authors. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2023.1256>

## **INTRODUCTION**

Library and information science (LIS) students often struggle with connecting their classwork with real-world experiences in their future professions (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016). Additionally, LIS scholars have called for a more concentrated effort to help students bridge the gap between instruction and practice, particularly in regards to social justice (Cooke et al., 2016; Poole et al., 2021) and soft skill development (Sanders & Bajjaly, 2022). To begin to connect LIS classroom instruction to practice, as well as introduce students to tools that can support their future social justice efforts by facilitating meaningful, in-depth conversations with underserved groups, MLIS students from two iSchools were given an assignment that required them to work in the field. They did this by completing and reflecting on the Project VOICE Community Exploration Tool (CET), a design tool meant to help libraries initiate a co-design process with underserved groups around more effective social-justice focused programs and services, while also gaining a comprehensive understanding of the groups in order to better serve them. The tool has been developed and refined as part of a larger IMLS-funded project, Project VOICE. The CET takes a strengths-based approach to understanding underserved communities by asking about culture/traditions, priorities/aspirations, struggles, needs, and successes/strengths (Campana et al., 2023). Results from the students' reflections on the experience are examined to answer the following research question: how might a field-based social justice assignment foster soft skill development for LIS students?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

With increasing recognition of the importance of engaging in social justice work with underserved groups among public libraries (Jaeger et al., 2016), demand has also increased for public librarians who are skilled in cultural competency, reflexivity, and communication - vital soft skills that help facilitate social justice work through community engagement. While definitions vary in specificity, soft skills can be thought of as skills or abilities that allow one to relate to and with others, involving both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions (Saunders, 2015). Soft skill instruction has typically been incorporated into LIS curriculum through "passive strategies," including lectures and readings rather than "active strategies," such as hands-on or field-based activities (Sanders & Bajjaly, 2022, pg. 198). However, active learning strategies have been tied to better learning outcomes and retention (Campana & Agarwal, 2019); especially when students are able to gain practical experiences in the field. Reflecting on LIS instruction, students often report that hands-on experiences placed in the field of practice are the most valuable instructional strategies, yet they also find this type of learning experience the one that they have the least exposure to throughout their LIS education (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016). Indeed, while cultural competency is notoriously difficult to impart to students through traditional educational means, it remains a key component of social justice work and should be integrated into LIS education in valuable ways (Cooke et al., 2016). Additionally, employers are looking for LIS students with practical experiences in the field and often report needing students who already possess the necessary soft skills for the position (Saunders, 2015).

## **METHODS**

To provide students with a field-based social justice learning opportunity, researchers developed an assignment for two MLIS classes, each at a different US-based iSchool. A participatory, design-based approach (Barab & Squire, 2004) was used for the assignment to enhance the experiential aspects in two ways: 1) students were asked to test the CET and provide ideas for redesigning and refining the Tool, and 2) by using the tool the students were completing the first stage in a community co-design process around social justice-focused programs and services. As a part of the assignment, students had to identify an underserved group they wanted to learn more about and complete the CET with a member of the group or a representative from a community organization that was working with the group. Afterwards, the students reflected on the experience by describing their process and feelings, challenges, changes they would like to see, and their understanding of the underserved group. The assignment submission was only included in the dataset if both the student and interviewee consented. In total, 36 students participated in the assignment, however only submissions where both the student and interviewee consented (n=26) were included. Of those, 18 were completed with community organizations working with the underserved group and eight with members from underserved groups.

Researchers used a two-cycle coding process to analyze the reflections. For the first cycle, two researchers read through the reflections and coded for broad themes. The team then reviewed the themes for agreement and adjusted in places of disagreement. This initial analysis revealed themes and quotes that suggested the assignment was fostering soft skill development for the students. Because of this, the team used the themes, quotes, and literature to identify three specific soft skills that were prevalent in the students' reflections and supportive of social justice work: communication, reflexivity, and cultural competency. Literature was used to identify definitions of each skill:

- Cultural competency is the ability to work effectively in cross-cultural situations with people of various backgrounds or experiences (Saunders, 2019), moving beyond simply understanding and being aware of differences and towards public library service that takes these into account (Cooke & Jacobs, 2018).
- Reflexivity is an intrapersonal practice that encourages challenging of internal bias or preconceived notions through various forms of self-reflection (D'Cruz et al., 2007).
- Communication uses interpersonal methods of relating to other people through written, oral, and other modes (Saunders, 2019).

These definitions were used in conjunction with the reflections to develop coding descriptions for each of the three skills (see Table 1). The reflections were coded by one researcher using these code descriptions and analyzed using frequency counts.

**Table 1**  
*Study codebook*

Code	Description
Cultural Competency	being aware of differences or what a community group is like; understanding new/different aspects of the community; taking differences into account when thinking about library service

Reflexivity	acknowledgment of changes in thinking surrounding the community; identifying errors or bias in own thinking; self-reflection; seeing value in self-reflection
Communication	listening, discussing, talking with the community; seeing value in listening to the community

---

## RESULTS

Of the 26 reflections included in the dataset, 24 students indicated some degree of soft skill development related to cultural competency, 20 reflexivity, and 25 communication. Across the codes, students stressed the value of a real-world, social-justice focused assignment that placed them in contact with members of the underserved group. One student expressed this sentiment by saying “while I still have not experienced their lives myself, I feel better equipped to support and engage with the community than I would if I had simply studied books, articles, or data on the topic.” A short description of results from each code is presented below.

### **Cultural Competency.**

A majority of students expressed that the assignment helped to deepen their understanding of the underserved group they were focused on. Students emphasized that hearing an insider perspective was inherently valuable because it illuminated aspects of the community previously unknown to the student. Even students who self-identified as having an insider status reported similar experiences, with one student writing “I was able to crystalize something that I knew was true about [the group] but I would not have necessarily been able to articulate it before.” This better understanding of underserved groups aligns with cultural competency skill development, especially as students began to draw connections in their reflections between the initial work they had done to understand the group and how the library might better serve underserved groups by addressing their unique needs. This was also illustrated in quotes from the reflections that stressed the importance of getting out into the community and seeing people with their own eyes “to identify and meet real needs in the community.”

### **Reflexivity.**

Though reflexivity was the most infrequently seen code in the dataset, the majority of students still indicated development of reflexivity. For example, one student shared that “it was hard to see the community past the lens I see it in,” noting that their previous interactions and perceptions of the underserved group were “colored” by their own past experiences. Reflexivity appeared to be especially prevalent for students who felt that they had little experience with the underserved group. Students often mentioned that they gained new understandings or described a previously unrecognized gap in their knowledge about the community by taking time to self-reflect on their conversations with members of the community or the community organization. While some students reported that the process of evolving their thinking was challenging—one used the phrase “outside my comfort zone”—most found value in this internal growth, with one student describing that this growth would allow them to “...be much more capable, confident,

and helpful when working with communities.” Another, recognizing future applications of reflexivity, wrote “as a future librarian, it’s important to me that I am cognizant of my own biases, and of how I develop my own perceptions about diverse userships.”

### **Communication.**

Communication skills were also seen in the dataset with students reporting that they were able to engage in “organic discussion,” “genuine,” and “in-depth” conversations, with many stressing an appreciation for the chance to not just speak, but to engage with others as well. As a student shared, “it was especially great to give someone a platform to celebrate the community and its successes and strengths.” Students indicated that listening was a desirable communication skill for their future work as LIS professionals. One student wrote that “at the end of the day, this tool is to help librarians connect with their community, and to connect, you have to listen.” Many students found the communication process to be a positive experience using words such as “eye-opening,” “inspiring,” “rewarding,” “illuminating,” and “enjoyable,” despite others expressing some amount of initial nervousness or discomfort. However, as some students were only able to work with an organization, rather than with a member of the underserved group, they recognized the need to think critically about who is serving as a mouthpiece for a community, and the importance of speaking with multiple members of the community to ensure they are developing a more holistic understanding of the community. A few students made connections between talking with their interviewee and developing trust between the library and community groups, with one noting that “it really illuminated how important it is to build a trusting relationship quickly” to facilitate more genuine communication. Other students tied communication skills in with both of the other codes, such as a student who shared “I think being able to communicate and learn from others is paramount to being a culturally competent librarian.”

### **DISCUSSION**

Overall, the field-based assignment offered students opportunities to build different soft skills that support social justice work, specifically cultural competency, communication, and reflexivity. The students reported that, through completing the assignment, they were able to 1) better understand the holistic lived experiences of underserved communities (cultural competency), 2) work on actively listening to and centering the voices of the underserved group (communication), and 3) challenge their own preconceived notions or biases through self-reflection (reflexivity). These three soft skills are vitally important for LIS careers, and can assist with building better understandings of, and stronger relationships with, underserved groups, yet they remain difficult to teach in a classroom setting (Saunders & Bajjaly, 2022). The reflections also revealed that most of the students had a positive experience with the assignment overall, especially in regards to communication. Positive experiences with assignments that require community interaction may provide motivation for students to engage more with underserved groups in meaningful ways as professionals, helping students to become more effective with social justice efforts in their future public library work. This is because these field-based experiences can provide a lower-stakes opportunity to practice the soft skills needed to effectively engage with diverse groups of people (Rogers, 2019), which may increase their comfort level with doing this work as well as their learning outcomes (Campana & Agarwal, 2019). Furthermore, as Cooke et al. (2016) write, social justice related-skills, like cultural

competency and reflexivity, must be integrated into LIS curriculum experience in a variety of modes to be impactful for students.

Beyond fostering the development of the three soft skills examined for this paper, the reflections emphasized that students valued and were motivated by the opportunity to move their classroom work into the field. Real-world experiences for students is a need that has echoed across the LIS landscape with some potential LIS employers prioritizing practical experiences and strong soft skills over an MLIS degree (Saunders, 2015). Researchers have pointed out that while communication skill development seems inherent in LIS classroom instruction where discussion, group work, and student leadership are frequently emphasized, this form of communication may not translate well to on-the-job applications in LIS professions, particularly when working with diverse groups (Saunders & Bajjalay, 2022). Additionally, being able to communicate effectively, and empathetically, with diverse groups of people is a foundational skill for social justice work in the LIS field (Cooke et al., 2006). Furthermore, many LIS programs offered asynchronously can limit the development of these types of communication skills. However, both in-person and asynchronous online classes participated in this assignment, indicating that field-based assignments that ask students both to talk and listen to community voices may overcome the shortcomings of traditional LIS curricula in supporting communication.

Despite the promise this study holds, several areas could be explored further. Since reflexivity development was not specifically built into the reflection prompts given to students, and it was the least prevalent skill found in the reflections, future efforts might involve a slight restructuring of the reflection questions or building in classroom activities to encourage self-reflection around challenging inherent bias or preconceived notions. Doing this could provide valuable benefits for the students as reflexivity is an important component of social justice work (Cooke et al., 2016), particularly as libraries increasingly focus on reaching and providing more effective support for underserved groups (Jaeger et al., 2016). Considering that students brought up limitations of speaking with a community organization, rather than with community members themselves, there is a need to better support students in connecting with members of underserved communities or organizations that are better integrated into underserved communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Results presented in this paper indicate that soft skill development, field-based experiences, and aspects of social justice work can be effective compliments to each other in LIS instruction and assignments. These dimensions have been noted in the literature as crucial curricular elements needed to prepare students for the demands of today's work as a LIS professional; however, these elements are difficult to teach through traditional avenues. This study offers the following recommendations to LIS educators: Offer students the opportunity to go out and speak with and listen to members and leaders of underserved communities. Structure these opportunities around aspects of social justice by centering the community's voice in the work students do to understand community-focused library service. In these ways, LIS students can potentially improve their cultural competency, reflexivity, and communication skill sets, which can strengthen their future community-centered, social justice efforts in the library.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The researchers would like to thank the students and community members who participated in the research activities. This research was funded by IMLS Grant #RE-18-19-0007-19.

## REFERENCES

- Barab, S., & Squire, K. (2004). Design-based research: Putting a stake in the ground. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences, 13*(1), 1-14. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327809jls1301\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327809jls1301_1)
- Campana, K., Kociubuk, J., Mills, J. E., & Martin, M. (2023). Learning about what's most important: Incorporating values into the design of library learning experiences for underserved groups. *Manuscript submitted for publication*. School of Information, Kent State University.
- Campana, K., & Agarwal, N. (2019). The landscape of research on learning in low-tech environments. *Information and Learning Sciences, 120*(11/12), 687-703. <https://doi-org/10.1108/ILS-10-2019-0103>
- Cooke, N. A., Sweeney, M. E., & Noble, S. U. (2016). Social justice as topic and tool: An attempt to transform an LIS curriculum and culture. *The Library Quarterly, 86*(1), 107-124. <https://doi.org/10.1086/684147>
- Cooke, N. A., & Jacobs, J. A. (2018). Diversity and cultural competence in the LIS classroom: A curriculum audit. *Urban Library Journal, 24*(1), 2. <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ulj/vol24/iss1/2>
- D'Cruz, H., Gillingham, P., & Melendez, S. (2007). Reflexivity, its meanings and relevance for social work: A critical review of the literature. *The British Journal of Social Work, 37*(1), 73-90. <https://doi-org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl001>
- Goodsett, M., & Koziura, A. (2016). Are library science programs preparing new librarians? Creating a sustainable and vibrant librarian community. *Journal of Library Administration, 56*(6), 697-721. <https://doi-org/10.1080/01930826.2015.1134246>
- Jaeger, P. T., Shilton, K., & Koepfler, J. (2016). The rise of social justice as a guiding principle in library and information science research. *Library Quarterly, 86*(1), 1–9. <https://doi-org/10.1086/684142>
- Poole, A. H., Agosto, D., Greenberg, J., Lin, X., & Yan, E. (2021). Where do we stand? Diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in North American library and information science education. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science, 62*(3), 258-286. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.2020-0018>

Rogers, C. (2019). Transforming students through integrative and transformative learning in a field-based experience. *Journal of Transformative Learning*, 6(1).  
<https://jotl.uco.edu/index.php/jotl/article/view/250>

Saunders, L. (2015). Professional perspectives on library and information science education. *Library Quarterly*, 85(4), 427–453. <https://doi.org/10.1086/682735>

Saunders, L. (2019). Core and more: Examining foundational and specialized content in library and information science. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 60(1), 3-34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/26567099>

Saunders, L., & Bajjaly, S. (2022). The importance of soft skills to LIS education. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 63(2), 187-215.  
<https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.2020-0053>