# Engaging through Conversation

## Community Building for Inclusive Library Instruction

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# Introduction

## Beginning

Library instructors often do not have a formal education in instructional pedagogy when they begin delivering lessons through library instruction.[1] Learning how to be a good library instructor can also be insular, with individual librarians testing new techniques and completing classes in silos without much input from other library instructors. Widespread change requires broad participation from librarians who are focused on diversity, inclusion, and equity in their instructional practice.

As library instructors new to George Mason University, we saw a gap in library instruction communities of practice, since none focused on both library instruction and diversity, equity, and inclusion. At the institution, there were general trainings about these issues, but none that focused on actionable plans for library instructors

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[*] All the collaborators responsible for this chapter are white. We benefit from the white supremacy and suppression maintained in librarianship and higher education. There are limits and hidden biases at work that stem from our privileges and perspectives. We also have other identities that play a role in our writing. Christopher is a cis, able-bodied, queer man. Ashley is a cis, able-bodied, heterosexual woman. David is an able-bodied and queer nonbinary person.

that would give us the skills to directly apply our learnings to the classroom. In response, we created Conversations of an Inclusive Nature (COIN) to provide a space for library instructors to build a community focusing on the intersection of their jobs and social justice.

## Definitions

Throughout this chapter, we use *library instructors* to mean faculty librarians as well as library staff who teach classes or workshops. Our definition of inclusion draws heavily on the definitions from Mason's Office of Compliance, Diversity, and Ethics and C4DISC.[2] For our context, we highlight that inclusion "decenters majority perspectives and structures";[3] is "active, intentional, and ongoing";[4] creates "opportunities for historically excluded groups";[5] and is a "commitment to diversity at all levels."[6] Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso's definition of majoritarian narratives as stories that have been privileged by race, class, gender, and other privileges guides our work.[7] This encompasses white supremacy, ableism, and colonialism, as well as other forms of systemic oppression. By decentering majoritarian narratives, library instructors may begin to understand how their own stories and intersecting identities affect their experiences.[8]

## Chapter Structure

In this chapter, we discuss the shortcomings of inclusion trainings in libraries and outline COIN, a conversation series centered on discussions of improving inclusion in library instruction. We also cover the creation and logistics of COIN, outcomes of the program, and how to adapt it to your context.

# Current Situation

> *Problems related to prejudice and discriminatory practices are usually denied by members of the dominant white group. Such denials tend to be reinforced by the belief among whites that equal employment opportunity and affirmative action legislative policies have opened doors for minorities and erased discriminatory practices in these organizations.*
>
> —E. J. Josey[9]

Librarians and scholars from marginalized communities have long said that not enough is being done to bring about justice and equity institutionally to libraries and library and information science (LIS) programs, which has affected library instruction.[10] Todd Honma explains how librarianship pretends to be a haven for justice while it upholds and mimics racist structures found in the rest of the country.[11] For example, libraries often collect Indigenous artifacts and systems of knowledge and fail to recognize the colonial history of their institution.[12] Future librarians are not receiving the education to remedy this. Social justice pedagogies have yet to become fully integrated into LIS curricula, but many scholars have presented methods to change this.[13] One way that libraries have attempted to answer this criticism of the institution is through internal cultural awareness workshops for staff.

Stephane Shepherd's study on the effects of cultural awareness workshops in the medical field concluded that the workshops are ineffective at making significant changes to workplace inclusion.[14] April Hathcock explains that diversity programs in libraries are too intertwined with whiteness to effectively recruit and retain librarians from underrepresented groups.[15] Cultural awareness workshops fail at destabilizing the majoritarian systems intrinsic to traditional library instruction. In order to demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity, the library field (well intentioned or not) came to the false conclusion that one-time inclusivity trainings or webinars are effective at creating inclusive instructors and instruction practices.

At our institution, library instruction often consists of single sessions with students, or the one-shot model. As a result, we hope to make as much of an impact as possible during our single classroom visits. We created COIN to be a place where library instructors can discuss inclusivity issues and connect them to their jobs and instructional practices, while keeping the limitations of the single-session instruction model in mind across our discussions.

# COIN Creation

As a response to the issues we recognized with inclusion trainings at our institution, we created COIN to engage with a community of people about inclusivity issues in library instruction settings. We created a series focused on libraries and library instruction, which concentrates on one issue at a time and is grounded in community participation and action. We chose to limit COIN's scope to instruction because this is an area where we can make both individual and programmatic changes without administrative buy-in. The COIN facilitators are all members of our library's Teaching & Learning Team, so we have a voice in higher-level decisions surrounding library instruction. There were several factors that assisted us in the creation of this program: the team had an existing interest in DEI-related issues, there was already

a framework in place for this type of work, and we were given the necessary time and space to plan these meetings.

First, there was already an interest in learning about inclusive teaching practices on our team. The Teaching & Learning Team previously designed a well-attended workshop series about universal design for learning, and library instructors regularly attended other diversity trainings as well. Further, some library instructors would regularly and informally discuss these trainings in relation to issues surrounding inclusivity in library instruction and how they might change their practices as a result of what they learned. Originally COIN was intended to be held in person to mimic this lunchtime discussion, but soon after our inaugural meeting in early 2020, most employees at our institution began teleworking due to COVID-19, which led to COIN being held online. A major goal of COIN was to expand these conversations so that all library instructors would have the opportunity to participate, and this online environment (while unplanned) helped expand the conversation beyond the silos created by workplace location.

Our library also had an existing framework for communities of practice that assisted in the creation of COIN. A community of practice is defined as a

> social learning communit[y] …driven by collaboration [that] may include sharing work or ideas or observing each other's work. Central to communities of practice are learning skills and concepts, but the building and transfer of cultural knowledge within the community enable them to thrive.[16]

This definition guided our creation of COIN.

It is important to remember that "training culturally competent and socially responsible library and information science (LIS) professionals requires a blended approach that extends across curricula, professional practice, and research."[17] While COIN is one example of the inclusion efforts at our library, it cannot solve these issues alone; it must happen in conjunction with other initiatives.

# COIN Logistics

COIN is a monthly discussion series, with each meeting focusing on a different inclusivity theme. In this section, we outline how the series runs, including how participants and facilitators interact, how we engage participants in the discussion, and the changes that we made as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The theme of COIN changes each month, but in each discussion, we focus on inclusivity issues in library instruction. Examples of past themes include academic ableism, feminist pedagogy, and race in the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy*. These themes come from a

variety of sources: scholarly literature, conversations in the library world via Twitter, broader world issues, and a list of topic ideas generated by our COIN community.

Once the facilitators settle on a theme, we select resources to share with our community. We include resources in a variety of formats, including scholarly articles, podcasts, videos, and news articles. We prioritize choosing materials created by the communities most affected by the issue we discuss. We also provide our community with a document containing discussion questions beforehand so that learners who may need more time to process information have adequate time to think about these questions in advance. This document initially includes three to five questions based on the facilitators' reading and viewing of the resources.

An example of a COIN theme we used recently was vocational awe, centered by Fobazi Ettarh's work both in her original article and in a podcast where she discussed her ideas.[18] During the meeting, we prepared questions asking participants where they saw vocational awe in our institution, how we could follow Ettarh's advice and start collaborating more across departments on instruction, and other questions that related to her work and ours.

While we started with our questions, our discussion quickly expanded into our participants sharing their own personal experiences with this topic, both at our institution and outside it. We, in fact, asked only one of our prepared four questions and instead allowed participants to share. This is an example of our facilitation style at work: giving participants the space and flexibility to share their own thoughts is a crucial part of our work. We also used anonymous whiteboard tools, allowing participants who were not comfortable sharing aloud to still be heard during the meeting.

# Community of COIN

Since COIN was founded as a community of practice, we made it a priority to build our community and constantly adapt to its needs. This group was founded to discuss inclusivity issues in library instruction, but also to be inclusive of all library instructors and our wide array of experiences and personal knowledge. In creating that inclusivity, we advocate for welcomeness and do not limit conversations to being centered on only scholarly articles. Instead, we also encourage our community to share their stories around these topics.

In order to build the community and allow it to flourish, we created a space in which people can share their thoughts, experiences, and ideas in a variety of ways. This community encourages everyone to continue discussions and work outside of COIN meetings. We frame the meetings as a starting discussion of the topic, but the application of the work happens in library instruction settings. We also created an online messaging channel to encourage continued discussion of topics and sharing of resources. These opportunities hopefully allow colleagues to get

to know one another as people, not just coworkers and scholars, which is one of COIN's major goals.

In a community of practice, keeping participation voluntary allows participants to spread what they learn throughout the library.[19] Even with the voluntary nature of COIN, the learning and benefits are widespread due to the collaborative nature of library instruction at Mason.[20] We advertised COIN through e-mails to library instructors and presented about it department-wide. In these avenues, we discussed what happens in this community and went over the guidelines for discussions. The social learning approach of COIN also allows library instructors to learn and practice the skills we are discussing within their own contexts.

Six months into COIN, we distributed an anonymous survey to all library instructors to evaluate the program and find ways to improve. In this survey, we gathered a list of suggested topics the community wanted to learn about. After we received the survey results, the facilitators held a special meeting to organize the data. Then, as a community, we discussed the results and came up with recommendations to improve the program. The community asked for a space to continue these conversations with each other and brainstormed the best ways to do this.

We also had a request for more guest facilitators from across the library and the university. We encouraged our community to volunteer to guest-facilitate in order to provide this diversity of experiences of facilitators. The guest facilitator roles are always completely voluntary—in doing this, we hope to avoid tokenizing our colleagues and asking them to speak for their entire community, a burden that falls especially disproportionately on our colleagues of color.[21] We also introduced collaborative discussion questions so that those who do not feel comfortable facilitating can still help focus the discussion based on their interpretations of materials. Currently, we do not have a budget to pay for guest speakers, so we are careful not to ask others to freely exert their time and emotional labor. Overall, the group discussions about the survey and the reaction of the list of recommendations helped strengthen the COIN community. Members reach out more often to discuss COIN topics outside the sessions, share over our online messaging system, and provide feedback on how to keep improving the program.

# Instruction Projects Originated from COIN

Not every COIN is expected to result in a significant change in instruction pedagogy, but some have led to larger projects and assessments of instruction practices. Here we will focus on three different projects that have originated from COIN to demonstrate how it has impacted our institution.

## Lesson Plan Review

One of the first outcomes of COIN resulted from our discussion on feminist pedagogy in library instruction. During this conversation, the community shared how individual lesson plans should be reviewed and altered to have a stronger focus on student authority and expertise. Since that discussion, library instructors have worked to both alter existing lesson plans and create new lessons grounded in this work.

## Finding Diverse Voices Guide

During a COIN discussion on majoritarian narratives, library instructors decided that students should be taught about the oppressive systems of academic publishing, the importance of locating diverse authorship for their research, and ways to find these authors. This inspired a group of instructors to create the "Finding Diverse Voices in Academic Research" LibGuide and an accompanying lesson plan. Subject-specialist librarians have adapted this guide to their own fields, and one department has already requested workshops specifically on using this guide in their classrooms.

## Anti-racist Pedagogy Module

COIN attempts to support other inclusion projects in the University Libraries, too. As a result of national and local discussions of anti-racism, some library instructors began working on an asynchronous learning module in Blackboard on how to be an anti-racist library instructor at Mason. In order to introduce this module, a COIN was held and facilitated by the creators of the module. This COIN has helped shape the creation of the module to be focused on the needs and gaps at Mason.

# Bringing COIN to You

Because COIN is an adaptable program and format, we encourage you to adapt it at your own institution. As you think through this possibility, we want to take a moment to highlight some of our considerations as we started our series.

Before beginning this process, consider your internal work environment and purpose.[22] Each institution is at different stages, especially regarding inclusivity work. For example, if your institution is in the initial stages of becoming anti-racist, begin by defining concepts like inclusivity or white supremacy. Be prepared to set

expectations for the discussions and consider how you will decenter majoritarian voices, counter harmful statements, and allow anonymous responses (see appendix for COIN discussion guidelines). Think about what your motivations are for creating this at your institution and what allyship looks like for your community.[23] If your institution can maintain consistent work toward decentering majoritarian narratives, then your COIN could focus on structural changes such as adjusting job application requirements, name of use policies, and promotion processes.[24]

Our community members have been crucial in improving COIN along the way. Through a large survey as well as informal check-ins during meetings, we have learned how our community feels about COIN, what topics they are interested in discussing, and what we can do to make their experience better. We recommend this community approach, coupled with assessing your community's needs and participation during COIN discussions and activities.

Finally, consider if and how you want administrators to participate. When management gets involved in these personal and sometimes controversial discussions, the power dynamics at play can stifle conversation.[25] We prevented this from happening by allowing many opportunities for anonymous feedback, while still allowing administrators to participate. Perhaps there could be a secondary COIN for administrators and managers, or supervisor-free COIN meetings. Whatever you choose, make sure to always emphasize your commitment to the community and the marginalized voices in the library.

# Conclusion

For this chapter, we attempted to bring together relevant diverse perspectives in our sources. As we learn and advance our community's pedagogical practices, we hope to listen to the voices leading the movement of systemic change and to acknowledge the work of those who have been fighting against oppression in libraries long before us. Changing our instruction strategies and working together to introduce new teaching expectations will help to begin change at our level.

Racism and oppression did not start with, nor will they end with, one outwardly racist person. Racism and oppression are systemic. We see COIN as a step beyond education into action; action that we can take in our community and in our teaching. In addition to programs like COIN, which encourage more inclusive teaching practices, we need systematic change to the deep-rooted oppression evident in hiring practices, promotion criteria, and retainment.[26] Committees and initiatives must have the power and sustainability to confront the issues and imagine a better future for all learners.

# Appendix: COIN Discussion Guidelines as of Fall 2021

1. Learn from each other. This happens through listening, acknowledging differences, and realizing differences increase awareness.
2. Understand that there are different approaches to solving problems. If you are uncertain about someone else's approach, ask a question to explore areas of uncertainty. Listen respectfully to how and why the approach could work.
3. Be careful about putting others on the spot. Do not demand that others speak for a group that you perceive them to represent. Conversely, if you are a member of a group relevant to the discussion, you can choose to speak up or not depending on your comfort level.
4. Recognize that we are all still learning. Be willing to change your perspective, and make space for others to do the same.
5. If challenging something that has been said, do not challenge the individual sharing this idea or practice. Instead, challenge the idea or practice itself.
6. Accountability is important to growth. People will be given grace but will also be held accountable. If someone challenges something you said, this is an opportunity to grow not to become defensive.
7. Step Up, Step Back. Be mindful of taking up much more space than others.
8. Do not generalize about people. Be aware that even within groups, people have different lives and experiences.
9. Speak from your own experiences. Trust that your and others' experiences are important and valued; they are enough.
10. This is a confidential space. Don't share what others talked about without permission. Ask individually for permission to share others' stories.

# Notes

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