

# The Making Research Accessible initiative: Co-op Term Reflections

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My first eight-month term as the Student Librarian for the Making Research Accessible initiative (MRAi) offered many unique perspectives on how academics and researchers can better serve the communities they study, while also giving me instructive experience in the fundamentals of academic librarianship. Briefly speaking, MRAi is an ambitious collaboration between UBC Library and the UBC Learning Exchange that aims to connect research on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside with the neighborhood's organizations and people through a combination of material curation and open access archival. I found a few similarities to my Graduate Academic Assistant position at Koerner Library's Scholarly Communications office in this position; I did, for example, already have background knowledge of open access advocacy and principles. Other aspects of the MRAi position, however, offered totally new experiences in my (admittedly early) library career. The MRAi Student Librarian position has stretched my theoretical scholarly communications knowledge into more experiential—and experimental—domains.

Overall, my workplan has proven to be quite fluid because the initiative is in a transitional period. At the start of my term, I primarily reached out to authors of scholarly articles and helped redesign the MRAi website to match the Learning Exchange site's new layout and color scheme. Later in the term, I was assigned to more metadata work and group pre-planning in preparation for the reshaping of the initiative's front-facing portal. (Historically, this portal has been called the Information Hub, but it will soon undergo a name change; for convenience's sake, I will continue to refer to the portal as the "information Hub" or "Info Hub" throughout this report). I plan to do another eight-month co-op term at MRAi, so aspects of my work in the first term will be described as part of a continuing process in this report.

## Duties and Responsibilities

One of the main responsibilities of the MRAi Student Librarian position is to request permitted versions of scholarly articles from their authors. Scholarly publishers and their journals set their own rules for how articles they publish can be shared, and it is our prerogative to find and follow these stipulations so that our requests do not run afoul of copyright law. I first use an online self-archiving policy guide called [SHERPA/RoMEO](#) to determine which version—between pre-prints (versions before peer review), post-prints (versions after peer review, but before final typesetting) and publisher's versions (the final typesetting)—the author and I are allowed to archive to the university's digital repository, cIRcle. SHERPA/RoMEO also typically lists embargo periods, which are periods of time (usually anywhere from 6 to 48 months) that must pass from a given article's date of publication before it can be archived. Once I have all the relevant stipulations at hand, I can begin with the request itself.

MRAi's e-mail request template has been tweaked and improved slightly over the years to meet the preferences of different student librarians and more effectively communicate its message to its recipient. The current template briefly introduces the initiative, lists the articles requested, provides the author instructions for proceeding with cIRcle archival, and thanks them for their time. I plug all the "variables" (citations, permitted versions, embargo periods, names, etc.) into the template, add the proper e-mail address, double-check for inconsistencies/errors, and then send it off. Request e-mails can take longer than one might think, since I must double-check to ensure everything in them is rendered correctly. Plus, scholars tend to be quite busy, so there is no guarantee I will get a response the first time I request something. If I receive no response, I typically follow up with a shorter "bump" e-mail quoting the initial request. After two non-responses, MRAi determines the author should not be bothered further and the attempt is considered "unsuccessful."

MRAi uses a shared spreadsheet document to track progress on scholarly article requests. The tracking document is colour-coded by status. An article pending action is colored white, an article in the process of being archived becomes yellow, a successfully-archived article is green, an unsuccessful attempt is grey, and so on. Early on in my term, I helped make some significant streamlining changes to this document. The Student Librarian no longer has to manually colour each row; if the proper phrase is inserted into the **Status** column, it automatically turns a given entry to the appropriate colour. In addition, I added filters for each status phrase so I can view entries that belong to a certain category with a single click. I cut a couple of redundant “Notes” columns from the old version of the doc, and added columns denoting permitted versions, embargo dates, and license status at cIRcle staff’s request. I also added a column that captures “curated materials” (i.e. materials related to the entry, such as brief summaries or YouTube lectures). The tracking document is my most frequently used resource; it must be constantly revised to reflect updates in our article-gathering process. It helps the initiative see, at a glance, how far our collection has come along since its inception, what our collection’s strengths are, and how we can improve it.

About every month or so, I add new entries to the tracking document. The student librarian inbox receives search alert e-mail blasts from three different sources: Mendeley, Google Scholar, and QXMD. I separate them into their appropriate e-mail folders and then comb through the search results to determine which articles are relevant to the initiative. Once I have found one, I add its title, authors, corresponding author e-mail address, and full APA citation to the sheet (organized alphabetically by first author’s last name).

Perhaps one of my most challenging responsibilities as MRAi Student Librarian was creating a draft version of the initiative’s first Collections Management Plan at my supervisor’s request. I had not taken the iSchool’s Collections Management course yet, so I had little idea of what a “normal” collections management plan looked like, let alone a plan that would properly represent such a unique, mutable endeavor as MRAi. I first approached the plan by writing a short history of the initiative because I didn’t fully grasp the rationale behind MRAi’s past collection-related decision making. From there, I transitioned to our present-day collection management strategies, and finally made a few suggestions for our future. Devising a cohesive plan for the future was also difficult. At the time, many details of our contemporaneous Info Hub planning were still up in the air. I did not want to appear presumptuous by making the plan’s goals too specific, so I decided to paint my points with broad strokes. The main critique of my finished draft was that I had exceeded the scope of the project by focusing on the past and present, instead of looking mainly toward the future. However, I was also told that my survey of MRAi’s past could still prove useful in other contexts. In the end, I felt a bit sheepish because I had overextended myself on this project, but I took some solace in the silver lining.

Finally, as the new Information Hub design and structure has taken shape, I have been involved in nearly every step of the process: developing user profiles, performing content analyses, tweaking workflow designs, comparing our plans to similar websites, testing a metadata schema, making lists of other repositories to harvest from, brainstorming for a new name, and so on. Thus far, we have relied heavily on collaborative documents and comment threads to help us iterate. No one person takes complete control of a given task, and sometimes it takes multiple attempts and a couple of in-person discussions for us to improve an approach.

The metadata schema is a good example. UBC Systems Librarian Paul Joseph developed a draft schema based upon our stated needs in the business plan for the Information Hub redesign. He first presented it to us in November. Paul reasoned that we should start working the metadata schema out early because

it is the “engine” for the sheer amount of content on the new Information Hub. Since then, we have added and taken away certain metadata fields as MRAi deems them either necessary or obsolete. Filling out test metadata entries using real items in the tracking document has been the most effective method to determine what we might and might not need within the schema. So far, my supervisor, Aleha, a Graduate Academic Assistant, Bob Yeats, and I have built about thirty of these examples together. In particular, we have tried to surface potentially “problematic” entries (i.e. items with metadata demands that the schema does not meet). If we test extensively in order to work out the majority of the kinks now, then the metadata should make more sense to the end user from the first day the new website goes live.

## Skills

The MRAi Student Librarian position has been a great opportunity to cultivate unique skill sets alongside the fundamentals one might expect to learn in entry-level librarianship experience. Because MRAi has one foot firmly in academic librarianship and the other in community outreach, the student librarian is in good position to learn a lot about how the two intersect.

When I first took this position, I set my sights on sharpening my metadata development and management skills. The tracking document overhaul (described earlier in this report) was my first opportunity to improve the initiative’s existing metadata. It took me a while—about a month and a half or so—to become familiar enough with the tracking document to feel comfortable altering it. With the input of cIRcle Librarian Tara Stephens-Kyte, however, I was able to turn it into a clearer and more useful document. Now, the cIRcle Operations Assistant can refer to the tracking document for version and embargo information on an item they are about to archive instead of having to search through our e-mail correspondence.

Additionally, the Info Hub scoping exercises were like building blocks that helped me understand the considerations required to build a content management system like ours from scratch. I have been an accessory to this project from the beginning; UBC Library Business Support Analyst Carolina Amigo laid out the new Info Hub project’s high-level business objectives to Aleha and me in my very first meeting of the work term. From that big-picture vantage point, Carolina then split the different phases of the project into temporal milestones to shoot for, and she confirmed our minimum requirements for each component of the new website by reviewing them one by one with us. Carolina’s birds-eye viewpoint helped us target individual tasks and develop strategies for completing them. Observing thorough project management in a real-life situation has given me a framework for approaching projects that I might have to manage in my future career.

Many different people have a hand in guiding MRAi’s mandate—not only university librarians, but also public librarians, academics, educators, and community workers. Each professional in the committee has their own area of expertise and personal perspective. Though much of my actual work hews close to academic librarianship, internalizing different perspectives is critically important in order to do my job to the fullest. The monthly committee meetings are frequently the best venue for fruitful dialogue and strategic breakthroughs. However, I am still a paraprofessional, and I recognize I am rarely the most “qualified” person on any given subject. Therefore, I tend to be quiet and listen at most meetings until I am prompted to speak. Active listening is especially helpful when I need to take a step back and stay aware of potentially problematic aspects of the initiative’s goals. Kathleen, the director of the UBC Learning Exchange, is adept at identifying these pressure points and suggesting alternative approaches.

Building a learning tool for a marginalized community takes a great deal of forethought; we know that if MRAi is to succeed in the long term, the initiative needs to earn the trust of its intended audience in the Downtown Eastside. Developing these soft skills and gaining experience navigating the nuances of a large-scale project like MRAi will prove especially valuable if I intend to pursue scholarly communications positions later in my career.

## Concluding Reflections

The iSchool courses that best prepared me for this position were steeped in social justice issues. LIBR 569A (Information Practice and Protocol in Support of Indigenous Initiatives) and LIBR 569C (The Progressive Tradition of Information Professions) both approached librarianship from distinct viewpoints and critical lenses. They articulated the librarian's duty to amplify marginalized voices, validate different informational needs, and maintain respectful relationships with the people they serve. All of these courses' central principles—advocacy, witnessing, negotiated access, space-making—also play a central role in MRAi's ethos. The initiative is deliberate in its decision-making because its success hinges on how well it can serve communities with many contesting concerns.

If I could give a piece of evergreen advice to future students in this position, it would be to start talking with MRAi committee members early, especially in small groups or one-on-one. Committee members work in many different places (UBC and the Learning Exchange, along with SFU and VPL) and specialize in different areas (community engagement, communications, knowledge exchange, librarianship, pedagogy, research). MRAi affords student librarians a great chance to network and collaborate with people across disciplines. Even informal chats can lead to interesting ideas.

At times, staying proactive can be daunting. I admit I struggled to take initiative in certain aspects of my career before I came to UBC. It was, however, largely a product of being thrown into difficult situations without enough guidance or support. In my pre-UBC work environment, I was depended upon to keep a complicated system running smoothly. Any big changes, however necessary they may have been, ran the risk of disrupting the overall workflow. I was, essentially, in over my head, and I became anxious at the possibility of ruining critical components of the operation beyond repair. It is a fear that I have worked hard to overcome ever since I started the iSchool program. My supervisors at MRAi have been excellent at giving me space to try different things—and gently correcting course if they do not quite go as I planned. For example, when I was struggling with edits to my collection management plan draft before a meeting with the committee, Aleha stepped in to make some much-needed corrections, but reassured me that some of the material she cut was still relevant to the overall initiative and could find another use later on. In the end, I have found that allowing me leeway to make some mistakes has given me greater confidence in my capabilities, and for that I am grateful.

During my next term at MRAi, I hope to do a little bit more outreach. Throughout my first term, the Info Hub project has forced most of MRAi's energies inward. We are focusing intently on delivering a functional, intuitive, and informational finished product. Once the new web environment is ready to go (likely in late August), we can begin to promote it. The new Info Hub is meant to draw two different audiences—community members/organizations and students/academics. Drawing publicity to the initiative and developing a userbase for the Info Hub might require some innovative approaches. The Learning Exchange provides public computer stations to residents and serves as a neighborhood gathering place; we could do some sort of special tie-in, like a community research sprint, a workshop, or a luncheon. It is never too early to start planning!