

***Towards informed learning:
Snapshots of a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence program in Denver***

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This paper outlines aspects of the Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence (SIR) program that I undertook in Denver, Colorado in August-December 2010. The SIR program proved a most enriching experience for me, professionally and personally.

One reason for this paper is to encourage other LIS professionals and educators to apply for Fulbrights and other types of scholarships and exchange programs. And also to reinforce the message that research and further study really can open doors and enrich our professional careers. My Fulbright opportunity grew quite unexpectedly out of my doctoral study and previous experience as information literacy educator.

The Fulbright scholarship program was founded in 1945 by US Senator and Rhodes scholar, William J. Fulbright, with the aim to “bring a little more knowledge, a little more reason, and a little more compassion into world affairs and thereby to increase the chance that nations will learn at last to live in peace and friendship” ([Australian-American Fulbright Commission](#), 2011). It offers an extensive range of research and educational opportunities across all disciplines, drawing international scholars to the US and sending US scholars to other parts of the world. The Australian-American Fulbright Commission administers the scholarship program in Australia and provides outstanding support, both to Australian scholars and to visiting international scholars. In this way, it achieves its aim to “*promote and support mutual understanding between the peoples of Australia and the United States through educational and cultural exchange*” ([Australian-American Fulbright Commission](#), 2011). The Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence (SIR) program assists US institutions that are historically under-represented in international academic exchange. Unlike Australian-American Fulbright scholarships, SIR is administered by the [Council for International Exchange of Scholars](#) in Washington DC.

Prior to leaving for the US, I gained invaluable insights and encouragement through the orientation program hosted by the Australian-American Fulbright Commission. Highlights included opportunities to meet other current and past Fulbright scholars and the presentation dinner presided by US Ambassador Jeffrey Bleich. A further exciting prelude to my scholarship was attending the Independence Day garden party at the American Embassy in Canberra.

My SIR program was hosted jointly by 3 higher education institutions: [University of Colorado Denver](#) (UCD), [Metropolitan State College Denver](#) (MSCD) and [Community College Denver](#) (CCD). The main aim of the program was to advance the academic success of international students and traditionally underserved students at these institutions. The objectives of the program were quite varied and complex:

- Develop tri-institutional faculty and staff capacity to support academic success of international students and underserved students
- Support informed learning initiatives to re-vitalise Auraria Library’s information literacy education programs and information services
- Co-teach an undergraduate first year experience course (unit)

- Participate in professional interaction and cultural enrichment: community outreach, conferences, symposia, campus visits and travel

In this paper I concentrate on the second objective and shared initiatives with Auraria Librarians.

I came to call my SIR program the Auraria informed learning project. Auraria is the name of the campus which houses my 3 host institutions. It is situated in downtown Denver and is principally a commuter campus (in other words, most students live off-campus). The student population on the Auraria campus is very diverse, culturally and socially, with a large proportion of Hispanic, African-American and indigenous students, as well as increasing numbers of international students. Many students are from less privileged backgrounds and are first in family to attend university. So my SIR program contributed to the strong and active commitment of the 3 institutions to assisting students' transition to university and supporting their learning needs for study and life.

I worked with a wide range of professionals across the Auraria campus – academics, learning advisors, international office staff, HR officers, and students – but principally with the Auraria Library director and staff. It was symbolically important - and pleasing for me - that my home base was the Auraria Library. It made me available on common ground to everyone across the campus.

[Auraria Library](#) is situated at the centre of the campus. It serves the students and staff of all 3 institutions, plus the wider community. Consequently it provides a wide range of information resources, facilities, services and an information literacy program. When I arrived in August 2010, the library was already engaging in an ambitious revisioning process, led by Auraria Library Director, Dr Mary Somerville and members of the shared leadership team of senior library staff. Through this process, they seek to address the learning needs of all library users in the context of ever-increasing student numbers, rapidly advancing technologies, changing pedagogical practices.

The revisioning process has 4 inter-related aspects:

- Library building refurbishment
- Library service redesign
- Information literacy enhancement
- Library staff development

The process is underpinned by theories and practices of shared leadership, participatory action research collaborative design, reflective practice and informed learning (Brwn-Sica & Somerville, forthcoming; Somerville, 2008; forthcoming). It was my doctoral work (Hughes 2009; forthcoming) and in particular the connection with Bruce's work on informed learning (Bruce, 2008; Bruce & Hughes, 2010; Bruce, Hughes & Somerville, 2011) that drew me into the process.

The Auraria Library revisioning process involves intellectual, professional and practical challenge for all. As scholar-in-residence I sought to support Auraria librarians in their revisioning journey. My role was that of catalyst and critical friend, to mentor and encourage participants, rather than to direct or impose changes. With a view to fostering exploration, dialogue and strategy building around informed learning, I led a series of workshops which enabled the librarians to:

- Explore fresh approaches to information services and information literacy
- Develop understanding of informed learning as a concept
- Apply informed learning principles to the planning, implementation and development of information literacy education

Professor Christine Bruce of QUT set the scene for my SIR residency with a presentation to Auraria librarians on informed learning in early August 2010. Informed learning (Bruce 2008) is a relatively new construct. Quite simply, informed learning implies “using information to learn”. It fuses learning about a subject with learning to use information critically, creatively, reflectively, ethically, and wisely. I built on this conceptual foundation over the next four months through a series of workshops and discussions with librarians and other interested groups around the campus. The most sustained interactions were with the librarians and focused on the development of policies and approaches that:

- Support active and reflective learning – eg inquiry-based, problem-based learning
- Are relevant to learners’ context and are woven into the curriculum
- Forge continuing partnerships – between librarians and educators

The workshops and discussions with librarians focussed attention of seven questions: *Who? What? Why? How? When? Where? So what?*

These questions were applied to various key activities, which included:

- analysing library users’ needs and learning space design
- planning policy, services and information literacy
- evaluating established and new service models
- reflecting on professional practice and learning

The workshops fostered experiential learning. The librarians were themselves informed learners. Simultaneously they enhanced their practice as educators, through planning and applying strategies for curriculum-based informed learning.

In addition, informed learning involves collaboration between LIS professionals and academics and other educators. My SIR program also introduced concepts and practices of informed learning to academics through seminars, my teaching commitments and personal contact. Some interested academics also engaged with librarians in strategic discussions around informed learning initiatives.

Informed learning is a dynamic work in progress for the Auraria librarians. When I returned briefly to Denver in April 2011, it was exciting to see previous years’ plans coming into practice and new initiatives emerging. During an evaluation session, the librarians showcased 11 informed learning projects, and reported on several others. Examples of what has been achieved so far include:

- Development of a wiki-based informed learning Blueprint for internal collaborative planning and discussion;
- Development of a comprehensive informed learning plan, that is publicly available and promotes the policy, current scope and further potential for curriculum-based informed learning
- Creation of several professional-quality, branded promotional materials, including 4 posters on topical informed learning issues, which have already been successfully used for poster sessions at two campus open days;
- Development and application of an online survey, which innovatively both analyses students information literacy needs pre-class, and is used by students as a learning tool by students during class
- A project and exhibition for industrial design students focusing on library facilities, where the library became a learning lab; this project also represents a productive librarian-academic partnership for informed learning

The outcomes of these activities, which are continuing to grow at Auraria Library, include:

- A shift towards a holistic approach to information literacy that focuses on deep contextualised learning that extends beyond information skills instruction

- Stronger collaborative ties forming between librarians and academics
- Production of new learning resources and promotional materials
- Creation and use of new planning tools to support campus-wide informed learning
- Increased knowledge, expertise and confidence ,and renewed professional excitement, among Auraria librarians

While the informed learning journey continues at Auraria Library, it is evident that all library users are already benefitting – students, academics and librarians alike. From my personal perspective, through this Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence program I have developed as informed learner and educator. The program has also enabled me to try out the theory of informed learning in practice – and to find that it works well! All this offers me and my colleagues at QUT and in Denver a promising foundation for further collaborative research and development. What's more, I have made new friends, connected with international colleagues and explored vibrant US sites, history and culture.

I'll leave you with a picture of a familiar Denver inhabitant who is surely a resourceful informed learner ...



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Fulbright SIR experiences blog: <http://www.fbdenver.blogspot.com/>

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