



Evidence Summary

Librarians View Instruction as Integral to Their Professional Identities

A Review of:

Julien, H., & Genuis, S. K. (2011). Librarians' experience of the teaching role: A national survey of librarians. *Library & Information Science Research*, 33(2), 103-111. doi: 10.1016/j.lisr.2010.09.005

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Abstract

Objective – To explore the ways that professional and non-professional library staff experience and relate to their instructional roles.

Design – Online survey.

Setting – All types of Canadian libraries, including public, school, post-secondary, medical, special, and other libraries.

Subjects – A total of 788 library staff persons with instructional responsibilities.

Methods – In 2009, the authors constructed a 20-minute anonymous survey that contained questions about the nature of librarians' instructional work, their preparation for doing instruction, and their experiences as instructors. Subjects were recruited via several electronic mail lists. The authors used SPSS to analyze the quantitative data and NVivo to analyze the qualitative data.

Main Results – The study found that the majority of subjects believed instruction to be integral to their professional identities, although some viewed it as an imposition. The nature of instructional work varied greatly, but included short presentations; a series of sessions;

semester-length courses; and one-on-one instruction. Subjects prepared for instruction through on-the-job training; reading professional literature; attending workshops and conferences; taking a formal course in instruction; and other methods. On the whole, training helped library staff to feel more prepared for teaching and to embrace instructional work as integral to their professional identities. Study participants derived enjoyment from instruction in the form of satisfaction with facilitating student learning; relationship building; personal development; task variety; and appreciation of the heightened profile of library staff. Subjects also described several barriers to teaching, including administrative, technological, and logistical barriers; client and faculty interactions; and interpersonal challenges such as nervousness or lack of preparation. Finally, subjects described the ways that instruction has changed with the impact of new technologies, increased expectations, and changing pedagogical practices.

Conclusion – Library administrators should support the teaching duties of librarians and library staff by helping to provide them with adequate preparation time, resources, emotional support, and training. In addition, formal preparation for instruction should be integrated into professional library training programs, including MLIS programs, to better prepare librarians and other library staff to participate in information literacy instruction.

Commentary

To support the growing need for information literacy skills, librarians are increasingly called upon to serve as instructors in the formal classroom, through distance learning, or through one-on-one interactions at the reference desk. The demands brought about by the changing information landscape naturally raise the question: Are librarians and other library staff adequately prepared to embrace this new

instructional role? In many cases it would appear that they are either unprepared to teach or are unsure about their role as teachers. This study provides a valuable analysis of this issue and contains important implications for library administrators and library science programs.

In this study the authors have built upon their previous work, in which they analyzed librarians' experiences of the instructional role through interviews and diary data (Julien & Pecoskie, 2009; Julien & Genuis, 2009). In previous studies the authors focused on librarians' often complex and unequal relationships with teaching faculty (Julien & Pecoskie, 2009) and the emotional stressors that come with doing library instruction (Julien & Genuis, 2009).

Although the population sample used in this study is not random, the high level of participation from staff from a variety of library types provides critical insights into the changing role of instruction in library work. The study received ethics board approval, and the survey instrument, which is included as an appendix, was pretested twice to ensure its validity. As the authors observed, a weakness of the study design is that participants were self-selected and therefore may have particularly strong feelings about instruction. The choice of the survey method, however, is appropriate for the study objectives.

The authors found that significant relationships existed among a number of important factors with regard to preparation, expectations, and the instructional role. For example, those who took formal instruction courses felt that they were better prepared to teach and viewed instruction as important to their professional identities; this was also true of those who attended professional development activities related to instruction. In addition, those with MLIS or equivalent degrees were more likely to expect to teach and to view instruction as an important part of their library roles. Although these findings are significant, the most

important finding to emerge from this research is that a good portion of today's librarians and library staff do indeed view instruction as integral to their professional identities.

What makes this study particularly interesting is its use of identity theory and role theory to provide a lens through which readers may view the issue of librarians' self-conception in relation to instruction. From this theoretical standpoint, roles and identities are constructed in response to social interactions that shape expectations for patterns of behaviour. As the roles of librarians change in response to new technologies, instruction is becoming more prevalent in librarians' work tasks, but numerous external and internal factors influence the ways that librarians view these new roles. Faculty interactions, changing student needs and preferences, new technologies, teacher training, and administrative support all have an impact on the ways that librarians relate to their new roles as information literacy instructors. As this study demonstrates, the effect of these compounding factors may be that librarians experience some ambivalence about the teaching role, while at the same time they believe teaching to be important to their professional identities.

One of this study's implications concerns how the role of instruction in library work has been only minimally addressed in library school curricula. Although librarians largely acquire teaching skills on the job, many would prefer to acquire these skills through their library school educations (Westbrock & Fabian, 2010). However, many library schools do not require students to take an instructional course or even offer any course in information literacy instruction (Julien, 2005). For MLIS programs that do offer instructional courses, their focus is often on school libraries and media centers, which is of limited use to those pursuing careers in different types of libraries (Sproles, Johnson, & Farison, 2008). Thus, the importance of addressing information literacy instruction in

the formal training for library careers should not be underemphasized.

While taking instructional courses is an important part of the preparation for library work, the process of learning to teach (and learning to teach better) is ongoing, occurring throughout one's library career. To competently and confidently embrace their instructional roles, librarians and library staff must engage in a process of continual education about new teaching strategies and new technologies through participation in conferences, seminars, webinars, workshops, peer reviews, evaluations, self-reflection, and reading the literature. In addition to its implications for library school curricula, this study is especially important for library administrators, since they play a critical role in creating a supportive work atmosphere that provides librarians and library staff with ample time and resources to prepare for teaching and to engage in professional development. Thus, this study should resonate broadly with library administrators who recognize the value of supporting librarians in their roles as information literacy instructors.

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