Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

More Research Needed on Librarian Teaching Anxiety

A Review of: Davis, Kaetrena D. "The Academic Librarian as Instructor: A Study of Teacher Anxiety." College & Undergraduate Libraries 14.2 (2007):77-101.

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Objective – To identify the types of librarian teaching anxiety and the coping mechanisms that often accompany it and to compare those findings with those described by Showalter in "Teaching Literature"; also, to examine whether perceptions of librarians from both inside and outside the profession influence teaching anxiety.

Design – A 35-item online questionnaire created using Zoomerang; a link to the questionnaire was distributed through the Information Literacy Instruction Listserv (ILI-L).

Subjects – Subscribers to ILI-L. There were approximately 3,700 subscribers to ILI-L at the time of the study. This electronic mailing list is sponsored by the Instruction Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries and is moderated.

Methods – As previously mentioned, a link to the questionnaire was distributed via the ILI-L. Requests for participation were sent to the list three times during the six weeks the survey was open for responses. The questionnaire consisted primarily of multiple choice questions, several with the option to enter a free text "Other" response, as well as four Likert-type questions. After the survey closed, the collected data was analyzed using SPSS. The article did not indicate when the survey was completed.

Main Results – 687 responses were collected. Of those, 657 were completed. Surveys were assessed for accuracy, during which 305 responses were eliminated, resulting in 382 "viable" responses (84). Accuracy assessments consisted of throwing out surveys in which respondents answered questions inappropriately, however, an explanation of what constituted an inappropriate response is not included.

Nearly three quarters of respondents (74%) indicated they enjoyed teaching. This trend did not appear to be related to the number of years of experience as a librarian. The majority of respondents (58%) had never taught full semester or quarter courses, whereas "virtually all" (86) had taught one-shot instructional sessions. Sixty-three percent of respondents noted being nervous prior to teaching. Although 40% of respondents noted having no physical symptoms of anxiety, of those who did, the main symptoms included sweating and upset stomach. Sixty-five percent of respondents noted experiencing mental or emotional symptoms, mainly identified as worries about being sufficiently prepared and answering tough questions (40%) and fear of public speaking (27%). These mental and emotional symptoms were noted to occur often in the case of 29% of respondents, and at least some of the time in 41% of respondents. Nearly three quarters of the respondents reported using personal strategies for dealing with teaching anxiety, including over-preparation, joining groups where they were able to practice public speaking, and prayer. Most (84%) did not have routines or rituals that they followed prior to teaching.

Some additional findings were presented regarding librarians' perceptions of themselves as well as perceptions of librarians by other faculty. Eighty-four percent of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that there are many differences in the roles and duties of librarians and paraprofessionals, while 78% agreed or somewhat agreed that faculty do not understand the librarian's teaching role. Thirty-five percent noted defending teaching roles to other librarians.

Conclusion – The role of librarians in academic institutions continues to evolve and include more teaching. As an increasing number of librarians regularly teach and move to teaching semester-long credit courses, the subject of teaching anxiety will continue to grow in importance. This small study draws attention to the need for more research in this area.

Commentary

Little research exists that specifically addresses teaching anxiety in librarians. Given the shifting role of academic librarians toward more teaching, whether course-integrated or in stand-alone courses, it is a topic worthy of attention. While Davis' study attempted to provide some insight into librarian teaching anxiety, it fell short in many regards. That being said, the discourse in the introductory sections of the article about defining a librarian and how that definition and evolution of instruction relates to teaching is thought provoking by itself, although a bit dated.

The problems with this study began in the construction of the questionnaire itself, which was included as an appendix to the article. The online survey failed to automatically skip certain questions based on the participant's response. The manuscript indicates that many respondents did not do this on their own, and as a result, nearly half of the responses obtained (305) were not included in the final analysis. This elimination resulted in a low response rate (approximately 10%) based on the number of subscribers to the electronic mailing list and brings into question whether any of the results are meaningful. Additionally, there is no mention of validating the survey or vetting it amongst colleagues for clarity.

Question design and wording are keys to obtaining the best possible results in this type of research; Davis' study had many problems in this regard. In the career choice and perception section of the survey, respondents were asked about their level of agreement with certain statements related to librarianship. Three of these used negative language ("faculty don't understand my role," "leave librarianship," and "librarian stereotypes bother me"). These questions were immediately followed by one asking if the respondent had ever defended their teaching role. One must wonder if more neutral language would have produced different results. There are several typographical errors

in this section's table as well, including the misspelling of "agree" and using "somewhat agree" twice, once where it should have said "somewhat disagreed."

Another problem with the study is speculation on the part of the researcher about how librarians perceive their duties. The author asserts that librarians know what they do professionally and that their duties are clearly outlined from a question that asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with the statement, "There are a lot of differences in the roles/duties of the library professional and paraprofessional." Additionally, all of the data in this study are reported in percentages. The author attempts to draw parallels between perceptions, years in the profession, and teaching anxiety, yet there is no data that indicates whether any of the relationships were statistically significant. The use of percentages is somewhat confusing and without statistical analysis, difficult to evaluate. The author also failed to explain how

she analyzed questions with free text responses in the "other" category. All together, these issues result in some mistrust of the results on the whole.

Though the limitations and problems noted above prevent the information from being generalized, this study does highlight the fact that more research is needed to examine the causes and types of teaching anxiety in librarians, research that could lead to structured help in coping with this anxiety. The study also draws attention to the need for librarians to be cautious and seek mentorship when designing questionnaires of any kind, so that the data gathered from them will be more meaningful.

Works Cited

Showalter, Elaine. <u>Teaching Literature</u>. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003.