



The Preparation of Academic Librarians Who Provide Instruction: A Comparison of First and Second Career Librarians



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 April 2016

Received in revised form 17 May 2016

Accepted 19 May 2016

Available online 8 June 2016

Keywords:

Information literacy

Library instruction

Teaching skills

Preparation for teaching

Second career librarians

ABSTRACT

With the growing emphasis on information literacy and critical thinking in higher education, it is important that academic librarians who provide instruction have the necessary skills related to their responsibilities. The *ACRL Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators* include twelve skill categories that can serve as a measure of a librarian's ability as an instructor. The purpose of this study was to examine how academic librarians feel they have been prepared to provide instruction by determining the degree to which previous work experience (specifically a "first career") may have had an impact on their ability to perform their teaching responsibilities and to examine the extent to which the MLS degree has prepared them in the area of instruction. A survey was sent to four library Listservs yielding 608 respondents. Results indicated that librarians who had another career prior to becoming an academic librarian who provides instruction felt that they were better prepared to provide instruction than those who did not have a prior career. Furthermore, these librarians' responses seemed to suggest that for the majority of the skill categories, their prior work experience provided them with a greater extent of preparation than did their MLS education.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of information literacy in higher education has become increasingly important, especially as a means of engaging students in critical thinking and problem solving. Many academic librarians who provide instruction have responded by moving away from traditional bibliographic instruction and the teaching of skills (e.g., point and click) toward focusing on information literacy concepts as a means of framing instruction (Determing & Johnson, 2011). The adoption of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* by the ACRL board in January 2016 has encouraged academic librarians to approach their instruction from a different perspective and has sparked the development of new and creative lesson plans based on threshold concepts.

With an increased emphasis on information literacy instruction, academic librarians are being called upon to teach more and more frequently and in many different formats and settings, i.e., one-shot sessions, semester courses, face-to-face, online, synchronous, asynchronous, etc. Curriculum initiatives such as the first-year experience, writing across the curriculum, and general education have provided additional opportunities for librarians to take on the role of teacher and have impelled academic libraries to emphasize teaching as a "core

service" (Walter, 2008). Due to this increased demand, teaching responsibilities are not limited to "instruction" librarians, but can encompass all librarians in public service (Sproles & Ratledge, 2004). Librarians from all divisions of the library who are seeking tenure may now also be required to demonstrate teaching effectiveness, although this may vary greatly based on their particular institution. For these reasons, the term "academic librarians who provide instruction" was used in this study to identify those librarians who are involved in teaching in an academic library.

The purpose of this study was to examine how academic librarians feel they have been prepared to provide instruction by 1) determining the degree to which previous work experience (specifically, a "first career") may have had an impact on a librarian's ability to perform the teaching responsibilities of his/her position and 2) examining the extent to which the Master's Degree in Library Science (MLS) has prepared librarians in the area of instruction. The impetus for this study arose from observations the author has made regarding the circuitous pathways to teaching that librarians in her library have followed, as well as discussions she has had with colleagues regarding the effect of first careers on the teaching skills of second career librarians. Steven Bell (2016), Associate University Librarian for Research & Instructional Services at Temple University commented on his own early career in academic librarianship saying that, "Because I worked in an academic library, I was told to teach students how to use library research databases. I knew how to use the databases, but I had no idea how to

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teach students or effectively communicate why they should use the databases." As a second career reference and instruction librarian with a first career in arts education, the author of the current study has become increasingly cognizant of the fact that her previous work experience has provided her with many attributes that can be of value when carried over into academic librarianship, especially with regard to teaching, such as creativity, improvisation, discipline, instructional design, planning and organization. Taking into consideration the skills that potential employees have acquired through prior work experience would be both important and advantageous for hiring committees as they attempt to match skill sets of potential employees to the needs of the specific library.

In this study, the *ACRL Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators* (approved by the ACRL Board in 2007) were employed as a means of eliciting information from librarians in regard to their preparation for teaching. A comparison was made between three categories of librarians who provide instruction as part of their job responsibilities: 1) first career librarians (typically these individuals did not have a substantial prior career before becoming an academic librarian who provides instruction, 2) individuals with previous non-instructional work experience in libraries prior to taking on instructional responsibilities, and 3) second career librarians who had a substantial non-library prior career. The survey asked these individuals to indicate to what extent their prior work history helped prepare them for each of the skill categories listed in the ACRL standards. It was predicted that individuals with extensive prior work experience (subgroups 2 and 3) would rate their instructional preparedness skills higher than individuals who did not have such a foundation. These same individuals were also asked to what extent their MLS education prepared them for these same skill categories, but in this case, it was not expected to find significant differences between the three subgroups. It should be noted here that the responses received were subjective in nature and were based on the librarians' self-perception of how their past experiences assisted them in acquiring instructional skills. While a more direct, objective measurement of these librarians' teaching skills would be very useful, such a measurement would be difficult to accomplish and was not incorporated in this study at this point in time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature contains considerable information concerning the integration (or lack thereof) of instruction/teaching skills in the MLS curriculum, but there is scant research on the impact of prior careers on second career librarians, especially with regard to teaching.

MLS CURRICULUM AND TEACHING PREPARATION

Research studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s revealed that library schools were found to be lacking in providing formal training in bibliographic instruction. Patterson and Howell's (1990) survey found that professional education for library user instruction "remains uneven and haphazard, and few instruction librarians have had the necessary courses and practical experience in their formal library education programs to prepare them even minimally for what is encountered on the job" (1990). However, by the end of the 1990s, there had been some improvement in this area and the majority of accredited MLS degree programs offered a separate course on instruction (usually in the form of an elective) and/or provided content on pedagogy in other courses within the curriculum (Walter, 2008). Despite these gains, Dalrymple (2002), recommended that library schools do more to emphasize the importance of acquiring teaching skills to pre-service librarians and strengthen the curriculum in regard to instructional content. Pappert (2005) agreed that librarians should receive a strong foundation in pedagogical theory and practice while in library school.

Within the past 20 years, several studies have examined a list of proficiencies for instruction librarians in order to investigate the level to which these librarians are prepared to teach. Some of these studies analyzed the proficiencies from the librarians' perspective. Shonrock and Mulder (1993) used the 84 proficiencies for bibliographic instruction delineated in the *Core and Advanced Competencies for Library Instructors & Coordinators* published by the ACRL Bibliographic Instruction Section (BIS) in 1985 as a basis for two surveys. The first survey asked members of BIS to evaluate the importance of those 84 proficiencies in 13 categories. The categories of Communication Skill, Instructional Ability, and Planning Ability received the highest mean scores from the 144 respondents. The second survey asked how the librarians had acquired the 25 most important proficiencies identified in the first survey and where they would have preferred to acquire them. Respondents (N = 181) indicated that only two of these proficiencies had been acquired primarily in library school and that 18 of the 25 proficiencies were acquired primarily through training on the job or were self-taught.

In 2007, the Instruction Section of ACRL published the *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators*. These revised standards were built around 12 broad skill categories, each with a set of specific proficiencies for instruction librarians (yielding 41 proficiencies), as well as 27 proficiencies for coordinators of instruction programs, for a total of 68 proficiencies (Association of College and Research Libraries, ACRL, 2007). Utilizing these new proficiencies, Westbrook and Fabian (2010) recreated Shonrock and Mulder's earlier study utilizing two surveys. They administered both surveys through the ACRL Information Literacy Instruction Listserv and elected to use only the 41 proficiencies that applied to instruction librarians. The results of the first survey indicated that planning skills, information literacy integration skills, and instructional design skills were the categories that were of most importance to respondents (N = 173). Similar to the findings of Shonrock and Mulder (1993), the second survey found that the majority of the 41 proficiencies were learned primarily on the job (37) or through self-teaching (4) and none were learned primarily in library school.

Other studies that have focused on the preparation of librarians in the area of instruction have analyzed course offerings and syllabi in library schools. Albrecht and Baron (2002) reviewed the websites of 41 American Library Association (ALA) accredited library schools and found that 26 offered courses related to library instruction (although many of these were intended for media specialists in the public schools) and 63% had instructional content as part of another course. In addition to the content analysis of the websites, Albrecht and Baron attempted to survey 49 library school deans and received responses from 26. 58% of the respondents indicated that instructional content was integrated into other coursework. Surprisingly, a requirement in instruction was reported by only one institution. Albrecht and Baron also queried practicing instruction and information literacy librarians as to how they learned their instructional skills. The results were very similar to those of Shonrock and Mulder (1993) and Westbrook and Fabian (2010), with 84% of the 80 respondents indicating that their teaching skills were primarily acquired through on the job training.

Sproles, Johnson, and Farison (2008) also studied the syllabi of information literacy courses to determine how their learning outcomes corresponded to the 12 skill categories in the 2007 ACRL *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators*. The most frequently mentioned outcomes in the instruction syllabi were instructional design (mentioned 107 times), information literacy integration skills (68), and teaching skills (61). These were followed by presentation skills (45), planning skills (42), leadership skills (39), communication skills (36), and assessment skills (26). The skills that were least mentioned in the outcomes were promotion skills (12), administrative skills (7), subject knowledge (3) and curriculum knowledge (1). (It is interesting to note that in Westbrook and Fabian's (2010) study, librarians indicated that none of these skills were learned primarily in library school.) Sproles, Johnson, and Fabian concluded that although courses

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