


Bibliographic Instruction: The Views of Academic, Special, and Public Librarians

Roma M. Harris

This study identifies the positions taken by academic, special, and public librarians with respect to the role of bibliographic instruction in the delivery of reference services. Using a series of statements derived from articles relevant to the information-versus-instruction debate, the author asked respondents to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with various positions represented in this debate. The results revealed that academic librarians tend to favor positions that stress user independence, whereas special librarians view information delivery as the key function of reference service. Public librarians fall somewhere between these two positions. The results also indicate that the practice of bibliographic instruction is largely unregulated in terms of both library policy and professional training in instructional techniques.

ven though bibliographic instruction (or user education) seems to be a fact in most academic libraries, some believe that it should not be. For instance, Tom Eadie argued recently that user education is, essentially, useless when it is "aimed at groups of library users, delivered on schedule and in anticipation of questions that have not yet been asked, rather than on demand at point-of-service."¹ Others, too, have been critical of user instruction, claiming among other things that it stifles creativity. Mona McCormick noted, for example, that "if library education focuses only on how to locate information and on the particulars of a certain index . . . it will soon bore the student who does experience the challenge and creativity of using information critically."² Instead,

she argued, the search for information should lead students to a critical approach to information.

Mary Huston suggested that instruction should empower library users to operate from their own domain of experience rather than from that of the librarian.³ Extending this point further, Willie Parson claimed that "it is the failure to be concerned with the critical treatment of information that calls into question the notion of the library as the center of the academic environment. Effective pedagogy makes the issue of critical thinking a priority of the first magnitude."⁴

Criticism of user education is not limited merely to methods of delivery and their impact on users. Rather, the very role of user education in librarianship has been challenged. Thus, not only

Roma M. Harris is Associate Professor at the School of Library and Information Science at the University of Western Ontario at London, Ontario, Canada N6G 1H1. The author would like to thank Patricia Dewdney for suggesting the idea for this paper and for commenting on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

did Eadie, a former user education librarian, suggest that he was not sure that librarians "should be 'educating' students" at all,⁵ but Pauline Wilson went so far as to argue that by assuming teaching responsibilities librarians are promoting a fiction about their occupational roles.⁶ In spite of such doubts, some appear to be completely confident about the centrality of teaching's role in librarianship. Indeed, Charles D. Patterson and Donna W. Howell claimed that "the librarian is a teacher. Whether assisting individual library patrons in locating information and thus informally teaching or formally lecturing to a class and teaching the specificity of the structure and organization of a given literature, the reference librarian is, in each situation, teaching."⁷

The disagreement and confusion in the field over instruction-versus-information delivery have presented problems not only for librarians who wish to define their roles but also, and perhaps more importantly, for the users of library services. As Anne F. Roberts pointed out,

information [and] instruction have [often] been at cross purposes with each other since each term has been joined with a conflicting view as to the amount of assistance to be offered in each case. Information has been associated with giving the greatest amount of service, while instruction limited the service to pointing the way for users . . . If all this confuses reference and instruction librarians it certainly confuses the users. Users want answers, not instruction.⁸

Of course, instruction and information delivery need not be considered mutually exclusive. In fact, according to Brian Nielsen, "the present competition between those who advocate the intermediary role and those who advocate the teaching role is unfortunate and unnecessary."⁹ Nevertheless, although information and instruction can be, and often are, integrated into reference service, the literature suggests that very different points of view exist in the field over what should be emphasized in service delivery.

Given the level of disagreement in the literature over the role and value of in-

struction in library work, it seems timely to consider the differences in perspective among librarians who work in special, academic, and public libraries. In other words, it may be useful to examine the values that inform librarians' positions on this issue and how these vary from setting to setting. In an earlier study, the author surveyed public librarians as to their views about the role of instruction in reference work.¹⁰ The results revealed that the majority of respondents saw user education as desirable, even when it is not requested by library patrons.

The disagreement and confusion in the field over instruction-versus-information delivery have presented problems not only for librarians . . . but for the users of library services.

However, the findings also indicated that little consensus exists within the public library community about the values that underlie the conflict sometimes referred to as the "information-versus-instruction debate."¹¹ The public librarians included in the sample did not agree on the extent to which a reference librarian's role is to deliver information or to teach patrons how to find it for themselves. They were also divided over such questions as to whether the teaching function of reference work is as important as information provision, and whether reference librarians perform work similar to that of teachers.

Overall, these results suggest that while public librarians generally favor the idea of instruction, they do not agree with one another about the extent to which it should be highlighted in reference service. What remains unclear, however, is where academic librarians and special librarians see themselves in this debate and to what extent different types of librarians hold different views about user education. The study reported here was undertaken in order to identify the positions on bibliographic instruction that exist among these three major groups within the library community.

TABLE 1
SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

| | Type of Librarian | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|--------|---------|
| | Academic | Public | Special |
| Mailed out | 250 | 310 | 249 |
| Returned, wrong address | 13 | 28 | 33 |
| Returned, useable | 91 | 120 | 77 |
| Response rate | 38% | 43% | 36% |

METHOD

The same methodology used in earlier research was employed in the present investigation. In the original study, a three-page questionnaire was sent to a random sample of members of the Canadian Association of Public Libraries (CAPL). In this study, a questionnaire with minor modifications for each group of respondents was sent to random samples of members of the Canadian Association of College and University Libraries (CACUL) and the Canadian Association of Special Libraries and Information Services (CASLIS). The questionnaire responses from all three groups were then compared.¹²

SAMPLE

In the original study, the names of 310 CAPL members were randomly selected from the 1987 Canadian Library Association (CLA) membership directory. The sample excluded students and retired association members to ensure that only practicing librarians were included in the study. In the present study the same procedure was used to select 249 CASLIS members and 250 CACUL members from the listings in the CLA directory. See table 1 for response rates.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire used in the original study included questions about the respondents' work setting, several open-ended questions about their understanding of user education or bibliographic instruction, their experience and training in user education, and their libraries' instructional policy. The questionnaire also included a set of statements derived from articles

about the information-versus-instruction debate with which respondents were asked to agree or disagree using a 7-point scale in which a score of "7" indicated strong agreement and a score of "1" indicated strong disagreement. Each of these statements was created in order to express the different points of view expressed in the debate. For instance, one of the instruction-oriented statements declares that "the primary goal of reference librarians in public [academic or special] libraries should be to help people become independent users of the library." The type of library identified in each of these statements was specific to the particular respondent group. Academic librarians were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement vis-à-vis academic libraries and special librarians with respect to special libraries.

RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

The level of experience and professional training of the librarians who participated in the study was comparable across the three groups. In fact, a one-way analysis of variance revealed that there was no significant difference in the years of working experience of the academic, special, and public library respondents and, in terms of their experience in delivering bibliographic instruction, the groups were remarkably similar. As table 2 shows, nearly all the respondents had conducted some user education, especially one-to-one instruction with library patrons. And, while academic librarians were somewhat more likely to have reported that they had given group instruction, a surpris-

TABLE 2
RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

| | Type of Librarian | | |
|---|-------------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Academic | Public | Special |
| Female respondents | 67% | 77% | 87% |
| Mean years experience (standard deviation) | 15.32 7.67 | 13.57 8.03 | 12.42 8.28 |
| Number <i>without</i> graduate degrees | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Library collection greater than 100,000 volumes | 100%* | 63% | 38% |
| Public services component to current job | 80% | 57% | 100% |
| Experience with bibliographic instruction | 100% | 90% | 93% |
| Individual instruction | 87% | 86% | 82% |
| Group instruction, tours | 80% | 77% | 65% |
| Formal lectures | 47% | 9% | 9% |
| Developed instructional materials | 5% | 7% | 3% |
| Trained in bibliographic instruction | 59% | 31% | 29% |
| Training received in library school† | 12% | 45% | 30% |
| Library has policy on bibliographic instruction | 62% | 24% | 25% |

* These respondents work in university libraries that tend to be large (i.e., with holdings in excess of 100,000 volumes). Librarians working in smaller college libraries were excluded from the study since the term *college* in Canada often refers to two-year postsecondary educational institutions in which the emphasis is on technical rather than academic fields of study.

† Refers only to those respondents who indicated that they had actually received some form of training.

ingly high number of public and special library respondents had also given library instruction to groups including orientation groups, library tours, and group instruction in the use of particular tools. The major difference, however, between the academic librarians and the other two groups was with respect to formal, classroom-type lectures. Nearly half of the academic librarians reported that they had done some teaching of this sort, while very few of the public librarians or special librarians indicated that they had had this type of experience in their current work settings.

It is noteworthy that although most of the librarians who participated in the study had delivered some form of instruction to users, a significant number had not been trained to do so and worked in libraries in which there is no policy with regard to instruction. Not surprisingly, however, considerably more of the librarians who worked in academic settings reported that their librar-

ies had explicit policy statements on user education than was true of either the public or special librarians.

Beliefs about Bibliographic Instruction

One-way analyses of variance revealed that each of the statements concerning the respondents' beliefs about instruction elicited significant differences between the three groups of librarians (see table 3). Without exception, the academic and special librarians disagreed significantly with one another on the statements about user instruction, while the public librarians nearly always took a position somewhere in between. It is perhaps not surprising that the academic librarians tended to endorse the instruction-oriented items while the special librarians were more likely to endorse viewpoints that are information-oriented.

Thus, for example, in comparison with the public and special librarians, the academic librarians were less in agreement

TABLE 3
BELIEFS ABOUT USER INSTRUCTION: MEAN SCORES*

| | Type of Librarian | | | F [†] |
|--|-------------------|--------|---------|----------------|
| | Academic | Public | Special | |
| The primary goal of reference should be to provide users with information. | 4.69 | 6.00 | 5.29 | 28.35 |
| Instruction is appropriate with new users. | 6.44 | 5.87 | 5.64 | 8.75 |
| Instruction should be made available only when users request it. | 1.79 | 2.76 | 3.52 | 30.09 |
| Instruction should be a regular part of reference transactions with most users. | 6.19 | 5.46 | 4.21 | 34.11 |
| Librarians should avoid spoon-feeding information to users. | 4.56 | 4.02 | 3.22 | 11.04 |
| Instruction is appropriate for most types of users. | 5.90 | 5.26 | 4.41 | 18.43 |
| Instruction is best done by teaching groups rather than individuals. | 2.88 | 2.85 | 3.91 | 18.42 |
| The primary goal of reference librarians should be to help users become independent. | 5.59 | 4.37 | 3.61 | 26.38 |
| Librarians have an obligation to teach users about the correct use of library tools. | 6.18 | 5.43 | 4.18 | 34.69 |
| The teaching function of reference is as important as information provision. | 6.02 | 4.15 | 3.76 | 44.38 |
| Reference librarians perform similar work to that of teachers. | 4.82 | 3.29 | 2.67 | 37.41 |
| The best reference librarians combine information provision with instruction. | 6.61 | 6.03 | 4.91 | 33.20 |
| Instruction enhances the image or status of librarians. | 4.13 | ‡ | 5.53 | 34.55 |

*Scores ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

†For each item the probability of the F value was .0002 or less.

‡Item not included in original survey of public librarians.

with the statement that the primary goal of reference librarians should be to provide users with information and more strongly endorsed the position that instruction is appropriate for new users and that the teaching function of reference work is as important as information provision. Special librarians, on the other hand, more strongly endorsed the statement that instruction should be available only when users request it and disagreed more than the other groups that librarians should avoid spoon-feeding users. Despite the special librarians' information-delivery orientation, however, they were more likely than academic librarians to endorse the notion

that instruction enhances the status of librarians.

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation indicated that academic, public, and special librarians with similar levels of education and work experience have very dissimilar views about bibliographic instruction. On the information-instruction continuum, the academic librarians fall toward the instruction end and the special librarians toward the information end, while the public librarians fall somewhere in between. Clearly, then, librarians who work in different settings tend to have quite different perceptions

of the role of instruction in the provision of reference services.

User Independence

At the root of these differences seems to be the question of user independence. Within the academic library setting, the common view of users appears to be that they will be liberated by library instruction, that is, they will be free to pursue their own information needs once they have been taught how the library works and when the tools relevant to their fields of study have been demystified for them. Examples of this perspective are typified by the following comments made by some of the academic library respondents:

I believe that learning to use information sources effectively and efficiently is an important part of lifelong learning.

No student should graduate without knowing how to use a research library to locate information in her or his field.

Academic, public, and special librarians with similar levels of education and work experience have very dissimilar views about bibliographic instruction.

Related to the idea of user independence is the notion that library patrons should be instructed, whether or not they wish to be. Thus, some of the academic respondents commented, for instance, that:

Every time you interact with a user you should teach [him or her] a little something.

The ideal is to use each encounter between user and librarian as an opportunity to instruct . . . Unfortunately not all users are amenable to this approach so some "spoon-feeding" is necessary.

These comments suggest that some librarians feel an imperative to teach, no matter what. This imperative was also evident in the comments of several public librarians, one of whom recommended that even if a patron doesn't

want to be instructed librarians should "try hard to sneak it in!"

Conversely, within the special library setting, delivery of information to the user is seen as the key function of reference service, and whether the user knows about the library and its tools is incidental to this goal. Typical of the special librarians' responses were comments such as:

The only justifiable role for BI in special libraries is as a marketing technique. One of the strongest selling points to justify having a special library is that it saves valuable management time by having specialists do research for users.

Users in special corporate libraries need information immediately—they don't care where it came from and don't want to know how to get it—that's what they pay librarians to do.

Users of special libraries are generally not interested in knowing how the library "works." They want to get their information and leave.

Senior vice presidents are willing to spend time clarifying their needs but not learning how to embrace my profession.

Public librarians, by falling somewhere in between the information and instruction positions, appear to have some ambivalence about the issue of user education—some taking a position with respect to users that is more in line with that of their academic colleagues, others taking the view that information delivery is the key function of public library reference service, and still others acknowledging the validity of both positions. For instance, one respondent commented:

Many patrons like to be informed so that they will bring more skill to their next library visit. However, just as many patrons are not interested in how the library works; they just want the information. I equate this to me and the grocery store: I want to know where the cat food is, not why or how the store decided to put it there.

The ambivalence of the public librarians was also shared by some of the respondents in the other groups. A number

of academic librarians, for instance, pointed out that bibliographic instruction can never take the place of good reference service. For example, one academic librarian observed that "BI is necessary but it complements rather than replaces reference assistance. People do need reference assistance even after becoming fairly competent in library use."

Other Agendas

Some of the public and academic librarians' comments suggest that user education can also serve an agenda in libraries that has little to do with the instruction-versus-information debate over the "best" way to deliver reference services. Instead, what they seemed to be implying was that user education is promoted in their institutions not so much for the patrons' benefit but rather as a potential cost saver. Typical of such comments were:

Financial constraints mean that less time is available to actually provide users with information. Reference librarians don't have the luxury to provide such service now even if they wanted to.

At our institution the prime objective of BI is self-sufficiency since reference staffing is minimal.

In an interesting reversal, some of the special library respondents cited financial constraints as the justification for *not* engaging in bibliographic instruction. For example, "Many special libraries do not have sufficient staff to be able to spend as much time as they wish on instruction."

User Education and Librarian Status

One of the more curious findings to emerge from this study concerns the librarians' perceptions of the status-enhancing impact of bibliographic instruction. It has been argued many times in the literature that part of the attraction of the teaching role for librarians rests in its potential for increased status.¹³ Academic librarians particularly see the adoption of a teaching role as a means by which they can become more like their faculty colleagues, thereby increasing

their chances of achieving or maintaining faculty status. In this study, academic librarians, whose formal instructional role is perhaps more prominent than that of other types of librarians, were less likely than the special library respondents to believe that instruction carries with it such a status-enhancing effect. This result is rather difficult to explain. Perhaps user education is indeed accompanied by an increased status for special librarians but not for academic librarians. Alternatively, and probably more likely, because academic librarians engage in formal instruction more often than their counterparts in special libraries, they are able to assess more realistically the

The practice of bibliographic instruction, judging by the results of this study, seems to be, by and large, unregulated.

likelihood of increased gains in status. For instance, it is not uncommon for academic librarians to report that even where they enjoy faculty status, they tend to be perceived by their academic colleagues as second-class citizens.¹⁴ In other words, this result may be due, in part, to wishful thinking on the part of some special librarians and realism on the part of the academic library respondents.

Little Policy, Little Training

Whatever the values librarians may hold about the role of instruction in reference service, the practice of bibliographic instruction, judging by the results of this study, seems to be, by and large, unregulated. Although nearly all of the respondents had done some bibliographic instruction, not only did relatively few of them report that their libraries had any policy on user education, but their background preparation for offering this instruction was often inadequate. Many had received no formal training in user education and, of those who reported that they had been trained, very few had learned about

bibliographic instruction as part of their professional education in library school.

This pattern of results is consistent with Patterson and Howell's observation that professional education in bibliographic instruction "remains uneven and haphazard, and [that] few instruction librarians have the necessary courses and practical experience in their formal library education programs to prepare them even minimally for what is encountered on the job."¹⁵ The results also lend some credence to Roberts' view that the absence of any training information for instruction librarians in the literature may be due, in part, to the myth that "anyone can teach."¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The results of the study suggest that the instruction-versus-information controversy over user education is far from over. Many librarians, especially those who work in academic and special libraries, remain polarized on the issue. However, not all who advocate the virtues of user independence do so simply because of their commitment to a particular philosophy about reference service. Rather, the comments received from the respondents indicate that, at least for some, the stress on user education has little to do with what is best for the user and more to do with what is financially expedient.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Tom Eadie, "Immodest Proposals," *Library Journal* 115:43 (Oct. 1990).
2. Mona McCormick, "Critical Thinking and Library Instruction," *RQ* 22:339 (Summer 1983).
3. Mary Huston, "Rethinking Our Approach for Research Instruction," *Research Strategies* 1:185-86 (1983).
4. Willie L. Parson, "User Perspective on a New Paradigm for Librarianship," *College & Research Libraries* 45:371 (Sept. 1984).
5. Eadie, "Immodest Proposals," p.45.
6. Pauline Wilson, "Librarians as Teachers: The Study of an Organization Fiction," *Library Quarterly* 49:146-52 (Apr. 1979).
7. Charles D. Patterson and Donna W. Howell, "Library User Education: Assessing the Attitudes of Those who Teach," *RQ* 29:515 (Summer 1990).
8. Anne F. Roberts, "Training Reference Librarians Using Library Instruction Methods," *The Reference Librarian* 10:70 (Spring/Summer 1984).
9. Brian Nielsen, "Teacher or Intermediary: Alternative Professional Models in the Information Age," in Constance A. Mellon, ed., *Bibliographic Instruction: The Second Generation* (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1987), p.32.
10. Roma M. Harris, "Bibliographic Instruction in Public Libraries: A Question of Philosophy," *RQ* 29:92-98 (Fall 1989).
11. See Connie Miller and Patricia Tegler, "In Pursuit of Windmills: Librarians and the Determination to Instruct," *The Reference Librarian* 18:119-34 (Summer 1987).
12. School librarians were excluded from the study because in Canada their professional training and the conditions of their work are quite different than those of other librarians. Indeed, they are generally considered to belong to the teaching profession rather than to that of librarianship.
13. See, for example, David Peele, "Librarians as Teachers: Some Reality, Mostly Myth," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 10:267-71 (Nov. 1984).
14. See, for example, Gaby Divay, Ada M. Ducas, and Nicole Michaud-Ostryk, "Faculty Perceptions of the Librarians at the University of Manitoba," *College & Research Libraries*, 48:27-35 (Jan. 1987).
15. Patterson and Howell, "Library User Education," p.522.
16. Roberts, "Training Reference Librarians," p.70.