



Evidence Summary

Higher Education Librarians Are Comfortable and Confident With their Teaching Responsibilities and Pedagogical Knowledge

A Review of:

Bewick, L., & Corral, S. (2010). Developing librarians as teachers: A study of their pedagogical knowledge. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 42(2), 97-110.

Reviewed By:

Mê-Linh Lê
Health Sciences Librarian
Health Sciences Library, University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada
Email: me-linh.le@usask.ca

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Abstract

Objective – The primary objective of this study was to gather quantitative information on the need, development, acquisition, and application of pedagogical knowledge by academic librarians with teaching responsibilities.

Design – Online survey questionnaire.

Setting – Higher-education (HE) institutions (i.e., post-secondary institutions such as colleges and universities) in the United Kingdom.

Subjects – Subject librarians from 82 HE libraries (one from each).

Methods – Of the 191 HE institutions in the United Kingdom (determined via a now-unavailable directory), 137 supplied an online staff directory with contact information. One subject librarian from each HE institution was contacted; librarians were selected from the online directory by taking a name systematically from a different point in each listing (i.e., first, second, third, etc). Each librarian was sent an email that contained an introductory message as well as a link to the questionnaire. The online questionnaire was created using Survey Monkey and piloted before and after input. It employed mostly multiple-choice tick boxes as well as open-ended questions and comment boxes. The 35-question survey questionnaire was developed in part through email interviews with two leading researchers in the field (identified via

the literature). Responses were received from 82 librarians (60%). The answers were analyzed and cross-tabulated using SPSS. Komogorov-Smirnov tests were done to determine the significance of some results. Open-ended questions and comment boxes were placed into categories using Microsoft Excel to identify patterns and themes.

Main Results – The 82 librarians who responded to the survey came from a wide variety of backgrounds: the majority were subject librarians from Arts & Humanities (31%), had spent more than ten years in their position (38%), worked full-time (71%), were members of pre-1992 HE institutions (59%), and went by the job title of Subject Librarian (30%) (or a slight variation thereof).

Respondents indicated a significant amount of variation in terms of the number of hours spent preparing and teaching each week, ranging from 0 to 25 hours per week (FT staff) and 0 to 12 hours (PT staff). Eleven librarians spent 40% or more of their time teaching. Due to the high standard deviation (5.71), however, and the fact that many librarians indicated difficulty providing precise figures, these percentages should only be used as general estimates.

The study found that librarians were involved in a variety of teaching settings, including on-the-spot support, writing materials, teaching small groups, conducting one-on-one instruction, and teaching large groups. Evaluation was not indicated as a regular practice. With regard to pedagogical development, most training was of an informal nature learned on the job (75%) or through trial and error (61%). Other training methods included short courses or training programs, conferences, peer-support groups, and committee work. The most valuable lessons librarians took from their training were awareness of different learning styles (37%), the use of new techniques (29%), and contribution of planning and preparing (27%).

A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed on the correlation between involvement in

formal training and knowledge of designing learning activities or teaching and learning theories (97.4% and 100% likelihood of a significant impact, relatively). While the authors state in the article that a Chi-square test was done, the original thesis upon which the article is based (available via http://dagda.shef.ac.uk/dissertations/2006-07/External/Cox_Laura_MALib.pdf), notes that the test was not completed as more than 20% of the expected counts were less than five (a frequent limiting constraint of the test).

The vast majority felt their work was either important or very important; that they were sufficiently qualified and knowledgeable; and that they were confident providing the sessions. Responses were mixed when it came to determining whether additional training would improve their confidence or aid them in their teaching role. The majority of respondents also felt they had reasonable or extensive knowledge of topics related to their teaching roles (e.g., delivering sessions and information literacy). Indeed, when questioned as to what could improve the effectiveness of their teaching only 36 (44%) responses were given: subject knowledge and e-learning/new technologies were indicated as the most helpful.

Librarians indicated that their preferred delivery methods when learning new skills were (in order of popularity): formal sessions, on-the-job development; short courses; and other options (e.g., increased library school training). The majority of respondents noted there were enough opportunities available for them to develop their teaching skills. When asked at the end for additional comments on teaching knowledge and development in general, responses were varied, although many offered suggestions for ways of improving the development and provision of teaching skills within the library profession as a whole.

Conclusion – The authors posit that information literacy instruction has become a major component of the job requirement of a subject librarian. Survey results indicate that

subject librarians recognize the value of pedagogical knowledge but question the importance of the theoretical aspects; spend a significant amount of time on various types of instruction; learn on-the-job; feel they are sufficiently knowledgeable in their role and feel confident providing instruction; and favour short-courses or formalized programs for continued learning. Future studies would benefit from interviews, additional tools to track instruction details, and perhaps a larger scale.

Commentary

This helpful study serves as further evidence of the growing role of librarians as teachers. Its brief but thorough review of the literature acts as a good starting point for those unfamiliar with the development of information literacy, focusing particularly on the last decade. This research will be of use to those in an instruction coordinator position or involved in professional development at a HE library. Insights from the article will assist them in planning the content and delivery format for training sessions, workshops, and webinars. The article provides an overview of how subject librarians wish to view their instructional role, and what routes and tools might be used to expand on librarians' knowledge of pedagogy, particularly with respect to how librarians wish to receive future training

However, with some minor modifications to the study design, the resulting data might have been more generalizable and representative of the true state of pedagogical knowledge of librarians.

One shortcoming is the relatively small sample size. The format and nature of an online survey with mostly quantitative answers (six questions required a written response that were not coded) is well suited

for obtaining information from large groups of individuals. When one considers the heterogeneity of instruction in HE institutions, a larger sample size would be beneficial to more accurately capture the current climate surrounding teaching. The authors note that they were limited by time and resource constraints, which may partially explain the small sample size.

Closely connected with the sample size is the randomization tool used to contact librarians. The article notes that names were taken from different places (first, second, third, etc.) on staff directories. No further information is given on the selection process, the likely disparities in how staff directories are laid out, or how the variable staff sizes of libraries were handled (i.e., how 'high' did the first, second, third, method go?). It is suggested that future studies of this nature use some type of online randomization tool to alleviate such issues.

The article would have benefited by including its survey instrument. It is referred to frequently, is noted as a limitation of the study, and contained errors that led to difficulties answering certain questions.

Finally, while the validity tests used in this study are sufficient for a project this size, future studies that expand on its scale and scope should consider including additional measures to test the reliability and validity of the survey instrument.

Although these shortcomings limit the study slightly, the end results are still informative. It builds on the work of others in some areas but adds new knowledge to the acquisition method of pedagogical knowledge. While not emphasized, the survey provides hard numbers on the relative dearth of librarians involved in assessment. If instruction is to continue as a major aspect of the work of a librarian, assessment must be more broadly addressed.