

# HELP US HELP THEM: INSTRUCTION TRAINING FOR LIS STUDENTS AND NEW LIBRARIANS

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## INTRODUCTION

With the growth of information literacy instruction in academic libraries, librarians are now, more than ever, required to be skilled teachers. With this in mind, the question must be asked: How are LIS curricula and veteran librarians evolving to foster instruction skills in the next generation of librarians? We studied the instructional training experiences of librarians who graduated from LIS programs between 2003 and 2008. Through a survey of this group we discovered how LIS students are prepared for library instruction throughout graduate school, as well as subsequent on-the-job training. By studying these efforts, we learned of challenges facing this group and those training methods which have been most effective. From the perspective of recent graduates and new instruction librarians at a variety of institutions, we will discuss the results of our research on the transition from LIS student to Instruction Librarian

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the spring of 2008, we conducted a review of the literature related to LIS education for library instruction. We were surprised to find that the majority of the literature on the topic of LIS education for library instruction is from the 1980s and '90s. However, some of these studies have been updated throughout the years, and some of the older information is still applicable and interesting. We have included a brief summary of this literature.

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Several studies have been conducted to determine the percentage of LIS programs that regularly offer instructional courses. The first of these studies took place in 1987 (Larson and Meltzer), but it was not until a 1999 study (Westbrook) that the number climbed above 50% for ALA accredited LIS programs. A similar survey in 2002 showed that 58% of programs offered specific instructional courses, although this figure is 63% when instruction training as part of another course is considered (Albrecht and Baron). Doubtless, it is time for another study, particularly since the focus on instruction in librarianship has increased over the past five years.

## INFORMATION LITERACY TRAINING FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

In December of 2008, we sent out a survey on the ILI and NEWLIB listservs regarding information literacy instruction training. Our questions focused both on time spent in graduate school and on the job. We received 312 responses. Thirty-nine percent of respondents graduated from graduate library school programs in 2007 or 2008, 33% in 2005 or 2006, and 25% in 2004 or 2003. The focus of this survey was placed on graduates between 2003 and 2008, although there were two respondents that graduated before 2003.

Only 40% of respondents had taken a course on library instruction during their professional degree coursework. A follow-up question intended for this group of 124 respondents asked for the name of this course. The most common course titles fell into three major groups: Bibliographic Instruction or Library Instruction; Information Literacy or Information Literacy Instruction; and Library User Education or User Instruction. Each grouping made up approximately 20% of the 122 course names given, so together 60% of the courses

fell under one of these categories. Of the 191 respondents who did not take an instruction course during graduate school, 53% stated that there was no course of this type available. Several noted that they were unconcerned with this lack of availability because they already had previous teaching experience and would not have taken such a course even if it was available. Others felt that the instruction courses offered focused solely on school media librarians. One stated, "Library instruction was a new component of the reference fundamentals (required) course in my program. We learned lesson planning, active learning techniques, and that was about it." Comments like these imply that in some programs, instruction is just starting to become an important component of library school education.

Seventy percent of those surveyed felt that they would have been better prepared for their current jobs if they had taken additional instruction courses, or if none were offered, had taken one at all. Some librarians wished that instruction courses had included less educational theory and more hands-on practice, while others thought that more theory would have been helpful. We received many comments related to specific aspects of instruction. For example, respondents would have liked to learn more about designing distance education curricula, developing meaningful instruction through one-shot sessions, and instructional technologies. The importance of learning by doing, however, was mentioned repeatedly, as one respondent said, "As a matter of fact, nothing replaces real world experience."

When asked how important courses in library instruction were in relation to career goals during graduate school, 56% felt that they were important or very important. The general consensus was that instruction is an integral part of academic librarianship in general, particularly in public services departments. Sixty-one percent held the view that taking instruction courses was important or very important in relation to their current jobs. We were surprised to observe that only five percentage points separated the responses to these two questions, as we expected a higher number of librarians to believe that instruction courses would have benefited them. Perhaps this is a result of the emphasis placed on "learning by doing" that respondents noted in the survey comments. Finally, 61% of responding librarians stated that during graduate school, their career plans included instruction. The majority understood that instruction is a significant part of working in academic libraries.

Not surprisingly, 75% of these librarians chose neutral (30%), somewhat satisfied (18%), or not satisfied at all (27%) when asked how they felt about the availability of library instruction courses. Many programs offer only one course on this topic, and often sporadically. One librarian stated, "One basic course is NOT enough. And if library schools cannot offer more than they need to collaborate with the Education faculty to determine what graduate courses (and maybe even some upper level undergraduate) education courses will work in the LIS program." We also asked about the satisfaction level with the quality of library instruction courses. While this question was not applicable for 38% of respondents, 32% were satisfied or

very satisfied. Interestingly, positive comments focused heavily on the impressive expertise, professionalism and talent of the professors who taught these courses. This follows logically--those teaching courses in instruction should be excellent teachers themselves. The slightly more negative comments generally focused on the lack of practical instruction experience.

We were also interested to know whether librarians were able to gain instruction experience outside of coursework during graduate school. Thirty percent were not able to, while 26% managed to do so through practicums and 44% through on the job experience. Of the 23% who chose other, many had previous teaching experience in everything from high school education to teaching English as a second language. Others depended on teaching or graduate assistantships, and some respondents even taught 100-level LIS courses for undergraduates. We found the comments on this question to be particularly interesting because they illustrate the varied and creative ways that librarians learn to teach.

Almost two-thirds of the respondents viewed receiving instruction training outside of coursework as important or very important, and this is often identified as a particularly important factor in finding jobs after graduate school. One librarian noted, "[Instruction training is] probably the *most* important...while all my interviewers were interested in the class, they were really excited to see that I had instruction experience. I also think it helped in interviews themselves; having the experience of teaching definitely helped with the job-talk portion of (academic) library interviews."

## **ON-THE-JOB INFORMATION LITERACY TRAINING FOR NEW LIBRARIANS**

The second part of our survey focused on instruction training for new librarians once on the job. We discovered that on-the-job training is lacking, but that respondents were not overly unsatisfied with the situation because they understand the constraints their libraries are under. New librarians have sought training on their own and do not necessarily hold their institutions responsible or fault them for the lack of training.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents are employed in either a college or university library, and 68% describe their instruction duties as "a major component of my position." Eighty-five percent reported that they teach individuals at the reference desk, 81% teach one-shot library instruction sessions, and 64% provide library and research assistance to faculty. Instruction duties were detailed further in the comments; many respondents reported that their instruction duties include training coworkers or other librarians. Since our survey group consisted of people who graduated within the last five years, we were surprised to learn that so many have already taken on the responsibility of training others in a field where they have not been working professionally for very long.

Fifty-six percent of the surveyed librarians responded that they had not received instruction training on the job, and 44% said that they had. The comments reveal that most of the

training they received on the job was informal and included observing and co-teaching. An overwhelming number of comments reported that instruction training, for the most part, consisted of actually teaching.

Since there was a lack of formal training provided on the job, we were not surprised to learn that 61% of respondents sought additional training on their own. The most common training activities pursued were reading professional literature and participating in listservs. The second most popular training pursuits were webinars and conferences including LOEX, WILU, and Immersion. Several librarians mentioned wanting to pursue more opportunities, but being unable to because of lack of time and/or funding. Since listservs and professional literature are the least expensive and time-consuming methods, it stands to reason that they are preferred by many respondents.

After asking respondents to describe instruction training at their places of employment, we inquired as to their satisfaction with it. Concerning satisfaction with the availability of training, results were split almost evenly with 38% choosing somewhat satisfied or unsatisfied, 32% neutral, and 30% satisfied or very satisfied. The question, “How satisfied are you with the quality of instruction training?” resulted in a similar split. Thirty-three percent were not satisfied at all or somewhat satisfied, 36% were neutral, and 31% were satisfied or very satisfied. While these results do not make for a strong argument, the comments reveal that new librarians would like to have more instruction training opportunities, but that they are sympathetic to their institutions and understand the reasons why this area is lacking. Many recent graduates work at a small institution where they are the only instruction librarian, and report that they did not expect to have the opportunity or resources to train once on the job. One librarian asked, “Who would train me?” and this appears to be a common question for many of the new librarians we surveyed. Since our survey group consisted of graduates within the past five years, we can gather that many new librarians start at smaller institutions in their first professional position. Perhaps there would be more training at a larger institution with more resources. Even though respondents were not particularly unsatisfied or satisfied with the quality or availability of on the job instruction training, 71% agreed that instruction training is important or very important for new librarians.

Further examining on-the-job instruction training that was available, we discovered that the most common training activities are informal. Observing other librarians teach, attending instruction workshops, and receiving feedback from colleagues and/or other faculty were ranked as “the most helpful in preparing you for library instruction.” Once again, many librarians report learning by actually doing. As mentioned in the graduate school instruction training section of the survey, many librarians pointed out that they had prior teaching experience that helped a great deal.

In the final part of our survey we asked the respondents to answer questions concerning various aspects of themselves as instructors. We feel these questions are a valuable part of the

survey, allowing us to see how these librarians have developed, regardless of the training that they have or have not received. When asked, “How confident do you feel in your instruction skills?” 63% said confident or very confident and only 4% responded not confident at all. In considering the comments in this section of the survey, it is clear that new librarians are proud of their development as instructors, despite their lack of training. Respondents often attributed their confidence to feedback they received. Comments also showed that they are continually learning, developing instruction skills, and striving to improve.

In response to the question, “With which aspect of instruction do you feel most confident,” the largest group of respondents (61%) answered, “familiarity with concepts and lesson content.” Examining the methods used by new instruction librarians when pursuing their own training (listservs and professional literature), it follows that these activities would foster a higher familiarity with concepts and lesson content, but not necessarily improve confidence in speaking in front of a group, or preparing a lesson.

The common theme of “learning by doing” came up again when reporting how particular skills were learned; one respondent commented that “no amount of training can prepare someone sufficiently for their first teaching experience.” Several also mentioned that presentations during graduate school were helpful in gaining experience at speaking in front of a group.

In an effort to find concrete ways to improve instruction training for new librarians and LIS students, we asked what they would change about the way they developed these skills. Respondents were in agreement on this question; they would have liked to have more pedagogical knowledge, training in education methods, and a theoretical foundation, before beginning their careers as instruction librarians. Many librarians reported feeling that they have an incomplete picture of information literacy and library instruction, and that they do not even know which parts they are missing until they have to do it. Some comments showed that respondents would like “more grounding in research-based, proven skills,” “big picture ideas first before jumping in,” and “more of a basis to build on—why we are teaching (and why we are teaching this way), and what are the goals of instruction sessions.” While some suggested that this is something that could be addressed during graduate school, several also stated that they were not confident in the skills or knowledge of their library school professors to remedy this problem, even if the attempt was made.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that new librarians want more training and preparation before they teach. From the perspective of instruction librarians, LIS programs should regularly offer courses in instruction. However, we also noted a strong conviction that one can never be prepared for providing library instruction without actual experience. This implies that courses in library instruction need to include teaching experience, and not simply pedagogical theory. These librarians are comfortable

with the content that they teach, which often has been learned in LIS program courses, but feel that they lack experience speaking in front of a class. We were also impressed with the variety of ways in which librarians sought out this type of experience, indicating that they indeed recognize it as necessary career development. This group of librarians is continually making efforts to develop instruction skills, whether the available options are intensive, such as attending Immersion, or informal, such as following appropriate listservs.

This is only one part of the research that is necessary to truly understand the challenges with and gaps in the training of instruction librarians. Librarianship is due for another survey of LIS programs; we suspect that the percentage offering instruction courses has become even higher. Regarding the working environment, it is clear that personnel and financial limitations inhibit the training of new librarians, but further research might help us discover more creative ways that librarians can receive this type of training. However, we hope that the results from this survey will inspire those in our field to consider these challenges and possible solutions.

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