WHEN TO PLANT HEIRLOOMS AND WHEN TO PLANT HYBRIDS: UNEARTHING INSTRUCTION LIBRARIANS’ MOTIVATIONS FOR ADOPTING NEW PRACTICES

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INTRODUCTION

What motivates librarians to try new things in information literacy instruction (ILI)? Why do some of us try every innovation that comes along, while others stick to familiar methods (and most live in the middle)? This paper presents analysis from a study that attempts to answer these questions. I will lay out some of the major themes and findings from the first phase of analysis, and offer some suggestions on how librarians can put these insights into practice. In particular, these findings may hold resonance for incorporating the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education into their libraries’ information literacy instruction.

BACKGROUND AND METHOD

The research done in this area is mostly on the motivations of teachers (who are not academic librarians) to adopt new practices (Gautreau 2011; Green, Chivers, & Mynott 2000; Nolen, Ward, & Horn 2014; Purmton & Alexander 2013; Walker & Symons 1997). Other studies have explored librarians’ information literacy contexts, practices, and identities (Albrecht & Baron 2008; Julien & Genuis 2011; Koufogiannakis 2013; Seymour 2012; Walter 2005; Walter 2008; Westbrock & Fabian 2010). While many of these studies address decision-making in information literacy instruction, none of them has it as a primary focus.

To explore the motivation behind ILI decision making, I conducted in-depth video interviews with 12 academic librarians, all with responsibilities in ILI at institutions in the Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA). They completed a screening questionnaire prior to being interviewed; selected questions are summarized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MLS</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>11</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years worked as a professional librarian</td>
<td>4 or fewer</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>10 or more</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Years worked at current institution</td>
<td>2 or fewer</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 or more</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People at institution with responsibilities in information literacy instruction</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>1</td>
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Table 1: Summary of participants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would you rate your familiarity with current trends, developments, and publications in information literacy instruction?</th>
<th>Very unfamiliar</th>
<th>0</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat unfamiliar</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat familiar</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very familiar</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<th>In general, which statement best describes how you feel about participating in information literacy instruction?</th>
<th>I rarely enjoy it</th>
<th>0</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I do not enjoy it most of the time</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I enjoy it most of the time</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I almost always enjoy it</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<th>How would you rate your interest in incorporating new methods and/or theories into your information literacy instruction practices?</th>
<th>Very low</th>
<th>0</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat low</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat high</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See Appendix A for a numbered list of interview questions. After interviews were recorded and transcribed, I identified themes using the qualitative data analysis software nVivo.

**PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

Three primary categories of themes arose in coding the interview transcripts: *Practices, Influences, and Barriers*. The bulk of this paper will address these categories, along with themes about emotion and reflection.

**Practices**

When asked to define ILI (Question 1), participants used more abstract words, like “think,” “question,” and “critical,” often describing students and their behaviors. When describing their work (Question 2), they used more instrumental words like “course,” “level,” and “science,” often describing the timing and structure of ILI. This suggests at least a partial disconnect between participants’ conceptual and practical thinking about ILI practices.

Two questions in the interview asked participants about practices new to them that they decided either to incorporate or not into ILI. Examples of practices that were incorporated ranged widely, from implementing qualitative assessment of all ILI to different methods of classroom control. Pedagogical methods mentioned included the BEAM method, group work, and several examples of active learning.

Examples of practices that participants never incorporated included technologies (like clickers or social media), integrating the Framework into one-shot sessions, conducting assessment, and recording their own teaching. Several participants expressed caution or fear of failure:

- “It feels a little ominous to try to tackle such big ideas when you’re working in one shot sessions.”
- “I'm hesitant to do something that relies on technology where you're assuming that everyone has a smart phone or that everyone can install [software] on their machines.”
- “I don't feel comfortable yet [with group work] because I don't know if my experience is enough yet to keep control of the classroom…and make it meaningful.”

Practices that participants tried and abandoned mostly related to assessment: pre- and post-tests, minute papers, digital badges, and using tutorial statistics for assessment. Participants did not find they were getting useful or conclusive information from these practices.
One participant tried using a flipped classroom by assigning a recorded lecture and using class time for questions, but it was clear students hadn’t watched the video:

“I have instead adopted some of the good things about flipped classroom by making them watch maybe a short 10-minute video… we don't watch that during class like we might have used to because now the flipped classroom has influenced my ideas. You can apply that to a lot of things.”

One participant summed up an attitude expressed by some, but not all, participants: “I'm convinced we can always do better. I'm not convinced that any practice is best yet.”

**Influences**

Where do librarians find out about practices that are new to them, and what factors encourage them to adopt those practices? The graph below shows sources of new practices that more than one participant mentioned.

**Figure 1: Where librarians found out about practices new to them**

Interestingly, librarians with additional graduate degrees, compared to librarians with an MLIS only, were more likely to cite informally or experientially acquired knowledge (such as observation or experimentation), rather than formally acquired knowledge (such as coursework or continuing education) as an influence on adopting new practices.

The most frequently cited reason for adopting new practices was to benefit students. One participant, for example, justified using newer technology because it would create less “friction” with students who are used to that technology. Another said that students “find it exciting to do new things,” in contrast with what they were used to in high school. Yet another, however, described new practices this way:

“I feel that there’s an attitude out there that…information literacy is so boring, how can we like get our students more involved, you know? Let’s use glitter, let’s use the acting techniques or whatever, and that really bothers me because I think information literacy is super important, it’s part of lifelong learning, it’s everywhere, and so it’s up to us to integrate that into students’ processes and sort of make it fit with…their goals and their needs.”

Participants were also motivated by evidence of student learning, or seeing practices work well through instruction exchanges or observation. Participants cited burnout of both librarians and students as a reason to switch things up, whether that meant differentiating instruction or keeping oneself interested:

“We do so much that’s repetitious, and we do so much that’s written about, and we do so much that we talk about to each other, that it’s really exciting to figure or to stumble upon something that we haven’t tried before or thought of…”

**Barriers**
Barriers to adopting new practices were mentioned frequently though not asked about explicitly. Some have already been covered, but the barrier mentioned most frequently was organizational culture and structure. Among participants citing organizational culture and structure as a barrier, half said that their ILI teams were understaffed, noting a rise in class requests and a drop in the number of librarians available to teach them. Participants in coordinator roles mentioned other librarians’ entrenchment in ILI practices, or felt the burden of being the “expert” on all new practices. Several participants noted that teaching improvements, especially small ones, are not valued in their review or tenure processes:

- “I’ve really stagnated because it’s not a priority for my tenure. My first priority has to be my research and publishing and I will do enough with my teaching but…that cannot jeopardize my research. I have negative incentive.”
- “All of these other things that I’m perhaps just on the road to, count a lot, and yet [teaching is] the most dramatic way I impact students, right? I have 1,000 students in and out of my classroom every year. Like that, I feel, is the very real contribution I’m making, but my job doesn’t necessarily see it that way.”

The ILI described by the majority of participants included one-shot ILI sessions. Some participants saw this form of instruction as a barrier to adopting new practices that were meaningful, but not seen as feasible within the one-shot. One participant spoke about alleviating this barrier by reducing their goals in the one-shot session to one: establish longer-term relationships with the students in the class through research consultations.

Participants also hesitated to employ new practices because of how they thought students would perceive them. One participant cited research that students can be biased against the students in the class through research consultations. One participant put it this way:

“I feel when I take examples on the fly, sometimes, they work well, sometimes they don’t, which is a lesson in itself…I think [it’s] an important lesson, but it’s not necessarily the first lesson I want to teach them. I don’t want them to see me thinking, ‘Oh, goodness, even she can’t do it. How am I expected to do it?’”

Another frequently mentioned barrier was time constraints. Time figured significantly in these interviews, from the cycle of the academic year to ILI preparation time. One participant found it difficult to incorporate new practices after an “instruction rush” time of year: “I think it’s more I forget to do things. So… I can’t quite incorporate it or I don’t remember to incorporate, like I don’t remember to re-plan my lesson in enough time to redo it.”

Emotion and Reflection

As Julien and Genuis (2009) found, emotion is clearly involved in ILI work. While participants were not asked directly about emotion, almost all of them used emotional or bodily language when discussing what they perceived as the success or failure of new ILI practices. One participant put it this way:

“So now that I'm talking about it, it's all coming up, like all coming from my stomach up…the fact that I'm a junior faculty also is a reason why I would or wouldn't adopt a new practice. I feel like I'm in a moment in my life where I need to be a humble teacher and look at my peers and colleagues and learn from them as much as I can, and then there will be another period in my life where I'll be the one where I can feel more confident in actually adopting new practices, but for now I feel like I'm in the student teacher position.”

Participants described high teaching loads as “mentally and physically exhausting,” “tiring,” “emotionally taxing,” and “sort of draining.” One participant characterized ILI as “something that is so physically present because we have 20 or 30 or 40 people that we’re responsible for at that moment.” Some participants described trying new things as “exciting” and “fun,” and noted their “passion” for constant improvement. Others, however, used words like “worried,” “intimidating,” and “hesitant” about incorporating new practices, especially in relation to the course instructors whose students they teach. They wondered if they were “reading” the faculty and students in their classes correctly. One participant put it this way:

“If it’s something you do every day, like changing it is very intimidating, and finding the time to change it, and that there are so many of us that do it, if you make a small change, have you really contributed if you’re not sharing that change, and voting for it, and proselytizing for it, and spreading it across the department, right? It just takes a great deal of energy and once again, it doesn’t feel on campus, on a university campus, as if it is a highly respected skill.”

More than one participant said their confidence in themselves as teachers goes down if they receive negative feedback from students or faculty, for example.
“I do depend a lot on the class to provide fuel, I guess, and motivation for…confidence, I guess, is really what it is. I do lose confidence when a class does not react the way I expect or hope.”

Participants were asked: “How do you reflect on your information literacy instruction?” (Question 4). The methods mentioned by participants are summarized in the following graph.

**Figure 2: How librarians reflected on their instruction**

Many participants equated reflection with assessment, and all cited it as a way to identify the likelihood that new practices would be incorporated, either by themselves or others. This participant used it as a way to convert experience into evidence:

“I didn't have any way to prove my teaching philosophy. I'm a younger librarian so teaching Google, according to my boss and my colleague, I was spending way too much time. But I had no way to prove that I had reason to do that. And so that is why I started to do the pre-assessment and post-assessment….”

All participants stressed the importance of reflection on ILI in any form, but most also noted the difficulty of finding time to formally reflect.

**IMPLICATIONS**

While incorporating new ILI practices may not be comfortable or appropriate for everyone, I think the responses from these participants make the case that it’s worth it to create time, space, and permission for academic librarians to try. Some suggestions for fostering this environment follow.

The language we use when we talk about ILI and teaching development and practices can have a strong impact on motivation and decision making. For example, the word “exchange” was used more than once to positively describe conversations that convinced librarians to adopt new ILI practices, rather than “trainings” or “meetings.” We should also acknowledge the emotional and physical effects of ILI; Julien and Genuis (2009) urged “appreciation for the fact that these [emotional] challenges exist” (p. 935). Accardi’s *Librarian Burnout* blog encourages librarians to process these emotions through sharing stories of burnout, particularly in relation to ILI. And Galvan, Berg, and Tewell (2017) urge supervisors to “encourage risk-taking, give staff space to fail, and give staff time to be melancholy” (slide 33). Libraries and departments should create space for acknowledgement, celebration, and sharing of the emotional aspects of ILI.

The Framework calls research an iterative process. While many participants want to communicate this idea to students, they are held to a different standard when it comes to how their institutions, libraries, and departments value their teaching. Their varied, thoughtful, and nuanced approaches to improving as teachers do not match expectations about assessment and value. While these expectations and their very real consequences may not be avoidable, administrators and coordinators can also make space for more creative, long-term, and qualitative forms of assessment. As Gardner and Halpern (2016) write, “Assessment cannot be ignored; it
is up to us to work at making it as ethical a practice as possible, to acknowledge when it is not, and to navigate the continuum in between” (p. 47).

While none of the participants used the phrase “community of practice,” many of them described being a part of one, whether at their institution, at conferences, or through local or online communities. It is very clear that librarians would be open to more possibilities as teachers if they participate in more, and more varied, communities of practice. It is incumbent upon the leadership of our libraries and associations to make these available, but also on supervisors and administrators to value the time spent in these communities of practice. Considering the number of participants who cited or drew on research in education, some of these should include practitioners in other educational fields. The suggestions I make are perhaps not new, but I hope that this study can serve as another piece of evidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES


Green, J., Chivers, B., & Mynott, G. (2000). In the librarian’s chair: An analysis of factors which influence the motivation of library staff and contribute to the effective delivery of services. Library Review, 49(8), 380–386.


Interview Questions

1. Please define “information literacy instruction” in your own words.
2. Describe the kinds of information literacy instruction you do as part of your work.
3. Please tell me about your planning process for a typical information literacy instruction session. How do you decide what type of teaching method or approach to take?
4. How do you reflect on your information literacy instruction?
5. How do you find out about information literacy instruction practices, activities, or theories that are new to you?
6. Please describe a time when you considered a new practice in your information literacy instruction (such as active learning or assessment) and adopted it. Why?
7. Now describe a time when you considered a new practice in your information literacy instruction (such as active learning or assessment) decided not to adopt it. Or, this could be a time you tried something and decided not to try it again. Why?
8. In general, what convinces you to adopt a new practice in your information literacy instruction?
9. Please describe the structure of the instruction or information literacy program in your library or library system. For example, is there a coordinator of instruction?
10. How were you trained in information literacy instruction? Please include both formal and informal forms of education, reading, and training.
11. How confident do you feel as a teacher?
12. Describe any other pressures or influences on you related to making decisions about information literacy instruction.
13. Is there anything else you’d like to share with me about your information literacy instruction experiences?