

The Quarterly Interview: Jo Angela Oehrli

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-Edited Transcript-

LOEX: *Where do you work? What is your job title and what are your main responsibilities?*

Oehrli: I am a Learning Librarian at University of Michigan Libraries on the Ann Arbor campus where I have been since 2009. As a Learning Librarian I mostly focus on helping the beginning researcher. I used to be a high school and middle school teacher so I know where students are starting from. I mainly teach students how to think critically about information. I want students to be able to realize that there are many kinds of information out there. They need to know what is best for their particular information need. I also teach a basic and an advanced research class that are seven week courses.

I am also the Children's Literature Librarian. In that role, I work with students and faculty all over campus to research various aspects relating to children's literature. Over the last year, I've taught one shot sessions in young adult literature classes, School of Education classes, and in history classes. Children's literature is a diverse field, and I enjoy working with a wide range of students and faculty members both locally and nationally.

How has your K-12 teaching background influenced your work with college students? What is the biggest difference?

In various positions before I was a librarian, I have worked with babies and I have taught grandmas and everything in between! I feel like those experiences have illustrated that there are many ways that people can learn and that you should try a variety of teaching styles in the classroom no matter what the setting is.

I also feel like I have an advantage because I am someone who has been formally trained to teach. I used to teach all day every day and that is something that helps me when I have to teach in so many different settings. Instruction librarians might have to teach a class about women and religion one morning and teach about local environmental information resources that same afternoon. I can draw on my training and my background as a public school teacher to teach a wide range of content.

I would say the biggest difference I've experienced between being a teacher and being an academic librarian is that as an instructional librarian I don't get to develop a long term rapport with students. I need to make a good impression on students quickly and grab their attention right away. I tried to do this as a classroom teacher, but I

felt like I had a longer time to build a good relationship with my students.

Your presentation and publication background is quite diverse but I would like to focus on your work on data. What does the term 'data' mean, as it relates to librarians and what we do?

I have an expansive definition of the word "data." I feel like it could be anything from a large, quantitative, geological data set, to a group of observational videos from a research project, to your browser history. Data is everywhere and librarians have an important role to play in informing their users how to engage with data. Maybe they want to find data or statistics—We can help them do that in a very expansive way by working with them to talk about their research project topic and why they want a particular data set. As an academic librarian, sometimes I get asked to teach a class about how to read a scholarly article. I will definitely engage with students about the evidence they might encounter in a research article. What do they think of the experiment being described? Is it fair of the authors to draw the conclusions that they have? What data is missing from this study? Analyzing the data in an article is just one part of the complex evaluation process that anyone should complete if they are assessing information. We can also help them create new information based on other data. It's exciting to talk with students about how new arguments can be formed by using visualization tools such as Canva, Piktochart, easel.ly, and even more complex tools such as ArcGIS to make simple infographics.

Your research deals with themes like developing skills for data gathering. What skills are then necessary for librarians to be good data gatherers? Do you think these skills are innate to our existing skills as librarians? What can we do to acquire these necessary skills?

I think gathering data is an extension of librarians' existing skills. We're accustomed to finding information, but gathering data is just another way of gathering information. Data is just another kind of information. And many of the same principles about finding information apply to gathering data. What kind of data do you really need? Is it fair to draw any conclusions from this information? Are you using the data/information ethically?

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The same big picture ideals used when you find information can relate to gathering data. As librarians look to develop specific data gathering skills though, they might have to learn new digital skills in order to gather, manage, and engage with their data. How can Google Ngrams inform what we think of a text? How might you use Canva, Piktochart, easel.ly, or some other cloud-based, graphic software to create new information from the data you have gathered? Wouldn't it be powerful if, before students wrote an argument paper about race and society, they first created some sort of infographic using census data from the American Community Survey to prove their point? And while some of these tools may be new to librarians, it is good to remind ourselves that the information landscape is always changing. Librarians have always had to keep our ears and eyes open as the information world has evolved. We need to do the same things for developing our data gathering skills. Librarians need to practice gathering data, practice managing it, and practice creating new information from it. If someone is looking for a more formal training plan, Scott Martin and I wrote a book chapter entitled "Diving into Data: Developing Data Fluency for Librarians" in *The New Information Literacy Instruction: Best Practices* that outlines some aspects of data literacy training for academic librarians and subject specialists. The book chapter outlines how the University of Michigan Data Education Working Group provided a series of workshops around topics such as data storage, data management plans, text mining, and ethical uses of data, among many other library research data issues.

You also focus on ethical use of data. What would the unethical usage of data look like? How can we avoid that pitfall?

When I think of the unethical use of data, two situations occur to me right away.

- People sometimes claim that data supports their argument when it doesn't. Or it doesn't *really*.
- There are times when data is gathered unethically and then used to support an argument.

I've been working on a lot of instruction around fake news lately. I often see statistics and data used to support an argument that isn't quite ethical. Is it ethical to say that there is 42 percent unemployment when that number includes retired people? Or that cola cures cancer? The data doesn't really support these arguments. As for unethically gathering data, I think one of the biggest questions about gathering data online has to do with internet companies selling the data that they have been harvesting from

their users. If people aren't *really* aware of what can be gathered about them via their web browsers and their social media sites, should that information be used for profit?

I think in both cases, librarians have an important role. As trusted educators, we can teach our patrons about these issues and help people navigate these complex situations.

What advice do you have for librarians attempting to utilize data to inform their instruction?

If you are teaching about data, I would advise people to continue finding real world examples about how data is being used in student and faculty research and let those examples inform how they teach. I have actually seen students get really excited about discussing issues around data privacy, data literacy, and ethics in data when I use examples in which they can see themselves. In my advanced research class, one of the UM Government Document Librarians, Catherine Morse, visited class to talk about census and other types of data. When we started asking students about how much they did or did not trust survey data, there was an interesting conversation about how data information is gathered. Some of the students did not think a lot about how survey data was gathered or used ethically, and they have lost a lot of trust in polling information.

What books or articles have influenced you?

- A book that has really influenced me is John Bransford's *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (2000). It's a little dated now, but I think it really taught me about what happens when someone learns something.
- Nicholas Carr's article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" has also influenced me, mostly because I continue to think of reasons why Google is making us smarter.
- And I'll read anything by Debbie Abilock. She has a column about how students do research in *School Library Connection* which I find insightful.