

The Quarterly Interview: Jasmine Kirby

Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar

-Edited Transcript-

LOEX: *Where do you work? What is your job title and what are your main responsibilities? How long have you been in this position?*

Kirby: I work at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar. We are a satellite campus with undergraduate programs in computer science, information systems, biology, computational biology, and business administration. Our building is part of Education City, just outside of Doha, and we share facilities including a student center and dormitories with other American and Qatari institutions. We are a commuter school with most of our 400 or so students coming from the Doha area—the students are either Qatari nationals, residents whose families have been in Doha for years, or international students.

As the Instruction and Engagement Librarian, my main responsibilities are teaching students, faculty, and staff about and how to use various library resources and helping them become better researchers. I have been in this position since August 2019.

What inspired you to work overseas?

I love to travel and I had spent my junior year of college in Paris, which was a transformative experience for me. I am from Chicago and prefer living in large diverse cities, and I wanted to work in a place where coming from a diverse background is seen as a strength. Although being far from home can be lonely sometimes, every day feels like an adventure and usually in a good way. And while I'm at the very beginning of studying Arabic (well, Fusha), I do get to use the little that I do know in my day-to-day life, mostly reading underwhelming transliterations of Western brands.

What types of information literacy instruction (one-shots, for-credit course, voluntary workshops, embedded within the learning management system, etc.) do you offer to students?

I teach course-related instruction sessions for a wide range of classes and lunch workshops. I offer office hours, create LibGuides, and answer questions about how to do library research over email. Since I worry about Zoom fatiguing our students by if we hold too many workshops, I have started creating online tutorials on LibWizard for courses adapted from my in-person lectures and have updated our LibGuides and other online content. Some of our students took college level social science classes in high school and some students have never had to cite a source before, so getting them on the same level while not boring the more advanced students is really challenging.

What roles do culture and identity play in how you teach information literacy?

I try to give examples and names that are more familiar to the students, and I check with our student workers to make sure that any pop culture references I make aren't too out there. That being said, our student worker from Tanzania knew the show *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* while some of my American friends in the Midwest did not.

During the pandemic, there were issues about having cameras on in Zoom, both for practical reasons, such as bad wifi, but also cultural reasons with some female students not wanting to be filmed. Since my sessions are optional, and I don't and wouldn't want to require cameras on unless the student has the official waiver, I sometimes feel like I'm screaming into the void. But I'd rather have students be comfortable, and I give them different ways to participate, for example, incorporating Google Jamboards, so I know that they are out there.

How do you stay engaged professionally while being at such a distance from U.S. organizations? What sorts of professional groups have you gotten involved with there?

Planning meetings with colleagues in Pittsburgh can be frustrating due to the time difference (Doha is 7 or 8 hours ahead of Pittsburgh (there's no daylight savings here), but we still collaborate, and usually a few fly out to Qatar every year to teach workshops. After the switch to remote learning, I went home and worked from my parents' house between March and August of 2020, and I took that time to attend virtual meetings that would usually be in the evening or very early morning in Qatar and got to know some of my main campus colleagues. On the other hand, while it was good to be back with my family in Chicago, getting up at 4 am to be available for when I had meetings with my colleagues in Qatar was not ideal.

In my experience, institutional support is usually the bigger barrier than distance to getting involved in professional organizations; fortunately, I have a lot of institutional support here. The pandemic has also meant there's more content online in general. I was already involved in international professional organizations. For example, in library school I was active in European Horizons, a student-run EU studies organization, and in general, I have been using Zoom and collaborating online even before the pandemic made it cool. One instance of that is I've been participating via Zoom in the International Association of University Libraries' special interest group in data since November 2019 because one of my friends from a previous job got me involved in that.

(Interview...Continued from page 12)

Locally, I go to the Education City librarian lunch meetups, and the Ex Libris group, and I did Data Carpentry, a workshop on cleaning up spreadsheets, when they offered it across the street. The other issue was of course the Blockade (a diplomatic dispute between Qatar and some of its Gulf neighbors which made travel between Qatar and those countries trickier) which is a real issue as the United Arab Emirates is where most of the other comparable educational institutions are. However, during the pandemic, one positive change is more online regional events here in the Gulf.

What have you learned about teaching information literacy that you attribute to your experiences in Qatar?

I feel like I should have something more profound to say, but honestly, information literacy is information literacy. I definitely have had to be careful about assumptions I make about where my students in particular are at in terms of library experience and research skills, and I guess working out here has really hammered home to assume nothing and ask people and make sure we are all talking about the same thing. I know that's obvious but it's way easier said than done and means having some possibly awkward conversations.

And I probably should start calling zbib.org "zed" bib instead of "zee" bib to get less confused looks even though it sounds so wrong to me.

What advice would you give to a librarian who's considering working internationally?

Join international professional organizations and go to international conferences. For the latter, a lot of these have scholarships and are subsidized, so you get to travel to interesting places and meet cool library people in an affordable way. If you can gain fluency in the language of a place you want to work, this will also help. If you only speak English fluently, there are still a lot of places you can work and do fine since English is used a lot as a common language for education and here in the Gulf, it's also the common language for everyday life. There are a lot of jobs for school librarians at international schools which usually require an American or Canadian teaching license, but you can also do what I did and get a job at a satellite university campus of a school from your home country. Working for an organization tied to the motherland will make your life much easier. For example, I can be paid in US dollars instead of local currency and I have other benefits, such as help with taxes and health insurance that works in the US that I know not everyone working abroad has access to.

That being said, when I moved to Qatar, it was under the old kafala system (which has since changed), so in my first month, my job held on to my passport. While they kept me posted about everything and gave me it back once the visa process was done, technically I still needed their permission (which yes, was granted) to be able to enter and leave the country. Definitely do your research, talk to people, and for international schools, check online forums like the international educator (<https://www.tieonline.com/>). You need to have a good sense of humor with the visa process anywhere though, such as needing to send a lot of faxes despite this being in the summer of 2019. Your job should pay, in addition to your salary, for your flight there, housing, transportation, and more. In particular, in this economy, make sure you get housing assistance because in a lot of countries, you need to put down sometimes up to a year's worth of rent as a deposit (what House Hunters International doesn't show you). There's also the logistical nightmare of finding an apartment in a place you don't know well yet. Work-life balance isn't as much of a thing with this type of job because chances are the people you work with are going to be the most familiar people to you (and possibly your neighbors if you live in the company housing) and the people you rely on when you are so far away from home, so you need to trust your employer more than you necessarily would otherwise for a job closer to home.

Once you arrive, quality of life will probably be similar or better than the US, or you will be in a bubble that will make it similar enough to the US. I also recognize my privilege and understand that I am under many fewer restrictions as a Western expat woman than if I were Qatari or from a non-Western country.

What book or article has influenced you?

The Design of Everyday Things by Don Norman. I read this in graduate school because it was one of the handful of books we had at my job, and it completely reframed how I thought about problems. It made me look at systems in place rather than individuals and how design choices can have unexpected consequences and helped me become a much more compassionate person, or at least I think so. Plus, the part about indicator lights reminded me that I had left my oven, which did not have an indicator light, turned on, and I left work early that day to turn it off and was lucky I didn't burn my building down. A must read.