Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Academic Librarians Have Concerns about Their Role as Teachers

A Review of:

Walter, Scott. "Librarians as Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry into Professional Identity." <u>College and Research Libraries</u> 69.1 (2008): 51-71.

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Abstract

Objective – This study explores how academic librarians are introduced to teaching, the degree to which they think of themselves as teachers, the ways in which being a teacher has become a significant feature of their professional identity, and the factors that may influence academic librarians to adopt a "teacher identity."

Design – A literature review extended by qualitative semi-structured interviews.

Setting – The research took place at an American university with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching designation of "Doctoral/Research — Extensive."

Subjects – Six academic librarians.

Methods – The main feature of the article is an extensive literature review around the themes of LIS, teaching, and qualitative research methodologies. The literature review is supplemented by qualitative research consisting of semi-structured interviews of between 45 and 90 minutes each, which were conducted during spring 2004 with six librarians (five women and one man), whose length of professional service ranged from 2 to 32 years. All of the participants worked at the same institution. The data collected were reviewed throughout the process using field memos and a research log. The data were analyzed using a coding process where discrete ideas

that emerged from the data were used to identify a small number of themes. The initial conclusions in the study were validated through member checking during the writing phase. "Member checking involves sharing draft study findings with the participants, to inquire whether their viewpoints were faithfully interpreted, whether there are gross errors of fact, and whether the account makes sense to participants with different perspectives" (Centre for Health Evidence).

Main Results – Five themes around teaching and teacher identity as they pertain to academic librarians emerged from the data. The first theme was the centrality of teaching. Each participant sought out a position where the teaching role was valued. The role of teacher spilled over into the other roles of the librarian, i.e., reference service, collection development, etc. The next theme was the importance of collegial and administrative support, which is critical to the ability to focus on work as a teacher. The stress of multiple demands emerged as a theme, as time dedicated to teaching was often at the expense of something else. Another theme was the problems with professional education around teaching. Instruction course offerings in library schools were reported to be meagre, and some were badly planned and executed. The fifth theme involved stereotypes and misperceptions. Studies have shown that the academic library profession has been poorly understood by students and faculty. Study participants believed that many of their campus colleagues were either unaware of what they did, or were misinformed by popular culture stereotypes of librarians.

Conclusions – The small sample size precluded the making of any definite conclusions based on the study results. Other limitations of the study include the relatively short amount of time spent in the interview process and the narrow range of

librarians chosen to participate. The author notes that a subject pool more representative of academic librarians' full range of opinions regarding the importance of teaching as a professional responsibility would have resulted in more complex themes emerging. While the author is aware of the study's limitations, he feels there is value in the qualitative research design, in giving voice to individual librarians, and in the provision of insight into some of the research questions found in the literature of learning to teach and of teacher identity.

Given the limitations, Walter makes three conclusions about his findings. He points out the lack of a formal introduction to teaching in many library programs which has been explored by other studies and concludes that his study "suggests that continuing lack of attention to this issue results in a difficult introduction into the profession for new academic librarians" (64). Regarding continuing and professional education, Walter concludes that "this study suggests that there are a number of important questions about the content and conduct of these opportunities for instruction librarians that have not been explored in the literature" (64). Finally, Walter concludes that "this study suggests that there is an important connection between research on student perceptions of academic librarians, the study of teacher identity, and the future of the profession" (64).

Commentary

The author is forthcoming about the limitations of his small sample size and defines his study as exploratory in nature. He also notes that the participants were chosen for their strong commitment to their role as teachers. The value of the themes that emerged from the interviews with study participants lies largely in the notion that they are a starting point to further research

into the area of teacher identity among librarians. What is perhaps more valuable in this paper is the extensive use of the research literature to inform the various ideas throughout. The literature review is robust, and the author includes results from previous studies all through the paper to strengthen his statements and conclusions. The author examined the library literature as well as the literature around teaching and education. For anyone interested in this topic, the notes section alone is an excellent resource. Additionally, the article includes the interview questions used.

The author talks about the value of qualitative research design and analysis for the field of librarianship. He cites a study that noted that academic librarians' voices are more likely to be aggregated in study results, and individual voices are often not heard. The qualitative methodology can alleviate this issue by giving individuals a chance to speak and be heard while still offering conclusions that can be informative in a broader context. That said, the author himself only uses the voices of his study participants five times throughout the paper. Using more quotes from the research results, quoting the librarians' own voices, would have strengthened the rather tentative conclusions given by the author, and would have reinforced the value of the qualitative research design.

This article is useful for academic librarians interested in exploring the development of a teacher identity as part of their professional practice. The article also suggests further research avenues that might be explored, such as the perceived lack of a formal introduction to teaching in LIS education programs, an analysis of the content areas included as part of formal coursework on instruction, and the impact on professional development among teaching librarians of more focused attention to the notion of teacher identity.