



Librarians and breaking barriers to information literacy

Implications for continuing professional development and workplace learning

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper reports on a descriptive study undertaken to gain an overview of library and Information workplace needs (as of early 2002) for library professionals with knowledge and skills related to user education and information literacy instruction.

Design/methodology/approach – A description and discussion of a small-scale research project that used content analysis techniques to study job advertisements posted to the international LIBJOBS listserv over a period of three months.

Findings – A little over half of the advertisements required at least some experience of and/or skills in user education or instruction of some kind.

Research limitations/implications – The analyses reported in this paper were carried out early in 2002. However, more recent literature, and more recent research reported elsewhere, indicate that the findings remain valid.

Practical implications – The findings of the study, and recent literature, indicate that skills associated with user education and information literacy instruction are important in today's libraries.

Originality/value – The paper focuses on demonstrable employer and workplace requirements for the LIS professional, rather than abstract formulations and discusses the resultant implications for librarians' continuing professional development and workplace learning.

Keywords Librarians information facilities, Continuing professional development

Paper type General review

She patiently explained how the cataloguing system worked and led him to the nonfiction shelves. "So all these books in this area could be helpful because they're numbered the same?" The boy looked a bit like he'd found the Mother Lode. Marian was gratified to have been the one to have shown him the Dewey magic, but she was simultaneously peeved that he hadn't been taught in school. (Kallmaker, 2003, p. 3)

Karin Kallmaker's novel *One Degree of Separation* opens with Marian, a librarian in a United States public library, teaching library patrons how to find information and resources through the online catalogue, on the Internet, and by browsing the shelves. It could be argued that when the role of the librarian in information literacy instruction has reached the pages of light romance fiction, it has arrived in the public consciousness. However, to what extent are instructional skills, and specifically skills of information literacy instruction, expected of librarians in the workplace today? And if these skills are expected, what are the implications of this for the continuing professional development of librarians?

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Instruction in libraries

As a result of her review of the literature from 1977 to 1991, Edwards noted that

During the past quarter of a century, interest and concern for library instruction has grown dramatically, as evidenced by the increasing number of workshops and conferences held on the topic, as well as the number of committees and organizations dedicated to bibliographic instruction. Perhaps the strongest evidence of this surge of interest, however, is the number of bibliographies, monographs, and journal articles focusing on all aspects of BI. (Edwards, 1994)

“Over the past decade”, says Marcum (2002, p. 1), “information literacy has emerged as a central purpose for librarians, particularly academic librarians”.

Various terms have been used to describe this work or aspects of this work, including “library tours” (Burford, 1997), “library orientation” (Graubart, 1995), “bibliographic instruction” (Holman, 2000), “library instruction” (Bober, Poulin and Vilen, 1995), “library research courses” (Newby, 2000), “user training” (Silva, 1997), “library skills instruction” (Morgan, 1997), “user education” (Newton and Dixon, 1999), “library customer education” (Cronau, 2001), “end user education” (Burrell and Joseph, 1999), “information skills instruction” (Logan, 2000), “information literacy” education (Poustie, 1999), “research instruction” (Asselin, 2000), “information fluency” (Rader, 2004) among others. These terms are sometimes used as synonyms or near synonyms (see, for example, Bower, 2000), leading even to the questioning of the proliferation of such definitions (Owusu-Ansah, 2005); however, they do not necessarily have the same meaning and may reflect different philosophical or theoretical approaches and practices, as well as the different aims and clientele of different kinds of libraries. Johnson (2001; 2004) has used the combined terms “library instruction and information literacy” to delineate the field covered by her bibliography compiled annually for the journal *Reference Services Review*. The purpose of introducing this brief discussion of terminology at this point is not to argue for the use of one term over others. Rather, it is provided to indicate the broad range of terminology and library activities that need to be considered when looking at the instructional roles of librarians.

Some professional associations, including IFLA with its recent draft international guidelines on information literacy (2004), have demonstrated interest in and support for user education and information literacy instruction in libraries. The significance of these was highlighted by Arp and Woodard (2002), who have said that “one of the most sweeping changes in the field . . . in the last five years has been the development of numerous standards, guidelines, and research reports”. In the United States, the Association of College and Research Libraries has developed the *Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries* (1997), the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000), the *Objectives for Information Literacy Instruction: A Model Statement for Academic Librarians* (2001), and a document on *Assessing Student Learning Outcomes in Information Literacy Programs* (2002). Other countries have also developed documents or standards or guidelines, for example the CAUL (Council of Australian University Librarians) *Information Literacy Standards* (since updated as the *Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework*), and *Information Skills in Higher Education* from the Standing Conference of National and University Librarians (SCONUL) in the United Kingdom (1999). While these documents were developed specifically for academic libraries, the author’s research (Clyde, 2002) showed that public and special libraries have also been involved in user education and information literacy work, to the extent that there are numerous

publications about it. Current ideas about lifelong learning and ongoing personal and professional development reinforce the importance of public library involvement in information literacy activities and programs (see, for example, Raseroka, 1997). Poustie (1999), has written about the role of the public library in information literacy through Internet instruction, and Todd and Tedd (2000) have described "training courses for ICT as part of lifelong learning in public libraries" in Belfast. In special libraries, user education programs, in various forms, have been developed for medical students (Gibson and Silverberg, 2000), pharmacists (Kirk, 2000), police officers and students (Ramachandran, 2000), and nurses (Wallace, 2000), among others.

In addition to providing information literacy instruction for library users, librarians may be involved in training activities as part of their jobs. These activities might include training individual new members of the library staff in local procedures such as catalogue data entry; training volunteer helpers; training staff members from branch libraries; running workshops for groups of people involved in a new library activity or program; and presenting professional development workshops for participants from outside the library. Since the focus of this paper is on librarians and information literacy instruction, the training aspect of library work will not be discussed further in this paper, though there will be some reference to training activity in the Tables that summarise the research results (see below). Those who are interested in the training aspect should consult the full report of the study (Clyde, 2002).

The research study: methodology

The main aim of the small-scale international research study discussed in this paper, was to provide an overview of current library workplace needs (as of the first half of 2002) for the knowledge and skills related to information literacy instruction and training. What needs do libraries and information agencies have for professional staff with knowledge and skills related to user education and instructional practices? Libraries and information agencies from time to time make public statements (in the form of job advertisements) about the knowledge and skills they require in their new professional staff. Not only do statements in job advertisements represent the knowledge and skills that employers would like to have; they also represent the knowledge and skills that the employers are prepared to actually pay for. Consequently, the decision was made to use content analysis of job advertisements as the main research strategy. Most job advertisements include information about the library or information agency, information about the position (including the duties that the successful application will be expected to perform), and information about the knowledge, skills and experience that are considered essential or desirable in the person who will fill the position.

While a number of professional journals carry job advertisements aimed for librarians, most are national or state/local in their focus, even though they may carry some advertisements aimed at an international audience. Covering all the relevant journals, plus national and international newspapers, would have meant a large and expensive data collection project. However, there are some international listservs that are either wholly devoted to job advertisements in the field of library and information science or have this as one of their purposes. From among these, IFLA's LIBJOBS was selected as the basis for the project, because it is devoted entirely to job advertisements in this field and carries a relatively large number of advertisements. Although a considerable number of postings are American, there are also many advertisements from other countries, for example Canada, the European countries, South Africa, Saudi

Arabia, Morocco, and Hong Kong, among others. The positions advertised represent the range from entry-level positions through to library director. The main limitation is that LIBJOBS does not usually carry advertisements for school library positions, hence these libraries were not considered as part of the study.

The LIBJOBS listserv was monitored daily for a period of three months, from 1st December 2001 to 28 February 2002. All job advertisements that contained statements related to library orientation, user education, information literacy instruction, information skills development, library skills instruction, bibliographic instruction, training, or variations on those terms, were saved and printed in full. For each advertisement, the following were recorded: the job/position title; the type of library or information agency; the level of emphasis on education/training functions in the job as described (education/training is the primary focus of the job, education/training is an important part of the job, education/training is a minor part of the job); the relevant words/phrases from the position description; the relevant words/phrases from the statement of required skills, experience or characteristics. With content analysis being used as the basic methodology, each advertisement was treated as a document for the purposes of analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative strategies were used. The results of the analyses will be presented in the next section, followed by discussion and conclusions.

The research study: summary of results

The number of advertisements analysed was 150, representing 51.5 per cent of the total number of advertisements posted on LIBJOBS during the three months (see Table I). This means that a little more than half the jobs advertised, had some type of education, instruction, or training component.

Of the 150 relevant advertisements, 13 (or 8.66 per cent) were for specialist information skills or bibliographic instruction librarians (see Table II). The positions were for university librarians who will work primarily in information skills instruction or bibliographic instruction with students and/or faculty, including some positions for people who will take responsibility for coordinating or managing information literacy or information skills instruction programs and staff. For example, from a university library:

The Coordinator of Undergraduate Library Instruction works with library staff to teach library research and information literacy skills to a wide range of audiences. This position is responsible for organizing first-year library instruction programs – such as Freshman and Transfer Student Orientations, Freshman Interest Groups, and Freshman seminars as well as course-integrated sessions with departments such as Rhetoric and Composition. A significant portion of the time will be spent teaching sessions with these programs, as well as other programs for undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, librarians, and the public. The coordinator maintains communication with instructors and department liaisons, develops sample active learning activities and scenarios, schedules classroom and library instructors for sessions, and supports staff in developing their instructional skills. Additionally, this position will participate in monitoring and updating content for the . . . Information Literacy Tutorial. . .

Table I.
Advertisements on
LIBJOBS: December
2001, January 2002,
February 2002

Total number of advertisements on LIBJOBS	Number of advertisements related to education or training	% of advertisements related to education or training
291	150	51.5 per cent

	Sample job titles	Number of advertisements	% of advertisements
Job primarily education and/or training	(a) Information Literacy Librarian; (b) Instructor – Library; (c) Instruction and Information Literacy Specialist	13	8.66
Education or training an important part of the job	(a) Information Services Librarian; (b) User Services Librarian; (c) Education Reference Librarian	82	54.66
Education or training an minor part of the job	(a) Catalog Librarian; (b) Collection Development Manager; (c) Systems Librarian	55	36.66
Total		150	100

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Table II.
Emphasis on education/
training functions in the
advertisements

While some advertisements required knowledge of current bibliographic instruction or information literacy developments, only one (from an American university library) specifically cited “experience working with the *ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, or other competency standards”. The great majority of the positions in this category (11 out of the 13) were in university libraries where information literacy and bibliographic instruction might be expected to be important; however, it should be noted that two were in other kinds of services.

The majority of the 150 advertisements (82 or 54.6 per cent) specified education or training duties as an important part of the job, though not the primary focus of the job. For example, an advertisement for a Government Documents Librarian in a college library specified that the appointee, among other tasks,

... participates in general reference and instructional programs of the library ... Promotes use of the documents and maps collection to the college community and prepares user guides and web pages. Provides specialized instruction and reference assistance focusing on government documents and electronic government information ... will take an active role in providing library instruction ... for assigned Social Sciences department(s).

An advertisement for a Children’s Librarian in a public library specifies that the appointee, among other tasks, “provides assistance in study-oriented activities and in developing children’s reading interests; arranges children’s programs and schedules and conducts class visits”.

In 55 of the 150 advertisements (36.66 per cent), the education or training component was a minor part of the job. In a university library, the Electronic Records Archivist, among other things, “...participates in the Library’s training and development programs”; in another university library, an American/African American Studies Librarian “participates in instructional programs by giving tours, demonstrations, and individual counselling sessions”. In a state library, a Librarian for Electronic Resources and Collection Development is required to, among other things, “design and provide

related training for staff, library users, and/or other librarians". In a public library, a Librarian I "may be assigned any of the following responsibilities: . . . training of scheduled groups of patrons, programming for patrons". In an advertisement for the Head Librarian of a law library, the appointee is required to, among other things, "develop and implement training programs for attorneys and paralegals on research-related matters".

A range of instructional tasks related to information literacy was specified in the job advertisements. In 71 of the advertisements analysed (47.33 per cent), bibliographic or library instruction for groups was among the activities that the appointee was expected to perform; this was the instructional or educational activity that was most often mentioned. Some 23 advertisements (15.33 per cent) specifically stated that "information literacy" or "information skills" instruction was part of the job. The provision of training for library patrons (such as training for searching an automated library catalogue or CD-ROM) was specified in 30 (20 per cent) of the advertisements. Other activities mentioned in ten or more advertisements included coordination or leadership of user education or training programs, working cooperatively with university or college faculty to develop instructional programs, developing Web pages (to support users) or online instructional tools or guides, and developing printed instructional materials and handouts.

Table III shows that university and college libraries together accounted for almost two thirds (64.66 per cent) of the 150 advertisements that specified user education or training activities (broadly speaking) as part of the job. Public libraries accounted for 11.33 per cent, and corporate libraries for 9.33 per cent, while research or special libraries taken together (medical, law, research, church, and art libraries) accounted for 7.97 per cent. While it might have been expected that the education sector (university and college libraries) would account for the greatest number of positions that involved educational and/or instructional activities, it is worth noting that 35.34 per cent of the positions were in other sectors.

Table III.
Types of employers
represented by
advertisements that
specified education/
training

<i>n</i> = 150		
Type of employer	Number	Percentage
University library	70	46.66
College library	27	18.00
Public library	17	11.33
Corporate library	14	9.33
Medical library	4	2.66
Law library	4	2.66
Library consortium	3	2.00
State library	2	1.33
Non-governmental organisation	2	1.33
Research library	2	1.33
Church library	1	0.66
Professional association	1	0.66
Online information service provider	1	0.66
Art library	1	0.66
Support services	1	0.66
Totals	150	100

Summary and implications

It is clear that libraries of all types have been seeking to recruit professionals who have skills in user education, and information literacy development. While university and college libraries were particularly involved, nevertheless a significant number of advertisements related to other types of libraries. User education or instructional activities may be the primary focus of a job in which the librarian does nothing (or almost nothing) else. Alternatively, it might be an important part of a job (such as the job of reference librarian) where the instructional role appears to have at least equal weight with other tasks, or it might be a minor part of a job that is mainly focused on other activities such as cataloguing or collection development. The librarians who are appointed to these positions may be expected to perform a wide range of tasks and activities, from teaching full for-credit courses in universities to presenting occasional short demonstrations of a web site.

The tasks may include library orientation, face-to-face instruction, developing materials for remote library users, working with university and college faculty to design and develop programs, managing teaching facilities used for library instruction, creating print materials, and, like Marian the Librarian in Karin Kallmaker's novel *One Degree of Separation*, quoted at the beginning of this paper, providing one-on-one information literacy instruction for library users at point of need. Within some libraries or library systems, leadership positions are emerging for coordinators or managers of instructional or information literacy activities and programs.

To what extent are new entrants to the profession being prepared to undertake these kinds of professional activities? Westbrook's (1999) study of the curricula of American schools of library and information science showed that between 1974 and 1996 there had been a gradual increase in the number of courses offered in the areas of bibliographic instruction, user education, and information literacy. Her analysis of the public web sites of those library and information science programs that were accredited by the American Library Association (ALA) indicated that by 1996 more than half those programs offer at least one full, regularly-scheduled subject in user education and related matters. In the same year, Sullivan (1997) carried out a questionnaire survey of the 48 library schools accredited by the ALA in continental USA. Of the 33 institutions that responded, 19 (58 per cent) had a full subject devoted to aspects of user education (though this subject or course was not necessarily a compulsory course), while five (15 per cent) integrated the topic into their program though they had no separate subject for it. In only nine (27 per cent) was the topic not dealt with in the curriculum. As Sullivan says, it seems that "user education . . . is an established part of the library school curriculum" (Sullivan, 1997, p. 276). However, even assuming a further gradual increase in course offerings since 1996, there is no guarantee that students will have taken these courses, and graduates from a quarter of the ALA-accredited library schools will have been offered no courses with any content relevant to the topic. Would the picture be any different in other countries?

The results of the overview of instruction in libraries (reported in this paper), and the content analysis of job advertisements, provides strong support for the need to include a specialist unit or module related to user education and library instruction in pre-service educational programs for librarians. It is apparent that some new graduates will not have had the benefit of such specialist education; nor will many librarians who received their professional education some time ago. There are, of course, implications here for continuing professional development and workplace

learning. Indeed, in terms of needs for continuing professional development of library staff, Newton and Dixon's (1999) study of Scottish libraries indicated that user education was the "area of greatest consequence for most professionals" (Newton and Dixon, 1999). Newton and Dixon recommended "a strategic approach to teaching information professionals to teach", particularly in the case of established professionals, though they also considered pre-professional programs. This priority for continuing professional development is reinforced by the work of Morgan and Atkinson (2000), who reviewed "current trends in academic, mainly university, libraries". Among the trends they identified were involvement in lifelong learning, and involvement in teaching information handling skills (including instruction for students in distance education programs). This means, then, that some attention should be paid to this topic in both pre-service professional education programs for librarians and in continuing professional development programs. The former will ensure that new professionals are aware of the issues; the latter are necessary to meet emerging workplace needs as identified in this paper.

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