"Trying to figure it out": Academic librarians talk about learning to teach

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Abstract

Information literacy instruction is a core function in academic librarianship, yet librarians may feel unprepared for teaching. This qualitative research study explores, through the experiences of eight academic librarians in Ontario, Canada, how librarians learn to teach in the classroom. It uses narrative inquiry to study and share these experiences, an approach that is in the mainstream of teacher research, although little used in the library and information literature. Areas explored include the librarians' expectations of librarianship; what they learned at library school; teaching as learning; support from colleagues; continuing education; teacher identity; talking about teaching.

1 Introduction

Rob (2000)[i]: *I get one hour to connect with them. And if I don't deliver, I'll never see any of those students again. Where I say, I'm giving you all this information, it's too much information to take in, and even though it's too much information, it's not comprehensive. How do you structure it? Yeah, the structuring is really hard. How much weight do you give to the catalogue? Should I put all my emphasis on journal articles? How do you figure that out? To know how to develop a class, a lesson plan. To know how to engage your audience. To know how to control a class – classroom management is a big, big issue. How do you do it, when you've got one hour? For a bunch of people, where maybe a quarter don't want to be there. Of course, for some of that you only get with experience. Teaching's hard. I don't think people appreciate how hard it is.*

Danielle (2009): *[The part of teaching I don't like is] not being prepared. I was never taught how to target a presentation for 300 people versus a workshop for 12. I've learned this on the go. I guess it's that feeling of inadequate preparation for giving a workshop or presentation. That's my least favorite part of it. It varies from very basic*

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to very specialized seminars using the specific software that I even had to teach myself a few more times because I wasn't that familiar with it. I wasn't prepared for the level of teaching I would be doing.

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore, through the experiences of eight college and university librarians in Ontario, Canada, how academic librarians learn to teach in the classroom, how they "try to figure it out" (a phrase, with its variants, used by almost all the participants). I use narrative inquiry to study and share these experiences.

The changing and increasing role of information literacy instruction in the work of academic librarians has been well documented (Rader, 1999; Rader, 2002; Avery and Ketchner, 1996; Lynch and Smith, 2001; Albrecht and Baron, 2002; Clyde, 2002; Walter, 2008). It has become one of our core functions. As Albrecht and Baron write (p. 72), "librarians are no longer keepers of information, but teachers of information."

In practice, there can be considerable variation in librarians' teaching. Different librarians may draw on different "skill lists, standards and models…relating to information literacy" (Johnston and Webber, 2003, 340). They may use different techniques and strategies; position themselves within different learning paradigms; address different kinds of audiences on different subjects; employ different and always changing technologies. Librarians may be more or less intentional in their teaching.

Michael (1988): *We don't have an agreed upon approach to teaching information.*

Despite this, as Cardiff University's *Handbook for Information Literacy Teaching* (2009) points out, "the quality of teaching of information literacy must be excellent by everyone involved" (p. i) if we are to promote such instruction in our institutions. Arnold (1998) questions what makes librarians' instruction effective:

> What makes some classrooms come alive, with students actively engaged in the learning, while in others students sit passive and bored? What accounts for good teaching? Often teaching excellence is a combination of professional competence and personality traits that mesh in an indescribable mixture that is obvious when one witnesses it and frequently characterized by the response, 'I don't know what it is, but I know it when I see it.'" (p. 1-2)

With all this, how *do* librarians go about learning to teach? This question arose in my own practice as, relatively late in my career, I moved into classroom teaching. Since getting my MLS in 1986, I had been music cataloguer, reference librarian, government publications specialist, department head. I had been involved in staff training. I had always viewed reference work as teaching. Yet to my chagrin, I found that all my experience did not automatically translate into effective classroom teaching. I often felt incompetent and frustrated. I looked for ways to learn more about teaching.

How do librarians learn to teach? Studies have examined library school curricula to discover what librarians might learn about teaching there. Recently, Julien (2005) has found that worldwide, 51.6% of library schools still offer no course in information literacy instruction (p. 213). Sproles, Johnson, and Farison (2008), looking at North America, find that 85.2% of schools have an elective instruction class (p. 203). They also find that two-thirds of students are at least exposed to the topic of instruction in a required reference class (p. 202).

Studies have also surveyed librarians to find out how and where they learned to teach. The latest of these (Westbrock and Fabian, 2009) finds that librarians largely learn on the job, with some self-teaching also involved, although the respondents said they would have preferred learning many of the skills at library school.

These studies all approach the question at a high, generalized level. To date, no study has focused on an in-depth exploration of how individuals on the ground experience learning to teach. The present study, then, fills a gap in the literature.

2 Methodology

2.1 Narrative inquiry

As an approach to qualitative research, narrative inquiry is "the study of experience as story, [which] offers researchers a way to think about and share experience" (Hamilton, Smith and Worthington, 2008, 19). It is a way to study experience that is "the closest we can come to experience" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, 188). It brings research to life.

Narrative is well-established in the social sciences (Chase, 2005, 651; Riessman, 2008, 17). Creswell (2007) includes it as one of his five approaches to qualitative inquiry. In the field of education, it is part of the "teacher research mainstream" (Hamilton, Smith and Worthington, 2008, 18); it "often appeals to teachers and teacher educators who share and learn from one another through exchanges about knowledge, skills, practices, and evolving understandings" (p. 19). It is also seen as a reflective tool, with "reflection on practice … required of any teacher and any researcher" (p. 24).

It is no coincidence that the very few instances of narrative inquiry in the library and information science literature come in the area of librarian teaching. Walter (2008), in his study of librarians' teacher identity, uses interviews to "elicit personal narratives from a group of academic librarians regarding their experience as teachers" (p.60). Gronemyer and Deitering (2010) analyze stories that instruction librarians tell about their work. Whyte (2008) offers up her personal narrative of learning to teach in the context of reflection through story.

One of the goals of qualitative research is "to empower individuals to share their stories, [to] hear their voices" (Creswell, 2007, 40). Narrative is the approach that goes the furthest in this direction. As Walter (2008) notes, librarian voices are often

absent in the librarian literature, or are present only in an aggregated, impersonal form in the reports of surveys. In the following pages, however, to a large extent I let my participants do the talking.

2.2 Recruitment and sampling

I recruited my participants using a listserv at the University of Toronto Libraries and also the listserv of the Ontario College and University Library Association. My email invited any academic librarian engaged in classroom instruction to students to participate, with all levels of experience welcome. The potential benefits I touted were the chance to reflect on their teaching practice and the chance to voice their views.

Because narrative inquiry takes an expansive approach to presenting data, it generally focuses on a very small number of individuals or even a single individual. Choosing narrative inquiry thus constrained the total number of participants I could accept. I was also constrained by various practical considerations. One example of this is the restriction I placed on potential participants outside Toronto: I could only accept those planning to travel to Toronto for the Ontario Library Association conference.

Within these constraints, I chose my participants out of the larger pool of volunteers for maximum variation. My most important criterion was their graduation date from library school, as a marker for the length of their experience in the profession. Other criteria included the librarians' subject area; the size of their library; their position; other teaching experience. I was aware of the need to take into account the gender ratio of my participants, although in the event gender did not play into my decisions at all.

Taking all these factors into consideration, I eventually chose eight participants, five women and three men. I was previously acquainted with three of the participants. As is true for most qualitative research, the small sample size does not allow the findings to be generalized to the larger population.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

I conducted individual interviews with each of the participants in January-February, 2010, using a semi-structured interview format that focused on their teaching practice and particularly their learning-to-teach stories. The interviews lasted 40 to 85 minutes and generated approximately 150 single-spaced pages of raw data.

Narrative data can be analyzed in several different ways. I took a thematic approach to analyzing the data, "where primary attention is on 'what' is said, rather than 'how', 'to whom', or 'for what purposes'" (Riessman, 2008, 54). Even more than this, however, I analysed for story (Creswell, 2007, 55), looking for both the broad outline and the telling detail. Clandenin and Connolly (2006, 142-143) speak of the tension, in creating a narrative research text, between story and theme, between creating a rich, complex narrative and working in a more reductionist way that focuses on generalisable themes, with the participants fading into "support roles". They conclude

that anyone whose main concern is generalisable themes should be doing another kind of study in the first place.

I pieced together and constructed narratives for all the participants, restorying them (Creswell, 2007, 55) into a framework based on common elements of the narratives. I decided to create a group narrative, a polyphony (Czarniawska, 2004, 121), where the individual voices would still stand out. During the interviews I occasionally had the sense that one participant was talking back to another, point, counter point. In the group narrative, although the participants have never met, they may seem to play off one another.

The participants had the opportunity to review and respond to this group narrative in a wiki.

3 The participants

The eight participants work at college and university libraries in Ontario, Canada. They studied at three different Canadian library schools, with graduation dates ranging from 1988 to 2009. I have tagged each participant with their graduation date as a marker for what they might have studied in library school and as a marker for their experience. It is an imperfect marker, however: one participant in effect worked as a librarian for 12 years *before* receiving her degree; two others had extensive (10 or more years) previous careers. Note also that tagging the participants with their graduation dates does not mean they should be considered as representatives of their graduation year.

Their library settings range from large libraries to a one-person department library. Job titles run from library Director to [Subject] Librarian to variations on Reference and Instruction Librarian. There are three science librarians, four social science/humanities librarians, and one whose work runs the gamut.

The amount of teaching they do ranges from a high of 50% of the job (spread unevenly through the year, so that September-November and January-March are virtually 100% teaching) to a low of 3%. The librarians at the lower end either previously taught considerably more and/or supervise other instruction librarians. One also teaches a course at a library school.

All of them said they enjoy teaching. By way of introduction, here are some of their reasons.

Blackdog (1991): *Well, most days I like teaching. The thing I probably like most about it is seeing that somebody's got it. You explain something, you walk around, and you see them doing three-word searches, or you see them using the resource you just showed them. And you say, "So, what do you think of this?" And "Oh, this is great. I can't believe what's here." Just that kind of feedback that people have discovered things. The interaction. I like talking about finding information, I kind of like the topic. I can get pretty wound up about it. You know, show what happens when*

you don't do a very good job of it. Most of it is being able to engage with the students.

Danielle (2009): *I have a passion for the library, and using the library resources. So I want to instill that in someone else. It's letting them know that the library isn't their enemy, that they can still maybe go to Wikipedia and Google, but maybe as a reference point, a starting point, and getting them excited about resources that can actually enhance their education, or get them that A, that makes me excited. So that's what I like about teaching. And especially within my specialty, imparting a bit of that knowledge onto someone else who has no idea of what they're doing, I like doing that. Getting them excited about [subject A], using an entirely different tool, it's what makes me really excited about teaching.*

Laura (2005): *I do like teaching. I have to say, every September when I teach my first course I'm so nervous. I can't eat, I can't sleep. But then, as soon as I'm talking, I really like it. It's when the students say "I never knew how to do this, I wish I'd known how to do this [earlier]", or "This is going to be really helpful" or if they've been struggling and then I can show them how to do it, it just makes me feel very good. I like the classroom teaching – sometimes I like to hear myself speak, I like when they laugh at my jokes. I like that I am teaching them, they're learning something that's going to help them with their jobs, make them better at what they do. And I don't like – I was going to say if the students are being juvenile, but I kind of like that 'cos it's a challenge, and it lets you be a bit of a jerk. Or not a jerk, but you can be* that *teacher: "Sorry, do you have a question?"*

Rob (2000): *I do [really like it] actually. Well, it depends. I have some tough faculties. The [faculty A students] can be really tough. It's a lot of work to try and get them on board. [Faculty B] I used to find really tough and they're great now, they really are. I've gotten a better handle on the resources, and I've spent a lot of time getting to know them and really adding value to the program and adding a whole bunch of things to the collection that they didn't have before, that are making their lives easier, making the library relevant. And then I have the [faculty C] students, which are just the best classes ever.*

Claire (2002): *I do enjoy – I got more comfortable with it as time went on. When I came into it I didn't have much background in it, so it took a while to find my feet with it. So yeah, I do enjoy it. I prefer it if it's a smaller group. When it's getting upwards of 20 students – it depends on the circumstances, but when you're in a lab and if you don't have any back-up, it can be hard to keep the pacing right. It can be tricky, if some people are a little bit less inclined technically. But for the most part, I enjoy it. It's a way of getting to know the students, and engaging with them.*

David (2004): *I definitely enjoy it. I get very nervous beforehand. Although it's gotten a lot better. But I do enjoy it, it's nice having a captive audience, it's nice if I can make people laugh - I'm not always able to do that, sometimes it's kind of boring. And I like meeting the students. Certainly when I started out, I'd think in the back of my mind, "You don't really know this, you don't really know this." Though probably*

I knew it better than I thought I did. But that sort of problem is certainly gone pretty much. Once you know everything on a topic pretty well because you've done it many times, then it makes it a lot easier to talk. I'm a kind of introverted type, although I like sitting in my office making something and then showing it to people. And that's sort of what happens in a class, right? So I like doing that with handouts, with little activities, or with the tutorials or anything like that. It's a chance to show something. And so sometimes, if something works, if there's an image that expresses something clearly, or a little activity that makes people laugh – that feels great. I'm really exhausted afterwards. Especially if it's been a long class, I'm kind of jittery for the rest of the day.

Da Vinci (1998): *I love it. I enjoy teaching. I have no fear of getting up in front of people, especially if I know more than they do. I love just making sure they get the information that they need, you know, that I know they should be able to go off and get the information. I don't expect them to be experts by the time they finish, and I tend to not do hands-on. I tend to do just lecturing.*

Michael (1988): *I enjoy it. I enjoy it because I don't do that much of it. I would find it very draining if – I couldn't be an instruction librarian. For me it's an occasional thing, it's something different, something exciting. But I find the performance aspect of it exhausting. You're on, and you do have to perform and be entertaining.*

4 Personal expectations of librarianship

Michael (1988): *Certainly I knew there would be presentations on occasion, but I was trained to work with one individual at a time in a reference interview. That was the norm. It was always one-on-one, what does this person want. There was never dealing with a whole bunch of patrons.*

Blackdog (1991): *There'd always been an interest in teaching. In this library setting, there appeared to be the opportunities for teaching. So I guess I did expect it. I don't think I got so specific [as to think of classroom teaching].*

Da Vinci (1998): *I love doing reference work, interacting with people. So I just took [instruction] as an extension of that. So instead of teaching one person, I'm just doing exactly the same sort of thing I would do with one person with a group.*

Rob (2000): *If anyone had ever told me I would spend 50% of my day teaching, I would never… I don't mind that, because I like it, but for a lot of people this is a shock. This is really, really tough. And they never expect it. I don't know anyone who came out of library school and thought they would teach. One of the things I kept asking while doing my degree was, "but what does the day look like?" None of it prepared me for what the day would be like. [My current practicum student from library school] said exactly the same thing, that she had no idea there would be so much teaching.*

David (2004): *When I thought of library school, teaching wasn't the first thing that jumped into my head when I thought about what it would involve, being a librarian. I was aware that librarians taught things like how to use the catalogue and all that stuff. I don't think I really did [see teaching as part of the job]. I really thought I'd probably be a reference librarian – the limited experience that I had was that and I enjoyed it. Certainly I had no real sense of [teaching's] importance. I don't mean that so much objectively, in terms of its objective importance, but its importance in terms of how librarians rank it.*

Laura (2005): *When I was in library school, this wasn't the job I thought I would have. I wanted to be a public librarian. I saw myself at the reference desk in a public library, doing readers' advisory.*

Danielle (2009): *I didn't want to be a teacher because I don't like public speaking, yet here I am. After doing my own research I realized it's inevitable. During my Masters I did a content analysis of [librarian] job postings. Not all, but a vast majority needed teaching experience. From public library to academic library, wherever I [would] end up, I was going to be in some form teaching. It was in my last semester that this became more evident. It wasn't evident coming into library school. I didn't realize that it would be so heavily pronounced.*

Da Vinci (1998): *I always say that what you do in librarianship is a self-selecting thing. So if you're not good at teaching and presenting and stuff like that, you end up working in the backroom stuff. You're probably the cataloguer, the serials person, the collection development type person. And if you're an outgoing person who is comfortable talking, then you end up at the reference desk and doing the courses.*

Blackdog (1991): *All [our] professional cataloguers were removed from cataloguing and put on the reference desk [and asked to teach].*

The narrative of the profession as documented in the introduction is one where teaching has played an increasingly central role in the work of academic librarians. The comments here seem to indicate something of a blind spot to this narrative. It is not possible, of course, to generalize from the experience of such a small sample of participants, though it is possible to say that not all library school students or even librarians are aware of the changes that have taken place in librarianship. However a large Canadian study (8Rs Research Team, 2005) also observes that would-be librarians hold misperceptions about the work in the profession, and suggests that marketing for the profession should highlight actual job functions.

5 What they learned about teaching in library school

Michael (1988): *Zippo. I remember we made classroom presentations, we certainly got instruction in the reference interview, but I don't remember any instruction in how to teach.*

Blackdog (1991): *We didn't have a [Bibliographic Instruction] course. It was prior to that. I know one was in the works by the time I graduated. And it took about five years for them to pull it together. [Library school] was pretty much presentations by students. So I learned a lot by observing what other people did. Both [good and bad]. You know, "I'll never do that." Or, "that was interesting."*

Da Vinci (1998): *We had to do a lot of presentations. One of the goals was to get people very familiar standing up in front. It was an explicit goal. That training was more effective for doing a presentation at a conference. It didn't really transfer over to teaching. We didn't do pedagogy.*

Rob (2000): *Zero. Teaching wasn't even mentioned, it wasn't even a component. I didn't hear the term "information literacy" until I started to work. It wasn't there. We had a lot of student presentations on – the big thing at the time was the serials crisis. It was all about the serials crisis. There was the closest to teaching, where we'd sit through all these, for the most part, really lousy student presentations on various things. You weren't really learning anything. You were practicing your very best "pretend this person is saying something interesting" expression. And there was no component like how do you - you just have to present. For a lot of people it was just torture. Total. Standing up in front of people talking about really dry subjects.*

Claire (2002): *When I went through [library school] there was nothing on information literacy. Absolutely nothing.*

David (2004): *There was no course that I took on it.*

Laura (2005): *There was a class on instruction and information literacy, but I didn't take it. We'd have presentations. But not, "This is how to search this", they were "This is mystery writers."*

Danielle (2009): *It was in my last semester that [the importance of teaching] became more evident. And by that point I could no longer sign into classes I should have been taking. They had one Instruction Methods course – overbooked, with a waiting list of 30 people. So I jumped into Professional Communication, which didn't necessarily answer [the teaching] skill sets, but it did get me presenting. [It] was an asset because they filmed you. And this is the first instance I've ever seen what I looked like. I come out of there all the time thinking I must have been red in the face, I must have been stammering, I must have been shaking. I feel that way inside, I wonder how's it portrayed to the people. That class gave me tricks of how to hide your fear. So that was a great asset. I practiced enough just because I realize, okay, I've got to be comfortable with myself. If I can't do it, fake it. So that class was helpful in terms of presenting in a larger group.*

As it happens, none of the participants took an instruction course at library school, although four of the eight had the opportunity (I checked with the library schools in question): Rob and Da Vinci, as well as Laura and Danielle. Rob and Da Vinci seem oblivious to the fact that such a course existed in their time at library school – another

blind spot – although Rob speaks passionately about the need for such classes. Sproles, Johnson and Farison (2008, 206) also observe a dissonance between what librarians believe was offered on instruction at library school and the greater amount their study found was actually offered. I suggest that such instruction at library school does not register with students who do not yet see the importance of instruction.

The group's non-participation in instruction courses runs counter to the assumption that library school now prepares librarians for teaching. I saw this assumption in the group: when asked if librarians were prepared for teaching some of the participants immediately mentioned library school courses in instruction. Blackdog expressed surprise that library school students might feel unprepared for teaching. Danielle was still clearly upset that she had not taken the course. Rob imagined the course he wished he'd taken.

Claire (2002) took a six-week online continuing education course on teaching for librarians from a library school:

That helped, because it was talking about learning objectives, and trying to align your teaching with having some – don't just go in there and dump on them, have some idea of why you're there in the first place. [I didn't apply it] as much as I would like, to be honest, but it did focus what I was trying to do with teaching. So that helped.

In other words, this class was helpful but not sufficient: it did not fully prepare her for teaching. However no one in the group questioned the idea that how to teach could be taught in one six- or twelve-week course (although Rob did feel some kind of practical teaching experience should also be built in at library school).

The latest survey to examine where librarians learn to teach echoes these findings. Westbrock and Fabian (2009) started with ACRL's list (2008) of 41 proficiencies for instruction librarians. None of their participants said they learned any of the proficiencies primarily at library school, although some percentage of them must surely have taken an instruction class (Westbrock and Fabian did not actually ask). This again counters the idea that library school coursework can prepare librarians for teaching. Their participants did feel that library school *should* be the primary place to acquire two-thirds of the proficiencies. Westbrock and Fabian talk of a disconnect between professional education and professional responsibilities. I suggest there is also a disconnect between librarians' expectations of library school instruction courses and how much coursework alone can actually teach about teaching.

It is also worth noting how much presentation skills were emphasized in the participants' accounts of what they learned at library school, although the concept of teaching as presentation provides only a very stunted view of teaching. For example, this is only one category out of twelve in ACRL's list of instruction proficiencies.

6 First teaching experiences

Michael (1988 ; non-science librarian): *I got there about September 15th, and the first week I think I taught 12 classes. It was like, okay, you're scheduled to teach this class tomorrow, it's on nursing resources. It was flying by the seat of my pants. I'm not sure how much the students learned. I learned a lot. There wasn't a lot to build on. I learnt by trial and error. The hardest part there, I think, was teaching where I didn't have an understanding of the discipline.*

Danielle (2009): *I'm actually in a contract position. I've been there since September. I'm taking over someone's position. When I first got to my job, within three days I gave an entire day [off-site] workshop based on her [PowerPoint] slides. So arrived on the Monday, left the Thursday. And here you go.*

[For another class] of over 200 people, generally it's about an hour to 45 minutes, and it's all pre-scripted – more of an outline. But it's been a learning experience. I was given this script, walk into a classroom and do this. "Oh, it's all self-explanatory, you'll be fine." Okay. I walked in there and my employee information didn't work on the computer, and I didn't know how to use the terminals, it was different than in the library.

[Before teaching this class again,] the one thing I took upon myself, I asked one of the librarians if I could shadow one of her presentations so that I wasn't going in blind. [I saw] one class. Out of everything. And here you go. I just watched. And then afterwards I followed her back to her office and thanked her and then -- she was really busy. She goes back to work, I go back to work. And I just jotted down a lot of notes, oh yes, don't forget to mention this, go here… And then I went home and practiced the script on my own.

Walking into my first 200 class in a university, when I'm not that much older than they were, was intimidating. And so a trick I kept telling myself was okay, you don't need to know everything, but you know a bit more than them. You can tell them that much. Faking it.

Rob (2000): *When I started, my first real teaching in libraries was – I worked in [a] Public Library for a year. Which was really one of the best jobs I ever had. Because I was children's librarian, you have to do story time. And story time is super tough. It is a really scary thing. I sat through a couple of story times with other people and got an idea. And we had a full story time archive, which I've never seen anywhere else. So all the children's librarians would just pool, send in their lesson plans. And they were all arranged by theme. So when you're starting off and you have no idea, you can go, "Okay, we're doing 'Farm'. What are good farm books? What are good farm songs?" So you start, you would build that up, that was hugely beneficial. Hugely beneficial. And then, after that, then you build up your own archives, and you start coming up with your plans, and you just pull it together. And so you just figure it out. But starting off with that archive was great. And having good colleagues. The*

children's librarians were great and people really helped each other a lot, it's a real sense of team and that made a huge difference.

[In his present academic job:] *You're just thrown out there and you're told this is what you're going to do. I started, and I sat in on two different classes, with two different colleagues. And that was it. I took really good notes for what everyone did for their classes, and then I just had to go with it. That was it. Thrown in. And I just had to figure it out. And that is really difficult. To do an hour on stuff you've never done before. My first [subject X] classes were total disasters. I didn't know what they wanted. It was just the biggest waste of time. There was nothing of value for them, and it was miserable for everyone involved.*

David (2004): *I was encouraged to sit in on some classes that were being taught here before I taught any. To see how [my supervisor] did it, for example, because he was quite experienced. I think I saw two or three. I probably should have seen more. But I probably could have seen more if I wanted to. Probably I was eager just to do it myself.*

There were some existing materials. Certainly I would talk to [my supervisor] a lot. He would show me the kinds of things that he did. And what he thought was important. And I watched him teach, so I saw how he did it. And we had certainly some handouts ready or – I personally like to do everything my own way. So I would sort of customize – end up doing everything my own – because I discovered pretty quick that I like PowerPoint.

I think at first I felt I was very boring. I know I was. Because I didn't really know how to make it interesting. I would just sort of show them, you click here, and then you go here, and then you go here, and then you go here.

Claire (2002): *I was lucky that I had [X] that I was able to use as a mentor. I had absolutely no background. I went to some of her sessions and watched what she did, and learned from her, used her handouts, then co-teaching with her. So definitely she was my guide to start with. It was scary having to teach – I'm supposed to get up there and pretend I know what I'm doing? The first few times were – yeah, they were pretty alarming, I've got to say. In terms of my personality, I'm not real big on presentations. I'll do them, and I've got much better at them as time goes by.*

Laura (2005): *I was assigned a mentor, who's an excellent teacher. So I watched [her] a couple of times, she's just got a really great style. Very confident, and very present. And then other instructors that I watched. When I first started [my boss] recommended classes to sit in on, taught by other librarians, who she thought would be good to see. Just different personalities and different styles, different content. I started [teaching] within two months. The first class I taught was a lecture, one of the lectures in [subject A] that somebody else had written the script. And it was awful. Awful! My boss was there at the back of the room, and I was teaching these students, and I had such a dry mouth that I lost my voice, and my eyes were watering, and it was awful. My voice got shrill… and my boss was there. I think it was just me being*

so nervous. And just too much pressure. And so then I taught a few times when [my boss] wasn't in the room and just got my sea-legs. And then I guess I started planning my own stuff in [subject B]. It was really when I started teaching classes that I had organized, so I felt ownership over the content, that I kind of picked it up.

One of the narratives in the profession is the increased support for teaching both locally and nationally through various programs, committees, and conferences (see for example, Rader, 1999; also Walter, 2006), a support that was not available in the past.

Claire (2002): "*My general sense is that [the institutional support] is there, that you get support if you need it. Generally, I feel like the infrastructure's in place."*

Clearly in some of the more recent stories the participants did receive more support. Yet the most recent story is not that different in outline from the oldest story, nor from Rob's story in the middle. The narrative of support does appear to have taken hold with these librarians. This can be seen in their expectations. The three librarians with the longest experience all said they did not expect or look for support when they started. Danielle and Rob, on the other hand, expressed outrage at the lack of support; they clearly hoped and looked for it.

How *students* experience the teaching of new librarians is not part of the library literature. We can catch a glimpse in the stories here. Michael (1988): "I'm not sure how much the students learned." Rob (2000): "It was just the biggest waste of time. There was nothing of value for [the students]." He also emphasizes the importance of teaching well: "I get one hour to connect. If don't deliver, I'll never see any of those students again."

7 Teaching as learning

Rob (2000): *You remember what went wrong. After classes I'll look at my lesson plans and I'll just rip stuff out. All that stuff that just totally flopped. You look at your timing. You think, oh, I really rushed this. I sounded like I really didn't know what I was talking about, why you would go to this website. Why* would *you go? Well, I thought, I didn't really explain that. I could hear myself talking, and go, you're rambling. You're not being coherent with that. So you need to be really aware, take that on board for what's not working. It's always ongoing. Because classes that went really well last week could just bomb. But it's really hard to have that level of self-awareness, as to what's not working and how you can change.*

Laura (2005): *As far as instructional techniques, you really have to be present and observant of your group. Seeing how engaged they are, and adjust your volume or your body language, add a joke or whatever. So speed it up or slow it down and have a dialogue with them, which is hard, often you'll ask a question and nobody will answer. Finding out what they need to know, putting yourself in their shoes. It's always hopefully getting better. And it will never stop changing. And sometimes, if I think this class has way too much going on, simplify, simplify, and then I miss something, I was too brutal. Sometimes you make a change and it doesn't work. But it*

is always tinkering. There's what you know you should do, and then there's how much time you have. I feel like my classes aren't as good as they could be, but sometimes you don't have time to make it as good.

Danielle (2009): *I'm still really new at this. So it's always refining my presentations later. I've taken presentations that I thought were solid and realized maybe I didn't get this point across. When students do come up and meet me, then they start giving me more one-on-one feedback. So it's like, "Where exactly are the databases located on the library page again?" Oh, I took for granted that you would know where that is. I had students come up to me afterwards with everyone giving me almost the same question. I knew what to emphasize at a later presentation. Which wasn't passed down to me from anyone else. This has all been self-taught, learned on the job.*

Blackdog (1991): *I think, "Oh yeah, last year it was probably pretty good" and then I have a hard time not touching it and doing it again. So sometimes I'm working really late the night before. And I'm a little hazy on what I'm doing. But usually I'm pretty good at winging it. Sometimes it's [based on] my own feeling of, wow, I had a hard time getting this out in this way, how else could I present it that makes more sense to me. Or, oh, gee, I didn't realize they were missing this step before, I thought they kind of understood that, I have to introduce that somehow. So it's a combination of both what I felt and what I get from the students. Sometimes I have – when I'm really organized – I will have [my own] feedback form. And I will ask as much about the content as the way it came across. It's just free comments-based, basically. "What did you like? What didn't you like? What would you recommend? What else would you like to tell me about the session?" [I'm always trying to] make it better. I'm a perfectionist.*

This kind of personal grappling with the material is probably unavoidable for anyone who aspires to teach well. There has lately been an increased awareness in the profession of reflection as a tool for improving instruction (for example, Tompkins, 2009). This is not to say that courses and support do not make the process easier. As described here, it is a very solitary activity; ideally, it does not have to be that way.

Several of the participants describe colleagues who seem to avoid this grappling, who appear to have no self-critical awareness of their teaching: they read from scripts exactly as prepared by someone else; they use nothing but text-heavy PowerPoint slides, for hours; they remain oblivious to their students.

The narrative of teaching in the profession is generally one of accomplishment and success. Bad teaching – what it is and why it happens and what effect it has on students – has no place in the narrative. It may be that these librarians have no interest in teaching, let alone teaching well. Or it may be that they have no other model, that they are self-taught and working in isolation. There are real drawbacks to learning only on your own.

8 Support from colleagues

Stress and anxiety around teaching are elements in several of the librarians' accounts. Support through collaboration and teamwork with colleagues is seen to have a positive effect on the experience. Rob (2000): "Good colleagues … made a huge difference." Danielle (2009): "I would seriously hope [in my next job] there'd be a peer support network."

Laura (2005): *It's very collaborative. [X] and I do most of the planning [for one area]. Theoretically it could be anybody who's involved in the planning, but I oversee it. Some classes I would have a partner to work with. Some classes were really a committee to plan. Even though I oversaw it, I'd pull in other people to go over things. The people I work with are fantastic. I have had a very positive experience.*

Such a collaborative environment is far from universal in this group however.

Blackdog (1991): *We don't really talk about our teaching, right? No different from faculty. I honestly, unless I ask someone point blank, or I happen to have been helping with a particularly large class, I have no idea exactly what someone else has been doing. We tried to get the equivalent of a journal club going, where people would choose an article related to instruction. Go and read it, then get together and talk about it. Well, we've done it once. And it's, here we are, side by side in our little offices, and we have so little interaction. Sad. But we're all tied to that screen. It's a sort of inertia.*

Rob (2000): *It's really not a good team environment here for working with other colleagues. People are very protective of what they do, they don't share information, and it's too bad. And I find that a real challenge, not having colleagues you can easily talk to. Because that helps with the teaching, if you can talk to people, and really get their feedback. Teamwork is a real skill that some people have a real problem with. It's one of the things I really notice here, that the librarians, there isn't that collegiality. That people know what they're doing is right. I think some people can really suck the life out of a classroom. And God, you've been doing this for 30 years. You're still doing exactly the same thing. And you're coming to me and saying, "Why are my class requests going down? Why is nobody asking me for a class?" Well, what do you say? I say, "You know, well, it could be that you don't have so many first year students. You know, maybe the requirements have changed." And if you say to a colleague who you already know isn't going to take it well, going to be really upset if you say, "Have you looked at the way you teach?" I'll quietly give – if I think people really are interested in feedback – and some people aren't. Feedback's hard.*

Michael (1988): *People are hesitant to be honest. Because if people are honest, we'll hurt each others' feelings. If one of my colleagues has actually been a rover in one of my classes, I'll say, "What do you think worked?" And I actually don't get much of a response. People tend to be very nice: "Oh, that was just great." Thank you, I wasn't actually looking for a pat on the head. Collegiality is hard, because it requires a*

certain level of trust between people. I wish that we actually could say to each other, "That really wasn't very good. That didn't work." And I'm much more willing to do that with somebody who is hierarchically beneath me - early in their career, reports to me directly - whereas somebody who has been around longer and is of comparable rank, I'm just much less willing to say anything.

Danielle (2009): [Of her two closest colleagues] *It's been a hard time connecting together, to network, in a teaching capacity. I go to them a lot more for other help, like collection development, cataloguing, and all that. There's not that support centre for presentations. I don't know what [the others] do, I don't know if it's just presentations, or if they do it on the catalogue – I don't know. I did have a base of what the librarian before me did, and it was a lot of presentations. My presentations this semester are definitely improved. It's always a building strategy, and there's no way then to pass that knowledge along.*

At issue here is not just how librarians experience learning to teach, it is *what we learn* about being an effective teacher. If we do not talk to one another, how can we help each other to improve our teaching? How can we "pass that knowledge along"?

One idea that has taken hold with several in the group is mentoring. Blackdog (1991): "I think there's a bigger role for mentoring." Da Vinci (1998): "Mentors are a good thing." Danielle (2009): "I would take [a new librarian] under my wing." There is a little doubt that a new librarian could benefit from this kind of support and attention, though the precise role of a mentor has not been fleshed out. Da Vinci: "Just to ask those little questions." But there are bigger questions too, and as shown above, we do not necessarily know how to talk about them. It may be the mentors would need instruction in this first. It may be we all need assistance.

Creating mentors does not address the needs of librarians in various stages of their careers who still want to learn more about teaching. Laura (2005) suggests a library instruction consultant with pedagogical and subject expertise, who could look at her teaching and make suggestions. My own belief is that teamwork and collaboration need to take on a much larger role. In the absence of such an expert, I suggest we need to try to figure it out together.

9 Continuing education

Or course, we do look, in varying degrees, for expertise outside the local setting.

Blackdog (1991): *I read, a fair bit. The library literature. But I also read in higher ed literature as well. The library literature has been how to create collaboration with faculty, that end of things, down to "Here's a really great assignment we gave in a [subject] class". I have a Google alert set up for "graduate students information literacy." Because people tend to put things up on websites they don't necessarily publish. So I get stuff that way. I've always tried to go to the two main instruction conferences, WILU and LOEX. Or it could be a workshop at the [faculty teaching centre], I go to lots of theirs. If anything comes up through an ACRL online course,*

I've done those in the past. Or rebroadcasting a session from ALA. There is a budget for that kind of development. I've done one of the ACRL Immersion courses.

Claire (2002): *I did take an [online] course on the information professional as educator. [It took] six weeks. So that helped. Some [local workshops] have been good days and I've taken away a few things. And there's also been a few through the [faculty teaching centre]. They had a couple of sessions that were useful – learning objectives again, and just planning out your class.*

David (2004): *Some of those [local instruction] events were useful. I picked up [an exercise] about how to teach Boolean searching in an engaging way, a physical, active, humourous way. I've done that many times now and it was a great idea. I've never used [any other exercise I saw in a session] in a class, but in the back of my mind that's a useful thing I could do. I always think how can I fit them into a template I've already got. And sometimes that's the tricky thing.*

Laura (2005): *I go to the [local instruction] workshops and that sort of thing, but [they're] right before the holidays and by the time you come back you've forgotten [them]. I really enjoy them every time I go, but the application – I never get to it.*

Michael (1988): *Hey, I'm a librarian, I could find a book on the topic, couldn't I? Maybe not the best resource. I don't want to do some fly-by-night continuing ed thing. I guess there probably are things out there and I just haven't taken advantage of them. I get busy with all kinds of other things in life.*

Da Vinci (1998): *I don't do continuing ed. I guess the only thing I've done, I've taken Captivate, for creating video type tutorials.*

Danielle (2009): *I bring [teaching preparation] home with me a lot. I haven't had the time yet to take out a, maybe a resource guide for librarians, or book – not that I've found one yet. That might be useful. I've seen a few books for information literacy and how to connect to the students. But I quite frankly don't have the time. I would love to actually take an online course. I've looked for help. I've seen what resources are [at my institution] and it's geared towards faculty and T.A.s. They have a lot of training seminars over the summer for incoming T.A.s.*

Rob (2000): *There's a session arranged for the [faculty teaching centre] to work with librarians to work on their teaching skills. But I'm not going to go to it. This is a generic teaching workshop for any teaching faculty. And I don't believe that you can transpose a regular classroom teaching model on a librarian teaching model. I get one hour to connect. If I have a bad day in a regular classroom, I've got 14 other weeks in term that I can make up, that I can connect with these students. And that's a totally different ballpark than having only one hour. And any time that I've gone to any [faculty teaching centre] workshops, I haven't found them that good. That might be harsh. You know, it's great that [they're] going to do this and are reaching out, but they really need to come in and sit in one of our classes. And see what are we doing. What are our needs. Talk to us about what we see are the challenges. Talk to*

us. What are the problems we face. You can't just put this generic model on and say, yay, we're reaching out to the librarians to teach them how to teach. I really don't believe that works.

The narrative in the profession is one of support for learning to teach through an array of professional development opportunities (again, see Rader, 1999). Blackdog perhaps exemplifies the librarian of this narrative. The narrative is not wrong, but it is incomplete. A number of participants in the group chose not to participate, for different reasons. Those who did participate, did not always apply what they learned – a common problem with one-shot workshops, as librarians, who frequently teach one-shots, can attest. Thus availability did not necessarily mean participation, not did participation necessarily mean application. The main barrier cited was time.

10 Where does the responsibility for learning to teach lie?

Michael (1988): *Well, I think if you're hired to do something, you're meant to do it. There is a presumption that you're already trained to do it. I don't want to baby professionals – there should be an expectation on the individual to figure it out. If you don't know, then do something about it. Which is not an unusual presumption in the academy. We presume the same thing of Ph.D. students, that they will be able to teach. And no recognition that there might be particular skills to teaching. [Though] I think that is changing. Even with faculty. People are recognizing this is a specific skill. But I don't want to put too much blame on management – I'll blame management in libraries for lots of things, but I think it's not unreasonable for management to say people should already know their jobs.*

Blackdog (1991): *I don't think I expected to have any more support. One of the things that sticks in my head is talking with a senior librarian just before I was hired. Her comment was, "As a professional you should know within six months of starting a new job what you don't know, and how you're going to find out." I didn't realize how much it's etched on my brain. [Professional development] is made available and it's up to you to take it or not. I think there's a bigger role for mentoring.*

Da Vinci (1998): *I was quite happy having [the teaching] become organically clear. Just I wonder whether, if there was some more support, I could do better. I think [responsibility] lies with the individual and, if anything, more with the employer. Mentors are a good thing.*

Rob (2000): *[When I started] it was just an expectation that you would know how to do it. I do think there is [a responsibility at library school]. It doesn't have to be for everyone, but if you're seriously interested in going into the academic stream, you need proper teacher training. And I don't know if you can build practicums… We can't have [library students] teach a class, obviously, because if they screw it up and we've only got one chance, that's it. But we can give a tremendous amount of modeling. And lesson plans. Mentoring I think is huge. We need more mentors.*

Claire (2002): *Hey, if it's part of your job, you better learn how to do it. So I took the course, I did it on my own time, 'cos I felt if I needed to know this it was something I was going to have to do. But I certainly felt supported, the cost was covered and [my mentor] was always very approachable and available. But I felt that it was her responsibility to help me, 'cos I didn't know. Outside of the education for incoming librarians, we certainly need institutional support. My general sense is that it is there, that you get support if you need it. Generally I feel like the infrastructure's in place.*

David (2004): *There was support. It might be good to take a required course. If it were part of the work day to take the course, I would certainly take it. Because it would be a great help in the classroom.*

Laura (2005): *By accepting the job, I committed to doing it. And if I did feel unprepared, I sort of see it as, that's your own problem, right? 'Cos that's your job, to do it. But I think the institution has a responsibility to give you what you need. And I think [here], they do a lot. There's a lot available to us, but you sort of need to plan it yourself, or with your supervisor. I want to know theory, and I could know, but I just don't. That's my own fault, right? I could totally learn it and I probably have time, but there's always – when I have free time there's something else I could be doing.*

Danielle (2009): *I find the institution expects you to have those skills. Job ads are, "You must have these skills", not "You will need to learn these skills". And so where do you develop those skills? Your first job? I think we're supposed to miraculously know it. That's been my experience. And it may have been different with someone else. It may be the [area of the library] I'm in. Or because I'm contract. Maybe if I was there more long-term they would have invested – it's hard to say. But then again, I'm rather resourceful and my boss has make that clear, that's why he's like, "You're good, you figure it out, I don't have to walk you by the hand." Maybe it's their lack of preparation. If it's expected of us as librarians, it should be put in place as a system to help us. And it goes back to library school. Because it goes back down to our core. What are we as librarians? Where's our future? We're taking a stronger emphasis on teaching. That's not reflected in our curriculum.*

The narrative of individual responsibility for learning their job clearly has a strong grip on many of the individuals in the group, bound up with a sense of librarians as professionals and academics. This narrative is in tension with one in which there is an expectation of support for learning the job. The narrative of individual responsibility may at times be one of convenience. Danielle speculates that "Maybe it's *their* lack of preparation" (italics mine). It may be that individuals who had no support themselves do not know how to provide support.

To Albrecht and Baron (2002), library schools and employers both are giving librarians the impression that taking on more intense instruction duties requires little preparation or experience, leaving librarians to play catch up on their own (p. 91). In fact, teaching well requires lifelong learning in multiple sites and situations. Librarians need a broad infrastructure to support this learning, one that may include

formal training at library school, modeling and mentoring, support from colleagues, institutional support, continuing education, and self-study. ARCL (2003) has a list of best practices in programs of information literacy that can serve as a guide for support. Walter (2006) draws on the literature of instructional improvement in higher education to provide further ideas, particularly focusing on the role of library leaders.

The experiences of the participants in this study suggest that at present the infrastructure is still patchy. There is a real cost to the lack of adequate support for learning to teach in the profession. "Trying to figure it out" is a phrase (with variants) used by almost all the participants. I use it myself. It seems embedded in our identities as teachers. This may simply represent the ongoing learning process – I suspect librarians as teachers will always be trying to figure it out. But I sense it also captures an underlying attitude of uncertainty, maybe even insecurity, about teaching.

Teaching anxiety is a feature of several of the participants' stories. Davis's study of librarian teacher anxiety (2007) found that a majority (62%) of librarians felt nervous before teaching (p. 87). Fear of public speaking was the cause in 22% of cases - however 19% was simply from lack of training (p. 92).

The cost of inadequate support and preparation goes beyond the individual librarian teacher however. Their teaching is inevitably affected as well. And if their teaching is affected, so is the learning of their students. Turning the focus outwards to learners in this way can help us reframe the question of responsibility for learning to teach. The tension between individual and institutional responsibility is irrelevant to our students. The question then becomes how we, as individuals, as a group, as a profession can focus on improving our support for instruction, for learning to teach, in ways that will positively impact our students' learning.

11 Talking about teaching

The librarians in this study chose to participate because, for whatever reason, they wanted to talk about teaching and learning to teach. Opportunities for such talk in our day-to-day work lives are hard to find. We may be held back from talking about teaching by isolation or reticence or insecurity or lack of vocabulary. Yet discussion of teaching is a "distinguishing feature of a culture of teaching" (Walter, 2005, 368).

Narrative, the telling of stories, can give us a way to open the discussion, a way to share and reflect on our experience and knowledge and understanding, a way to improve our practice.

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[i] All participant names are pseudonyms, followed by the person's date of graduation from library school. Any identifying details have been omitted.