Librarian Attitudes toward Librarians Teaching Nonlibrary Subjects

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abstract: This study examines the current attitudes of librarians toward the practice of librarians teaching classes beyond the domain of library skills and information literacy. An electronic survey was sent to ILI-L (Information Literacy Instruction List), the Association of College and Research Libraries library instruction e-mail list. The author tabulated the results and parsed them to extract a useful summary. This survey found that attitudes remain mixed. However, a positive or negative opinion did not seem correlated to institution size or type, but only to an individual’s job function. Surprisingly, instruction librarians had the most negative opinion of this practice.

Introduction

As the information environment continues to evolve in the twenty-first century, it has become impossible to lead students through a walled garden of library resources that keeps all material of complex value outside. In many ways, it would be undesirable to keep students trapped in such an artificial environment. One solution being explored at the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho, is for our librarians to move beyond the traditional role of guest lecturer for a day and begin teaching whole classes through various interdisciplinary venues, such as Integrated Seminars and the Honors program. Both are existing arrangements within the university for elective courses not tied to a traditional discipline. The hope is that these classes will create opportunities to discuss and demonstrate advanced information literacy practices without explicitly presenting themselves as library skills classes. While this kind of teaching is new to this institution, it is not new to the profession. This researcher felt it worthwhile to examine how such endeavors have played out in the past, and specifically how librarians regard such a shift in their identity and responsibilities.
Literature Review

What is most notable about the existing body of literature on librarians teaching non-library classes is that there is so little of it. One paper observes, “A literature search on the topic of librarians as professors in higher education inevitably retrieves articles on librarians teaching bibliographic instruction or information literacy, with very few other options.”1 Another says, “In light of the fact that this sort of instruction offers such fertile and valuable new ground for academic librarians, the scarcity of literature relating to credit-bearing classes and practical details is perplexing.”2

Also remarkable is how negative the literature is. This comprehensive literature review found nine unfavorable articles3 and only four favorable ones4 on this topic. Even the affirmative articles tend to be mixed, often discussing the challenges at greater length than the benefits, while the negative articles tend to be unequivocal.

The article that casts the deepest shadow over this subject is “Librarians as Teachers: The Study of an Organization Fiction” by Pauline Wilson, then an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.5 She claims:

Librarians generally believe their status to be low, and a concern for status runs through the literature of librarianship. Academic librarians, in fact, have been characterized as having an inordinate passion for status. Undoubtedly the organizational fiction that librarians are teachers has been used to buttress a claim to a higher status or a claim to more prestige.6

Wilson continues, “It is not surprising then that librarians have sought relief from the stereotype by seeking to use the occupational title of a different profession, for there can be no doubt that they have a genuine need for a more comforting self-image.” She concludes:

A root cause of the lack of recognition is this: there is no basis for recognition. It is not that teachers and professors will not recognize librarians as teachers. Rather, it is that they cannot . . . There is no basis in fact, no reality, that would cause a connection, an identification, to be made between the librarian and his or her occupational role and the faculty member’s own occupational role of teacher or professor. The organization fiction that librarians are teachers is truly a fiction.7

All 16 pages of this article are highly quotable, and it has framed the discussion ever since, with every paper since 1979 reacting to it in some way.

Another paper of interest is Mark Polger and Karen Okamoto’s “Can’t Anyone Be a Teacher Anyway?” in which they describe a survey of student attitudes toward librarians.8 The tool they use assumes that the respondent thinks of librarians as teachers and asks them to justify their responses only if they express the opinion that librarians are not teachers. (For instance, “If you do not perceive the librarian as a teacher, please select some of the roles below that best suit a librarian’s role.”) In other words, the path of least resistance through the survey is to agree that librarians are teachers, and yet only 54 percent of students ultimately assented to this idea. Nearly half the undergraduate respondents worked against the survey to express their opinion that librarians are not teachers.
Other papers had a variety of criticisms of librarians as professors or teachers, including Wilson’s statement: “Academic librarians claim to be professors, members of a profession whose major occupational task is teaching. By the magic of words things that are of one kind are made to seem to be of another.”9 David Peele raises another objection, declaring:

As long as it requires a second masters to be an assistant librarian but a PhD to be an assistant professor, we are not meeting the same standards. The fact that they have a doctorate does not necessarily mean that they are great teachers, of course, but by the same token our second Masters does not insure that we are great bibliographic instructors.10

William Walters has a list of reasons why librarians should not be considered teachers, but the broadest stroke is “an overemphasis on generalist skills and a reluctance to gain expert knowledge.”11

Not all the negative authors simply gainsay the practice of librarians teaching outside of traditional library instruction. Several bring up legitimate concerns. Both Jane Kemp and Fred Borchuck express uneasiness that “librarian-teachers and non-teaching librarians may end up pitted against one another for status, compensation, and even their very employment.”12 In particular, Kemp highlighted, “These [responses] included the worry that the librarian-teacher unwittingly reinforced the stereotype of the other non-teaching librarians as administrators who are not intellectually credible.”13 Even Wilson expresses a practical concern on behalf of the teacher-librarian: “Not only is the status claim rejected, but also the librarian is placed in the untenable position of not being able to fulfill the requirements of the fictional role, of having his or her work performance judged according to the occupational tasks and standards of an entirely different profession.”14 Ross Johnson summarizes the claim that librarians are equivalent to teachers with a pithy statement: “Like their teaching faculty colleagues, academic librarians sometimes strain to make the simple unclear and the obvious obscure.”15

Those with a favorable outlook on the topic take another approach. Scott Walter says, “Contrary to what some critics have suggested, this is not the result of academic librarians seeking to enhance their professional status on campus by associating their work with the most visible feature of the work of the college professor, but is simply evidence of a far-reaching change in the profession of college teaching itself.”16 Both Margaret Burke and Mark Yerburgh also rebuke the idea that librarians only teach in a mercenary search for enhanced status:

As innovative technologies and increasingly sophisticated support staffs continue to relieve academic librarians of monotonous day-to-day routines, some will gravitate towards functions of an administrative nature. Not all, however, have either the opportunity or the inclination to oversee large clusters of specialized support units, prepare grant proposals, or assemble armadas of budgetary materials. Some academic librarians want to teach.17

Walters goes even further:

Arguably, however, there is a more fundamental goal: to bring the librarian subculture into closer alignment with the faculty subculture. This is especially important if we see the library’s mission in terms of scholarship and learning rather than information access. Closer alignment can perhaps be achieved by increasing librarians’ involvement with faculty research projects and regular course instruction, by weakening those aspects of the
One major point of contention is disagreement over when a librarian is entitled to assume the mantle of teacher. Some, like Peele, argue that the test is when librarians perform a function analogous to that of teachers:

What has been contended here, however, is that when we teach a credit course as part of our library instruction program we have every right to call ourselves teachers. We do then what college teachers do—choose course content, meet classes for regular periods throughout the semester, give out assignments, think up paper topics, set exams, have office hours, and know our students by name.

Others, like John Budd, propose more liberal criteria: “While the information being dispensed by the librarian is different from that dispensed by the classroom instructor, it is different only in form, but not in substance, and usually it must be interpreted as it being dispensed.” As to the issue of credentials, Budd replies, “[Opponents] erroneously state that the librarian approaches the various bodies of knowledge as an outsider, almost as though anything exceeding the bounds of the MLS program is beyond the librarian’s ken.” H. Palmer Hall attempts to demonstrate that reference work often involves more teaching than some faculty do:

Librarians know that the more successful and the more highly published a faculty member may be, the less he or she stands in front of a class. [Once] a “super star” faculty member, no teaching in front of a classroom goes on at all . . . Once achieving that exalted, officially recognized faculty status, the “star” faculty member becomes something of a “reference librarian”—dealing with students on a one-to-one basis, answering questions and doing research.

Leaving aside issues of status or external perception, many authors note benefits to librarians from this kind of work. Walters explains, “Active involvement in scholarship can help improve librarians’ subject knowledge, keep them engaged with the research literature, give them a better understanding of empirical research methods, and build professional affinity between librarians and regular faculty.” Peggie Partello agrees: “In the meantime, they are intellectually stimulated in a way that is not always possible in traditional library work. This also presents an opportunity for growth and renewal for librarians who have been performing the same duties for some time and need a change.” Other benefits include getting to know students, getting to know faculty, and improving as a librarian. Partello sums up her experience as a teacher thusly: “I felt directly involved in the mission of the college in a way that I don’t feel in the library.”

Both detractors and supporters identify many challenges to a nonlibrary teaching role. For instance, say Nicole Auer and Ellen Krupar, “Even if you get work release for the addition of grading responsibilities, you will have to carve out at least half of your work week for creating and revising assignments, fielding student questions and complaints about the assignment and/or grade, dealing with lost or incomplete assignments, and communicating with course instructors.” Likewise, Partello asserts, “Teaching faculty had spring break, a lengthy Christmas vacation, and reading days to mark papers, pre-
pare presentations, grade quizzes and tests, update course materials, etc. As a 12-month employee, I did not have these breaks, unless I chose to use my vacation time.” Kemp notes, “The inflexibility of the academic librarian’s daily schedule also is cited as a reason for librarians not easily taking on classroom-teaching roles.” Partello observes that her own colleagues did not regard her outside teaching as relevant and that, in her study, “Several of the directors who responded were concerned about librarians teaching because they feared it would take time and energy away from library duties.”

Many authors report various forms of “policing” from their librarian peers. Walters, for example, observes, “Academic librarians are sometimes reluctant to earn doctorates, for instance, because it is the library subsystem, not the academic system, that determines which characteristics and behavior will be rewarded.” Some authors note that librarians are not regarded as real faculty members by students. Nicole Auer and Ellen Krupar, for example, report that students did not even bother to read the syllabus and were surprised when a librarian graded and enforced deadlines like traditional teaching faculty.

Ultimately, the takeaway from this literature review is summarized by Johnson: “College librarians are being marginalized into a specialized academic ghetto. Not exactly teaching professors nor simply white-collar clerks, academic librarians find themselves in a position where they must not only justify but redefine their position in academe.”

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Methods

The researcher created an online survey of 12 questions with the program Qualtrics. In February 2017, he sent an invitation to participate to the e-mail list ILI-L, the Information Literacy Instruction List, hosted by the American Library Association and populated by members of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Instruction Section. Invitations also went to other librarians and library workers with an interest in library instruction. One hundred thirty-nine responses were received, with all responses complete and valid for use in the study. The quantitative responses were automatically tabulated by the Qualtrics software, while the author manually categorized and tallied the qualitative responses, sorting them into thematic groups, such as positive or negative, type of concern, and the like.

Because this survey was conducted by polling only one e-mail list, the sample may have captured only a small slice of potential respondents, although the author believes ILI-L members to be a reasonably comprehensive population of librarians who both work in library instruction at the college level and interact online. Librarians outside of academia, such as public librarians and K–12 librarians, were not solicited. For public librarians, teaching credit-bearing classes would be truly extra-vocational. There may be an interesting study in K–12 librarians who are also K–12 teachers, but that situation falls outside the scope of this endeavor.
Results

Figure 1. Answers to the question “What type of library do you work in?”

Librarians from a college or university setting represented 85 percent of the responses, which is not surprising considering both the venue of the call for participation and the subject matter. Forty percent of the respondents worked at a private college or university, and 45 percent at a public college or university. See Figure 1.

Figure 2. Answers to the question “What is the size of your institution?”
More than a third of the responses (39 percent) came from medium-sized or large public universities, those with 3,001 to 10,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment and more than 10,000 FTE, respectively. The next largest category was small private colleges, accounting for 19 percent of the responses. Private colleges dominated the very small (less than 1,000 FTE) and small (1,001 to 3,000 FTE) categories, while public colleges and universities prevailed in the larger groups. See Figure 2.

The ratio of schools with formal instruction programs was consistent across institution sizes, hovering at roughly 80 percent. See Figure 3.

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Responses from librarians who performed library instruction despite having no specific instruction responsibilities came in nearly equal proportions from the small, medium, and large institutions, with 27 percent, 22 percent, and 30 percent of respondents reporting that they did such instruction. See Figure 4.

Fifty-six percent of respondents identified as instruction librarians, and 23 percent as another type of librarian. Ten percent of the respondents were library administrators. Of the “other” positions represented, three were archivists, three were subject librarians, two were managers, and one librarian each had responsibility for online learning, scholarly communications, collections, interlibrary loan, and systems. The various categories of jobs—administrative, specialist, and public services—spread across all sizes of institution. See Figure 5.
Most respondents had faculty status, and the ratio increased slightly with institution size. Fifty-seven respondents with faculty status described having taught outside the library disciplines, and another 30 respondents without faculty status had done so. Both groups reported teaching outside classes at similar rates, 62 percent and 68 percent respectively. See Figure 6.

In answer to the question “If you have taught a subject other than library skills or information literacy during your career as a librarian, please describe below,” 49 percent of respondents reported teaching subjects other than library skills or information literacy. These responses probably indicate that this study interested librarians already engaged in this kind of teaching. An average percentage of the profession is unavailable, but this percentage seems too high for the general population of librarians. Even when the researcher attempted to combine similar subjects, respondents listed 31 distinct disciplines. Many respondents reported teaching multiple classes, sometimes across various subjects. Thirty-nine respondents described teaching classes devoted to such topics as “student success” or “college essentials.” English and history were well represented, tying at 15 respondents each. Library science classes had seven responses, and various cultural studies were represented in five responses. Most of the academic disciplines were represented by at least one response. Some of the most interesting miscellaneous courses included Bigfoot Studies and Vampires.

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Seventy-seven percent of respondents indicated an interest in teaching nonlibrary classes. When cross-referenced against faculty status, there was no correlation—that is, both faculty and nonfaculty librarians expressed this desire at similar rates. See Figure 7.

Figure 7. Answers to the question “Are you interested in teaching nonlibrary classes?”

Figure 8. Answers to the question “Do you believe it is appropriate for librarians to spend time teaching nonlibrary classes?”
For the question “Do you believe it is appropriate for librarians to spend time teaching nonlibrary classes?” faculty status had a marked effect. Sixty-nine percent of respondents with faculty status indicated that such teaching would be an appropriate use of their time, while only 50 percent of those without faculty status agreed. The most resistance came from those identifying as instruction librarians, who have focused their careers on teaching. Notably, all library administrators were in favor, which runs contrary to some of the findings in the literature review and suggests a philosophical change over time. See Figure 8.

![Figure 8](image)

Figure 8. Answers to the question “Do you believe it is appropriate for librarians to spend time teaching nonlibrary classes?”

Most notable is the difference in the responses of the instruction librarians. While only 64 respondents in that category indicated on the previous question that it was appropriate to spend time teaching other subjects, 72 say that such teaching has value. Unfortunately, this survey did not ask for the respondents to provide a rationale for their answers, so the reasons for the 6 percent discrepancy are unclear. Perhaps the respondents drew a distinction between local policies and theoretical ideals. See Figure 9.

![Figure 9](image)

Figure 9. Answers to the question “Do you believe that there is value in time spent by librarians teaching nonlibrary classes?”

The vast majority of respondents agreed that nonlibrary teaching enhances the perception of librarians.
It largely enhances the perception of librarians, but I think there could be an in-profession issue—for other librarians, such work may cause them to think, “Oh, that librarian is too good for our profession now,” or something similar. I know that, at my institution, discussions around librarians teaching courses outside of the library (i.e., within a specific department or subject area) have been somewhat tense because people see our work as serving the library’s needs and interests first and foremost. While teaching outside of the discipline could do that, not all librarians may see it this way.

Other observations include “Unless the librarian has an advanced degree in the field of the subject matter, I don’t think they are qualified to teach the content; that is the job of faculty” and “I don’t believe that it matters to others.”

The open-ended question on the survey yielded much the same spectrum of reactions as the literature review. There were concerns about the practicality, such as, “We are way too short-staffed, all the time, for this to be a smart solution for our institution.” Five additional participants responded as follows:

This all depends on the background of the particular librarian (do they have a master’s degree in the field they are teaching) and whether or not they are getting additional compensation or relief from other duties while they are teaching.

I think it’s fine to teach non-library related courses, but with release time (and the department should compensate appropriately). I don’t think librarians should be used as free labor by external departments.
They should be paid the going rate for adjuncts in addition to their library salaries, and only focus on it outside regular hours, unless it is written into their job descriptions. One has to watch out that library responsibilities are not minimized to the point where administration can use it as an example to cut library staffing budget.

However, pay to teach in my subject area is much higher than my librarian salary. So teaching my subject at librarian pay would devalue my skills, in addition to taking time away from instruction in information literacy and scholarly communication topics. If I had wanted to teach in my subject, I would have looked for a professor position rather than a librarian position. I don’t think any small gain in status would compensate for the negative effects.

I am teaching one research course and have instruction sessions in many other courses, but I have a hard time because I am still staff and am expected to be in the office M–F and sometimes weekends doing library work including reference. At the same time, I also am expected to participate in the same activities as faculty. It sometimes feels like two jobs that are often not compatible.

A proponent opined, “The better integrated we are in the life of the institution, the less likely we will be outsourced. Outsourcing is an ancient practice in libraries, and it will soon be coming to the library ‘priesthood.’” Another respondent said, in a vote of ambiguous support, “In my experience people who object to librarians teaching outside of the library don’t have a whole lot of respect for librarians in the first place.” Or, to put a positive spin on a similar sentiment:

I believe in traditional academic settings there is a strong perception among other faculty that the instructional skill sets of librarians are limited to library topics and information literacy. Teaching credit-bearing courses that are interdisciplinary helps eliminate this stigma. I don’t think it should be required of all librarians, but I would like for the option to be more available.

Another addressed the issue of library culture, saying, “It is unsettling to some stodgy individuals, but overall it was a valuable experience for me.” One respondent’s personal experience echoes others previously published:

Teaching [an outside class] has been a wonderful experience, personally and professionally. I get to know my students better than I would in my typical library one-shot sessions, I’m able to use a different area of expertise, and I’m able to get a much better idea of what pedagogical approaches work for me in a classroom setting (so this experience improves the work I do as a librarian, too). I’ve been able to develop deeper connections to faculty members as well. I’m able to better relate to their professional experiences (course prep, problem students, grading, etc.), and feel that I am seen more as their “equal.”

Others echoed this experience. One said, “I’ve learned about library services from the classroom side of things; my library pedagogy has improved immensely; I am more likely to be viewed as a colleague by other faculty outside the library; I am better-known by students.” Another declared, “This doesn’t only enhance our reputation among the faculty but helps keep me current about the realities of our students.” Still another enthused, “Definitely adds to our cachet! Improves our image . . . not just old fuddy-duddies in the library.”
Understandably, some of the respondents seemed conflicted:

When an institution exploits a librarian to fill an instruction need that would otherwise be filled by adjunct faculty, it can be very problematic, esp. if the librarians do not have faculty status in any way. On the other hand, on a campus where librarians have a strong standing among the faculty and the campus body, it could be very good for the campus and for the library to have librarians exposing and using their additional expertise (which so many academic librarians have) through credit-bearing subject courses.

Issues of exploitation of both librarians and adjunct teaching faculty are worthy of investigation but fall outside the scope of this study. Librarians and adjunct instructors may not compete for teaching positions the way that adjuncts and teaching assistants do, but all of this points to important issues within the academic ecosystem.

**Conclusion**

This paper examines the evolving attitudes toward librarians teaching subject matter other than library skills and information literacy. The literature on this topic is scarce, although the discussion of this topic stretches back to 1979. Past investigations have found mixed opinions, and that trend continues in 2017. This paper reports the findings of an online survey of the members of the ACRL Information Literacy Instruction List. The survey received 139 responses, with 56 percent of respondents identifying as instruction librarians, 23 percent as other types of librarians, and 10 percent as library administrators. Of those who responded to this survey, a remarkable 49 percent have taught other subjects while employed as a librarian, most commonly courses in student success or college essentials, English, history, library science, and cultural studies. Seventy-seven percent indicated an interest in teaching nonlibrary courses. Only 69 percent reported feeling it appropriate for librarians to teach such courses, and those who identified as instruction librarians were the most resistant to the idea. Notably, all library administrators favored such endeavors. Eighty-four percent indicated that such teaching enhances the perception of librarians.

Among concerns expressed were excessive burdens on library staff; insufficient, nonexistent, or inappropriate financial compensation; and the perceived demand to meet all expectations of professional staff and all expectations of teaching faculty simultaneously. There was also concern that librarians might take jobs away from adjunct teaching faculty.

On the positive side, respondents reported that nonlibrary teaching allows greater interaction with, and understanding of, students; provides the opportunity to use and expand other areas of expertise; and offers a chance to improve relations with teaching faculty. Many people noted positive effects on their library pedagogy as well. Some
respondents also perceived that this kind of teaching helps legitimize librarians as faculty members.

This study suggests that more library administrators than ever support librarians teaching beyond the library. Further, librarians who have done so unanimously report positive, transformative impacts on their practice and their perception within their institutions. Only librarians who have not stretched beyond teaching traditional library skills oppose the practice. This may be a self-fulfilling trend, in which those who seek outside opportunities support the practice, and vice versa. Nevertheless, it might benefit both librarians and libraries if faculty librarians were pushed outside the comfort zone of the library and encouraged to engage in the broader teaching mission of their institutions.

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Notes

5. Wilson, “Librarians as Teachers.”
6. Ibid., 152.
7. Ibid., 151, 154.
8. Polger and Okamoto, “‘Can’t Anyone Be a Teacher Anyway?’”
15. Johnson, “Faculty Status for Academic Librarians.”
21. Ibid.
22. Hall and Byrd, The Librarian in the University, 101.
34. Auer and Krupar, “Librarians Grading.”