



“Am I a Teacher Because I Teach?”: A Qualitative Study of Librarians’ Perceptions of Their Role as Teachers

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abstract: Over the past few decades, the demand for academic librarians who can teach information literacy skills to college students has steadily increased. This interview study explores how academic librarians in a mid-Atlantic metro area define the roles of librarians and teachers, value their teaching role as librarians, and view their teacher-librarian identity. While all librarians interviewed highly valued teaching, the sample split between those who identified themselves as teacher-librarians and those who saw themselves as librarians who teach, with one librarian not associating with the teacher role. Discussion includes implications for librarians, librarian educators, and library administrators.

Introduction

Information literacy remains a vital skill and conceptual knowledge set for college graduates to learn. Traditionally, the responsibility for teaching information literacy falls on librarians through either the one-shot format or the less common credit-bearing course. Because of the growing complexity of the information environment, librarians’ roles as teachers have become more integral within the academy. A closer examination is needed of how librarians’ conceptions of their professional identity align with a teacher persona. How do reference and instruction librarians view their evolving roles within the academy? Do reference and instruction librarians self-identify as teachers, or does that role feel ancillary to their traditional duties?

Since academic librarians teach information literacy skills in more classes each year,¹ it becomes increasingly important to examine the impact such instruction has on librarians’ self-conceptualization as teachers and how it relates to their professional



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identities. A better understanding of librarians' sense of themselves as teachers might help libraries foster job satisfaction and minimize burnout. The purpose of this interview

study is to explore the views of academic librarians on their roles as teachers. Do they see teaching as part of their professional identity as a librarian, as something distinct, or are the two intertwined? What factors contribute to academic librarians' teacher identity? The intent of this study is to uncover how some reference and instruction librarians within a mid-Atlantic metro area conceptualize the intersections of librarianship and teaching and how they see their professional identities.

Literature Review

Roles of Academic Librarianship

Though the role of librarian has evolved from the gatekeeper of knowledge, some librarians' professional identities remain deeply tied to these traditional duties, particularly since many disciplinary faculty hold these conventional views. Library as a place remains integral to librarians' self-image as they seek to attach themselves to the trust and respect that the cultural institution of libraries receives from the public.² In so doing, librarians align their services with the library building itself and with the traditional services of reference, cataloging, and collection development. Librarians who work beyond the traditional confines of the library, such as teaching in classrooms or conducting events and outreach around campus, may be seen as outsiders, lessening their perceived expertise among faculty and campus partners.³

Emerging roles have also become an increasingly large responsibility of librarians.⁴ Not only are librarians expected to maintain and transform their traditional roles but also they are relied upon to incorporate new duties, which take an increasing amount

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The more librarians solidified their instructional domain through the publication of the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education and the Framework for Information Literacy for

Higher Education,⁶ the more they grounded their professional identities in teaching.⁷ Even within the roles of academic librarians not explicitly related to teaching, such as cataloging, innovation, and collection development, a recent literature review demonstrated that librarians identify information literacy as an undercurrent for their success within the academy.⁸



Librarians may perceive teaching as a professional responsibility, but that view is not inherent to faculty. Though perceptions vary substantially by institution, faculty often see librarians as academic support personnel whose responsibility is to ensure access to an adequate collection of materials for them and their students.⁹ These different perceptions make it important for librarians and faculty to collaborate when librarians seek to carve out the role of educator within a higher education setting.¹⁰ The push and pull between librarians' views of their teaching roles and faculty's attitudes toward these roles will likely affect how librarians value teaching within their larger set of responsibilities.

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Teacher-Librarian Identity

In the past decade, several studies focused on teacher-librarian identity. As academic librarians moved from bibliographic instruction to the critical thinking approach of information literacy instruction, their teaching role in the academy grew. The Framework highlights this shift and positions librarians at the heart of teaching in the academy.¹¹ Veteran librarians noted these shifts in Laura Sare and Stephen Edward Bales's study of academic librarians with 10 or more years of experience.¹² The librarians in their study adjusted their perceptions of themselves as librarians with shifts in the field; as academic librarianship moved increasingly toward teaching, work in the classroom assumed greater importance in their understanding of the profession. Heidi Julien and Shelagh Genuis uncovered similar results in their study of Canadian librarians, which found that the majority of librarians surveyed considered instruction integral to their professional identity.¹³

The rise in teaching responsibilities for librarians brings its own set of issues for professionals, including managing increased workloads and responsibilities, and teacher anxiety due to a lack of formal training in pedagogy. As academic librarians increase their instruction time, their other responsibilities remain, which may cause them to view their roles as teachers adversely and force them to contextualize their teaching roles within a larger set of job duties.¹⁴ A case study of two librarians in the United Kingdom also observed the push and pull between the roles of librarian and teacher.¹⁵ In this interview study, the academic librarians viewed their teaching as an extension of their librarian role, neither as a distinct professional persona nor as central to their identities as librarians. The diverse job duties of academic librarians may be the cause of these perceptions. Anxiety about teaching and feeling unprepared to teach due to minimal or no training impacts librarians' conceptions of themselves as teachers.¹⁶ When combined, these studies seem to indicate that practicing librarians may have

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changed how they perform their jobs and value teaching as part of their identity, but formal education programs in library school have not kept pace.

A few recent studies focused on individual librarians and how they construct meaning of their roles as teachers. In Trevor Austin and Janine Bhandol's case study of two academic librarians, the researchers witnessed a range of commitments to teaching. These varying articulations of the role of teacher are described by Austin and Bhandol as buying into teaching with a measure of resistance.¹⁷ While the two librarians at times acknowledged their teaching roles, they held out against full acceptance. A 2015 study by Emily Wheeler and Pamela McKinney used a phenomenographic approach to determine four categories in which British librarians viewed their roles as teachers. This

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study found that librarians identify as teachers who teach ("teacher-librarians"); teachers who do not teach ("learning support"); nonteachers who teach ("librarians who teach"); or nonteachers who do not teach ("trainers"). Often, they hold multiple conceptions at once.¹⁸ The ability to maintain multiple teacher identities at the same time potentially articulates the beliefs about academic librarians as teachers that Austin and Bhandol expressed but did not categorize.¹⁹ Sare and Bales's study of veteran librarians provides a context to interpret these studies.²⁰ The librarians interviewed observed that they

were "always becoming" librarians because the field is driven by change. This attitude may demonstrate that librarians' conceptions of their teaching roles not only fall along a continuum but also shift and expand over time as the profession changes and broadens to meet the needs of users.

Professors can play an important part in how academic librarians conceive of themselves as teachers. Many previous studies attributed this to librarians' beliefs of who should teach information literacy skills—librarians or professors. Some librarians rely heavily on how outsiders—that is, nonlibrarians—view their work, and they react accordingly.²¹ The constant presence of an "outsider" may be a source of embarrassment for librarians while they teach.²² Additionally, some librarians believe students learn best through disciplinary faculty.²³

Many librarians rely on the "gift of time," hours during class to teach information literacy granted to them by professors, and they use this deferential language when describing their teaching role.²⁴ This relationship between librarian and professor results in constant negotiation of instructional responsibilities and impacts how librarians view their roles as teachers. One way to reduce the need for such bargaining is to

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embed information literacy into the curriculum with explicit learning outcomes at the university level. By doing so, librarians could begin shifting the cultural norms of institutions.²⁵ Mandy Lupton argues that embedding information literacy in

the curriculum places librarians firmly in the educational mission of an institution and invites them into the professional development opportunities afforded to professors as instructors.²⁶

Students also play a key role in how librarians shape their teaching identity. Mark Aaron Polger and Karen Okamoto surveyed students about their perceptions of librarians as teachers.²⁷ Students typically considered librarians as teachers within the classroom, but when removed from class, fewer students made that connection. Instead, they viewed librarians as guides to help them find resources; they also reasoned that since librarians are not typically instructors of record or subject-specific experts, they are not teachers.²⁸ This type of feedback from students impacts librarians' perceptions of themselves as teachers, and more research needs to be conducted in this area.²⁹

Present Study

By examining a larger sample of librarians than previous studies did, this study intends to add to the current literature on teacher-librarian identity. It aims to examine the factors that contribute to instruction and reference librarians developing a teaching persona. It also probes whether previous models of teacher-librarian identity persist.³⁰ Finally, it attempts to explore the importance of this professional identity for librarians. How does a teacher-librarian persona contribute to an individual's work or to the profession?

The study and results presented here are part of a larger research project that investigated academic librarians' conceptions of their educational roles in the academy. The original study included research questions about librarians' teaching self-efficacy; however, those findings will not be explored here. The research questions guiding the results reported here include:

- How do academic librarians view teaching as a part of their professional identity?
- What factors contribute to academic librarians' teacher identity?
- How do others' beliefs about librarians as teachers shape how librarians perceive their roles?

Methods

Participants

Participants were selected based on a brief recruitment survey administered using Qualtrics, an online survey tool, and on willingness to participate in an interview. The survey was distributed to 130 librarians who had a job title that indicated instruction responsibilities at nine academic libraries in a mid-Atlantic metro area. The academic libraries included a mixture of state and private institutions, but no community colleges or special schools. Forty librarians from seven of the institutions responded to the survey. Twenty-nine respondents agreed to an interview.

Interview participants were selected using a maximum heterogeneity sampling strategy. The intention was to build a sample with even representation across the institutions surveyed and with participants who spent varying percentages of their time teaching. Twelve librarians were contacted for interviews. Selected characteristics of the participants can be found in Table 1.



Table 1.

Participant*	Year of library science degree	Years teaching IL	Percentage of time spent teaching	Faculty status	Degrees beyond the master of library science
Lindsey	2015	2	1–24%	Faculty (tenure-track)	None
Jennifer	2008	5	1–24%	Faculty	PhD
Will	1996	21	1–24%	Faculty	PhD
Mary	2008	3	25–49%	Staff	Master’s
David	2013	4	25–49%	Staff	None
Stephanie	2013	5	25–49%	Faculty (tenure-track)	None
Amy	1987	30	25–49%	Faculty	Master’s
Deb	1982	35	25–49%	Staff	None
Alex	2010	5	50–74%	Faculty	PhD
Harriet	1983	5	50–74%	Faculty	None
Kim	2014	4	75–100%	Faculty	None
Nancy	2004	12	75–100%	Faculty	Master’s



Interviews

The researcher scheduled an hour to meet with the 12 librarians on their respective campuses for an audio-recorded interview. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol. The questions centered on the concepts of teacher self-efficacy, the librarians' own thinking about teaching, and the role of librarians in a college or university setting. This article focuses on how participants defined the roles of librarians and teachers, where they believe those roles overlap, and whether they think of themselves as teachers. The full interview protocol is available in the Appendix.

After each interview, the author wrote analytic memos about each interaction. These memos recorded demographic and background information about the participant; notes about participant reactivity; emerging ideas related to the research questions and connections to other participants; and notes on researcher reflectivity. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The author maintained detailed notes throughout the transcription process. These memos and notes allowed for an emerging interpretation of the data and acted as an anchor when beginning data analysis.

Analysis

The researcher created a list of categorical codes related to the research questions and the supporting literature after transcribing the interviews. Additional codes were added after reading through the transcripts. Two rounds of open coding occurred by hand, using methods described by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin,³¹ and a final round of coding used NVivo 11. During this third round of coding, the researcher removed codes that no longer seemed relevant to the research questions and reapplied some codes that appeared during initial coding rounds.

Validity

As suggested by Joseph Maxwell, this research utilized rich data collection, respondent validation, discrepant data and negative cases, and comparisons as validity checks.³² The interviews, which ranged from 25 to 55 minutes, and the data from the recruitment survey built a rich data set for this study. Verbatim transcriptions allowed for the analysis to paint a vivid and detailed picture of the phenomena emerging in the study. This rich data set not only permits a more representative interpretation of the themes across the sample but also assists the other validation strategies utilized. Respondent validation occurred throughout the interviews. In some cases, the researcher offered an interpretation of what the participants had said and asked if it was correct. Participant variation included different home universities and different levels of education beyond the master of library science (MLS). Similarities also emerged, including similar subject liaison responsibilities, the percentage of the participants' time that teaching occupies, and the number of years they taught in academic libraries. This heterogeneity within the sample improves the trustworthiness that the findings support comparisons across the groups identified.

Coding revealed contradictory responses, and an attempt to resolve these is made throughout the analysis. Inconsistent responses occurred most frequently between



participants' descriptions of their work and identity as librarians and a hesitation to identify as teachers. Often librarians described their work in terms like those they used to characterize the work of teachers, but when asked if they see themselves as teachers, balked at this notion. The analysis that follows attempts to make meaning from these contradictions.

Findings

Definitions of *Librarians* and *Teachers*

Librarians

Every librarian interviewed described librarians as information specialists, people dedicated to serving their users, or some combination of the two. Definitions of the most commonly used phrase, *information specialist*, varied across participants. Participants described librarians as managers of information, a bridge between information resources and users, and even "safari guides to the information world." The tasks of these information specialists include "helping other people learn how to navigate information effectively," facilitating the "evaluation, the consumption, the creation of valued information," and organizing information. Amy's³³ description of librarianship as managing information both as an input and output highlights many of the participants' descriptions of librarians:

The most generic term that I would like to say is that they are an information specialist. In other words, information is their product, and there are, I would say, two flows—one in and one out. One way in is the organization of . . . anything from publication to metadata to all the different forms of communication. And that bringing things in, sending things out, or actually sharing this information, and teaching individuals as well as artificial intelligence—how to navigate and structure information as it is organized in the world today.

These descriptions of librarians as information specialists are consistent with previous research that examined the roles of librarians.³⁴

Along with information specialist, the participants placed a high importance on the service orientation of academic librarianship. Some responses were consistent with previous studies that found librarians' identities tied to the institution of the library and a strong sense of professional identity as articulated in the American Library Association's Code of Ethics.³⁵ Most participants, however, explicitly connected service with helping users. Some described service orientation not simply as a quality of academic librarians who directly assist users, such as public services or reference librarians, but also as a characteristic for all academic librarians. Stephanie explicitly explained it as such: "So whether [the service orientation] is kind of mediated through a job like technical services or more directly service-oriented in a public services position, I think your stakeholders are usually at the center of your job." Descriptions of librarianship as a service-oriented profession arose when asked to describe the qualities of a "good" librarian and a "bad" one. Often, service was the metric for these definitions. Lindsey characterized a good librarian as someone with an attitude that exudes "I really want to help students," and



when describing a bad librarian explained, “I guess if you don’t want to help students, I don’t know why you’re in academic libraries.”

These descriptions of librarians as service-oriented and as information specialists intersected and overlapped in the interviews. Librarians as knowledge sources also appeared, but usually within the context of good librarianship or daily job duties. Good librarians “know their stuff,” “have a deep knowledge of library resources,” are skilled at finding subject resources, and “may be an expert in a particular field” giving them depth of knowledge in a discipline. These resources are central to functioning as an information specialist, but knowing them deeply and fully distinguishes a librarian as exceptional.

Across the interviews, an awareness of the evolving nature of academic librarianship pervaded. Participants called attention to the need for dynamism within their roles in the academy. Deb, the participant with the most teaching experience in academic libraries, described the need to stay abreast of changes in the profession. She laughed as she recounted the early days of information literacy instruction, formerly referred to as bibliographic instruction, and how the issues discussed at the Library Orientation Exchange (LOEX) Conferences in the 1970s are still talked about today. But she also described a need to adapt with changing theoretical and practical directions of the field, mentioning the positive directions in which the Framework will take librarianship. Conversely, Kim, a librarian with less library instruction experience than most subjects in this sample, approached the topic of dynamism in the profession from the opposite end of the spectrum. She criticized change-adverse librarians as “clinging to traditional practices, but not in a very positive or healthy way.” She talked about librarians from “an earlier generation” being bogged down by jargon and transactional processes in a way that damages the field. A few other participants echoed these sentiments of change aversion and the need to grow one’s conception and practice of librarianship as the profession evolves.

Teachers

While information grounded participants’ definitions of librarians, content and subject-specific knowledge dominated descriptions of teachers. Few librarians drew distinctions between types of teachers. For example, Nancy and Stephanie characterized K–12 teachers differently than professors,³⁶ but many participants simply described a teacher in general, some taken aback at the prospect of depicting such a broad profession. Many participants acknowledged depth of content or subject knowledge as integral to being a teacher. This contrasted with descriptions of librarians, which emphasized knowledge about resources rather than content. Mary and Will mentioned not only the importance of teachers being knowledgeable but also described knowledge as a vehicle to teach students or others interested in their area of expertise.

Participants rarely mentioned knowledge without the accompaniment of passion and empathy.

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I think the two main things are that personal connection, so like just getting the impression that the person cares about you. So actually it's all about caring, right? So it's about making your students understand and feel like you care about them and their development, and also really caring about the subject.

The connection between empathy and good teaching stands in stark contrast to descriptions of bad teachers across the interviews. Words used to describe good teachers included *respectful*, *empathetic*, *honest*, and *encouraging*. Words used to characterize bad teachers included *punitive*, *not inclusive*, and *unapproachable*. These descriptions focused on the student and on the participants reflecting on their experiences as students.

A few participants raised distinctions between librarians and teachers. Most notably, they called attention to how teachers develop relationships over time with students. Since most librarians, and all participants in this study, do not teach a credit-bearing information literacy course, they drew this distinction as a line separating the two professions. Alex articulated this difference emphatically on multiple occasions. As someone whose librarian job has them³⁷ teaching information literacy skills in classes and who also serves as adjunct faculty within their discipline, Alex pushed back against any comparisons of librarians to teachers. They did this primarily through their explanation of teachers. When asked to describe a teacher, Alex immediately distanced themselves from the term in their explanation:

I am sick of correcting my kids who are like, "You're a teacher!" And I want to tell them that I'm not a teacher because of the work that their teachers do. When I think of the word *teacher*, I think of someone far more vested in the well-being and mentoring and development of a student over time. That is arguably just pedantic, right? That do I teach? Yes, I teach, therefore I'm a teacher. But when we say a *teacher*, we are not just talking about a person who happens to teach, right? So I think if we're going with the identity part, it's very hard to identify as a teacher when there are these people out there doing this really sort of robust, not 24/7 but enduring like long-term or at least invested work.

Alex later goes on to describe that as a librarian they are not owed a doctor's note if students fail to show up for an appointment, and students do not need to provide them with documentation from the university's disability office. Alex mentioned growing invested in the dissertation work of students over time, but the deeper teacher-student relationship does not develop. Other participants echoed these sentiments by mentioning that, as librarians, they did not have to grade or worry about "helping a student become a good person," tasks they claimed as designated for teachers.

Where Librarians and Teachers Overlap

When asked about whether librarians and teachers have overlapping responsibilities, many participants used the act of teaching as the essential connector. Some participants, like Kim and Will, explicitly said that the overlap is that both teach. They pushed beyond classroom instruction, too, and described more traditional roles of librarianship to express when teaching occurs for librarians. Will observed, "Even when we're doing reference, we're teaching," to explain how instruction occurs at the reference desk. When talking about one-on-one research consultations, Kim said, "When I think of a reference interview, that to me can be an example of teaching. It just has a different name, and it's a different



way of thinking about teaching.” A few other librarians mentioned the reference desk and one-on-one consultations as like the roles of teachers. These comparisons connect to previous calls to cultivate teaching identities in library schools’ reference training.³⁸ Some librarians, when asked whether they considered an interaction at the reference desk as teaching, agreed they did, and some even noted that it was drilled into them during library school.

The most commonly mentioned overlap between the two professions was that both groups care deeply about student learning. Good librarians and good teachers focus on students first. Amy described how both librarians and teachers “realize that they really can shape another human being through their interactions,” and she asserted that both do so with an ethical code guiding them. Other participants mentioned that librarians and teachers care about what students learn and what they are researching. Harriet summarized this reaction: “We both have our students’ interests at heart. We want them to learn. We want them to learn different things. We want them to succeed.” In many instances of defining “good” teachers and librarians, participants demonstrated various levels of vocational awe, “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession,” which created an impression of both occupations as callings, rather than professions.³⁹

The Value of Teaching as an Academic Librarian

When asked how much participants value teaching as part of their job, the majority placed it at a high level of importance. A few described it as “essential,” others as “primary,” and still others used variations of “very important.” The exceptions include Stephanie, who simply described it as “important” when thinking about her faculty status on campus; Harriet, who was not asked this specific question; and Alex, who described their one-on-one reference consultations as the most valuable part of their job as an academic librarian.

Two themes emerged from asking participants why they value teaching: instruction helps a librarian reach the most students, and it makes librarians’ work visible on campuses. Jennifer described that, as a business librarian, teaching offered her the biggest impact in building relationships with business faculty. She sees instruction as an outreach tool. This visibility was confirmed by other participants, some of whom believe teaching not only brings students into the library building but also empowers them to ask questions at the reference desk. Amy explained how teaching brings visibility to the collections in the library as well. She

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declared that it sheds light not only on what resources students and faculty currently use but also on what materials are missing from the collection.

Instruction also offers librarians individuality and freedom in their jobs. Nancy noted that she valued instruction highly because “that’s where I feel the most autonomous.” She explained that she felt in control of how she designed and presented library instruction. She did not feel this autonomy in her collection development work, her work at the reference desk, or her other duties as a subject librarian. This connection between teaching and autonomy did not emerge in any of the other interviews; however, it is an interesting line of inquiry that should be explored in future research.

Teacher-Librarian Identity

Throughout the interviews, many participants talked around how they viewed themselves or other academic librarians as teachers. All participants were asked whether they see themselves as teachers. Three identities emerged from their responses: teacher-librarians, librarians who teach, and not a teacher. Refer to Table 2 for the participants’ perceptions of their identities.

Teacher-Librarians

Half the academic librarians interviewed stated they regarded themselves as teachers. As Table 2 shows, teacher-librarians spanned the spectrum for percentage of their time

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spent teaching information literacy and years of experience teaching the subject in higher education settings. Wheeler and McKinney found a similar grouping of academic librarians in their phenomenographic study on the teaching identities of librarians.⁴⁰ The participants identifying as teacher-librarians in this study often answered “yes” to the question about whether they viewed themselves as

teachers. This response required follow-up questions about why they saw themselves as teachers. Many simply used the verb *teach* as an explanation as to why they consider themselves teachers—they teach within a college or university setting and therefore are teachers. David explained that, as a librarian, he has expertise like that of professors and uses that knowledge to position himself as a teacher.

Kim, an archival instruction librarian, serves as a model for this type of teacher identity. Throughout her interview, she described herself as a teacher. When asked about how librarians and teachers overlap, she referenced teaching as part of her title. She also juxtaposed her teaching persona with her colleagues’ negative association with teaching identities:

So I am a teacher, that’s what I do. I’m also a librarian—that’s also in my title. And I think sometimes I’ll encounter people who teach but don’t see themselves as teachers. Who literally are teaching like—if you’re in front of a classroom and you’re showing someone how to do something, that’s the definition of *teaching*.

Table 2.
Participants' perceptions of their teacher identities

Participant	Teacher identity	Percentage of time spent teaching	Years teaching IL
Alex	Not a teacher	50–74%	5
Lindsey	Librarian who teaches	1–24%	2
Mary	Librarian who teaches	25–49%	3
Stephanie	Librarian who teaches	25–49%	5
Deb	Librarian who teaches	25–49%	35
Harriet	Librarian who teaches	50–74%	5
Jennifer	Teacher-librarian	1–24%	5
Will	Teacher-librarian	1–24%	21
David	Teacher-librarian	25–49%	4
Amy	Teacher-librarian	25–49%	30
Kim	Teacher-librarian	75–100%	4
Nancy	Teacher-librarian	75–100%	12

She continued by explaining that teaching and librarianship are one and the same, never fully articulating if that resemblance applies to all librarians or only to specific types of librarians. When asked specifically if she sees herself as a teacher, Kim gave a flat “yes.” When asked why, she replied emphatically, “Because I teach. I mean I build lesson plans. I have assessment tools. I build worksheets. Like, that’s it! I’m a teacher!” This resounding acceptance of the teacher-librarian identity characterizes this group of participants.

Librarians Who Teach

This group of librarians view teaching as part of their job as librarians or they see themselves as a specific type of teacher. Many see themselves as a combination of both. This is a blend of what Wheeler and McKinney saw as “librarians who teach” and those who provide “learning support,” and what Lupton referred to as “teaching librarians.”⁴¹ As Deb observed, “When I’m in a classroom and when I’m preparing for a class, I think of myself more of a teacher, but I think my role as librarian is what’s foremost in my mind most of the time.” Mary and Harriet cited their numerous other responsibilities as subject librarians, such as collection development and outreach, which indicate teaching is part of a larger set of roles they manage daily. Stephanie described herself as a “type of teacher” and said she needed to view her job in this way to think of what she does in the classroom as teaching. This group of librarians did not want to abandon their librarianship role as core to their work identity; to avoid that, they distanced themselves from fully adopting the label of *teacher*.



Not a Teacher

Alex explicitly distanced themselves from accepting any teacher identity when performing their duties as a librarian. They clearly separated their librarian identity from their teaching identity when leading a for-credit course as adjunct faculty in their discipline. They described librarians as professionals who connect students and instructors with resources for their research or teaching. They defined the distinction between librarians and staff working in libraries as a professional master's degree in library and information science, the only participant to mention this degree as a requirement for the role of librarian. When asked to describe teachers, they immediately distanced themselves from that identity and described the type of teaching they do in their library work: "The kind of teaching that we do in the library I feel, I describe as popcorn. Like pop, pop, pop! I'm teaching here and here and here. And I'm teaching on this and this and this. And there's no overarching narrative in a way that when I'm being a professor, I have a semester of narrative."

While this description of teaching may appear to fall under the previous teaching identity group, the majority of Alex's interview reveals a stark distance from any identification with the persona of teacher. When asked forthright whether they see themselves as a teacher, Alex replied, "Not when I'm a librarian."

Perceptions of Others

During the interviews, participants were asked about how instructional faculty on their campus view librarians. The intention of this question was to explore individuals' perceptions of themselves as teachers through an alternative lens. This line of inquiry proved generally unfruitful. Responses included that faculty view librarians as co-educators, academic support, or highly variable depending on the academic department. Some participants described their faculty as frankly indifferent. No meaningful pattern emerged between how faculty perceived the educational role of librarians and how librarians in this study saw their functions as teachers. This seems to contradict previous studies and may be an important area for further research.⁴² Participants did not discuss how students' perceptions of their roles impacted their belief in their teacher-librarian identity.

Discussion

Educating the Educator

Previous studies showed that when librarians do not see themselves as teachers, they often cite their lack of teaching experience or qualifications.⁴³ Many other studies have called for requiring instruction courses, instruction tracks within library programs, or revising current library school courses to move beyond the abstract and theoretical concepts of teaching to the more practical.⁴⁴ On the surface, the findings of the present study might seem to echo these studies. Participants in this study noted a lack of formal training; however, no one attributed their teacher identity to their training, preparation, or qualifications. On the contrary, Alex, the only librarian with formal and practical pedagogical training prior to becoming a librarian, rejected the role of teacher in relation to their job as a librarian.



The Value of Teacher-Librarian Identity

As librarians' roles in the academy continue to evolve and diversify, teacher-librarian identity can help create meaning in one's work as well as cultivate intrinsic motivation for professional development in pedagogy and student learning.

Creating Meaning in Work

The librarians in the study, no matter how they identified as teacher-librarians, noted that teaching is one of many responsibilities of their jobs. Most participants placed high value on teaching, as well. Connecting value to teaching potentially boosts job satisfaction. A previous study found that librarians who placed more significance on their teaching role had higher opinions of the meaningfulness of their work.⁴⁵ Nancy not only talked about how teaching was the most important part of her job but also discussed how it provided her the greatest autonomy in her work. Even Alex, who denied a teacher-librarian identity, found the highest value of their job as working one-on-one with students. Alex admitted that this type of interaction could be seen as teaching and likely is.

Librarianship is often restricted to standards, regulations, and strict organizational structures. Teaching can offer librarians the flexibility and space for creativity and experimentation in ways that traditional librarian roles do not. Additionally, cultivating job satisfaction and work meaningfulness likely reduces burnout and facilitates job retention, which helps the universities employing librarians.⁴⁶ In this way, a culture that fosters teacher-librarian identity will benefit not only academic librarians but also the colleges and universities for whom they work. An attempt was made during this study to uncover a connection between teacher-librarian identity and its importance to the profession. Although some evidence from the participants pointed to connections between work meaningfulness and teacher-librarian identity, no pattern fully emerged in this sample. Why does teaching provide greater autonomy for librarians? How does that independence impact identity formation and work meaningfulness? The answers to these questions remain unclear.

Teaching can offer librarians the flexibility and space for creativity and experimentation in ways that traditional librarian roles do not.

Investing in Teaching Is Investing in Learning

Student learning is the core of teaching in the academy. If librarians view themselves as teachers, they will likely feel more invested in student learning outcomes. While this study did not seek this correlation, future studies could examine this issue. Most participants centered the student when talking about both librarianship and teaching. If librarians invest their work in student learning, then dedication to professional development in teaching and outreach to students should logically follow.



Future Research

The results presented here focus on academic librarians' teacher identity. Because of this, only academic librarians participated in interviews. Talking with a variety of stakeholders in library instruction could provide a more complete picture of external factors influencing this type of identity formation. A few participants discussed how the changes in academic libraries impacted their daily work, particularly related to instruction. While part of this study's impetus was to seek answers to how the changing role of librarians in the academy affected teacher-librarian identity, only librarians with many years of experience could begin to address this. A study of librarians who have practiced their profession for 20 or more years could provide more explicit answers to this question.

A longitudinal study following librarians from the end of library school through the first few years of their career might reveal more about the formation of academic librarians' identity. Through a set of case studies, longitudinal research in this area could help create conceptual models for how librarians' teaching identity evolves over time and possibly stabilizes. Similarly, a case study examining differences in teacher-librarian identity formation at one institution could provide a model for how librarians construct their teaching persona within the context of a group. Austin and Bhandol designed a similar study but followed only two librarians at different institutions.⁴⁷

Limitations of the Study

This study used a small sample size ($n = 12$) and was geographically bound. This small sample likely does not represent the larger population of academic librarians. Future studies could expand to a national study of librarian identity and gather participants from a more representative set of higher education institutions, including community colleges, technical colleges, or special schools. All the participants interviewed were reference, subject, or instruction librarians. A study larger in scale could recruit participants with a more diverse set of job responsibilities. A more refined inclusion survey and a national-level study could also help with selecting a more representative interview sample.

Conclusion

The teaching role of academic librarians continues to increase each year as professors bring librarians into their classrooms to teach information literacy skills and concepts to their students. While this study did not find distinct patterns in teacher-librarian identity formation, it did reveal how pervasive and valued the teaching role is in academic librarianship. College and university library administration needs to support the professional development of academic librarians to cultivate strong teachers as instruction continues to expand the roles and responsibilities of librarians in the academy.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

This interview is interested in librarians' perceptions of their teaching identity. Questions will center around the concepts of teacher self-efficacy, metacognitive thinking about teaching, and the role of librarians in a college or university setting.

1. How do you describe a librarian?
 - a. Describe a specific librarian (no names) that you believe embodies "good librarianship."
 - b. Describe a specific librarian (no names) that you believe embodies "bad or clumsy librarianship."
2. Walk me through a typical day in your position. [Note: Make sure you know what the librarian's official title is.]
3. Describe your teaching experience as a librarian.
 - a. How did you learn to teach?
4. Walk me through a teaching experience as a librarian that you would describe as:
Typical
Successful
Unsuccessful
5. Do you have a sense of how instructional faculty perceive librarians on your campus?

If needed: As educators, as academic support, or as something else?
6. How did you come to this understanding of their feelings about librarians?
7. How much time do you spend on teaching?
8. What does spending time on teaching look like, e.g., lesson planning, teaching, reflecting, reading, etc.?
9. How do you describe a teacher?
 - a. Describe a specific teacher (no names) that you believe embodies "good teaching."
 - b. Describe a specific teacher (no names) that you believe embodies "bad teaching."
10. What aspects of being a librarian overlap with those of a teacher?
11. Is this at odds with how you believe those outside the profession feel about librarians in the academy? Why or why not?



12. Do you think of yourself as a teacher? Why or why not?
13. How confident are you when teaching information literacy?
14. Have you always felt that way?
15. Can you think of an event or series of events that shaped that confidence?

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