



## Librarians' experiences of the teaching role: Grounded in campus relationships

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### ABSTRACT

Analyses of information literacy instruction practices have neglected, until now, in-depth exploration of librarians' experiences in their teaching roles. That gap was addressed by this study, which explored Canadian academic librarians' self-perceptions as teachers. Semistructured interviews with 48 participants revealed that they experience complex relationships with teaching faculty. Data are analyzed using symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman's concepts of deference and ceremonial rules, and work on gifting and reciprocity. The relationships are discussed as unequal in terms of power, where power is ceded to the teaching faculty. Study participants discuss this unequal balance of power by referring to their own self-positioning and the institutional culture of their workplaces. These results suggest areas of challenge to full realization of instructional goals, which merit attention by managers and by those charged with preparing librarians for instructional work.

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### 1. Introduction

In 21st century modern economies, information literacy is critical for success in the workplace, in daily life, and for participation as an informed citizen. Information literacy skills include the abilities to

“determine the extent of information needed, access the needed information effectively and efficiently, evaluate information and its sources critically, incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base, use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally” (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2005).

Few opportunities exist for individuals to learn these skills well; however, those sufficiently fortunate to attend postsecondary learning institutions typically have those opportunities, and often this knowledge and skills are offered and disseminated by academic librarians. Librarians have a long tradition of offering bibliographic instruction but more recently have expanded their instructional repertoire to include more generalizable information literacy skills. The instructional work performed by academic librarians, in cooperation with teaching faculty, is therefore critical to help students and others in the academic community learn skills that are increasingly necessary for successful negotiation of the myriad information sources and media widely available in the western world. The progress and success of librarians' instructional work is therefore worthy of research attention.

### 2. Problem statement

In spite of the fact that librarians' instructional work is important and increasingly central to the activities of academic librarians, previous research shows some ambivalence about instructional roles on the part of some library staff. Some librarians remain unconvinced of the value of information literacy instruction, some feel unprepared for instructional roles, and some express hostility towards the instructional expectations they feel towards the students they teach and towards the teaching faculty on campuses (Given & Julien, 2005; Julien, 2003, 2006; Julien & Boon, 2002, 2004; Julien & Given, 2003). This ambivalence undoubtedly affects students' learning experiences, compromising the potential success of instructional efforts. At a time when the importance of information literacy skills is widely acknowledged, and the lack of such skills is equally lamented, librarians' work in teaching these skills is particularly significant. When there are few opportunities for citizens to receive formal training in information literacy skills, other than during postsecondary educational experiences and occasionally through workshops and courses taught in public libraries, ensuring the quality of these existing opportunities is critical. That quality is threatened when those providing information literacy instruction are not fully engaged in their teaching roles. Thus, the research question arising from these previous findings was, How do library staff with instructional experience and relate to those roles?

### 3. Literature review

Although literature focusing on instructional outcomes at the program or course level is available and relevant to a broader focus on those concerns, that is not central to the focus of this study. Of primary importance to this paper is literature focusing on the librarian/faculty

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relationship. In this qualitative study, the focus arose from a grounded theory approach to coding interview data. During those analyses, relationships between the study participants and teaching faculty became a major theme, so that topic became the focus of interpretation. This subject (i.e., relationships between teaching faculty and librarians in academic institutions) has produced an abundance of literature in librarianship. Because a constructive relationship between these two groups is recognized as contributing to the success of information literacy instruction, the literature abounds with descriptions of the specific challenges ascribed to the relationship and advice about how best to create a more successful relationship. Common themes include the existence of two solitudes, or a separation between faculty members' and librarians' experiences on campus; collaboration, or the need for faculty–librarian relationships to foster information literacy initiatives; and librarians as advocates, which argues that success for information literacy initiatives lies with librarians, especially in building effective relationships with teaching faculty. For example, some literature argues that librarians' professional goals are quite separate from those of teaching faculty; librarians are service providers and so operate in a very different context than do teaching faculty (Farber, 1999; Hanson, 1993). Hardesty (1999) speaks to the primacy of research (within the research, teaching, and service model) for faculty, which clearly separates their interests from those of librarians. Concerns related to attitudes and assumptions on the part of librarians with respect to teaching faculty were clearly articulated by Julien and Given (2003) and Given and Julien (2005). In their analysis of librarians' postings to a major information literacy listserv, they revealed that many librarians eschew teaching faculty as their clientele, instead privileging students. Faculty members were frequently constructed as troublesome and arrogant and who fail to understand librarians' roles. In other studies of instructional librarians, the complexity of the faculty–librarian relationship was cited as a primary challenge to achieving success in information literacy instruction (Julien, 2000, 2003, 2006; Julien & Leckie, 1997). Despite evidence of difficulties in this relationship, the literature is also peppered with examples of how librarians have overcome these difficulties in specific contexts to “win over” teaching faculty and establish constructive relationships that foster successful collaboration in information literacy instruction (cf. Baird, Lillard, & Wilson, 2004; Bhavnagri & Bielat, 2005; Brown & Duke, 2005).

#### 4. Theoretical frameworks

##### 4.1. Symbolic interactionism

Several theoretical constructs were found to be helpful in interpreting the data. A primary conceptual lens was *symbolic interactionism*, which rests on the notion that roles and identities are constructed and evolve through social interaction, and is based on the work of George Herbert Mead (cf. Mead, 1922). Patton (1990, p.75) defines symbolic interactionism as “a perspective that places great emphasis on the importance of meaning and interpretation as essential human processes.” In particular, the idea that individual conduct is associated with a specific position or set of circumstances, which provide behavioral guidelines, prescriptions, and boundaries, was important for interpreting the data. Symbolic interactionism has had relatively little traction in librarianship to date. Exceptions where the theory has been explicitly used to interpret empirical data include Akintunde and Selbar (1995) and Cool (1993). Muller (1942) suggested that the theory would be useful as an interpretive lens for reading research, and Hall (1990) and Horn (1998) argue in favor of employing symbolic interactionism for research in librarianship. Finally, Fishidun (2002) provides a concise history of the theory's development and presents a case for its value to understand interactions in the library. In this study, symbolic interactionism was

recognized as valuable for interpreting the experiences described by the study participants, as they experienced their specific positions in campus hierarchies.

##### 4.2. Gift giving and Goffman's deference behavior

Additional conceptual lenses include the work of Erving Goffman (1967), who emphasized self-presentation in social contexts and research surrounding the gift and reciprocal exchange cycles, especially in anthropological and sociological contexts. Within Library and Information Science (LIS), Goffman's work has been applied more widely, notably by Chelton (1997). Research surrounding gifting and reciprocity has been applied in LIS by Cronin (1995) in his examination of acknowledgement behavior in scholarly communication, and through investigations establishing Internet communities as gifting economies (Tschider, 2006; Veale, 2003). These works were especially useful in interpreting the experiences of participants as they sought the gift of time from their faculty colleagues and as they displayed deference behavior towards faculty members. These theoretical perspectives on the data are explained where relevant in the presentation of research results, as is appropriate for the presentation of qualitative research using grounded theory.

#### 5. Methods

The data were collected via interviews exploring the perspectives and points of view of the research participants (Mellon, 1990); thus, a phenomenological approach was taken. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity because the questions asked of them were potentially sensitive.<sup>1</sup> The interview questions were tested in a pilot study ( $n=26$ ) in which library staff with teaching responsibilities were interviewed in a single Canadian province between January and April 2006. This pilot successfully confirmed the value of the interview method to explore the issues of interest, and the interview questions. For the full study, 56 library staff with instructional responsibilities (professional librarians or paraprofessional staff) in academic and public libraries across Canada were interviewed about their experiences in their instructional roles between January and March 2007. Potential participants were identified by examining library web pages to identify staff with instructional responsibilities, and these people were contacted by e-mail and invited to participate. The academic libraries where participants were employed were diverse, including college and university libraries from institutions of varying sizes. The instructional experiences of the participants were equally diverse; that diversity was represented by usual teaching format (large classes, one-on-one instruction), teaching method (active or lecture), length of time as a librarian and as an instructor, etc. Because the focus of this paper is on relationships with faculty members, experiences reported center on classroom teaching, which requires interaction and negotiation with teaching faculty. The interviews were semistructured and lasted between one-half hour and two hours (Appendix A shows the questions). Most of the interviews were held in offices and boardrooms at the participant's place of employment. At least one interview occurred in a public space away from the participant's workplace.

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by research assistants. Both authors conducted open-coding, qualitative analyses using NVivo software. A grounded theory approach was taken to identify themes arising inductively from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Agreement about themes and consistency of analysis was achieved through face-to-face meetings between the authors. Within

<sup>1</sup> All data collection was conducted in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, and was approved by the Education, Extension, and Augustana Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta.

the study, trustworthiness was achieved through attention to the following: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Credibility was realized through the selection and adoption of appropriate and well-established research methods suited to the investigation (i.e., interviews to explore sensitive issues deeply). Transferability was met through the breadth of the study (national in scope), and the significant number of participants included in the work. The voices of those participants reported below speak to the confirmability of the findings, and dependability was achieved by the description of methods, above, and by the use of the pilot study prior to the design of the larger investigation.

## 6. Results and discussion

The results and their interpretation are based on the expressed experiences of the study participants. Clearly these experiences represent only one set of perspectives in a complex relationship, which is not balanced in this study by the voices of other members of that relationship, i.e., faculty members. Consistent with qualitative research approaches, results and discussion are integrated.

One of the most salient themes identified in the data analyses was the experience of complex and asymmetrical relationships between instructional librarians and teaching faculty at academic institutions. Thus, data from the academic library staff ( $n = 48$ ) are the focus of this paper. The faculty/librarian relationship is so critical that sometimes instructional “success” was defined by these study participants as successful faculty negotiation and relations, rather than in terms of students’ learning. This succinctly details the importance of these relationships with teaching faculty within the working lives of participants. This also clearly establishes which member of this teaching-related triad (teaching faculty/students/librarians) is considered most significant within the educational cycle. From the definition of instructional success provided by research participants we can understand the teaching faculty as sitting on the apex in this established relationship.

### 6.1. The gift of time

The relationship with teaching faculty was often described by the study participants as characterized by dependence, where the participants were dependent on the giving (or provisions) from the teaching faculty. Several respondents spoke to the subservient role played by librarians in this unequal power relationship, where power is generally ceded to teaching faculty. For example, participants often expressed the provision of in-class time to teach information literacy skills as a “gift” from the faculty member. The concept of “time,” although an intangible commodity and not a physical object, acts as an element of the reciprocal exchange cycle. This gift of time is a distinct link between the giver (teaching faculty) and receiver (librarian). This linkage connects the giver and receiver into a reciprocal exchange relationship which is interconnected with power relations. Reciprocity and gifting practices form a significant piece of the literature in anthropology and sociology. Studies in these domains show that gifting creates an obligation to reciprocate, and is the ground for other types of economic exchange (Malinowsky, 1932; Mauss, 1954). Other, more recent studies show that the practice of gifting is a strategic, selfish activity in which the giver, when gifting, desires an obligatory reciprocal relationship (Bourdieu, 1977; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones, 1992; Smith, 1990). These recent studies work to reiterate what Sherry (1983) detailed by saying, “Gift-giving then, is properly a vehicle of social obligation and political maneuver” (p.157). Previous research literature, therefore, suggests that teaching faculty understand that their actions will cause a reciprocal response by librarians to be necessary in common social order and this gifting will help to ensconce and reinforce teaching faculty as lead in this hierarchy. By choosing to characterize being given time to teach as a gift, research

participants are acknowledging the social obligation placed upon them and are positioning themselves as deferent and subordinate to teaching faculty.

### 6.2. Deference behavior

Goffman (1967) described the above type of characterization as “deference” discourse, and further examples were woven throughout comments related to the participants’ relationships to teaching faculty. Goffman’s description of ceremonial rules and deference behavior clearly fits the participants’ construction of this relationship. Goffman describes a ceremonial rule as “a conventionalized means of communication by which the individual expresses his character or conveys his appreciation of the other participants in the situation” (p.54). These ceremonial messages can be conveyed via linguistic acts, such as a “statement of praise or depreciation regarding self or other, and does so in a particular language or intonation” (p.55). Further to Goffman’s understanding of deference behavior, Rogers and Lee-Wong (2003) note that deferent communication “indicates respect for the other’s knowledge and abilities, demonstrates understanding of the other’s work obligations and time constraints, and employs tone and forms of address that do not overstep the superior–subordinate hierarchical relationship” (p.400). Such message statements were common in the data.

When examining the theme of collaboration, an example from Fran (all participants were given pseudonyms and all quotations are transcribed verbatim) was noted. Fran recalled “a real high when somebody had ... trust in me to really sort of, not coteach, but it is a collaboration.” In this quote it is significant to note that Fran qualifies her position as an instructor with the epistemic modal “sort of.” This utterance is considered a negative politeness strategy which functions to show respect and sensitivity to not impose upon another’s perspective (Aries, 1996, p.118). By using this qualifying language Fran reveals her insecurity and uncertainty in the collaboration established between herself and the teaching faculty member. In accordance with the linguistic workings of the epistemic modal, Fran shows respect for the face-saving needs of the faculty member she is discussing and chooses to not interfere with that faculty member’s position as teacher. Therefore, Fran works to defer to the faculty member in two ways: a) by ceding power in not clarifying her own words and position with the collaboration, and b) implicitly working to show respect to the faculty member’s position via utterance usage. Interestingly, other research shows that the use of epistemic modals in qualifying talk is more common among females than males (Aries, 1996, p.119). Marianne too, used the epistemic modals of “sort of” and “kind of” to qualify her relationship with a faculty member when she said, “It’s really sort of like, sort of a partner, partnership with a faculty member ... I’m actually kind of part of the ... not part of the class, but an element of it ....” In this example, Marianne (similar to Fran) is hesitant to interfere with the status of the faculty member when asked to define her own role as instructor. Craig (a male participant) did use qualifying talk (but not the epistemic modal type of speech feature) when he hedged his “collaboration” with “pretty much” and spoke of his efforts to get the faculty to “buy in.” Therefore, it is notable that both men and women research participants participated in this category of linguistic behavior, albeit of differing types, to describe their deferent positions and relationships with teaching faculty.

Participants continued to choose language that revealed the deference aspect of their relationships. Goffman (1967) states that deference behavior “tends to be honorific and politely toned, conveying appreciation of the recipient....” (Goffman, 1967, p.60). In this study, Carole said, “It’s just a matter of finding out what the instructor expects.” Fran reported that, “I didn’t want to step on her toes....” The words of the above two participants work to cede power, authority, and knowledge of curriculum to the teaching faculty. Martin’s words show agreement with this perspective when he said,

“A great deal depends on them [teaching faculty] and what they want.” This comment works to praise the knowledge of the teaching faculty as experts and suggest that library instructional staff do not hold expertise necessary in order to craft a successful curricular collaboration. Martin later said, “She even sent me a thank you card afterwards! ... they may be thankful but they [usually] don't bother.” Examination of the sending of the thank you card to Martin is interesting as an exhibition of reciprocity and politeness. It is also an exception to the behaviors experienced by library instructional staff (as noted by Martin above). This demonstration of gratitude would continue the cycle of reciprocity in the relationship of the librarian and faculty member, where indebtedness is constructed by actions (including gratitude). Politeness has been defined as “the grease in social interaction with cooperation as one of its goals” (Grice, 1975). The lack of thanks usually proffered to the participant described here suggests that these organizationally grounded relationships are taken for granted as they are short of the respect and cooperation understood in conventional relationships.

### 6.3. Experiences of disrespect

The difficult and unequal power relationships experienced by some of these participants was reflected in disrespect and exploitation by teaching faculty. Some of that disrespect appeared to be supported by institutional culture and was also supported by librarians' self-positioning as defeated, passive, dependent, and subordinate to teaching faculty. For example, Roseanna said, “Faculty will use you for anything ...,” and Claire said, “We're at the mercy of the faculty member ... will they or won't they allow us that precious 50 minutes...” Richard stated, “You work very hard to earn that time they've given you,” while Curt said, “It's always a case of the professor opening up an hour or two of their class time...” Note Colleen's use of “allow,” which is permissive in tone, when she says, “She was more comfortable allowing me to do the whole thing.” Stella's words, too, speak to this dependency, “I've been after that particular professor to allow me to come in ... it's just a matter of trying to convince him ... the hardest part of the battle is getting the faculty members to buy in and give you the time out of their class...” Amy reported feeling “marginalized” by teaching faculty, while Kevin felt like a “substitute teacher.” Shelley accepted her inability to create change in the attitudes of faculty when she said, “My preference is that they [faculty] come [to class], but of course, if they don't, they don't.” Marianne was forthright in her comment, “I'm not sure that faculty credit librarians a lot.” Later, Marianne reported an incident where she prepared a presentation and was introduced as “the librarian, she's going to tell you how to do your assignment ... don't stress about it, it's really easy, it's only worth five percent, so don't even worry about this assignment, it's totally easy...” This experience left Marianne feeling belittled, as though her role was simple and unimportant. These examples of disrespect, as experienced by the participants, reinforce both the hierarchical structure of teaching faculty over library instructional staff and the apparent disrespect by teaching faculty for the instructional librarian's knowledge stores. These concepts link directly to other comments from study participants which focus on the labor-relation roles between each group.

“Deferent communications show an awareness that organizational relationships are asymmetrical in one way or another, if not by an imposed pecking order, then by expertise and experience” (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003, p. 397). The acceptance of the deference behavior on the part of the academic librarians by teaching faculty suggests that there exists a hierarchy of position on campuses and that librarians are perceived as subordinate to teaching faculty. Other participant comments within the study related directly to librarians' experiences of uncertainty about their roles, position, and how these fit into the larger campus organizational relationships. Martin discusses the difficulties in interpreting the roles of librarians and their place on

campus when he said, “I think a central problem in the university setting, we go round and round this all the time, is that we don't have the status of, we don't have the right to be teachers.... We're not thought of as teachers, although in this university we're part of the faculty association ... I don't think they [teaching faculty] see us as having the right to teach ... all your efforts about teaching are kind of done in a funny kind of vacuum and you're always wondering if it's valid what you're doing...” Sharon echoed this when she said, “I'm not great at going to the department and saying ‘You need me!’ when I'm not sure they do.” Institutional attitudinal change is necessary for these relationships to be altered and for more significant perceptions about what can be learned from the roles to be constructed. There were exceptions to this attitude, however. Craig was speaking of the teaching faculty when he said, “In fact, I told them, I don't even want to see you just on your own ... I want you to come here with something that we can work on together.” It is significant to note that Craig's exception included the speech act ‘we,’ (“... something that we can work on together”). This delineates inclusivity and acts as a display of membership (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Further to this, this participant spoke of faculty as “friends ... peers ... equals.” Lorne, too, expressed an exceptional view:

Now we're more and more engaging in a conversation with the faculty member to talk about learning outcomes ... how it fits in the program of his or her course ... where it fits in the curriculum.... We've been using a [new faculty orientation day] to initiate relationship building with faculty.

He went to comment about a “change in librarianship generally, from the servant to the colleague ... to more of an integral partner in the education process ... we certainly aren't there yet, but I think that we're farther along the road...” It is noteworthy that Lorne's perspective was an exception, yet he did qualify his comments at the end when he said “... we certainly aren't there yet...” Amy said,

I had really good luck with ... computer science because the professor ... used to be married to a librarian and she thinks librarians are wonderful ... so I don't know if it's a gender thing or whatever, because I had great luck with the mathematics department and the [professor] there has been a woman as well ... and my library rep in Geography is a female ... maybe it's a gender thing, but I do have more difficulty with the male getting ... I don't know....

It is significant that Amy uses the word “luck” to describe the positive nature of this relationship, as opposed to positioning the relationship with the more powerful usage of language such as “success.” Amy's focus on the gender issues as relevant to the faculty-librarian relationship are also pertinent; most librarians are female and their relationship with a largely male teaching faculty is certainly affected by gender relations and power struggles. It is noteworthy that Craig and Lorne, quoted above as exceptions, are both male.

## 7. Conclusion

These data demonstrate that for many study participants, their relationships with teaching faculty on campus remain fraught. The power imbalance perceived by the participants is exacerbated by the gendered nature of librarianship and of academe, by traditional campus hierarchies and cultures that privilege research over teaching roles, and by traditional campus roles that separate scholars from service providers (e.g., librarians). Nonetheless, finding ways to negotiate the challenges associated with these relationships will be fundamental to improving information literacy instruction. Having established an area of challenge wherein many potential barriers to successful information literacy instruction are grounded, it is difficult to identify space for amelioration of those barriers. Are traditional

campus hierarchies amenable to challenge? If so, who is responsible for mounting that challenge? As in all power relationships, it undoubtedly falls to the lower-status members in those relationships (i.e., librarians) to seek redress. Since teaching faculty value subject expertise primarily, it is proposed that redress be grounded in librarians' demonstrations of their expertise. Librarians understand well that they possess expertise unknown to most teaching faculty; that expertise is demonstrable in the success achieved by students with opportunity to learn from librarians. Those expectations for success must be articulated in librarians' teaching goals, achieved through the application of pedagogic expertise, and demonstrated by measured outcomes. Therein lie librarians' immediate challenges; their rewards are uncertain vis-a-vis improved campus relationships, but their students certainly will be rewarded.

Further exploration of the experiences of librarians, in their teaching roles and otherwise, might provide fruitful means by which constructive change is generated. Objective analyses of outputs and outcomes provide valuable data, but those outcomes are mediated by the actors who are responsible for generating them. Understanding the experience of that mediation may reveal greater appreciation of how librarians understand of their roles, and their engagement in them, thus providing avenues for amelioration of barriers to successful outcomes. When preparation for professional work includes acknowledgement of the emotional experiences associated with that work, it may be expected that approaches to managing those experiences constructively may be developed. Thus, there may be a role for those charged with preparing librarians for their work (both instructors in LIS programs, and on-the-job managers), in more explicitly recognizing the challenges experienced by librarians as they negotiate campus hierarchies.

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### Appendix A. Interview questions

The following questions formed the basis of the interviews:

1. Please describe your experiences as a library trainer/instructor. [Since librarians use various labels for their educative positions, the terms "teacher," "instructor," and "educator" were used interchangeably. Some librarians use the term "training" to describe this work, so flexibility was used in choice of vocabulary.]
2. How long have you been instructing?
3. What is the nature of that instruction?
4. When you started working in libraries, did you expect to be doing instruction in your library work?
5. Do you feel prepared to do this work?
6. How have you prepared for this work?
7. Did you receive training in library school/your technician program?
8. Have you participated in any professional development opportunities related to instructional work?
9. Have you participated in any informal training for this work?
10. What do you enjoy about instructional work?
11. What challenges does this work bring to your role in the library?
12. How has the role of instructional work changed during your career?

13. How do you understand instructional work to fit with your role as a librarian/library staff member?
14. Do you have any other comments about doing instruction as part of your job?

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