

# Librarians' Experiences of the Teaching Role: A National Survey of Librarians



**HEIDI JULIEN & SHELAGH K. GENUIS**

**SCHOOL OF LIBRARY & INFORMATION  
STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA**

**CAIS/ACSI ANNUAL CONFERENCE, 2009**

# The context

2

- Information literacy (IL) is critical to full social participation and to individual decision-making
- Many citizens are not as information literate as they might be (confidence exceeds skill levels), so instruction is valuable
- Libraries have a traditional and ongoing role in IL instruction
- There are many barriers to effective instruction (e.g., resources, managerial and administrative support, preparation of library staff for this work)

# The “barrier” in question...

3

- Many library users and library staff are ambivalent about the potential role of libraries in IL instruction
- Some library staff do not embrace this work enthusiastically – some express discomfort, antagonism
- Some reasons for this ambivalence include
  - Insufficient pedagogical training for librarians
  - Changing work roles
  - Complex attitudes towards users
  - Ambivalence about the place of instructional work in libraries

# Research Question

4

- How do library staff with instructional experience relate to those roles and what might be the implications of those self-understandings for instructional outcomes?

# Data collection and analysis

5

## Data collection

- Pilot study: 26 interviews of library staff in one Canadian province, January-April 2006
- Phase I: 58 interviews, January – March 2007, with library staff (mostly professional librarians) in public and academic libraries across Canada
- Phase II: Diary method, 14 participants, 4-month period
- Phase III: National survey, n=798, completed March 23, 2009

## Data analysis

- Qualitative data (interviews, diaries) analyzed using open-coding, grounded-theory approach
- Survey data analyzed quantitatively using SPSS

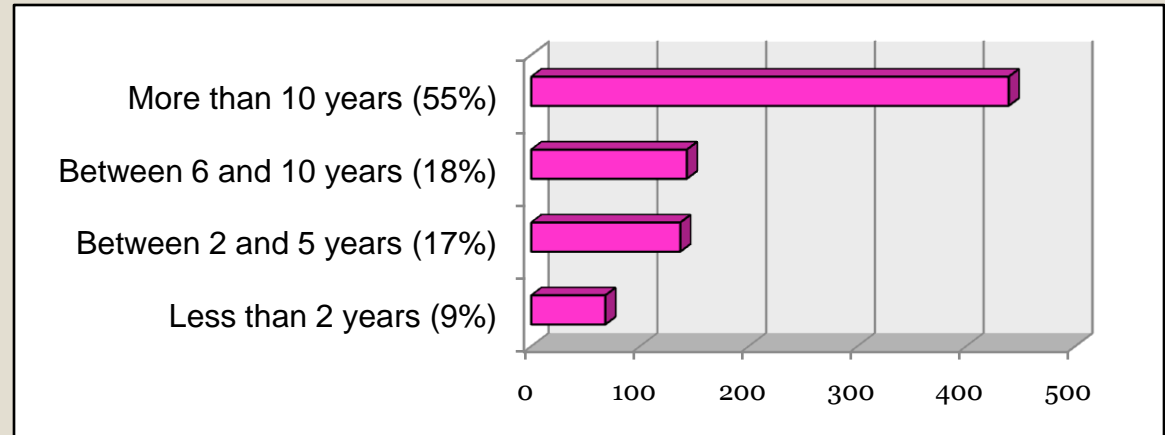
# Survey Results

6

English respondents, n=767; French respondents, n=31

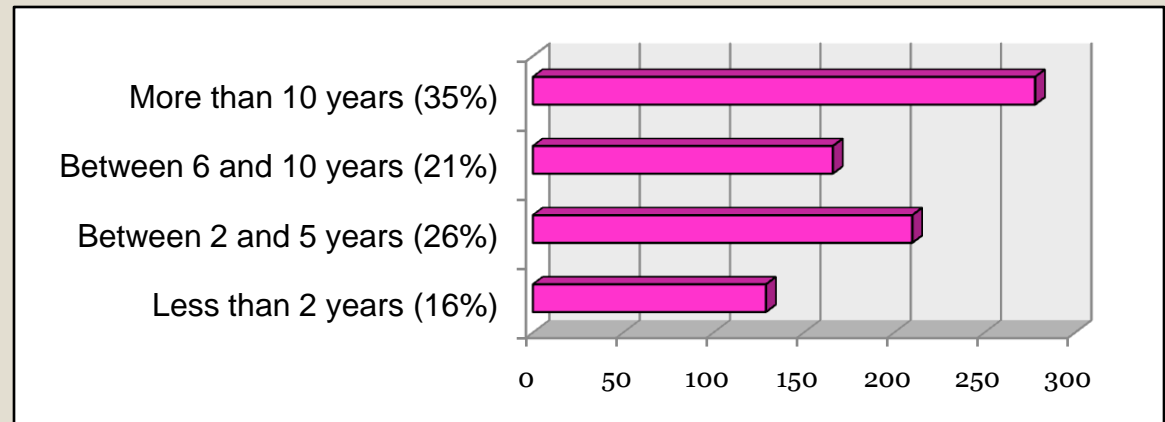
## How long have you been working in libraries?

Largest proportion of respondents (55%) have been working in libraries for more than 10 years



## How long have you been instructing within libraries?

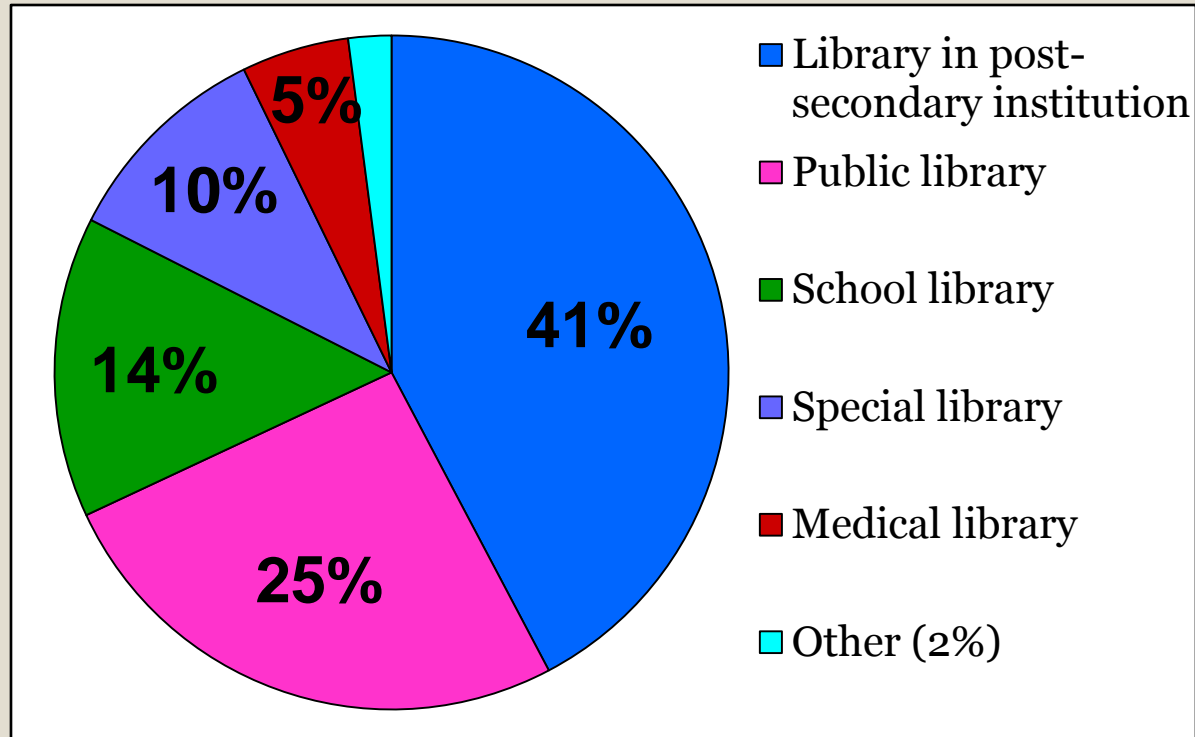
35% have been doing instructional work in libraries for more than 10 years



# Survey Results

7

## What type of library do you currently work in?

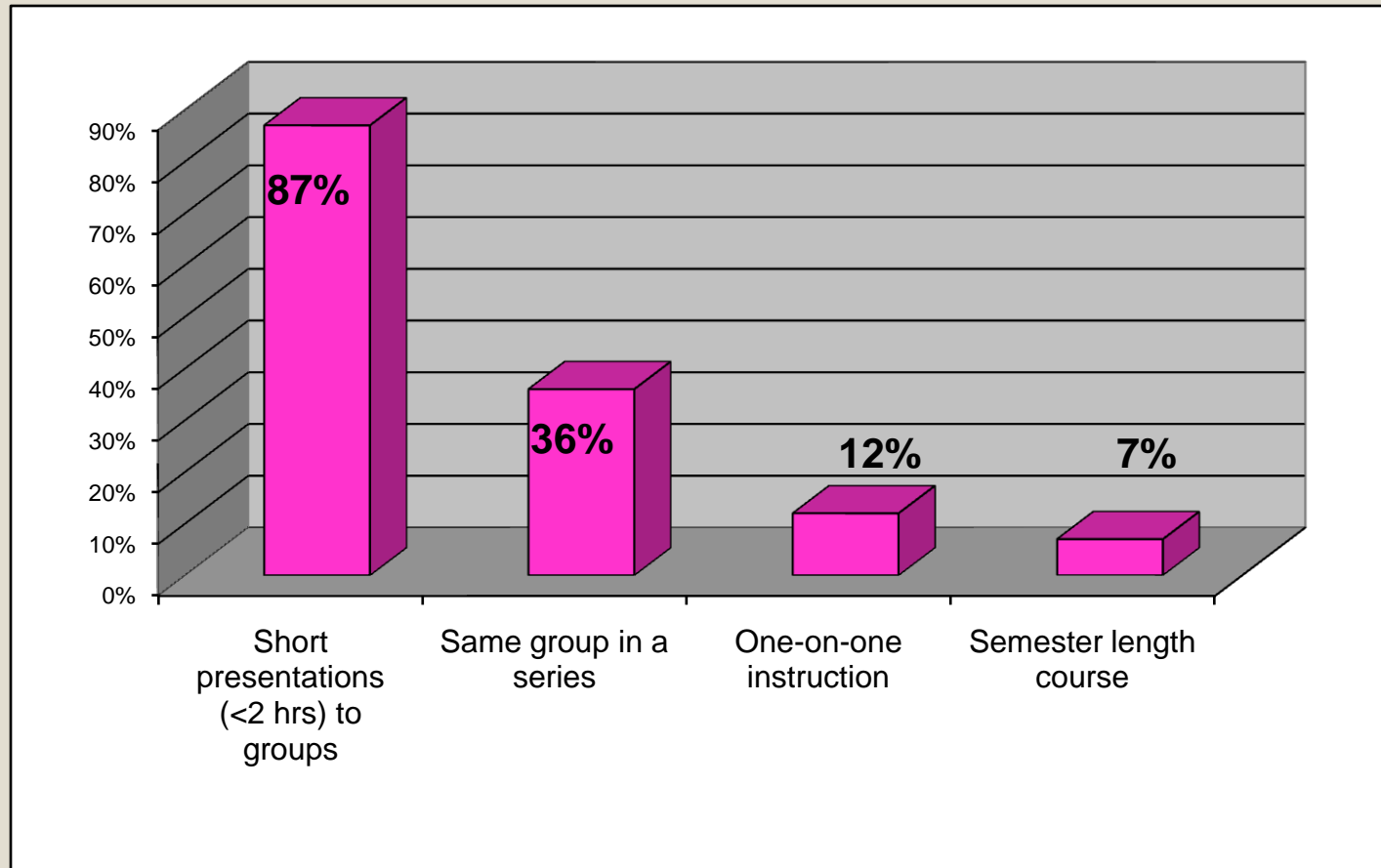


## Educational background

- 71% have MLIS or equivalent

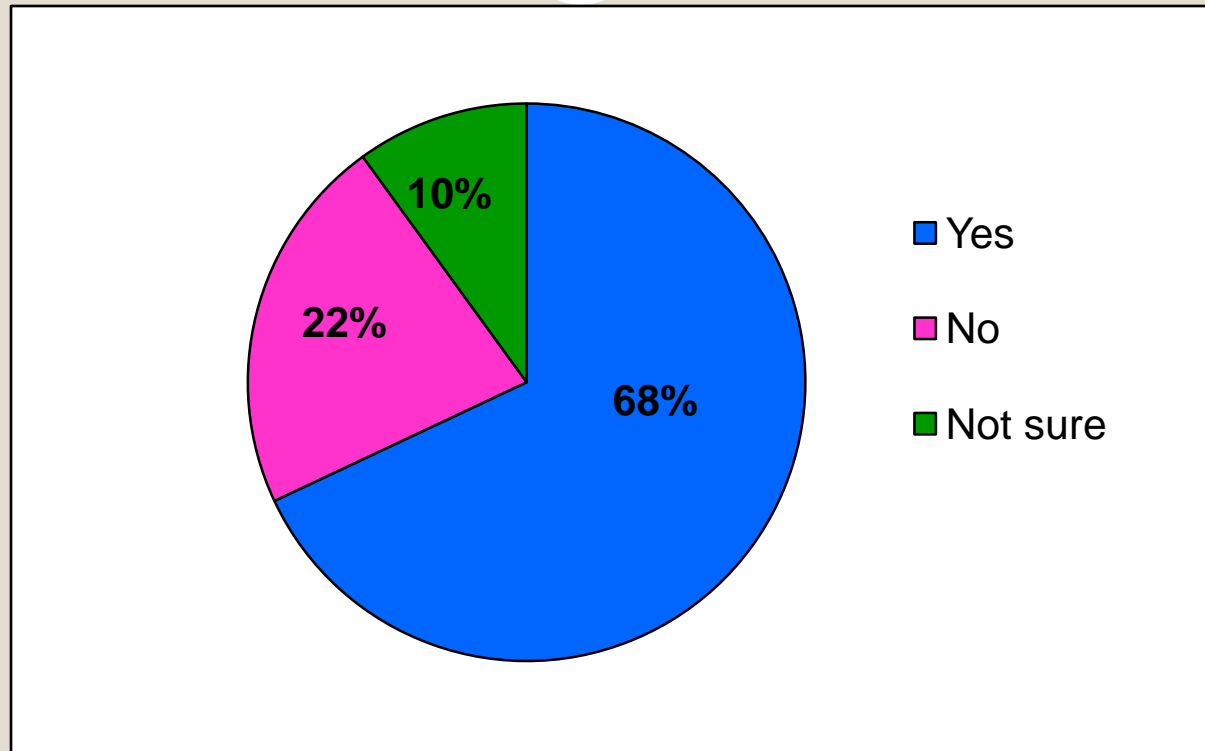
# Nature of instructional work

8



# When you started working in libraries, did you expect to be doing instruction?

9



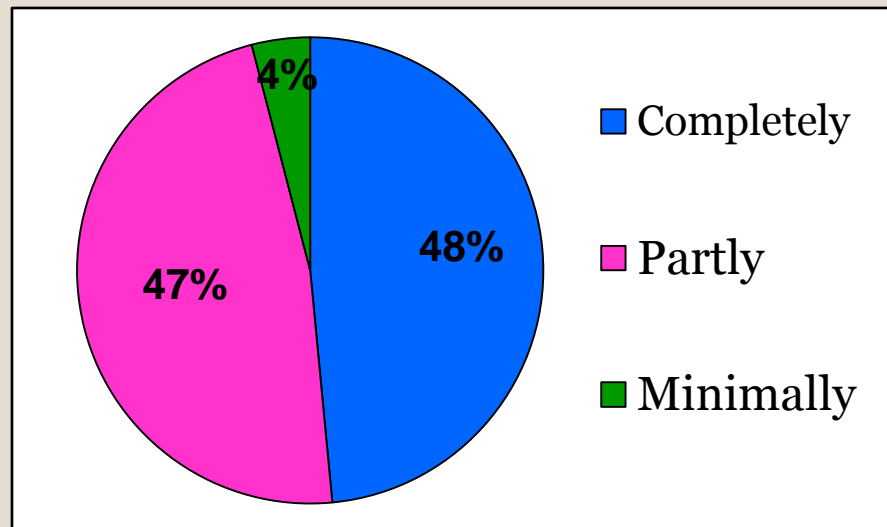
*It's part of the role of a public librarian.  
I assumed that teaching would be part of any library role.*

# Preparation for instructional work

10

- 39% took instructional-related course(s) during MLIS or equivalent
- 26% learned instruction-related curriculum during MLIS or equivalent
- 74% read professional/research literature in instruction
- 42% engaged in other forms of professional development related to instruction

**To what degree do you *feel* prepared?**



# Preparation for instructional work

11

## **Survey results consistent with interviews and diaries**

- Clear desire for more preparation
- Some equation of presentation skills with teaching
- Focus on teaching as intuitive

## **Challenges:**

- I would like to have a better understanding and grounding in educational theory and pedagogy than I do at present.
- Our role and success continues to be based on personal relationships with faculty, not on generally accepted practices. How can you be prepared for a moving target?
- There is always more to learn, and fairly little support from the institution I work for. As a result I don't always feel like I'm ready to provide what professors are requesting/expecting.

# Enjoying instructional work

12

- Consistent with interview, diary data
  - Respondents appreciate the ‘light-bulb’ moments
  - Respondents experience satisfaction from seeing student learning outcomes
  - Building relationships with students and teaching faculty plays a primary role in the enjoyment

*I love it when “the light-bulbs go on” in the class-room, and when students flock to the library and my office to clarify their thoughts and ideas because they care about their work. I enjoy the friendships that I have developed with students and faculty over the years, and I am thankful for my connections with like-minded colleagues.*

# Enjoying instructional work

13

## **‘Light-bulb’ moments:**

- I enjoy all of it. I love seeing lights go off in my students. I love seeing them engaged. I love the appreciation I feel from them when they see value in libraries. I love teaching one on one. I love being in front of large classrooms.... I love my newest “role” as the facilitator rather than as the “teacher”.
- Facilitating student learning and understanding. Watching them grow as researchers / “seeing the light go on.”

## **Learning outcomes:**

- The feeling of satisfaction when I can tell that students have really learned something that will make a difference to their work.
- I enjoy WHEN it seems to get through, when the occasional student really GETS what I'm trying to illustrate.
- Finding creative ways to engage students and help them learn effective strategies for research; seeing students get excited about their topics, about research, or about the array of resources the library can offer to them; .... meeting students where they are, then taking them a little further....

# Enjoying instructional work

14

## **Relationships with users (students and teaching faculty):**

- I enjoy interacting with the students .... It's gratifying when someone comes and tells you how what you have done has made an impact on their research or even if they come in just to say hi.
- I find it creates a connection with the students. They get to know me and come in to the library looking for help from either me or my colleagues. .... I find that the process of meeting with faculty to plan our classes creates a personal connection in addition to a professional connection.

## **Professional and personal reward:**

- Some days it can be trying, but then anything worthwhile comes with some cost. Often it is humorous and ultimately rewarding. When I entered this profession I didn't anticipate the level of personal rewards I would receive from helping to empower others to locate information and materials and learn new technologies or search tips.
- Although I would not use the word "enjoy" but I believe instruction is necessary to facilitate access to information .... so teaching how to do it well satisfies me professionally.
- When the class is engaged and everything falls into place well (with the right mix of activities/lecture, and no technical foul ups), the buzz I get from teaching is the most enjoyable part of the work.

# Not enjoying instructional work

15

## **Two respondents provided negative responses to the question, 'What do you enjoy about instructional work?'**

- I do not enjoy any aspect of information literacy instruction work. Students don't want it, and research shows it usually doesn't help them, but librarians are compelled by their employers to provide IL instruction anyway.
- Nothing. Not what I set out to do when I received my degree. Had I wanted to teach, I would have gone for a degree in teaching.

# Challenges of instructional work

16

- Lack of preparation for the teaching role (leading to lack of confidence and challenges engaging students)
- Challenging relationships with teaching faculty
- Lack of administrative/managerial support
- Resource constraints – time, facilities, technological challenges (broken equipment, changing interfaces)
- Teaching clients with few computer skills, and with varying language abilities and learning styles
- Teaching students who believe they do not have anything to learn

# Challenges

17

## **Lack of preparation for the teaching role**

- Don't know enough about educational theory. Don't know enough about setting objectives, developing marking rubrics. Difficult to design information literacy assignments that can be consistently evaluated.
- I feel like I'm always playing catch-up on teaching techniques and educational theory, since these topics have to be largely self-taught
- Lack of subject area expertise. Lack of teaching training. Lack of preparation time for teaching a specific class.
- The challenges are teaching in areas that I am not as well versed in; controlling rowdy classes; capturing their interest when they don't want to be there; incorporating active learning; and liaising with faculty about what I actually would like to do in the classes.

# Challenges

18

## **Challenging relationships with teaching faculty**

- Supply teacher syndrome - less than 10% of the class came on one occasion. Professors' lack of understanding and respect (some believe we can cover everything their students need to know in the 15 minutes they can spare from their syllabus; class requests on extremely short notice; telling a class of 150 students to meet with the subject librarian outside of class time - without warning the subject librarian!).
- Getting some faculty to recognize that information related-instruction is important has always been a challenge.

## **Structure may limit impact**

- Librarians as instructors -- and not as teachers -- typically are parachuted into courses and give 50-90-minute one-shot sessions, rather than more expanded teaching. Typically, these one-shot sessions are requested with multiple educational outcomes, which are difficult to organize and carry out. Very often, to deal with the one-shot reality, librarians focus on teaching technical aspects of information finding tools or resources, and not on the more conceptual, and perhaps more important, outcomes such as organizing ideas....
- Getting the one-shot session to deliver something that is not a waste of the student's time is also a challenge.

# Challenges

19

## **Lack of administrative/managerial/institutional support**

- There is no clear way in the performance review process that good instruction can be rewarded. Managers still seem more impressed when librarians teach large numbers of workshops and not fewer higher quality workshops. The biggest challenge is how effective instruction can be valued within the organizational structure.
- [IL] work within most academic libraries is mainly considered a second-tier educational endeavour. Librarians are not fully given faculty or academic status in some institutions and this influences whether or not they are given “teaching” status in the university.

## **Resource constraints – time, facilities, technological challenges**

- Technology is still a challenge - mostly it works, but you still encounter classrooms with nothing more than an overhead projector. Really hard to demo a database.
- Having the time to prepare. I want to have a confident feeling .... that I am prepared, but I usually feel like I am flying by the seat of my pants.
- In the public library, lack of funding for instructional programs, and lack of publicity resulting in low turnout.
- The workload is extraordinary .... to do instruction well takes a significant amount of time and energy.

# Changing instructional role

20

## Themes

- Respondents wrote extensively about the impact of changing technology, and about how technology has changed methods and tools
- A theme of increased expectations was also evident

## Example responses ...

- I have gone from chalkboard to smartboard .... from mimeograph to photocopy to pdf... from textbook to ebook. The tools of the trade have greatly changed. The teaching style has changed from being a sage, to being a facilitator, to being a guided mentor... a changing focus on the learner and their involvement/ownership in their learning.
- We have become facilitators rather than teachers. More teamwork approach. Students want more images, more experiential learning.
- I am no longer simply instructing people how to use the library and its services. And we've moved beyond subject guides and database tutorials. Now I'm showing them how to live in and through the web, how to organize their intellectual lives, how to connect. IL is a basic life skill, a sine qua non of our age. As a result, nothing exists on its own, separately contained and manageable. The web dissolves all that and demands a complex and ever-expanding knowledge of its mysteries and rituals.

# Place of instruction in professional identity

21

## **Integral to my professional identity (78%)**

- I am reference librarian so it is implicit in that role.
- See my earlier answer about being told right from library school that instruction was key to any library job. Anyone who thinks that librarian is a good career for introverts needs to leave the profession. Librarian is a people job and the mousy types who hide in the corner don't belong.
- Those who do not want to provide instruction are in the wrong profession.
- Anyone who doesn't want to teach shouldn't be working in a public service or academic library role. The librarian possesses knowledge that most people in the organization don't possess; hence, we're the only ones who can teach these.

# Place of instruction in professional identity

22

## **Unique contribution defines identity**

- I'm an instruction librarian. It's the core role for librarians at our institution, and it should be. Creating an information literate student body that can function independently in a confusing information world is a hugely important role. Google has removed the need for most basic reference questions, but students still need to learn how to navigate and evaluate the information...
- As one of the key roles of public libraries is to support lifelong learning, it is our responsibility to ensure we are providing the public (all ages) with the skills to know when to choose a specific information source over another. As experts in the field of information, it is professional librarians who are best suited to help the general public navigate the sometimes overwhelming world of information.
- Teaching takes up most of my time as a professional librarian. I believe strongly that IL can help students succeed at university. It is my contribution to their success and therefore an integral part of what universities are meant to do: opening the world of scholarship to them, so that they can understand the world we live in better.

# Place of instruction in professional identity

23

## **Duty or expectation (31%)**

- It gives me credibility, status, and face recognition to the student body, but it is not enjoyable.
- I'm not that comfortable with taking on the role of training, I can be impatient. But librarians can be a shy bunch and since I'm not that shy, it sort of fell in my lap by default. But now, I feel it defines my role here.

## **Imposition (2%)**

- Imposed: Library staff numbers continue to diminish, rendering those that remain not much choice. Individuals are not asked to participate in instructional work but are told to do so. Any resistance to this is met with great disapproval by supervisors. Following along this argument, it then becomes an expectation of all --- both professional and non-professionals who have even fewer qualifications and often desires to participate in such things.
- Information Literacy instruction is largely a waste of my time and the time of the students I teach. All the time I spend preparing and teaching IL sessions would be better spent managing the collections in my liaison areas, helping students who actually want help, improving my knowledge of the subjects in my liaison areas, or even looking out my window at clouds rolling by.

# Place of instruction in professional identity

24

## Impact of the institutional context

- I wish I could say it's integral to my professional identity, but I don't feel my organization takes it seriously enough for that to be the case. I do consider it a duty of my job, though--both because my managers tell me it is :) and because I think it's important to enable our customers to make use of our services and resources.
- I enjoy the variety it gives me in my job. However at times I feel it's a chore, and that I could spend my time doing something better. My corporation has a learning and development department, which is not part of the library. I feel this department should take care of training, while I should focus on reference and client relations. I don't feel it's essential to the job; in many ways, having so many diverse responsibilities spreads me too thin, at times.
- I do love teaching and do think of it as part of being a professional. However, I'm not very proud of my teaching. I feel it could be a lot better. I feel that the lack of coordination in my institution also lowers the level of professionalism in our teaching as a whole.

# Additional comments

25

- **Many suggestions to incorporate more education for instruction during MLIS programs**
  - ...I want to mention that I took an Information Literacy course as an elective at the U of T, but I think it should be made mandatory.
  - Just to say that I wish I had been better prepared for it during library school!
  - It should be made clear to students during their graduate program that they will be expected to teach as part of their duties in academic libraries.
  - Some of the staff I supervise don't like the instructional component of their jobs. This is one area where it is challenging to find staff to participate. It is a constant challenge to train staff so that they feel competent in this area.

# Questions arising from this data...and implications

26

- How can challenges to successful instructional experiences be met?
- What are implications for supervisors and managers?
- Are there implications for librarians' education during the MLIS?
- Value: these findings move focus on instructional challenges beyond instrumental concerns (e.g. training or resource limits).

# Acknowledgements

27

- Sincere thanks to our participants
- Sincere thanks to all the assistants who have participated in all phases of the study: Jen (J.L.) Pecoskie, Lesley Kok, Ubianuju Mollel, and Melanie Rutherford
- Funding: SSHRC SRG 410-2006-0002