Asking “Good Questions” about How Academic Librarians Learn to Teach

Eveline Houtman

“How do academic librarians learn to teach?” This question holds personal importance for many librarians. “Where do you develop those [teaching] skills?” asks one new librarian. “Your first job? I think we’re supposed to miraculously know it. That’s been my experience.” Many new librarians feel unprepared for teaching. This may hold true for more established librarians as well as they take on new roles or are asked to rethink the ways they teach.

The question also holds importance for the profession. A wide array of professional programs and activities exists in support of librarians learning to teach: courses in library schools, the Immersion program offered by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), webinars and workshops, conferences, local supports such as peer mentoring or communities of practice, scholarly publishing on information literacy instruction, and more. Despite this, the perhaps uneasy question persists: “How do librarians actually learn to teach?” Other questions may arise: “How should librarians learn?” or “How can we best support librarians learning to teach?” These are practical questions. More broadly, as Shulman suggests, “if you wish to understand why professions develop as they do, study … their forms of professional preparation.”

This chapter explores the research questions we might ask to better understand and support academic librarians’ professional preparation for their teaching role. The scholarship of teaching and learning “invites faculty [and librarians!] … to ask good questions about their students’ learning.” In examining how academic librarians learn to teach, librarians are positioned in the role of student or learner. What “good questions” could we ask about their learning? Of course, the connection to librarians’ own students’ learning also remains; the underlying assumption is that as librarians learn to teach, their teaching improves, which leads to improved student learning.
In search of good research questions to ask, this chapter draws on the field of education, specifically the research on teacher education and teacher learning. Stepping outside our own field offers us fresh perspectives and may challenge our assumptions. Library instruction has already borrowed heavily from the field of education, including teaching techniques, models of instructional design, learning theories, and broad approaches to teaching, such as learner-centered pedagogy or critical pedagogy. The library and information studies (LIS) literature has largely not turned to the education literature on teacher learning, however; librarians are more likely to consult the higher education literature on faculty learning. It may be that librarians see the contexts and experiences of K-12 teachers’ learning as too far removed from librarians’ contexts and experiences. However, education’s large and well-resourced research base has produced extensive research on teacher learning beyond what LIS can accomplish, and many questions do transfer from one context to another. In particular, more than any other field, the field of education has investigated questions related to professional development and professional learning.

The sheer size of the literature on teacher education and teacher learning may also be daunting to librarians: where to start? In approaching this literature, the author has made no attempt to be exhaustive, instead drawing on selected review articles and handbooks on teacher education and learning. The SoTL research questions inspired by this literature are also not intended to be exhaustive; it is hoped that they are useful and generative of further ideas.

**Focusing on Programs and Activities**

One way to think about how librarians learn to teach is to focus on the programs and activities designed to support their learning. This is the main focus, for example, of the research questions suggested by the ACRL’s Instruction Section regarding librarians’ instruction-related continuing education.

What should librarians know or be taught about teaching and where should they be taught are two practical questions that arise within this perspective (similar questions are addressed in the teacher education literature), which have also led to research questions. In 2008, an ACRL task force tackled the what question by reviewing the LIS literature; it produced the ACRL’s Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators, an exhaustive list of the skills instruction librarians need and presumably are expected to acquire. Westbrock and Fabian’s research uses these proficiencies to investigate where librarians learn to teach, finding that most proficiencies are learned on the job. Where their participants believe they should learn their pedagogical skills, however, is at library school.

A number of studies do investigate library school course offerings on instruction, which typically are not particularly extensive—often just one elective course in a two-year degree, offered irregularly, with little experiential learning. Other studies describe locally developed courses for practicing librarians or on-the-job programs such as a peer mentor program or a community of practice that allows library instructors to learn together.
Given the variety of educational and professional development programs and activities related to instruction, the question arises of what is actually effective in supporting librarians’ development as teachers. In fact, the ACRL Instruction Section’s first suggested research question is: What are the most effective ways for a librarian to learn fundamental methodologies and pedagogies? This then begs a further question: How should effectiveness be evaluated? Since the overarching aim of these activities and programs is to improve librarians’ teaching—and therefore student learning—research questions might be:

- How do the programs and activities change librarians’ teaching practices?
- What elements (if any) do librarians incorporate into their teaching?
- Why do librarians not incorporate other elements?

Changes in teaching (and even more so changes in student learning) may be difficult to observe and evaluate, however. In the field of education, Desimone instead proposes measuring the core features of effective professional development as established through research consensus in the field. The five core features she identifies for teachers’ professional development are:

1. Content focus. Activities should focus on subject matter content and how students learn that content. The latter relates to pedagogical content knowledge, which combines knowledge of the content with knowledge of how to teach it.

2. Active learning. In the context of teacher learning, this might involve observing an expert teacher or being observed themselves.

3. Coherence. This relates to the extent to which teacher learning is consistent with their previous knowledge and beliefs, and with their educational context. Beliefs and contexts will be discussed further in the next section of this case study, which focuses on professional learning.

4. Duration. Research shows effective professional development requires a sufficient amount of time, including the span of time over which the activity occurs. Suggested duration includes twenty hours or more of contact time with activities spread over a semester, or a more intensive program spread over a few days with follow-up over the semester.

5. Collective participation. Interaction with colleagues is a powerful form of learning.

Research questions involving these core features from the field of education might include:

- How do LIS programs and activities (in general or specific instances) measure up to these core features of effective professional development for teachers? Which are the most effective, based on these criteria?
- Based on the results of the above evaluation, are these measures actually useful in the LIS context?

The issue of coherence may be particularly pertinent at this time as the shift from the ACRL’s Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education to its Framework...
asks librarians to reconceptualize their information literacy instruction. Research questions could include:

- Looking specifically at professional development related to the Framework, how have issues of coherence/lack of coherence with previous practice been addressed?
- Taking the issue of coherence into account, how can programs and activities better support learning in this area?

There are broader, conceptual questions we might ask about professional development programs and activities. For one, how do we as a profession conceptualize the educational and professional development practices involved in learning to teach? The desire to learn at library school suggests widespread approval of a model where teacher knowledge and skills are transmitted through coursework lasting perhaps a semester. On-the-job programs suggest a model that involves collaboration and collegiality. What other models do we/should we employ?

Again, what should librarians learn about teaching? This is less settled than it may once have seemed. The ACRL’s Standards for Proficiencies document, with its atomized list of skills was rescinded in 2017; it has been replaced by a document outlining the Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians. What does this say about our conceptions of teacher knowledge in LIS? Do we need or want a common understanding in the profession of the teaching knowledge necessary for practice?

More broadly still, what is the purpose of our professional development programs? What are our goals, our values, our objectives? What does “improving teaching” even mean?

One way to turn these conceptual questions into research questions is to start with existing programs and activities to examine the thinking underlying their design. This could involve, for example, examining the LIS literature, local professional development initiatives, or activities emanating from a professional organization, such as the ACRL. Research questions might include:

- Looking at current programs and activities, what are their goals, values, and objectives?
- What knowledge and skills are valued?
- Explicitly or implicitly, how do these programs and activities conceptualize “improved teaching?”
- Looking across different programs and activities, what patterns or trends are evident?
- What do these patterns or trends tell us about how learning to teach is conceptualized in the profession?

Researchers should probably not expect to find unified conceptions in the profession on any of these issues. They may well find a variety of conceptions that are in conflict with one another. Such research, however, will allow them to map the terrain as a basis for further research and discussion.
Focusing on Professional Learning

Another way to think about how librarians learn to teach is to focus on their learning. This reflects broader trends: within higher education, the focus is shifting from teaching to learning;\(^\text{31}\) in research on professional development, the focus is shifting from content and programs to professional learning experiences.\(^\text{32}\)

Research on learning has demonstrated that learners are active co-constructors of knowledge, rather than passive recipients of knowledge. In addition, learners create their own understandings “based upon the interaction of what they already know and believe and the ideas with which they come into contact.”\(^\text{33}\) The importance of previous knowledge and beliefs has already been mentioned above when considering the coherence of a program. Librarians may feel uneasy at the use of the term beliefs in a professional context,\(^\text{34}\) but in fact it is in use in a wide range of fields, together with a host of alternative or related terms such as conceptions, perspectives, values, personal theories of practice, and many more.\(^\text{35}\)

Broadly speaking, according to psychologist Bandura, “people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true.”\(^\text{36}\)

There has been extensive research in the field of education on teacher beliefs,\(^\text{37}\) which may be defined as “teachers' implicit assumptions about students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught.”\(^\text{38}\) Teacher beliefs play an important role in teachers' learning and development; teacher education programs often take great efforts to uncover students’ prior beliefs so that these do not interfere with learning new ways of thinking about teaching.\(^\text{39}\)

What do we already know about librarians’ beliefs related to teaching? There has been little research in the area, so these beliefs may need to be inferred from the literature or from librarians’ statements and actions. A fundamental question relates to the role of teaching within the profession: are teaching and learning to teach seen as important and valuable? The librarian who believes the answer is no may cut themselves off from professional learning in the area. Library school students often fail to take the instruction courses available to them because they do not recognize their importance and value.\(^\text{40}\)

There are tensions between views of library instruction as skills training or “point-and-click” demonstrations and views of library instruction as the teaching of concepts or critical-thinking skills.\(^\text{41}\) Librarians may view instruction variously as a presentation,\(^\text{42}\) as a performance,\(^\text{43}\) or as a co-investigation with their students of “the political, social, and economic dimensions of information, including its creation, access, and use.”\(^\text{44}\)

Research questions might then include:

- What beliefs about teaching underpin librarians' teaching practices?
- What beliefs about their teaching roles underpin librarians' teaching practices?
- How do these beliefs influence how they learn to teach and how they choose and experience professional learning?
- How do beliefs about teaching develop? How do they change?

Closely related to teacher beliefs is teacher identity.\(^\text{45}\) A number of LIS studies have investigated teacher identity in academic librarians. Through survey research, Davis,
Lundstrom and Martin find that 83 percent of their respondents \((n = 245)\) agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I consider myself a teacher.” Walter, who explores teacher identity through a small narrative study, finds a strong commitment to the centrality of teaching among his participants to the point that it colors all their work. They recognize that not all librarians are equally engaged with the teaching role, however. Austin and Bhandol find more ambiguity in their small-scale narrative study, conducted in the United Kingdom; they characterize their participants as variously “buying into, playing out and resisting the teacher role.”

Professional identity is always entwined with personal identity. As Klipfel and Cook write, “Who we are as people matters in the context of learning.” Affect plays a role in librarians’ views of both teaching and of themselves as teachers. In addition, professional identity may be entwined with the politics of identity, with the social, historical, and political forces that shape an individual.

- How does librarians’ teacher identity develop? How does it change?
- How does librarians’ teacher identity influence how they learn to teach and how they choose and experience professional learning?
- What role does affect play in librarians’ teacher identity? What role does it play in their professional learning?
- What role do the politics of identity play in how librarians experience learning to teach?

Professional learning is experiential. The actual experience of teaching is always a key part of learning to teach: “practice makes practice.” Librarians report both positive and negative experiences in their teaching. Negative experiences may, in fact, have a greater impact on their learning as the dissonance these provoke can lead to changes in beliefs and practice.

- How do librarians learn to teach through their experiences with teaching?
- How do negative teaching experiences lead to learning and change?
- What supports would help librarians turn negative experiences with teaching into learning experiences?

Teachers also come to teaching with another kind of experience: they have spent thousands of hours in the classroom as a student watching their own teachers in action; Lortie calls this “the apprenticeship of observation.” Faculty members, for example, often become enculturated in their discipline or profession’s particular teaching methods—in what Shulman calls their signature pedagogies—through observation of teaching. Librarians, on the other hand, may never have experienced information literacy instruction as a student; they lack this form of experience.

- How do librarians become enculturated in information literacy instruction?
- How do they identify and learn its signature pedagogies?
- What experiences can take the place of an “apprenticeship of learning” as a student?

Reflection is also a key component of professional learning, particularly critical reflection that questions the assumptions brought to the work. The importance of reflection for practice is recognized in the LIS literature.
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- How does reflection on their teaching practice contribute to librarians’ learning to teach?
- What supports or hinders the development of a critical reflective practice with regards to teaching?

Professional learning is always situated and mediated by context. Context might include the classroom, the students, colleagues, faculty, resources (including time for professional learning), the institutional culture, the professional culture, and the broader culture.

- How do the librarians’ contexts enable or constrain their teaching and their learning to teach?
- How do their contexts influence their beliefs about their teaching?
- How do librarians learn to teach through interactions with colleagues?

Professional learning for teaching happens over time. For K-12 teachers, the stages of teacher learning are more formalized: there is pre-service learning (or initial education), teacher induction programs that provide support in the first year(s) of teaching (librarians will appreciate the fact that new teachers also often feel unprepared to teach), and in-service learning for practicing teachers. Librarians also have different learning needs at different stages of their career. Certainly, the most intensive learning usually takes place as librarians start to teach, often under stressful conditions, with varying levels of support.

- What supports most help new librarians in learning to teach?
- How do the learning needs of instruction librarians change over their career?
- How do their learning strategies change over their career?

Finally, professional learning is complex and holistic. Learner, context, and learning are always interrelated; professional learning is embedded in practice. Attendance at an ACRL Immersion program, an interaction with a student, reading a challenging information literacy article, or a light bulb moment in the shower may all be perceived by the librarian as a significant learning experience. Webster-Wright designates this lived experience of continuing to learn as a professional as “authentic professional learning.”

- What do academic librarians see as their most significant learning experiences relating to teaching?
- What supports or hinders authentic professional learning?

Conclusion

For an academic librarian just starting to teach, learning to teach may be seen as a relatively simple matter: learn some techniques, maybe a bit about students and how they learn, observe some colleagues, and go. However, the more that librarians teach, the more they may realize how much there is to learn about teaching. The learning becomes an ongoing process.

Likewise, for a practitioner-researcher first researching how librarians learn to teach, the research questions may seem relatively straightforward and uncomplicated, perhaps where and what librarians learn. As the researcher digs deeper, they may realize that how
librarians learn to teach is more complex than originally thought. New research questions emerge to reflect this.

Involvement in the scholarship of teaching and learning starts with asking “good questions” about people’s learning. This chapter suggests a number of research questions about how academic librarians learn to teach, and there are likely many more that could be asked. They all point to one overarching question, however: What really matters to how librarians learn to teach? And from there we can ask: What does academic librarians’ professional preparation for teaching tell us about what matters to the profession?

ENDNOTES

4. Lee S. Shulman, foreword to Thomas Hatch, Into the Classroom: Developing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), ix.
17. ACRL Instruction Section, “Research Agenda.”
22. Ibid.
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