

Life after Library School:
On-the-Job Training for New Instruction Librarians

Amanda Click
Instruction and Reference Librarian
The American University in Cairo

Claire Walker
Reference and Instruction Librarian
Cumberland University

Abstract

This article examines the development of new instruction librarians through on-the-job training. Research includes a literature review, interviews with librarians, and a survey of library administrators. Perspectives from new librarians and administrators are gathered and compared through surveys and interviews, identifying a vast disconnect between these two groups. The authors provide suggestions for improving the quality and availability of training opportunities for new librarians in order to help them ease into their professional responsibilities and improve the quality of library instruction.

Introduction

Most academic librarians participate in some sort of instruction, be it showing an undergraduate how to use the library catalog at the reference desk, teaching students in an upper-level sociology class which databases are most appropriate, or training a new employee how to use the integrated library system. As new library school graduates scour job listings, they see requirements like “instruction experience,” and “teaching ability.” Once these brand new librarians arrive at their first jobs, they often find that they are expected to possess these skills already. They receive little training or guidance. The purpose of this paper is to explore how new librarians feel about on-the-job instruction training, what training they wish they were receiving, and how the situation might be improved. We define on-the-job training as both in-house and outside training. In order to meet these goals, we conducted interviews with new instruction librarians, as well as a survey of library administrators in order to gather multiple perspectives.

Literature Review

The literature discussing training for instruction librarians is abundant and ranges from the presence or absence of training in Library and Information Science (LIS) programs to professional development programs and topics in between. This discussion dates back over 30 years. While much has changed, such as the number of graduate schools offering classes on instruction, much remains the same. Petrowski and Wilson (1991) write about the need for in-house training and propose a solution to the lack of training for bibliographic instruction, including a checklist for developing a training program. More than ten years later in 2003, Hook, Bracke, Greenfield and Mills discuss the need for instruction training at the University of Arizona libraries and describe the specific modules developed to provide adequate training. This article demonstrates that there were not great improvements in training for instruction librarians during those ten years but that some libraries recognized this need and worked toward progress.

Wilkinson and Lewis (2006) discuss the need for comprehensive training in academic libraries and the important role that library administrators play in this effort, inspiring further investigation into the perspectives of library administrators. Walter (2006) frames the discussion of the development of librarians as teachers in the overall picture of instructional improvements in higher education. Looking at the literature, it is clear that the need for instruction training is not new. Although the problem has been much discussed, few solutions have been identified in the literature. Through interviews with new instruction librarians and a survey of library administrators, we have discovered fresh perspectives and solutions to this issue.

Instruction Librarian Interviews

Previous Research

In the fall of 2008, we administered a survey for new instruction librarians (graduates from 2003 to 2008) and collected more than 300 responses. This survey was distributed via the Information Literacy Instruction (ILI) and New Librarian (NEW-LIB) listservs. We focused on the availability of instruction training in graduate programs and also began investigating what kind of on-the-job training new instruction librarians received once in their first professional positions. As the literature would suggest, the respondents agreed that LIS programs were not adequately preparing librarians to teach. The respondents advocated raising awareness of the need for training and felt that quality courses in instruction should be offered regularly in graduate programs. Although the focus of this survey was training in graduate school, it included several questions about on-the-job training. The respondents expressed dissatisfaction with instruction training once in their first professional positions and identified specific improvements that could be made. New instruction librarians appreciated evaluation and feedback as a means to improve teaching and increase confidence. In addition to in-house training, asynchronous and inexpensive online training was a priority for new librarians. Results of this survey were illuminating and begged further investigation. We wanted to explore further the ways in which these librarians continued to develop once in professional positions.

Method

One year later, in the fall of 2009, we randomly selected 52 of the original respondents and asked them to participate in a follow-up interview regarding the issues that surfaced. After reviewing the original data, we developed 10 questions that expanded upon previous responses and addressed new topics as well (Appendix A). Over the course of a month, we conducted 25 interviews via email. The results were gathered in interview, not survey, format. Respondents answered open-ended questions and were not prompted with answer choices. Answers varied greatly, as these librarians interpreted questions in different ways.

All participants had been in the profession for less than five years. We were interested not only in expanding upon what we had learned from the first survey but also in discovering if these librarians had experienced any changes in their instruction training situations since the last time we were in contact.

Satisfaction with Training

In the initial interviews in 2008, this group of librarians expressed dissatisfaction with the availability and quality of on-the-job training. Not much had changed in the intervening period. Of those interviewed, 60% said there had been no changes in training over the past year, and 24% felt they had received “very little” training. These librarians felt that seeking training is their responsibility, although a few received institutional financial support for doing so. One in five described some changes in instruction training over the last year. These changes were often related to larger changes; for example, the hiring of new librarians or the addition of a for-credit information literacy course to the curriculum. One respondent described spending a semester team-teaching with an inexperienced new hire and reported a positive experience for both librarians.

Not surprisingly, almost half the librarians reported that their satisfaction level with on-the-job training had not changed over the past year, although 20% were somewhat more satisfied. These more satisfied librarians tended to be those who reported changes in training. Many of the respondents also indicated that they wanted more training than they currently received. Fourteen out of the 25 interviewees felt instruction training is very important. However, a significant minority said training had become less important to them as they gained experience in the classroom. The following are selected responses to the questions regarding satisfaction with training:

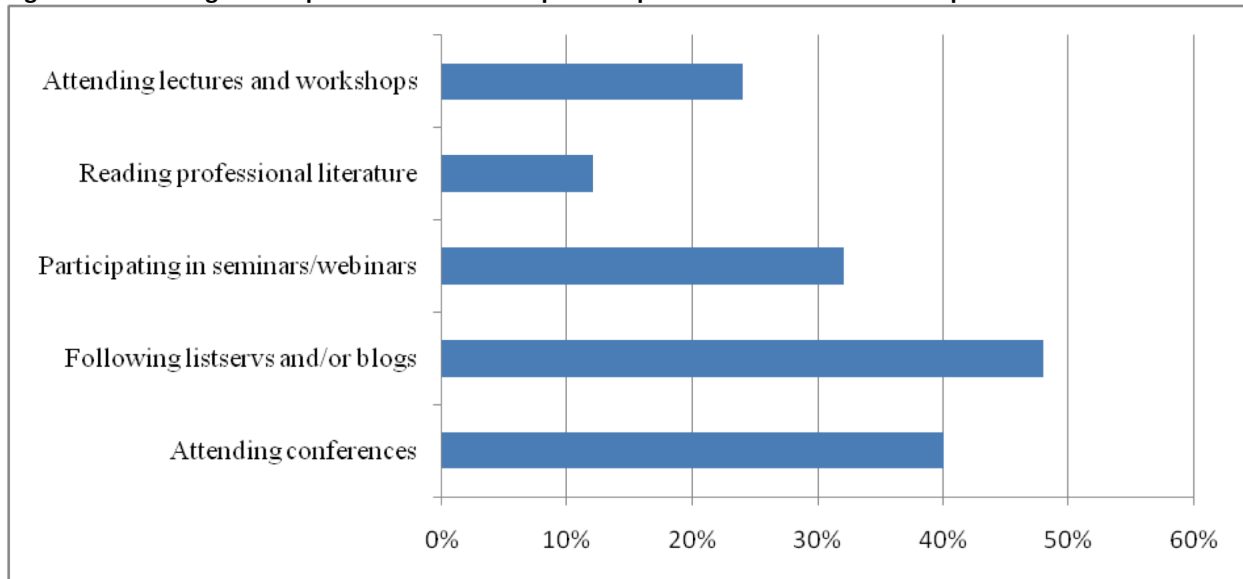
- “Even though I still want to work on my instruction skills and find new and better ways to do instruction, the informal feedback from instructors has increased my confidence so that needing formal feedback on my instruction skills is still highly valued but not as urgently needed as when I first started.”
- “It's essential to keep learning, growing, and trying new things in order to keep from stagnating.”

Training Activities

The previous survey showed that instruction librarians consider feedback to be extremely valuable as they work to improve teaching skills. The respondents received feedback from faculty, students, and colleagues, but 30% said they got very little formal feedback. Some gave students ‘one-minute’ papers at the end of class to garner a sense of the impact of their instruction work, but they also questioned the effectiveness of this technique. Others wished that colleagues were more open to participating in observation and giving feedback.

Regarding additional professional development and instruction training activities, 40% attended a conference in the last year, most often the American Library Association (ALA) and Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) conferences. Other than that, respondents also trained by reading library instruction-related listservs and blogs. We should note that this data was affected by the distribution of the original survey on the Information Literacy Instruction (ILI) and New Librarian (NEWLIB) listservs. Webinars and in-person seminars were also popular with a third of the respondent group. Several librarians had attended Immersion, ACRL's intensive information literacy institute, with mixed results. In addition, librarians took advantage of the centers for teaching and learning that can be found on most campuses. By attending lectures and workshops along with faculty members from different departments, they developed teaching and classroom management skills.

Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents who Participate in Specified Professional Development Activities



The following are selected responses to the questions regarding training activities:

- “The only instruction training that I've had this year is following listservs and viewing some of the links and sources recommended. Not surprisingly professional development was cut to save money.”
- “I'm still going to conferences like ALA Annual and Midwinter...When I go to conferences, though, I do seek out sessions on instruction more than any other topic.”
- “I conducted an informal 'summer salon' for discussing instruction last summer, which I think was helpful.”

Confidence

Despite the marked lack of on-the-job training, these librarians reported high levels of confidence: 20% stated that they were ‘confident’ or ‘very confident’ and 44% were ‘somewhat confident.’ Eleven out of the 25 claimed increased levels of confidence over the past year, often citing positive feedback from faculty, colleagues, and students as the reason.

When asked with which aspect of instruction they were the most confident, the answers varied with little repetition. However, 20% felt most confident in developing lesson plans and teaching materials. Another 20% felt most comfortable with the content they taught. Two answers received three mentions apiece: creating assignments and activities and engaging students. This concept of engaging students, though, was also the most common answer to the next question: “With which aspect are you the least confident?” Twenty-four percent of the respondents found developing and maintaining student interest and involvement to be difficult. Public

speaking also appeared both places, with two librarians feeling most confident and three feeling least confident in this aspect.

Figure 2. Confidence of New Instruction Librarians

Top five aspects of instruction with which the respondents were MOST confident:	Top five aspects of instruction with which the respondents were LEAST confident:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lesson content 2. Developing lesson plans and teaching materials 3. Creating assignments and activities 4. Engaging students 5. Public speaking 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Keeping student interest 2. Classroom management 3. Public speaking 4. Assessing instruction 5. Unfamiliar subject matter

The following are selected responses to the questions regarding confidence with instruction:

- “My presentation skills are by far what help me 'survive and thrive' as I draw upon my skills as a former teacher and storyteller to create realistic research scenarios with typical problems researchers encounter.”
- “If most [students] are hostile or bored, I usually blame myself for not being able to make the instruction session interesting or relevant.”
- “I am most confident with my ability to set relevant learning goals for a session and to create and lead activities which teach students the skills required to meet these goals.”

Advice from the Instruction Librarians

The respondents tended to be particularly eloquent when it came to giving advice. Nine of the 25 recommend observation and peer evaluation, and several of these mentioned watching faculty from outside the library teach if possible. Five librarians asserted the importance of practice, and several encouraged team-teaching as a way to begin this process. In addition, 20% suggested that new librarians find a mentor for support and feedback. Almost three years ago, this research was inspired by a perceived lack of availability of instruction courses in MLS programs. Even now, 32% of the respondents urged graduate students to take instruction coursework. Some enthusiastically described a course they had taken; some lamented the fact that these classes were not available to them. They all agreed, however, that such courses are valuable. The following quotes are selected from the instruction librarians’ advice:

- “I am really glad I did take a course in instructional strategies while completing my MLIS [Master of Library and Information Science]. I think a course like that should be mandatory for all library students since most librarians have some sort of instructional duties.”
- “I think a trusting mentoring relationship between and instruction librarian with at least two years' experience and a new instruction librarian would be an ideal way to allow for structured training, both formal and informal, in a way that is non-threatening and supportive.”

Survey of Library Administrators

Method

In order to gain a different perspective on on-the-job training for new instruction librarians, we gathered information from library administrators. As supervisors, these administrators are often the ones who decide which training is available to new librarians. We requested participation via several listservs, asking administrators to complete an 11-question survey (Appendix B). Through this survey 112 administrators shared what they see as the greatest needs for new instruction librarians, the types of training they provide or advocate, and anticipated developments and challenges in library instruction. Because we surveyed the administrators with many of the same questions we asked new librarians in the initial survey, the data from these two surveys are interesting to compare. While some perspectives of new librarians and administrators matched closely, others revealed a vast disconnect in perspectives between these two groups.

Availability of Training

In the first part of the survey, administrators answered specific questions describing training at their institutions. Eighty-six percent of respondents answered “yes” to the question “Do you (or your library) provide in-house training for new instruction librarians?” The next question revealed that the most common in-house training provided was “observing other librarians provide library instruction,” which 94% of respondents consider a training activity. “Receiving feedback from colleagues/other faculty” received the second highest response at 67%. Some common responses from administrators in the “other” category for this question consisted of team-teaching, informal discussion, and providing outlines and standardized curriculum for new librarians. In the 2008 survey of new librarians, 57% said that they have not received instruction training on-the-job, a much larger percentage than the 14% reported by library administrators.

Barriers to Training

Administrators reported time and budget as being the greatest barriers for providing adequate training for new instruction librarians, and one respondent commented that these two barriers are often one and the same. If there were no time or budget restraints, administrators reported

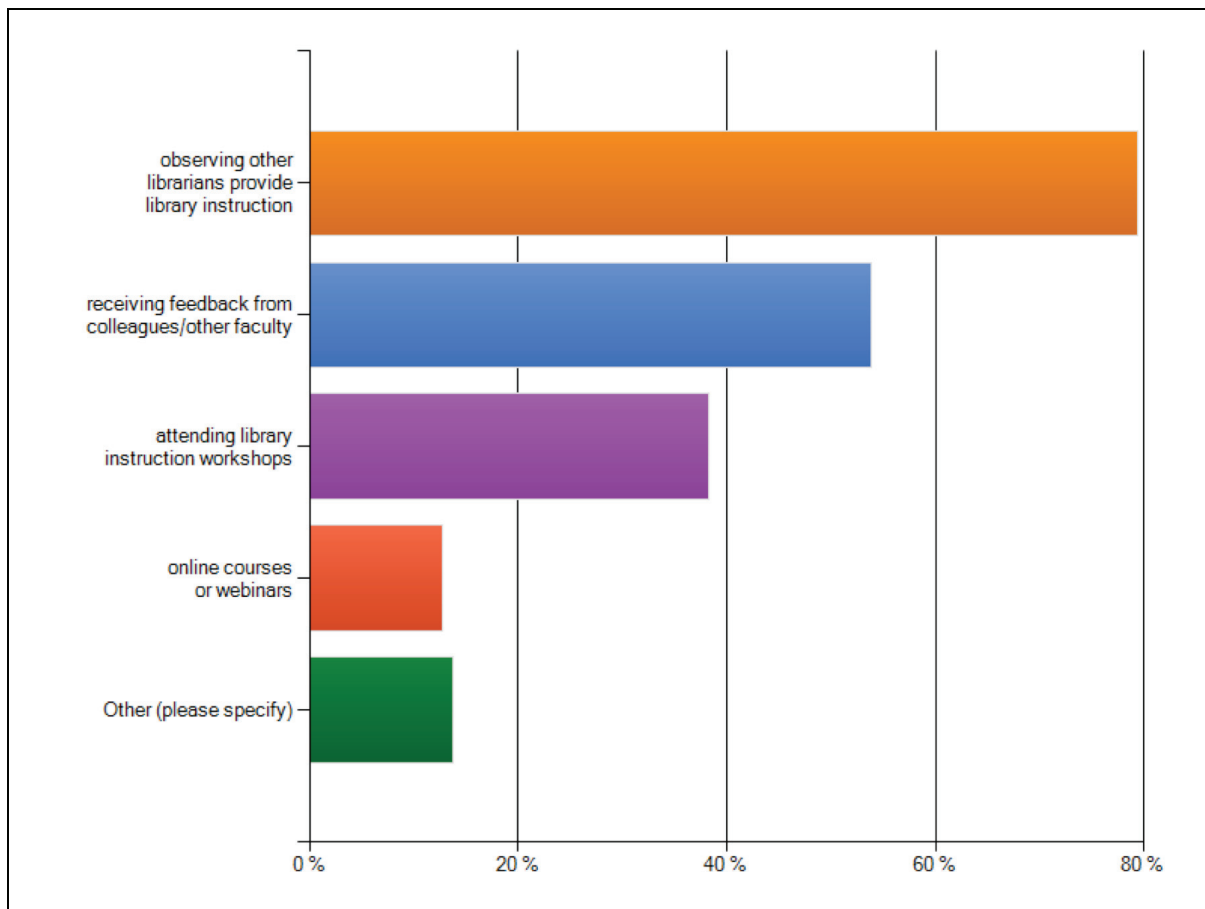
that they would provide more training. In fact, 28% of the instruction librarians interviewed reported that professional development funds had been cut at their institutions.

The top choice for ideal training activities was “attending workshops or conferences,” which 91% of administrators would support. Among the remaining choices were in-house workshops, receiving feedback from colleagues/other faculty, observing other librarians provide library instruction, reading library instruction literature, and online courses and webinars. None were supported by less than 70 percent of administrators. Many of these activities match those reported by the librarians in the survey and interviews. In the “other” category administrators mentioned the need for librarians to attend educational and instructional design training separate from library training and advocated specific workshops such as ACRL’s Immersion.

Training Activities

When describing on-the-job training, 92% of library administrators favored “attending workshops or conferences.” In addition, “online courses or webinars” and “reading library instruction literature” were supported by more than 80%. Other kinds of training mentioned were listservs and blogs, teaching training on campus, and mentoring programs.

Figure 3. What have you found to be the most successful training activities for new instruction librarians?



Administrators found that “observing other librarians provide library instruction” and “receiving feedback from colleagues/other faculty” were the two most successful training activities. Practice, team-teaching and co-teaching were also mentioned as effective training activities. In the previous survey new librarians were asked which training activities had been most helpful in preparing them for library instruction, and they ranked the choices in the same order, with similar percentages. It is worth noting that the highest-ranked activity, “Observing other librarians provide library instruction,” is relatively inexpensive and requires little staff.

Perspectives on New Librarians

We also asked administrators several questions about new librarians they hire. When asked, “Among new librarians that you hire, what do you find is the biggest area needing improvement?” 47% of administrators responded with “preparing a lesson.” “Speaking in front of a group” and “familiarity with concepts and lesson content” were ranked at 34% and 37% respectively. Many administrators also mentioned classroom time management, understanding students and determining student needs, and training in pedagogy. In the initial 2008 survey, new instruction librarians identified “speaking in front of a group” as the area where they were least confident, and “familiarity with concepts and lesson content” as the area where they were most confident.

Perspectives on Graduate Programs

Eighty-six percent of library administrators reported that they did not think graduate programs adequately prepared new librarians to teach. This response is not unexpected, as the previous survey revealed that new librarians felt the same way. Administrators provided more insight into this question, saying librarians didn’t lack an understanding of library concepts but rather teaching and learning concepts. Many mentioned the need for education in pedagogy and teaching fundamentals, and several indicated that LIS faculty lack experience since most are not practicing in the field. Other administrators argued that this question cannot be answered about all programs because some are making significant progress. Some pointed out that employers and administrators should not expect new instruction librarians to be seasoned teachers because this is a skill that is developed over time, even for those who do receive adequate training.

Anticipating Challenges

Looking forward to the future of instruction librarians, administrators were asked what they anticipate as being the greatest challenge for the next generation of librarians. Responses varied greatly, ranging from maintaining institutional support to staying abreast of new technology.

While viewpoints varied, overall administrators recognized the need for training new instruction librarians, and they were supportive of a variety of training activities. Owing to a perceived lack of training in graduate school, most were active in training for new librarians,

whether by in-house or outside means. The following quotes are selected directly from administrators' response to the question of why training matters:

- "Keeping libraries relevant as teaching and learning institutions"
- "Learning how to teach in the online environment"
- "Inadequate education and preparation"
- "The greatest challenge is how to truly integrate information literacy throughout the curriculum"

Sharing different perspectives developed through years of experience, these administrators provided insight to the discussion of on-the-job training for new instruction librarians.

Conclusion

Considering the data from the instruction librarian interviews and administrator surveys together, we can see where these two groups are in agreement and where they differ. It is clear that these two groups perceive the training situation in very different ways. As previously noted, 86% of administrators indicated that they do provide in house instruction training for new librarians, but almost a quarter of the interviewed librarians said that they receive no training. We suspect this disconnect is related to how these groups define training. The new librarians see peer observation as important but too informal, and the administrators see this as a vital part of instruction training. New librarians and administrators support many of the same professional development activities; both groups are highly in favor of attending workshops or conferences and receiving feedback. Sometimes librarians and administrators agreed on less pleasant topics: the instruction librarians lamented decreased professional development funds, while the administrators identified budget concerns as the greatest barrier to providing training.

These new instruction librarians are indeed making an effort to improve teaching skills, but the research suggests they would appreciate a more structured environment in which to develop as teachers. While the literature and research both demonstrate a growing commitment to instruction training, they agree that there is much room for improvement. Improved communication between librarians and administrators regarding training and expectations would likely help close this gap. In addition, no- or low-cost development opportunities should be sought out and publicized. Although the focus of this study was not to evaluate how LIS programs prepare instruction librarians, both groups mentioned the lack of a foundation provided in graduate school. Library school programs need to address this issue and ensure that the appropriate courses are offered regularly.

Future research should look more closely at these training activities and determine how effective and efficient they truly are. Librarians and administrators agree that observation and

feedback are crucial. Are they, in fact, worthwhile training activities? How and why do they help librarians develop teaching skills? When time and money are so limited, should we not make sure that the training and professional development activities in which librarians do participate make the most of both?

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Appendix A

Instruction Librarian Research Questions

1. In our previous survey we discovered that new instruction librarians highly value feedback on their teaching - do you agree or disagree and why? Explain the feedback that you receive and/or give.
2. Over the last year, have you noticed any changes in the way that instruction training on the job is provided at your institution? Please explain.
3. In our last survey, you described the additional training activities that you pursued on your own, e.g. following listservs, attending workshops. Describe the additional training activities in which you have participated this year. Are these typical for you, or have you made changes?
4. Has your satisfaction with on-the-job instruction training changed within the past year?
5. How important is on-the-job instruction training to you? Has this changed over the last year?
6. How confident do you feel in your instruction abilities? How has this changed in the past year and to what do you attribute these changes?
7. With which aspect do you feel most confident?
8. With which do you feel least confident?
9. Do you have any recommendations for ways that on the job training for new instruction librarians could be improved? Advice for these new librarians?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your instruction training experiences?

Appendix B

Library Administrator Survey Questions

1. Do you (or your library) provide in-house training for new instruction librarians?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

2. If yes, what kind of in-house training does your library or department provide for new instruction librarians?
 - a. observing other librarians provide library instruction
 - b. receiving feedback from colleagues/other faculty
 - c. in-house workshops
 - d. other

3. What kind of training do you provide, advocate, or support besides in-house?
 - a. attending workshops or conferences
 - b. online courses or webinars
 - c. reading library instruction literature
 - d. other

4. Among new instruction librarians that you hire, what do you find is the biggest area needing improvement?
 - a. speaking in front of a group
 - b. preparing a lesson
 - c. familiarity with concepts and lesson content
 - d. other

5. If you had no time/budget constraints, what training would you provide or support for new instruction librarians?
 - a. attending workshops or conferences
 - b. online courses or webinars
 - c. reading library instruction literature
 - a. observing other librarians provide library instruction
 - b. receiving feedback from colleagues/other faculty
 - c. in-house workshops
 - e. other

6. What do you see as the greatest barriers for providing adequate training for new instruction librarians?
 - a. time
 - b. budget
 - c. institutional support
 - d. willingness of new librarians to participate

e. other

7. What have you found to be the most successful training activities for new instruction librarians?

- a. observing other librarians provide library instruction
- b. receiving feedback from colleagues/other faculty
- c. attending library instruction workshops
- d. online courses or webinars
- e. other

8. Do you think that graduate programs adequately prepare new librarians to teach?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Why or why not?

9. What do you anticipate as being the greatest challenge for the next generation of instruction librarians?

10. Is there anything else that you would like to say on this topic?