

The Reference Librarian as Scholar
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In the ten minutes or so that I have, I will assume a “yes” answer to the question of whether the reference librarian is or should be a scholar and focus on two particular aspects of the role and responsibilities of the scholar.

My perspective on the role of the reference librarian as scholar is based on my work as an academic library administrator, reference and public services librarian, LIS faculty member, and researcher.

Librarians as users of and contributors to the literature

With regard to the role of users of the literature, I refer to use of the knowledge base of the discipline (of library and information science or the profession (librarianship or information services).

In a general sense, the scholar understands the value and importance of the scholarship. The knowledge base of a discipline or profession reflects practice, informs professional practice, if that research and discussion are relevant, timely, and reflective of the needs of those in organizations, and informs the scholarly discussion. That scholarly and professional discussion includes the publication of books and conference proceedings, as well as the ephemeral subset of conference presentations. However, the role of the journal literature represents a unique and important part of the scholarly discussion in the field, based on a range of factors associated with the review process, indexing and accessibility, immediacy, and breadth and depth of content coverage.

Thus, the reference librarian, as scholar, is a consumer of the literature and makes decisions that are informed by the research and scholarship (both in the discipline and profession and beyond, in areas such as the management literature, with regard to the management of reference services, communication literature, in terms of our roles related to instruction, the reference interaction, conflict resolution and negotiation, and adult learning theory). I will say more about the issue of making decisions and not dismissing the literature, including research and theory, as irrelevant. In relation to the area of management of reference services, for example, there has been increased emphasis on the importance of theory in supporting managerial decision making overall, including providing managers with well-articulated theories, supported by research and presented in the literature, indicating the patterns in data and the context in which the specific theory is likely to be relevant (Christensen and Raynor, 2003, pp. 66-74).

In *The Social Life of Information*, which addresses information and information technology in the organizational context, particularly private sector organizations and

universities, Brown and Duguid address the concept of “meaning and sensemaking” in translating broad ideas, including theory, into process that is relevant for employees to enhance their level of understanding and to contribute more effectively to overall organizational performance.

A similar focus on the importance of theory for managers and information services is evidenced by similar discussions in journals, such as *Library Administration and Management*, which is very much practice-oriented.

Beverly Lynch has written about the importance of theory and the limited application of theory in library management. She indicates that “while new management theories have developed, not much change seems to have occurred in the practice of management of libraries” (Lynch, 2004, p. 31). There is concern about the diffusion of theory into the literature of library and information science and into the arena of practice and the difficulty associated with making discussions of theory relevant to the organizational circumstances of librarians.

With regard to the issue of the use of and contributions to the journal literature, research conducted by Powell, Baker and Mika (2002, pp. 55-56), indicates that librarians in a range of settings read the research literature on a regular basis, with particularly high percentages reading specific journals, such as *College & Research Libraries*, *Information Outlook*, and *Information Technology in Libraries*. However, a number of the respondents surveyed in the research study indicated that they did not “regularly read any of the research-based articles in the journals” for a number of reasons, including the fact that “they did not consider research-based articles to be relevant to their jobs.... [Others] stated that they preferred to read essay or opinion pieces.... [or] that they did not have enough expertise in research methods” (p. 57). So, there is evidence that librarians are not active consumers of the research literature.

The scholar also has the responsibility of contributing to the knowledge base of the discipline or profession. In this regard, I refer to contributing data, research, and analysis to the scholarly and professional discussion (and, not simply the anecdotal or the single organizational perspective, unless it is described in terms of its relevance to other organizations and circumstances).

The research indicates that the majority of academic librarians have faculty status or similar academic status in their institutions (Cronin, 2001, p. 144; Weaver-Meyers, 2002, p. 26), nearly all of which require activities such as research, publications, presentations at professional and scholarly conferences, as well as service to the profession, the institution, and to society at large (Black & Leysen, 1994, p. 231; Park & Riggs, 1993, p. 72). It is certainly the case that there are distinctions based on the type of academic institution, with the most rigorous requirements associated with promotion and tenure for librarians in research universities, as compared with comprehensive universities, liberal arts and community colleges (Black & Leysen, 1994, p. 231; Park & Riggs, 1993, p. 72). However, my remarks relate to the reference librarian in the academic setting, in general, not only the reference librarian with faculty status and rank.

In the research conducted by Powell, Baker and Mika, the researchers also found that while more than half of the respondents never or seldom conducted research related to their positions and two-thirds never or seldom conducted research related to the profession, more than 80% of those who conducted research “had not published the results of their research” (pp. 58-59). It appears that study participants did not conduct research because of the limited levels of “support for conducting research” and the fact that many believe that although the MLIS degree prepared them to be consumers of research, it did not prepare them to do research on their own (pp. 60-61).

In research related to publication in high impact, highly cited journals, Jim Williams and I found that, by far, the majority of the authors (54.6%) are employed in research or doctoral university libraries. Only 12.6% are employed in comprehensive universities, with 0.8% in liberal arts colleges and 2.5% in community college libraries, and 0.8% in separate professional schools. (Williams and Winston, 2003) In spite of the fact that there are only 56 ALA-accredited LIS programs in the US and Canada, a high percentage of the articles has been authored or co-authored by LIS faculty.

The research related to the importance of those in organizations using and contributing to the literature is particularly relevant to reference librarians, based on their roles as faculty colleagues, by whatever title, their roles as partners in the academic enterprise, working with teaching faculty in achieving the three components of the mission of higher education institutions, and their roles in providing research assistance and instruction as a part of the development of not only the research process for students and others, but also the development of analytical skills, for example, that have been identified by employers as so critical.

Ultimately, the literature documents and informs practice. Practitioners have indicated concerns about the relevance of the published literature and their apprehension about being consumers of that literature. Reference librarians, in particular, as scholars, should see themselves as both contributors to the knowledge base and users of the knowledge base, to support informed decision making, acknowledging the role of MLIS programs in better preparing them to do so.

References

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