Canadian Academic Librarians as Online Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in Canada has brought about some major changes for colleges and universities. These include changes in policies for student health and safety, grading policies, new challenges for international students, and changes in the mode of learning to online and hybrid, to name just a few. Although Covid-19 is impacting how courses are delivered, many higher education institutions were already on a clear trajectory to offer more online learning. One public report in 2018 found that 80% of colleges and 90% of Canadian universities offered distance education, and 98% of those institutions offered online courses. These decisions to offer increased online learning courses are having an impact on higher education personnel, including changes to library services, spaces and roles. Academic librarians are facing a number of transitions – not the least of which are new pedagogies for online and open learning.

There is a scarcity of information about the skills and competencies required of academic librarians for these changing roles. The research presented here employs an online survey of academic librarians' perceptions to capture the current realities of Canadian academic librarians' roles and their accounts of their skills and competencies with respect to online learning. An extensive literature review indicates that *librarian as teacher* is an emergent role that intersects with technology. The survey findings reveal that academic librarians work across a wide range of library ecologies and most of these librarians acquire significant technological and pedagogical competencies while in the role. The findings of this study have direct implications for the curriculum of preparatory programs for academic librarians.

Keywords: online learning; academic librarians; technology; blended librarian; instructional design; online pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on students in Canadian colleges and universities. According to *University Affairs*, there are a myriad of issues facing university students for the Fall of 2020 [1]. These include concerns about grading because some universities in Spring, 2020 moved to a mixed grading model that allowed students to select pass/fail as an option. Many but not all Canadian universities have moved classes online or hybrid for Fall, 2020. There are the usual pandemic-related health risks for students in their classes, on campus and in residences. At least one university has requested that students sign a legal waiver releasing the university from responsibility if they contract the Covid-19 virus. Universities are enacting policies for the wearing of masks and other efforts to provide the safest possible environment for the upcoming academic year [1]. In the midst of this, Statistics Canada has published a study showing that students in today's university cohorts will likely experience reduced wages and unemployment in the years past graduation [2], which is adding to pressure on students. The shift of courses to the online mode appears to be just one of a growing list of pivots required in tertiary education in Canada in 2020 as higher education responds to new contexts.

While the events of the pandemic are unsettling, the reality is that the increasing shift to online learning at universities is not a new phenomenon. A 2018 public report by the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association [3] details that most universities and colleges in Canada (90%) were already offering what they termed *distance learning*, and 98% of those distance offerings were online learning courses in 2016. Most of the online courses in 2016 were reportedly offered through video and 22% were print-based [3].

As more and more higher education courses become available online, there are implications for the students and their instructors, but also others in higher

education, such as academic librarians [4].[5],[6],[7]. This paper reports findings from a national survey of Canadian academic librarians who identify that they have online teaching roles in their institutions (not limited to information literacy instructional roles). The research was undertaken by a graduate student at Ontario Tech University (formerly the University of Ontario Institute of Technology). The survey was distributed through the eLearning in Libraries Collective ListServ and the Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians ListServ and provides a rich data source. The second data source was the synthesis of recent academic librarian job postings which show that employer expectations are beginning to mirror the professional realities surrounding online roles in higher education for academic librarians. Many current job postings acknowledge that teaching in tertiary institutions occurs across modalities, and that blended skills are required of the online teaching role.

The findings indicate that academic librarians have varied online roles within their institutions such as teachers, instructional designers and leaders, indicating the significance of online teaching in the profession. The findings also indicate the key technological and pedagogical skills required of these roles. Based on the findings of this study, a competency framework is proposed that reflects the present realities for Canadian academic librarians.

2. ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS AS TEACHERS

The teaching role of academic librarians continues to grow [8]. [9], [10], [11] despite librarians having less than ideal opportunities to learn *how to teach* during their professional librarian education [12], [13]. As a result, academic librarians often find themselves in teaching positions with insufficient background knowledge of pedagogy [14], [15], [16], or having to learn to teach on the job [14, [16]. This is further complicated by the proliferation of online learning models which often require academic librarians to teach in both physical and online learning environments seamlessly. They are required to understand how to use technology in the online teaching-learning process, despite a documented gap in training [12], [13] or experience in a traditional classroom environment [12].

Roles specifically related to online learning such as eLearning Librarian (York University, 2007), Digital Pedagogy Librarian (University of Michigan Libraries, 2017), and Online Instructional Design Librarian (California State University, 2017) are

emerging, but online teaching is not limited to these specialized roles. Rather, it is distributed throughout several job categories as the findings of this study suggest and require academic librarians in teaching roles to have what Bell and Shank refer to as *blended skills* that combine traditional librarian skills with technology and instructional design skills [17].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A research study was undertaken to determine how Canadian academic librarians would describe their present roles in online learning environments. The study employed mixed methods and included both a survey and a detailed analysis of job postings for academic librarians. The survey was created based on the findings from the review of the literature and job postings for current academic library positions. The survey was sent to academic librarians via email. A more detailed account of the findings is available in the master's thesis [18] which is openly accessible via UOIT's institutional repository e-Scholar. Each open-ended question was analysed separately to identify common themes or topics in the respondents' answers. The data were first extracted into individual tables and then assigned primary codes, leading to the identification of the themes reported in the findings.

In sum, 45 librarians employed at universities and colleges in Canada who identified as having some degree of online learning responsibilities in their job completed the survey. Respondents included librarians working in a range of positions with diverse titles and instructional roles. Most of the respondents were university librarians (66%) with the majority working at comprehensive universities offering undergraduate, Master's and Doctoral programs (60%). Most librarians were either from Ontario (33%) and Alberta (31.1%), with no respondents reporting from Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick or Manitoba. Experience amongst the respondents varied with more responses from early career librarians. The largest number of respondents (57%) have been working in their current position for less than five years. Fewer (24.5%) have been in their positions between six and ten years and the smallest group of respondents (13.4%) indicate that they have been in their current role for eleven years or more.

4. FINDINGS

There were a number of key findings from Canadian academic librarians' perceptions of the pedagogical knowledge and technologies used in their practice. First, academic librarians hold a broad range of

position titles across different aspects of academic librarianship from general librarians to library administrators as well as some more specialized e-learning positions. Few librarians hold positions that directly corresponded to online learning.

Academic librarians also have multiple roles associated with online learning, including as designers, creators, teachers, and leaders, while others seek ways to be involved. As *designers*, academic librarians design synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences in support of blended and online learning initiatives. While less common, some design at the program level, developing components of classes or entire e-learning courses, and some oversee the development of online tools to augment face-to-face learning. Design at the program level is often in partnership with other campus groups. As *creators*, librarians create a variety of online instructional materials, including video tutorials, learning objects, modules and online tools.

Academic librarians are also *teachers*, providing instruction to mostly undergraduate students (68.8%) and graduate students (40%), but some have a role in teaching the faculty (28.8%) and other librarians (13.3%) as well. Librarians report that they support the integration of educational technology into instruction for faculty. For their peer librarians, they provide blended and online information literacy instruction. Much of their teaching takes place through blended or online classes via one-session seminars and workshops, including synchronous instruction via video conference. In some cases, they teach blended and online for-credit courses.

Academic librarians report that they need to be able to apply these blended skills to work seamlessly across learning environments. For example, academic librarians increasingly have roles within learning management systems as embedded librarians and roles as designers of learning objects and online guides for students to access just-in-time. Some librarians have eLearning and educational technology leadership roles within their institutions, and in these roles, they drive institutional initiatives both in libraries and campus-wide.

In sum, Canadian academic librarians confirm that their roles have changed significantly as enrolment in online learning has increased in post-secondary education. Many librarians report that they are learning these key pedagogical and technological skills while on the job, confirming the findings of previous studies.

5. SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Building on the knowledge reported by Canadian academic librarians in online roles, the findings of this research suggest that there are key new competencies required of academic librarians such as utilizing both asynchronous and synchronous technologies to produce and deliver online learning content [18]. Based on the reported growth of online learning across academic librarianship, the research suggests that academic librarians develop the ability to work seamlessly across learning environments, utilizing a *blended* skillset.

These findings become perhaps even more relevant as more academic librarians, along with other teaching faculty transition, to online learning as a result of Covid-19. A proposed competency framework can fill in gaps in the current pedagogical and technological toolkit of academic librarians who are currently working in online roles or seeking opportunities to work online. It is hoped that this research helps academic library administrators identify areas for the ongoing professional development of academic librarian staff.

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