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# While we're on the subject: experiences and reflections of a medical subject librarian



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This article is one subject librarian's reflection on the first three years in post. It will focus on how library-school training prepares trainees for the subject librarian role and how ongoing on-the-job training also contributes to the skills and knowledge required. The article also describes the challenges and expectations involved in being a subject librarian.

## INTRODUCTION

I've been a medical subject librarian for three years at a large, redbrick university, and even in that short time my role has evolved a great deal. When I first began in my professional post I divided my time between classifying items, liaising with my subject school on its resource needs and developing and delivering training for students. I now add to this mix with managing projects, writing for publication, chairing a cross-departmental group in the medical school, developing and delivering training to visiting sixth-form students and supporting researchers with search strategies for systematic reviews.

My library-school training equipped me for much of my role but it has also been the on-the-job training and sharing experiences and good practice with both internal and external colleagues that have helped me to keep up with a diverse and challenging role.

**WHAT DID I LEARN IN TRAINING AND HOW WELL DID IT EQUIP ME?**

My library-school training was very typical and included a wide variety of modules, including cataloguing and classification, electronic libraries, management, information retrieval, information literacy, project management and research methods.

Some of what I learned at library school was far more relevant at the beginning of my job than it is now. This has sometimes been because of organisational changes. For example, classification is now undertaken by our dedicated metadata team but it was part of my role for the first six months/year. Other areas have developed exponentially, such as information literacy, especially as my enthusiasm to become involved has meant a development of that aspect of my role. I now chair the library service's information literacy working group (ILWG), a group which implements actions from our information literacy policy.

As part of an electronic libraries module we had training in planning lessons and presenting and this has been very valuable because training students takes up a significant part of my role. From the huge first-year intake of the medical degree (400) through to new master's students and PhD researchers working on systematic reviews, the training that I provide is very varied. Even though my professional training helped, I think library schools could do more in the way of developing trainees' teaching skills and their understanding of pedagogy. Many of my colleagues have never had any form of teacher training and have said that they would have found it very useful.

Information-retrieval training has also been important as part of the subject side since I support undergraduates in their literature searching and researchers in their systematic reviews. The project management training I received at library school has also really helped with the project aspect of the job (especially writing successful funding bids), as many service developments are usefully planned and implemented here, using project management methodologies; this is perhaps another area that could be further developed in library-school curricula.

**WHAT EXTRA TRAINING HAVE I HAD?**

Since starting my job I have received a wide variety of training, both subject-specific and generic, internal and external. I think investment in train-

ing is important for subject librarians (as well as everyone else) as it instils a culture of continued professional development.

Subject-specific training and coaching have been given at appropriate times, and in context, with my line manager and colleagues, and have been essential. Understanding how systematic reviews work, what's involved in critical appraisal of papers, the intricacies of the five-year medical degree and what kind of information first-year medical students need to know has been invaluable. Also, self-study on medical terminology and the latest medical and health news has been helpful. Learning medical acronyms and the Latin or Greek anatomical names comes in very handy when trying to impress first-year medics or helping a PhD student through advanced literature searching.

External courses have also helped to boost my subject-specific skills and knowledge, including training on specific online medical databases and attending the annual health libraries group conference.

I've also had further training in teaching skills, in the form of a two-day staff development course primarily designed for post-doc researchers new to teaching. This really helped me gain confidence in planning and delivering training and it's also been important in making it known that the library is keeping up with teaching standards across the university.

Further IT skills training has also enabled me to explore areas such as Web 2.0 and re-usable learning objects (RLOs). A group of like-minded librarians and techies meet every few months to look at ways of using new technologies in libraries. This has allowed me to gain knowledge of, and experiment with, Web 2.0 applications, which in turn has helped in developing online learning material for use by students in our virtual learning environment and also in two of the projects that I've managed since starting in post.

I also recently completed an externally accredited course on team leading. This has enabled me to develop leadership skills which I employ in my role as chair of ILWG, delegating work-loads and setting objectives for the group, based on our information literacy roadmap.

## WHAT HAS BEEN MOST CHALLENGING?

Chairing the ILWG has been challenging because the group and I have worked hard to drive the information literacy agenda forward by implementing actions and recommendations from the IL roadmap. For the ILWG much of this has been uncharted territory and so we often learn from the good practice of colleagues at other institutions. In some cases it has meant writing briefing papers for senior-level university management and collaborating with other colleagues across the university to join up the training we provide. As anyone working in a large organisation will testify, this can be time-consuming and frustrating. Even so, the group has forged strong links with individuals in other departments, which has helped us to achieve many of our objectives. Diplomacy and negotiation play a large part in much of this cross-departmental working.

The subject side has also been challenging. It has taken time to really get to grips with the diverse needs of a very large and demanding school. Undoubtedly, the most important process has been getting to know the key administrators, researchers, academics and IT staff in the school and building on those relationships. Getting to know medicine as a subject area (my first degree was in religious studies) has also been a steep learning curve for me but one which I have really enjoyed.

Collection development and management are still central to subject librarianship, at least at my institution. Over the past couple of years issues (including lack of shelf space) have meant more of a focus on the retention and disposal of stock in our libraries. Again, this means liaising closely with subject schools on their needs and knowing how different subject areas affect how you manage stock. For example, there are several clinical governance issues that I have to bear in mind with the medical stock – out-of-date pharmacology books anyone? – but colleagues who look after the biosciences courses have to retain much of the older stock because it doesn't date as quickly. Knowing the key people to contact and deploying negotiation skills have been vital in ensuring that the collection-development process, be it new journal subscriptions or disposal of old stock, is seamless and effective.

## WHAT DO I DO NOW THAT I DIDN'T EXPECT?

I've been surprised at the level of autonomy we are given in this role. Managers have been very pro-active in their support of us all undertaking projects relevant to our remit, whether this is subject-based or other key areas of work for library services (research support, e-books, information literacy and so on). I have been very lucky that in my short time in post I have managed two projects and been on the team for a third. I didn't expect this role to be so flexible as to allow this, and it has been a hugely satisfying aspect of the job, with highlights including giving a paper at a conference on a Greek island. It has also helped me to develop my project management skills and in developing online learning materials and writing for publication.

I never expected to be as involved in the subject department as I have been either. The medical school at Birmingham is undertaking a systematic review of the five-year undergraduate medical degree: the 2014 review. As part of this process an evidence subgroup was formed to gather information needed to inform the review. I was invited onto this group to undertake literature searching when appropriate. However, it soon became clear to the members that they were receiving a greater number of literature-related requests than others and so I have now become chair of the group, helping to coordinate responses to information requests.

This highlights the importance the medical school sees in the contribution that the library, and in particular the subject support, makes. It is clear that our skills as subject-based information professionals are recognised and highly valued.

## CONCLUSION

Since starting my career I've learned that there is a wide range of skills and knowledge that are employed as a subject librarian. Some are learned in library school but many others accrue on the job, including subject knowledge, diplomacy, teaching and IT skills. It's the combination of learning these skills and taking advantage of the opportunities that the role can offer that makes subject librarianship a diverse and evolving job that, in many cases, is largely what you make it.