

Affective Dimensions of Academic Librarians' Experiences During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Experiences and Lessons Learned for Information Literacy

Abstract

Purpose: This article explores the affective dimensions of academic librarians' experiences during the forced pivot to emergency remote teaching because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Through semi-structured interviews with librarians at eighteen university libraries in Ontario, Canada, the researcher prompted study participants to reflect on how their work and that of other librarians in their organization changed during the period of focus, including the main challenges and opportunities experienced for information literacy instruction.

Findings: This study finds evidence of stress and anxiety among academic librarians teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic, including lack of confidence and skills with eLearning and challenges to work-life balance challenges. At the same time, the data show strengths and successes fuelled by resilience, collaboration and a growing culture of care, which in many cases, resulted in strong expressions of pride by interviewees on what was achieved during this global health crisis.

Originality: This study is one of few studies adopting a qualitative research methodology to explore the affective dimensions of academic librarians' experience of information literacy instruction during the Covid-19 pandemic. Its implications are instructive for future pedagogical approaches and workplace culture among information literacy teams, including communication, collaboration, flexibility, and leadership support.

Keywords

Information Literacy, Library Instruction, Affective Labour, Covid-19, Online Education, Qualitative.

Introduction

With the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, educators, including academic librarians, were forced to adopt new teaching platforms and technologies in tight timelines, while coming to grips with the fundamentals of online teaching practices to deliver instruction to remote students. The author undertook a qualitative study, involving semi-structured interviews, to explore and examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on information literacy (IL) instruction in Canadian academic libraries, with a special focus on institutions in the Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL).¹ Her first published article (Bury, 2022), drawing on this study data, focuses on the evolution of eLearning trends, including a huge shift to online IL instruction in tight timeframes. These trends are explored in both curricular and

¹ OCUL is a consortium of university libraries in Ontario that strives to build research supports and learning environments for Ontario's university population. See more at <https://ocul.on.ca>

co-curricular contexts, including modes of instruction delivery and changes in teaching practices. This article, by contrast, focuses specifically on how the data from this study shine a light on the affective dimensions resulting from this massive disruption. The challenges of surviving change experienced by academic librarians in the domain of IL programming are investigated, including difficult emotional situations permeated by stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and lack of confidence. The study results also reveal the enduring resilience, creativity and strength of spirit commonly demonstrated by study participants: not only did these librarians often meet expectations, they sometimes exceeded them. This study shows that, above all, stronger collaboration, combined with a heightened culture of care, played a central role in the transition to teaching IL online. This article concludes by exploring key lasting implications for the future of IL work.

Literature Review

For many teachers in higher education the sudden transition to teaching online necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic meant a large, challenging, and often uncomfortable change. This is verified in research studies on the affective aspects of the university faculty teaching experience, where stress, decreased well-being and work-life balance challenges are often cited (Casacchia *et al.*, 2021; Schwab *et al.*, 2022; Watermeyer *et al.*, 2021). Such studies highlight various factors including lack of confidence or competence with teaching online, difficulties engaging or relating with students online, and a growing pastoral care role to ease mounting student anxiety.

Research studies in academic libraries uncover similar findings. Shin *et al.* (2022) conducted a survey of academic librarians in the United States in April and May 2021, finding that one-third of respondents stated that they were unfamiliar with online instruction best practices, while 20% said they were experiencing technology challenges. A study by Reed *et al.* (2022) on changes experienced in online librarianship roles in U.S. academic libraries after March 2020, including teaching responsibilities, found that one third of survey respondents did not feel prepared to engage in online librarianship with lack of training, experience and technology issues cited as factors. Survey research by Goosney (2024) of Canadian academic librarians provides data on participants' felt confidence, finding that pre-pandemic over half (53%) of respondents reported having felt a general lack of confidence, with 34% stating they were "somewhat confident" and only 13% stating they were "very confident." When asked to reflect on current states of confidence at the time of survey execution in late 2021 and early 2022, it is notable that confidence had grown, with 93% of respondents stating that they felt somewhat or very confident, and only 7% indicating low levels of confidence.

Shin *et al.* (2022), as well as Ibacache *et al.* (2022) found that academic librarians in the United States referred to challenges with student engagement when teaching online, as well as workload and work-life balance challenges. Todorinova's survey research (2021) also found respondents in the United States commonly referred to the challenge of addressing work-life balance with mentions of exhaustion, Zoom fatigue and burnout. Reed *et al.* (2022) found that online instruction librarians referred to heightened stress levels, particularly due to additional workload caused by loss of colleagues through attrition or even death. In survey research conducted with New Jersey academic librarians in fall 2020 (Salvesen and Berg, 2021) and then again in fall 2021 (Berg *et al.*, 2022), including those engaged in IL instruction, findings indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic caused stress, anxiety, overwhelm, fear, frustration and increased work-life balance challenges, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, but even continuing for many in to fall 2021.

A survey of Canadian academic librarians conducted by Eva (2021) which explores IL instruction trends in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, finds that survey comments highlight the exhaustion faced by both faculty and librarians. McLay Paterson and Eva (2022a, 2022b), in research focused on Canadian academic libraries, found that the study participants they interviewed commonly spoke about how the boundaries between work-life and home-life were eroded, as well as the load of additional caregiver or parenting roles, in addition to expansive work roles.

Goosney's study (2024) asked Canadian academic librarians to rate a range of personal and environmental factors affecting their instructional practice during the pandemic, all with associated affective dimensions. She found that the most universally difficult factor was screen fatigue with 77% reporting that they found this extremely or somewhat challenging. Further, 52% of her respondents identified that social or professional isolation was a challenge, with 45% indicating that family commitments including caring responsibilities were challenging. The isolation experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic was aggravated by fewer opportunities for spontaneous interaction with colleagues, with no scope for watercooler conversations and chance encounters (Berg *et al.*, 2022; McLay Paterson and Eva, 2022b; Salvesen and Berg, 2021; Todorinova, 2021).

How did ways of working together and coping change, if at all, to help overcome the challenges and emotional issues that educators faced in higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic? The literature does identify both strengthened collegial collaboration and a culture of care as being important, including enhanced team environments, where everyone being in the same boat led to buoying one another and pulling together to survive.

In terms of the university faculty teaching experience, McQuirter (2020) reflects on her experience teaching at a Canadian university and emphasizes the strong success of transitioning relative to pre-Covid times when attempts at educational innovation were far less successful. In addition to the role of strong institutional support for new teaching technologies, combined with technical support, she identifies collegial sharing and collaboration as key to navigating this change. Similarly, Watermeyer *et al.* (2021) highlight heightened collegiality among faculty at the UK universities they studied, as colleagues pulled together to transition to online teaching, in some cases with the result of mending gaps in previously fractured departments.

In the academic library world, McLay Paterson and Eva (2022b) found evidence of heightened collegiality and sharing, especially among smaller teams of Canadian academic librarians, who were sometimes a subject of their study, usually in quite informal ways. Both McLay Paterson and Eva's (2022b) and Todorinova's (2021) studies establish the role intentionality played in setting up virtual meeting and sharing spaces, sometimes just for socialization and connection purposes, using tools such as Zoom, Slack and Microsoft Teams. In a similar vein, Goosney (2024) found that informal peer support played a key role for 74% of her respondents in preparing and bolstering them to teach online during the pandemic, while organized collaborative supports such as peer mentoring and team-based instruction were identified by only 21% of respondents.

In addition to collaboration and collegial sharing, several studies also identify a culture of care as helping instructional librarians deal with high learning curves, new workload demands, and work life balance challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. McLay Paterson and Eva (2022b) emphasize that "(t)eamwork was often mentioned along with an accompanying appreciation for caring work relationships" (p.11).

What shape did this take? Firstly, there is some evidence that library leaders afforded librarians more flexibility in how they organized their work, including those with IL in their duties. McLay Paterson and Eva (2022b) found that several of their interviewees had parenting responsibilities that were supported by enabling them to keep more unconventional hours until childcare services resumed. Hudson-Vitale and Waltz (2020) identify the central role that caring for each other needed to play in academic libraries during the Covid-19 pandemic, including attention to the physical, emotional, spiritual and mental well-being of employees and they share strategies for how this might be achieved, especially by library leaders. Martyniuk *et al.* (2021) identify how communities of practice played a role during the Covid-19 pandemic to enable new library employees to share, collaborate, seek advice and support one another.

Another facet of this growing culture of care surfaced in classroom environments. Pedagogies of care first emerged as elements of feminist pedagogy especially with Noddings (1984) but also within some central tenets of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973) and more recently the fields of relational pedagogy (Gravett *et al.*, 2024), trauma-informed pedagogy (Thompson and Carello, 2022) and culturally-relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Pedagogies of care garnered more attention and adoption by university faculty during the Covid-19 pandemic (Hess *et al.*, 2022; Gelles *et al.*, 2020; Goin Kono and Taylor, 2021). In academic libraries, there is a small body of literature (including Founds, 2024; Greer, 2023; Nelsen *et al.*, 2022; White, 2022), that document successful adoption of this pedagogical approach, spurred on by the pandemic, with most of them taking the form of case studies.

Methodology

The methodology is very similar to the aforementioned related article (Bury, 2022). This article explores distinct themes from the same data set.

The author employed an exploratory, qualitative approach, adopting grounded research methodology as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008). While a considerable number of studies exist on the theme of focus in this study, the predominant approach is one of case studies or research using survey methods, with a noted lack of studies adopting a qualitative approach on this theme. The methodology underpinning this study was deemed fitting because of the goal of exploring interviewees' experiences and perceptions regarding affective dimensions of their experiences with IL instruction and practice during Covid-19. The focus is the period from the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 through the following two academic years, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022.

Participants and Recruitment

This study focused on recruiting interviewees from member institutions of the Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL) by contacting designated leads and coordinators or main contacts for IL. The author chose to focus on these libraries as they are all at Ontario universities. Given in Canada, educational and health policy is regulated at the provincial level, all these schools needed to align with a common set of government mandates with respect to Covid-19, which the researcher believes adds cohesion in terms of a significant aspect of the external environment affecting these libraries at the time. In addition, this was identified as a representative sample, given that the author's review of relevant library websites, combined with interview data, establishes that IL programming is offered across a wide range of program levels (undergraduate and graduate levels) with class sizes ranging from very small ones (such as graduate seminars) to very large (undergraduate classes with several hundred

students). There is a large range of population sizes within these institutions, i.e., a spectrum that applies in terms of student enrolment or FTE as statistics available on OCUL's website illustrate.²

The researcher used the online staff directories of the twenty-one OCUL institutions to identify individuals matching the role most fitting to the purposes of this study. In some cases directory information was unclear and it was necessary to make contact with these schools to verify the best individual to speak with. By December 2022 the researcher had a list of contacts for all schools and she emailed to invite them to participate starting January 2023.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview approach was taken, in line with grounded theory methodology, allowing for flexibility to draw out interview participants. The interview guide (see Appendix) includes five general background questions to obtain important context about interviewees' job duties, length of experience, and the way in which their role fitted in to the broader organizational context. The six main questions that follow explore how the nature of interviewees' work and that of teaching librarians in their organization changed during the period of focus, as well as the main challenges and opportunities experienced for IL instruction. Perceived lasting implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for the domain of IL at interviewees' institutions and the work they pursue were also examined.

The Human Participants Review Committee (HPRC) of the researcher's university approved the study protocol and proposed research instrument in December 2022. Interviews were conducted between January and March 2023 and took an average of one hour. They were conducted and recorded on Zoom. The purpose and nature of the interview was shared with interviewees by email in advance, as well as a broad outline of the main topics to be covered. In addition, all participants provided their consent to participate and have the interviews recorded in advance using an online consent form prepared by the researcher and approved by the HPRC committee as part of the ethics approval process.

Data Analysis

The researcher hired a professional transcription company to prepare transcripts of all interviews. These were also anonymized and de-identified. Using an iterative, recursive process the researcher applied an inductive coding process using NVivo. Initial codes were developed and collated to create a preliminary coding structure with themes and subthemes. As part of an iterative process, as interviews proceeded and data analysis continued, codes were refined and final themes and subthemes established. As outlined earlier, this article shares a subset of results from a larger study on the overarching focus identified.

Findings

Librarians at eighteen of the 21 libraries invited to participate accepted this invitation. They were coded as Participants A through R. Due to the shifting and sharing of core roles for IL operating during the study's period of focus, a total of 25 librarians were interviewed representing eighteen schools: there were twelve interviews with one librarian, five with two, and one with three at once.

² Student population by institution on the OCUL web site last updated in July 2023: <https://ocul.on.ca/populations>

Interviewees shared a common function in their roles: being a key contact for IL at their institution. This included responsibilities for monitoring and reporting IL statistics, communicating about IL instruction, and/or responding to faculty requests for IL sessions. Not surprisingly, the scope of IL roles, however, varied considerably across institutions, depending on size and organizational structure. Responsibility for IL was the most substantive part of this role in eight (44%) of the eighteen institutions, including responsibility for strategic and overarching planning elements. In the other ten IL responsibilities formed just one element of a larger role, with a majority of this group also having subject librarian liaison responsibilities.

Study participants were not asked demographic questions, but as part of general introductory interview questions they were asked about their professional and IL experience as shown in Table 1. A majority have been professional librarians for over a decade: 44% for over 20 years and 32% for 10-19 years. The balance of 24% had 3-9 years. A majority had extensive experience with IL practice, with most participants (44%) having 10-19 years of experience, followed by 28% at 20 years or more, and 24% at 3-9 years and just 4% at 0-2 years. Finally, a majority of participants (60%) indicated that they had been in their current roles 3-9 years, with 24%, only 0-2 years (often because of restructuring within the organization), and the balance 10-19 years (4%) or 20 years or more (12%).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Emotional Labour Challenges

Results indicate that interviewees commonly faced challenges that caused anxiety, stress, lack of confidence, overwhelm and more. In early 2023 when these interviews were done Ontario universities and their libraries had made a “return to campus” with much teaching happening again in person, so those interviewed were reflecting back on the experience.

Several participants highlighted the psychological toll that the pandemic took:

[It's] so difficult a task to think back to that time because I feel like there's so much amnesia about it, yes, and probably intentional amnesia. (Participant A)

A few study participants stated that even in the 2022-2023 year instructional librarians haven't fully moved past burnout or recovered from what they experienced:

The pandemic really brought up the idea of burnout in the classroom, for the students, for the librarians... All of us, I think, are feeling this burnout, and I don't know how to move past it. I don't know how to solve it. (Participant I)

Stress was especially high in the early months of the pandemic when interviewees used words like “chaos” or “mess” to describe the situation. This interviewee's words are representative of how intense emotions were early on, while also demonstrating a common experience throughout the pandemic of a heightened workload:

March 2020 the pandemic hits. The first three weeks were abject terror. The third week after the pandemic hit, I spent 35 hours on Skype calls, because we didn't have Teams yet, primarily with liaison librarians, convincing everyone that we could do online instruction. (Participant L)

Another interviewee articulated the experience of isolation in a world where everyone was working remotely and where much uncertainty prevailed:

It was a big shift also in trying to keep people connected, worrying about how people were doing. How were we as a team going to manage information literacy instruction? How long were we going to be home? A lot of uncertainty. (Participant P)

Interviewees mentioned that those in their instructional cohorts often had to manage additional parenting or caregiving duties during the pandemic, on top of other new work demands:

It was so stressful. Being thrown into this situation where we're working from home, and many of us have families at home, too. (Participant K)

One study participant described a recurring theme well: the great toll of emotional labour associated with a mandate to quickly shift to emergency remote teaching. This involved a dramatic reconceptualization of the way that academic librarians taught, including learning new tools and technologies, and a move away from an environment where in person delivery was the norm:

But the biggest challenge I found was just the psychological and emotional difficulties that everyone was going through in this period. It was so much extra work and so much extra emotional load and just so much extra effort in order to do all of these new things and think about what we did in a completely different way and reconceptualize things that you had been doing, in some cases for 20 plus years and had real confidence in. And plus, all of the other things going on. Some people were just really burned out and really stressed and really in some cases, I know, some of my colleagues, I know, were quite depressed. And it was really challenging, I think, for people to do all of that in that context. (Participant O)

Commonly described was the lived experience of adapting or feeling more comfortable once it was shown that teaching online was possible especially after getting through the first few scary months. Interviewees described how instructional librarians developed skills to teach in synchronous, asynchronous and hybrid modes. They observed that a drop in synchronous faculty-requested IL (which a majority reported), made time for librarians to build asynchronous IL content (often described as being very time-consuming).

It was a common challenging experience to engage students in synchronous instructional sessions, especially in larger classes. Also difficult was transferring hands-on, active learning elements from in person teaching to online delivery, though this did vary depending on the class or context. When this experience was negative it proved tiring and demotivating:

I heard a lot of feedback, and again it would depend on the faculty member and the department, but they said they would go into a large class and on Zoom it would just be the black boxes with the photos or names. A lot of faculty, a lot of students were not engaging in the Zoom, and they wouldn't engage in the chat. It was just talking to yourself essentially and not being able to gauge. But then others were really engaged depending on the class. (Participant N)

While some participants described the benefits of experimentation with new interactive tools (such as polls and whiteboards) often there was some difficulty and frustration. Interviewees explained how they

had to be prepared to recover after technology failures and it was more difficult to do in-class assessments or check-ins in Zoom:

I had a lot of technology fails. I really tried to do things with idea boards, polling, and this kind of stuff ...Without a faculty champion, I found it really hard to break the ice over video. I found myself trying things and having them not work and going back to safer, more conventional instruction, which you're not supposed to do... And just assessment. And I don't even mean in a very formal way, but just "Are they understanding what I'm saying?" kind of thing... That type of in-class assessment is a lot harder to do when you're not in the room with them. (Participant G)

Culture of Care, Collaboration and Collegiality

A majority of interviewees said that through this time librarians pulled together and showed care and support for one another, and this played a critical role in enabling a shift to emergency remote teaching. While there were ongoing challenges, the mitigating impact of these positive developments feature strongly and fondly in the recollections of this time for most interviewees, as this participant so well articulates:

And also coming together... I think the main success for us, or for me, was working collaboratively with my peers in ways I hadn't done before. (Participant M)

Interviewees spoke about strengthened collaboration among colleagues for IL instruction, motivated by the imperative to build new skills and confidence with eLearning including learning new platforms, tools and online teaching practices. In schools with subject liaison models rather than a single unit responsible for IL, this was noted quite commonly as a departure from before, when librarians worked more independently. A large majority said such activities led to stronger skills, confidence and abilities with teaching IL online.

While the role of institutional professional development to enhance online teaching ability (for example, by educational developers on campus), should not be underestimated, this was commonly described as an individualistic endeavour among librarians organized *outside* the library, and collective efforts to enhance eLearning skills almost always were described instead as occurring *within* the library. Informal approaches predominated here, not formal ones. Only about a third of interviewees, usually from larger schools, identified formal internal training pursuits as important. These were usually in the form of a series of mini-workshops where librarians with the strongest skills in eLearning would present, but they also involved retreats, or occasionally guest speakers.

Enhanced collaboration took place primarily by sharing or discussions at meetings. These could be hosted by functional teams with responsibility for teaching and learning (where such a unit existed) or more commonly by teaching and learning working groups or committees. At such meetings time was set aside to facilitate learning from one another, sharing know-how and strategies:

The instruction group was very helpful, I think, in terms of facilitating discussions around what people were doing and what was working and what wasn't working... We had our monthly instruction meetings and a good portion of those meetings was just: "What have you been doing?", "What's working, not working?", "What strategies have you tried?" Those kinds of things... And then we spent our time saying: "This is how we've used it in our instruction," "Here's some examples of what we've done and that's worked and this hasn't worked," and

stuff like that. I think that was helpful for people because I think people just had a hard time envisioning how on earth they could do all of this and what options there were available and how you would switch your thinking to doing things online like that. (Participant O)

Informal demonstrations fostered collegial learning:

But there was a number of informal opportunities where somebody in the library would say, "Hey, my unit and I, or I've been experimenting with Zoom, or I've learned how we might approach X." By that point we were using Teams channels. They would send everybody a message and say, "I'm doing this thing from two to three if anybody wants to come online and observe." (Participant P)

Another form of informal collaboration involved more expert librarians (perhaps an eLearning Librarian or an instructional design librarian) assisting or informally mentoring colleagues to help them climb the learning curve to teach a class online or develop asynchronous learning content. In some cases, this type of mentoring happened less on the basis of role designation and more by virtue of the fact that those with more knowledge or mental capacity to be innovative would help those who, for whatever reason, had less capacity:

And I think those who were less able, had less mental ability to be innovative through all sorts of psychological and other emotional reasons, could then benefit from some of their colleagues who had a little bit more capacity to do those things... That sharing was really critical, I think, in helping everybody get through really. (Participant O)

Communities of practice also played a role in a few institutions, where colleagues benefitted from a community environment to share, vent, seek advice and collaborate in collegial ways about quickly evolving practices:

So, my big takeaway wasn't even the technology that I learned. It was the sense of community that we were all in it together. So, I was grateful for that community of practice... (Participant Q)

Software such as Microsoft Teams was also important in facilitating collaboration and sharing, most notably by facilitating setting up shared channels or drives as an inventory to bring together already existing learning objects. This also made it easier to share tips, instructional materials, tools and more:

I know we had a whole folder of stuff, so people would find things, or listen to webcasts or webinars... I think just because we were doing things differently, we shared our slides or videos more, so that people could reuse them. Some people would create a video about something, because they weren't going to be presenting synchronously, and they were sharing something. So, we were doing more of that. (Participant K)

A majority of participants often spoke about the evolving of a culture of care which they valued, especially in hindsight, and saw as playing a core role. Over a third of interviewees described how they saw their team of teaching librarians become closer during the pandemic. As this participant so eloquently puts it, it was a time of elevated stress where being mindful of protecting and helping others needed to be a central focus:

I'll just go back to the mental health actually because it all comes down to that we have a certain threshold as humans for stress. And whether that stress is related to Covid or something in somebody's personal life, whatever it is, we have this certain threshold. And the threshold was continuously being bumped up upon, if that makes sense? Especially through our lockdown and before the vaccines were available. The main challenge was helping people accept that less or different was okay. (Participant N)

Among those who had formal responsibility for a team of teaching librarians or were chairing a teaching and learning committee or working group in their library, a majority spoke about the weight they placed on helping the team during this stress and uncertainty. They talked about shifting priorities and recognizing that to keep things sustainable the focus needed to be on pivoting instruction online, while other work had to be put on the back burner. In addition, they often expressed how their teaching teams achieved commendable outcomes in very difficult circumstances, and took strong pride in their work:

I'm really, really proud of my team for how they came together and supported each other. (Participant E)

The importance of thinking differently about teaching was stressed, not just in terms of modalities and technologies, but also in terms of shifting or sharing work to manage load, and thinking more about how librarian capacity could meet faculty requests:

And it was the first time that I said things to my department, like: "If you can't teach this session, then don't worry about it," or "If there are any issues, let's bring them to the team to talk about." And we'd never been in the position to do that before. You did your job, and that was that. (Participant K)

Other ways to help render the situation more manageable included giving individuals more flexibility around working hours, especially where there were parenting or family care duties. In addition, several interviewees mentioned how children who were at home, would often be seen on camera during team meetings, and that collegial support and understanding around such situations was common.

Another theme that surfaced often, at least in institutions with larger teams, was the importance of carving out virtual meeting spaces for connection and checking in. A few interviewees mentioned that they set up times for their teams to meet for the sole purpose of social connection. This practice was most common among interviewees who had designated responsibility for directing the work of teaching librarians:

A lot of it felt like checking in with people to see how people were doing. It felt like waves. Somebody would have a moment of panic or something would really not go well in someone's life and then they would come back and then another person. It felt like it was never ending waves of people struggling through things. (Participant P)

Making more space for connection that we didn't have before and making space for mental health. And this isn't directly teaching but if we're not feeling mentally healthy, we can't teach. (Participant N)

Virtual meeting spaces played an important role in providing safe, empathetic, friendly spaces where colleagues could be open about difficulties and seek advice:

I don't think anybody felt worried about saying: "I'm stressed." "I'm overloaded." No one was hiding that, and I think that was really healthy because it meant we could at least acknowledge it. (Participant O)

Several participants also spoke about how they witnessed librarians (and even colleagues beyond the libraries) becoming more open, approachable, flexible, patient and tolerant, partly as a mechanism for coping and working collegially with others. This included a strengthened capacity to engage with or depend on colleagues:

But I think that we've shared this thing with a number of our colleagues and for a lot of them that are still around, I don't know, people just seem more approachable to me now as a result. (Participant G)

There was also an observation of growth among librarian colleagues in the form of navigating risks and uncertainty, and of being willing to experiment and learn new ways of teaching, together with a heightened recognition of the role of kindness:

And now, somebody said not that long ago at a team meeting: "So, how have we grown recently?" And somebody's like: "We're able to just roll with stuff." I'm like: "Yes, we are." I think as a group we've become pretty flexible. That's been a positive. Not that I would recommend a pandemic! (Participant N)

So, I think the kindness that came out of this disaster, it's still here, and I hope that we're going to continue to be more collegial. And I also see that in our students as well. (Participant I)

Another participant expressed a related idea that the experience of the pandemic had brought more perspective, and while he felt it had aged him professionally faster than otherwise would have happened, he expressed some appreciation of being less affected by vocational awe:

I feel a bit more seasoned. And for better or worse, have a bit less of that vocational awe and maybe just feeling more confident, hopefully, not stagnant, in my teaching practice as a result. So, Covid might be incidental to that, but I don't know if it would have been quite the same. I think this has aged me professionally faster than it would have otherwise. (Part G)

The classroom context of these instructional librarians also warrants attention with respect to the theme of a culture of care and collaboration. While a majority of participants expressed frustration about student engagement in instructional contexts (as described earlier), resulting in feeling disconnected from students, a small number spoke to how they observed a heightened spirit of care and sense of connection in the classroom. In some cases this took the form of students being more forgiving and understanding when glitches or challenges with technology arose. There was reference to an unspoken understanding that online teaching did not have to be polished or flawless in this crisis environment (in contrast to pre-Covid where study participants said they felt the eLearning bar was high). This manifested itself through students being patient, and in some cases helping librarians with troubleshooting tips:

And I think another thing is that because all the students and faculty were kind of thrown into that at the same time, people were a lot more tolerant of the fumbling around... I think before people felt like they had to do an online class and it had to be perfect... I felt that way that it was kind of like: "Oh well, you know, if all of a sudden my sound goes out, I'll just log in again and see if I can pick up where I left off." Whereas before that would have been panic mode for me, like: "Huh, what do I do now?" So in that way, it was good and I think it certainly made our team more flexible and not afraid or not nervous about taking on new stuff. (Participant D)

In a similar vein, a few participants spoke about how they or their teams engaged in an intentional practice to foreground care when teaching IL, because, as this participant describes, there was a strong awareness of the stress or even trauma that students experienced:

I've seen a shift in the way students think or the way they approach learning. And I feel like part of that is informed by trauma. They're just, their brains are, their cognition is slower or they're experiencing more stress or there are knowledge gaps...I've just seen a real shift. (Participant E)

Another interviewee cautioned that focusing too much on online instructional technologies could mean losing a compassionate teaching approach:

There are groups of people who really need in-person support and visible support. I don't think technology is the entire solution...What Covid has taught us is that many people are suffering from many different problems ...I hope we don't lose track of that with our route to everything online and always available. There is a human dimension to learning and to feeling successful and we should participate in that. (Participant Q)

One participant identified how she focused intentionally on affective aspects of research for students in her IL sessions:

I started doing mental health checks too as part of my presentations. So I would be like: "On a scale of one to ten, from really anxious to feeling very secure, how do you feel when you approach research or enter a library?" So I started really bringing that stuff in. I think part of it was that mental health became a really big part of the pandemic. (Participant R)

Another participant spoke about how her team of instructional librarians developed a new IL curriculum during this time, with an express goal of shining more of a light on emotional aspects of research, in quite large part spurred by what had been seen and felt during the pandemic:

"Research is hard and it's an immersive process...and really trying to normalise what that means. And so again, back to that mental health and wellness and really supporting students where they are at." (Participant N)

Discussion

Many articles focusing on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on IL instruction in academic libraries take the form of survey research (Ibocache *et al.*, 2021; Shin *et al.*, 2022) and case studies (Dempsey and Heil, 2021; Dong, 2021; Ezell, 2021; Howes *et al.*, 2021; Joe, 2020; Leibiger and Aldrich, 2022; Lierman *et al.*, 2022; Mannion, 2021; Proctor *et al.*, 2021; Siddall, 2022; Wheeler and Kyprianou-Chavda, 2021).

These publications emphasize the innovations in eLearning that happened in academic libraries during the Covid-19 pandemic and how further investment in eLearning infrastructure and professional development to enhance librarian expertise in this domain is critical for the future. This article, in contrast, foregrounds the human and affective dimensions of what instructional librarians in academic libraries experienced pertaining to their IL work and practice, alongside a small number of other studies that share data and explore themes, with considerable coverage of affective dimensions of academic librarians' experiences, including references to instructional work (Berg *et al.*, 2022; Goosney, 2024; McLay Paterson and Eva, 2022a, 2022b; Salvesen and Berg, 2021; Reed *et al.*, 2022; Todorinova, 2021). This article aligns with and indeed bolsters the findings in this small body of literature, as outlined below, while also building evidence through a qualitative research methodology (relatively rare among studies on this theme).

This study finds evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic caused a high emotional labour toll on academic librarians teaching IL. They faced the challenge of shifting IL education online, combined with feelings of isolation, stress, work-life balance hurdles and more. And yet this study indicates that, in general, this cohort rallied and even surpassed expectations for adapting to needed changes, quickly learning new skills and ways of teaching. This study also finds evidence that heightened collaboration and sharing among instructional librarians, as well as a stronger culture of care, played an important role. This served to help this cohort build skills and competencies to teach more proficiently online, but — arguably even more significantly — it played a critical role in improving their comfort and confidence with doing this and in easing anxiety, stress and feelings of overload. Moreover, this study indicates that there was an observed strengthening of traits among many instructional librarians through the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in more positive ways of working together, including more capacity for resilience, flexibility and openness.

While the intense stress of the pandemic is one that interviewees didn't want to experience again — they spoke of how its emotional toll is still affecting them — they commonly expressed that it would be very beneficial to sustain the positive growth aspects of this experience including the human and affective dimensions that resulted in stronger team dynamics and enhanced collegiality and a stronger culture of care.

Recommendations and Future Research

In exploring implications or recommendations for the future of IL instruction from this and related studies, a number of important threads can be highlighted.

McLay Paterson and Eva (2022b) argue that the Covid-19 pandemic illuminated and intensified the emotional labour challenges, that were already common among academic librarians. They argue that it caused librarians, including those who teach, to develop a new consciousness around the importance of boundaries and work-life balance and engendered a recommitment to the caring aspects of work and to the value of building intentional collegial relationships. They assert that academic libraries should develop more compassionate policies and practices informed by reflection on what was learned during the pandemic. In a similar vein, Cox (2023) through a review of the literature on compassionate leadership and sharing personal experiences as a senior leader, argues that the pandemic foregrounds how leading with compassion in academic libraries is more important than ever before and shares skills and traits inherent to this approach. Thus while, studies like these indicate that one lasting lesson of the pandemic has been the imperative to engage in more compassionate leadership in the academic

workplace, a review of the literature, finds a gap in studies or recommendations that propose specific policies or best practices, especially in the domain of academic libraries, including the teaching domain. Therefore, more research is recommended in this area.

McLay Paterson and Eva (2022b), in citing Ettarh (2018), argue that uncoupling academic librarians' professional work and their vocational awe (a phenomenon identified as being strong (Agostino and Cassidy, 2019; Cheshire and Stout, 2020)), would protect librarians from overload, stress and anxiety. Ettarh (2022), in looking at the impact of Covid-19 on libraries, argues that the extent to which vocational awe could be weaponized increased due to a severe lack of work-life separation and more potential for job creep, when the lines between home and work life blurred substantially and where new or additional tasks for library employees were more common. In a similar vein, she argues that setting boundaries to protect mental and physical health of library employees has been more front of mind since the pandemic, and that to sustain improvements collegial advocacy and commitment to care will be critical — especially where to date libraries have not typically rewarded this.

VanLeeuwen *et al.* (2021), whose research uncovered much evidence on the emotional labour challenges faced by teaching faculty in Canadian universities and colleges during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic (with strong parallels to what was experienced by instructional academic librarians), argue that the adoption of trauma-informed or trauma-aware practices, in the classroom and in working with others, can play an important role. They speak to how this was done among some faculty with positive outcomes during the pandemic, but highlight an additional role that this can play, as we continue to recover from an experience that was stressful at best and traumatic at worst for teachers and students. Ladson-Billings (2021b) shines a light on the core role she believes culturally-responsive pedagogy, as another growing practice within pedagogies of care, needs to play in the future, especially in light of what we have learned from the pandemic. In a similar vein, Gravett *et al.*, (2024) argue that relational pedagogies or pedagogies of mattering, will play a critical role in fostering understanding, care and connection in the future of higher education.

As outlined in the literature review section of this article, there is a dearth of work that explores pedagogies of care in academic libraries. Additionally, while IL practice can certainly be informed by research in other fields of higher education, to establish contextually-relevant and robust pedagogies of care, that respond to the specific gaps and stressors students faced and continue to face around engagement with information and its sources, we must invest time and resources in evidence-based research pertaining to pedagogies of care within the field of IL itself.

Finally, it is recommended that academic libraries stand to benefit from intentional organizational post-pandemic reflection to generate insights on what was learned and how this might be brought to inform what is done in the domain of IL instruction moving forward, as the author's study and others consulted, demonstrate a marked lack of activity in this area. Therefore, it is recommended that those with responsibility for leading IL programming in their institutions would do well to carve out spaces for this type of reflection before the memories and takeaways of the pandemic fade.

Limitations

The author acknowledges some limitations of the present study. Although the response rate from the purposive sample in this qualitative study was high with eighteen out of 21 Ontario university libraries participating, the overall sample is quite small when compared to all of Canada and is limited to universities offering undergraduate and graduate degrees. The sample does not include any college

libraries (noting that college libraries in a Canadian context do not imply a four-year undergraduate institution, as in the United States, but rather institutions that offer more applied degree, diploma or certificate programs, often with emphasis on practical skills and direct links to specific career paths). Though it is reasonable to expect Canadian universities to have commonalities with their U.S. counterparts, it is also important to understand that these Ontario universities are publicly funded; the study included no private universities (an important institution type, especially in the United States). Additionally, it is likely that some aspects of the study were influenced by the Canadian context, for example specific pandemic policies or regulations in Ontario.

Conclusion

This study is one of a few that shines a light on the lived experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic of academic librarians in the domain of IL with special focus on the affective dimensions of what they encountered. Most research, in contrast, takes the form of case studies or survey research showcasing transitions to online teaching modes in specific institutions, describing how eLearning evolved, with a focus on technologies, pedagogies, skills and competencies.

Investigating the affective dimensions of the Covid-19 IL experience for academic librarians has a strong value for helping process, remember and learn from what was experienced. We have learned much from engaging with the very real human dimensions of this situation, most importantly seeing the capacity of those engaged in teaching to pull together, buoy each other, and teach and learn from one another. We also witnessed the development of heightened collegiality and a stronger culture of care. Lessons from this and other work cited illustrate the critical role played by the affective dimensions of academic librarians' experiences with IL programming in a time of crisis. Lessons from this research, combined with needed additional research on this relatively understudied aspect of the pandemic, stand poised to offer powerful and insightful directions for the future of IL instruction, where success will inevitably be best achieved through leadership practices guided by a holistic view of what was learned during this unprecedented time and informed by a rekindled consciousness of the critical importance of enhancing affective and human aspects of this work to build a better future.

Appendix

Interview Guide

Introduction

- Review background and purpose of study
- Review consent form and institutional ethics protocol as it relates to the study
- Ask if the interviewee has any questions before starting
- Start Zoom recording

Demographic and Background Questions

How long have you been in your current role?

How long have you been a professional librarian?

How long have you been involved in information literacy (IL) practice as a librarian?

Can you describe how responsibility for IL programming fits in to your role and the extent to which it is part of your overall portfolio?

Approximately how many staff and librarians do you work with engaged in the planning, design or delivery of IL programming? Where does that team sit in terms of the organizational structure and have there been any notable changes in the last 5 years here?

Covid-19 and the Evolving Nature of Your Role Including Professional Practice and Scope, Opportunities and Challenges

Please cast your mind back to the latter part of the academic year 2019-2020, commencing March 2020, and the ensuing academic year 2020-2021, when Ontario was in the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and universities had to pivot to emergency remote teaching mode suddenly for much of this time. What were the main ways in which the nature of your own work and that of teaching librarians working with you changed in terms of IL programming?

One year later in the academic year 2021-22, when universities in Ontario were adopting more blended or hybrid models of teaching across more disciplines, and we generally saw more students back on campus, how had IL programming evolved at your academic library under your leadership and with your team? Was this academic year different in any significant ways from the prior academic year and, if so, how?

How would you characterize the main challenges for your role at this time, i.e. during the years 2020-21 and 2021-22, with regard to IL programming and how did you respond to them?

How would you characterize the main opportunities or innovations that happened under your leadership and with your team during this time in the area of IL programming? What are you especially proud of?

Reflections on Lasting Implications of Covid-19 for the Future of Your Role (15 minutes)

Do you perceive any lasting implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for the domain of IL at your Libraries and the work you pursue? In other words, how would you describe the ongoing legacy of Covid-19, if any, for your role here and the team you work with?

Closing Question

Is there anything else you'd like to comment on or that you think I should know connecting to this research study that I didn't ask you about before we wrap up today?

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