



Foraging for instruction: A microethnography of academic librarians' information behaviours and practices in instructional planning

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47989/ir31ISIC65151>

Abstract

Introduction. Academic librarians regularly deliver information and digital literacy instruction. This study explores the information behaviours and practices exhibited by academic librarians in the context of instructional planning, with a focus on information foraging and information-resource use.

Method. A short-term microethnographic study was conducted of academic librarians (n=3) from a postsecondary institution in Toronto, Canada. Data gathering involved unobtrusive observations in librarians' offices, fieldnotes, photographs, and semi-structured interviews.

Analysis. A manual stepwise analysis process was conducted, involving open coding, focused coding, and the writing of integrative memos. The thematic narrative was employed to present findings, which manifested in the writing of excerpt-commentary units.

Results. Findings reveal that instructional librarians exhibit information foraging behaviours in the instructional planning process. Instructional librarians rely on a combination of documentary and social information resources to complete the task of instructional planning. Temporal pressures, experience levels and feelings of inadequacy also shape information behaviours and practices.

Conclusion. While instructional librarians take pleasure in seeking and retrieving instructional information, they often lack adequate time for planning or adequate information from faculty colleagues. Regardless, institutional repositories of instructional materials and strong relationships with fellow teaching librarians are integral to their information behaviours and practices.

Introduction

As technology rapidly evolved in the 20th century and digitally accessible information became widespread in the 21st century, the information landscape transformed, and the need for academic librarians as instructors of information and digital literacy emerged (Loesch, 2010). In training to deliver said instruction, newly hired academic librarians are often expected to consult a combination of documentary and social information resources, including the reading of pedagogical writings and shadowing their more experienced colleagues (Bewick & Corral, 2010; Houtman, 2010; Westbrook & Fabian, 2010; Wheeler & McKinney, 2015). Seeing as librarian instruction is often requested by a disciplinary faculty member, colloquially referred to as an instructional 'one-shot' (Reitz, 2013), instructional librarians must also learn to navigate the postsecondary landscape as information professionals who work alongside disciplinary experts (Azadbakht, 2021; Becksford, 2022; Cadogan et al., 2023; Kirker, 2022; Sandy et al., 2023; Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2015). As a result, instructional librarians' information behaviours and practices are generally aligned with the needs of the students and faculty members they serve (Mavodza, 2011; McDonald et al., 2015). This study seeks to illuminate the information behaviours and practices exhibited by academic librarians while preparing for information and digital literacy instruction. Through observations conducted in instructional librarians' offices, this exploratory study offers a look behind the curtain of the information foraging habits (Pirolli & Card, 1995) and information-resource use that surface in the process of instructional planning. In addition to findings related to instructional librarians' information behaviours and practices, this paper makes a methodological contribution by employing the writing method of the thematic narrative with excerpt-commentary units.

Research focused on the searching skills, strategies and preferences of academic librarians continues to grow in the library and information science (LIS) literature, as evidenced later in the literature review, but little attention has been paid to the process of instructional planning and so the present study seeks to address this gap. Furthermore, questionnaires and interviews are frequently used in studies conducted on academic librarians (Nel, 2020, p. 12), so observations conducted in the offices of academic librarians present a novel approach to data collection in the field. Other studies have either observed librarians in the process of teaching (Szempruch, 2025) or non-library faculty members working in their offices (Ruth, 2015). This study also endeavours to establish the first links between theoretical understandings of information behaviour and academic librarians' practical instructional experiences, which addresses a need in the literature for increased 'integration and collaboration between theory and practice' (Nel, 2020, p. 14).

Literature review

Information behaviours and practices of academic librarians

A recent scoping review by Nel (2020) synthesized the key findings from over 120 studies on the information behaviours and practices of academic librarians, concluding that librarians generally feel 'confident' in their ability to seek and retrieve information (p. 10). The review's findings also denote information sharing as a crucial aspect of librarians' behaviours and practices, whether through in-person interactions like 'communities of practice' or through virtual encounters over 'electronic mail' or 'online discussion groups' (p. 10). To satisfy their information needs, librarians tend to prioritize 'library databases and collections', 'electronic books', and 'scholarly journals' as information resources (p. 10). Collaboration and socialisation are integral to librarians' information practices, and these practices are ultimately shaped by the 'norms and attitudes' within their specific institution and within the field of academic librarianship more broadly (Nel, 2020, p. 10).

Through semi-structured interviews and think-aloud narratives, Tucker (2014) positions academic librarians as 'expert searchers' who have developed a 'profound discernment of critical concepts of information' (p. 239). In Tucker's view, academic librarians have mastered certain threshold concepts like the 'information environment' and 'information structures' and combine their

abilities in these various domains to retrieve information effectively and efficiently, in a process referred to as ‘concept fusion’ (p. 245). Reference librarians were noted as possessing a ‘strong willingness to explore new avenues’ in the search process and an ‘enthusiasm’ for the pursuit of information, as well as embodying qualities like ‘persistence and patience’ (pp. 250-251). The strategies employed by instructional librarians were found to be shaped largely by their learning experiences as students and teaching experience as instructors, where ‘each experience fuelled the other’ (Tucker, 2014, p. 251).

Instructional planning as information task

In practice, the information task of instructional planning is often hindered by a lack of adequate time, with academic librarians often having to rush through the task (Gill, 2023; Julien & Genuis, 2009; Julien & Genuis, 2011; Julien & Pecoskie, 2009; Nichols Hess, 2020; Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2015). Instructional librarians face ‘administrative and practical challenges’ that involve balancing multiple portfolios on top of their instructional work (Julien & Genuis, 2011, p. 108). Julien and Genuis (2009) describe these challenges as the ‘invisibility of emotional labour’ (p. 935) in the work of instructional librarians, who are expected to jump from one session to the next, with little time to seek and retrieve information for the purposes of creating new or updating existing instructional materials. Despite these challenges, academic librarians still take pleasure in instructional planning thanks to the variety of topics on which their instructional responsibilities allow them to retrieve, synthesize and present information (Julien & Genuis, 2011, p. 108).

Information environments of instructional librarians

To complete the task of instructional planning, instructional librarians are dependent on social information resources, such as the information they receive from disciplinary faculty members requesting their instruction (Julien & Pecoskie, 2009). The authors’ findings suggest that instructional planning is largely informed by the demands of the disciplinary faculty member, resulting in instructional planning that prioritizes ‘successful faculty negotiation and relations’ over ‘students’ learning’ (p. 151). Instructional librarians also participate in communities of practice alongside other librarians and faculty members related to the scholarship of teaching and learning, allowing them to reflect on their current pedagogical practices and exposing them to new instructional strategies (Hays & Studebaker, 2019; Houtman, 2021; Mallon, 2019; Sandy et al., 2023). Apart from formal communities of practice, instructional librarians benefit from ‘supportive interpersonal relationships’ with fellow instructional librarians to develop their instructional repertoire (Nichols Hess, 2020, p. 345).

When not consulting social information resources, instructional librarians rely on documentary information resources, like existing instructional materials that they or their colleagues have previously used, which are usually housed on ‘shared drives, learning management systems, repositories, and LibGuides’ (Gill, 2023, p. 18). If they cannot make use of an existing instructional resource, then instructional librarians may turn to ‘learning object repositories’ like ‘Project Cora and the Association of College and Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox’ which provide them with ‘open and freely accessible instruction resources’ (Ford-Baxter, 2023, p. 426). For librarians engaged in digital literacy instruction, toolkits, like the one curated by the ‘Digital Library Federation’, otherwise known as ‘#DLFTeach’, serve as important sources of information for instruction (Neatrou et al., 2025, p. 42).

Research questions and positionality

This study takes up the information task of instructional planning in the work of academic librarians. While academic library instruction also occurs over videoconferencing platforms, this study exclusively addresses the delivery of in-person instruction, and so academic librarians’ offices served as the primary field site. Instruction also occurs in various configurations in academic libraries, including reference desk interactions, staff training or private research

appointments, but this study takes particular interest in classroom instruction that has been requested by a disciplinary faculty member. More specifically, the research questions guiding this study include:

1. While preparing to teach a class, which information behaviours and practices do academic librarians exhibit?
2. Which information resources are the most important to academic librarians' instructional planning and why?
3. Which factors, whether personal or otherwise, influence academic librarians' instructional planning and how?
4. Methodologically speaking, how might answers to these research questions be presented to scholars in a lively and relatable way that honours the research participants' realities?

On a personal note, while an ethnographer should endeavour to maintain an 'etic perspective' (Fetterman, 2010), I come to this work with some insider knowledge. Having studied pedagogy and instructed university courses, I possess first-hand experience with instructional planning. To avoid influencing the study's findings with personal biases, I heeded Spradley's (1979) warning about 'expressing ignorance' (p. 57). I did not impose my knowledge and experience of instructional planning on the participants while gathering data. Instead, I prompted them to elaborate further on their practices so that the ethnographic record could accurately represent their experiences.

Methods

Theoretical approach

With regards to terminology, 'information behaviour' and 'information practice' are both relevant terms to this study. The differences between these two concepts are debated (Wilson et al., 2009), but when appropriate, I employ these terms in the study according to Savolainen's (2007) distinction that information behaviour denotes a 'needs and motives' approach to dealing with information, while information practice refers to information-related activities 'affected and shaped by social and cultural factors' (p. 126). For instance, academic librarians may exhibit information behaviours while working alone in their offices to prepare an instructional session, but they may also exhibit information practices when they engage in strategies influenced or informed by their fellow academic librarians.

In terms of the literature on information seeking, Bates' (1989) 'berrypicking' model stands out for its relevance to this study, as an explanation of exploratory searching using the analogy of 'picking huckleberries or blueberries in the forest' (p. 410). Similarly, Pirolli and Card (1995) propose the 'information foraging' model, taking inspiration from biological and anthropological conceptions of 'food-foraging strategies' (p. 51). While the models share many similarities, Savolainen (2017) delineates key differences between the two. Berrypicking accounts for searching that may be open-ended or fluid, but information foraging envisions information seekers as animals, hunting for specific information in response to an external stimulus. In the foraging metaphor, information seekers forage through 'information patches' or information resources, which emit an 'information scent' that attracts seekers to them, and in turn, the seekers develop an 'information diet' or preference for certain sources of information (pp. 586-587). In this foraging process, the seeker is often making information-related choices based on task requirements, the nature of their information diet, and 'cost-benefit judgements' (p. 588). I chose to approach this study from the information foraging perspective, rather than berrypicking, because information foraging is predicated on 'task performance or problem-solving' (Savolainen, 2017, p. 588), and the object of this study is the execution of instructional planning as a time-sensitive work task.

Methodology

Inspired by Stebbins' (2006) writing on 'concatenated exploration' in the social sciences, this study serves as the first link in a planned chain of ethnographic explorations that will grow in complexity and size, and so, the present study is 'predominantly exploratory in scope' (p. 484). The research methodology employed in this paper is informed by the work of Pink and Morgan (2013) on 'short-term ethnography', in that it is a 'sociological microethnography' which focuses on practical activities (p. 353). While traditional ethnographies may require a researcher to spend months or years in a field site to understand the way of life of a particular social group, short-term ethnographies are better suited for the study of specific activities, like instructional planning. The approach to this ethnographic research is also influenced by Griffin's (2017) work on positivist ethnography in LIS settings, aiming to observe and describe information behaviours and practices in situ. Despite the short-term and granular approach of this study, the study still adhered to Spradley's (1979) ethnographic cycle by selecting the ethnographic project based on my personal interest in the experiences of instructional librarians, before determining the ethnographic questions that would guide the project through the data gathering process.

Data gathering and analysis

Instructional librarians (n=3) possessing between two and six years of professional experience each, served as the study's population, with varying disciplinary specializations and a combination of digital and information literacy instructional responsibilities, served as the study's population. While other participants were recruited, scheduling around teaching sessions proved difficult, limiting the number of participants who could see the data gathering process to completion. I recruited participants for the study via convenience sampling. Before proceeding with data gathering, I required participants to sign informed consent letters (Appendix A). To maintain confidentiality, I have de-identified their names as Informant A, Informant B, and Informant C.

Following Emerson et al.'s (1995) model for unobtrusive observations and fieldnotes, I passively observed each participant for one hour while they prepared for instruction in their offices, taking handwritten notes that documented the work they completed at their desks and on their computers. Inspired by the work of Prosser and Loxley (2008) on visual research methods, I also captured a photographic inventory of the participants while they worked, following a shooting guide established prior to the observations (Appendix B). While integral to data gathering in ethnographic research, these methods can be intrusive. Participants must grant the researcher access to their private spaces and risk being personally identified in photos, which further constrained the number of participants willing to participate in the project.

As a short-term ethnography, this study prioritized the 'intensity of the research encounter' (Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 355), resulting in a rich ethnographic record that included observations, fieldnotes, photos, and interview transcripts, despite the limited pool of participants. To avoid any undue influence on the participants' behaviour during the observation process, I scheduled semi-structured interviews with the participants at least one week after the observations had concluded. Prior to the semi-structured interviews, I provided participants with an interview guide (Appendix C) that incorporated information-related questions and photographic elicitation, largely informed by Bernard's (2002) writing on grand-tour and mini-tour questions. I audio-recorded and then transcribed these hour-long interviews, before de-identifying the transcripts and permanently deleting the recordings.

Once I had gathered the complete ethnographic record, I engaged in Emerson et al.'s (1995) stepwise analysis process. First, I conducted open coding where I reviewed the fieldnotes, photos and interview transcripts in print format, to make note of any broad thematic ideas that emerged at first glance. Then, I undertook focused coding, using coloured highlighters and sticky notes to aggregate recurring themes and areas of research interest. Lastly, I crafted integrative memos

(Appendix D), which served as both a medium for self-reflection on the research experience, and as precursors to the writing-up process.

Writing-up

This study was written with the ‘thematic narrative’ in mind (Emerson et al., 1995; Hartel, 2020); a method of writing ethnographic research that incorporates ‘several analytic themes or concepts linked by a common topic’ (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 170). Later in the Findings section, I denote these common topics through subheadings. The thematic narrative is made up of ‘excerpt-commentary units’ consisting of an analytic point, orienting information, an excerpt, and analytic commentary (p. 182). Unlike traditional social-scientific writing, the units combine content typically found in findings and discussion sections to craft an impactful narrative. In writing these units, I endeavoured to prove my point ‘economically’, while also being mindful of ‘length, relevance, readability’ and ‘comprehensibility’ (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 187). To achieve this, I revisited the results of the focused coding and the integrative memos repeatedly, and this iterative approach allowed me to clarify and link the key analytic themes that emerged from the participants’ contributions. While it may seem like each excerpt-commentary unit is reflective of a single participant’s experience, the excerpts are intended to exemplify the commonalities shared across participants.

Excerpt-commentary units (findings and discussion)

Information foraging

Instructional librarians act like foragers, adeptly jumping from information patch to information patch in hopes of gleaning the information required for the purposes of instruction. After my observation of Informant C, I assembled these photos in a chronological order which illustrate this behaviour:

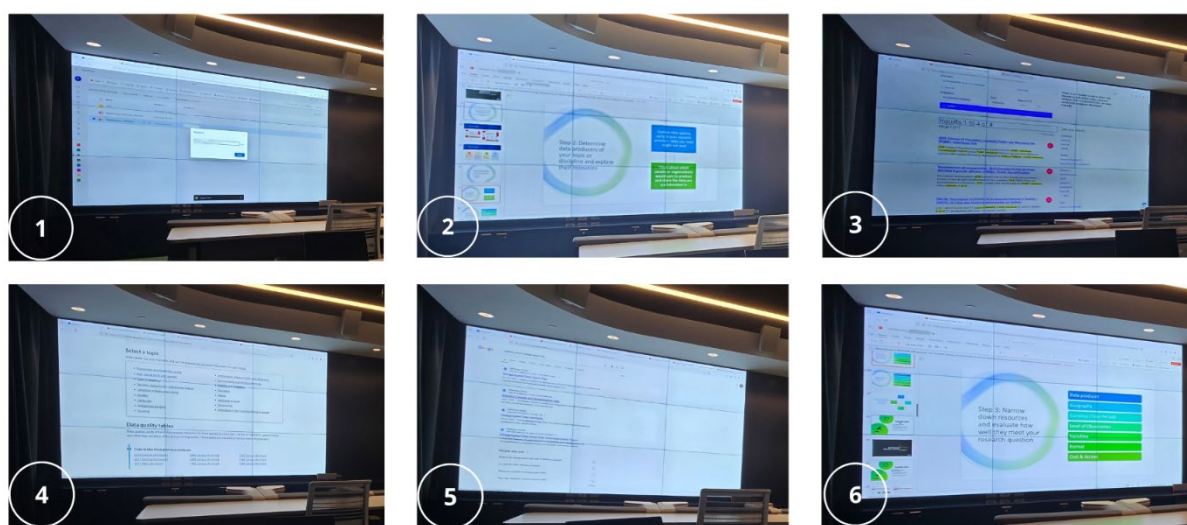


Figure 1. Informant C’s resource consultation process, moving from institutional repository and discipline-specific databases (#1, #3 and #4) to Google searching (#5)

Informant C is an information forager with a well-established information diet, successfully navigating the information patches available to them to prepare their instructional content. Informant C chose to prioritize their most reliable information patches, consisting of institution- and discipline-specific resources. By consulting these trusted resources first, Informant C clarified the focus of their search, before branching out to less reliable patches. Tucker (2014) characterizes this expert searching behaviour as being ‘discerning of the environment’ (p. 253). The searcher must first home in on a specific informational scent before navigating to more expansive information patches. For example, if Informant C started the process with a Google search, they

likely would have to sift through an abundance of results without focus or purpose. This behaviour is apparently typical of academic librarians, who may incorporate Google into their information practices, but still tend to prioritize 'library catalogues rather than commercial or free websites' (Nel, 2020, p. 12).

Academic librarians approach instructional preparation with a combination of curiosity and determination, relishing in finding information while keeping task completion top of mind. When asked to describe their instructional preparation process, Informant B likened it to their experience conducting scholarly research:

I always aim to be focused. Sometimes, I do get a little distracted. I think it's very similar to a research process [...]. It's like an iterative process that you do when you're researching: you start with something, and then you might refine it to something else, or you might strike upon something that's a better example or a better topic.

In this response, Informant B is expressing that while they remain task-oriented in the process of instructional preparation, they also let the search process guide them in new directions. As an expert searcher, Informant B exhibited what Tucker (2014) describes as 'enjoying the hunt' (p. 250). As an experienced instructor, Informant B could just as easily rely on their existing instructional materials, but they chose to actively embrace enthusiasm. However, in information foraging, information seeking is ultimately driven by 'task performance or problem-solving' (Savolainen, 2017, p. 588). Despite their enthusiasm, Informant B's information behaviour was tempered by the looming requirements of the work task.

When preparing or updating instructional materials, academic librarians conduct their searches based on satisficing, quickly cutting their losses when they deem an information resource inadequate. After writing up the field notes from my observation of Informant A, I noticed how promptly they moved from one information resource to the next:

Whenever Informant A needed to update their lesson plan, they would begin an information search. Informant A would swiftly assess the value of a resource, comment out loud on the quality of the resource, and then move on. They would continue this evaluative process in rapid succession until they were satisfied with the information they retrieved.

In this process, Informant A conducted some mental math, determining if a resource was worth their time and energy based on what the resource could provide them. In some cases, instructional resources are dense and require careful parsing, and in other cases, instructional resources are concise and easily assessed. Regardless of the resources being consulted, Informant A was adept at executing 'cost-benefit judgments' (Savolainen, 2017, p. 588), a common strategy employed in information foraging. Making these judgments frequently and efficiently, Informant A demonstrated 'persistence and patience' (Tucker, 2014, p. 251), which is characteristic of the information behaviour of an expert searcher.

Information diet

Existing instructional materials, typically hosted on digital institutional repositories, are the most prized information resource in the instructional planning process of academic librarians. In my observations, all the informants consulted their existing instructional materials, as evidenced in these photos:

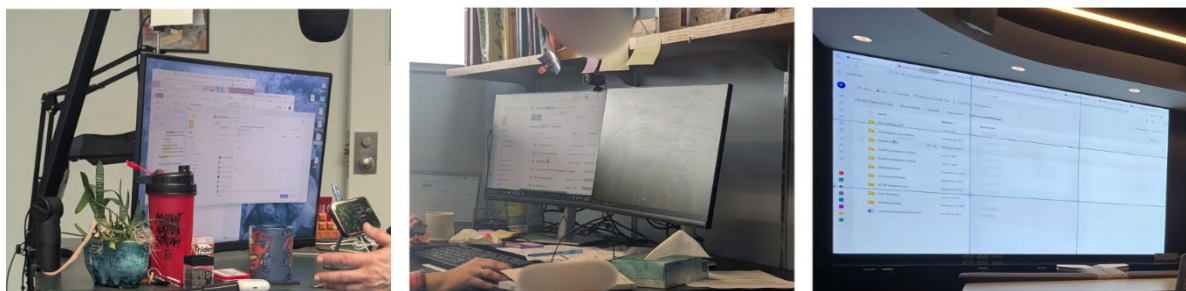


Figure 2. Informants A, B and C choosing to first consult their institutional repository

Without fail, every time I started an observation of an informant in their office, they would first open the Microsoft Teams or Microsoft OneDrive account affiliated with their institutions. It appeared that these digital databases housed a plethora of instructional content, including lesson plans, PowerPoint slides, descriptions of tools and databases, and instructions for activities. Some of the content had been generated by the informants, but a significant amount had also been prepared by their colleagues. In Gill's (2023) investigation, a lack of 'sharing and collaboration' amongst instructional librarians negatively impacted the teaching experience (p. 23). I witnessed the primacy of these shared repositories that act as time-saving tools, streamlining instructional planning. To be clear, their reliance on these existing resources should not be interpreted as a sign of laziness. Instead, this behaviour is a testament to both the reliability of these repositories as information patches and the ability of academic librarians to judiciously make cost-benefit judgements about how much time they can spend preparing for a single instructional session.

Academic librarians rely on information from their disciplinary faculty colleagues, usually contained in email communications, to feel confident in their instructional preparation. Informant B captured this sentiment in our interview when they described how a lack of information from a faculty colleague can negatively impact the preparation process:

Having [the faculty member's] information about the research assignment helps me to really tailor the session to the students' needs. It is really important, and it makes me irritated when they don't provide me with information [...]. So, I usually ask and most are pretty good, but sometimes they don't give you the syllabus, even if you ask for it.

While the academic library might curate and offer their own set of library-led workshops, lots of academic librarian instruction relies on requests from disciplinary faculty members. According to Informant B, communicating effectively with these faculty members was critical to the success of their instruction, which the literature also supports (Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2015). If they failed to retrieve adequate information from the requesting faculty member about the context of the class and the learning needs of the students, then the instructional session risked being overly generic or missing the mark altogether. Informant B's experience is not an isolated case, as evidenced by Julien and Genuis' (2011) finding that a lack of 'faculty buy-in or support' is an ongoing challenge for many instructional librarians (p. 108).

At the start of their careers, fellow academic librarians are crucial information resources for teaching librarians, influencing their instructional practices and assisting them in the creation of foundational instructional materials. For instance, Informant C described the co-creation process they completed with a veteran colleague at the start of their tenure:

[Colleague] came with more ideas than I did because I was fresh out of library school. Essentially, we put together lesson plans and developed slides. I have taught it now for three or four years, so I don't really bring up the lesson plans anymore, but I found that process crucial for me.

With little experience under their belts, greener instructional librarians can turn to their peers for inspiration and guidance. Informant C had not previously worked in teaching roles but was expected to undertake teaching responsibilities soon after completing their LIS studies. While documentary information resources can be helpful, more experienced academic librarians serve as invaluable social information resources. As a newcomer, Informant C found their footing by collaborating with a veteran colleague. According to the literature, this collaboration can be fostered in formal 'communities of practice' (Nel, 2020, p. 10) or informally through supportive colleague-to-colleague interactions (Nichols Hess, 2020).

Situational, personal, and organizational factors

The process of instructional preparation for academic librarians is governed by temporal pressures, both in terms of in-office preparation time and time allocated for instruction. As I wrote down notes while observing Informant A, they spoke out loud to themselves about their concerns related to time:

While they worked, Informant A would make comments about not wanting to waste their precious preparation time on menial tasks. They expressed their discontent with having to prepare for the session an hour before teaching it. Informant A would also frequently check their emails to confirm they were respecting the time limit established by their faculty colleague.

Instructional librarians find themselves between a rock and a hard place, yearning for more time to search for and work on instructional materials, but having to defer to their faculty colleagues to determine the duration of their instruction. Informant A felt like they never had enough time for instructional planning, which is echoed in Vassilakaki and Moniarou-Papaconstantinou's (2015) review of the literature. Simultaneously, librarians rely on the faculty members who request their instructional expertise to provide them with the 'gift of time' (Julien & Pecoskie, 2009, p. 151). If the faculty member can only offer a short period of instructional time to the librarian, then the instructional librarian must limit the content of their lessons, resulting in less time spent seeking and retrieving information related to instruction.

The more time librarians spend in their teaching roles, the less laborious, time-intensive, and stressful the information task of instructional planning becomes. Reflecting on their life as a novice instructor, Informant B described how their instructional preparation process became more seamless, calm, and playful:

I am spending less time on preparation now than I used to, because I have at least 25 or 30 different presentations in my folder that I can refer back to [...]. I feel a lot more relaxed about preparation [...]. I used to get really nervous before every class that I taught, but now it's less [...]. Also, having all that experience gives me more time to branch out and try new things.

The work of instructional preparation for newcomers is complicated, having to create content from scratch and ruminating excessively on the preparation process. Nichols Hess (2020) attributes this hardship to a lack of working relationships and professional development. Generally, newcomers have a limited repertoire of instructional resources and skills from which to pull. As Informant B attests, the confidence in their current preparation process stems from their existing documentation and years of teaching experience. The literature also indicates a direct correlation between a librarian's time spent in a role and their confidence in their ability to prepare and deliver instruction (Julien & Genuis, 2011).

During instructional planning, academic librarians experience feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy related to being perceived as legitimate in the eyes of their students and faculty colleagues. While in conversation with Informant C, they spoke about how these concerns manifest in their attitude toward using open educational resources:

I try to see what's out there, but it's half my fear and half my pride. I think I should be creating [instructional materials] on my own [...]. In general, it just doesn't feel right. For some reason, there's something within me that doesn't want to crib off something else. [...] I feel like I owe it to whomever I'm teaching to not use that content or not use a lot of that content.

Despite not being directly represented in the content of their instruction, academic librarians expend time and energy in the instructional planning process to ensure they are perceived as competent. This manifests in various ways, including updating their materials with contemporary references, preparing printed handouts for students, and making alternative plans if technological issues arise. In Informant C's case, they believed that referring to open educational resources would denigrate their credibility, as if they were taking an undeserved shortcut in their completion of the information task. Julien and Genuis (2009) attribute this preoccupation with reputation to the disregard academic librarians often experience at the hands of both learners and faculty colleagues.

Conclusion

In line with the literature on time being a limited resource in instructional planning (Gill, 2023; Julien & Genuis, 2009; Julien & Genuis, 2011; Julien & Pecoskie, 2009; Nichols Hess, 2020; Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2015), the study's participants all expressed concern about lacking time in their work schedules for instruction-related searching, causing them to make cost-benefit judgements on an expedited timeline. Personal feelings of self-doubt or inadequacy also obfuscated the participants' instructional planning, which has been documented in the literature (Julien & Genuis, 2009). However, years of job experience and teaching practice can alleviate some of these pressures (Julien & Genuis, 2011) and such was the case for the participants. In terms of information resources, existing instructional materials found on institutional repositories, like Microsoft Teams and OneDrive, were the most trusted and commonly used amongst this study's participants, which aligns with Gill's (2023) findings on the importance of sharing instructional materials between librarians. Instructional librarians' information practices are also influenced by both disciplinary faculty members and fellow librarians. As Julien and Pecoskie (2009) assert, academic librarians rely on the information provided to them by the faculty members requesting their instruction, and the study's participants would often refer to this information to ensure they were following the ideal information scent in the instructional planning process. The study's participants also benefitted from supportive relationships with more experienced colleagues to guide their information seeking and retrieval while planning for instruction, hearkening to Nichols Hess' (2020) findings on the subject.

Speaking to information science more broadly, the present study begins to address a gap in the literature. While academic librarian's information behaviours and practices in the context of work tasks have been studied at length (Nel, 2020; Tucker, 2014), little attention has been paid to the behind-the-scenes work of instructional planning. With regards to information foraging, previous studies have explored the information foraging habits of undergraduate students in the context of curiosity-driven learning (Kedrick et al., 2023), gaming (Avvisati & Borgonovi, 2023), and digital library environments (Lin & Zhang, 2025). Information foraging research has been dominated by publications from the field of computer science, resulting in limited social science writing on the topic (Nwagwu, 2024, p. 139), and so academic librarians' ability to forage for instructional information in digital spaces represents a novel frontier in information foraging. Based on the study's findings, academic librarians exhibit similar information behaviours in their instructional

preparation tasks as they do in their non-instructional search tasks. Following the information foraging metaphor, academic librarians carry baskets with them, like their lesson plans or PowerPoint slides, to berry patches, which represent their trusted information resources. The information scents that they follow are generally informed by their faculty colleagues and fellow instructional librarians. They then judiciously pick berries to fill their baskets based on their dietary needs, which represent the requirements of the information task. In order of priority, they will first pick through existing instructional materials housed on institutional repositories, then library databases, before moving on to broader Internet searches. Instructional librarians are information foragers who take pleasure in the information retrieval process and assess instructional resources based on cost-benefit analyses, all while prioritizing completion of the instructional preparation task.

From a methodological standpoint, the thematic narrative proved to be a useful tool for both storytelling and research analysis purposes. In traditional social scientific writing, the writing-up process can feel formulaic, in the sense that each original data point must be connected to as much existing research as possible, resulting in a product that reads less like a story, and more like a *show and tell*. However, in writing the thematic narrative, original research findings and the existing literature must coalesce into impactful, yet economically written, units. This writing style forces the author to engage deeply with both their own research data and the existing literature. In the coding process, the author must sift through their data with a fine-toothed comb in hopes of identifying throughlines which bring together the individual accounts of their research participants. Each component of the excerpt-commentary unit must then be judiciously considered, crafted, and placed to develop a compelling story that is academically sound, flows coherently and accurately represents the worlds of its participants. The writing-up process requires the researcher to build an intimate relationship with the ethnographic record, but in doing so, the researcher invites the reader into the lives of the ethnographic study's participants thanks to the 'creative tension' that emerges 'between excerpts and analysis' in the writing (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 186).

This study is exploratory and limited in its sample pool of participants (n=3), and as such, its findings should not be used to make sweeping generalizations about the instructional planning process of all academic librarians. Furthermore, none of the librarians in this study were complete newcomers to the profession or crafting entirely new instructional content. Based on the study's findings, the instructional planning process of newly hired librarians generating content for the first time likely differs from that of the study's more seasoned participants. Despite these limitations, the research methodology of short-term ethnography employed in this study offers some professional implications and potential avenues for future research. Instead of a multi-year ethnographic study where the researcher embeds themselves into the social fabric of an institution, short-term ethnography enabled this study to drill down directly to the machinations of this everyday work-related activity. According to the findings, existing instructional materials and institutional repositories are pivotal to facilitating the preparation process. To complement Gill's (2023) investigation where a lack of resource sharing stifled instruction, a future study could investigate contexts where sharing and collaboration have prospered and how this culture of collaboration has positively impacted the instructional preparation experience. Future studies conducted on more participants from a variety of institutions will further concatenate the chain of exploratory studies, allowing 'grounded theory' to emerge from the 'detail, breadth and validity' of the growing body of available research data (Stebbins, 2006, p. 486).

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Jenna Hartel for inspiring me to pursue ethnographic research and sharing her deep knowledge of information science with me. I would also like to thank my research participants for inviting me into their private offices and being so candid in discussing their personal

experiences. Lastly, thank you to the reviewers for their thoughtful comments that improved the rigour and quality of this paper.

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Appendix items

Appendix A. Informed consent letter

Consent Letter for Research

[primary investigator's name]
[institution], [specific faculty]
[institution's address]

Dear [participant],

This consent letter is your invitation to consider participating in research that I am conducting at the [specific faculty], [institution]. This study explores instructional planning process of academic librarians, with a focus on information behaviours and practices.

I will conduct an observation and interview with you concerning the topic above. Combined, both the observation and interview should not take longer than 2 hours. During the observation, notes and photographs will be taken. The interview will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. There is no compensation.

Upon completion of both the observation and the interview, all identifiable information that links you or your employer to the study will be removed. The data will be kept indefinitely. Your name will not appear (a pseudonym will be used) in the final paper. The final paper may be shared for the benefit of the information studies discipline and profession.

I will leave you with a copy of this consent letter and retain one copy for my own records. The only people with access to this consent letter (in addition to you) are representatives from the [institution's research ethics office].

There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study, in fact, there may be benefits of enjoying the process and learning more about yourself and information.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate in any portion of the research, at any time and without penalty. You may decide to withdraw entirely, without any negative impact, within one week of today. In the event that you wish to withdraw, any information collected about you will be immediately destroyed and not used in the study.

If you have any questions regarding this study, you can contact me by email at [email]. You may also contact the [institution's research ethics office] at [email] or [phone number], [research protocol #] for reference.

Thank you in advance for considering participation in this research project.

Sincerely,
[primary investigator's name]

Participant Name (Please Print): _____

Participant Signature: _____

Appendix B. Shooting guide for photographic inventory

Photographic Inventory Shooting Guide

- 5-15 photos per field site
- Focused on your instructional planning process
- Degrees of resolution: the office/workspace > the desk > documents (both virtual and physical)
- Initiated by the observer or invited by the informant, for example:
 - Observer: “May I take a photo of (object/item/space)?”
 - Informant: “Would you like to take a photo of (object/item/space)?”
- Photographic elicitation: Informants may be asked to describe or explain photos taken during the observation in further detail, later during the semistructured interview

Appendix C. Semi structured interview guide with photographic elicitation

Semi structured Interview Guide

Grand-tour question

- In general, how do you experience (i.e., thoughts, feelings, behaviours, etc.) the instructional preparation process?

Mini-tour question

- More specifically, how did you experience preparing for the instructional session that I observed?

Questions about information

- You may consult various information resources (i.e., email communications, lesson plans, PowerPoint slides, web searches, etc.) in the instructional preparation process. Which of these resources are the most important to you and why?
- Let's say you are preparing for an instructional session; you have all your tabs open on your computer. How would you characterize/describe your behaviour when consulting these various information resources?
- Photographic elicitation: Looking at this photo/these photos (taken during the observation), what ideas, thoughts or emotions come to mind for you?

Appendix D. Titles of integrative memos

Integrative Memo Index

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. (Berry)Picking Participants | 5. “Am I Good Enough?” and Other Questions |
| 2. Lesson Plans, Printouts and Staplers, oh my! | 6. No Need to Reinvent the Wheel |
| 3. Tabs on Tabs on Tabs | 7. Gleaning for Instruction |
| 4. Slides on Slides on Slides | |