

## **“You Can’t Learn It in School”: Field Experiences and Their Contributions to Education and Professional Identity**

## **« Ça ne s’apprend pas à l’école » : Les expériences de terrain et leur contribution à la formation de l’identité éducationnelle et professionnelle**

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**Abstract:** Field experiences are uniquely positioned at the intersection of education and the workplace, making them key sites for the development of professional identity, which results from socialization processes that occur in both education and work environments. To explore how field experiences complement, diverge from, and intersect with classroom experiences, this research analysed interviews with and reports of Canadian library and information science students who did co-op placements in academic libraries. The findings confirm that field experiences are important for linking classroom learning to practice and that they help illuminate the realities of librarianship and clarify the implications of classroom learning for practice.

**Keywords:** academic librarians, co-op programs, field experiences, LIS education, professional identity

**Résumé :** Les expériences de terrain occupent une position unique à l’intersection du système éducatif et du monde du travail. Cela fait d’elles des lieux-clés du développement de l’identité professionnelle, qui résulte elle-même des processus de socialisation qui se produisent aussi bien dans l’éducation que dans les milieux de travail. Pour explorer la façon dont les expériences de terrain complètent, s’écartent, et s’entrecroisent avec les expériences en classe, cette recherche a analysé des entrevues et des rapports d’étudiants en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l’information au Canada qui ont fait des stages coopératifs dans des bibliothèques universitaires. Les résultats confirment que les expériences de terrain sont importantes pour faire le pont entre l’apprentissage en classe et la pratique, et qu’elles contribuent à éclairer les réalités de la bibliothéconomie et à clarifier les implications pour la pratique de l’apprentissage en classe.

Mots-clés : bibliothécaires universitaires, programmes coopératifs, expériences de terrain, formation en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information, identité professionnelle

### Introduction

Field experiences (FEs) are a relatively common component of professional education programs, such as education, social work, nursing, medicine, and librarianship. The primary purpose of FEs is to provide a link between theory and practice, and in most professional programs these practical experiences are seen as a critical component of a student's education. Professionals and scholars have also recognized the potential of FEs to enhance library and information science (LIS) education (Ball 2008; Juznic and Pymm 2011), especially when they are a true reflection of the professional environment (Berg, Hoffmann, and Dawson 2009).

Another important feature of FEs is their potential contribution to the development of professional identity. Professional identity is the set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences that contribute to people's definition of themselves in professional roles (Schein 1978). The development of professional identity is a result of the socialization processes that occur in both education and work environments, and FEs are uniquely positioned at the intersection of education and the workplace.

The study presented here is part of a larger study exploring the professional identity of academic librarians. In this study, we aim to answer the research question: as key periods of professional identity development, how do FEs complement, diverge from, and intersect with classroom experiences?

### FEs in LIS education

FEs vary greatly in terms of length and format, as well as the nature of students' responsibilities. In LIS education, there is no clear standard for the format of FEs that students participate in: *practicum*, *internship*, *work-study*, *co-op placement*, *FE*, and *service learning* are all terms that have been used to describe a student's practical learning experience (Grogan 2007; Rothstein 1968). Table 1 shows the variety of FEs across the eight Canadian universities that offer the professional masters degree in librarianship or information science.

In this study, we focus on the co-op placement because co-ops closely resemble the experience of working as a professional. In a co-operative education program, students alternate periods of study with periods of paid work experience. Other distinguishing features of co-op programs are that students engage in productive work, not merely observation; work placements are monitored by the home institution; and students' performance on the job is supervised and evaluated by the employer (Canadian Association for Co-operative Education 2009).

In the LIS literature, recent publications have generally agreed that FEs are valuable for students. Researchers have evaluated student experiences of FEs in

Table 1. Field experiences (FEs) in LIS programs in Canada

University	Title of FE	Length of FE	Credit Units	Required
Dalhousie University	Practicum	One term, <sup>a</sup> 100 total hours	None	Yes <sup>b</sup>
McGill University	Practicum	One term, 10 hours/week	3 cu	No
University of Alberta	Practicum	One term, 100 hours	3 cu	No
University of British Columbia	Practicum	Minimum 2 weeks	None	Yes <sup>c</sup>
University of British Columbia	Co-op	One or two terms, full time	None	No
University of British Columbia	Professional Experience	One term, 10 hours/week	3 cu	No
Université de Montréal	Internship ( <i>le stage</i> )	One term, 36 days, 3 days/week	6 cu	Yes <sup>d</sup>
University of Ottawa	Co-op	Two terms	12 cu	No
University of Toronto	Practicum	One term, 105 hours or 3 weeks	3 cu	No
University of Western Ontario	Co-op	One or two terms, full time	None	No

Source: Course listings found on MLIS program websites.

<sup>a</sup> A term is 12–14 weeks.

<sup>b</sup> Required unless the student gains the equivalent of four months' suitable employment while attending the school.

<sup>c</sup> Required for students who began their MLIS before September 2011.

<sup>d</sup> Students may apply for exemption from the internship if they have had at least six months' professional work experience, full time or equivalent, within the last three years.

order to elicit students' perspectives on what constitutes a relevant and beneficial FE. Commonly reported benefits include gaining hands-on, "real-world" work experience; interacting with professional librarians, being mentored, and building contacts for the future; and being able to put theory into practice (Damasco and McGurr 2008; Ferrer-Vinent and Sobel 2011; Kelsey and Ramaswamy 2005; Leonard and Pontau 1991; Sargent, Becker, and Klingberg 2011). Samek and Oberg's analysis of students' reflective papers found that in addition to learning practical skills on their FEs, students also learned how to "think like professionals" (1999, 308). Students desire a FE that reflects the reality of professional practice and socializes them into the professional environment.

At the same time, researchers studying the experiences of LIS students identified several opportunities for improving FEs, which can be summarized as the overarching need to balance structure and freedom. Students want their FEs to have the structure of detailed goal-setting, focused mentoring, tangible feedback, and the chance to take on a project that would lead to a concrete end product (Damasco and McGurr 2008; Ferrer-Vinent and Sobel 2011; Kelsey and Ramaswamy 2005; Leonard and Pontau 1991; Sargent, Becker, and Klingberg 2011). Concurrently, they desire more responsibility for carrying out tasks, more voice in choosing projects to take on, and more opportunities to do professional work rather than clerical or paraprofessional tasks. This need to balance

structure and autonomy in LIS FEs was recognized as early as 1936 by Ernest Reece: "fieldwork often has seemed faultily planned and carelessly directed, and [...] sometimes it has resulted in casual treatment and waste of time, and even exploitation and neglect" (quoted in Grogan 2007, 18). This sentiment was echoed many years later in the Canadian Library Association's report from the National Summit on Library Human Resources: FEs "can't be exploitative for students, [and] must provide practical, useful, meaningful employment" (The Intersol Group 2009, 56). The challenge of developing a balanced yet structured FE has persisted for more than six decades.

LIS publications have also addressed the experiences of host institutions; these articles were written by academic librarians who were motivated to provide better placement experiences for FE students. Leonard and Pontau (1991) and Kelsey and Ramaswamy (2005) proposed guidelines for librarians to consider when supervising students on FEs. These guidelines were based primarily on the authors' experiences of hosting students and attempted to address the challenges discussed above. The fact that the same challenges persist over multiple decades points to the complexity of the FE environment, with often competing needs among LIS programs, students, and host institutions. It also perhaps indicates that, in the area of FEs, librarians are not reading the library literature and adjusting their practices according to what they read or, at a minimum, that there is a need for better information-sharing among host institutions.

The body of literature addressing FEs has focused on the experiences of FE students and host librarians. While many of the authors suggest that there is a connection between theory and practice, very few publications explore the nature of that connection or how best to balance theory and practice. The connections between theory and practice as reflected in both the classroom and the FE have not been well examined in the LIS setting. One notable exception is a study by Sargent, Becker, and Klingberg, who solicited feedback from librarians who had supervised students as well as from LIS faculty. The researchers noted that librarians "observed interns applying what they learned in classes to their team projects" (2011, 32) and were aware that students were applying their FE projects to their class projects. Interestingly, they did not comment on whether faculty noticed these connections between the classroom and the FE, only that faculty felt that the FEs were "valuable" experiences.

A theme that emerges prominently from the research is LIS students' overwhelming desire for practical experience as part of their education (Cherry et al. 2011; Prytherch 1982; Samek and Oberg 1999; Sare, Bales, and Neville 2012). This is not unique to LIS education but is a common feature of educational programs that lead students towards a definite professional job and professional association. While, at first glance, this desire for practical experience speaks to the value of FEs in professional education, there is also a further, significant implication for professional identity development: professional identity may be closely linked with performing specific activities that are seen as core to the profession in question.

### **Professional identity development**

Professional identity for librarians, in its broadest sense, answers the question: what does it mean to think of oneself as a librarian? More specifically, professional identity is the set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences that contribute to people's definition of themselves in professional roles (Schein 1978). It is "a way of being and a lens to evaluate, learn and make sense of practice" (Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012, 374). Very few studies have examined the notion of professional identity for librarians; there is far more literature that discusses professional image.

Researchers studying librarians' professional identity have focused on librarians' identification as teachers. Walter's 2008 exploratory study of librarians and teacher identity found that teaching was central to librarians' work, and not just teaching in the classroom but teaching as applied to any public services activity. Julien and Genuis (2011) surveyed librarians across Canada to explore their experiences of the teaching role. They found that librarians who most strongly viewed instructional work as integral to their professional identity were more likely to be those who had been formally prepared for teaching through their education and who expected their work as a librarian to include teaching. These findings provide a counterpoint to the writing from thirty years earlier of Pauline Wilson (1979), who challenged librarians' claim of a teacher identity. She called for librarians to stop identifying with the teaching profession and, instead, to develop "a professional identity that is understandable and believable not only to themselves but to others" (Wilson 1979, 160). While this research has looked at one piece of librarians' identity, an attempt to examine a holistic description of librarians' professional identity has yet to be provided in the literature.

While there is little research specifically examining the overall professional identity of librarians, researchers have examined LIS student perceptions of librarianship and the experiences of new librarians. Across this research, the concept of socialization into the profession is a common theme. For students, the LIS classroom is an opportunity to become integrated into a community of library professionals, and therefore to become socialized to certain aspects of the profession (Cherry et al. 2011; Jones, Greene, and Ruhala 1993; Reid et al. 2008; Sare, Bales, and Neville 2012; Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012). Socialization continues for new librarians, as they learn "on the job" what they did not or could not learn in library school, such as organizational culture, library-specific policies, tenure requirements, or even specific skills such as collection development (Oud 2008; Sare, Bales, and Neville 2012). In addition to socialization processes, student perceptions of librarianship are shaped as they have opportunities to reflect on and evaluate their experiences of the profession, to adapt and adjust their conceptualizations of the profession, or to experience critical incidents that shape their views (Mardis 2007; Samek and Oberg 1999; Sare, Bales, and Neville 2012).

Similar themes emerge from research on professional identity and identity formation in other fields, such as social work, education, business, and medical professions, where researchers have studied new professionals as well as students

on FEs. Professional identity develops as students or new professionals are socialized into the values and behaviours of the profession (Cornelissen and van Wyk 2007; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann 2006), as they are able to learn about and enact or "try on" new roles (Angot, Malloch, and Kleymann 2008; Baker and Pifer 2011; Ibarra 1999), as they start to embody the practice of their profession and take on specific associated activities (Grealish and Trevitt 2005; Timostsuk and Ugaste 2010; Wong and Pearson 2007), and as they develop relationships with professionals who can serve as role models, give feedback, and be part of a support network (Baker and Pifer 2011; Ibarra 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann 2006). Both education and work are key sites for professional identity development, and FEs provide an interesting intersection between the two.

Finally, two reviews of research on professional identity development outside of librarianship provide a broad overview on the topic. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) identified four features of teachers' professional identity formation: it is an ongoing process; it depends on both the person and the context in which they find themselves; it consists of sub-identities, which the individual must be able to harmonize in order to achieve a clear identity; and, for ongoing learning, it is important for teachers to be active in professional development. Trede, Macklin, and Bridges (2012), reviewing the literature on professional identity development in higher education, identified three aspects of professional identity: first, professionals develop skills, knowledge, values, and behaviours that look like those of other professionals in the field; second, in doing so, they become identifiably different from those who are not part of that profession; and, third, they identify themselves with their profession. The development of professional identity appears to be predictable and observable across the professions; however, the professional identity development of librarians has not been well explored.

## Methods

Several prior studies examining the formation of professional identity in (non-LIS) professional students informed the methods used in the current study (Grealish and Trevitt 2005; Niemi 1997; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann 2006; Reybold 2003). The researchers conducted qualitative thematic content analysis on two data sources: semi-structured interviews with students in masters in library and information science (MLIS) programs who had recently completed a co-op placement in an academic library, and the co-op reports of these students.

In the interviews, participants were asked questions related to three broad themes: their experiences and daily activities during their co-op placement, their perceptions of their own professional identity, and their professional goals and aspirations. The participant-driven nature of the semi-structured interview format allowed the researchers to gather a full understanding of the participants' experiences.

The reports analysed for this study were written as part of the students' fulfilment of their program's requirements for completion of the co-op placements.

Students are expected to complete written assignments as part of their co-op, in the form of either structured reports (Faculty of Information and Media Studies n.d.) or “career-building assignments” (School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies n.d.). The co-op reports and the career-building assignments have similar structures in that they ask students to describe the library context in which they are doing their placement and to reflect on the nature of the work they are doing. For simplicity, *co-op reports* will be the term used throughout this article. The co-op reports provided additional descriptions of the students’ work environment and responsibilities during the placement. Using report analysis as a method of data collection helped to ensure the internal validity of students’ activities during their co-op placements.

The study’s population was Canadian MLIS students who had recently completed a co-op placement in an academic library. Calls for participants were sent at times of the year when students would be returning from placements, so that interviews could be conducted when their memories were fresh, to capture reflections that were as accurate and complete as possible. Participants were recruited from the University of British Columbia (UBC) and the University of Western Ontario (Western) between March 2010 and May 2011.<sup>1</sup> Staff at Western’s Faculty of Information and Media Studies and UBC’s School of Library, Archival and Information Studies assisted with recruitment.

The researchers interviewed sixteen students, at which point saturation of the data was reached and no further themes were found in the data (Seale 2004). Because of the researchers’ proximity to Western and the necessity of conducting the UBC interviews by telephone, it was expected that the majority of participants would be from Western, and in fact fifteen were from Western and one was from UBC.<sup>2</sup>

A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data from interviews and co-op reports (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Both researchers coded interview transcripts and co-op reports to identify preliminary themes that emerged from the data. The themes were further refined and clarified through repeated analysis of the data and confirmation between researchers. The method of analysis for this study follows the iterative analysis model described by Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann (2006) in their work on professional identity construction in medical residents. As anticipated, the co-op reports validated and elaborated on topics discussed in the interviews; the major difference between the interviews and reports was that students had adopted a much more formal tone in the reports and were more likely to present a uniformly positive impression of their placement experiences. This difference is not surprising since the reports were prepared in fulfilment of program requirements.

### **Participants**

Summary data about the study’s sixteen participants are presented in table 2, including sex, size of the host institution in terms of full-time student enrolment, and length of the co-op placements. The host institutions were in four different provinces, and four institutions hosted two participants each, at different times.

Table 2. Summary data about participants and host institutions

Sex	Size of Host Institution (Enrolment)	Length of Co-op Placement
Male: 4 students	Small (4,000–10,000): 2 students	4 months: 6 students
Female: 12 students	Medium (10,000–22,000): 8 students	8 months: 10 students
	Large (over 22,000): 4 students	

**Results**

From the two data sources, four themes emerged that provide insight into the ways that FEs relate to classroom education and contribute to the development of librarians' professional identity: (1) the relationship between theory and practice, (2) the need for and availability of training outside the classroom, (3) the authenticity of the professional experience, and (4) the importance of working as an equal with librarians.

Participants' comments will be presented here with pseudonyms. Individual experiences are fundamental to this research, and therefore the use of pseudonyms is a way to acknowledge that "each student who participated is a real person, with their own unique life experience to draw on" (Grealish and Trevitt 2005, 143).

*Relationship between theory and practice*

Students provided examples of times when their placements had both confirmed and challenged what they had learned from their classroom education. Unsurprisingly, students identified the classroom as the venue where they learned about the theoretical foundations of librarianship. This echoes what others have found (Cherry et al. 2011; Coleman 1989; Sargent, Becker, and Klingberg 2011). In their descriptions of this theoretical foundation, students referred to learning about the global and historical "big picture" of librarianship. They talked about being given an overview of the field and a grounding in the main concepts of librarianship, such as collection development or intellectual freedom. In their introduction to these concepts, students felt that the classroom presented them with ideal cases and neat, tidy categorizations. As Maggie observed, "[W]hen you're working in a library [...] you don't necessarily have time to sit back and [...] talk about these big existential issues like the economics of information—but I mean I think that that's why you have to do it as a part of your studies."

Students also described the classroom experience as a presentation of individual puzzle pieces, that is, discrete components of librarianship. On their placements, they became aware of how those puzzle pieces fit together and what that meant for the practice of librarianship. In Emily's words, "you're having kind of a smattering of different topics [...] and it's valuable, but disjointed. [...] The nice thing about the co-op was that [...] you see how they fit together and what it means practically to be a librarian." Similarly, Juznic and Pymm (2011) found that students described their co-op placements as helping to fit puzzle pieces together.



Some students were surprised by the resulting picture. For example, they had not expected to observe and, in some cases, experience, the high level of professional autonomy that academic librarians have in their daily work. Students also remarked on the breadth of responsibility that librarians had in their roles. Along with a lack of awareness of the self-directed nature of librarians' work, students were not aware of the range of roles of academic librarians. They had been aware of reference librarian and subject librarian roles but little else beyond those. They had also expected more compartmentalization of librarians' roles and instead found that individuals "did it all." Matthew's comment was that "the sheer volume of work [...] that [...] that's a little bit [...] okay, that's something I'm not prepared [...] you know, a never ending stream of work."

The co-op placements also revealed aspects of librarianship that had not been clear from the students' classroom experiences. Notably, students said that they saw the "inner workings" of libraries and were given much greater insight into and understanding of academic libraries' structure and organization. Students also gained first-hand experience of the extent to which librarianship is a "people profession" and of the importance of soft skills such as adaptability, flexibility, and communication. Several students remarked that these soft skills can't be taught in a classroom; for them, this spoke to the value of co-op placements as part of their MLIS education.

Overall, students expressed that experiencing librarianship was different from learning about it in the classroom. This difference in experience was expressed in two ways. In one way, experiencing librarianship clarified students' understanding of concepts and principles they had learned in the classroom, as when Emily said, "I found myself many times in my co-op thinking to myself, 'Oh, so this is what they were talking about' in library school or [...] 'Oh, usage statistics,' you know, 'they're really important.' [Laughs] I was told that, but now I know why." The concepts that were discussed in the classroom were experienced by students as they exist in practice.

In another way, students felt that they only really learned about how to be librarians because of the experience on their placements; for example, Matthew stated, "[Y]ou learn more about reference from doing it than from that course." The co-op allowed for skills learned in theory to be solidified in practice.

#### *Need for and availability of training outside classroom*

While students said that they craved the practical experience of librarianship in order to fully understand the profession, most students declared that they needed little, if any, training for that experience. As Ophelia said, "I feel [...] there was no training. [Laughs] [...] But that was adequate." Rather, the practice of librarianship seems to be something that students feel they can learn on the job, or that they can simply *do* without first needing to learn specific skills or concepts, as when Joy said, "I heard over and over again that 'oh, it doesn't matter you'll learn on the job.'" Students clearly saw the workplace, not the classroom, as the venue for learning how to do activities associated with librarianship.

Although few students identified an explicit need for training on their placements, several forms of training emerged as important components of their co-op placements. Many students spoke of shadowing or observing librarians, for example, during reference desk shifts or instruction sessions. Isabelle explained this as: "it wasn't training one on one, but just by watching how they taught, watching how they did things." Some students were given a general orientation to library staff and specific procedures, or a tour of the physical library space. Some, particularly those students whose placements were in health sciences libraries, described training on the use of specific databases, which was arguably the most formal, structured training provided to students.

Perhaps the most prevalent kind of training was the opportunity to ask questions and seek help as needed. Ophelia described her training as "not really any formal training, but I [...] always had the sense, I mean, throughout the 8 months, if I ever had a question I felt completely comfortable asking anybody." In this way, students perceived a collegial learning environment in their host libraries. They frequently spoke of being comfortable with asking questions when they needed help, and they said that the librarians they worked with both encouraged them to ask questions and took the time to answer their questions. Because of this comfort with asking questions when they didn't know what to do, students also described their placements as a safe place to experiment. In some cases, students took on projects that were new to the library, and there was no established "expert" they could turn to; however, these students still spoke of feeling able to ask questions and work through them together with librarians.

Students described opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities during their co-op placements in academic libraries (described in more detail below). They expressed eagerness to participate in the diversity of work experience offered to them and felt that the co-op environment was a safe place to experiment with ideas and concepts, as illustrated by Emily's comment that "the learning that I experienced in my co-op was done in a safe place where I was expected to be learning and [...] to make mistakes." Students expressed appreciation for experiential learning that took place in the safe environment during their co-ops.

#### *Authenticity of the professional experience*

Students' broad areas of responsibilities and a description of the associated activities are captured in table 3. Most of the areas of responsibility are reflected in the courses offered in the MLIS programs at both UBC and Western: Collection Management, Instructional Role of the Librarian, Marketing in Information Organizations, Foundations of Information Sources and Services (i.e., reference services), Research Methods, and Web Design and Architecture, among others. The areas of professional development and operational or paraprofessional support are not directly related to courses in these MLIS programs, although it is likely that some of the operational support activities, such as committee work, would be addressed in the schools' required courses on Management of Information Organizations. In addition, both MLIS programs offer a course on Academic Libraries. The close connection between the courses offered and the activities students

Table 3. Roles and activities undertaken by students on co-op placements

Area of Responsibility	Specific Activities
Collection management	Selected materials for the collection Weeded materials from the collection Analysed reference collections Carried out collection assessments for program reviews Compared database contents Assisted with digitization initiatives
Information literacy instruction <sup>a</sup>	Observed, assisted with, taught, or co-taught in-class instruction sessions Created screencast tutorials Worked on an instruction assessment tool Created or marked student assignments
Marketing and outreach	Created displays, posters, or brochures Provided tours Wrote newsletters or articles Planned and hosted events Managed social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook)
Operational and paraprofessional support	Attended library staff meetings Participated on committees Performed data entry Assisted with project work Worked in the archives
Professional development	Provided workshops or created online tutorials for library staff Attended conferences and workshops
Reference	Provided reference services, both in-person and virtual reference
Research and scholarship	Collected and analysed data about library services and operations Worked with librarian colleagues on the librarians' research projects Presented or submitted for publication
Web development	Worked on website redesign teams Conducted a card sorting study Updated web pages

<sup>a</sup> Students worked on instruction for both faculty and students, and it was both general and course specific. In some cases the students developed the material, and in other cases they worked from pre-developed material.

experienced on their placements further highlights the ways in which classroom education and practical experiences complement each other.

While every student had a unique experience with a unique combination of the activities captured in table 3, there were several themes that ran through students' descriptions of their day-to-day work. When students described their co-op experience, the most prominent sentiment shared by interviewees was that their work and daily activities were reflective of the work done by professional librarians. Ophelia said, "I was pretty much doing what the rest of them were in terms of, you know, reference and information literacy and projects and [...] and even scholarship." As evidenced by this quote, students wanted to list the types of tasks they completed that reflected the professional work of librarians.

The perception of the equivalency of work was reinforced by the level of autonomy that students were afforded. In Caroline's co-op report, she said she felt "very lucky to work with the kind of team that not only listens to the co-op student's ideas, but also allows her to follow through on them." She and other students spoke of their autonomy in relation to choosing the projects they worked on, working independently, and exercising flexibility with their time.

While there was an expressed desire for equivalency and autonomy, interviewees disclosed multiple examples where the work they described better aligned with the responsibilities of paraprofessional staff. This included tasks that could be classified as clerical in nature, such as transcription, printing, or searches for images. Students often completed tasks that required knowledge or awareness of what was going on in the host library but not necessarily a professional librarian's broader, big-picture understanding of libraries in general. In most of these cases, students were aware that the work was more paraprofessional, as when Isabelle said, "I think interns tend to get the, you know, like design this brochure, design this thing. Because it's a good way to learn about the library services and basically anyone can do it."

The paraprofessional role of the co-op student was also reflected in the way in which co-op students conceptualized their job as a supportive role for librarians. Mirko observed, "I just kind of, you know, help people out when [...] when they were sort of [...] had a lot of the high workload." Repeatedly, the supportive role taken on by co-op students was framed in relation to assisting the "busy librarian." As Joy said, "I think that what I was doing sort of reflected things that needed to be done, but that were sort of [...] the other librarians didn't have time for."

Finally, co-op students took a major role in the provision of reference services. Students provided reference services for up to three hours a day during their co-op placement. As LeMaistre et al. (2012) note, reference interactions have declined, librarians have engaged in new opportunities, and paraprofessionals are successfully taking on a more active role in reference services. While most students enjoyed providing reference services and embraced that as a major responsibility of their co-op placement, the students recognized that this work was increasingly being done by paraprofessionals. Diana articulated this with the observation that "staffing the reference desk, the librarians were a big part of that, but [...] well, they *were* a part of that, a bigger part of that was [now] the library associates [...] they were mostly on the desk." In light of these changes, Nancy expressed concern about the primacy of providing reference services for the library during her co-op experience: "[I]f a major component of my placement is reference, it is discouraging to hear colleagues speak of how reference is essentially a dying aspect of the profession."

While providing reference services was a key responsibility assigned to co-op students, the authenticity of the responsibility was questioned.

#### *Importance of working as an equal with librarians*

Students were, overall, very positive about their co-op placement experiences and often attributed their positive experiences to a sense of belonging and being

treated as an equal. This sense of equality was reflected in the resources they were given to do their work (including personal offices for most students), the autonomy they were afforded, and the language they chose to describe their experiences. For example, they often used *we* when describing the library environment or initiatives, demonstrating their strong sense of belonging to the institution. While there was a sense of unity, it is also important to note that there were occasions where students' language reflected that they saw themselves in a more subordinate role, and they spoke of assisting or helping librarians, or being "invited" to attend meetings or participate on committees. This occasional subordinacy did not, however, impede students' sense of belonging.

Students' expressed sense of belonging was strengthened by their perceptions that they had made a real and valuable contribution to the library. Emily spoke about how her work during the placement continued to make a difference to the library even after she had left: "I was producing things that I feel they can use after I'm gone. Not just for me to have the experience, but something that they can keep and make use of. [...] I found that the most rewarding."

Last, students' sense of being equals with librarians was shown in the way they referred to librarians as their "colleagues" and saw themselves becoming part of a community of librarians. For Joy, part of the way this happened was through sharing in conversations about the profession: "[C]onnecting with people who are actually in the profession. [...] I think just having talked with [librarians] [...] we'd sit at the desk and have some very interesting conversations just about librarianship in general. [...] [I]t was kind of interesting to bounce thoughts off some one and just explore."

And as Caroline wrote in her co-op report, "having an experienced department available to talk openly and honestly about professional politics and the 'bigger picture' has been a wonderful education in organizational culture." In an important distinction from their experiences in the classroom, students spoke about this socialization into the community of professional librarians only in relation to their co-op placement experiences. To a large degree, this acceptance into the library community led students to feel as though they were librarians. In Andrew's words, "[I]n a very real sense I felt like a librarian by the end of my term."

## Discussion

This research highlights important ways that FEs complement, intersect with, and diverge from classroom experiences and confirms that co-op placements can play a significant role in librarians' professional identity development. This research found that FEs provide students with an important link between the theory learned in the classroom and practice as experienced in the workplace. Students prefer informal, on-the-job training to learn how to do the activities associated with librarianship, rather than classroom learning. While the classroom is important for imparting to students the theoretical concepts that are foundational to librarianship, FEs are the site where students took on roles and relationships that allowed them to see themselves as part of a community of librarians.

This research reinforces the notion that FEs provide students with an opportunity to make connections between theory and practice. The findings also start to highlight how this link may be manifested for future librarians: practical experiences reinforce and illuminate concepts that students learn about during their coursework. Particularly noteworthy is the nature of this link in instances where classroom learning and practical experience diverged. In these instances, students did not label what they had been taught as "wrong" but rather described divergences as situations where the reality and implications of classroom concepts could be seen only when they were experienced in practice. Whether practice directly converged with the theory or not, the FEs illuminated students' understanding of the realities of librarianship. In terms of professional identity development, these experiences allowed students to adjust their conceptualizations of librarianship (Samek and Oberg 1999). Students were keenly aware that their practical experiences complemented their classroom learning; as Maggie said, "I picked up a lot about the way a library works that you can't learn in school [...] and I actually might argue that I think [FEs] should be required."

This research also supports the importance of informal training, as acknowledged in research by LIS scholars DeVinney and Tegler (1983) and Sare, Bales, and Neville (2012). The relatively high value placed on informal training over formal training or orientation programs may in fact underscore the value of classroom learning for librarians, further reinforcing the link between theory and practice. If much of what librarians do can be learned on the job, then perhaps what distinguishes librarians from other library staff is the foundational theoretical concepts, principles, and values that are acquired from professional education.

The value placed on informal learning also has a potentially important place in librarians' professional identity. First, the priority of and focus on informal training undertaken by students in their co-op placements closely reflects the professional development undertaken by librarians throughout their careers. Second, in relation to librarians at the host institutions, there is an important mirroring between informal training responsibilities, where host librarians guide and answer questions for co-op students, and the daily professional responsibilities of librarians, where they strive to meet their patrons' information needs. As in other studies of professional identity formation (Ibarra 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann 2006), librarians may therefore be serving as role models for students through this informal and collegial approach to training, further shaping students' perceptions of the profession.

In addition to becoming part of a community of helpful librarians, this research highlighted other ways in which students began to negotiate their place in the community of librarians. For example, the sense of having had an authentic work experience on their co-op placements allowed students to see themselves as librarians and begin to take on the roles and experiences associated with librarians. This also reinforces research in social work (Wong and Pearson 2007) and education (Timostsuk and Ugaste 2010) about the importance of taking on specific activities in order to develop professional identity, as well as Ibarra's (1999) findings regarding managers who were able to try on new roles.

In fact, students' sense of being able to see themselves doing librarians' work was so strong that it overrode instances where their tasks were in fact more paraprofessional in nature. Some of the students' responsibilities fell somewhere in between those of paraprofessional library staff and professional librarians; students were often asked to do menial or support tasks, and when they took on projects or work that were similar to those done by librarians, such as preparing or delivering information literacy instruction, it was often a librarian and not the student who had ultimate responsibility for that work. Mirko remarked on this difference: "I felt that I was doing the work that librarians do. [...] [U]ltimately other people were accountable for those projects being completed. So I felt that I was kind of insulated from real responsibility."

This in-between nature of the co-op student's role is likely an appropriate one, given the short-term, transitory nature of the students' employment. In many professional settings (e.g., business, publishing, journalism, and government/politics) it is not uncommon for interns and co-op students to be assigned more menial tasks. Further, while students' activities were sometimes more paraprofessional in nature, the FEs still provided an opportunity for students to understand and adopt the attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences of professional librarians. It was not necessary for them to take on the full responsibility and authority of the profession in order to be able to develop their professional identity. As articulated by numerous students, it was important that the FE was a positive space where it was okay to make mistakes. By being insulated from the full responsibility of the profession, therefore, students were given the opportunity to imagine themselves as professional librarians who could successfully take on that responsibility.

While it was valuable for students to feel that they were doing the work of librarians, it was equally important for them to perceive that they were treated as librarians' equals on their placements. This is an experience that cannot be provided in the classroom; although MLIS programs have a role to play in socializing students into librarianship, they do not provide opportunities for students and librarians to interact as fellow professionals. The inherent power in the instructor-student relationship means that students cannot connect with their instructors as colleagues or peers, even those who were or are practising librarians. Again, students' perception of being equals on their placements was strong enough to override demonstrations of inequality such as being "invited" to attend meetings rather than having such attendance be expected of them. Students could see themselves as part of the community of librarians because of how they were treated by the hosting librarians and library staff. By referring to themselves as part of the hosting institution ("we") and identifying how their work contributed to the library's operations, students demonstrated that they had begun to define themselves as part of the profession of librarianship.

### **Limitations and further studies**

This study's participants were recruited from only two Canadian universities, and students who complete co-op placements in academic libraries are an even

smaller subset of those institutions' MLIS students. The low number of participants was further complicated by the timing of the study; participants were recruited in the years following the 2008 financial crisis, when many academic libraries were tightening their budgets and therefore not hiring co-op students as often as they had been. Since the participants constitute a small subset of Canadian LIS students, the findings are not generalizable to all students in LIS programs. At the same time, the researchers found a high degree of consistency across the study's participants; however, this may be due to the fact that almost all participants were students at Western, and their perspectives may reflect the philosophy and objectives of Western's MLIS program and its co-op program. To confirm the study's findings and extend the research to more LIS students, further studies should include more students from a variety of MLIS programs and could explore how professional identity development is observed for students who go on co-op placements in non-academic library settings, students who participate in other types of FEs, or those who do not participate in any FE.

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory study examined FEs, specifically co-op placements in academic libraries, as an important intersection between the education and practice of librarians. The findings confirm that FEs are important for linking theory and practice and that a key aspect of that link is found in opportunities for FEs to illuminate the realities of librarianship and clarify the realities and implications of classroom learning. Informal training methods predominate and are preferred by students; this both mirrors the continued professional development of librarians and provides opportunities for students to become part of the community of librarians as they seek help from their librarian colleagues. In general, students saw themselves as having had authentic work experiences and as having done the same work as librarians. They felt that they were treated as equals with librarians, which allowed them to start to see themselves as librarians and therefore develop a professional identity as librarians.

For classroom instructors in library schools who influence the LIS curriculum, and for those academic librarians who host and supervise FEs, this understanding of the connections between education and practice may help to ensure that meaningful and relevant FEs are provided for LIS students.

### **Acknowledgement**

This work was funded in part by the Canadian Association of Research Libraries Research in Librarianship grant.

### **Notes**

- 1 At that time, these were the only two Canadian universities that offered a co-op option as part of their MLIS programs.
- 2 Only two students from UBC responded to the call for participants, and only one of them was eligible to participate.



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