

Supporting Mid-career Academic Librarians: A Mixed-methods Study of Professional Development Preferences and Approaches

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Abstract

As mid-career librarians and supervisors, we were motivated to learn how others navigate this lengthy period of their work life, which can span 20 or more years. We queried 15 mid-career academic instruction librarians via a survey and interview to learn what factors motivate their engagement in professional development. Analysis surfaced a recursive relationship between practice and validation composed of internal and climate-based themes that we developed into the Learning Process Framework. We identify practices for libraries to adopt to support a mid-career cohort and to inform institutional training efforts and retention strategies. We also outline practices for mid-career librarians to consider as they navigate strategies for learning and engagement.

Introduction

Mid-career librarians' professional development needs have traditionally been less discussed than the needs of librarians at earlier career stages. However, demographic reports indicate that many library workers are at the middle age and mid-career stage of life (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023), so the ongoing professional development needs of this cohort are an important issue for library administrators and supervisors to explore. The mid-career stage covers a lengthy period of time, and for many librarians this is a time when they can potentially have a significant impact on their organization (West and Galoozis 2023). Workers at the mid-career stage have multiple reasons for wanting to grow and learn professionally, including personal ambitions and a desire to benefit their institutional community (Griffiths, Thompson, and Hryniewicz 2014). Regardless of the reason for wanting to continue their development, mid-career librarians are interested and skilled contributors with the ability to influence organizational culture.

As library supervisors, we were particularly interested in supporting the professional development needs of our employees. For us, that primarily meant academic librarians with

instruction responsibilities. Mid-career instruction librarians face several key professional challenges. For example, they have participated in a high-level shift in how information literacy is conceptualized with the replacement of the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* with the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* in 2016 (Hsieh, Dawson, and Yang 2021). They have experienced a pandemic and the resulting rapid changes in expectations around how instruction is delivered (Lierman, McCandless, and Kowalsky 2022). And they have become more aware of the need to see their pedagogical practices through an equity and inclusion lens (Mallon et al. 2023). Each of these challenges requires significant time and attention to gain new insights and skills and then to implement and assess those practices. However, instruction librarians at this career stage often experience burnout, the pressures of both formal and informal leadership responsibilities, and an increasing distance between their own lived experiences as students (West and Galoozis 2023). More information about the mid-career stage and professional development opportunities for librarians at this career stage can provide managers and supervisors with strategies for supporting their mid-career staff. In this article, we report on a study we conducted to gather input from mid-career instruction librarians so as to better understand how to support their professional development needs.

Literature Review

The mid-career stage does not have a single definition. This stage is sometimes described as an age range, for example, workers who are 35 to 45 years old (Indeed Editorial Team 2023), and sometimes is based on the length of time workers have been in their career, for example, 10 to 25 years (Levine Knies 2017). Regardless of the measurement used, there are some shared assumptions that workers at the mid-career stage will have accumulated a certain level of job expertise, as well as self-reflective skills that help them adapt to changes and gain internal confidence in their work abilities (Bimrose and Brown 2014; Brunetti and Marston 2018). Mid-career definitions also include the assumption that workers will be facing some similar age-related life challenges that may not be directly related to their work. These life challenges may include the possibility of a higher rate of depression (Blanchflower and Oswald 2008) and caregiving responsibilities (Misra, Lundquist, and Templer 2012).

Because of our focus on the mid-career professional development experiences of instruction librarians and the relatively small amount of literature on mid-career librarians' professional development needs, we turned to career development literature in other fields to see if relevant

examples could be found. The teacher training literature provided several relevant models of career support. One model is the Succession of Phases in Teaching described by Huberman (1993). This succession model outlines seven phases teachers can experience during their careers. These seven phases are career entry/exploration, stabilization, experimentation and diversification, reassessment, serenity and relational distance, conservatism and complaints, and disengagement. Huberman assigned ages in roughly 10-year blocks to these stages. For example, the serenity and relational distance phase describes the experiences of 45- to 55-year-olds, and the conservatism and complaints stage is often composed of those teachers in the 50- to 60-year-old age cohort. Workers can progress through these stages linearly, but Huberman notes this is not always the case. Sometimes there are punctuated episodes in which one stage is experienced more strongly than another stage; other times there may be a regression to an earlier stage. This regression may be a positive experience if a teacher is returning to a stage in which they are feeling more energetic or willing to experiment.

Another related model is the Teacher Career Cycle Model (Fessler and Christensen 1992; Maskit 2011). This model has eight stages including preservice, induction, competency building, enthusiasm and growth, stability, career frustration, career wind-down, and career exit. This model doesn't specifically assign age ranges; it also acknowledges that not every teacher goes through each stage and that individual teachers will spend variable amounts of time in a stage for reasons that are not always directly related to their overall length of time in the profession. The Teacher Career Cycle Model begins to explore some of the motivating factors that can encourage teachers to learn and explore not just as new employees, but also once they have gained more experience. For example, teachers in the enthusiasm and growth stage experience a high degree of job satisfaction that prompts them to continue seeking ways to grow as teachers. Conversely, teachers in the stability stage are described as having reached a "plateau" and are less motivated to seek out professional development opportunities (Maskit 2011, 852).

These two career phase models primarily describe individual attitudes toward and experiences of career development and growth. Other determinants of mid-career workers' willingness to engage in continued education include the way the professional development programs are presented and structured. Career services researchers who have explored the motivating factors for continued learning at the mid-career stage across many professions have found that in addition to job satisfaction, workers were motivated to continue learning when they had choice in selecting training activities. Workers also valued on-the-job training because of its clear relevance to their work, and they appreciated work that challenged them to learn (Bimrose

and Brown 2014). Teachers similarly appreciated agency in the professional development choices they could explore. Having the ability to choose a direction and the acknowledgment that their identity and interests as teachers might change throughout their career were important indicators of continued professional development engagement (Brunetti and Marston 2018; Strahan 2016). Another key aspect of successful professional development programs identified by researchers Shulman and Shulman (2004) was the inclusion of intentional time for self-reflection.

Broader sociocultural factors can also influence mid-career professionals' willingness or ability to engage in career development. The everyday influences of mid-career life that often include navigating between various caregiving responsibilities and relationship demands can lead to challenges in work-life balance (Griffiths, Thompson, and Hryniewicz 2014). Other broader social factors also come into play. For example, the gendered nature of professions like teaching and librarianship can sometimes result in a dampening of the agency of women in these professions to explore more educational opportunities or leadership paths (Smith 2011). As with most sociocultural factors, a more nuanced consideration of context is needed, including knowledge of workplace culture, external demands, and personal demands, to better understand an individual's professional development choices (Brunetti and Marston 2018).

In academic librarianship, there are several unique contextual factors about librarians' entry into the field that likely influence their approaches to professional development. One factor is that librarianship is a second (or third) career for many librarians. Among school librarians, 78 percent came to librarianship as a second career (Cockcroft 2023). Another factor is that the graduate-level preparation for many master's of library science or master's of library and information science degrees, the most common degree requirements for librarians, is a professional master's program rather than a program with a thesis requirement, which may not result in the same level of practice pursuing self-directed opportunities to learn needed skills. The emphasis on practical preparation in areas like administration or functional areas of librarianship provides an introduction to the many day-to-day work demands of librarians. However, instruction librarians have long felt that the instruction training provided to them in graduate school has left them underprepared (Brecher and Klipfel 2014; Wang et al. 2021). For academic librarians, who may also have research and teaching responsibilities, the gap in training may require taking on new identities in these areas. Griffiths and collaborators (2014) saw this type of gap in classroom teachers who became faculty educators. Those teachers typically needed to independently pursue gaps in their knowledge to make the transition to their new roles.

While many professional development opportunities exist for academic instruction librarians, including conferences, webinars, professional organizations, professional literature, and communities of practice, mid-career librarians have different levels of interest in and access to these opportunities. As a result, we wanted to learn how mid-career instruction librarians prefer to learn new things and stay engaged in the profession. We also wanted to learn if there were particular stages, or natural ebbs and flows of mid-career life, that affected instruction librarians. To better understand these librarians' experiences, we conducted a study to gather in-depth input from mid-career instruction librarians across the United States and Canada, working at a range of institution types, to inform better support for mid-career instruction librarians.

Methodology

To learn about factors, including curiosity and career stage, that motivate mid-career or experienced librarians' engagement in professional development, we designed a qualitatively driven, mixed-methods study consisting of a survey and an interview (Hesse-Biber and Johnson 2015). The study was approved as exempt by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Oregon State University.

Convenience Sampling

We recruited participants located in the United States and Canada. Participation was limited to English-speaking librarians able to respond to a web-based survey and an online interview, and who carry out instructional activities in an academic setting. We brainstormed a list of 55 potential participants using convenience sampling, in which we sought participants accessible to us (Andrade 2021). Sampling tactics included directly contacting librarians in our professional networks, librarians we knew of from their instruction-focused publications, or librarians we were aware of who had received tenure or full promotion. From the 55 potential participants, we invited 24 to participate by email. Of these, 15 completed the IRB consent form, survey, and follow-up interview. The remaining 9 either declined due to scheduling conflicts or did not respond to the email request.

Parameters for Participants

Our definition for "mid-career" was someone who has worked for at least 10 years in a professional position (Levine Knies 2017). We were mindful of including participants who represented a range of types of academic libraries and who were geographically dispersed across the United States and Canada. We sought participants who either currently work or have worked at an academic institution and whose responsibilities included instruction or instructional

activities. We broadly defined instruction to include reference, consultations, outreach, and creation of web-based content, as well as leading student or staff training.

Of the 15 participants, the institutions represented included four private and eleven public universities. Participants were geographically dispersed: two were located in the Northeast, one in South Canada, five in the Midwest, one in the South, one in the Southwest, two in the Mountain West, and three on the West Coast (this regional overview includes the two Canadian locations).

Survey

Fifteen participants completed the survey, which was the first step in the study process and consisted of multiple-choice and short-answer questions. Questions in the survey asked about how respondents learn new things, which formats lead to more effective learning for them (e.g., online vs. in person, synchronously vs. asynchronously, reading vs. watching a video), what career stage they are at from a provided list, and the professional associations to which they belong (see Appendix A for the survey questions).

Interviews

The next stage of the study was an interview. We held interviews with 15 participants. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and were held on Zoom. The interview questions were sent to participants ahead of time. Questions included follow-up questions based on their responses to the survey to better understand how they use curiosity to learn work-related information, how they learn about new areas or tools in librarianship that may be outside of their day-to-day work, how they incorporate new information into their instruction practice, and how their approach to learning and professional development has changed over time. We also asked participants to comment on what they considered to be the most pressing things for them to learn at this point in their career, as well as what is most pressing for instruction librarians in general to learn about (see Appendix B for the interview questions).

Analysis

We analyzed participants' responses to the survey to look for trends in career stage perceptions, preferences for learning modalities, and commonalities in professional service engagement. We used thematic analysis to generate codes and to develop and refine those codes into themes in NVivo (Braun and Clarke 2006). We iteratively developed the codes after independently reviewing the interview transcripts and then jointly discussing our codes. We then created themes based on our shared and revised codes. Throughout the process, we continued consulting our transcript data and checking if our themes matched the coded segments of our

transcripts. To gain a better understanding of our coding process, see Table 1 for an abbreviated portion of the code comparison process based on four code areas that we used to move toward a conceptualization of the themes. We also consulted the literature to better situate our participants' experiences within other relevant studies. Finally, we grouped our themes into a framework we called the Learning Process Framework, which will be described in a later section.

Table 1. aProgression of the coding process from coding to conceptualization of themes*

Reviewer 1 codes	Reviewer 2 codes	Sub-themes	Internal conditions for learning themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of local colleagues for learning • In-person learning connections • Virtual connections mattered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campus faculty support • Committee work substituted for face-to-face conferences • Community of practice • Learn from expert directly • Observation • Talking with colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing collaborative networks 	Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting skills across career • Assessing an instructional situation to determine success • Established process for work • Evolving instruction methods • Move from mimicking to independence • Practice is important 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment of student learning • Engagement in daily work • Applying what was learned/or a lack of opportunity to apply • Newer duties • Learn by doing • Step-by-step learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application and adaptation 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges mental health • Assessing an instructional situation to determine success • Recognize their own expertise • Sees changes in the higher education landscape • Makes broader connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective practice • Cross-roads • Time management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discernment 	Validation

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding boundaries of enough 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evolving search and learning methods • Am I keeping up • Still engaged • There is always more to do • Conferences give me that new spark 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Want to learn more • Both self-motivated and job expectation • Self-motivated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire to learn

*This table includes a sample based on four coding areas to illustrate the overall process used.

Study Limitations

A limitation of qualitative research based on a small sample size derived from convenience sampling is that findings cannot be generalized to the broader library community (Andrade 2021). This study design also means that results represent a single moment in time of self-reported information. Despite these limitations, we chose to use this method because of the rich depth it provides in examining life and work experiences.

Results

Survey Results

Our survey provided us with an introduction to our participants and served as a jumping-off point for conversations we continued during the interview. We report here the survey results most related to their self-identified career stage and preferences for learning.

Career Cycle Stage

We asked participants what career stage, as modified from the Teacher Career Cycle model (Fessler and Christensen 1992; Maskit 2011), they most identified with. For our study, we focused on five stages of the Teacher Career Cycle model that aligned with the mid-career period: enthusiasm and growth, stability, competency building, career frustration, and career wind-down. The survey included definitions that we adapted for librarians. Most respondents identified with the enthusiasm and growth (seven) and the stability (six) career stages, while two identified with the competency building stage. No respondents identified with the career frustration or wind-down stages (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participants' selection of a career cycle stage

Career Cycle stage and definition	No. of participants	Years as a librarian for each respondent
Enthusiasm and Growth: At this stage, librarians reach a high level of competence in their work and continue to progress professionally. Librarians often love their work at this stage, seeking out new ways to enrich their instruction and enjoy a high level of job satisfaction.	7	8, 14, 17, 18, 20, 21, 21
Stability: At this stage, librarians' careers often reach a plateau. They do what is expected of them, and sometimes little more. Librarians often find little value in professional development programs and are seldom motivated to participate in professional programs.	6	12, 12, 13, 13, 15+, 16
Competency Building: At this stage, librarians are striving to improve their instruction skills and abilities. They seek out new materials, methods, and strategies. At this stage, librarians are often receptive to new ideas; they often regard their work as challenging and are eager to improve their skills.	2	16, 22

Learning Preferences

We wanted to know how librarians prefer to learn new concepts or skills for their daily work. We asked about modality preferences and whether their learning was prompted by their institution or based on their own interest. Unsurprisingly, when offered the option to choose a more situational response like “both” or “it depends,” most participants chose these options. However, there were some modality preferences that received more definitive responses. Six participants preferred to learn in person, and nine participants preferred to choose learning opportunities based on their own interests (see Table 3).

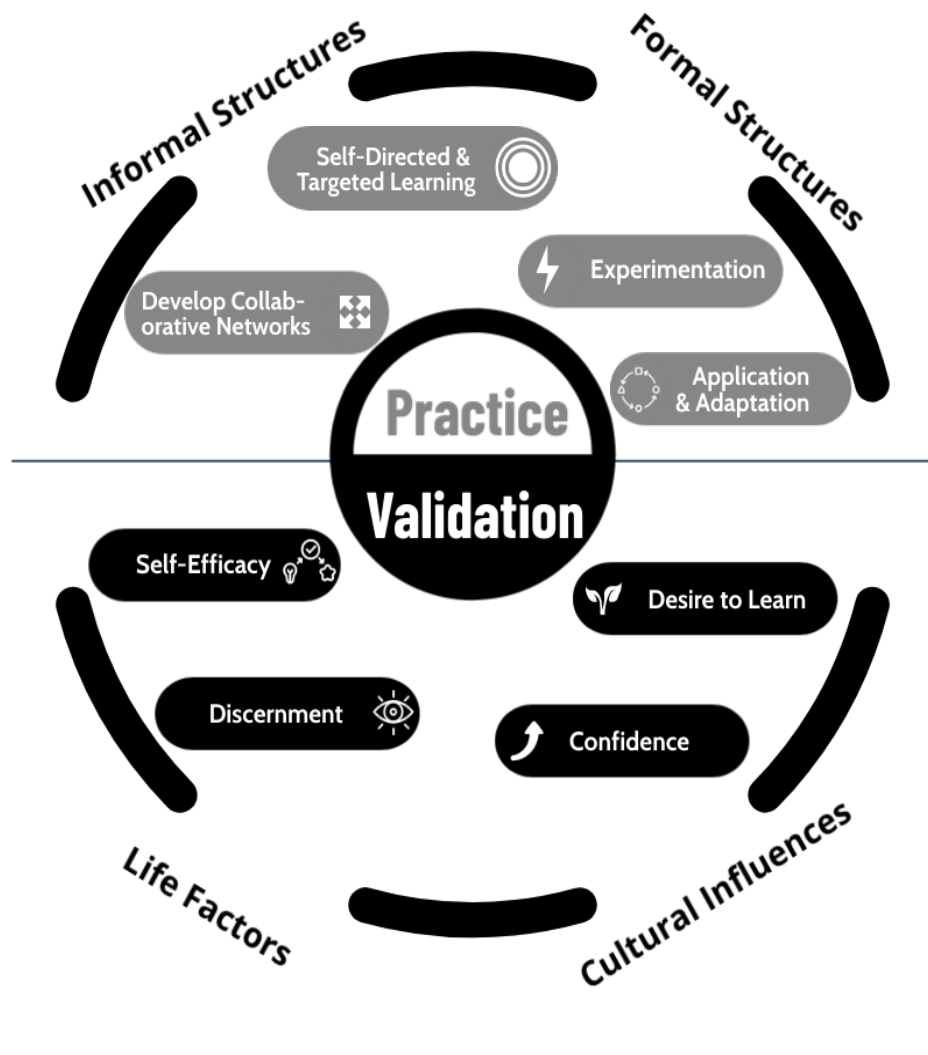
Table 3. Participants' modality preferences to achieve deeper and more effective learning for work-related information

I prefer to learn...	
On my own	1
With others	1
Both	6
It depends	7
Online (either synchronously or asynchronously)	1
In Person	6
Both	2
It depends	6
Online asynchronously (e.g., self-paced tutorial)	3
Online, synchronously (e.g., a webinar or presentation)	4
Both	1
It depends	7
On my own (e.g., through trial and error)	2
Structured learning experience (e.g. class, webinar, or workshop)	0
Both	9
It depends	4
Reading	0
Watching someone else	0
Both	11
It depends	4
Based on my own interests	9
When prompted as a specific initiative from leadership	0
Both	3
It depends	3

Interview Themes and Framework

Based on our thematic analysis of the interview responses, we developed the Learning Process Framework (see Figure 1). The Learning Process Framework has two categories of themes: climate-based conditions for learning and internal conditions for learning. The internal conditions for learning themes represent mid-career librarians' self-directed approach to the learning process and include two core themes with four sub-themes. The climate-based condition themes include four areas representing the sociocultural aspects that influence a mid-career librarian's approach to learning over time, but over which they may have limited control. We will describe both categories of themes from the Learning Process Framework in the following section.

Figure 1. The Learning Process Framework



Climate-based Conditions for Learning Themes

The outer circle of our learning process framework acknowledges the impact of climate-based factors, which are comprised of sociocultural elements from the workplace, home and family life, and broader cultural influences. These factors often combine to influence how librarians approach professional development throughout the mid-career span. Many of these factors may be outside of the employee’s direct control but can still significantly affect willingness or ability to engage in professional development. The four climate-based themes for learning we identified from the interviews with our participants were *Informal Structures*, *Formal Structures*, *Cultural Influences*, and *Life Factors*.

Informal Structures

The *Informal Structures* theme is based on noncodified networks, social structures, and implicit knowledge in organizations that can result in both opportunities and barriers for mid-career librarians' motivation to learn and engage with new work. An informal structure could come in the form of knowledge of job flexibility. For example, several of our participants acted on the opportunity to choose new roles within their library, and as a result were able to try out new skills or to step away from positions they were no longer energized by. Barriers often came in the form of attitudes or long-held ways of doing things and sometimes resulted in a lack of willingness to pursue new resources or instructional ideas. Often, these implicit barriers were more recognizable when participants were newer at their libraries. These informal barriers can undermine mid-career librarians' willingness to explore new professional paths or instructional approaches.

We have coordinators of different areas, for example, instruction and reference coordinators, and they wanted to move on, and I took over both and was seeing more and more overlap. So that's why I expanded my view of what can fall under instruction. (Participant 9)

They're okay with what I do, no one wants to talk about how we could do something different. That's a departmental thing. (Participant 14)

I got overwhelmed with people thinking things would stay the same—but they haven't, they've already changed. I need to ... try things that are different than just the regular classroom. (Participant 1)

Formal Structures

The *Formal Structures* theme represents participants' reflections on overarching hierarchical structures at their universities or the quality of the leadership in their institutions. These formal organizational structures could result in positive feelings, making participants feel supported and encouraged to engage in exploration and learning. Alternatively, organizational structures could also dampen participants' willingness to pursue new projects or learning opportunities. Reorganizations, interim leaders, and "troubling" department heads were examples of problematic organizational factors at leadership levels. Another organizational factor arose when library leadership misrepresented instruction librarians' goals in campus conversations. The promotion and tenure process is also a formal structure that can have significant impacts on the types of opportunities mid-career librarians receive, as well as the uncomfortable power dynamics they may encounter. A much larger organizational factor was represented by

structures outside the library, such as the academic calendar, that were completely outside of participants' control, but which significantly affected the way library instruction could be offered.

I work at a pretty great place. I know what it's like to work at places that are not so great.... I know there's a lot of complexity.... I know my dean is accountable to other people. But that helps me to understand what I'm dealing with. (Participant 14)

Our administrators are setting us up by saying to campus that we offer the one-shot model. (Participant 7)

There was a power structure. I was tenured, that person [my collaborator] wasn't. So it was important to discuss the power difference. These were structural things I hadn't accounted for that informed those [working] dynamics. (Participant 9)

Part of it is a comfort with having tenure. There is a comfort there, more than I thought there would be. I thought nothing would change, but there is a comfort—maybe a security with it [tenure]. (Participant 15)

Our quarter system, the philosophy of our writing program doesn't allow for that [ways of carrying out library instruction]. (Participant 1)

Cultural Influences

Broader cultural influences such as gender, government policies, historical events, and generational shifts also determined participants' professional activities and contributed to the concept of the *Cultural Influences* theme. As we interviewed participants from both Canada and the United States, we observed some differences between countries in terms of what higher education areas were most pressing to learn about. Another cultural example is the enduring influence of gender norms. As a feminized profession, these gender norms continue to shape how others in academia may perceive librarians and the resulting labor librarians are willing to put into their instruction. Potential generational differences across the librarian workforce were another example of how larger cultural shifts can influence the perception of work and how mid-career librarians learn to interact with colleagues. Finally, current, globally impactful events were a major example of cultural influences at the time of this study, which caused our participants to reflect on what work most mattered to them.

Decolonizing and Indigenous peoples—in Canada, we're further along in that than in the US. There are settlers in Canada who mean well and want to do things right. It shows up in our Truth and Reconciliation [Commission of Canada]. It's in our public work. It shows up for me in using more Indigenous examples in what we teach. (Participant 13)

The gender dynamics—the history department is a lot of older white men—it’s weird. I’m not overcompensating for you not wanting to do this stuff. (Participant 14)

I think you know, I’m GenX—not to make sweeping generalizations—[but often my attitude is] “Oh, you want me to take that on?” That’s what we’re supposed to do. I see in my [graduate student employees], their generation, the quiet quitting thing—I’ve definitely seen an unwillingness. They’re just like ‘no.’ ... You have to figure out what the current expectations are in the workplace. I feel I’ve really struggled with that in the past year. I don’t know how I learn that—by experience, by talking to colleagues? (Participant 3)

But after the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd.... I check my own privilege much more than I used to. That’s something that has changed. Sometimes at work, I’m like—have we learned nothing from the pandemic? (Participant 3)

Life Factors

The *Life Factors* theme reflects the “life” portion of the traditional work-life balance dichotomy. However, for many workers, the divide between work and life is rarely cleanly separated, with both work and life affecting each other. These mid-career librarians felt the impact of caregiving work, which provided focus for their time at work, but also sometimes reduced the amount of extra energy they had for new work ventures. Some of our participants were becoming more aware of how their bodies or minds worked and needed to adapt their way of doing work to allow themselves to work in healthier ways.

Being good at my job only ever got me more work. I’ve been thinking more about my own work-life balance. (Participant 14)

I feel like, probably with me in the last two years, my life has changed pretty dramatically with having a kid. I feel like I have less time to explore the things I’m curious about and to be able to learn more. (Participant 4)

Sometime during the pandemic, I was diagnosed with adult ADHD. I had been talking with other adult colleagues, and another person had been diagnosed, and we talked a lot about it.... It seems like a lot of librarians have it—or maybe that’s anecdotal.... But when I talk about that, I think about how I’m engaged when I’m learning—I’m aware of my attention span and my focus. (Participant 12)

Internal Conditions for Learning Themes

The inner circle of our Learning Process Framework calls attention to mid-career instruction librarians’ engagement in an iterative network of choices, action, and self-reflection as they continue developing new knowledge and skills. There are two main themes in the internal

conditions for learning: *practice* and *validation*. Each of these themes has four sub-themes that inform how instruction librarians may choose to implement new ideas at various points in their practice, as well as how they draw on their sense of self to bolster their decisions about both what to learn and how to learn new things.

Practice

The four sub-themes in the *practice* theme are *application and adaptation*, *experimentation*, *self-directed and targeted learning*, and *develop collaborative networks*. Each of these practice sub-themes interacts with the others to inform how, when, and why librarians in mid-career explore, evaluate, and iterate their work. At earlier career stages, instruction librarians may initially mimic others' ways of working, but as they gain more experience, they adapt and apply examples within their own instructional contexts. The more instruction librarians learn, the more they can then experiment with new techniques that build on those adaptations or try something entirely new. We heard repeatedly from these mid-career librarians that when they wanted to learn something new and then practice that new skill, they were self-directed in their approach. Some participants read about the topic and others watched webinars, but in each case these librarians were taking the initiative to explore new topics. Our participants were also targeted in what they chose to explore. They didn't follow up on every idea that was suggested, and they sought out learning experiences specifically connected to their area of expertise or the area in which they wanted to grow. For example, a participant noted a preference for attending a course on digital humanities rather than a broader academic librarianship conference with a few sessions on digital humanities. While many of our participants regularly attended library conferences sponsored by formal library professional organizations, over time participants observed that they attended primarily to network. Several of our participants gravitated more toward targeted local or regional networks where they knew they could develop longer-lasting connections for discussing new applications for their work. Finally, as these librarians sought out learning opportunities, they increasingly drew on collaborative networks, most commonly turning to coworkers to learn or discuss something new or to conversations with colleagues within regional or subject-specific contexts.

Application and Adaptation

I've gone from a lot of copying-and-pasting instruction and taking direction about what I was supposed to be doing from someone in an administration position. I did a lot of that in the beginning. And instruction is not the most natural thing for me to step into. But over time dissatisfaction with those approaches and seeing others do other things led me to make my own changes. (Participant 2)

I love bringing in new things. If I've taught something the same way 12 times, I'll be super bored and you'll be super bored. But if I've read this fantastic new book on research, then I want to adjust all my teaching for the coming year around what I've learned in this book rather than teach the same way that I have for the past eight years. (Participant 15)

Experimentation

For me, I just give it a try—it's that kinesthetic curiosity in me to just try it and see how it works. And if it doesn't work, I think about why it doesn't work or didn't work and see if it was a particular aspect that didn't work, or if it just wasn't right for that particular class or that particular instructor. (Participant 4)

I'm interested in improving my instruction and making it as good as I can. I constantly revise and reflect on what I do. (Participant 14)

Self-directed and Targeted Learning

That depends on what it is that I'm trying to learn. Am I trying to learn about a case study and someone's experience that they're trying to apply in instruction or is it something technological that I'm trying to learn? If it's learning about someone's experience, then a webinar or conversations or observations. But if it's technological, then I would check out YouTube to learn how to do that more technological aspect. (Participant 4)

When I was first in the profession, I relied more heavily on the field. Like attending ALA [American Library Association], ACRL [Association of College and Research Libraries], and what they offered.... Now I don't look to the [librarianship] field so much. I find it more interesting to look at higher education, WGSS [Women and Gender Studies Section], scholarship of teaching and learning. I use those fields to think about the "what" of the concepts. (Participant 7)

Developing Collaborative Networks

I saw lots of options to explore with joining the [regional] co-op, so I talked with consortial reps and colleagues. I looked at putting together a proposal based on what I learned and with colleagues' feedback. (Participant 9)

Despite not being an extrovert, I always found the "pop into an office" the easiest way to learn and ask questions. (Participant 2)

Validation Theme

The *validation* portion of the Learning Process Framework contains the four sub-themes of *self-efficacy*, *discernment*, *confidence*, and *desire to learn*. The codes associated with validation reflect the internal processes of developing a belief in your ability to carry out an important task,

cultivating a sense of your own agency to make choices concerning your instruction or other work projects, building confidence in your own abilities and expertise, knowing when you can say no to a project or request, or determining when to apply your expertise in a new situation. These internal strengths often resulted in an increase in our participants' desire to continue learning and exploring new areas.

Self-efficacy

When I was newer in my career, I'd think—"these are the clothes I will put on." But now I know who I am, and I have a better handle on who I am as an instructor. I'm more able to take observations, conversations, other interpersonal, directional information and see it through my own lens. (Participant 9)

We have complete autonomy in our jobs—what I do as a liaison can be completely different from my colleagues. We decide what we want to do.... A faculty member will say, "I've heard about this thing," and if I'm excited about it, I can follow up on it. If I'm not excited about it, I can say, "My colleague does that—let me pass that off for you." (Participant 15)

Discernment

I think it's the recognition that not every class requires library instruction, and if it's not situated in a way that's productive for students, it's not worth doing. I don't want to corner anyone into doing anything. (Participant 14)

I said, "No, I'm not going to do a scholarly vs. popular activity" ... in [a history class], what we did was look at different containers for content, like journals and online options. I had different outcomes. And the faculty said, "This is great—this really teaches them what I want them to know, more than the scholarly vs. popular." (Participant 11)

Confidence

I'm just more confident for better or worse in being able to just teach. I'm willing to go in and know if it doesn't go well, it's not always my fault. Maybe earlier I was more concerned that if I had a bad class that the instructor wouldn't invite me back. I don't worry as much. (Participant 6)

When I was in previous roles, [classified staff examples], I was just putting numbers on photos. And I was constantly looking for validation from others. I've gotten more confidence in myself and am able to say X matters for me. I couldn't do that before unless I got validation from others—peers or supervisors. (Participant 5)

“I have to teach about 40 times for performance anxiety to go away. The good thing is that means you still care; not that the opposite is bad.” (Participant 6)

Desire to Learn

I do talk to other people. I don't like to not know something, so I feel like I'm constantly trying to learn. There's a lot I don't know. (Participant 6)

I put myself out there, I taught a demonstration version of the class—and I opened myself up for feedback. (Participant 13)

I probably worked a lot harder to get as much experience and professional development as I could earlier. And now I feel more confident in my approaches, and I probably don't take as advantage of opportunities as in the past. There's less time, even though I sign up for more than I attend. (Participant 8)

Discussion

Comparison to Teaching Stages

Our surveys and interviews with mid-career academic instruction librarians provided comparisons of their learning and work experiences to those of other mid-career teachers, examples of how this demographic navigates learning opportunities, and ideas for how supervisors can support these librarians. Overall, we learned that the previously described mid-career teaching stages were fairly representative of our participants' experiences (Fessler and Christensen 1992; Huberman 1993; Maskit 2011). For example, both instruction librarians and K–12 teachers gain confidence when given the space to experiment and practice, and they benefit from encouragement to reflect on their teaching practice so they can grow and develop. However, we observed that academic librarians may move more slowly through the stages of validation to the stability stage compared to classroom instructors. Brunetti and Marston (2018, 5) use the idea of validation to describe how teachers begin to be acknowledged as “competent classroom practitioners.” In their context, this validation may come from external sources like supervisors, students, or their students' parents. For our participants, almost all validation was internal and was based on practices like reflection and assessment. Many academic instruction librarians do not teach daily, and in cases when they are teaching guest lecture classes, there may be a gap of a year or more between teaching that specific content. As a result, the opportunities to receive external validation may be few and far between.

More research would be needed to learn how prevalent this pattern of career-stage alignment is, especially because in the interviews, some participants shared that they wished

they could have chosen more than one category. In addition, it is possible that a larger pool would have resulted in some participants selecting the career frustration or career wind-down stages. If participants had been able to choose multiple stages, that may have resulted in the more negative stages being selected. Finally, it is possible that participants felt pressure to choose more positive stages to show themselves in a more favorable light.

Recommendations for Mid-career Instruction Librarians

Based on our findings, we have several recommendations for mid-career academic librarians who wish to continue learning and avoid extended career plateaus, but who also seek to balance the types of opportunities they pursue. One approach is to establish a self-directed learning practice (Yan et al. 2020) by reflecting on potential new applications for instructional expertise. For example, consider learning new content and then try teaching that content, or consider instruction work from a more programmatic lens. Mid-career instruction librarians should recognize their agency as mid-career employees and how their expertise can be used to influence organizational culture, instruction programs, initiatives, or practices.

Collaborative learning is a powerful way to continue to engage in learning. Plugging into existing structures that support mid-career learning or creating new networking structures can be key to building new mid-career learning opportunities. Multiple examples from the literature showcase the benefits of collaborative learning for mid-career employees. For example, teachers in a fellowship program benefited from the collaborative relationships built into the program's approach to learning and engagement (Strahan 2016). Networking and the resulting opportunities for deep conversations and collaborations also support mid-career learning (Shulman and Shulman 2004). In our study, mid-career librarians benefited from sharing knowledge and supporting other mid-career librarians. Having in-house conversational partners was one of the most valuable resources for our participants. Collaborative efforts can also be developed across institutions when participants share an interest or problem. For example, librarians interested in developing their research and publishing skills founded *The Librarian Parlor* to connect with other academic librarians exploring those issues (Fargo, Bhat, and Powell 2023).

Finally, set or reset work-life boundaries. The participants in our study who were most satisfied, as well as energized by their careers, were also learning how to set boundaries that allowed them to try new hobbies and prioritize time to be with family or friends.

Recommendations for Supervisors

As supervisors, we were particularly interested in learning how to support our mid-career instruction librarian employees. Our findings suggest several ways to develop a climate that encourages continued learning at the organizational level, as well as through individual feedback mechanisms.

First, it is crucial to create an organizational culture that allows all employees to thrive. Clear communication is key to fostering learning. When organizational expectations result in the need for the development of new skills or focus areas, for example, due to a change in budgets or because the larger cultural landscape shifts, balance formal communication from leadership with opportunities for collaborative input from mid-career librarians. Mid-career librarians are more likely to have been through these organizational cycles of change before, and their past experiences should be recognized.

Organizations can also examine how professional development money is allocated. While early-career instruction librarians should certainly be supported financially to pursue professional development opportunities, mid-career librarians' professional development needs shouldn't be neglected. These employees have long careers ahead of them and will need resources to learn, adapt, and grow.

Encourage networks and information sharing across units within the library or in the region. Informal conversations such as those shared over coffee or walks can provide longer-term benefits in increased connections. Resist the urge to squash those activities. At the same time, suggest participation in structured learning opportunities for broader personal growth. Bimrose and Brown (2014) found that employees benefited from opportunities that on the surface did not seem to match employer initiatives but which were energizing for mid-career employees. Provide a range of leadership opportunities for mid-career employees that encourage agency and growth. Leadership opportunities can be formal or less formal, like being part of a mentoring program (Brunetti and Marston 2018). Mentoring in academic libraries is often driven by the promotion and tenure process. But Nichols Hess (2023) notes the value of informal mentoring structures that can potentially provide more insight into areas like academic culture or work-life balance. However, not all mid-career librarians will demonstrate their agency or desire leadership opportunities, so the same path shouldn't be expected for everyone (Brunetti and Marston 2018).

In conversations with mid-career employees, acknowledge the episodic nature of learning across a lifetime. For example, at the time of these interviews, generative artificial intelligence

(AI) was quickly emerging as a worldwide topic of interest. However, out of our 15 participants, only three mentioned AI as a pressing topic for instruction librarians to learn about. These participants were observing the potential impacts generative AI could have on how information evaluation would be taught. That said, our participants discussed many additional topics that could be pressing for instruction librarians to learn. These topics ranged from scholarly communication to anti-racist pedagogies to working with people, but more commonly, topics suggested by these participants tended to be higher-order considerations like learning more about information behaviors, pedagogical knowledge, and institutional effectiveness. This wide range of possibly pressing topics highlights that supervisors shouldn't require employees to jump on each new academic development. Trust employees to recognize the larger-scale shifts in the profession and remember that some mid-career librarians may not need to constantly apply new instructional techniques purely for the sake of change. Instead, they may rely on skills honed over time. Regularly discuss and model the natural "rhythms in learning" and the importance of maintaining an overall balance in work (Bimrose and Brown 2014; Brunetti and Marston 2018). Make space for employees to discuss times of boredom or even "boreout," a negative psychological response that can limit interest in work and the willingness to grow, and then encourage employees to reflect on what is fulfilling in their work (Stock 2015; Weiss 2023).

Finally, continue to give meaningful, productive feedback and evaluation. It may be expedient at times for supervisors to assume everything is okay with mid-career librarians and that they do not need input on their productivity or path. But these employees are still keenly interested in having conversations with their supervisors about their work. For example, they may wish to discuss complex issues, new initiatives, or successes with projects or daily work. Look for opportunities to provide validation, as these kinds of check-ins can become disappointingly rare for mid-career librarians (Nichols Hess 2023).

Conclusion

Our study contributes to an increased understanding of the value of dedicated support for mid-career librarians' professional development. We underscore the importance of encouraging mid-career academic librarians to exercise the expertise they have gained and choose self-directed learning opportunities. In addition, involvement in specific disciplinary or local peer-based communities can enhance mid-career librarians' abilities to learn and develop. Future studies may consider how employees who were previously employed for significant periods of time outside of libraries experience the mid-career stage in librarianship. Additional studies could

consider those who opt to leave library work and how access to professional development and growth (or the lack of support) contributed to their decision. Finally, future research may build on, adapt, or problematize the Learning Process Framework. For example, studies could explore whether the Learning Process Framework holds true for librarians who focus on noninstructional areas of librarianship or for those who hold managerial positions. These and other questions will add constructive, informed approaches to libraries' institutional training efforts and retention strategies for mid-career librarians.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. Think of a time when you learned a new skill or approach in your personal life. What was that skill?

2. Think about the skill you just described. Choose from the list of sources that were helpful to you as you learned that new skill or approach. (Select as many as apply.)

- Books
- Articles (magazine, newspaper, journal)
- Conferences
- Workshops or classes
- Social media (Twitter/X, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc.)
- Podcasts
- Visiting a place where that skill was showcased or demonstrated
- Visiting a place that gave you space to think
- Games or gaming
- YouTube
- TV shows or movies
- Conversations with a friend—in person or online
- Conversations with an expert—in person or online
- Observation
- Other

3. Please give a brief example of a source you chose from the list in the previous question, and how you used it to spark your learning.

4. Now think about when you learn new things for your job. Which format results in deeper and more effective learning for you? Please choose one option from each prompt. If you answer “it depends” for any of the responses, please expand on the context:

- With others
- On my own
- Both
- It depends

5. Which format results in deeper and more effective learning for you?

- In person
- Online (either synchronously or asynchronously)
- Both
- It depends

6. Which format results in deeper and more effective learning for you?

- Online, asynchronously (e.g., self-paced learning via a tutorial)
- Online, synchronously (e.g., a webinar or presentation)
- Both
- It depends

7. Which format results in deeper and more effective learning for you?

- As a structured learning experience (e.g., through a class, webinar, or workshop)
- On your own (e.g., through trial and error)
- Both
- It depends

8. Which format results in deeper and more effective learning for you?

- Through reading
- Through watching someone else
- Both
- It depends

9. Which format results in deeper and more effective learning for you?

- When prompted as a specific initiative from leadership
- Based on your own interests
- Both
- It depends

10. Which of these Career Cycle stages (adapted for librarians) most resonates with how you see yourself at this point in your career? (Choose one best response.)

- **Competency Building:** At this stage, librarians are striving to improve their instruction skills and abilities. They seek out new materials, methods, and strategies. At this stage, librarians are often receptive to new ideas; they often regard their work as challenging and are eager to improve their skills.
- **Enthusiasm and Growth:** At this stage, librarians reach a high level of competence in their work and continue to progress professionally. Librarians often love their work at this stage, seeking out new ways to enrich their instruction and enjoy a high level of job satisfaction.
- **Stability:** At this stage, librarians' careers often reach a plateau. They do what is expected of them, and sometimes little more. Librarians often find little value in professional development programs and are seldom motivated to participate in professional programs.
- **Career Frustration:** This stage is characterized by frustration. Librarians often begin to wonder why they are still doing instruction.
- **Career Wind-Down:** At this stage librarians are prepared to leave the profession—either for a new career or for retirement. For some librarians this may be a pleasant time; for others it may be a bitter or unhappy period.

11. How many years have you worked in libraries?

12. What professional associations are you active in?

13. Do you have any additional thoughts you would like to add?

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. We consider library instruction to encompass many different areas of work including one-on-one work with students or student workers, coordination or administration of instruction, instructional design, credit courses, workshops, and guest lectures, learning object creation, outreach, and reference. Activities may occur online, in person, or both. How is this similar or different to instruction at your institution?

2. In the pre-survey, the curiosity types that most closely matched you were _____. How does that fit with your self-assessment of how you learn new things?
3. Give a work-related example where you applied something you learned that originated from a curiosity spark.
4. In the pre-survey, you said that you learned new skills using the following sources: _____. In your library instruction duties, do you use the same or different sources to learn more about your work as an instructor?
5. How do you learn new topical areas or tools in librarianship that may be outside your day-to-day work? For example, scholarly communication, data management, digital humanities, or a disciplinary tool outside of your area? Are there formats or approaches that work well for you?
6. How do new ideas or approaches you have learned about show up in your instruction practice?
7. How has your approach to learning and professional development with regards to your development as an instruction librarian changed over time?
 - Has your approach changed in any different ways since 2020 (since the COVID-19 global pandemic)?
8. What is most pressing for you to learn more about at this point in your career?
9. What do you think is currently the most pressing area for instruction librarians in general to learn more about?
10. If you could tell your past self something about what your approach to learning looks like today, what would it be?
11. Do you have any additional thoughts you would like to add?