

## **F2 Beaumaris 1 Wednesday 5 December 16.45 – 17.15**

### ***How can we theorize academic librarians' cross-boundary identity? --- Focusing on information literacy as a new dimension of librarians' jobs (0213)***

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#### **Abstract**

This research explores how academic librarians' shifting identity is conceptualized using 'third space theory', proposed by Whitchurch. As this theory suggests, elaborating 'cross-boundary' professionalism is a critical issue. Recently, higher education has faced institutional changes from external factors (i.e. policy) and professional staff tend to take responsibility for new elements of their roles. For academic librarians, information literacy is emergent work, which they are expected to conduct in relationship to the disciplines. I will explore how their shifting identities are described in information literacy education, focusing on a UK social science institution. Semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with four academic librarians. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: Relationship to the departments; disjointed tension; and pedagogical development to address this rapidly changing context. Drawing on these, I will suggest how this 'cross-boundary' experience might be theorized.

#### **1. Introduction**

This research explores academic librarians' shifting roles under the constantly changing structure of higher education. In recent years, the role of professional staff has been critically explored. For example, the development of new educational programmes is one of the most significant phenomena in Higher Education. While most universities have strategies that focus on education, this affects more staff than before, because conventionally recognized 'bounded' professional roles are changing. Academic librarians face this issue, for example (Klain-Gabbay & Shoham, 2016; Law, 2010). In the academy, they have historically provided a foundation for scholarly communication through collection management and development. However, they now face the new challenge to develop information literacy around the disciplinary curriculum (Hardy & Corral, 2007; Secker, 2015). What this suggests is that their roles are becoming 'cross-boundary', where their identity might be shifting with institutional change.

This research elaborates how their identity has been shaped around information literacy education. Many people have sought to theorize identity (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). I understand that academic librarians' identity is formed and influenced by social contextual issues. I will theoretically explore this with 'third space theory' (Whitchurch, 2008b), focusing on shifting professional identity. Then, empirical evidence from academic librarians' accounts will be used to characterize and facilitate an understanding of this 'cross-boundary' profession. Finally, I will describe how they work in conjunction with the disciplinary curriculum.

#### **2. Third space theory**

'Third space theory' is proposed to explain newly created patterns of professional work in the academy (Whitchurch, 2006, 2008b, 2013). Whitchurch identifies three kinds of professional (Whitchurch, 2008a, p.377): bounded; cross-boundary; and unbounded. For bounded professionals, their roles can be located within the boundaries of a function or organizational locations. For 'cross-boundary' professionals, boundaries are actively used to realize strategic advantage. For unbounded professionals, the boundaries are disregarded. As indicated, 'cross-boundary' specifies current emergent professionals, but its theoretical elaboration has not

been fully conducted (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010).

Drawing on this, I propose that academic librarians' changing roles can be summarized in Table1.

Table1. Academic librarians' role in comparison with 'Third space theory'

Third space theory	Bounded	Cross-boundary	Unbounded
Academic librarians' role	Management Collection development One-shot information literacy	Subject liaison librarian Integrated information literacy	Information literacy part of literacy support

As librarians' commitment to information literacy increases, their primary role is expected to realize its implementation around the discipline, as a subject liaison librarian (Carlson & Kneale, 2011). This suggests that they can be viewed as 'cross-boundary' professionals (McCluskey, 2013). Academic librarians increasingly recognize themselves as supporting information literacy through disciplinary programmes. This hybrid responsibility has also been noted in the literature (CILIP, 2018).

This research further elaborates how librarians' cross-boundary identity has emerged in the experience of information literacy.

### 3. Methodology

I employed a case study methodology in a single social science institution in the UK. Semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with academic librarians. Participants' diverse experience was reflected by their career length. The participants were recruited by snowball sampling. Four academic librarians were interviewed. Table 2 summarizes the participants' attributes.

Table2. Participants' attributes

Participants	Gender	Experience	Role
Jane	Female	??	Manager/ Subject liaison librarian
Monica	Female	25years	Subject liaison librarian
Sandra	Female	1 year	Subject liaison librarian
Lucy	Female	15 years	IT support manager

Jane was the manager of the teaching and learning section as well as a subject liaison librarian. Lucy was appointed as IT support manager, but will be included as she has developed relevant programmes with the libraries. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted for about 30-45 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically, with themes emerging from the close reading of transcripts. This study received institutional ethical clearance and followed approved procedures for informed consent, including guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. In this research, participants' names are pseudonyms.

### 4. Findings

Three major themes have emerged from the analysis. I will discuss these with reference to obtained data.

#### 1. Relationship to the department

This institution, originally, prepared academic librarians as 'subject liaison librarians' who have a relationship to the department. As confirmed, their role is increasingly shifting toward how to develop information literacy around the discipline. The accounts center on the strategy of contacting the department and reacting to the needs expressed. From there, the issue is

how to construct a better relationship with the departments, understood in terms of their ability to react to these requests.

## 2. Disjointed tension

Several accounts address academic librarians' experience of feeling disjointed from the curriculum. While information literacy is positioned theoretically as 'integrated' into the disciplinary curriculum, librarians face the situation where academic staff do not show its significance in curriculum design in practice. This signals a considerable gap in understanding how to integrate informational literacy and the curriculum between academic librarians and academic staff.

## 3. Pedagogical development to address rapidly changing context

Lastly, several accounts addressed the issue of staff development, or how to develop the pedagogy of information literacy. In the pre-service training of academic librarians, there is not enough time to develop their pedagogy. For example, Monica's account illuminates that librarians' involvement in disciplinary teaching is seen as a relatively recent issue, lacking development in information literacy. Jane, a novice librarian, also acknowledges that in-service training is crucial to develop her practice. Most of them refer to the importance of the regular staff meeting to share their ideas.

## 5. Conclusion

Academic librarians' cross-boundary practices suggest new issues for their identity that have not been specified in their previous bounded understanding of their role. The analysis identified three points. Firstly, academic librarians' central mission is to support information literacy close to the disciplines which means that developing a strategy for communicating with the departments is becoming central to their roles. The significance of information literacy is emphasized by academic librarians, but not by academic staff, causing some disjunction in terms of the disciplinary curriculum. Furthermore, development of pedagogy by academic librarians occurs through on-the-job training as a result of emergent practice. A further challenge is that the issues of realizing cross-boundary practice requires the elaboration of in-service training in terms of pedagogy development and the strategy of communicating with departments. These will lead to effective cross-boundary, integrated development of information literacy.

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