

Project Report

Teacher, trainer, or facilitator? Exploring the pedagogic identity and support needs of UK health librarians

<http://dx.doi.org/10.11645/20.1.854>

Katie Smith

Knowledge Specialist, Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust. Email:
katie.smith@berkshire.nhs.uk.

Jessica Waite

Clinical/Outreach Librarian, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. Email:
jessica.waite1@nhs.net.

Abstract

This project report looks at the pedagogic identity of health librarians in the UK, predominantly National Health Service staff, and related challenges they face. Through an online workshop and a follow-up survey, the authors investigated how health librarians perceive themselves as teachers, the challenges they face when teaching healthcare staff, and what support they need. The findings reveal a multifaceted identity, with 'trainer' being the most common descriptor, followed by 'facilitator', with 'teacher' being the least common descriptor, though many librarians selected multiple identities. Key challenges faced were time, technology, practicalities, skills, and engagement. The study highlights the need for more professional development opportunities focused on pedagogic skills, particularly around confidence-building, teaching critical appraisal and statistics, and creating engaging learning environments.

Keywords

continuing professional development; health libraries; healthcare sector; information literacy; teacher librarian; UK

1. Introduction

Librarians working in the health sector in the UK have a broad range of experience with teaching. There are qualified teachers, people who have been teaching in libraries for many years, and people who have little to no experience in teaching at all. The authors were

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Smith & Waite. 2026. Teacher, trainer, or facilitator? Exploring the pedagogic identity and support needs of UK health librarians. Journal of Information Literacy, 20(1), pp. 143–152.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.11645/20.1.854>

interested in exploring the self-perception of health librarians as teachers, the challenges of teaching healthcare staff and what more could be done to support health librarians in the UK, most of whom work in the National Health Service (NHS). Health librarians in the NHS are required to teach NHS staff and students on subjects such as how to conduct a literature search, how to critically appraise evidence, study skills, reflective practice and reference management. This is included in many job descriptions in the sector, but often librarians receive little, if any, training in how to teach effectively. Anecdotal experience told us that many health librarians struggle with confidence when teaching and that there is a variation in the terminology used. We wanted to find out whether this was something felt across the sector.

With support from the CILIP Information Literacy Group (ILG), we organised an online event called Top Tips in Health Teaching: A Knowledge Sharing Workshop, where health librarians could come together and share their experiences, tips and feelings around teaching. We were especially interested in capturing the descriptors that librarians use to describe their information dissemination techniques, with 'teacher', 'trainer' and 'facilitator' used as examples; and whether 'information literacy' (IL), a term that is not widely used in the UK health librarianship context, was meaningful to them. This report will describe the event and look at responses to a series of questions we asked during the event, followed by a survey we undertook to get a broader range of views from health librarians who were unable to attend.

2. Literature Review

IL instruction has long been a core service in academic libraries (Julien, 2005) and it is increasingly becoming a core part of the role of many UK health librarians as well (Barker & Phillips, 2020; Kelham, 2014; Rudd & Harding, 2021). The importance of evidence-based practice, where healthcare professionals' decisions are "base[d] on their clinical expertise, the preferences of the patient, and the best available evidence" (de Bruyn, 2013), has given health librarians an opportunity to provide more teaching to clinical staff on how to effectively search healthcare databases and how to critically appraise the articles they find, so that they are able to access the best available evidence. Evidence-based practice is mentioned numerous times in *Knowledge for Healthcare* (NHS Health Education England, 2021), which is the NHS Knowledge and Library Service Framework, highlighting its importance to all NHS library staff.

There is limited literature that looks at health librarians' perceptions of themselves as teachers. In the US context, 'teacher' is an integral part of the clinical librarian role (Tan & Maggio, 2013), with librarians teaching users about searching, critical appraisal, reference management and copyright. In the UK, George and Rowland (2019) make a case for health librarians to become Higher Education Academy Fellows, in order to "validate librarians' role as pedagogic and intrinsic to the learning process and highlight where our teaching contributes to institutional aims" (p. 291), while noting that this is a route taken by few within the NHS. Many health librarians working in the NHS would meet the criteria for Associate Fellowship or Fellowship (Advance HE, 2023), however working outside of a higher education context means that it is not a highly visible path to take, despite often teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students how to search for and appraise literature. Whilst teaching is part of UK health librarian's job descriptions, it is not a necessity to have a formal teaching qualification, and in some instances even paraprofessionals will deliver teaching. Therefore, compared with the US and in UK higher education sectors, it is difficult to get NHS organisations to support health librarian's desires to

receive formal teaching qualifications as it can be argued that it is not a necessity for the role and the organisation may not view librarians as 'teachers'.

There are several studies which describe the perceptions of academic librarians (those who typically work in higher education institutions) regarding their teaching. Many studies described librarians as having multifaceted views of themselves as teachers. Pierson et al. (2019) discuss multiple identities within the profession, of which teacher is one. Wheeler and McKinney (2015) described four categories of academic library staff conception. These are teachers whose teaching is equal to other teachers (teacher-librarians); teachers whose teaching is supporting but not equivalent to other teachers (learning support); those who reluctantly refer to themselves as teachers (librarians who teach); or non-teachers who do not perceive themselves to have the ability or qualifications to use that term (trainers). Kirker (2022) similarly referred to teacher-librarians, who conceptualise themselves as librarians who are teachers; to librarians who teach, who conceptualise themselves foremost as librarians for whom teaching is only a part of their jobs; and "not a teacher", librarians who do not feel like teachers at all, even though they perform some instructional activity. Conversely, all of Walter's (2008) study respondents strongly identified with the role of librarians as teachers. Grigas et al. (2016) write that academic librarians are seen to have a passive rather than active role in teaching in universities. For the purposes of our survey, we used the terms teachers, trainers and facilitators as these were the terms that most reflected our feelings of teaching NHS staff and students. These are probably closest to Kirker's teacher-librarians (teacher), librarians who teach (trainer), and "not a teacher" librarians (facilitator).

Academic librarians who work in the health field report various methods of teaching undergraduate medical and other health sciences students, including flipped classroom and self-directed learning (Hill et al., 2020; Minuti et al., 2018; Schilperoort, 2020). Academic health librarians focus on curricular design, development and assessment in their teaching (Maggio et al., 2015). While there is some crossover in materials taught by academic health librarians and librarians working in the NHS, there is a difference in context, with NHS librarians teaching qualified healthcare employees and students on placement, rather than students in their educational setting.

Most of the literature focuses on the experiences of academic librarians and there is a lack of research into the experiences of health librarians, especially those in the NHS. Whilst some of the experiences can be applied across sectors, there are unique challenges of teaching healthcare or NHS staff and therefore further research is needed specifically into teaching in the health sector.

3. Top tips in health teaching: A knowledge sharing workshop

In September 2025, the authors and the events team from the CILIP ILG led a two-hour online workshop aimed at sharing best practice and exploring feelings towards and experiences of teaching for health librarians. We wanted to capture people's feelings, positive and negative, towards teaching, as well as sharing practical tips. We organised the event into sections: ten-minute presentations on three subjects taught by health librarians, followed by breakout rooms in which participants could discuss their feelings on teaching those subjects in small groups, before coming back as a whole group to wrap up the discussion. The session was attended by

127 people, all health or health-related librarians in the UK, recruited through LIS-Medical, a mailing list for UK informational professionals who work in healthcare.

For the first section, Sarah Gardner, Clinical Evidence Specialist at Doncaster and Bassetlaw NHS Foundation Trust, presented to the group about the evolution of her approach to teaching critical appraisal. Critical appraisal is “the process of carefully and systematically examining research to judge its trustworthiness, and its value and relevance in a particular context” (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2025). It is a component of evidence-based practice, as well as being offered as a course by many NHS libraries.

Next, Katie Smith, Knowledge Specialist from Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, spoke about how she has adapted literature search training on the NHS Knowledge and Library Hub, which is NHS England’s searching platform, changing it from a long, in-depth session to a shorter introductory session with the option for a more personalised and detailed follow up. Literature searching training is a core offer from NHS libraries, and librarians spend a lot of time conducting literature searches, as evidence-based practice is a key component of the NHS.

The final presentation was from Bethan Morgan, Site Librarian at Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, about teaching reflective practice. This is an area with which fewer participants had experience, as reflective practice is taught much less frequently in UK health libraries. However, as reflective practice is a key element for many healthcare staff when revalidating, it is an area where more health libraries may wish to increase their offer.

During the introduction to the session, we asked four questions of participants via Mentimeter. After the workshop we also sent these questions to a wider range of UK health library staff, through the LIS-MEDICAL mailing list. These four questions were:

1. Do you consider yourself a teacher, trainer, facilitator, none of these, or something else? (146 responses)
2. What are the challenges you face teaching healthcare staff? (131 responses)
3. What’s one thing you struggle with that you’d like to learn? (113 responses)
4. Do you think the term information literacy is relevant to you? (124 responses)

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Identity: Are we teachers or trainers?

For question one, participants were given five options: teacher, trainer, facilitator, none of these, and something else, and they could select multiple answers. ‘Trainer’ was the most popular response with 98 people in total choosing ‘trainer’, of which 56 chose it as their only answer. ‘Facilitator’ was the second most popular response with 52 people in total choosing it, and 15 selecting only this choice. 15 people selected both ‘trainer’ and ‘facilitator’. Finally, ‘teacher’ was the least popular option with 43 people in total selecting it, and 12 selecting it as their only answer. However, 15 people said they consider themselves to be teachers, trainers and facilitators.

It was clear that for many people this identity is not singular. 47 people selected multiple options, and comments from the event attendees included that the perception of their role changes depending on the context. For example, some said that hosting a journal club would need more facilitation skills to encourage discussion whereas if they are helping staff to refresh

existing skills, they feel more like a trainer. Many agreed that you need all three skills (teaching, training and facilitating), as various courses would require different teaching approaches.

In answers to the question we asked about challenges in teaching healthcare staff, identity as teachers also came up. Nine people said that they were not taken seriously as a teacher, despite having a teaching qualification or teaching on a regular basis, and that there was a lack of awareness that librarians can and do teach.

This issue of having a multi-faceted teacher identity and not being identified by others as a teacher is also reflected in the fact that whilst it is part of health librarian's job descriptions, it is rarely part of their job title. It may make it harder for health librarians to be put forward for teacher training courses or justify why they should have teacher training if they themselves or others do not identify what they do as teaching.

4.2 Challenges of teaching healthcare staff

For the second question: 'What are the challenges of teaching healthcare staff?', 131 people responded and five themes emerged: time, technology, practicalities, librarians' skills, and literacies and engagement.

4.2.1 Theme one: Time

Time constraints were found to be a major challenge in teaching healthcare staff. 33 people responded with a general answer about time being a challenge. 26 others gave a more specific answer that healthcare staff do not have time to attend library training. Many included that staff rotas and capacity impacted on them attending library training and six people stated that finding an appropriate time to deliver training was a challenge.

There was a discussion about the optimum time to schedule training to ensure healthcare staff could attend. Some participants shared experiences of hosting training sessions at untypical times, including early morning (8am) or evening. Some had run evening sessions online which seemed to have better attendance and felt more informal, but others shared that they had few sign up for evening slots and many did not attend. As MDT (multi-disciplinary team) meetings tend to occur between 8am and 9am, some librarians have delivered training then and others said they get good uptake for one-to-one training at 8am.

Whilst giving healthcare staff more time to attend library training is not an issue easily solved by health librarians, this does highlight the need for library training to be planned and delivered expertly to ensure maximum learning retention in the short time staff have.

4.2.2 Theme two: Technology

Poor technology was also mentioned frequently (n=12) with many mentioning Microsoft Teams, the software used in most NHS Trusts, as being difficult to use to facilitate online training. As a lot of healthcare library training sessions take place online since the pandemic, having reliable technology is important to deliver good training sessions. Changes in technology and the use of AI were also mentioned as challenges (n=3).

Several participants highlighted specific technical skills they would like to learn in question three, including relating to AI and critically appraising AI (n=6), additional PowerPoint skills (n=3) and how to manage breakout rooms and Microsoft Teams in general (n=1). Making online

teaching more interactive was also raised as something that they struggle with that they would like to improve (n=9).

These responses indicate a need for further training to allow health librarians to develop their own digital skills and confidence in teaching on digital platforms. If the librarian is struggling to manage technology during a teaching session, the learning outcomes for those attending will be impacted and it may also affect the librarian's confidence.

4.2.3 Theme three: Practicalities

Many saw the practical aspects of training in healthcare settings challenging and there were common issues raised that were shared across many organisations. Having low numbers of attendees on training sessions was a common experience and advertising sessions was mentioned as a key challenge (n=18). Linked to this, encouraging attendance and getting enough attendance was also mentioned (n=13). Many also have an issue with non-attendance or 'Did Not Attend' (DNA) (n=7) and some had linked this to the time pressures that clinical staff have which may mean they suddenly cannot attend training. Two participants had also identified that library training, unlike most clinical training, is voluntary and therefore not a priority especially when clinical staff have lots of mandatory training they must complete. This would also impact on attendance.

Other challenging practical aspects include finding appropriate rooms or space for training (n=5), organising group sessions (n=2) and distractions (n=2). The availability of librarians (n=4) and lack of appropriate resources (n=2) were also mentioned, highlighting the difficult financial context health libraries are experiencing. Whilst these practical aspects may not be thought of as key teaching skills, they can impact the delivery and quality of the session. Learning skills including how to manage distractions or marketing techniques to increase attendance may help to mitigate these issues.

4.2.4 Theme four: Librarians' skills

Many librarians mentioned that they struggled with a lack of confidence (n=18) and this was also raised as something they would like to learn or improve (n=22) in question three. Whilst we were not asking specifically if the participants had formal teaching qualifications, three participants mentioned that they felt not having a teaching qualification or teacher training made teaching more challenging. Librarians also have to spend time refreshing their own knowledge and skills, understand terminology and keep up to date with changing resources (n=4).

Throughout the event, it was clear that teaching critical appraisal and statistics was something that many health librarians struggle with and it was the most popular answer for question three (critical appraisal n=27, statistics n=15). It can be difficult to confidently teach a subject if the trainer struggles to understand or feel comfortable with the subject themselves. However, during the event, strategies were shared to help trainers to teach unfamiliar subjects, including facilitating a discussion and placing the emphasis back on the learners.

Many librarians felt more confident with teaching searching skills. This could be due to literature searching being a key skill for health librarians and they spend a lot of time using the databases that they demonstrate during training. Reflective practice was not a subject that many had taught before, but they still reported that they would feel more confident to teach reflective practice than critical appraisal.

4.2.5 Theme five: Literacies and engagement

The final theme highlighted the challenges involved with engagement during training sessions and teaching staff who have a variety of knowledge and experience. Many participants mentioned engagement as a key challenge (n=13) and four others specified that they found it challenging to make sessions meaningful, for example, ensuring that the purpose for staff attending is clear and that the training has examples that link to clinical practice. Interaction, engaging users and using innovative techniques were also raised in answer to question three, with 20 people saying these were something they would like to learn. As mentioned earlier, with library training being voluntary and clinical staff having so many demands on their time, librarians want to make their sessions as engaging and interactive as possible to hold learners' attention and maximise retention. However, many find it difficult to learn how to create interactive and engaging sessions, especially with topics that learners could find 'dry' and boring or that librarians are not confident with themselves.

Health librarians also find it challenging to teach healthcare staff as there is usually a mix of roles (n=6), and the librarian needs to manage different levels of experience and knowledge (n=11). There may also be varying levels of customer enthusiasm, confidence, IL and IT literacy (n=7) which can be difficult for the trainer. Librarians want to understand the learners' needs (n=12) so they can adapt the training to the learners and make it relevant and meaningful, but this can be difficult with large groups and not knowing their needs before the course. It can help to have specific examples during the training as learners may struggle to see the relevance of the course to them (n=5), but again this is difficult to facilitate when there is a mix of roles, or it is not known who will be attending. Further training for health librarians that focus on these skills specifically may help librarians to feel more equipped to handle a mixture of literacies and engagement and ensuring that each attendee gets the most out of the session.

Finally, it is important for healthcare libraries to collect feedback on all their services including training, and to especially record the impact that training has had. However, collecting meaningful feedback was raised as being a challenge (n=1) which may be linked to survey fatigue and low attendance.

4.3 Is the term 'information literacy' relevant?

Our final question aimed to explore whether health librarians find the term 'information literacy' relevant. The Chartered Institute of Library Information Professionals (CILIP) (2018) defines IL as "the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to reach and express informed views and to engage fully with society". In the health libraries sector, IL as a term is not heard often despite health librarians teaching IL skills and developing critical thinking skills.

However, out of 124 respondents, 84% of the health librarians surveyed said that they feel the term 'information literacy' is relevant to them (n=105). Only four people said they didn't feel it was relevant and 15 were unsure. Health librarians interact consistently with healthcare professionals and tend to focus on more clinically meaningful terms such as evidence-based practice. It is clear from this response, however, that they do value IL as a term, even if they don't use it in day-to-day practice.

5. Conclusion

This event showed that teaching is a key part of health librarians' role but there is a variety of feelings and challenges that affect this. The self-perception by health librarians is a mixture of trainer, facilitator and teacher, with the majority not identifying with a singular term but needing aspects and skills that link to each for different purposes.

Many struggle with confidence, especially with critical appraisal and statistics, and the lack of teacher training for health librarians means that some struggle with knowing key teaching skills including managing a variety of roles and abilities within a group of learners and making sessions engaging. Aspects including time, technology and encouraging attendance also appear to be key challenges for teaching in the health sector.

The enthusiasm and engagement in this event showed that more practical workshops and training sessions about teaching skills need to be arranged for health librarians. As this study is a snapshot of health librarians based on attendees at an event and a follow up survey, it does have limitations. However, the results reveal tendencies and perceptions that require more research. Further research specifically into teaching qualifications held by health librarians and others' perception of their teacher status may support applications by health librarians for teaching qualification courses, helping to provide them with the key skills needed to deliver meaningful and impactful training sessions.

Declarations

Ethics approval

Ethical review was not considered necessary in alignment with Berkshire Healthcare and Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trusts' guidance on the conduct of ethical research.

Funding

Not applicable.

AI-generated content

No AI tools were used.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Sarah Gardner and Bethan Morgan for giving their time and expertise in the workshop, and Ella Wharton and Ami Pendergrass from CILIP's Information Literacy Group for their invaluable support in the setting up and administration of the workshop.

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