Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Academic Librarians Perceive Duration and Social Interaction as Important Elements for Professional Development

Attebury, R. I. (2017). Professional development: A qualitative study of high impact characteristics affecting meaningful and transformational learning. The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 43(3), 232-241. http://dx.doi.org//10.1016/j.acalib.2017.02.015

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Evidence Summary

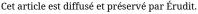**Academic Librarians Perceive Duration and Social Interaction as Important Elements for Professional Development**

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Abstract

Objective – To understand the characteristics of meaningful and transformational professional development experiences of academic librarians.

Design – Qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

Setting – Public and private colleges and universities in the United States of America.

Subjects – 10 academic librarians.

Methods – The researcher selected 10 participants using an initial survey distributed through national library electronic mail lists. Two rounds of semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted over Skype during fall 2014 and spring 2015. The first round of interviews began with background questions about participants' careers, then moved on to questions about professional development experiences that were meaningful and/or transformational. The responses from this first round of interviews were used to develop questions for a second round of interviews with the same participants. After completing the interviews, the researcher sent follow-up emails to participants in order to gather

feedback on summaries and interpretations of interviews. The transcribed interviews were used to create an initial set of codes and then imported into NVivo for analysis using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

Main Results – All participants reported on professional development experiences that they found to be meaningful. Half of the participants discussed professional development experiences that were transformational for their perceptions and practice of librarianship. The themes of duration and interaction were identified in every participant's discussions of meaningful or transformational professional development. Reflection, discomfort, and self-awareness were also identified as prominent themes.

Conclusion – The study found that two of the most important ingredients for meaningful and transformational professional development are activities that are sustained over time and that include social interaction. The participants perceived long-term interactive professional development activities as opportunities to identify and address gaps in their professional knowledge, which benefits themselves and their organizations. On-the-job learning, single-theme workshops or institutes, and professional committee work were particularly promising forms of meaningful professional development.

The author recommends that academic librarians who are interested in meaningful or transformational professional development look for activities that are sustained and interactive, that promote reflection, and that provide opportunities to increase self-awareness of gaps in knowledge. Facilitators of professional development activities should include interactive components and ensure that participants have a chance to stay in contact after the event in order to encourage long-term interaction and reflection.

Commentary

Librarian professional development has garnered significant interest in recent years. With rapid changes in the library landscape,

continuing education and skill development will continue to be essential for librarians (ACRL Professional Development Committee, 2000). A number of recent studies explore professional development for specific areas of academic librarianship, such as information literacy (Shamchuk, 2015) and data librarianship (Conrad, Shorish, Whitmore, & Hswe, 2017). Building on previous work (Attebury, 2015), this study uses adult educational theory to identify characteristics of meaningful and transformational professional development across academic librarianship.

The form developed by Letts et al. (2007) was used to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this study. The purpose and justification for this study are clearly articulated, and the author grounds her research question and findings in adult education theory. Hermeneutical phenomenology is an appropriate research design, as it can be used to interpret and develop practices and policies around a social phenomenon based on participants' first-hand descriptions. The author describes how hermeneutical phenomenological techniques were used to enhance the analytical rigor of the study, and she includes a number of transcript excerpts in order to more fully illustrate the importance of the themes. The fact that the descriptions and interpretations of the interviews were provided to participants for feedback increases the credibility of the results.

The main weakness of this paper lies in the lack of descriptive clarity of the sampling and data collection methods. Although the author mentions that the interview participants were purposively selected, she does not provide the criteria for selection. Further, she does not indicate whether 10 participants was determined to be an appropriate sample size in advance, or whether sampling was done until redundancy in data was reached. More discussion of the purpose and development of the second round of interviews would also be helpful. Specifically, it is not clear whether these interviews were conducted to address gaps and misunderstandings of the content covered in the first round of interviews or to cover additional content. It is also unclear

whether individual sets of follow-up questions were constructed for each participant. Finally, the reader's overall understanding of how the findings follow from the data would be enhanced if the interview questions were included as appendices at the end of the paper. The lack of transparency of methods may cause problems for anyone wanting to reproduce this study.

This study is significant in its focus on adult educational theory, particularly the constructs of meaningfulness and transformational learning, in exploring the professional development experiences of academic librarians. With limited time and money, librarians face a daunting task in choosing among the plethora of professional development activities available. This study will help librarians and their organizations to know how to identify opportunities that are likely to be the most impactful for their practice.

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