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Reflecting on our time as Digital Literacies Librarians

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Abstract

What does it mean to have digital literacy in a job title? In this reflection paper, two early career academic librarians discuss their experiences as Digital Literacy/ies Librarians. They reflect on the ambiguity and magnitude of the term digital literacy, and how they interpreted the term in their work.

Keywords: digital literacies, digital literacy, academic librarianship, reflection, digital literacies librarian, early career librarian

What does it mean to have digital literacy in your job title? We (both authors) met through a teaching observation program in 2019 and quickly discovered via our email signatures that we had similar job titles: Digital Literacies Resident Librarian and Digital Literacy Librarian. Having the term "digital literacy/ies" in our job titles led to many conversations about how we interpret the job title in our roles. This paper includes individual reflections by both authors about our roles as Digital Literacy/ies Librarians, concluding with a discussion of our shared understandings and experiences.

Making Digital Literacies Fit with Alissa

I started my role as the Digital Literacies Resident Librarian with very little understanding of what digital literacies were. I knew that my role encompassed a variety

of projects that were based in the digital world: open access publishing projects, training pre-service teachers to use our educational robotics collection, teaching information literacy, and working at the reference desk. As an early career librarian in my first post-MLIS contract position, I felt ready to tackle each of these projects individually, but was daunted by the word "digital literacies".

I dove into my individual projects, and began to forget about any concerns with my job title. It wasn't until I met Joanna a couple months into my role that I started thinking about "digital literacies" again. Joanna introduced me to the International Federation of Library Association's (IFLA) 2017 statement on Digital Literacy, and Jisc's model for digital literacies. Both IFLA and Jisc (2014)—a not-for-profit company out of the United Kingdom that provides information technology (IT) services for higher education institutions—conceptualize digital literacy/ies as an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of skills like media literacy, information literacy, technical proficiency, and creation in the digital world. Looking at these models, I was finally able to see how each of my projects "fit" under the larger umbrella of digital literacy/ies. For example, my work with educational robots focussed on learning skills and technology literacy for pre-service teachers, whereas my teaching focussed more on information literacy. While this understanding allowed me to better explain to others how my work related to digital literacies, I still felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of skills encompassed by digital literacies. How could I as an early career librarian define my role when the term is so big? I quickly realized that I couldn't. In conversations with Joanna, we both expressed the value of digital literacy skills, and the work that we were doing. However, we both expressed frustration about how nebulous a concept like "digital literacy" is.

Focus on the literacy with Joanna

My first position as a librarian was as a Digital Literacy Librarian. This role centered around educational resource creation such as video tutorials, LibGuides, and synchronous instruction sessions on a variety of topics including: orientations, assessing the reliability of sources, and using various search tools.

I initially looked at the job posting and thought that I didn't have enough IT experience for a position with "digital" in the title, but reading the description I realized

how education-focused it was. Throughout my time as the Digital Literacy Librarian, I learned that I was not alone in that assumption. Upon noticing my title, colleagues also saw an emphasis on the "digital", and contacted me with questions about technology and data issues. As Alissa mentioned, I started researching digital literacy, and learned that there are many types of literacies that can be considered digital. Due to the plurality of competencies under the digital literacy umbrella, it is a logical jump to use the plural "digital literacies". While we used singular "digital literacy" at my institution, the plural "digital literacies" encompasses the sheer number of skills implied by the term (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; Belshaw, 2016). In my job title, the singular "Digital Literacy" was meant to encompass all of these competencies and I feel that both the singular and the plural can be used somewhat interchangeably

As a fully remote university, all library instruction involves at least one digital literacy competency whether that is connecting through Microsoft Teams or LibChat, teaching an online instruction session, or walking someone through using the library webpage via telephone. However, involving digital literacy is different than encompassing all elements. I became stressed with the sheer magnitude of taking on all the competencies under the digital literacy umbrella. In conversations with Alissa, and referring to Walton's (2016) article I realized that digital literacy is not just the responsibility of the library but needs to be an institution-wide consideration.

Conclusion

It's been over a year since I, Alissa, completed my contract as a Digital Literacies Resident Librarian, and all of this came flooding back when I was looking at a recent call for proposals for a conference. Included in the various session tags were the following: information literacy, mobile technology, technology, and digital literacy. Sharing this with Joanna, we chatted about the overlapping nature of a lot of these terms and wondered what sessions might get tagged with which term. The conference proposal is just one example, but it highlights a couple themes from our reflections including: the ambiguity of the term digital literacy, and the impact of that ambiguity on how we interpreted our jobs as early career librarians. Both of us see the value of the work that we did in our time as Digital Literacy/ies Librarians, and the need for library workers to engage in this

kind of work. That said, we firmly believe that the responsibility of digital literacy should not fall just to the librarians, but to the institution as a whole (Walton, 2016).

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