

## Lifelong learning of librarians in pandemic times

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**Abstract.** *All over the world, librarians' association prepared online training on specific needs in response to COVID-19. Although most training courses have been conducted online, this learning environment has advantages and disadvantages that limit the effectiveness of the courses. This research investigates the opinions of librarians related to the advantages and barriers of taking an online training course and to explore how they relate to the new way of doing their professional activity. The results showed that librarians desire to improve their skills on creating virtual libraries, building databases, the use of digital tools and platforms, online marketing, library management and competencies to carry out online projects with students.*

**Keywords:** lifelong learning; online training course; professional skills

### Introduction

Almost all research regarding librarians and online learning addresses the online courses that librarians offer for other persons (students, teachers, the general public etc.) and not the courses that librarians take or need to take in order to be able to better accommodate the needs of the library users. Such courses include: support for students (including, among others, bibliographic management apps, citation styles, reference guides, and other tutorials) (University of Toronto Mississauga Library, 2020a), instructors (including video resources, textbook alternatives, streaming services, data analysis software, copyright information etc.) (UTSC Library, 2020), and researchers (data and information visualizations, data discovery, digital exhibitions, digital scholarships, GIS and digital mapping services, research impact management, researcher id management, open access, research data management) (University of Toronto Mississauga Library, 2020b), access to basic material for the general public and for students (Repanovici, Barbu & Cristea, 2008; De La Rosa, 2020) and other types of support for the general well-being of the online classes, especially in academic libraries (Enis, 2020). Other studies present the librarians point of view regarding online learning (Fernández-Ramos, 2020), for example.

The American Library Association (ALA) offers a comprehensive online learning page (American Library Association, 2020) where librarians can find general information regarding online learning, information about creating inclusive and engaging online library courses, creating a training program framework for the staff, assessment of online learning, accessibility of online instruction materials etc.).

IFLA also has a useful list of resources regarding COVID-19 and the global library field in which they focus on presenting how libraries have responded to the crisis, online courses being one of the examples given (IFLA, 2020).

Although much information is written about the types of courses offered by libraries or librarians to the public (general public or specific categories), there are very few studies about the courses that librarians attend in order to be able to offer such courses. Our study aims to address this issue and to further the knowledge regarding the impact of these courses.

## **Literature review**

### ***How adults learn. Learning styles and the online medium***

Adults have a variety of learning styles, each with its one advantages: individual learning (studies alone), collaborative learning (prefers to study in groups, in cooperation), auditory learning (uses listening for learning, prefers audio materials), visual learning (prefers visual materials), concrete learning („learn by doing” approach), abstract learning (reads, prefers written materials), logical learning (prefers to study processes), sensual learning (prefers creative learning) (Tuulikki Alamettälä et al, 2020). Of course, online learning has certain specifics that make it easier to use for some adults and difficult for others. We can assume, for example, that those that can learn by themselves and prefer visual materials can adapt easier to the realities of the online education while persons that prefer to learn by doing or to work in tight groups might have problems adapting or find online learning less stimulating.

### ***Continuous professional development of librarians***

The incredible rhythm of development in technology has affected almost all professions and has imposed the need for a continuous professional development in, maybe, all areas of society. As observed „the constant need to be both proactive and reactive to the pressure of change cannot have impacted so significantly on other professions as it has on the library and information profession” (Genoni& Walton, 2005), librarians are at the front of the need for continuous professional development. We can assume that this need has only increased during the pandemic, especially given the need to change many of the services offered by libraries to online-based ones.

### ***The online environment – alternative for librarians’ training***

The COVID-19 crisis has only heightened the need for such development, this time almost exclusively in an online medium. Courses offered in this period cover a wide area of aspects, such as: COVID-19 response, accessibility, collections, copyright, digital libraries, medical librarianship, open access and education, podcasts, scholarly communication, technology, and others (Dai, 2020).

## **Methods**

The objectives of this research were to investigate the opinions of librarians related to the advantages and barriers of taking an online training course and to explore how they relate to the new way of doing their professional activity.

### **Study population**

The study took between May and June 2020. The group of participants is composed of 87 librarians, members of the Romanian Library Association, from the public education system, pre-university and university level, thus ensuring representativeness. The librarians participated voluntarily in this study, following a continuous professional training module, conducted online.

The group consists almost exclusively of women (only two respondents are men). This bias is explained by the influence of cultural factors, as in Romania the profession of librarian is often chosen by women. The majority of participants (80%) come from urban areas and a large part (89.7%) work in pre-university education institutions (Table no 1. Socio-demographic data). Respondents ranged in age from 25 to 60, with a mean of 47.85 years and a standard deviation of 7.27.

Table no1. Socio-demographic data

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Female	85	97,7 %
	Male	2	2,3 %
<b>Area</b>	Urban	70	80,5 %
	Rural	17	19,5 %
<b>Institution</b>	Pre-university	78	89,7 %
	University	9	10,3%
<b>Studies</b>	High school	8	9 %
	University	49	57 %
	Postgraduate	30	34 %

Source: Authors' own research.

### **Survey design**

The research method is the questionnaire-based survey. A questionnaire to investigate the opinions of librarians related to the advantages and barriers of taking an online training course was developed. In order to measure the method of engagement in their own training the following indicators were used: frequency of the involvement in the task, the number of group interventions and the number of tasks solved.

The questionnaire for investigating the opinions of librarians related to the advantages and barriers of taking an online training course contains 6 socio-demographic items (type of institution where they work, age, sex, background, seniority at the workplace, level of academic training), a section on online learning skills with 6 items (level of development of digital skills, types of platforms used, the need for platform tutorials, barriers to accessing platforms, advantages of using online educational platforms), a section dedicated to information literacy.

The research tools were applied after the completion of a training module, conducted in the online environment. The SurveyMonkey platform was used for this purpose. The data was analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistic 21 statistical analysis program.

### **Results**

#### ***Investigating librarians' views on the advantages and barriers of taking an online training course***

Given that the research took place in the first part of the COVID 19 pandemic, one of the researchers' concerns was to discover the degree of use of online educational platforms before the forced transfer of activities in the online environment. A large part of the respondents, 54 (62.1%) had not used online educational platforms for the dissemination of professional knowledge before the pandemic. Also, only 30

respondents (34.5%) accessed and logged on to the Moodle platform without prior consultation of the tutorial provided by the organizers. The rest of the participants received support in accessing the platform, either from the organizers or from colleagues, or by asking for the help of their own children.

The digital skills level declared by respondents at that time is quite low. Only 34 people (38%) stated that they have intermediate level digital skills, and the rest stated that the level is minimal to none.

The main types of platforms used up to that point were educational platforms such as Moodle and Zoom, but in few to none cases from the position of course and video conferencing creator and many more, 57 respondents (66% of the total) from the position of end-user.

All respondents consider it absolutely necessary to have tutorials on using the platforms before accessing them.

The main barriers identified by respondents in accessing the platforms were: difficult access due to poor Internet connection, instability of Internet connection, technical difficulties, use of computers with modest performance, lack of experience in using the Moodle platform, low level of digital competence, ignorance of English, reduced possibilities to connect from alternative computer devices (mobile phone, tablet). Only 30 participants (34.5%) of the total respondents connected without problems, to the link of the training course.

The main aspects considered difficult in the participation to this ongoing training course that took place online can be grouped into the following categories: technical aspects related to accessing the platform, participants' Internet connection, battery problems for those who connected from mobile phones, limited experience of some students who made the training process difficult (e.g. "Some participants did not know how to use the platform and kept the microphones open and their own sounds could be heard"), the lack of performant devices for students, technical and digital knowledge, the communication with the trainers, overlapping personal administrative activities with the training, spending too much time in front of the computer, fatigue, reluctance to technology and online communication environment.

Regarding communication with trainers, some respondents stated that they would have liked a higher level of interaction, which was often blocked by students' insecurity in their digital skills. Also, the socialization during the breaks of the training activities is minimal, which gives an artificial feeling to these professional training sessions.

Among the advantages of using online educational platforms, the respondents pointed out the following: accessibility of the course, limitation of financial and logistical requirements, increased comfort, as it is not necessary to leave home for a training course, timid persons were advantaged because it is not necessary to speak or open your camera, easy access, accuracy of information, new materials, new or improved knowledge, improved skills both in the field of information culture and in the area of digital skills, interaction with trainers and colleagues, making new friends.

### ***Exploring the manner of relating to the new way of carrying out the professional activity***

In order to identify how librarians relate to the new way of working, open-ended questions were asked. A large number of participants expressed their hope that they will do well, 54 respondents (62.06% of the total) said that they will do well in the new environment. Some have acknowledged that it will be a challenge but that they intend to improve their skills as they believe that in the future much of the work will be done in this way. Some of the respondents proudly wrote that they are already part of social

media circles through which they get in touch with students, teachers, colleagues and members of various committees.

The voices of those who highlighted the difficulties related to the new conditions were also represented: lack of adequate access technologies, inadequate technical resources, lack of equipment, lack of adequate software for library work, lack of necessary digital skills, lack of visibility of librarians, the high number of hours required for professional qualification and for the learning of new competences, the high number of hours spent in front of computers, impaired health through excessive use of computers. Only one participant expressed his intention to create a new library database, in a new program.

Participants consider that they should train or improve their following skills: creating virtual libraries, accessing platforms, building databases, promoting the library online, communicating documents online, competencies to create online courses, and the use of digital tools, library management, competencies to carry out online projects with students.

## Discussion

Consistent with previous studies (Todorova et al, 2017), librarians still want to improve their professional skills. The epidemiological conditions of the last year bring into question digital skills as a basic element of vocational training. The main concerns of librarians were the discovery of ways to adapt to digital environments of interaction with their customers. Research participants also expressed concerns about the consequences of the sudden shift of activities to the online environment. Issues related to the ergonomics of online work and its efficiency were debated.

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