

Taylor Baugher and Emily Blumenthal

Beyond the Cardigan

Why Asking “What Do You Think a Librarian Does?” Transforms Instruction

At the start of a first-year instruction session at George Washington University (GW), Taylor Baugher introduced herself as a research services librarian and asked her class, somewhat on a whim, “What do you think a librarian does?” After a brief pause, a student timidly raised their hand and said, “You get the resources that we use.”

At its heart, yes, this is librarianship, or at least one form of it. This simple answer offered a perfect organic segue to discuss collection development and the immense cost of the resources their tuition was supporting, subsequently leading to a conversation about Information Has Value, a key frame from ACRL’s Framework for Information Literacy.¹ From there, Taylor could discuss the work of other library professionals, from disciplinary experts to data services librarians and software developers, naturally directing students to the support section of the library’s website for research consultations.

After this five-minute basic introduction, the class was markedly more engaged and the discussion more robust. Taylor had not only connected students to resources but also demystified and humanized the expert in front of the classroom.

Overcoming Library Stereotypes

After that initial success, Taylor tried the question again in a different class but this time was met with silence. Students did not know why this person was in front of them, and this led to confusion and disengagement. Taylor responded to the silence with humor, asking, “No one knows, right?” and this eased the tension in the room.

When Emily Blumenthal integrated this reflection into her classes, she also found that humor was key to breaking the silence, sometimes joking, “I’m already breaking stereotypes by not wearing a cardigan!” The answers to “What do you think a librarian does?” quickly followed, often reflecting ingrained assumptions: “Shelves books,” “checks out books,” or, in one enthusiastic response, “*I just learned that you actually go to school to be a librarian! Librarians have to learn this whole complicated system of numbers about books.*” This exchange echoes the wider issue of library anxiety, a long-documented feeling that undergraduate students have that is exacerbated when librarians use jargon or assume shared knowledge creates distance.

Library anxiety was first theorized in 1986 by Constance A. Mellon, who found that 75% to 85% of all students experienced fear or anxiety in reaction to their experiences with the library.² Mellon noted that students’ feelings of anxiety were often expressed in relation to the vastness of the library and a feeling of being lost within such a large space. Gelman Library,

Taylor Baugher is research services librarian for undergraduate research at George Washington University, email: taylor.baugher@gwu.edu. Emily Blumenthal is data services librarian at George Washington University, email: emily.blumenthal@gwu.edu.

where many first-year library instruction sessions occur for GW students, is a seven-floor behemoth of Brutalist architecture. Providing a friendly guide in the form of a librarian who can demystify the library space and systems helps relieve this feeling of library anxiety.

We've found that students don't always know why a librarian is in front of them. And if they don't know why we're there, or what we do, why would they listen? Whether in a data literacy workshop or a first-year writing session, students' mental models often remain fixed around circulation desks and stacks. When students see librarians only as caretakers of materials, not also as educators or collaborators, a barrier to learning is created before the session even begins. A basic question like "What do you think a librarian does?" helps set the stage by removing that initial layer of jargon and confusion from students' vocabulary.

Establishing Authority and Building Relationships

These moments of levity and honest admission open the door for real conversation. Our research librarians come from a variety of backgrounds—MLIS, research Ph.D., elementary education, programming, and more. The master's degree in librarianship prepares us for far more than shelving books: It teaches us to teach, support research, and help students navigate information and data across disciplines.

When students realize that librarians teach, collaborate on research, and even analyze data, their interest and curiosity deepen. What starts as a simple query becomes a powerful opportunity for connection. By starting with what they think they know, we create a space for curiosity, trust, and connection.

This technique powerfully supports the affective learning domain, fostering curiosity and openness, which are key precursors to research confidence and sustained engagement. When students recognize librarians as approachable experts, we hope they are more comfortable asking for help, scheduling consultations, and viewing the library as an integral part of their academic network.

Conclusion: A Shared Reimagining

This exercise has prompted wider conversations among colleagues about how we frame our expertise. Instructional designers have expressed interest in adapting the prompt, and our conversations about jargon have even led to suggestions like adding *librarian* to the campus's glossary of essential language for students who are learning to apply English in academic settings. It's become a touchstone for discussing visibility and how our teaching can reshape perceptions of librarianship itself.

At its core, this exercise is about meeting students where they are, not only in their information skills but also in their understanding of who we are and why we're there. The question "What do you think a librarian does?" may be simple, but it invites something powerful: a shared reimagining of what learning and librarianship look like in higher education. ♪

Notes

1. American Library Association, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," February 9, 2015, <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

2. Constance A. Mellon, "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development," *College & Research Libraries* 47, no. 2 (1986): 160–65, doi:10.5860/crl_47_02_160.