

## **Roundtable: How do you explain to your family, your friends, and strangers what you do as an information professional?**

Jackie Phinney

Amy Paterson

compiled by Allana Mayer

Welcome to our third Roundtable, where we ask practitioners to write in with their responses to a new question each issue. This time we asked for your elevator pitch, your prepared speech, or the analogies or anecdotes you use when someone says “Isn’t that done by Google now?” or “You have to go to school for that?” Enjoy!

### ***Jackie Phinney***

Instruction/Liaison Librarian, W.K. Kellogg Health Sciences Library, Dalhousie University

I am the first person to admit that when I applied to graduate school to study my MLIS, I wasn’t totally certain about what I was getting into. When I told family and friends what my study plans were, I was often met with the question “you need a Master’s degree to do that?” They assumed that all I would be doing in my career was shelving books, and at the time I didn’t have a much better explanation to counter with.

Fast-forward a few years after graduating, and I am now an academic librarian at a well-known Canadian medical school. These days when I share with people that I am a librarian, their first reaction is usually one of surprise and awe. When they ask where I work and I answer them, they become intrigued and usually want to know more.

I begin my explanation by asking if they are aware of the local medical school program, as we are a satellite program that is only seven years old. Most people are, which allows me to then go deeper and share some of what my job entails: “I help our professors, staff, and students with finding the things that they need to be able to study or teach or do research, and I also buy books for the library.” Now, if they still seem interested to know more and have not checked out of the conversation, I go even further: “I also teach medical students in the classroom or alone, and I work with local doctors (i.e. clinical faculty) to show them some really neat tools that help them make medical decisions fast.” This fact often surprises people, as “librarian” does not seem to correlate with “teacher” in many people’s minds.

There are other parts of my profession that I usually don’t discuss with people socially. These include my committee work, reference services, and online instructional content that I create/maintain. For the most part people are really interested to know about what I do and enjoy hearing more. By talking about my work with non-librarians, I am humbly

reminded of the average user's perspective which we, as professionals, need to constantly be aware of.

### ***Amy Paterson***

Electronic Resources and Assessment Librarian, Thompson Rivers University Library

"Oh you must love books!" When I tell someone I'm a librarian, more often than not I'll hear some version of this comment. I do love books; I also have a cat and an overflowing tea cupboard. I'm a pair of glasses and a bun away from a librarian stereotype, but I don't really want to talk about any of that because "loving books" is neither a skill I'm proud of nor is it particularly relevant to my job as an Electronic Resources Librarian.

I think of my career as an Information Professional as delightfully multitudinous, so any explanation of what I do can vary depending on both who I'm talking to and what project I'm currently most excited about. If people do bring up my love for books, I'll often bridge that into talking about a quality of mine that I do think helps significantly in my work: a tendency towards systems thinking. I'm usually a big picture kind of person, but more than that I like examining how different components interact and work together. One of the things I love about books is that they often serve as practical representations of theoretical and/or philosophical concepts, and I like to think that the same is true of librarianship. As a librarian, I'm in a position to create significant change in these systems to improve and streamline access to, yes, books, and to all other relevant forms of information.

Of all the ALA core values, Access is probably the one that comes up the most when I describe what I do. Working with electronic resources, I engage directly with access problems on a near-daily basis, and I can usually squeeze in nods to diversity, education, and social responsibility under this umbrella. Many of the people I talk with initially see information as being freely available, so, depending on what's on my mind that day, I might bring up the Open Access movement as a response to unsustainable practice in scholarly publishing or the importance of embedding critical evaluation into information literacy skills. If I'm wearing my Assessment hat, then I might mention accessibility and inclusion barriers in libraries and talk about challenges inherent in identifying and fixing them. While these topics can get very technical and complicated, I've had to boil them down to their simplest form to tell my three-year-old, "Mama sees what kind of information people need, and then she helps them get to it." "And you give people books!?" "Yes, that too."