The interpretive repertoires of Zimbabwean academic librarians

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Abstract:
Zimbabwean academic librarians have developed interpretive repertoires to identify as teachers because of growing engagement in instruction and training within their campuses. Interpretive repertoires explain the motives and qualities of individuals that is attitudes and perceptions. This paper undertook to delve into the role, identity, image and status of the Zimbabwean academic librarians, as these presented enough evidence to support interpretive repertoires. This paper describes, accounts of Zimbabwean academic librarians collected from a chosen sample of 79 academic librarians using a questionnaire, document research and the interview. The Bindura State University of Education, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Lupane State University, Midlands State University, the National University of Science and Technology, and PHSBL80 Library (which preferred to stay unidentified) took part in the study. The paper suggests that academic librarians should move on to set teaching into the courses taught by faculty. The paper recommends academic librarians to work more closely with academic staff to develop courses from the onset, planning the teaching and systems.

Keywords: Blended librarianship; Academic librarianship in Zimbabwe; Information Literacy Skills Training; Teaching

1.1 Introduction

Most academic libraries now deliver teaching. Whether teaching occurs in the form of Information Literacy Skills (ILS) education for undergraduate students, sessions for colleagues, or the access to learning management systems (LMS) for remote library users (Turner, 2016: 477). University communities now look upon the 21st-century academic librarians as instructors because of the valued features of the instructional designer and instructional technologist in blended librarianship (Bell and Shank, 2007: 3; Walter, 2008: 51-52). The two characteristics, instructional design and instructional technologist coincide with teaching ILS and e-Learning (Clapp et al., 2013; Mugwisi, 2015; Johnson, 2016; Mullins, 2016). Academic librarians have aimed for different models of professional staffing that support instructional designer and instructional technologist roles (Shank, 2006; Bell and Shank, 2007; 2011; Campbell, 2014; Vargas et al., 2015), by broader mission (s) (Oakleaf, 2011: 62).

The Zimbabwean academic librarians now identify as teachers because of the growing engagement in teaching and learning within their campuses (Chikonzo et al., 2014; Mavodza, 2014). But then again, the Zimbabwean universities have not yet warmed up to academic librarians' support in the classroom and the teacher identity (Chanetsa and Ngulube, 2016: 155; Tshuma, 2017: 99-100; Dabengwa, 2018: 175-176). This is because ILS programmes (the backbone to the teacher status), do not add to the student's degree or certification (Jiyane and Onyancha, 2010: 19).

To understand the interpretive repertoires elaborated by academic librarians, this study depended on the attitudes and perceptions of academic librarians and the university communities towards academic librarians. The investigators' line of rationale is coherent with Wetherell and Potter's (1988) description of interpretive repertoires as "constructs of a social object within a context". Interpretive repertoires expound the motives and behaviours of both academic librarians and university communities through attitudes and perceptions of academic librarianship. This paper investigates the role, identity and image of the academic librarians, as these presented enough evidence to support interpretive repertoires.

1.1.1 Image and identity of academic librarians

It is problematic to separate between the image of the academic librarian and the image of the library altogether (Aharony, 2006: 238). This is because the literature on the image and identity of academic libraries and academic librarians interweave both. The notions of image and identity are connected and may well not lead to the same conclusions. An image may illustrate the means by which the external environment observes the academic librarians – **an attitude** (Perini, 2015: 18-22). While identity is how the academic librarians consider their profession – **a perception** (Perini, 2015: 18-22).

Pickens (2005: 44) points out that an attitude as a "mindset or a tendency to act in a way due to both an individual's experience and temperament". The attitudes of academic librarians may hold a positive or negative course with limited instances being indifferent. Perception is the act by which people construe and organise events to develop an experience of the world (Otara, 2011: 21). Pickens (2005: 52) says when a person comes across an experience, the person recognizes it as something based on earlier experiences.

However, what an individual understands or perceives may differ from the real world. The researchers paid attention to understanding actions is not consistent among the academic librarians (Wetherell and Potter, 1988; Wetherell, 1998; 2009; Wertz et al., 2011). The researchers realised that at times the image of academic librarians may not be in sync their identity. For example, the librarian sees himself/herself as a professional who builds collections and opens access and makes information available. However, the public sees the librarian as someone who stamps books (Aharony, 2006: 238-239; Langridge, Riggi and Schultz, 2014: 229-256).

There are studies conducted to explore academic librarians' professional identities from the perspectives of academic librarians. Typical studies with this angle include Wilson and Halpin (2006) and Mckinney and Wheeler (2015), among others. For instance, Wilson and Halpin (2006: 89) noticed that although LIS professionals have advanced experiences outside LIS, they still distinguished themselves as service providers instead of specialists with a corresponding standing to the medical and legal professions. In addition, Mckinney and Wheeler (2015: 118) discovered that academic librarians perceived their teaching roles as "Teacher-Librarian"; "Learning support"; a "Librarian who teaches"; and "Trainer", depending on interpretations of academic librarianship, ILS, and other lecturers (**see Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Four different interpretations of teaching among academic librarians		
	I teach	I do not teach
I am a teacher	**Teacher-librarian** I am a teacher AND I do the same teaching as other teachers	**Learning support** I am a teacher BUT my teaching is not the same as other teachers'
I am not a teacher	**Librarian who teaches** I am not a teacher BUT I do some teaching	**Trainer** I am not a teacher AND I don't teach

Source: (Mckinney and Wheeler, 2015)

1.2 Methods

The researchers gathered data from a population of 136 academic librarians from the BUSE, CUT, LSU, MSU, NUST, and PHSBL80 Library. These university libraries were selected through the researchers' decision on which universities will offer participants who had practiced phenomenology. This sampling referred to as purposive sampling, selects participants "on the basis of knowledge of a population, its elements, and the purpose of the study" (Babbie, 2013: 128). One institution had not replied to grant the researcher access up to the time of writing up this study (discussed as **PHSBL80 Library** to protect its identity and respondents. Purposive sampling was utilised on the sample to define the participants for the semi-structured questionnaire, separate interview protocols for academic librarians and Library Board members (see **Table 1**).

Table 1: Distribution of instruments to the sample

Instrument	Target group	Total
Semi-structured questionnaire for academic librarians	Assistant Librarians, Technical Assistant, Senior Library Assistants, Chief Library Assistants, Bibliographic Service Librarians, Senior Assistant Librarians, Systems Librarians Technology Librarians	80
Interview protocol for academic librarians	Assistant Librarians and Systems Librarians	17
Interview protocol for library boards librarians	Head Librarian, Deputy Librarian and Sub-Librarians	3

The Select Statics Services© (Select Statistical Services, 2017) web tool calculated the sample size and confidence interval of the population of 136 academic librarians. The Select Statics web tool determined that the sample size for a population of 136 academic librarians, was 101, at a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5.

80 questionnaires were sent out to academic librarians (including librarians from PHSBL80 Library who conceded to take part), instead of the sample size of 101. Fifty-nine (59) questionnaires came back; so, the **return rate** of the survey was **74 %**.

The researchers depended on studies such as Shank (2006), Bell and Shank (2007), Shank and Dewald (2012), York and Vance (2009), Julien and Pecoskie (2009), Richardson (2010), Corrall and Keates (2010), Perini (2015), Al-Fadhli, Corrall and Cox (2016), and Chanetsa and Ngulube (2016) to formulate the questions that probed the interpretive repertoires of academic librarians.

1.3. Findings

The data are displayed through significant statements that explain how academic librarians experienced blended librarianship through detailed descriptions and matrices. The significant statements were grouped into larger units of information that agreed with the research questions which Creswell (2013: 83) has called "textual descriptions".

Table 2: Key statements why academic librarian said they textual librarians

Aspects of blended librarianship	Key statements from interviewees
Combining traditional and contemporary issues in librarianship	PHSBL73: "Yes, because I combine the traditional role of a librarian with the training role of teaching, facilitating teachings and learning. Mixing the two makes me a blended librarian."
Offering faculty liaisons	PHSBL70: "… to some extent…we are doing faculty liaison, I believe that is part of blended librarianship."
Teaching roles	PHSBL77: "Yes, I think so, in the sense that we also partake in the teaching of students in the faculties we service."
Ability to use technology	PHSBL65: "I learned several technologies. All these I did outside the LIS curriculum because I know that these are the skills that are needed in a modern library."

The academic librarians in the interview provided self-perceptions of blended librarianship to explore if they selected the blended librarianship identity. **Table 2** summarizes the key statements from the interview and questionnaire that selected academic librarians made on their self-perceptions as blended librarians.

Sixteen (16) out of twenty (20) interviewees identified themselves as blended librarians stating different characteristics of blended librarianship as arguments, for example:

- Combining traditional and contemporary issues in librarianship (9 responses);
- Offering faculty liaisons (2 responses);
- Teaching roles (3 responses); and the,
- Ability to handle technology in the teaching, learning and research (2 responses).

Three (3) out of the twenty (20) interviewees were doubtful whether if they qualified under the label of blended librarians. Among these three (3), two (2) were Assistant Librarians and one was a Systems Librarian. Another Assistant Librarian was sceptical to be called a blended librarian because there was no Technology Librarian at his university:

> PHSBL63: "...we will become fully fledged blended librarians, but as long as we are like this-learning on our own...of course we have managed to redesign spaces, put in some new things, did collaborations. But we could do it at a greater speed if we have someone who is an emerging technology librarian."

The Systems Librarians argued they could not be classified as a blended librarian because they did not take part in activities such as shelving, cataloguing, and the circulation desk. One Systems Librarian gave the following:

> PSHBL75: "It is difficult because we are a service department... our core business would have included Reader Services and Technical Services…We come in as technologists. Of course, I do have an MSc in LIS...It would be more difficult for me to say I am a blended librarian. Maybe I am, but my day to day activities are not."

**Figure 2: Survey respondents' self-perceptions in blended librarianship**

From the results of the survey pointed out in **Figure 2,** it can be recognized that most of the respondents in the survey see themselves in terms of Mckinney and Wheeler's (2015) categorisation of academic librarians' perception of their teaching roles as a "Librarian who teaches".

Both the survey respondents and interviewees rated their conduct as blended librarians to find out how they felt they were performing as blended librarians. Self-rated performances are indispensable since they depend on respondents' self-appraisal and are a snapshot image of the organisational culture in academic libraries and the university at large.

The least frequent class among the six (6) libraries is "Teacher-Librarian" and is present in only two institutions (LSU and NUST Libraries), displaying an insignificant area in Figure 2, compared to other levels.

The survey respondents had to evaluate themselves on a scale of 1-3. These ratings are explained as *"I could do better"* (1), *"Good"* (2) and *"Excellent"* (3). **Figure 3** indicates the scores from 34 survey respondents who answered the self-rated performance question. Twenty-five (25) academic librarians did not answer to this item. 65% of the survey respondents rated themselves at $\frac{2}{3}$, 24% rated themselves at $\frac{1}{3}$ and 11% rated themselves at $\frac{3}{3}$ which is a whole number 1 or simply translates to 100%.
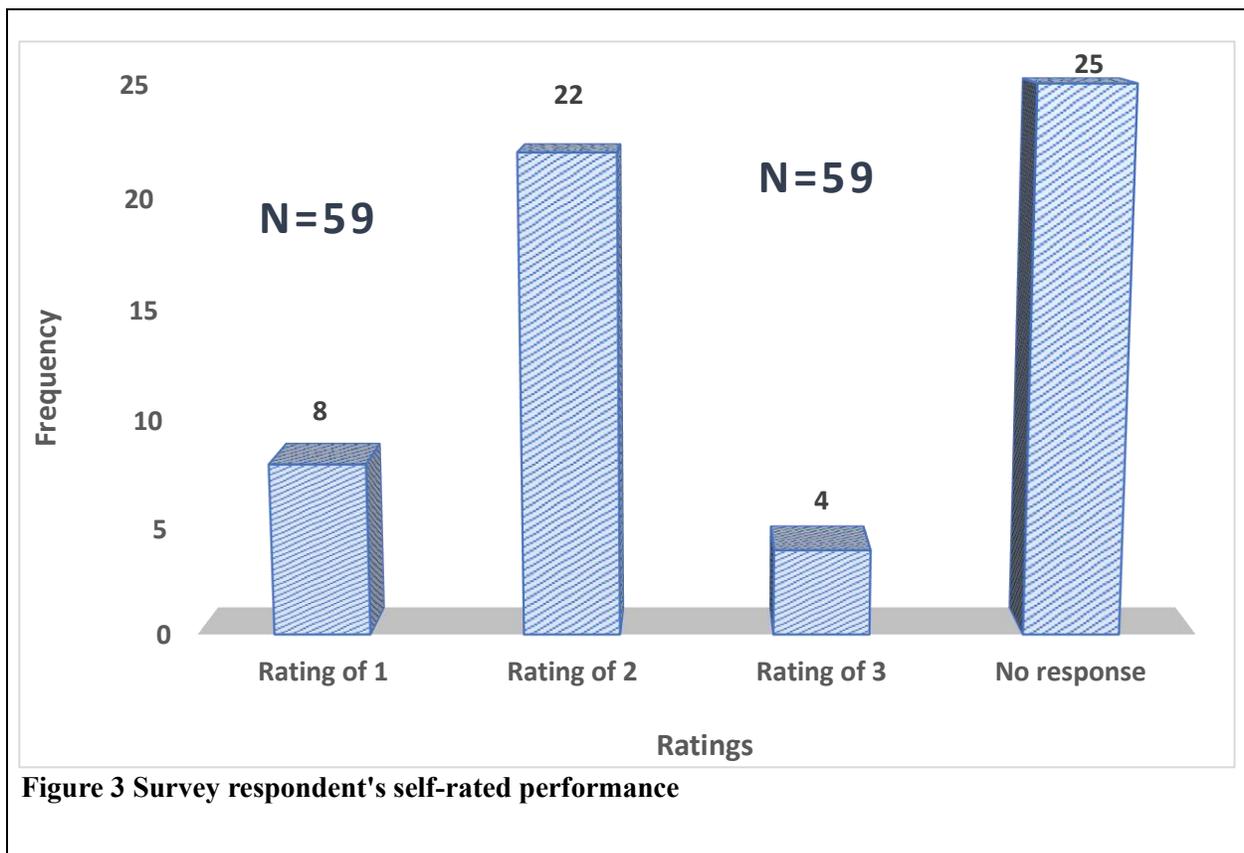
Figure 3 Survey respondent's self-rated performance

The survey respondents who rated themselves $\frac{2}{3}$ specified that communities were satisfied with their services but stated there was room for improvement. One respondent within the $\frac{2}{3}$ category wrote: *"I am still coping with technological developments since technology is not static."* The survey respondents who rated themselves $\frac{1}{3}$ justified this by saying they did not have the necessary

resources and skills to perform their roles. The respondents who self-rated their performance $\frac{1}{3}$ wrote that: "*More training is required to achieve more*", "*I could be better if I get all the necessary resources,*" and "*There is an absence of chances to perform, that affects my performance*."

The survey respondents who rated their level of blended librarianship at $\frac{3}{3}$ justified that their communities were satisfied with their work, and that they had the requisite skills for blended librarianship. One of these respondents stated that: "*I am a qualified librarian. I have kept abreast with current trends in the profession through online Google groups, workshops and Communities of Practice.*"

Table 3. summarises the key responses in interviews with academic librarians' self-ratings of blended librarianship. The interviewees rated their performance of blended librarianship as well on a scale of 1-5, where 1 was the least and 5 was the largest, and thereafter they were questioned to support the response. The Library Board representatives were required to rate the library staff member's performance on blended librarianship

Table 3. Summary of the interviewees' rating and justifications for blended librarianship	
GROUP RATINGS OF BLENDED LIBRARIANSHIP	**KEY STATEMENTS FOR JUSTIFYING RATING**
Assistant Librarians:	
$\frac{3}{5}$	*The systems part is still a grey area* *Better education in the subject matter* *The way in which the technology is changing*
$\frac{3½}{5}$	*I lack the skills in Systems Development* *There are duties that I may not be able to do now*
$\frac{4}{5}$	- I'm judging by the response that I get - There is still room for development - On the lecturing side, I can learn more - I am trying to give back to the community especially where technology is concerned
$\frac{4½}{5}$	*There is still much that I need to learn* *Librarianship is dynamic*
Systems Librarians:	
$\frac{4}{5}$	*What we have tried to do is based on the theories*

Library Board members:	
$\frac{3}{5}$	• *We are doing is still very basic*
$\frac{4}{5}$	• *They are not to be stuck in traditional librarianship*
$\frac{5}{5}$	• *They are working hard to change the negative perception in the university*

The academic librarians presented their community's impression of the role they matched to show the interpretive repertoires. **Table 4** summarises the interviewee's perceptions of their role in the university community.

Table 4: Academic librarians' perceptions of their role in the community

Type of perceptions	Category of academic librarians' perceptions		
	Negative perception	Mixed perception	Positive perception
Perceptions of students	They follow negative stereotypes from lecturers They do not value the librarian's knowledge	N/A	The ILS course has changed student perceptions
Perceptions of lecturers	They are negative about the academic librarian's knowledge Do not value academic librarian's qualifications Do not support academic librarian's programmes	Their value of the library depends on where they were trained It depends if the library is imparting skills already in the community It depends on the level of interaction with the community	Respect academic librarians because they now know of library services There is a high commendation of academic librarians which has reached the executive

In the interviews too, academic librarians had **mixed feelings** on lecturers' perceptions. One interviewee acknowledged that lecturers, who had gained their professional qualifications outside Zimbabwe, put a greater value to the library, unlike the lecturers who had studied in local institutions. Other interviewees believed they had a **positive perception** from their communities due to:

- Their leading roles in using ICTS within the university (for example referencing and citation tools and anti-plagiarism software);

- The emergence of librarians with higher qualifications such as MSc. LIS;

- Academic librarians who were crossing the academic and non-academic divide through the ILS course; and,

- The consistent marketing of library products and services.

1.4 Discussion

The data explains that academic librarians identify with the blended librarian identity. This is because academic librarians were offering faculty liaisons, teaching ILS and LTAs and using their work duties to change the negative stereotypes of librarians in their university. The researchers noted the tasks described by the academic librarians are coherent with the literature of blended librarianship. Therefore, the academic librarians are warranted to characterize themselves as blended librarians.

The paper's findings establish the academic librarian's appraisal of their participation in teaching through Mckinney and Wheeler's (2015) conceptions of professional identities. The data cited that most academic librarians considered themselves as a *"Librarian who teaches"*. Mckinney and Wheeler (2015) affirm that academic librarians who fall into this category are hesitant to be pointed out to as lecturers but refer to activities among learner and faculty as "teaching". On the same note, the academic librarians in this study perceived that their teaching could be equal to that of lecturers, but they were prudent to suggest they lacked formal subject skills and teaching qualifications to be at par with the lecturers. The literature on identity theories calls this scenario in the findings an identity dilemma, which takes place when the "work of claiming and maintaining valued identities is complicated by conflicting sets of normative expectations, and hold 'contradictory' identities" (Dunn and Creek, 2015: 261). The valued identity in this paper is the *"Librarian who teaches"*, which is difficult to achieve since academic librarians:

- Lack of in-depth subject knowledge and teaching qualifications;
- The negative stereotypes about academic librarianship; and,
- The submissive role to faculty, which are contradictory identities.

Perhaps academic librarians in the study were no longer operating at the "periphery" in their faculties but had not yet reached the core (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where they had a sense of identity as "master practitioners" with teaching and subject qualifications within their faculty. This sentiment was shared by participants in studies such as Mckinney and Wheeler (2015) who averred that LIS qualifications are not enough for academic librarians to regard them as teachers. The researcher may allude the academic librarian's teaching identity to what Dunn and Creek (2015: 265) have presented as a deviant-either-way, whereby to conform to anyone identity (teacher or librarian) may have the impelled action being labelled a "deviant" and a "conformist". Academic librarians had to choose if they are librarians or teachers, and the *"Librarians who teaches"*, might be the intermediate ground, a deviant-either-way.

1.5 Conclusion

Academic librarians were facing identity dilemmas where they claimed they were receiving a positive response in the university communities for their teaching role but are not formally recognised as academic staff. Academic librarians believed their participation in teaching ILS and showing LTAs to both faculty and students warrants them to be academic staff, however, lecturing staff and students do not refer to them. This is because academic librarians have admitted that they often lack subject expertise and teaching skills. A conclusion from this finding is that academic librarians have become deviant-either-way, by taking part in the teaching, learning and research at the peripheral levels (through cooperative teaching, without integrating into a lecturer's courses) and teaching ILS training and LTAs (often within the spaces of the library, such as the learning commons).

Academic librarians ought to work in their faculties, especially if they are to fulfill faculty liaisons. Working at the main library takes the academic librarian away from their community, making it ineffectual to build lasting relationships. Faculty liaisons need constant communication and involvement of the academic librarians, and this can be achieved better if the academic librarian works at the point of the need, the faculty.

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