What, and How, We Teach Now

Educating Youth Librarians in the Twenty-First Century

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How are future youth services librarians trained? Are library schools tuned in to current practices? How do library school faculty determine what skills and abilities are needed for today's library work, and are they responsive to the cultural, social, and societal forces that change day-to-day library practices?

In fall 2010, 246 youth services faculty and adjuncts from ALA-accredited library and information schools in the United States and Canada were emailed a link to an online survey about what they taught and how they taught it. There were sixty-seven responses, made up of thirty-one assistant, associate, or full professors; twenty-eight adjunct faculty, and eight who identified themselves as "retired" or "other," a category that reflects the variety of job titles proliferating within our field—for example, lecturer, teaching professor, clinical (non-tenure) professor, and professor of practice.

Of those who responded to a question about years of teaching experience in library and information science (LIS) programs, thirteen had taught less than five years; eighteen taught between five and ten years; nine taught between eleven and fifteen years; and eleven had been teaching in this area for more than fifteen years. Because the survey was administered anonymously, demographic data is limited, but respondents had the opportunity to provide an email address; thirty-six did so.

Based on a review of this information, it appears that faculty or instructors from at least twenty-three American and three Canadian information sciences schools participated in the study. ALA listed fifty accredited schools (including both United States and Canada) at the time the survey was administered in 2010.

The survey included nearly forty questions on topics that ranged from faculty roles in 2000 to whether service learning is a required course component. This article focuses on what the survey results reveal about course delivery and course content, and when and why changes are made to the curriculum.

Technology has changed many things in our field, and course delivery is a good example. Students no longer have to come to the instructor; the instructor more often comes to them through distance education courses. As of fall 2010, twenty-five respondents were teaching a combination of face-to-face and online courses, while only six taught completely online. Figure 1 indicates the range of delivery methods reported. A "synchronous" class typically takes place virtually but in real time, with the students and instructor meeting together; while an "asynchronous" class has prerecorded lectures and students access the class on their own time. The "other" category included courses delivered via television or satellite locations.

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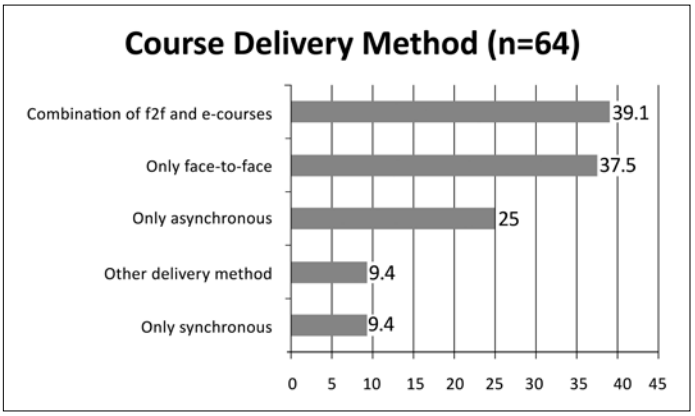

Figure 1. Course Delivery Methods for Youth Services Classes

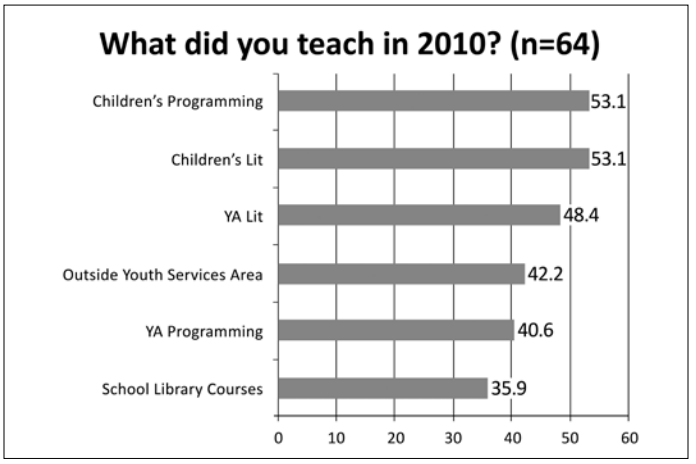

Figure 2. Classes Taught in 2010

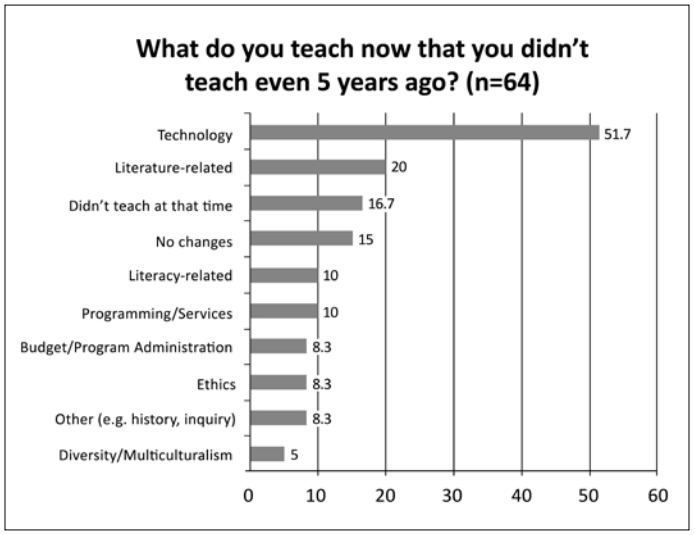

Figure 3. Classes Taught Now

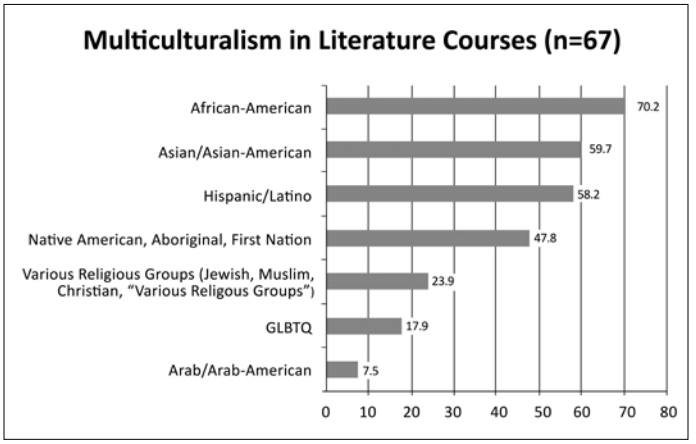

Figure 4. Multiculturalism in Literature

What Did Youth Services Faculty Teach?

In 2010, thirty-four taught children's literature; the same number also taught children's programming. These continue to be the most prevalent youth services courses offered by library schools. Other courses (see Figure 2) included young adult literature, young adult programming as a separate course, and school library courses. It is interesting to note that twenty-seven faculty or adjuncts also teach courses outside the youth services area.

In a related question, respondents were asked about what they taught now that they didn't teach even five years ago (see Figure 3). No surprise, responses indicated changes due to technology, but there were also changes in other areas as well. As a result of technology changes, classes now include Web 2.0 tools, databases, e-books, and gaming. There was a focus on content creation ("blogs, wikis, prezi, animoto, podcasting, voicethread") for both youth and librarians. In fact, reasons for learning the technology included marketing tools for youth librarians, use of social networking tools to advocate for youth/youth services, and YouTube videos for storytelling. Technology also occasioned more consideration of "library responses and responsibilities for cyber-bullying, privacy, and surveillance."

Literature instruction now includes new formats and population groups, interfaces, and publishing trends. Faculty respondents listed graphic novels, urban fiction, ezines, and e-books as newer formats they now cover in class. They explore online interfaces and sources for materials, such as One More Story (www.onemorestory.com) and the International Children's Digital Library (ICDL, http://en.childrenslibrary.org), and some include digital storytelling. Online book trailers were identified as "weapons in our booktalking arsenal."

Multicultural/diverse literature appears to be important (see Figure 4), with fifty-four reporting they include diverse and multicultural materials in their literature classes. The emphasis continues to be on mainstream ethnicities and LGBTQ works, but respondents also included literature from groups as specific as Eastern Indian, Cuban, and those with limited English proficiency.

There were variations in how instructors identified diversity, from being very specific, to taking a more general approach. One instructor reported, "I am very inclusive of all cultures in my courses as I define culture based upon religious preferences, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, immigration status, ethnicity, and race." Another focused on differences based on materials and age:

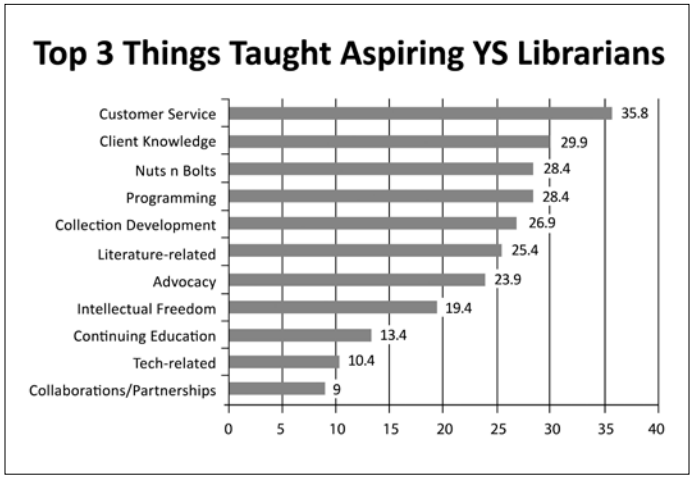

Figure 5. Top Three Things Taught

> "I usually include materials on African-American teens, gay teens, urban and/or disadvantaged teens . . . characters with disabilities . . . others such as Native Americans and characters of Indian origin living in England or the U.S. . . . and immigrant characters of other nationalities . . . characters with mental illness and ones with homeless teens. . . . In children's, I tend to opt for a strategy that some experts have endorsed, of using books that depict characters or illustrations of multiple races . . . as well as specific races."

For at least one respondent, changes in literature have resulted in "reading as a site of resistance to authority and how readers subvert that authority by what they choose to read."

The results of a question asking about a separate diverse/multicultural literature class were less promising. Of sixty-two respondents, seven teach a separate class "often," five teach one "sometimes," and forty-four never teach a separate multicultural literature class. However, fifty respondents include diversity or multicultural content in their programming courses.

Another new area of instruction addresses literacy-related topics, including "youth information- seeking behavior" as well as "language and literacy theory." These issues are most often addressed in programming courses, which now include "early literacy programs," and "emphasize twenty-first-century literacy skills and how to incorporate the development of these into the everyday work of school and public librarians serving youth."

What Are the Most Important Things You Teach?

Educators were asked to list the top three things they taught future children's and young adult librarians. Figure 5 shows the categories of response. Although youth services and youth programming are the two most common classes taught in library schools, they are not considered to be the most important content areas. According to survey respondents, customer service and client knowledge skills are more important.

Customer service concerned how youth are treated in school and public libraries, and includes topics such as advocacy, respect, intellectual freedom, and individuality. Respondents used words and phrases such as "authenticity," "empathy," "individual," "youth ownership," "respect," and "value young people," to convey an attitude that is user-focused. Put succinctly, "to focus on what youth want and need and not what librarians think they should want and need." Client knowledge meant having "contemporary, accurate, developmental information," and "understanding the unique needs of youth."

The Nuts 'n Bolts section addressed the daily operations of youth services, services, programs, planning, outreach, and management of youth services and the role of youth services in the overall library mission. Faculty want students to learn community analysis, the "program design cycle," how to develop "skills in working with diverse stakeholder groups," in addition to "best practices in services to children and teens," and "programming and services, advocacy, intellectual freedom." In terms of professional standards, there were references to twenty-first-century learning (American Association of School Librarians/AASL) and ALSC competencies.

Respondents made a distinction between collection development skills and literature-related information. Collection development was selection, evaluation, weeding, and "right book, right reader." Literature-related responses were broader and included "reader response theory versus 'great books' approach," "how picturebooks can be used at all levels," and "you must read children's lit to know what's out there."

Advocacy, collaboration, and intellectual freedom surfaced in the customer service category, but also occasioned specific comments. Advocacy was identified by instructors as being "willing to stand up for youth in the community and the library," advocating for equitable service and sufficient allocation of resources. Knowledge of intellectual freedom would prepare future librarians to respond to censorship challenges and ensure that youth "have the same rights of freedom of information that adults do." Instructors have incorporated information about collaboration and partnerships in their classes, so that youth services librarians work in a network of other people working with and for youth to make the best use of scarce resources, to reach beyond the young people to whom we have easy and regular access, and to pool resources.

Faculty identified continuing professional education as an important thing, noting that "you never stop learning." Another respondent wanted to empower students to become enthusiastic and capable professionals, while a third wanted students to continue to learn and be inquisitive, adding new skills and reading for one's own self development.

The most important things about technology had to do with new trends, having students become technology and literacy leaders, and encouraging responsible ethical use of technology. In other parts of the survey those technologies included e-books, blogs, and social networking tools.

In addition to these categories, thirteen instructors gave responses that seem to point toward an "ideal" youth services librarian, someone who would learn from young people. Many respondents agreed that youth services librarians should "love what they are doing or get another job." They should be flexible, creative, curious, compassionate, fun, and consider that they are preparing for a service job, not a reading job.

One instructor commented, "Adaptability to change and flexibility are critical traits for any librarian, but especially for YA librarians. Do you have the right stuff for working with youth in a library or information agency setting?"

Eighteen respondents also provided what appears to be advice for future youth workers. "Success is the presence of excellence, not the absence of mistakes," commented one faculty member. Others noted that students should "expect change," "work smarter, not harder! Don't reinvent the wheel," and finally, "expect that youth services librarianship will be both challenging and rewarding . . . you'll never be bored."

How Do Faculty Decide What to Teach?

Two questions asked how youth services faculty choose what they put in their syllabi. The first question asked what might prompt changes to the list of the things they felt were most important. Seventeen respondents indicated that their awareness of the field was the leading reason to effect a change, followed by ten who attributed changes to experience in the field, eight said technology, seven noted change was caused by trends in the field, and finally, two based change on research. Respondent comments from this question included the following:

- "I would have focused more on books at one point—now I am more balanced in talking about other materials, formats, web-based information, etc."

- "Standards are more important than ever in meeting state and national mandates. Technology has vastly changed the world of school librarianship and new librarians need to be the go-to person concerning technology in their schools."

- "New research, technology, and best practice informs curricular content in youth services courses. Examples: Six early literacy skills (Every Child Ready to Read/ECRR), new research on achievement gap (socioeconomic factors, gender differences), American Academy of Pediatrics research report on children's media consumption, etc."

Twenty-six faculty reported that they change less than a quarter of their syllabus each time they teach the same course, while twenty-one change their syllabus 25 to 50 percent each time, nine change less than 10 percent of the content, and four faculty change 50 to 75 percent of their syllabus each time. One respondent noted that "25 percent each time is 100 percent in four years . . . anything I encounter at conferences, workshops, or in professional literature may prompt a change. I try to learn from my students and target

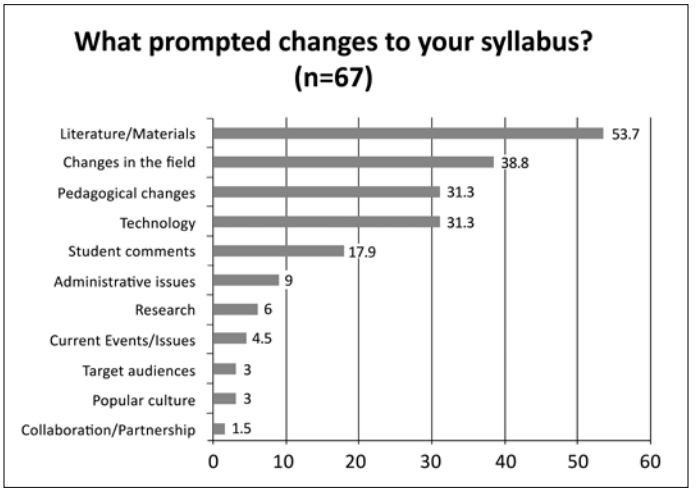

Figure 6. Changes in Syllabus

their learning needs, so I'm always looking for effective and efficient ways to cover all of youth services work."

The second question related to curricular changes was more general, simply asking instructors what would prompt any changes to coursework. Figure 6 indicates areas that impact coursework generally. Changes in actual children's and young adult literature account for the biggest change, as faculty noted the appearance of new genres, resources moving online (databases and websites), new authors, awards, and new trends in publishing.

Standards and competencies from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the AASL, ALSC, and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) were also mentioned, as were national initiatives such as Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR).

Technology also impacted coursework. Moving traditionally face-to-face classes to an online environment means making "major changes to accommodate the mode of delivery and the shortened session" for some, and for others it means being more dependent on online resources and tools.

Research, current events, and changes in the field also affect the youth services curriculum. Respondents noted new discoveries in developmental psychology, new directions in research, and new research on children and reading. Current events, especially related to books and other materials, publishing and demographic trends, and something one respondent called, "technological tipping points," also influence what is taught.

Faculty mentioned they stay tuned to daily work in the field, incorporating new ideas related to serving youth in libraries, current trends in the practice, and changes in youth populations.

Other questions delved more deeply into content and teaching changes over the past five years for teaching children's literature, young adult literature, and programming. Instructors were asked to describe any content and or pedagogical (teaching)

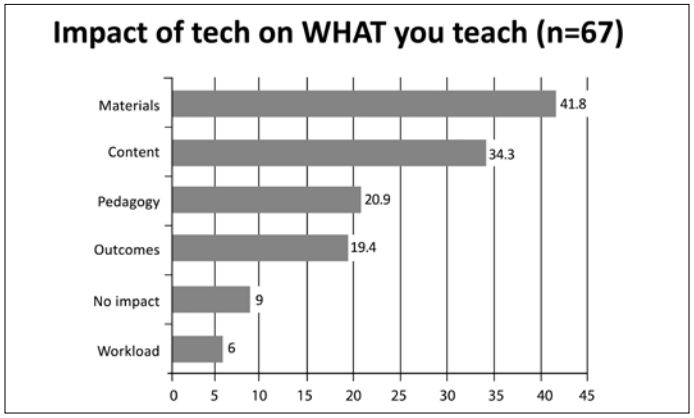

Figure 7. Impact of Technology on WHAT You Teach

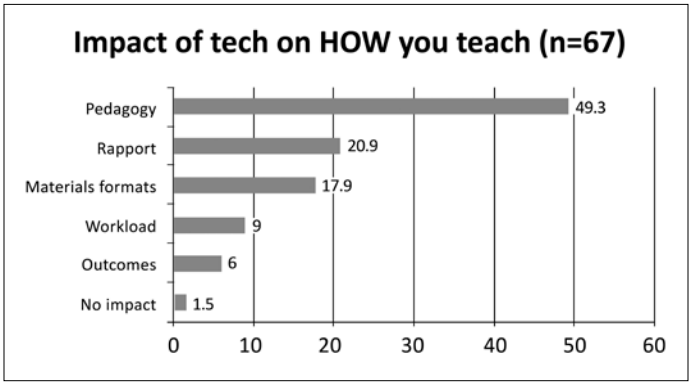

Figure 8. Impact of Technology on HOW You Teach

changes that influenced what or how they taught. Across the board there were references to technology and how new tools and formats influence content and delivery.

In terms of programming, twenty respondents changed their courses because technology introduced—or necessitated—new ways of doing things. From Web 2.0 to gaming in libraries, these were tools that instructors feel students need to know prior to going into work situations. One faculty member noted, "Technology has changed how programming and services are marketed, so students need to understand Twitter and Facebook even if they do not use them, which means I have to use them as teaching tools."

Another comment addressed changes in even the most traditional programming—storytelling: "The greater use of digital storytelling in public and school library services/programs has led me to include this element in my traditional storytelling course."

In terms of teaching, many respondents mentioned how teaching materials had moved online. One respondent noted, "I now access many resources online that used to be in print, so I use the computer and projector more than I used to."

New tools for teaching have led some to rethink their approaches as instructors, moving to a customer-service model and away from the "sage on the stage."

Another respondent commented, "Technology influences the need and interest in children's/YA programming, so in terms of content, I am shifting to include more discussion of that. Also, availability of communication and collaboration technology (such as Skype and Google Docs) change how I teach and how students construct work for the class."

Not all changes had to do with technology; some respondents also indicated added content on specific client groups, such as serving the needs of early literacy, minority audiences, and homeschooling groups.

There is also more attention being paid to management practices such as outreach and marketing to marginalized youth and to collaborations with community partners.

For literature, courses were updated because of new formats (graphic novels, audiobooks, e-books, multimodal texts) and resources moving online. One respondent went so far as to comment on collection development in general, saying "so much of this process is guided by online resources (both those that librarians subscribe to and those that book jobbers provide) that my teaching of this process has incorporated more complicated and multifaceted methods of evaluation. No longer do we evaluate our materials for condition and check our collections against the core collections."

Respondents also mentioned increased access to "authors, illustrators, poets, and publishers including advance information on books, media, and trends. Greater access to laypeople's [*sic*] views on books, reading, and publishing." Others have added "media [for children's and young adult lit] starting from book tie-ins like games or movies, but also including media that begins outside of literary forms."

There may also be changes due to other factors such as diversity, "books by and for Latinos have increased my ability to foreground this population and its needs," or familiarity with different critical schools of thought, such as feminist theory. Several respondents mentioned ongoing challenges to intellectual freedom, and how an influx of education students has influenced uses for books mentioned in class.

"How" these literature courses are taught has also changed. For example, "teaching a children's lit course face-to-face and teaching synchronous online courses are two totally different formats. If I want to share materials with my online courses, I have to go to much greater efforts to make the material available (scanning book pages, embedding audio files in the course shell, including the use of webcams along with microphones)."

Respondents also described changes in teaching practices. "Multimedia, Internet links, online teaching and learning, inquiry based learning, and cooperative learning strategies are now deeply embedded into all of my teaching." "I've introduced literature circles, to privilege and explore peer learning. I'm exploring various media tools to encourage creativity and problem-solving that responds in part to teaching millenials." And finally, "The ability to more successfully collaborate

using Web 2.0 tools provides opportunities for more successful implementation of collaborative work in online teaching environments."

Impact of Technology

Technology emerged as the biggest change factor, for everything from genres to advocacy tools. Two questions on the survey asked faculty and adjuncts to think about the impact of technology on "what" and "how" they taught youth services courses. Figures 7 and 8 present the survey results. Materials and content are related but different, in that "materials" is more general and includes things like genre, and format, while "content" responses tended to be more specific—for example, "changes literacy focus from print to a broader media focus," or "topics related to information technology, such as digital divide, information literacy, and ADA-compliance." Another respondent said, "now that technology is changing the availability and access to resources I focus on teaching students skill sets that apply across resources rather than teaching about specific resources. I try to focus on teaching students how to make good decisions."

Pedagogical responses spoke to changes in teaching habits, style, or delivery, with mixed results. For example:

- "Young adults are the natives of technology usage. It must be used in every facet of what I teach, including gaming and social networking."
- "That I don't see students face-to-face which I miss. I don't really know what they are thinking. Only what they provide me via email. I don't know if I am truly having an impact with each lecture."
- "Because we teach almost totally online I am unable to do some of the interactive exercises and we don't do as much with student presentations."
- There were also some concerns about being able to have "ROBUST [sic] literature discussion" and creating a good class rapport.

On the positive side:

- "More multimedia because all of us like it (students and instructor) . . . the ability to extend class beyond the three contact hours"
- "Technology really helps me to make my online courses more engaging for students, allowing them to participate in real-time . . . I also use social networking technologies such as Skype in my face-to-face courses to bring in authors, experts in the field, etc."

Other positive outcomes from technology include greater flexibility for students and instructors, more ways of soliciting engagement, and more opportunity to work with individual students.

What Does It All Mean?

As with any survey, there are questions about how much we can generalize the results. In this case, the 27 percent response rate makes us cautious about characterizing youth services educators as a whole group. The survey was designed to keep the results anonymous but participants were also invited to give contact information and, based on those who did, we know that educators from at least twenty-five of the fifty-five ALA-accredited library and information science schools contact provided responses.

What we can say is that it appears that today's youth services educators draw on a variety of resources to determine what they will teach the next generation of youth librarians. According to the survey results, educators look to practitioners and professional organizations for desired skills and knowledge. They include research from their own work as well as from related fields such as brain research and youth development. They also appear to be culture watchers, trying to keep their course content current in order to prepare students for their future roles. Although there is more to be done for diversity, educators routinely include it in the literature and programming courses.

Technology has been a game-changer for practitioners and educators alike, but the good news is that educators appear to be seeking ways to prepare preservice librarians to enter the workforce with at least some familiarity with a number of different tools. Tools are not the only areas of change, though, as one survey responded noted, "Topics such as privacy, intellectual freedom, censorship, and access have been expanded to include issues related to the digital world."

Another respondent also spoke to the challenges of incorporating and teaching technology, given how quickly things change: "I don't teach people how to use specific tools or systems. I do try to present a wide array of possibilities and then teach my students to critically evaluate how effectively any given technology will serve the purposes of the library."

There is a lengthy and still growing body of scholarly and professional literature about training librarians, but few of the voices belong to youth services educators. It seems only fitting that, since the 2010 survey was intended to help fill the gap, we give the last words to two survey participants. The first comment captures the commitment to future librarians that came through in the survey responses: "My instruction is based on equipping professionals to deliver meaningful service in a way that meets user needs and substantiates the value of the service to stakeholders." The second comment characterizes the passion educators expressed: "Enthusiasm and compassion are the keys to serving children and young adults. All those teaching those who will be working with them must model both."