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PROFESSIONAL READING

CRITICAL TEACHING IN THE LIBRARY

by Alycia Sellie

Maria Accardi, Emily Drabinski, & Alana Kumbier, *CRITICAL LIBRARY INSTRUCTION: THEORIES AND METHODS*. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010. 358p. pap., \$35.00, ISBN 978-1936117017.

Although academic librarians constantly instruct the curious and the assignment-laden, most librarians are not formally taught to teach. Our training comes on the job, at our own inclination, and among colleagues who might feel as adrift as we do about pedagogy. I often have conversations with colleagues about how we desire to transform our teaching. We want to get beyond tutorializing, demonstrating, and showing students where to click on a webpage. We are interested in helping with more than finding the full text or exporting a citation — but often we are bound to these topics in our classrooms because students must know how to do these things (and somehow all of our websites, catalogs, and databases aren't easy enough to navigate and instruct on their own — yet).

“Information literacy” is the raft that we cling to in the uncertain waters of library instruction. It has become one of the most influential concepts in academic librarianship; it is now a staple in library classrooms and in the pedagogical assessment of library instructors. Yet even in this environment, where teaching is the bedrock of academic library work, we still struggle to define the concept of information literacy. Library scholars point out that definitions are vague (p. 151), that there remains a “definitional debate” within the field, and that a “rigorous and multifaceted understanding of the concept” still needs to be developed (p. 22).

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defines information literacy as “a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.”¹ ACRL has also set the standard within academic librarianship; its set of information literacy guidelines has been widely accepted as the best teaching tool for library educators.

Another, smaller group of library educators are likewise struggling with information literacy, but in a different manner. They are not agonizing over its definition, but assessing whether the current frameworks and ACRL standards are appropriate, or enough — as we teach within an increasingly politicized and commodified information landscape. These librarians worry that our underdeveloped concept of information literacy is not adequate for teaching students about issues that affect not only their homework, but also their daily lives. They feel that it is not sufficient to help students locate data; it is also their job to help students contextualize and critique information systems. These librarians are opposed to the “banking system” of education, in which students are viewed as empty vessels, waiting to be filled with information. They object to the notion that the instructor is the only authoritative source of useful information, and to the practice wherein students collect or

“bank” information from teachers only until it is time to pour it back out on a test. These librarians question the very possibility of assessing critical thinking, as well as the role of the academy in our work. They refuse to believe that a classroom can be entirely neutral, just as radical librarians have critiqued the idea of neutrality in collection development and cataloging. Striking out from library worlds, these librarians have become interested in the pedagogy of other fields, and they are particularly interested in social justice and critical teaching. They explore how critical pedagogical concepts can be taught in the library classroom. They want to invite the lived experiences of each student into their classrooms and urge each researcher to explore boundaries and areas of conflict.

Three such librarians recently edited and published *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*. Within this work, the goals that Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier shared were to “get a group of librarians together to talk about the ideas that background critical practice in the classroom — from Freire’s models of liberatory teaching to Kapitzke’s criticisms of standards models to Elmborg’s blending of literacy theory and library practice” (p. x).

Outside of librarianship, critical pedagogy has been described by leading scholar Ira Shor as “a social justice curriculum specifically designed to

question the status quo and promote democracy, peace, equality and ecology, at home and abroad.” Shor also stresses that questioning the status quo can mean many things (Tea Party members can be said to do it, for example); critical pedagogy is further distinguished by being “bottom-up, oppositional, insurgent, and counter-hegemonic.”²² Shor studied with Paulo Freire, who is considered by many to be the founder of critical pedagogy and who is cited in many of the essays in this collection. Many other critical educators are referenced (Henry Giroux, James Elmborg, bell hooks, and Cushla Kapitzke are among the most popular), making the book’s collected bibliographies important starting points for librarians interested in further study of pedagogy.

“Ours is a profession that often splits working and thinking in two,” the editors write in their introduction to *Critical Library Instruction*; “theorizing goes on in LIS doctoral programs while front-line librarians concern themselves with ‘best practices’ at the service desk” (p. ix). It is clear that Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier had praxis in mind in this volume. Many of the entries detail the classroom experiences of practicing librarians, and some include sample assignments and rubrics that the writers have used in their teaching. The book offers not only applicable solutions for the teaching librarian, but also thought and theory for those who are interested in the underbelly of the pedagogy.

The book is grouped into five sections: “Conceptual Toolkit,” “Classroom Toolkit,” “Teaching in Context,” “Unconventional Texts,” and “Institutional Power.” In the first section, Jonathan Cope explores how library educators involve (or ignore) issues of social power in their scholarly work on the subject of teaching. Employing the work not only of Gramsci and Foucault but also of Pawley and Wiegand,

Cope grounds his examination of LIS literature within a larger theoretical framework of the study of power. This essay is illustrative of the whole of the volume: it is thoughtful, well-written, and broad in its bibliographic reach. Like Cope, many of the librarians in this volume look at work beyond library literature and acknowledge the political environment in which we teach.

Many of the essays speak out against patriarchy and hegemony in the classroom, and two directly discuss critical feminist pedagogy. Sharon Ladenson explores the tenets of feminist teaching in “Paradigm Shift: Utilizing Critical Feminist Pedagogy in Library Instruction,” arguing that feminists must “resist educational practices that promote and foster passive behavior” (p. 105). She points out that women’s studies classes are often the only places in the university where students are allowed to bring their daily life experiences into their studies and are expected to examine how their experiences are rooted in social positions based on class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual preference.

Ladenson’s goals in her library classroom are to invite collaboration among students and to foster active engagement and critical thinking. She describes teaching library sessions for a Michigan State University first-year undergraduate writing course in which students explore biographical information about women (which is sadly still a complex topic on which to find information). Through her employment of critical feminist pedagogy, not only are her students more engaged, but she becomes more involved when she uses her own interests in critical feminism to frame her teaching.

In the volume’s final essay, Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith take on critical pedagogy, asking important questions about their own work and

pointing to feminist criticism of critical pedagogy (which has been acknowledged by such scholars as bell hooks and Elizabeth Ellsworth). They ask,

How are librarians to work toward social justice in the library classroom, if when we hold our educational philosophies — and our very selves — up to meet our practices in the mirror, those practices are often not our own but those of the faculty with whom we collaborate? Is such social justice work even a reasonable desire given the particular ways librarians are suspended in the bureaucratic structures of a corporate university? (p. 306)

Eisenhower and Smith question critical pedagogy’s reliance on rationalism, they question the role of a teacher as a consciousness-raiser, and they are careful to point out that education does not *form* but rather *informs* a person. They include labor issues in their discussion of the information industry, and they assert that users are creating as much as they consume (e.g., Facebook and Wikipedia). Finally, they wonder whether we librarians are indeed defiant enough to make a difference. This final essay offers an important critique as we move forward, and as library instructors experiment in their classrooms with critical pedagogy and other educational theories. It is wonderful to see Eisenhower and Smith’s work in this anthology, as it instantly challenges the limitations of this very work.

Critical Library Instruction is one of the most intriguing and intellectually satisfying books that I have read on the subject of teaching in libraries. Many of the essays begin by describing difficulties that I have shared or topics that I often struggle with when I am considering what I can attempt to ac-

comply with a class (in 50 minutes or less!). This book has helped to fill a void in library literature that divided theory and practice, and it has critically evaluated the goals and effects of our teaching. *Critical Library Instruction* propels the literature into deep reading and critical thinking about the underlying structures of knowledge production, and offers a vision of librarianship that touches the real lives of our students. This book invites the experiences, observations and interests of our students to become a part of our practice. It also acknowledges the impact of the politicized world in which they live, and helps us find ways to allow this world to inform our collaborations with them.

Many librarians joined the profession because of our commitment to issues at the heart of librarianship: we're committed to equal access to information. We want to share the joys of learning with those around us, but we also see that sharing itself is becoming increasingly threatened in our socio-political situation, as intellectual property giants and corporate monoliths struggle over the control of information distribution and try to make information a consumable and ephemeral product.

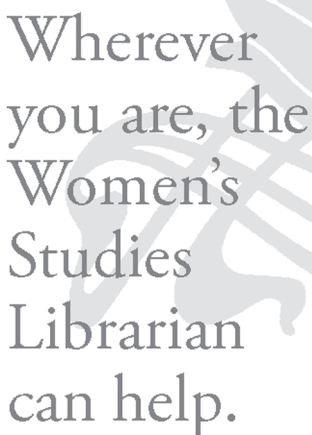
These issues — equal access to and the sharing of information — can easily be overlooked in the shadow of more dramatic spectacles where governmental secrets are leaked or our personal records are owned by big businesses. Recognizing the political significance of the informational structures in which we live and work is crucial to our labor within the library and to our ability to help our fellow citizens make decisions at the reference desk and in the classroom. *Critical Library Instruction* is a crucial text for those who are interested in conscious teaching — within these systems, and in the library.

Notes

1. "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," "reviewed by the ACRL Standards Committee and approved by the Board of Directors of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) on January 18, 2000, at the Midwinter Meeting of the American Library Association in San Antonio, Texas," and posted online at <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm>.

2. Ira Shor, "Critical Pedagogy and Library Instruction," Lecture for the Library Association of the City University of New York, Brooklyn College Library, May 8, 2009.

[*Alycia Sellie is a librarian at Brooklyn College and a student of American studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. She recently released issue #2 of The Borough is My Library: A Metropolitan Library Workers' Zine at the Desk Set's annual Biblioball in Brooklyn, and is also working on "The Readers' Bill of Rights for Digital Books," a campaign that aims to preserve our right to read in electronic formats. She can be reached at <http://alycia.brokenja.ws>.*]



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