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Main Description

Information Literacy has been an important movement in academic libraries for at least the past decade. Still, no consensus has emerged about how to define information literacy or how broadly or narrowly to apply literacy theory to the work of librarians. In fact, the historical definitions of librarianship have tended to work against the integration of literacy theory into the daily practices of librarianship. These definitions have emphasized protecting the library as warehouse of externalized knowledge and the librarian as mediator between that knowledge and the students and faculty who need to use it in the educational process. The end result has been that information literacy's power to transform libraries has been neutralized and contained. This paper explores the ways that traditional librarianship is constructed in the discourse of professional training and the ways that critical literacy theory might transform the practice of libraries and librarians in colleges and universities

Short Description

This paper explores the ways information literacy has been constructed in the discourse of academic libraries.

Keywords

Information Literacy
Critical Literacy
College and University Libraries

Information Literacy has become a central concept for academic libraries in the information age as librarians have begun to see their work as less about managing physical collections and more about helping students and faculty navigate the complex, emergent information environment. While librarians have embraced information literacy in principle, consensus about a working definition of information literacy itself has been elusive. Information literacy has been an elastic concept, as ambitious or as conservative as the individual using the term. Indeed, those outside of libraries have begun to ask for a clearer definition and a clearer manifestation of that definition in practice.¹ Luke and Kapitzke argue that “traditional print literacies—which schools have developed elaborate curricular and pedagogic technologies to produce—are not sufficient for students immersed in the mediascapes and infospheres of classrooms and libraries, home, cafes, and new civic spaces.”² Even as they advocate for the importance of information

literacy as educational practice, they note that librarians' definitions of information literacy are "at best anachronistic and dysfunctional, at worst counter-productive in their avoidance of the central questions facing students, teachers, and libraries."³ Luke and Kapitzke raise important fundamental questions about libraries and their inability to challenge their own historical definitions of who they are and why they define their work as they do. They conclude that "the information sciences have yet to engage with critical literacies, and with the larger epistemological questions raised by new technologies and postmodern constructions of discipline, knowledge, and identity. A critical approach to information literacy would appear to require a daunting paradigm shift within a professional group that is generationally the product of a baby-boom, late print training."⁴

Indeed, as dire as Luke and Kapitzke see the information literacy problem to be, it may be even worse than they suggest. Not only is the current generation of librarians the product of late print training. The entire profession of librarianship was born and has grown to maturity under the late print paradigm. The library is an intellectual construct so wedded to print culture that it may not be able to survive a transition to literacy reconceived as a set of multi-modal and multi-media skills. Clearly, the attachment to print as the privileged medium for the exchange of ideas and culture hinders the library's ability to evolve new practice, though many librarians in academia are working to define information literacy as the vehicle for that evolution. Still, it is the very culture of libraries and librarianship that is the biggest obstacle to this evolution. Librarians have historically positioned themselves as mediators in the information exchange, investing great energy in their reputation as trusted guides to arcane and difficult tools. It is that reputation which is at stake in negotiating new definitions of information literacy.

The Library Ethos

As Kaptzke points out, librarians "function as intermediaries between society and school and between teacher and student.... [S]elf proclaimed impartiality—albeit in the service of liberal education—has historically rendered the role of librarians invisible and exempt from critical inquiry."⁵ This statement raises three major themes in the way librarians have defined themselves—mediation, impartiality, and invisibility. Librarians have positioned themselves as mediators between students and information. This mediation was appropriate and even necessary when information was a scarce commodity that required special skills to access. Impartiality is linked to mediation in the library ethic, since the goal of the librarian is to be a transparent conduit from the information storehouse to the mind of the student. As much as possible the librarian aims to channel the wishes and desires of the student to fruition. In the librarian ethos, this means the librarian must simply answer the students' questions without passing any form of judgment. Ideally, the librarian disappears in this transaction. The ideal librarian functions as a form of technology—value-neutral, efficient, and faceless.

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This model derives from an age when libraries were largely warehouses charged with storing the entire history of human knowledge. In the “banking concept of education” posited by Paulo Freire, the library is the ultimate bank, and librarianship sets itself in service to the banking educator, whose role is to “make deposits” in students’ heads. Librarians have an odd status in this educational equation. As Freire notes, the “action allowed to the students extends only so far as receiving, filing, and storing deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors and catalogers of the things they store.”⁶ Interestingly, Freire describes the dilemma of the student in banking education using librarians’ terms. Denied full agency in the educational process, the student (like the librarian) is reduced to collecting, filing, and cataloguing the educational content mandated by disciplinary experts. In order to make this role into a profession, librarians have adopted a “fiduciary” relationship between the content as valued by these experts and the students who wish to make withdrawals from the information bank. The librarians’ values (mediation, invisibility, neutrality) are designed to inspire trust in the same way that lawyers, physicians, and bankers inspire trust. Librarians act as agents who protect the interests of both parties in the banking transaction (the community of disciplinary scholars and the community of students). Their fiduciary responsibility to both parties charges them with holding knowledge in escrow, making it available in the present while preserving its past and its future value for students. In a print world in which texts on paper transmit knowledge, this fiduciary relationship was a unique and necessary social charge. Today, as digital texts proliferate across networks at almost the speed of light, the fiduciary role is obsolete and has become a serious obstacle to libraries’ evolution.

As a consequence, the fiduciary relationship has morphed into a “fiduciary fallacy,” the basing of practice on an outmoded assumption that education is the transmission of a fully formed body of knowledge from teacher to pupil. The fiduciary fallacy manifests itself in many obvious and subtle ways. Some of the key ways include a focus on the knowledge being stored, organized and transmitted, rather than on the students’ needs; judgments about the “quality” of information based on standards provided by external authority (the “gold standard” of information); the assumption of the mediating position between information and the learner; and the externalization of motivation, whereby the students genuine interest is supplanted by an interest authorized by the academy. Of course, this struggle between student-centered learning and the “banking concept of education” plays itself out in classrooms all across every campus. The situation is unique for librarians, though, because they have never had a clear educational philosophy, opting instead for a clerical role in the transfer of information from stacks to students. Indeed, as academia rapidly evolves in the information age, it continues to convey to libraries that it wants something different than in the past. Over the years 1991-2002, for example, questions at academic reference desks dropped 26%, while requests for instructional sessions taught by librarians increased 55%.⁷ These dramatic shifts over a relatively brief period signal the way for a new librarian practice based in instruction, but this

practice must be won over from a highly resistant (even entrenched) vision of librarianship rooted in the fiduciary fallacy.

The Reference Interview as Speech Genre

At the very heart of the fiduciary fallacy in libraries is a concept called the “reference interview.” The reference interview is a ubiquitous concept in American librarianship, yet few outside of libraries are aware of its existence. In one widely used textbook for training reference librarians, the authors describe the reference interview: “The reference interview is at the center of reference service. It is the key to the library’s mission of making information available and understandable to its user group. The librarian mediates between the user and the world of information (within and beyond the library).”⁸ The reference interview is positioned as the embodiment of the fiduciary fallacy. The librarian’s role as mediator is justified by the need to make information “available and understandable.” This need is provided as “service’ to the “user group.” The reference interview is so ubiquitous in librarianship that it has become codified and scripted in multiple settings and incarnations. The authors of the text continue by suggesting that the reference interview is “essentially a straightforward matter. Pursuing three basic goals in a careful and disciplined manner should lead to success in most instances.” Presented as a narrative or linear process, the authors suggest that the first step is to “gain the trust of the user.” Next the librarian should “ascertain from the user an accurate understanding of the question, so that it can be answered as completely as possible.” Finally, the librarian should “make sure the user is satisfied with the answer provided.”⁹ Widely understood to be the model of reference service, the reference interview is fraught with educational problems. The entire transaction is portrayed as a precise information exchange, whereby the student asks a question and the librarian answers it accurately and completely. In reality, the model above is the source of great frustration for many librarians, who rarely question whether the model itself is the problem.

The reference interview is so entrenched in library practice that it has become what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a “speech genre.” For Bakhtin, “each sphere in which language develops has its own relatively stable types of ... utterances. These we may call speech genres.”¹⁰ Of course, such genres come with performance expectations. Each person must know what is expected and must perform the part. In the case of the reference interview, a number of problematic expectations are set up. First of all, the interview itself is not loosely defined, but is formal in nature. A script exists in the library literature, and “good interviews” follow the script. The reference interview is situated in a specific social context—at a desk, in a library. Implicit inequalities are in effect. The librarian knows things the student does not. The reference interview is a type of “literacy event” in which literacy is demonstrated and measured.¹¹ Indeed, most of the rationale for the interview is that the library itself is a complex text which needs interpretation and special skill to read. The librarian’s job in the interview is to judge the literacy

level of the student and to mediate access based on that level. The librarian is neutral in the transaction, contributing knowledge but otherwise exerting no force on the direction of the interview. Taken altogether, the reference interview is a complex event in which roles must be played, hierarchies enforced, and social nuances must be read. Perhaps most problematic in the entire event is the failure of librarians to articulate to the academic community that an interview is taking place or what they expect in this interview.

One consequence of speech genres, according to Bakhtin, is a form of stage fright. He notes that “Many people who have an excellent command of language often feel quite helpless in certain spheres of communication precisely because they do not have a practical command of the generic forms used in the given spheres.”¹² The helplessness described by Bakhtin is well documented in the library literature, going by the name of “library anxiety.”¹³ Librarians have never traced the source of this anxiety to their own practice. Indeed, the other widely used textbook for training reference librarians places the blame for failed reference interviews squarely on the shoulders of students: “The common complaint heard among reference librarians about their work is that few people know how to ask reference questions.... This should be simplicity itself, except that most people do not know how to frame questions.” The author continues, “Failure of the person putting the inquiry to make it clear to the librarian is the greatest road block to reference communication.... [M]ost of the ‘fault’ is with the innocent individual seeking an answer.”¹⁴ The problem delineated here runs deep in the culture of academic reference. The reference interview puts students in an untenable position. They are asked to participate in a strictly defined genre without being told the rules. When they sense that they are expected to play a role in the transaction, they become anxious and inarticulate. That response indicates to the librarian that they “do not know how to frame questions.” As a literacy event, the reference interview is stacked against student success.

“Good” Questions

The reference interview is better when students ask “good questions.” This straightforward assertion begs the essential question: What constitutes a “good question” in the minds of librarians? The library has a tangible investment in a number of tools for answering questions. These include the library catalog, indexes, bibliographies, encyclopaedias, almanacs—an extremely complex repertoire of resources with the specific purpose of answering questions. These tools are extremely good at answering factual questions (how tall is the Eiffel Tower?). In addition, the tools are generally organized along disciplinary lines, so questions that fall squarely within a discipline are “better” questions. Within disciplinary categories, the tools are organized by subject using a concept librarians call “controlled language.” The introductory reference text has this to say about controlled language: “Due to the richness of the English language, many similar terms can be used to represent a single idea; a system of controlled vocabulary links these many terms to a single term. All items that are about this

topic are thus collocated together, improving retrieval for the user.”¹⁵ By using controlled language, librarians cluster concepts by subject with the expectation that good questions will cluster around subjects, as well. This assumption is, of course, problematic. Hope Oson has cogently argued that the entire concept of subject classification is based on Cartesian epistemology, in which “a single knowable reality exists and that we come to know it by discovering universal truth.” According to Olson, “classification maps the topography of recorded knowledge structuring a space to reflect the single knowable reality and universal truth.”¹⁶ Elsewhere, Olson argues that “discipline—as the primary facet in our classifications—is the fundamental sameness. Within each discipline in a classification the subdivision reflects the discourse of the specialists.” Olson concludes that the primary result of subject classification is to reinforce the “epistemological and ontological presumptions of Western philosophy.”¹⁷ Indeed, viewed this way, the reference interview and subject classifications can be seen as powerful agents for channelling students into categories of thinking that reflect authorized disciplinary constructs in the academy. “Good questions” track automatically into such categories. “Bad questions” do not. The management of this process is made all the more powerful by its positioning as a fiduciary service—one performed ultimately for the good of the student and the academy by the self-effacing librarian. As Freire notes, “It follows logically from the banking notion of consciousness that the educator’s role is to regulate the way the world “enters into” the students. The teacher’s task is to [make] deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute true knowledge.”¹⁸ Traditionally, the role of the reference interview and the subject classifications have been to perform that act of regulation, not only of what enters the student, but also the way it enters.

Conclusion

In order to provide a working definition of information literacy, we must navigate two competing visions of the library. In one vision, the library retains its status as neutral purveyor of information, and information literacy is based on students mastering the libraries’ tools and systems. In this vision, information literacy is reduced to mastering a set of library skills with traditional tools. In the other more ambitious vision, the library becomes a site for student empowerment, a place where students create genuine questions and construct their own answers. In this vision, the library’s role in perpetuating disciplinary classifications and organizing and disseminating authoritative knowledge becomes part of what students must understand to be information literate, but only part. Much is at stake in negotiating these definitions as accrediting agencies begin to include information literacy in their accreditation criteria. Perhaps more importantly, the library is positioned to be an important site for student learning in the new century, but only if it can push past its anachronistic investment in the fiduciary model to find a new form of professional practice based on sound educational theory.

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In all fairness, the library did not invent the construction of knowledge it represents. The library is nothing but the mirror of the modern academic mind. The accumulated collection reflects the accumulation of recorded knowledge, which might be the highest achievement of the rational age. The sheer volume of material in the modern academic library testifies to the material nature of knowledge, a materiality that has come to burden modern scholarship in its ponderous, unwieldy demand that we master it. The library is the natural extension of the peer review process, and the library's transparent, neutral attitude toward its collections reflects the neutrality of that peer review process which is at the heart of the modern academy structured by disciplinary authorities. Indeed, the modern library as physical reality might well stand as the most powerful resistance to postmodernism's desire to make the campus new again. The academic disciplines can discard the canon by simply rewriting the next semester's syllabus. The library cannot follow suit and discard the millions of volumes the disciplinary specialists asked for as they were building the now obsolete canon.

Certainly, major changes in library practice are called for. Librarians need to begin to understand their environment as the reflection of a rapidly receding, historical worldview, not a living, viable one. They need to learn to treat the "library-text" as a complex and fascinating construction—a monument to modernist thinking—rather than as a system grounded in knowledge and reality. They need to move from the fiduciary fallacy to a new constructionist model by understanding the "modernist library" as the text of the postmodern researcher. In short, librarians need to learn to both teach and critique the library-text, as others in the academy have learned to both teach and critique their texts. This is complex work of the highest intellectual order, and it should not be the work of librarians alone. Academics from all disciplines can share in the critique of the library, to make it the site of ongoing inquiry and interpretation. Librarians have much to learn as they transform themselves from warehousing institutions to educational ones. It is in the interest of all academics that they make this transition as effectively, completely, and as quickly as possible.

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