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Review: Meeting the Challenge of Teaching Information Literacy

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For librarian and poet Michelle Reale, the pedagogical is personal. "I love this quote by Marcel Proust," she writes in her introduction: "'we don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us'" (p. ix). Reale illuminates the challenge of teaching information literacy (IL) through stories and scholarship in a quest for recognition of the negative feelings caused by that challenge. Her autoethnographic method portrays the difficulties of IL teaching as aspects of the practitioner's life to be reflected on, accepted, and understood. "I write from a very personal stance in order to prevent theoretical distance," she declares (p. viii). This brief volume offers anecdotes, personal feelings, some social science scholarship, and suggestions for responding constructively to the challenge asserted by its title.

After the first chapter's bleak portrayal of a typical IL class and an overview of the historical and critical development of IL in Chapter 2, most of the book explores professional issues of relationships, stereotypes, and feelings. The book's final sections offer two possibilities for "meeting the challenge": individual reflection and communities of practice. Each chapter closes with a few reflective exercises called "Points to Ponder," to encourage readers to develop their own reflective practices and personal insights on elevating the standing of IL librarians in academia.

"It Don't Come Easy" is the apt title for Chapter 1, which opens with a vignette of almost all the ways a one-shot IL session can go wrong: student distractibility, faculty detachment, librarian anxiety—everything but computer problems. The story illustrates the many challenges Reale has experienced in her career and her desire to confront the challenges of teaching information literacy through sustained and careful reflection that might lead to thoughtful change in practice.

Chapter 2 traces the development of academic library IL into an ill-defined discipline that is often difficult to explain, let alone justify. Reale explores several causes for this difficulty: the awkwardness of the jargon term itself, the academic debates over what IL is and how it should be taught, whether IL remains necessary, and the continuing debate surrounding the

adoption of the ACRL *Framework*. This chapter also begins to develop the theme of cooperation as a value more important to Reale than the service model, which she believes devalues the contribution of librarianship to university teaching. Merely delivering a service is far from the critical inquiry Reale sees as the proper work of university teaching, so her attack on the "ideology of servitude" is understandable (p. 5). Ideally, all faculty "serve" their students by teaching. However, a professional concept of service is not the same as a subordinated servitude, which her anecdotal and scholarly evidence suggest is the view of non-collaborative faculty and of academia in general.

Reale expounds on the challenges in IL instruction in Chapter 3, drawing on William Badke's description of it as a "hidden concept" that faculty do not understand and students ignore. Despite nearly fifty years of efforts, IL theorists and librarians have not been able to alter this cultural indifference. The next six chapters illustrate and analyze the persistent difficulties within academic librarianship to make IL visible.

Building on Reale's experience of faculty resistance toward the notion of librarians as peers in the classroom, Chapter 4 develops the idea that

> It would be difficult to underestimate the damage done to the profession in general and librarians in particular from the persistent, embedded, and institutionalized stereotypes we labor under. . . . librarianship has been feminized, scrutinized, debased, misunderstood, and devalued. (p. 29)

Reale cites psychologist Claude M. Steele's concept of "stereotype threat" to explain why these mostly negative stereotypes are so damaging (p. 31). In this particular context, many librarians derive self-esteem from their work, but demeaning stereotypes can be personally threatening and professionally challenging. When students are also reluctant to engage with librarians because of these off-putting stereotypes, their work becomes even more difficult.

After her exploration of how librarians are regarded by others, Chapter 5 turns to self-perception. Popular images of librarians are exemplified in the frumpily dressed action figure wearing glasses, with her hair in a tight bun and a finger at her lips to shush patrons (pp. 36–37). Reale has received several of these figurines as gifts from students, and as a result, she feels both pleased, yet puzzled at the persistence of these negative stereotypes. These mixed messages affect librarians' sense of self, and, more broadly, they challenge their identity as informational professionals. As argued by scholars in library science, sociology,

and psychoanalytical theory, this can lead to damaging levels of anxiety and shame, which Chapters 7 and 8 explore.

Chapter 6 returns to the theme of difficult librarian-faculty relationships. Reale provides examples to reiterate the need for librarians to be more deliberate in their negotiating with faculty to impart greater understanding of the value of IL instruction as a foundational and transferable skill (p. 54). In chapters 7 and 8, Reale revisits the topics of shame and library anxiety, from a student perspective and from the librarian's. She suggests that simple acknowledgement of one another's feelings could potentially facilitate a space in which both parties work more productively with one another.

Faculty relationships are treated more optimistically in Chapter 9. Emphasis is given to the need to establish a more cooperative classroom environment for a more effective student learning experience (p. 88). One "Point to Ponder" for this chapter asks readers to describe a positive interaction with a faculty and to identify the underlying elements or dynamics that made it successful (p. 89). Reflecting on these relationships serves as a good transition to the book's final chapter, which explains how and why librarians might consider forming or participating in communities of practice to share their tacit knowledge, both cognitive and affective. Reale offers strategies and techniques to help librarians gain confidence in the process and in one another as they discuss the several problems this book has presented.

Michelle Reale is a lively writer, and *Meeting the Challenge of Teaching Information Literacy* is a passionate exposition of a subject she loves despite the frustrations she suffers in its daily practice. It should be noted that the author fixes the responsibility for these frustrations almost exclusively on librarians and faculty, while only occasionally acknowledging that the academic system itself could also be at fault. Ultimately, however, Reale proposes individual reflection and communities of practice as means for recognizing and relieving vocational distress.

Overall, this book is an honest personal description of the continuing difficulties its author finds in her profession. Her casual writing style draws its authority from 25-plus years as a teaching librarian at Arcadia University in Philadelphia, and this book is a testimony to her heartfelt dedication to IL librarianship despite its challenges.