

Book Review

Reale, Michelle (2020). *Meeting the challenge of teaching information literacy*. Chicago, IL: ALA Editions. 128pp., \$57.99, ISBN 978-0-8389-4684-8 (Paper)

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Published at the pandemic's peak, I'm just now getting a chance to read *Meeting the challenge of teaching information literacy*. That's two years that I was without Michelle Reale's expert advice on the most effective techniques for teaching information literacy. Reale's initial story about Liz and the disengaged professor, who sits at the back of the room while Liz crams everything into a one-shot information literacy instructional session, is the perfect set-up for the question: *Have librarians set before themselves an impossible task?* (p. 3).

Reale begins the text by exploring why our information literacy lessons don't "stick with students," describing not only the need for students to recall what they have been taught, but also apply it different situations. In Chapter 2 ("The idea of a concept or the concept of an idea"), the author explains how difficult it is to define what we teach when information literacy is "an area with no defined parameters" (p. 9). They present a cogent argument that "information literacy is closely tied to functional literacy" as the use of information is "essential for everyday life" (p. 13), and thus all must become lifelong learners to function in our information society.

The author refers to the works of Rader (1991), identifying significant challenges for librarians teaching information literacy. These include:

- the lack of "well-staffed, carefully planned" and clearly articulated programs,
- the lack of a clearly defined educational role,
- a need for collaboration and partnership (p. 10).

Chapter 3, "Information literacy: still the 'hidden concept?'," begins with Badke's acknowledgment that 1-2 hours with students to acquaint them with the library through bibliographic instruction is insufficient (p. 19) and students "muddle through without the expertise and advantage of information literacy instruction" (p. 20). According to Reale: "Information literacy remains 'hidden,' in part because it is perceived to be the sole domain of the library and the librarian, which it clearly shouldn't be" (p. 21).

Collaboration means more than simply placing library contact info on syllabi. The author's responses to requests for a "library lecture" include:

- "I have an idea that is a bit different and would engage students differently"
- "What exactly do you want your students to learn/understand/do?"
- "I see what you're trying to do with this assignment, but I also see possible problems" (p. 25)

In Chapter 4 (“You just don’t get it”), Reale tackles the persistent problems of lack of faculty support and librarian stereotypes, reiterating the need for sustained collaborative efforts to address information literacy deficits among student populations if academic institutions are genuinely committed to student success. Additionally, they remind librarians that students don’t always appreciate the librarians’ role in their education. “If they do not see us as “teachers,” how receptive can they possibly be to our teaching? If what we do is not reinforced by their professors, how much is our impact blunted?” (p. 35).

Reale continues this theme in Chapter 5, “Inching toward the mirror,” by asking the librarian:

When we are not seen as equals, when we are seen as mere service providers instead of teachers, what happens to the quality of our work, not to mention our sense of what we can do, what we are doing, and what we hope to do in the future? How do we handle this on a daily basis, day in and day out? How do we perceive ourselves? (p. 42).

This chapter addresses issues of low morale, anxiety, and the imposter syndrome, closing with several hints to help us “understand our own self-perceptions with the profession” (p. 49).

“More than just transactional” (Chapter 6) builds on the notion of collaborative efforts being the way forward. Reale reminds us that:

[a]cademic librarians struggle and strive to deliver information literacy to the student population but must navigate a series of obstacles put in our way by faculty who simply do not perceive us as integral to the learning process. Instead, for many of us, our presence in the classroom is often transactional: be there at this time and cover *this, this*, and a little bit of *that* (p. 53).

They point to Raspa and Ward (2000) who “assert that we have reached a point at which neither librarians nor instructional faculty can adequately teach the research process in isolation of each other” (p. 54). While the public library is based on the service model, Reale is of the mind that using the service model for information literacy is unsustainable.

Dealing with “That anxious feeling” is the subject of Chapter 7. Most librarians are familiar with what is dubbed “library anxiety,” but some dismiss it. The author cites Mellon (1988), who studied college students and concluded that library anxiety is “based in shame” (p. 63), and that:

- students’ fears are due to a feeling that other students are competent at library use while they alone are incompetent,
- this lack of competence is somehow shameful and must be kept hidden,
- asking questions reveals their inadequacies (p. 68).

Students often “forget they are in college to learn, and they forget that they do not have to know everything all the time” (p. 64). Librarians would do well to remember that

they, too, do not have to know everything all the time! The chapter concludes by describing the impact that information overload has on these feelings of inadequacy.

Burnout did not spring up out of nowhere during COVID. “Exhausted: the emotional labor of librarianship” (Chapter 8) describes much of the hidden work librarians do each day that contributes to a feeling of being overwhelmed, and misperceptions of the library “as a safe place, a quiet place to retreat, a place in which not a whole lot really happens” (p. 75). Chapter 9 deals with faculty relationships and collaboration (“Can’t we all just get along?”). In this chapter, the author points to Iannuzzi’s (1998) assessment of the pace of change in organizations: “[t]he culture of an organization changes slowly and the culture of a college or university may require years to evolve” (p. 87). The chapter closes by reminding the reader that,

it’s a long game, a marathon---not a sprint. We have to be willing to put in the work and forge a path through our disappointments and challenges. When we work with faculty to figure out instructional needs and strategies, we are forming the basis of a new way of thinking about and teaching information literacy for both immediate academic needs and beyond to lifelong learning (p. 88).

Chapter 10 (“Let’s give them something to talk about”) emphasizes the library as a learning organization where communities of practice support librarians’ work and can minimize the anxiety and stress described in earlier chapters. In closing, Reale reminds the reader that teaching information literacy is not the responsibility of librarians alone,

though some in academia would believe that it [is]. The organization looks to us to teach information literacy but does little to understand exactly what information literacy is, why it is important, and how exactly we do it. So the solving of the problems associated with the teaching is often beyond us, often making what we do even more frustrating—because we need the cooperation of so many to make it work to its potential (p. 105).

Chapters close with *2-5 Points to Ponder* and excellent references for those who wish to consult them for a deeper dive into any topic. The book is worth reading by every teaching librarian, instructors who ask librarians to provide students with information literacy to support their studies, and college administrators who want to learn how librarians contribute to student learning.

References

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Education Libraries, 46:1 (2023)

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