

TOWARDS SELF-REFLECTION IN LIBRARIANSHIP: WHAT IS PRAXIS?

by John J. Doherty

Praxis, in Marxist terms, refers to the process of applying theory through practice to develop more informed theory and practice, specifically as it relates to social change. The progressive ideal implied in this is obvious, and is of particular relevance to librarianship. Also, in responding to a challenge for the need of a more theoretical framework to inform library theory and practice, John M. Budd defines praxis for librarianship in progressive terms as “action that carries social and ethical implications and is not reduced to technical performance of tasks” (20). In saying this, however, Budd further agrees with Richard Bernstein’s critique that the meaning of praxis has been watered down, in part, due to “an overenthusiastic affinity for technical matters and deference to technical expertise” (Budd 20).

That there is a need for a clear idea of praxis in relation to librarianship is obvious when the profession’s progressive roots are so clearly articulated in the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association:

In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations. (American Library Association Council)

The goal of social transformation inherent to this statement should define much of library theory and practice. In some instances it does, in progressive terms that are reminiscent of educational philosopher Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed.” For example, information literacy instruction comes with the working assumption that information is a tool that “enables people to overcome their false perceptions of reality” (Freire 86). Freire believes that “the transformation of thought to text requires the conscious consideration of one’s social context” (Fiore and Elsasser 89). In other words, the statement implies a theoretical framework to

librarianship, namely that to librarians knowledge is a social construction and that there is no privileged constructor.

Yet, the technical rationalist tone of library literature has resulted in a technical rationalist outlook in the profession. Such an outlook is not only symptomatic of the profession's inferiority complex, but an example of transference. The true discussion in library literature ought to be on the praxis of librarianship, particularly within the "trademark pedagogy" (Kapitzke 37) of librarianship, information literacy instruction. This requires attention to both reflection and direct action, and their relationship to each other. This paper, therefore, suggests that a model to follow can be found in educational literature, where there has been a similar tension between its progressive roots and a technical rationalist tone. By looking at how educators have developed the notion of praxis through critical self-reflection, in order to inform theory and practice, it is possible to come to terms with contrarian views in order to develop the critical theoretical framework essential to inform the changing practices of these difficult times in librarianship.

A Need for Critical Reflection

Librarians, however, are not very reflective practitioners. For example, Cushla Kapitzke indicts librarians for hiding behind their presumed impartiality. She criticizes this role as exempting school librarians specifically (and, I would argue, all librarians in general) from critical inquiry. I would further add that it also allows librarians to exempt themselves from the self-reflection necessary to praxis.

Freire's seminal 1970 work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues for a transformative praxis, wherein education can be used to foster critical reflection and action in order to transform: the pedagogy of the oppressed, he states, is "an instrument for [the oppressed's] critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization" (Freire 48). He goes on to say that the oppressed must see their reality as not closed, without an exit, but as something that can be transformed:

Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. (51)

Henry Giroux speaks of a "notion of self-criticism [that] is essential to critical theory" (35). He calls into question the objectivity that positivism encourages: "critical theory contains a transcendent element in which

critical thought becomes the precondition for human freedom. Rather than proclaiming a positivist notion of neutrality, critical theory openly takes sides in the interest of struggling for a better world” (37). Freire goes further, equating praxis with self-criticism: people will be truly critical only when “action encompasses a critical reflection which increasingly organizes their thinking and thus leads them to move from a purely naïve knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the causes of reality” (Freire 131).

Intrinsic to praxis, therefore, is reflection-in-action. Myles Horton intriguingly challenges people to act on their experiences (Horton and Freire 146). If one examines the self-imposed objectivity of librarians in this light it is easy to lean towards Kapitzke’s argument. For example, if one were to reflect on the “reference interview” (considered by many — myself included — to be a form of information literacy instruction) and the referrals made from it, one might begin to see the inherent privileging of information. The reference interview occurs usually when the librarian needs to learn more from her patron on his information need. The interaction is framed in a form of open-ended questions designed to clarify and draw out the needs of the patron and usually concludes with the librarian assisting the patron in meeting that need. Implicit in much of the description of the interview is that the librarian maintains her impartiality in the light of the request, using her skills to elicit enough data to make reasonable referrals.

In recent conversations I tried a little informal “self-reflection” with my colleagues; I was curious to discover the privilege inherent in these and other library transactions. What I discovered, mostly from digging, is that we tend to refer patrons to a core of information based on the Western cultural paradigm. This reminded me of what I previously wrote: that the resource selection process in libraries is hegemonic, depending as it does on privileged source lists and methods of collecting titles. On re-reading this piece, I was especially drawn to my argument that: “a recent survey of scientists and journal editors in developing countries discusses ‘structural obstacles and subtle prejudices’ that prevent them from sharing their research with the world.” (Doherty 404)

Dialogue, or Reflection-in-Action

Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggest that educational practitioners have to be committed to self-critical reflection on their educational aims and values (31). They go on to say that teachers should become more self-enlightened regarding their own world views and how these can distort

and limit their professional roles in society. They suggest that praxis is just this—doing-action, or remaking the conditions of informed action by constantly reviewing such actions and the knowledge that so informs these actions (33). If we replace teachers with librarians here, we could have a recommended course of action for our profession.

Freire speaks of the importance of a dialogic form of education in which pedagogy is developed and acted upon. He indicts the “banking” concept of education as one that seeks to maintain the status quo—the oppressors seeking to maintain their position. Through a form of “problem-posing” education, the oppressed are encouraged to communicate, to become conscious of their own consciousness: “People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are ‘owned’ by the teacher” (Freire 80). He goes on:

Dialogue is a human phenomenon, of which the word is at the core. And in dialogue, there is no room for banking. The “dialogical man” is critical and knows that although it is within the power of humans to create and transform, in a concrete situation of alienation individuals may be impaired in the use of that power. (91)

This dialectical notion argues that “observation cannot take the place of critical reflection and understanding” (Giroux 38). Lather (1986), in calling for a praxis-oriented form of research, defines praxis as a “dialectical tension, the interactive, reciprocal shaping of theory and practice” (258). As one reviews library literature and theory, one finds little in the way of critical reflection and understanding. In part, this is due to time constraints—the old argument of “I’m too busy to reflect.” However, I would argue that it is also due to the fact that most librarians involved in the “trademark pedagogy” of information literacy instruction are not trained as either instructors or critical reflectors. Indeed, information literacy librarians would echo Myles Horton: “the way to learn is to start something and learn as you go along” (Horton and Freire 40).

However, adopting a form of library praxis would encourage reflection-in-action, informed by the theories and practices of the profession. One informs the other, and, therefore, one is equitable to the other. For example, it is safe to say that librarians have issues with scavenger or treasure hunts. Yet if one acknowledges this as a form of uncritical bias, it becomes increasingly obvious that there is a demand, for in-house orientations, unmet by librarians and thus filled by instructors through such hunts, which usually prove unsatisfactory to both students and library staff.

Recently I had the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with myself, my

colleagues, and some campus peers on this very issue. A research article challenged me to critically rethink my attitude and bias against treasure hunts. It ultimately led me to try to find ways to engage students in learning about the library through a case-based, problem-based learning approach (Carder, Willingham and Bibb). This method would allow for students to come to own their learning by giving them more control and ownership of that learning. We tried this with a class in which they were given one of four problems to resolve: researching occupations/careers, researching colleges, how-to-get financial aid, and scholarships. In groups, these students brainstormed their problem-solving process, and then utilized resources (some of which are already pre-identified by the librarian) to resolve the issue at hand. We facilitated direction when called on, but this was meant to be a student-centered process. After 30 minutes, we reconvened, reported out, and wrapped up. Importantly, the librarian is not in control of the learning—the students were.

Peterson (2003) speaks of the progressive teacher as one who builds on her students' interests. To him however, the Freirian teacher does more: "She asks questions.... [e]ngaging children in reflective dialogue on topics of their interest" (365). In the previous library example, we did much of the same, challenging the concept of a library tour as an example of the Freirian concept of "banking" education. Just as Peterson notes in his examples, we preferred to look at the dialogic "problem posing" method—where "teachers and students both become actors in figuring out the world through a process of mutual communication" (366). Indeed, it was interesting that Peterson states that teachers themselves must undergo a transformative process; this is the challenge of a library form of praxis: "breaking the ideological chains of...formal education, of past training, and the inertia of habit of past teaching" (367).

Transforming the Profession: Action Research

It is telling, when one examines the literature of information literacy instruction, that most of what is published could be categorized as action research. Beile (2003) takes library literature to task for a lack of disciplined inquiry. Most of it comprises program descriptions, bibliographies and literature. In a generous moment, one could describe some of these program descriptions as a form of action research, wherein the practitioners (in this case, the librarians) are producing their own knowledge, sometimes in a dialectic of practice and theory.

In education, action research has been defined as "inquiry teachers undertake to understand and improve their own practice" (McCutcheon and Jung 144). Action research, in other words, is focused on the practitioner,

with the intent of self-reflection allowing for growth and change. The reason I am hesitant to completely ascribe action research as a category of library literature is the usual lack of self-reflection necessary to good action research.

A case in point would be my own co-authored paper on the development of a 3-credit information literacy class at Montana State University (Doherty, Hansen and Kaya). This work was informed by the theories of Daniel Bell and the recommendations of the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University. It is clear on re-reading this work that the authors were, at first, learning as we went. Then, with the introduction of someone to the team with an interest in undergraduate education and the social forecasting of Bell, some theory began to inform the practice. We began to do what Gitlin (1990) refers to as identifying and examining normative truths (448).

However, while we describe the development of our information literacy program in the light of such information, and imply some critical re-examination of our situation before fully completing the development, we are not very critical of the outcomes. While we do leave open many questions, especially those that arose from our review of our practices, it was unfortunate that most did not lead to a re-examination of those practices for continued improvement.

Conclusion: What is Praxis?

Recently some major voices in the library profession have argued that “[w]ithin library and information work there is a fairly long-standing antipathy toward ‘theory’” (Budd 20). I would concur with this statement: too much weight is given to the practical aspects of library practice at the cost of the theoretical. Yet, as Budd and others (Wiegand; Crowley) argue, it is only in a self-reflective praxis that librarians could critically engage with current theory. I would further add that practitioners could also actively begin to develop or transform that theory through critical reflection of their practice.

Praxis, therefore, in librarianship, is Freirian in outlook: “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire 79). It is very easy to assume that librarianship is a stable profession, wherein practice is stable, “less and less subject to surprise” (Schon 60). Indeed, many of the textbooks of the profession encourage such thoughts. In practice, however, the average librarian is likely to speak of the ever-changing world of information, access to information, and ways of facilitating such access (Doherty, Hansen and Kaya). Minus a grounded

theory of librarianship or ways of developing a grounded theory, or even more specifically of information literacy instruction, librarians tend to fall back on technical, rationalist based methods even when ineffective.

Beile notes, for example, that much of the information literacy literature of the 80's and 90's focused on the "variety of strategies for orienting the students to the library and teaching them to use its resources and services more effectively" (Beile 272). Few of these studies actually investigate the effects of information literacy (or, as she terms it, library instruction) on student learning. The academic library of the 21st century is a much different information environment than the majority of the academy has been used to. Librarians are bringing the library, and information literacy, into the academic curriculum — where the 21st century library is an integral part of the academic experience, and where students are asked to use it at the most appropriate moments to their research process, not just during the third week library tour.

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