

Teaching to Respect Intersectional Neurodiversity in LIS Classrooms and Practice

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ABSTRACT

- “Being a librarian is a people-person job....” – [Xavier Ateneo Senior High Library, Facebook, 2020](#)
- “...libraries are actively trying NOT to recruit people who don't enjoy working with the public...” – [iBrarian, r/librarians, 2020](#)
- “All I know is that if the jobs of the future depend on "likability," (and the corollary of being a "people person") I may as well give up now. That's the one skill I neither I or people like me cannot learn.” – [pigbitinmad, Library Journal comments, 2017](#)

The LIS profession, and in many cases, our textbooks, instructors, and professional guidelines, tend to frame librarianship as an exclusively social profession. For instance, a reference librarian has to be a good “people person” who can intuit patrons’ verbal and nonverbal communication and make others feel welcome. This devalues the skills and strengths that those for whom this is not a default bring to the LIS profession and is exclusionary or traumatizing to neurodiverse students (McCulloch, 2021). In this panel, we propose strategies for reframing instructional practices to allow all students to demonstrate their strengths and find a path in the LIS professions. Even as our profession aspires to adopt a growing definition of diversity and equity and recognition of intersectionality, invisible disabilities are often overlooked. This panel addresses issues of invisible diversity, social interaction, and ways to create an equitable classroom and work environment in which all voices, perspectives, and selves are valued.

Previous works have presented the lived-in experiences of neurodiverse information professionals (Bonanno et al., 2018), and explored the potential for autistic university student

inclusion in academic libraries through the development of guidelines for librarians (Anderson et al., 2018). Our panel delves into both the lived-in experiences of neurodiverse individuals in ALA-accredited master's programs and the workplace, how best to support neurodiverse students, and preparing neurodiverse individuals for the information workforce in the face of employers averse to hiring “non-people persons¹.” We do this through a moderated discussion revolving around the following critical topics in relation to neurodiversity and invisible disabilities:

1. Reframing deficit thinking to asset-based thinking, grounded in ALA policy
2. Modification of teaching practices and policies in LIS classrooms, wording of policies, and acknowledging the “neurotypical professor¹” perspective
3. Modeling productive and positive interactions for neurotypical LIS students to build and strengthen the ability to interact with neurodiverse classmates, coworkers, and patrons and for neurodiverse LIS students to do the same in the opposite direction
4. A discussion of potential holistic accommodations, strengths-based capacity building, and teaching to articulate translatable skills in professional library and information workplaces

Our panel opens with a discussion of ALA “behavioral guidelines” and the impossible precedents they set for neurodiverse employees of information organizations. Takeaways for the audience, in addition to the outlined discussion points, include curated documents for the audience related to the panel to discuss with their institutional peers and management, available at <https://bit.ly/3QBNaWZ>; lived-in experiences of neurodiverse individuals in ALA-accredited masters programs who have gone on to information professions; and examples of how to 1) modify course documents to clarify expectations for neurodiverse students, 2) create an atmosphere of trust with students, 3) normalize asking for help and using resources (for students and faculty) and 4) how to respond appropriately to a private disclosure.

We strive to impress upon attendees the importance of recognizing and honoring invisible differences, but recognize that as white, Jewish, and Hispanic women we can only acknowledge that the experience and reality of disability is different for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ members of society. Intersectional identities play an important role in neurodiverse communities, and the racist origins of autism and Asperger's diagnoses still influence what we know of neurodiversity today (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022). This panel serves as a starting point in LIS education, and through informing our teaching with empathy, compassion, and acceptance for neurodiverse students, we hope to also improve teaching in LIS education for all students.

Overly Honest Biographies of Panelists and Moderator:

Dr. Laura Ridenour is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Missouri. She does the work to be as functional as possible despite a word salad of diagnoses that vary in both accuracy and degrees of 19th century “hysteria”-style sexism. Her research interests include epistemology, philosophy of information, and data science; her experiences as a neurodiverse and otherwise invisibly disabled recipient of, mentor to, and instructor for students who use accommodations are reflected in this panel.

¹ We would like to thank our reviewers for their use of the terms “non-people persons,” and “neurotypical professors,” as these exemplify some of what this panel seeks to change.

Dr. Heather Hill is an Associate Professor at Western University in Ontario. She is actually three anxious raccoons in a trench coat pretending to be human. Her research centres around accessibility and public libraries and she teaches a course on accessibility and information environments.

Amy Waldman, M.L.I.S., is an adult reference librarian in the Milwaukee Public Library system. She earned her degree without university disability accommodations while working full-time for a local community college and caring for an aging and increasingly frail parent. She started her graduate studies when she was 48, graduated at 55 and started with MPL the day after her 57th birthday. As an AD/HD adult with multiple interests within librarianship, she has chosen, outside of her programming and reference work, to focus on diversity, equity and inclusion; civic literacy; and addressing reckless driving.

Dr. Denice Adkins is a Professor at the University of Missouri. As a poor, first-generation student, and later as a public librarian, she knew it could be worse, so why couldn't she appreciate what she had? It wasn't until she was post-tenure that she felt secure enough to visit a psychiatrist, who promptly diagnosed her with depression. Her research interests include services to Latinx and diverse populations.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Pedagogy; Students; Curriculum; Specific populations.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

pedagogy; neurodiversity; strengths-based instruction; invisible diversity; equity and intersectionality

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