The Role of Theory in the MLIS Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This panel explores the integration of theory into the master's curriculum for library and information studies. Balancing theoretical focus with more practical emphasis can be a challenge, and engaging students in theory by tying it to practice can be complicated. The panel will provide opportunities to explore these challenges in the specific contexts of reference and information literacy instruction courses, but also more generally throughout the LIS curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Balancing theory and practice in the master's level curriculum to prepare pre-service professionals for jobs as librarians and other information professionals has historically been a challenge for programs and course instructors. The LIS literature is replete with arguments for the integration of theory into the MLIS curriculum. Budd argues (2001), "philosophical investigation of practice is not an abstract exercise but is intrinsically connected to the nature of practice and is aimed at discovering how we act within our profession" (p. 80). Thompson (2009) writes that "[a]s students learn and understand the use of theory related to leadership, information access, information behavior, and other core topics germane to information studies, they are better prepared to advocate policy, and help design LIS curricula and other measures aimed at improving information access and understanding in the academic and practical environments in which they will practice" (p. 119). Rioux (2019) notes that the "application of metatheory can … bring critical clarity to challenges faced by LIS educators, students, researchers, and practitioners" (p. 9). Drabinski (2018) suggests that "[t]heory demands that we account for our practice, and through such an accounting we can see our daily work as determined by some conceptions of the world and not others, and therefore subject to change" (p. viii). She warns about consequences of failing to theoretically explore taken-for-granted work practices. Similarly, Nicholson & Seale (2018) argue that "in the main, librarianship emphasizes practicality, efficiency, and service" (p. 3), and that "the hegemony of practicality within

librarianship acts to reproduce patriarchy, neoliberal ideology, neutrality, and white supremacy" (p. 5).

A number of writers have focused on the benefits of incorporating specific theories into LIS curriculum. For example, Fox (2014) writes that "[u]sing epistemology to expose students to [a] diversity of perspectives can prepare students for both personal encounters (such as through public services) and abstract encounters (such as through collection development or cataloging) with gender diversity" (p. 242). Barron & Preater (2019, p. 88) note that "preoccupation with the day-to-day works to preclude systems workers from developing an integrative and reflective 'praxis' meaning, in Budd's [2003] terms, "action that carries social and ethical implications and is not reducible to technical performance of tasks." Barron & Preater (2019) demonstrate how applying critical perspectives to the practice of systems librarianship can reveal power structures in systems librarianship which affect daily decisions about privacy, openness, localism and autonomy. Hicks (2018) advocates that "a sociocultural perspective has considerable implications for the way that we think about information literacy as well as for how we teach it" (p. 71) because "information literacy is shaped and understood through its context" (p. 74).

Thus, the arguments for integrating theory into LIS curriculum to enhance understanding and future practice, and to interrogate existing practice, have a rich history. This panel builds on that tradition.

PANEL STRUCTURE

The panelists will introduce the area of interest (Heidi Julien, 10 minutes), and the remaining three panelists will make short presentations (10 minutes each) focusing on specific aspects of the theory/practice balance.

Amy VanScoy will focus on incorporating theory into reference courses. As former RUSA President Kathleen Kern argues, "Life in libraries is not a series of check- lists—there are professional decisions to make, and theories are frameworks for thinking about questions" (2014, p. 284). But balancing students' desire for practical skills and instructors' knowledge that theory will be useful in the long run is a challenge. VanScoy will share results of a recent study with Heidi Julien and Alison Harding that focused on how instructors of basic reference courses view this challenge and their strategies for addressing it (2022). In addition, specific theories and models from information behavior and reference research that may resonate with students will be shared.

John Budd will focus his remarks on incorporating theory into information literacy instruction courses. Information literacy is a staple service in academic and school libraries, and it has found its way into the curricula of many accredited master's programs. Such a course benefits greatly from the inclusion of theory into the instructional repertoire and practice. Master's students need to understand the theoretical underpinnings of teaching and learning, plus the particular theories that inform the foundations of information literacy work in libraries. The specific theoretical stance that relates directly to information literacy that will be addressed (briefly) is social epistemology (of the type articulated by Alvin Goldman (Goldman, 2002)). Social epistemology operates according to knowledge bases that include veritism and testimony. The practice-based implications of the operations will be featured, and the veritistic (truth-based) element will be emphasized. Ultimately, social epistemology can enhance the abilities of people

to evaluate the merits of what is written, said, and shown. The goal is to enable individuals to become optimally able to appraise informational and communicative actions.

Laura Saunders will focus on ways to link theory to practice and make its relevance more apparent to students. Theory provides an important underpinning for library and information services by explaining the *why* behind what our practice. Sometimes, however, students are more focused on the *how* of what we do, or the more concrete or practical skills that they see reflected in job postings. A lack of explicit connection between the how and why can lead to a disconnect that might leave students feeling disengaged or uninterested. This section of the panel will explore a range of strategies including transparency, in which instructors provide explicit explanations for their choices to integrate theory; modeling, or providing concrete examples of putting theory into practice; reflective practice, in which students are encouraged to find their own connections between theory and practice through guided reflections; and hands-on activities such as application cards and case studies that require students to use theory to support choices and actions. These techniques cut across content areas and can help students make the link between theory and practice and understand the importance of theory to their work.

Following the panelists' presentations, the audience will be asked to discuss issues raised. Open discussion will be encouraged, but prompting questions will be posed:

- *How do you balance theory and practice in your course(s)?*
- *What challenges do you face when negotiating that balance?*
- *How do students engage with theory in your course(s)?*
- *What pedagogical approaches do you use to incorporate theory in your course(s)?*

If the audience size allows, small groups will be formed in order to facilitate discussion. In the final 10 minutes, the panelists will summarize the experiences shared and best practices recommended. The panel will be relevant to instructors of all courses in the master's LIS curriculum.

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ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Curriculum; Pedagogy; Information literacy; Reference transactions.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Theory and practice; Praxis.