

MEETING *the*  
CHALLENGE  
*of Teaching Information Literacy*

MICHELLE REALE

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## INTRODUCTION

*Necessity is the mother of invention.*

For far too many semesters now, I have thought and reflected on why teaching information literacy (IL) feels so difficult, sometimes so fraught with tension. I used to think it was me. Maybe I wasn't working hard enough, maybe I wasn't congenial enough with faculty, maybe what I was offering wasn't convincing enough. I maintained a constant note to self: *do better*. Occasionally, I would lose sleep worrying about a scheduled session the following day. I would prepare and pore over lesson plans, then rewrite them all over again. I would express my feelings at our reference meetings, and my colleagues would murmur in agreement with me, validating my thoughts, which helped in the moment but, of course, did not solve the problem. I wasn't even sure, really, what the problem was. But I do know that deep down, no matter what I knew intellectually or how I wrote about the issue, I couldn't shake the feeling that peace would come if I tried just a little harder.

Being a reflective practitioner has helped me see a bit more clearly. Over a period of time, I was very intentional about what I chose to reflect on—I chose to concentrate almost exclusively on those things that I felt made the teaching of information literacy, as an academic librarian, so difficult. I already knew that I wasn't alone. Our professional literature explicates in many different ways, by an array of writers, all the vagaries of the teaching librarian, although articles usually focus on one particular aspect, such as lack of collaboration between faculty and librarian, limited amount of time, the perception others have of us, and so on. The list is a long one. But few, if any, articles dealt with the multifaceted reality of why our mandate is one that is often difficult to execute.

I wanted to examine, in a relational way, what some of the more hidden factors were. What I sought, simply because I desperately needed to make sense of it myself, was a much fuller picture. That is how this book came about. This book is probably not for you if you neither perceive nor experience any difficulties as a librarian teaching information literacy at your university. If you do not perceive a problem, then there is none. But for those who do, this book may help you concretize what you may have been feeling either explicitly or implicitly. I feel that it is really important to begin to understand and see, in black and white, what our challenges are so that we can personally begin to address them. This book does not offer a quick fix, not by a long shot. It also will not offer solutions as some of us have come to want or expect; rather, these chapters seek to explicate a problem or issue that we can further reflect on to find individual solutions. I have included a “Points to Ponder” section at the end of every chapter so that you can begin to reflect, in your own personal and professional way, on some of the issues—if, in fact, they apply to you.

In this book, I use a lot of personal anecdotes. Using primary methods of representation rather than relying *solely* on the research of others, I write from a very personal stance in order to prevent theoretical distance, which can be all too easy to fall into. Anzaldúa proclaims that “writing is a process of discovery and perception that produces knowledge and *conocimiento* (insight).”<sup>1</sup> I write to find out. I look to Ellis, who advises, “Personal narratives propose to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as coresearchers, and invite readers to enter the author’s world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives.”<sup>2</sup>

Stories abound in our work as librarians and teachers, and they intersect on a daily basis with our humanity and the humanity of others. So while writing about the challenges of teaching information literacy, I attempt to remain human and connected to everyone doing the same thing that I am doing every day during busy semesters. More than ever, storytelling within this type of work is very important—it is relational, it forges connections, and it validates. Andrea Barrett further bolsters the importance of sharing personal experience and reaches the heart of it when she says, “There’s something epistemological about storytelling. It’s the way we know each other, the way we know ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>

Finally, it must be said that this book is meant to be *generative* and *propulsive* to your own professional practice. It is meant to highlight areas of challenge and concern to those of us who teach information literacy in academia. It is meant to be used, and, in fact, is best used, in *conjunction* with reflective practice as a way of understanding the origins of our challenges, which then allows us to forge a path forward. Our busy semesters do not often afford us the time to think about these things—and for the most part, we don't, because, well . . . we have work to do! But like anything else we want to accomplish, we have to be intentional about finding the time, which is perhaps the most difficult challenge of all. But like the quote at the beginning of this introduction, necessity really is the mother of invention. Our rapidly changing profession exists in a rapidly changing world. It is, of course, much easier to go with the flow, to sublimate how we feel, and to resolve to deal with any issues we have with teaching on any other day—but not today. Like most of us already know, those days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months, and months turn into years. The semesters will keep on happening, will keep on rushing by.

My hope is that this slim volume will offer some validation for why what we do (though we love it) can be such a challenge and will act as a springboard for reflection that can lead to beneficial change in our own practice. I love this quote by Marcel Proust: “We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.”<sup>4</sup>

When the fall semester arrives, as it inevitably will, I aim to be more clearheaded and clear-eyed about the challenges I face. The reasons and conditions are many, but like everyone else, I will do my best for myself and for all the students I come in contact with.

It's a process; enjoy it!

## NOTES

1. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
2. Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004).
3. Marian Ryan, “An Interview with Andrea Barrett,” *Writer's Chronicle* 32, no. 3 (December 1999): 4–9.
4. Marcel Proust, In Search of Lost Time, vol. 2, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* (United Kingdom: Penguin Classics, 2005).

# 1

## IT DON'T COME EASY

---

*I don't ask for much, I only want your trust,  
and you know it don't come easy. —Ringo Starr, "It Don't Come Easy"*

*It is still very warm for the first week in September, though with the start of classes, summer, for all intents and purposes, is over. Students are still roaming the campus in shorts and flip-flops, lying on the grass in between classes, faces to the sun.*

*Liz, a midcareer academic librarian, is on her way to teach her first information literacy session of the semester but gets held up by a question from one of her student workers at the circulation desk. After she answers the student's question (and noticing to her dismay that the student still seems confused), she runs downstairs into one of the library labs, where a class of students is waiting for information literacy instruction. A bit out of breath, she enters the already full classroom, something she always tries to avoid doing. She prefers to arrive before the students do so that she can get set up and then greet them as they come in—it's a way of breaking the ice, the hope being that the personal greeting might make them more likely to give her their attention. She turns on the hard drive and waits impatiently to log in to the computer. Some students watch her. She guesses they're the ones who don't have any friends in the class. The others are talking, their voices hitting a pitch too loud for the cramped computer lab. Some students are hunched behind their computer screens, and one has a baseball cap pulled down so low, Liz can't see her face.*

*Liz addresses the class, asking if their professor will be joining them today. They respond with uproarious laughter, which sends a flush over her cheeks. Why*

*are they laughing? she wonders. One student points to the back of the classroom. The professor is in the corner, baseball cap on, typing furiously on the keyboard. She raises her hand, laughs, and apologizes. "Sorry! Don't mind me. Do your thing!" Liz smiles but is flustered. Later she will feel angry. She tries to quiet the students down a bit and looks back to the professor for reinforcement, but she has her head down, engrossed in what she was doing before she was "interrupted."*

*Liz asks the students to shut off their monitors and just listen for the first few minutes. Most of them do, but she can see the faces of the students in the last row, their eyes intent on the screen, their complexions shaded with a light-blue glow. They keep a conversation going among themselves, and the low rumbling distracts Liz to the point that she is losing her train of thought.*

*At the podium, Liz glances at the oversized clock on the wall. She just needs to begin. A stinkbug alternately flies and then jumps around the room, throwing itself against the walls, trapped. It feels like a metaphor, Liz thinks. The students are easily distracted and attempt to swat the bug. Only forty-five minutes to go, she thinks, as she finally steels herself to begin the lesson. Only forty-five minutes to do what feels, quite frankly, impossible. And it is the only opportunity for classroom time with this group during the entire semester. . . .*

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To say that being an academic librarian is extremely rewarding and satisfying would be true. To assert that it can be, on a daily basis, both challenging and frustrating is also true though, paradoxically so. There are myriad reasons teaching information literacy is often difficult; yet there seems to be little ongoing recognition of this fact, much less support in the face of it. Like the Energizer Bunny, we just keep going. Perhaps this is because the emergence of the information literacy model as mandate was a hard-won focal point for librarians in educational settings.

In truth, the ability to teach information literacy is often at odds in the setting in which this needs to happen: higher education. While no one can outright disagree that students need such instruction (twinning IL with "lifelong learning"), how, when, and under what conditions this instruction is rendered are often the difficult questions that librarians must navigate. If the vignette depicting the librarian "Liz" seems unduly negative and pessimistic, think again and read a bit closer. Hers is the experience of many librarians. One can identify several reasons Liz is fretting: it is the first week



of classes, and she is already asked to “instruct” a class, probably before an assignment is even given. The class is unruly and seemingly disinterested due, in part, to the lack of respect their own instructor is showing the librarian in the classroom. The instructor is disengaged and, seemingly by choice, uninvolved. Another box checked off. Without the support of the instructor, there seems to be no weight to the instruction for the students, no urgency, and they will have nothing to anchor today’s lesson to. Liz also knows that this will, in all likelihood, be the only opportunity she will have to interact with these students in this classroom—knowledge that further burdens her teaching goals during this “one-shot” instruction session. She understands from experience that what she covers today is unlikely to stick and be transferable in any meaningful way to their other classes, which fuels a personal feeling of futility for her.

And so I ask myself, *Have librarians set before themselves an impossible task?* I have asked myself this many times. While I love the field of librarianship, I do not always love how it makes me feel. I struggle to impart what I know, to help students, to go beyond the “skills” model of information literacy and to get students thinking—to ask questions and to impart a spirit of inquiry. How do I value myself and what I have to offer within the profession? How do others view the work that my colleagues and I are doing? Do faculty see us as true collaborators and/or partners, or are we all just working parallel to one another or sometimes, despite our best efforts, not working together at all? How does library anxiety come into play? Do we threaten faculty? Do we scare off students? How can we get our collective campus communities to understand what we are capable of doing? Further and perhaps most importantly, can we afford the emotional labor that it entails spending time ruminating how the profession is perceived instead of just expending the energy to do our actual work?

## THE PERFECT STORM

Due to a constantly and rapidly changing information landscape, we combat a shifting identity that has made those of us in the profession prone to believing we must justify the very existence of the profession, our libraries, and, by natural extension, ourselves. I am and always have been interested in the toll this tension takes on the psyche on a daily basis. I have spoken

informally to many of my colleagues who also claim this truth as their own. For me, a little bit of validation goes a long way, but, in fact, it goes even deeper than validation. It cuts to the very heart of why we do what we do. How many times have you felt that your lesson didn't "land"? How many times have you encountered students who you know you have taught an instruction session to and they still do not know how to use the online catalog or even know how to find a book in the library? These are just some of the reasons I believe that information literacy is, in part, so difficult to teach. Though this truly pains me to even commit these words to paper, I once had a senior thesis student brag that throughout her four years of education, she never *once* had to check a book out of the library. To say that I was stunned is an understatement. A little stung as well, if I am going to be honest. As though the library were a place to be *avoided* rather than embraced. Though I wonder, How many students might admit the same thing if I asked? It is a case of both wanting and not wanting to know. I tried to engage the student further, gently probing her as to what it was about the library that she didn't like. Maybe it was just the books or perhaps she preferred online resources? She seemed a bit annoyed: "I guess there doesn't have to be a reason, right? I just didn't need to take out any books!" She is entitled to her own opinion and her own experience, of course, and yet it felt like a personal failure to me. And it still does.

Lest anyone get upset or irritated at this point in the belief that I am painting the experience of teaching information literacy with a broad brush, I understand that the issues and struggles discussed here *do not* cancel out all the good and wonderful work that librarians on the front lines engage in every day. Not at all! But I *do* think we'd be remiss as professionals to turn a blind eye to the difficulties inherent in the practice. Far from demoralizing us as a profession, analysis of challenge serves to validate what and how we feel (the first step!) and then allows us to address the issues in creative ways. I don't have the answers. I don't know that anyone could. But I know that necessity really is the mother of invention, which is the idea that led me, over the course of many years, to fill reflective journals about the difficulties so many of us currently have but may be reluctant to admit. It helps to look it in the eye. I choose to depart from the mind-set that we are solely responsible for the reason that we are not getting our information across, and from that new horizon, we can begin to acknowledge the forces

at work—the forces in librarianship that have been longstanding and that cripple us in some ways. It has been interesting and sometimes a bit distressing to see how far librarians are willing to go to rehabilitate our image. We've been sexy, tattooed, young, edgy, and the list goes on and on. We have been intent on proving our worth and probably spend a good amount of time trying to do it. The overall effect of this behavior is that the focus of our teaching, which should be paramount, is now shared with our focus on constantly proving ourselves. It is an exhausting enterprise and contributes to the emotional labor we feel in our work. Nora Almeida makes an important distinction when she talks about the “outsiderness” that librarians feel (and rightly so) as separate from the marginalization that it is often conflated with.<sup>1</sup> She asserts that we are not necessarily marginalized—we have our mandate, we do our work, we fill a need—but that, more often than not in academia, we do it while sitting outside of the validation that others who teach in the classroom take for granted. She clarifies, “This is not to say that librarians aren't ever marginalized, but that marginalization and outsiderness are distinct forces that inform our autonomous capacity and pedagogical orientation.”<sup>2</sup>

How do we get beyond this? Lauren Wallis, in her blog *Smash All the Gates*, implies an ideology of servitude when she asks, “Should librarians ‘serve’ the academy by teaching its literacy skills unquestioningly, or should librarians participate in the critical reflection undertaken by ‘educators,’ a reflection that leads us to challenge, if necessary, the politics of academic exclusion, and to participate in the creation of new and better academic models?”<sup>3</sup> It is a good question, and one that certainly deserves an answer or thoughtful consideration at the very least. We remember our embattled librarian Liz, who at the start of this chapter was in a classroom virtually unsupported with students who clearly have not had the importance of the lesson she is trying to deliver impressed upon them and an instructor who was probably using the session to get a few of her own things done. What should Liz do? How many of us have encountered the same situation over and over again? Certainly when I began my career, a faculty request for a session was never questioned, let alone what content should be taught. I remember mildly balking at a staff meeting when I did not understand how I was to teach a session for first-year students without an assignment to teach to. My colleagues at the time were both amused and a bit agitated that

this was something I would question. I'd yet to become jaded to the ways in which librarians were expected to function in the academic system—I simply knew that it didn't feel right, forget the fact that it wasn't even pedagogically sound. The practice, at least for a time, persisted nonetheless.

For sure, my instincts were good ones, but I was unable to effect change, at least for a while, because of the culturally entrenched practice wherein “service” was expected of librarians but not necessarily thoughtful, timely, and relevant teaching. We all often feel, like Liz did, as though we have mountains to scale. We do our best, we challenge the culture, we change and adjust to change. We have had to reinvent ourselves and then reinvent the reinvention. Is it simply the reality and the life cycle of the academic librarian? Can we effect greater change? We can. And we will. But it is a process. As Kempke wisely advises, “Librarians are going to have to learn to advance their own interests before they can prosper in the academic environment.”<sup>4</sup> Press on!

## Points to Ponder



- How would you define your praxis as an instructional librarian?
- What is the most important aspect of your classroom teaching?
- How comfortable would you feel challenging and/or questioning the content of an information literacy session that you are asked to teach?
- What strategies for collaboration might work best?

**NOTES**

1. Nora Almeida, "Librarian as Outsider," *Hybrid Pedagogy* (2015), <https://hybridpedagogy.org/librarian-as-outsider>.
2. Almeida, "Librarian as Outsider."
3. Lauren Wallis, "Part 2: Professional Silenc\*," *Smash All the Gates* (2015), <https://laurenwallis.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/smash-all-the-gates-part-2-professional-silenc>.
4. Ken Kempke, "The Art of War for Librarians: Academic Culture, Curriculum Reform, and Wisdom from Sun Tzu," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 2, no. 4 (2002): 529–51.

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