

I want to make 3 points today:

- that the traditional vision of our role as being about curating collections is not enough and that this, in fact, may act as a barrier rather than the enabling force many of us see it as;
- that knowledge is not something static that lives in books or articles, but something dynamic that goes on in people's heads;

- that the role of the librarian is not merely to provide information, but to have a far deeper and more constructive involvement with 'learning to learn' ~~(social empowerment)~~

"Access without support is not opportunity". The opening up of higher education to students of all backgrounds made it clear that just giving someone access to a body of knowledge - a degree course or a disciplinary community or a library - is not sufficient for them to succeed. It's not enough to admit people to forms of learning and ~~information~~ ^{knowledge} cultures that they haven't encountered before, and tell them just to get on with it. For people to make sense of a body of ~~information~~ ^{knowledge}, they need not only access, but also guidance - structured, scaffolded support in understanding how information functions in that context: how to interact with it and use it in order to succeed.

Engstrom & Tinto's words, "access without support is not opportunity" don't just apply to education: they have implications for bodies of knowledge in every context: not just academic but personal and social too. I believe those words should be the motivating principle for every librarian working in every sector.

And that means thinking very hard about what we do, because traditionally we've been all about giving access. I'm not saying by any means that we should stop doing that! Access to information is fundamental to democracy. But what I'm saying is that we shouldn't stop AT that! We have more that we can and should do in order to support people.

Our collections are meaningful to us as entities - we've curated them, we've selected what goes in them in order to meet the needs of their audience, the community that uses that collection. For us, they have meaning in their own right. But for others, they may be an unassailable, unapproachable wall of information. The very principles and values on which we've built those collections may be felt by those outside the original audience as a barrier, as something that's "not for them". Every body of information comes with strings attached: it carries the invisible markers of the community it serves. If you don't happen to know how to pull those strings, then those invisible markers become the metadata of exclusion.

So we must not stop at provision. We must go further and help people to interpret and use the information we provide, turn it from being an overwhelming solid mass of other people's knowledge into something that can be approached one piece at a time, maybe starting in one small corner over here, something that the individual can relate to.

Because using information - or learning - is all about making sense of something on your own terms, not someone else's. A teaching librarian can help individuals take a mass of undifferentiated information, of data, of knowledge, and put it into a context where they can see how it fits with what they already know, with who they are. Paul Ramsden says that "learning ... can be thought of as a sort of *relation* between a person and a phenomenon" and it's exactly this, the relationship, that enables us to engage with information and not just passively absorb it. This relationship is what allows us to assess degrees of truth, to evaluate quality, to reject certain things - to make critical judgements and also to choose what and where and how we communicate those judgements - all those things we think of under the guise of 'information literacy'.

Now. This isn't at all the same as looking up answers for people. Very rarely is knowledge about tracking down the right answer, right there, on a plate. It's much more like framing problems. Asking difficult questions. Refusing to accept received wisdom in its neat little packages of meaning - other people's meaning, not being persuaded simply because something has the sanction of authority, but poking at it yourself to see just how far it really does hold.

So (heresy alert!) I know Neil Gaiman is a library hero, but I take issue with his statement that "Google can bring you back 10,000 answers. A librarian can find you the right one." We can - and should - do so much more than that. In the era of digital disintermediation, we're not needed to transmit information to people. What we *are* needed to do is help people develop the tools and insights so they can approach it, evaluate it, and use it in their own way - so they can relate to it. I can work with patrons and we can look stuff up together, but they recognise the answer they need - or the question - when they see it, because it's what they need in their context, not what I choose for them.

Because as John Holt says "I doubt very much if it is possible to teach anyone to understand anything, that is to say, to see how various parts of it relate to all the other parts, to have a model of the structure in one's mind. We can give other people names, and lists, but we cannot give them our mental structures; they must build their own." (Holt, 1982, p.145).

So let's unpack what teaching is before we go any further. Unfortunately the word 'teacher' is full of loaded connotations to do with mandatory education. We tend to identify 'teachers' with 'people who made us do stuff we didn't want to, in a stuffy room with people we didn't like, wearing clothes we wouldn't be seen dead in'. None of that is teaching - it's classroom control. And teaching is also not what I'm doing now - standing up here as a lone privileged voice, getting to say "Hey! this is how it is.". It might look like a lecture, but it's not teaching - it's *telling*. Speechmaking. Teaching isn't a monologue, an expert discourse, a "look at me, listen to me, this is what I say"-thing. The only thing that matters about teaching is learning - the construction of knowledge so that it carries meaning for the individual, by the individual. Teaching is whatever it takes to support that to happen.

It's not something that has to happen in a classroom. It doesn't have to involve the formal labels of 'teacher' and 'student' - in fact it's almost better if it doesn't, because then it has the potential to become an interaction of two parties who work together, not a unidirectional transfer of knowledge from 'expert' to 'learner'. What it involves is making information come alive, so that the learner can use it, explore it, stretch it, poke holes in it, build with it.

I want to invite you to reframe the idea of teaching towards 'supporting the ~~creation~~ ^{construction} of meaning' in any context, maybe without ~~ever~~ going into a lecture hall or a formal 'teaching' situation. Because I do believe that helping to make people meaning in this way is inherent to what we do.

So a rare books librarian who doesn't just display an item in their collection but talks to people, even for a couple of minutes, about the context of the book - either as information OR as an artefact - is creating a situation where learners can form meaningful connections with that item and its significance in various contexts: academic, historical or even personal.

Almost every helpdesk interaction has the potential to be a collaborative exploration of knowledge. All of our patrons bring existing knowledge and prior experience. They bring their own constructions of reality, and we have a choice around what we do with it. We can choose to ignore it and impose a solution - "Here's the answer", "Do it like this" - or to work with that prior knowledge, by asking the patron to share what they already know about the information landscape, or about making sources give you the results



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you need rather the ones they want you to see. In any interaction we have the opportunity to negotiate and co-construct meaning as equals, rather than to impose it as experts.

And I think what we need to do is firstly recognise how ideally we're placed to help this happen - and secondly, how vital it is that it happens.

** Of course you may be saying, "Yeah Emma, you work in a university; teaching is how things are there. What does this have to do with the real world, what about outside higher education? Surely this stuff about access and support isn't relevant?" Here's why it is. Just as much. No - even more so. Because ~~this recalls my original point~~ information is never neutral.

"Information is power," Aaron Swartz said, "But like all power, there are those who want to keep it for themselves." (Aaron Swartz, Eremo, Italy, July 2008 via @ernestopriego). I believe that the only way to social justice is through the critical and discerning approach to and use of information. And that means we ALL need to be taking every opportunity to use information critically - not just within the confines of a university discipline. And as librarians it's crucial that we embody that state of mind in our all of our interactions with information.

Because good teachers don't just *do*; they also *are*. They model a way of being, an approach or mindset, that can help learners to decide who and how they want to be. Teachers embody the values, the behaviours, the expertise that learners aspire to. We can and should be modelling a relationship with information that's based on critical appraisal and discernment, on asking questions, on probing into arguments and statistics and assertions and claims. And doctrines. And media stories. And party manifestos and advertising campaigns and snake oil and sacred cows and promises of eternal youth. This is what Paul Zurkowski meant when he said in 2013 that information literacy empowers not just individual people but the whole population by making it harder for those in authority to fool people. (ECIL keynote)

Sound big? Too big for us? No! It starts with helping our learners to ask one critical question of authority, one "Why is ...?" one "What if ...?" - freeing them from a solid monolithic mass of information to start asking questions and making connections - discerning, appraising, evaluating in their own right: pushing back at the information, and starting to *construct knowledge for themselves*.

We are not just about access. We are the support that brings opportunity. We are not just providers or right-answer-bringers, but partners in the construction and exploration of knowledge. We are teachers - *because we're librarians.*

- 5 seconds!