Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship
Revue canadienne de bibliothéconomie universitaire

Practical Academic Library Instruction: Learner-Centered Techniques, by Jo Angela Oehrli

Justine Cotton

Cite this review

Book Review: *Practical Academic Library Instruction: Learner-Centered Techniques*

Justine Cotton

Brock University

When the pandemic began in 2020, library teaching moved mainly online, and librarians embraced (or accepted) new ways of connecting with students during research consultations and classes. As many classes move back into physical classrooms, *Practical Academic Library Instruction: Learner-Centered Techniques*, is perfectly timed to welcome teaching librarians back to in-person instruction.

Designed to take the reader through each step of an in-class library session, Oerhli's book begins with a section on "The Basics," including philosophy, vocabulary, and developments in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Sections 2,3, and 4 follow the structure of a library class, from design and preparation through to the final chapter, "Looking Back on Your Teaching: Reflective Practice." While Oerhli writes that her book is aimed at experienced teachers (xiv), it would also serve as an excellent guide for new librarians finding their feet in library teaching.

Oerhli, an academic librarian at the University of Michigan, writes from the perspective of both a librarian and a teacher. Having worked extensively in libraries before pursuing both a degree in teaching and library science, she is uniquely positioned to write about learning theories, classroom management, and teaching strategies in the academic library setting. In the introduction, Oerhli writes that the goal of the book is "to provide advice on treating students as individual learners so that we as a profession can all make that shift" (xv). By weaving her experiences with the philosophy and research of a variety of education researchers in an accessible and easy to read format, she accomplishes this goal effectively.

Practical Library Instruction draws upon the philosophy of intentional teaching, involving careful planning and reflection on students, learners, and participants in the experience. I appreciated the positive and enthusiastic approach to library teaching. "Trust students to grow with you," (xvi) writes Oerhli in the Introduction, encouraging librarians to *like* students, trust students and have positive expectations of their engagement with our teaching. "...if you figure out a way to like and respect students and remind yourself of this before you walk into the classroom, most of the time, students will sense your goodwill and will respond positively" (40). In part as a result of my background in fitness but also based on experience with library instruction, I am passionate about infusing classes with positive energy. There are many ways to accomplish this goal, some of which Oehrli touches upon in Chapter 4, "Starting the Class: Setting the Stage for Learning." She notes the importance of creating rapport with students from the very beginning through individual introductions (if possible) and asking a thoughtful question at the very start of the class. By engaging students in reflection and discussion, they are given a voice and are more likely to become active learners.

Oerhli provides a great opening question that I will likely use in my next library instruction class: Where do you struggle when you are looking for information? (51). This is a question that gives an opportunity for self-reflection and will offer feedback that we, as librarians, are keen to better understand. This question is also appealing because it highlights the reality that research can be difficult and messy, connecting well with the ACRL Frame of "Research as Inquiry" and the knowledge practice to "value persistence, adaptability, and flexibility and recognize that ambiguity can benefit the research process" (Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education 18, 2016).

While Oerhli provides some solid methods for creating rapport with students, it would be helpful to have included some examples for how librarians might create connections with students in an online environment (given the movement toward more hybrid learning environments). Even in physical classrooms some students may feel uncomfortable contributing to the discussion, which is where some virtual tools can be useful. There are many examples of ways to engage students in a live online classroom, such as polling software or the chat feature, that would help teaching librarians build a broader base of tools to use.

Librarians will often see students only once in a term and establishing classroom discussion can be very difficult in these 'one-shot' sessions. In my opinion, Oerhli's strongest chapter is "Talking and Listening in Class" (Chapter 7). Here she does an excellent job encouraging librarians to balance teaching with listening. As teachers, we are often focused on delivering information during a time-constrained class. This

chapter makes the case that the discussions that arise in class are the true value of the library session, where students are not just consuming information but actively making connections with what they are learning.

I found Oerhli's best advice to include asking questions from a place of curiosity, thanking students for their participation, explaining why the discussion is taking place, and reminding us of John Keller's (2010) work on motivation and how it is affected by a students' fear of failure. (138). This advice gave me the opportunity to reflect on classroom discussions (or lack thereof) that have been frustrating and deflating; I don't typically think that students are worried about answering questions so it encouraged me to be more patient and rethink the questions I would ask in class.

Motivation is an issue that librarians contend with as we work to instill research and critical thinking skills. Convincing students that the content is important and relevant to their academic studies can be challenging. Oerhli delves into some techniques for building and maintaining motivation through the class. Along with practical suggestions (including elements of surprise, such as having students write on the windows of a classroom), she suggests appealing to the power of emotions by connecting with students' lives (e.g. telling a story about another student you helped or connecting a search to something that is important to them).

While this book does not introduce revolutionary new teaching techniques or technologies, it is a valuable resource for structuring thoughtful, effective library research sessions. As mentioned earlier, the book could benefit from some additional examples that could apply to both in-person and online classes given the move to hybrid classrooms. I am grateful that Oerhli did not set out to be provocative or radical but instead distilled her rich experience and philosophy into this practical book, because she has created a practical manual that can be used by all levels of instructors. Finally, the author shares extensive resources from both the disciplines of Education and Library Science, adding to the value of this book for new and experienced teachers. This is a book that will be an excellent resource for academic librarians who deliver in-person instruction and a great addition to any library teaching collection.

REFERENCES

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2016). *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework

Keller, John M. (2010). *Motivational Design for Learning and Performance: The ARCS Model Approach*. New York, NY: Springer-Verlag.