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Refocusing Academic Libraries through Learning and Discourse: The Idea of a Library, by Mary K. Bolin

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Book Review: *Refocusing Academic Libraries through Learning and Discourse: The Idea of a Library*

Mary K. Bolin. *Refocusing Academic Libraries through Learning and Discourse: The Idea of a Library.* Cambridge, MA : Chandos Publishing, 2023, 176pp, $105.50.

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Continual shifts in how people access information and the types of information available have necessitated a discussion of the organizational structure of academic libraries. While the traditional organizational structure of a library is collection focused, author Mary K. Bolin advocates for libraries to refocus their organizational structure to centre around services to users. Bolin wrote *Refocusing Academic Libraries through Learning and Discourse* in 2022. In the book, she observes refocused libraries in the wake of rapid technological advances and a global pandemic that accelerated the need for change within the academic library. This book is a follow-up to Bolin's *21st Century Academic Library* (2017), which outlines the foundations that necessitate this refocus. Despite being a follow-up to her previous book, the reader does not have to have read *21st Century Academic Library* to gain insight from *Refocusing Academic Libraries*.

Dr. Mary K. Bolin is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Nebraska Lincoln and has had a lengthy career in academic libraries. She began her career as a library faculty member in 1981 at the University of Georgia and worked at the University of Idaho for nearly two decades gaining experience in academic library and higher education administration before moving to the University of Nebraska Lincoln. In 1998 she cofounded the e-journal *Library Philosophy and Practice* with Dr. Gail Z. Eckwright.

Bolin wrote this book for academic librarians and administrators. The book is organized into six chapters. The first chapter will be of particular interest to

anyone who has come upon seemingly endless barriers when attempting to make change within their library system. Bolin uses Weber's concept of the Iron Cage of Bureaucracy to establish the tone of the book and then outlines the theoretical framework. Bolin's theoretical framework draws on bureaucracy and structuration, discursive institutionalism, as well as critical discourse analysis. Particular attention is paid to discursive institutionalism as the value of ideas, meaningful work, and organization through discourse underpins every stage of *Refocusing Academic Libraries*.

Chapter two provides information on the current landscape of academic libraries, higher education, and relationships between library faculty and library staff. Here Bolin provides the reader with a clear distinction between four different organizational types of libraries. Bolin defines refocused libraries as those which present themselves as a partner in the learning process, with collections being just one aspect of the library. The goal of the refocusing process is to shift away from being collection-focused to being an integral part of students' academic learning.

Chapter three details a discourse analysis of the strategic plans for Auburn University, Purdue University, Queensland University of Technology, and the University of Bristol. The purpose of the analysis was to observe the contrast between traditional and refocused libraries in the areas of core competencies, values, and public organization characteristics. Bolin provides a clear explanation of the parameters of her discourse analysis followed by applicable excerpts and analysis of specific areas of each strategic plan. Noting that the strategic plans used were typical exemplars of their genre of academic library, a curious reader may have questions about other strategic plans that were examined and not utilized, and what may have constituted an outlier in the content and format of a strategic plan. These areas were not covered in the book.

The fourth chapter is an extensive literature review. This is perhaps one of the most useful chapters in the book due to the varied selection of recent research. The first half of the chapter covers core competencies and various aspects of library transformation and organization. The entire second half covers specific aspects of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), from toxic workplaces and anxiety to racism. By highlighting such a wide variety of readings Bolin is exemplifying discursive institutionalism. Acknowledging the varied experiences of all library staff and how these experiences affect the functioning of a library and the process of refocusing is important to consider but it also makes for a more relatable text.

The penultimate chapter outlines the process for change. This chapter is the necessary core of the book. Bolin carefully outlines a process of refocusing that will take at least a year to complete. Bolin establishes that the key to refocusing is the opportunity for every member of the library staff to engage in learning opportunities

and the ability to communicate their ideas both publicly and anonymously. The process for creating change is as follows:

1. Create a learning organization through conversations.

2. Create a steering committee.

3. A team will analyze the data from the first 6 months of discussion that occurred as a learning organization. Bolin provides fictitious examples from different library departments. These examples were crucial for illustrating the value of these discussions.

4. Stop using the print collection as a way of defining or organizing the library.

5. Administrators further analyze data for common themes and ideas.

6. "Unfreezing" calls on all members of the library organization to take part in the refocusing of the library without hierarchical barriers. Bolin provides various activities for unfreezing such as task-driven cross-departmental teams for collaborative problem solving.

7. During the unfreezing activities, more data is gathered, and the final step is to analyze this data and agree to organizational change.

The concluding chapter is a short summation of the key points of the book, ending with instructions for building a humane workplace.

A book that discusses refocusing libraries towards user-centred programs for learning and access is a necessary item on the reading list of those interested in creating institutional change. Bolin's writing style is engaging for librarians at all levels of experience and departments. Bolin's notes on creating humane workplaces, valuing all types of ideas, and the special attention paid to DEI factors move this book from being purely focused on the administration aspects of strategic change to one that is responsive to issues that evolve from hierarchical bureaucratic structures.