

The Quarterly Interview: Emily Drabinski

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-Edited Transcript-

LOEX: *Your article “Toward a Kairos of Library Instruction” (2014) was the winner of ACRL’s Rockman Instruction Publication of the Year Award. Can you talk about the background behind using the Greek kairos theory to reconsider information literacy instruction and what this is?*

Drabinski: Kairos is a theory of time that emphasizes its qualitative aspects, suggesting that truth and meaning emerge in response to particular conditions, not progressively or eternally. Kairos contrasts with chronos, which is time understood as ordinal, on the clock or watch. Five o’clock is simply five o’clock in chronos; it’s quitting time, happy hour, or rush hour in kairos. Kairos has been used to rethink composition instruction since the 1980s and understanding language itself as kairotic means making room for different kinds of Englishes in academic discourse: we could always speak some other way. I find kairos compelling as an information literacy instructor because it frames our task as one of apprehending and articulating the present as structured by social forces, and thinking through ways of resisting and changing those forces where they do harm. For example, while we are learning to manipulate database interfaces in order to satisfy our curiosity and assignment requirements, we are also trying to understand them as ideological constructs that are subject to change. I have always been a little resistant to some of the ways our field talks about information literacy, as if it were a thing we could understand once and for all, something we can tell other people how to do or be. Kairos, as a theory of the present and the contextual and the contingent, offers me a way to slip out of the prescriptive demand of so much of our field’s discourse. I don’t know what you should do in your classroom. I don’t know what your classroom is like, who your students are, what they know, what they want to do and be. I don’t feel sure of my own knowledge of my own classroom. I was looking for a way to understand that feeling one gets when walking into a room with a new group of students, the artful way we all apprehend the moment and attempt to speak to it. Kairos reframes our work as thinking more about that moment and encounter. This is not to say that I don’t see information literacy as a set of skills, knowledge practices, and mindsets, whatever language we use to describe the “stuff” we teach. I think we have to name those things so that we can grapple with them as a profession, but that process of naming is, for me, about that grappling, not about discovering the truth.

As the Coordinator of Library Instruction at LIU, have you been successful at getting your colleagues to consider employing the kairos theory? If so, how are they doing that or how are you seeing that they are doing that?

In many ways, I see my role as a coordinator of instruction as really quite clerical. I value functional infrastructure:

transparent and fair distribution of workload, timely scheduling of information literacy courses, plenty of room and time for my colleagues to develop their own approaches to teaching in the library. If kairos is about contingency, I think all of our instruction is, and I don’t see my role as particularly focused on shaping the instruction that other librarians do. That said, we are a collaborative and collegial work environment and we all draw on each other for the instruction we do. My colleagues Susan Thomas and Kate Angell teach social work classes through zines, for example, highlighting the ways that alternative materials can teach students about authority in library collections. Kate and Eamon Tewell explore game-based instruction, something that has always felt a bit uncomfortable to me but turns out to really work well for some of our students. Gloria Willson teaches MeSH in her nursing and health professions courses in ways that have changed the way I think about structured information seeking in the sciences. I see all of that as kairotic, emerging from our extraordinarily diverse student body, the resources we have and don’t have, and the purpose and meaning our students bring to their work. We are an experimental group. I understand that as kairotic, but I don’t know that my colleagues would call it that.

Your publication background is quite diverse and I want to shift gears a bit and talk about your work on gender issues. What impact has this work had on your instruction?

My work on theories of gender and sexuality and information organization has made me teach structures with a lot more attention than many of my colleagues. I know that a lot of us eschew teaching things like subject headings, especially when working with students in their first and second years. But I think the ways that difference is disciplined both by language and by category in the catalog is important. Knowing that what you can find is determined in part by the organization of the space where you go looking makes more critical researchers. I also think we often underestimate the value of teaching students concrete skills like truncation of Boolean searching. Acquiring the technical skills necessary to make structures of power work for you feels amazing! For me, gender and sexuality studies is all about apprehending normative structures and working to resist and change them, and I try to teach information literacy as the same kind of project.

In your article, “What’s Gender Got to Do with it? A Critique of RDA 9.7” as the title indicates, you critique part of the RDA’s cataloging rules from the perspective of gender theory. Is there anything in ACRL’s new Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education that concerns

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you from a gender theorist's point of view?

I think the Framework works hard to incorporate many of the important critiques people had of the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. One of those, made well by Christine Pawley and Maura Seale and others, was the sense that the Standards constructed a neutral "information literate" student whose social position and context were erased. Looking at the first frame, Authority is Constructed and Contextual, the Framers define an expert as someone who can "acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others' worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations." This represents a significant move, I think, and a good one. My concern is the way that the Framework, and other conversations around gender, race, and class that we have in our profession, locates the problem of difference in the individual: individual information sources, individual librarians, and individual students. Acknowledging bias at that level is important, but it leaves aside structural critiques. I'd ask instead, how do systems of gender and sexual norms structure the experience of individual researchers? How can we intervene in those systems to make a difference for people at the level of the group or class, rather than only one on one?

Now moving in yet another direction, you have done work on radical teaching. What is a radical teacher with respect to library instruction? Should we be radical teachers?

The word radical comes from "root," and that's how I think of it in the library classroom. A radical library educator considers the structures of information production, collection, organization, and access as reflective of dominant ideology and as vectors of power for the distribution of knowledge and everything that comes from it. That means that when we teach students about the library, we need to develop ways of making those structures visible while equipping students with the skills to manipulate and change them. For me, thinking of teaching this way makes it much more interesting to me and to teachers, and it gives me some hope that we can play a role in making the world a better place. I don't think everyone needs to be a radical teacher—part of understanding myself and my work as radically contingent means that I respect the way others do things too. I think we've also seen from the ways that the work of radical librarians dovetails with dominant modes of teaching and learning in librarianship—an emphasis on active learning, for example, or moving to a "guide on the side" approach—that we don't have to share a political analysis or perspective to do valuable work in the classroom.

Is there a common thread running through all of your research that instruction librarians could use to help them improve their instruction?

I see the common theme in my work as an interest in how structural forces produce us as social actors, and how we then

work to resist and transform those very structures. For other teaching librarians, I think this translates to a suggestion to look under the hoods, of the catalogs and databases we teach, the research skills and habits we consider important, and the professional values that guide us in our work.

As an adjunct professor at Pratt School of Information does any of your research prove useful in the education of future librarians?

I love teaching future librarians because they arrive in the classroom already interested in information and how it works. I engage a lot of literature outside our discipline in my work—composition and rhetoric studies, gender and sexuality studies, infrastructure studies—and I think our field is fundamentally interdisciplinary. Teaching in ways that make those connections makes better librarians, I hope. So much of our work relies on our capacity to be nimble and able to engage multiple academic discourses in our classrooms, and I think my research has oriented me in those directions, something I hope comes through in the future.

What advice do you have about the process behind implementing any sort of critical theory into our instruction practices?

I certainly don't think it's necessary to incorporate critical theory into our work—lots of great teachers do great work without ever even knowing the word Foucault! That said, I think people with an interest should start by reading and writing. I think of critical theory less as a thing we do than as a thing that helps some of us figure out what to do. Critical theory has shaped the way I think, which shapes the way I teach. That has been very exciting, the sort of thing that keeps a person engaged even when our work can turn rote and repetitive (and it can!). There are lots of ways to connect with people incorporating critical theoretical work into their practice and research. The critlib hashtag on Twitter brings many of us together.

What books or articles have influenced you?

Everything by Hope Olson has been critical to the way I think about the world, in the library and in my ordinary life. Geoffrey Bowker's book *Memory Practices in the Sciences* has fundamentally changed the way I think about knowledge structures, as has *Sorting Things Out*, co-written with Susan Leigh Star. Safiya Noble's article "Hyper-visibility as a means of rendering black women and girls invisible" (<http://safiyaunoble.com/2013/11/13/invisibleculture/>) has me so excited for the ways her forthcoming book on the politics of algorithms is going to blow my mind.