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**Book Review**

## **Review of *Teaching Critical Literacy Skills: Strategies for Academic Librarians***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Review of Rempel, H. G. and Hamelers, R. (Eds.). (2023). *Teaching critical literacy skills: Strategies for academic librarians*. Association of College and Research Libraries. 2 vols. 528 pp.

### **KEYWORDS**

critical reading, information literacy, library instruction

### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

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There is a wealth of library literature on teaching information literacy, but until recently, critical reading has not been a part of the conversation, nor has it been seen as part of a librarian's domain. The *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy* does not mention the word "reading" anywhere in its frames, knowledge practices, or dispositions, and most instruction librarians struggle with teaching everything they want to teach as it is. Despite this challenge, librarians know that students cannot complete research successfully if they do not understand their sources, a situation that is becoming more apparent to many of us. (Full disclosure, one of my own research interests revolves around academic reading and first-year students.)

In *Teaching Critical Reading Skills*, Hannah Gascho Rempel and Rachel Hamelers have remedied this gap in the literature by providing librarians with an abundance of lesson plans and pedagogical materials for teaching reading. Prompted by an ACRL conference panel that Rempel moderated, she and Hamelers decided there was a need for instructional materials for academic librarians on critical reading skills. They were onto something; librarians were so interested in the subject that what was initially conceived as a one volume book became two when the editors received so many outstanding submissions.

Hannah Gascho Rempel and Rachel Hamelers are capable educators and librarians. Rempel is the Research and Learning Department Head and College of Agricultural Sciences Liaison Librarian at Oregon State University. Hamelers is a Teaching and Learning Librarian and the Math and Science Subject Specialist at Muhlenberg College. Both Rempel and Hamelers are active in the Science and Technology section of ALA, and both have been interested in critical reading skills for many years, making them more than qualified to edit this book.

The authors of the chapters are mainly instruction librarians, with a few disciplinary faculty as well. They are all talented instructors and come from a diverse array of institutions and hold various positions, such as student success librarians, outreach and instruction heads, digital scholarship librarians, various subject liaisons, and library school faculty. Many authors are distinguished in the field and have won multiple awards.

*Teaching Critical Reading Skills: Strategies for Academic Librarians* uses the theoretical underpinnings of Karen Manarin, Miriam Carey, Melanie Rathburn, and Glen Ryland's excellent 2015 text, *Critical Reading in Higher Education* as its basis. Manarin, et. al. assert that critical reading has two components: disciplinary or academic reading, and socially engaged reading. They explain that the former involves "identifying patterns in the text, determining main and supporting ideas, evaluating credibility, making judgements about how a text is argued, and making inferences about the text" (p. xiii), skills considered important aspects of reading. The more novel concept of socially engaged reading also involves essential skills, but these skills are framed as having a social component. Manarin, et. al. argue that this part of critical reading, "encourages readers to read in a way that [enables them to] understand a different perspective, empathize with those whose experiences are different from their own, or

create change in their community” (p. xiii). Many librarians may deal primarily with the first aspect of critical reading, but this second component is just as valuable.

Rempel and Hamelers’ two volume set is divided into five different sections. Volume One includes 1) Reading in the Disciplines and 2) Reading for Specific Populations, while Volume Two includes 3) Reading to Evaluate, 4) Reading Beyond Scholarly Articles, and 5) Reading in the World.

Each chapter includes an introduction, lesson plan (or plans), and a section explaining the connection to critical reading, providing the reader a through-line to follow throughout the text. The lessons are geared toward a variety of populations: undergraduate students, graduate students, community college students, and even younger students, though many can be tailored to fit alternative populations. Some of the lessons could be used or modified for one-shot instruction, while others are better suited to semester-long courses. Most disciplines are included, from STEM to health sciences to humanities.

Many chapters promote using technology as a teaching tool, with lessons using videos, social media, and digital humanities tools to foster critical reading skills. Many types of “texts” are also represented. In addition to scholarly articles, chapters include lessons on reading primary source materials, images, data, and even memes. (See Jenny Dale and Maggy Murphy’s innovative chapter, “Reading Memes: Rhetorical Analysis of Memes as Multimodal Texts” for lessons on the latter.)

In their introduction, the editors highlight three learner-centered themes that run throughout the book: making the implicit explicit for learners; reading as a skill that must be practiced and nurtured; and reading as a communal act. One or more of these themes are important elements of each chapter and indeed all are essential components of teaching critical reading.

These themes also hint at one of the main strengths of the book: the close attention paid to the affective dimensions of reading. For example, Chapter Five: “Teaching Students to Read and Critically Evaluate Scholarly Articles in Science and Agriculture” by Chrissy Hursh, includes a two-part lesson plan intended to reduce the cognitive overload experienced by beginning students and seeks to minimize the “bewilderment” felt by students approaching scholarly texts for the first time. By using scaffolded assignments, Hursh aims to make readings more approachable and less intimidating. Likewise, Chapter 28: “Textual Topographies: Equipping Students with Tools for Navigating Academic Writing” by Stephanie Gessler, stresses the importance of creating safe classroom spaces where students can feel comfortable with not knowing and with asking questions.

Another strength lies in using one or more of the ACRL Frames or on pedagogical texts outside of librarianship to undergird the lesson plans. Despite the lack of a specific mention of reading in the *Framework*, the authors point to several frames for inspiration, such as

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Scholarship as Conversation, Information Creation as a Process, Research as Inquiry, and Authority is Constructed and Contextual. Other texts used include John Bean's *Engaged Ideas*, Stephen Brookfield's *Teaching for Critical Thinking: Tools and Techniques to Help Students Question their Assumptions*, and Schoenback, Greenleaf, and Murphy's *Reading for Understanding: How Reading Apprenticeship Improves Disciplinary Learning in Secondary and College Classrooms*, just to name a few.

If the book has a weakness, it is in its organization. Many chapters could fit in alternative sections, and the sections themselves are a bit arbitrary. For example, Chapter 42: "Co-CREATE Your Class: Critical Reading Instruction for First-Year Students" from Section 3: Reading to Evaluate, could just have easily been in Section 2: Reading for Specific Populations, or because it covers an education class, Section 1: Reading in the Disciplines. Although this is the case for many chapters, it is a very minor quibble. The breadth and depth of the information provided more than makes up for it.

*Teaching Critical Reading Skills: Strategies for Academic Librarians* is a work of pedagogical excellence, a book which would be of benefit to any librarian interested in teaching critical reading skills. No matter whether you are a librarian at a community college, small liberal arts college, or large state university, you will find many creative lesson plans, as well as citations to other pedagogical texts to explore. Hannah Gascho Rempel and Rachel Hamelers have provided a robust and useful text, one that fills an important gap in the library literature.