



Peer-Reviewed Article

Radical Vulnerability: The Pedagogy of Real Talk for Authentic Librarian-Student Connection

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the implications, challenges, and impacts of the Pedagogy of Real Talk on the ability to foster connectedness in library instruction. Autoethnography is employed to position the author's experience as the subject of study, attempting to re-inset the importance of librarian experience in the enactment of inclusive pedagogy. Like the Pedagogy of Real Talk's support of instructor vulnerability in the classroom, this paper seeks to honor and analyze the author's experience as an early-career academic librarian. The autoethnography details the author's experience incorporating the Pedagogy of Real Talk in library instruction. Through critical self-reflection, this paper presents the author's reckoning with vulnerability and openness to foster connection between librarians and students. Library professionals are provided with an overview of the Pedagogy of Real Talk and are given insight into the implementation of a distinct inclusive teaching style for library instruction.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive pedagogy, autoethnography, library instruction, Pedagogy of Real Talk

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Introduction

I am a young, white, cis-woman and come from an American, working-class background. I have hypothyroidism, ADHD, and depression. I disclose these facets of my identity as they influence my interactions with the world and how others perceive me. Although some aspects of my identity afford me immense privilege, I still face challenges from sexism and ableism, particularly in my work as a librarian.

Early on in my career as a librarian, a professor introduced himself and expressed his enthusiasm for my hire. Although he was genuine, he was more enthusiastic that I was a young woman like the librarian before me, and thereby could enact the same “bubbly,” exciting personality. Being told this was a truly odd thing. Yet, this expectation felt like a mask I had to wear to successfully engage students and even professors.

This imposed persona was like wearing a stereotypical librarian costume and creating connection with students was difficult. A student once told me that it must be nice to sit in my office all day and listen to music. I was shocked at the assumption and wondered where this misperception stemmed from. This divide appeared anytime I taught a one-shot session or had a reference interaction. There persisted a misconception about me as a librarian. It was increasingly difficult to teach critically when I was stuck worrying about how to negotiate librarian stereotypes and bound to strict time limits in the one-shot.

Librarians are estranged from students and separated from class learning. Building connectedness and belonging in the classroom is necessary to support students’ critical exploration and reflection, but the transactional nature of higher education limits instructors’ ability to enact critical pedagogies, which encourage students to critically analyze social structures and power dynamics. Library instruction often takes the form of the one-shot session, which makes this educational transaction especially true (Nataraj & Siqueiros, 2022; Kingsland, 2020). More importantly, it makes connection with students difficult.

We all struggle in, as psychologist Judith V. Jordan writes, a “traumatized and traumatizing society” (2004, p. 42). It became increasingly difficult to keep up the friendly, happy librarian façade without it leading to burn out. The precarious balance to seem warm, helpful, and caring while also maintaining a sense of professionalism, neutrality, and competence was exhausting (Pagowsky & DeFrain, 2014). I began to question whether librarianship was a good “fit” for me. How could I be a supportive librarian when I needed support myself?

However, the problem was not entirely due to stereotypes. I was not able to be my authentic self nor was I able to build deeper connections through my teaching because I was terrified of being vulnerable. I was only able to situate authenticity in the library classroom through growth and direction, which was made possible through joining a Faculty Academy for

Inclusive Pedagogy. This opportunity had a lasting impact on my perception of vulnerable library instruction and my role as a librarian. The Faculty Academy taught me the Pedagogy of Real Talk (PRT), a newer pedagogical approach that highlights the essentiality of vulnerability in fostering connection in the classroom for enhanced student learning. From this experience, I have begun the arduous task of evaluating my own authenticity within the library classroom and beyond.

I will employ autoethnography, the study of one's experience, in this paper to give personal context to existing scholarship on librarianship and vulnerability. This methodology, like PRT, requires radical vulnerability. In this self-reflexive study, I investigate how PRT influenced my perception of my role as an authentic librarian and how I perceive the challenges associated with connecting to students and beyond. Librarians can utilize PRT in library instruction to foster deeper connections with students. Beyond the documented benefits of PRT for student belonging (Keyser et al., 2022), this pedagogy can impact the instructor's experience of belonging in the classroom and connectedness to students. Specifically, by embracing vulnerability, librarians can subvert the transactional nature of library interactions to build authentic relationships with students.

Literature Review

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that centers the writer's lived experience within the social context they are studying, offering insight into complex questions that quantitative research methods struggle to explore in detail (Adams et al., 2014; Poulos, 2021). This person-centered research approach aligns with my understanding of PRT as a person-centered pedagogy.

Autoethnography is a relatively new research method in librarianship, yet the scholarship on using autoethnography in library and information scholarship provides thought-provoking narratives about librarians' experiences (Deitering & Schroeder, 2017; Fourie, 2021). These examples of autoethnography in librarianship empowered me to consider and analyze my own struggles with connecting to students and implementing PRT. Autoethnography requires the researcher to be vulnerable and share their experiences. PRT asks the same of the instructor.

The Pedagogy of Real Talk

At my institution, I participated in a paid three-year Faculty Academy on Inclusive Pedagogy, which introduced participants to PRT. As part of the inaugural cohort of 13 faculty, I learned directly from Paul Hernandez, PRT's creator. Building on critical pedagogies including the work of Paulo Freire and bell hooks, PRT serves as a guide for instructors bringing personal experience, vulnerability, and connection into their classrooms (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994).

Two important facets of PRT are the “real talk” and the “alternative lesson,” which serve to support student connectedness and a sense of belonging. These techniques connect students to the curriculum, each other, and the instructor. Real talk requires instructors to share a personal story with the class and then prompt students to share their own experiences to establish connection, caring, trust, and understanding (Hernandez, 2022). The alternative lesson incorporates students’ experiences, interests, and worldviews in an engaging activity to orient students to content or achieve a learning objective. This allows instructors to teach in a way that is relevant to students’ lives. Both the real talk and alternative lesson allow students and instructor to engage with each other and the course content on a personal level.

During the first workshop, Hernandez modeled these techniques, sharing personal stories that moved me. His authenticity inspired me to reconsider my own teaching. I realized that if I wanted my experience of teaching and librarianship to change from one of monotony and disconnect, I had to do something I was uncomfortable with to coexist as librarian, teacher, and person.

Initially, I doubted PRT’s applicability to library instruction. There wasn’t enough time and there were more important things to do in that time besides share experiences toward the goal of “connectedness.” But I recognized its alignment with much of the student-centered, feminist work librarians are already bringing into their classrooms. PRT offers a chance to create connections with students that feel genuine rather than pro forma. Its purpose is to strengthen a sense of belonging to enable an effective, inclusive learning environment. I began the task of adapting PRT to library instruction, creating small, easy real talks and focusing more on the attitudes about teaching it presents.

Critical Pedagogies in Library Instruction

The critical aspects of PRT are not novel in library instruction. Maria Accardi in, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*, encourages librarians to develop lessons with students’ lived experiences in mind, including students’ directly in knowledge creation and destabilizing teacher-student power dynamics to include students as teachers themselves much like how PRT uses the alternative lesson (2013). The crux of feminist library pedagogy is to design a space where all voices are valued in a constructive discussion, including student knowledge and experience into the lesson (Accardi, 2013). Feminist pedagogy requires the classroom to be a site of collaborative learning, open dialogue, and inclusion. It encourages teachers and instructors to see students as whole people, in the context of society and socio-cultural backgrounds. This approach values student voices, experiences, and knowledge. PRT is a practical application of this ethos.

PRT is meaningful in the library classroom because it fosters student-librarian connections beyond the typical brief interactions in an instructional one-shot session. PRT builds upon feminist and critical pedagogy, centering student experience and decentering

teacher-as-authority. Incorporating discussion-based, student-led learning, it aligns itself to the feminist library pedagogy many library classes already employ. What is unique about PRT is the “real talk,” especially in the library instruction classroom. Real talk positions the librarian instructor in a place of open vulnerability further emphasizing the anti-hierarchical nature of the classroom. Instead of simply directing student discussion, the librarian is an active participant in that dialogue. This also serves to encourage students to share their experiences and thoughts since the librarian instructor is demonstrating vulnerability and bravery, which is expected of students in feminist classrooms.

The Importance of Libraries and Student-Librarian Connection

Academic libraries continue to be an invaluable contributor to student academic achievement. Library usage has been linked to higher GPAs and greater retention (Allison, 2015, Emmons & Wilkinson, 2011; Mezick, 2015; Soria et al., 2013; Crawford, 2015). However, library anxiety and student reluctance to seek out academic librarians is a barrier to students’ library use (Lund & Walston, 2020; Carlile, 2007). If students feel overwhelmed or apprehensive about seeking librarian assistance, they do not initiate conversations or interactions with librarians.

Students may feel reluctant to approach the library and librarians for various reasons, but librarian visibility and approachability play large roles in student-librarian interactions. The perception of librarian approachability has a significant influence on the willingness of students to interact with a librarian (Van Kampen-Breit and Cooke, 2015). Instead of going to librarians for help, students will ask professors and friends, presumably those they have a connection to and feel more comfortable approaching for help (Miller & Murillo, 2012; Robinson & Reid, 2007; Vondracek, 2007). It is imperative that librarians foster relationships with students to continue providing services that support student success.

Students feel more comfortable reaching out to librarians for assistance when they have had a librarian-initiated interaction, such as a library instruction session (Bennedbaek et al., 2021). Connections built from these interactions with librarians eased library anxieties and encouraged students to reach out to librarians on their own (LeMire et al., 2021; Dalal et al., 2022). Students who were at least exposed to a librarian through a librarian-initiated interaction were more likely to seek help from a librarian on their own, taking the initiative to interact with librarians themselves (Dalal et al., 2022). When students do interact with an academic librarian, they are more likely to use library resources and feel confident in their ability to use them (Dalal et al., 2022; Bennedbaek et al., 2021). Authentic connections between students and librarians are essential to maintain the centrality of the library in student education and to successfully support student achievement. Often the only time students meet with a librarian is in a library instruction session. PRT can be leveraged in library instruction sessions to create room for further connection and interaction.

Doing Real Talk

During my time in the PRT faculty cohort, I questioned how I might incorporate PRT in a one-shot instruction session. At its core, PRT fosters authentic interaction, inclusivity, and connection. Connection and openness in general are difficult. I often wonder: is being vulnerable and sharing experiences difficult only for me? Or is this a challenge many librarians face?

PRT asks instructors to share a personal story that revolves around a universal theme like perseverance, belonging, sadness, etc. and invite students to do the same. While many of my more experienced colleagues in the workshop were able to tell personal and poignant stories, this was a difficult endeavor for me. I was afraid of “getting it wrong.”

In kindergarten, as we learned to write our letters, my teacher called on me to answer, “Where do you begin when writing the letter ‘O’?” I was shy. Being called on to answer a question at that age was more terrifying than the thought of parasitic aliens bursting out of my chest (my parents let me watch PG-13 movies as a kid). Caught off guard and panicking, I stayed quiet. If I didn’t move, she couldn’t see me, right? My teacher told me that if I got the question wrong, she would cry. Now the stakes were high. I remember my answer to this day. “You start on the top.” Apparently not. She pantomimed being completely heartbroken. The other kindergarteners in my class all turned and laughed at me. Now as the student with “the wrong answer,” I became an obvious target for ridicule. I still remember the “correct” answer. Start on the right side of the “O.”

The teacher’s question and insensitive response to my answer still pops into my head from time to time. In hindsight, this experience colored much of my early education. I tried not to stand out or even talk in class after that day. To this day, I still fear speaking up. I fear being wrong. I fear the inevitable moment when everyone realizes I’m an imposter. This experience directly informs my understanding of student apprehension. Sharing a story or even a comment is daunting. However, students are more open to speaking or sharing when they hear this story.

It takes no small amount of bravery to share honestly. It is easier and more comfortable to ask students to share their experiences, their feelings, their thoughts while withholding your own. The intentional nature of crafting a story to share was difficult. My stories either felt too personal to share in a class I may be visiting only once or not vulnerably authentic enough. I also felt obligated to make my story relevant to the one-shot and not something that feels like it came out of nowhere. For PRT in the library one-shot to be successful, I had to reckon with my growing frustration and fears. I had to stop being an “all-or-nothing” perfectionist. Learning is a

vulnerable state, and I learned the hard lesson that vulnerability, while important, is difficult to do.

To adapt PRT into one-shot sessions, which is no easy feat, I focused on making the real talk small anecdotal introductions or asides. I became a better model of courage and vulnerability to students. I don't ask students to share their experiences because of the constraints of the one-shot and the understanding that the classroom may not feel like a safe space to share for certain students. Yet, when I shared a small anecdote or story, I found that students were more engaged. Over time, I tried different stories about academic struggles, personal setbacks, or moments of persistence. I would note how students reacted and reflect on how I felt sharing with the class.

Not every attempt worked, I still struggle with rejection sensitivity and the fear of seeming weird for sharing a story in a one-shot. Sometimes PRT and telling a story takes a backburner role, but being my authentic self does not. I still don't go as "deep" as full PRT calls for, but a little self-disclosure is better than pretending to be a librarian stock character. Luckily, I teach a five-week course where I am able to build a more robust connection with students. I found the longer courses are where PRT flourishes, but it still helped quickly build rapport in my five-week class.

Over the course of the three years, I taught numerous one-shots and six sessions of a mini-course on information literacy in which I introduced myself using real talks. At the beginning of class, I take a few moments to introduce myself, who I am, and what I do. Each class is different and so the things I share vary. Sometimes I talk about my research interests, how I started doing academic research as an undergraduate, my experiences with the scholarly publishing process, and how I sometimes struggle with the assumptions people make about me as a librarian. One real talk I gave to an introductory women's and gender studies class went something like this:

"I read your syllabus and was excited that this class is interrogating topics like gender inequality and sexism," I said facing students, the majority of whom are women. "This topic is relevant to all of us. As a woman, I negotiate gendered assumptions in my personal life and in my career as a librarian. People ask me if I'm married, if I have kids, and they expect me to want those things. When I expressed my desire to go to graduate school, a lot of people from my life tried to dissuade me. They couldn't understand why I wanted to continue my education. As an academic librarian, I'm able to learn and publish my research, but many people don't know that I have faculty status or that I do more than answer questions at the reference desk. Librarianship is portrayed as a feminine profession and librarians are stuck with archetypal feminine characterizations. Because feminized professions, especially ones

that involve caring and public service, are undervalued by the patriarchal, capitalist structure, the valuable work we do goes unnoticed. Today, I'm going to demonstrate how to come up with a research topic and use the library databases. I'm going to use the topic of emotional labor and women as a starting point because it interests me, and I have personal experience with this topic."

It can be daunting for students to share their thoughts or questions in a classroom and even more so in a one-shot with an instructor they are meeting for the first time. When I asked students to share their research questions or topics for our class demonstration of a database, I had students raise their hands. That is a noticeable change from the usually silent classroom I encounter during one-shots. One student's topic was gender inequality in the workplace. We discussed how we can focus this topic into a specific research question, using the experiences of students and me as an instructor to explore possible directions for research. We discussed the gender pay-gap in sports, gender disparity in administration and management roles in librarianship, and workplace harassment. The class became much more than a database demonstration. We connected research and real-world issues in a short amount of time.

Another real talk I shared had a dual purpose. I could either frame it as knowing when to use the right tools or knowing when to ask for help.

One summer, when I was a child, my parents and I went camping, as we often did. It was a hot evening and so we decided to grab some ice cream from the campground store. My parents walked along side me while I rode my bike, zigzagging around them. Being the kid that I was, I pedaled as fast as I could to my destination. Eventually I arrived at the store before them. The realization that I'd lost my parents startled me into circling back around to our campsite. It was getting dark and still no sign of my parents. Alone at the campsite, I began to panic. I was hungry, the sun was going down, and I was locked out of our camper. I wanted to get in the camper so I could wait for my parents in, what I deemed, safety. Hey, I was a kid prone to panic, okay? So, I looked around me to see if I could open the camper door without the keys. I saw stones and twigs. What should I have done?

This is where I usually pause and ask students to answer or give me their ideas about how this story was going to end.

Well, I decided I could probably use a stick to pick the lock. (Locksmiths, I'm sorry). It did not go as planned. The stick got stuck in the lock, thereby jamming it so now not even a key would be able to open it. Just as I was finished with my failed experiment, my parents arrived back at the campsite. I was in so much trouble.

Finally, a personal favorite of mine is about needing help and receiving too much help (in a way). This is a real talk I give my students in the 1-credit, five-week course I teach.

In fourth grade, I was tasked with writing an essay. I had no idea how to do that. I can't even remember if we learned what an essay was. So, like any kid, I go to my parents for help. Except their idea of help was to do the entire project for me. My dad got really into the topic for the paper and ended up writing a 15-page essay for, remember, a fourth grader's assignment. I still do not know how I ended up getting an A on that assignment when I obviously did not write it. It wasn't until years later when I finally understood how to write an essay.

I tell you this story because I know many of you use ChatGPT or another AI tool for different tasks. Sometimes we are cognitively offloading that task to AI, meaning that we lose important cognitive skills when we don't do a thing and instead have someone else, or in this case, AI do it. When we repeatedly offload tasks to AI, we are eroding our ability to do it ourselves.

I'll admit these anecdotes aren't very deep, and maybe they shouldn't be for a one-shot instruction session. However, they are true stories about myself, and they did take a brave moment of vulnerability to disclose. Even sharing a little about myself had an impact on student engagement. Normally, I'm met with silence in the one-shot classroom and watch as students look at their phones or laptops. While I wasn't expecting my disclosure to have an enormous impact, or any observable impact at all, I was happily surprised at the results. I saw most students in the class making eye-contact with me! I felt more present in the classroom as facilitator and fellow learner. I also noted the increased number of students that participated in class. Students asked questions about content and even about my job, shared their experiences, sent me follow-up emails, and wanted one-on-one consultations. I could feel that they were interested in what I was saying. I wasn't some stranger to them anymore.

Shifting Mindset

Our attitudes toward one-shots can be a barrier to engaging authentically with students. I was hesitant to "waste" time in a one-shot by talking about myself, which seemed self-indulgent and not student-centered, but I needed to change my perception of the purpose of a one-shot (Douglas & Gadsby, 2022; Nataraj & Siqueiros, 2022). Empathy and vulnerability do have a place in librarianship and in a one-shot (Beuoy, 2020). By implementing real talk, I started to feel less like I was providing a service and more like a person with valuable expertise to share.

I felt and observed the change in the librarian-student dynamic in the one-shot. Students were alert, looking at me and my teaching materials as I spoke instead of hiding their faces.

Students would answer when I asked questions of the class, tell me what confused them, ask their own questions, and seek my guidance. As I got better with PRT and my real talks expanded, I received more follow-up questions from students, emails, and one-on-one consultations.

The library is an essential resource for students, situating librarians in a unique position to offer empathetic connections to students outside of professor/student dynamics. Without human connection we feel alone, isolated, and lack self-identification. When we are disconnected, we are unable to grow and change (Jordan, 2004). I felt this stagnation in my own experience. I saw it in myself and in students. I couldn't connect because I wasn't ready to be vulnerable with students, and yet I expected students to be vulnerable by asking for help and sharing their thoughts (Douglas, 2018). This hypocritical expectation was an obstacle to fostering an inclusive, connected classroom. Connected classrooms mean both the instructor and the students are open to transformation through vulnerability in the learning process.

The foundation of PRT's ideology is radical empathy and vulnerability. Jordan and Schwartz (2018) position vulnerability as a powerful pedagogical tool. We discuss empathetic teachers and empathy in classrooms, but we often forget how to do empathy correctly. Jordan and Schwartz write, "radical empathy involves radical acceptance of vulnerability" (2018, p. 28). I'm not suggesting unfettered confessionals, but the acceptance of vulnerability by sharing our stories, thoughts, and feelings as a possible way to connect. When instructors are vulnerable with a class or a student, we actively alter the power dynamic and create a collaborative interaction where everyone can experience growth. As one-shots remain a primary method of library instruction, remember that the quality of time we spend with students is always important.

Limitations and Implications

This autoethnography is an exploration of my own experience with PRT, meaning I cannot speak to how students are impacted by this approach beyond what I've observed in classrooms. In the future, I hope to gather students' responses to PRT in library one-shots. A perception survey with Likert scales, such as the one created by Keyser et al. (2022), with the addition of a written reflection may be beneficial to collecting data on students' experience of PRT. Another avenue is to assess student achievement of learning outcomes in library classes that use PRT. Librarians can build this type of assessment into active learning techniques like in-class worksheet or activity, to measure whether students engage more with the content when librarians use real talks. Ultimately, more research is needed to explore future methods to assess students' experiences of PRT in library instruction and how it affects their learning.

Moving Forward

Inclusive pedagogy is more than incorporating social justice themes into a lesson. It is vulnerability and self-reflexivity in the classroom. If the instructor embodies openness and willingness to learn, it can result in the transformation of both students and teacher.

The Pedagogy of Real Talk requires commitment to being vulnerable and becoming your authentic self in the classroom. It took time and practice before I felt comfortable sharing stories in the classroom, and it took no small amount of courage to try. I was fortunate to have a group of colleagues to share failures and triumphs with. Doing PRT is not easy as my fellow cohort colleagues and I found out. PRT is a teaching method that best aligns with semester-long or year-long classes. However, the tenants of PRT, like the real talk, are still useful for instruction librarians teaching one-shots to introduce ourselves on a relational level.

What we do is not “invisible,” it is essential to the vitality of the institution. Ultimately, the success of inclusive pedagogy hinges on our willingness to delve into the relational facets of learning, acknowledging that genuine connection is as vital as content delivery. PRT can position librarians in a more visible, comprehensive role as part of student education. Although the one-shot has an obvious time limit, the quality of the time we spend with students is much more important than stuffing all our knowledge into a 50-minute session. Vulnerability and a demonstrated willingness to connect with students on a personal and professional level has an influence on students' attention and willingness to reach out. One positive interaction with a librarian is enough to impact students. I was amazed how sharing a small vulnerable story about myself caused students to focus on me rather than on the screen behind me or on their computers. Inclusive pedagogy isn't just for students, it is for us as well. A classroom is not an inclusive classroom if we forget to include ourselves.

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