Review of Libraries Promoting Reflective Dialogue in a Time of Political Polarization

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Abstract: Review of *Libraries promoting reflective dialogue in a time of political polarization*. Edited by

Andrea Baer and Ellysa Stern Cahoy and Robert Schroeder. (Chicago: Association of College and

Research Libraries 2019. 398 p.)

For more than three decades, there has been a myriad of forums and publications that have

sought to initiate conversations that would bring forth empathetic resolutions for differences in social

class, ethnicity, religion, political stances, etc. Unfortunately, these attempts have produced more

questions than solutions. Consequently, society has grown weary of grandiose ceremonies to rid the

nation of bias without acknowledgment that this bias is commensurate with the experiences of the

individual. From Clinton's 1998 Initiative on Race to today's political schism, opinions expressed about

divisive topics have continued to disrupt traditional civility. Members of the library staff are not

immune to the frustrations expressed during these times by patrons, students, and coworkers.

However, we must look inward to examine the personal motivation that we insert into our daily

interactions and instruction techniques. "Critical reflection …calls our attention to the effects of our

own assumptions, expectations, and beliefs in our practice" (Graf, 2016, p.9).

Libraries promoting reflective dialogue in a time of political polarization offers all librarians,

irrespective of public or academic settings, an opportunity to reevaluate current perceptions of

societal conversation. Editors Andrea Baer, Ellysa Stern Cahoy, and Robert Schroeder clearly avouch

that the impetus for this book was the recognition of national tensions that escalated after the 2016 US

presidential election. Undoubtedly, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of articles and

books diagnosing the nation's febricity as a condition caused by an ascribed social class, political

body, race, or gender. What sets this book apart from a great many of those before it is that it disavows

itself of the hubris of assigning individual responsibility for the breakdown in civil discourse.

Additionally, the authors of each chapter offer in-depth coverage of their subject matter,

thereby expanding on ideas previously presented as high-level summaries. A partial description of

reflective dialogue, as stated by the editors, is the ability to communicate without the "aim of

convincing someone else that we are right, but rather with the goal of recognizing a shared humanity

and appreciating difference, as well as the inevitable limitations of our own understanding" (Baer,

Cahoy & Schroeder, 2019, p.3). Within the introduction, the editors support this statement by revealing

limitations that they themselves found within this collection. Of particular interest was the declaration

that a number of the writings reiterate "that librarianship has long been a predominantly…middle-

class, cis-gender and liberal-leaning profession" (Baer et al., p.4). The text proceeds to note that all the

authors within the book were academic librarians. These disclosures demonstrate an awareness of

and a desire to fill the gaps to include the broader community view as they build upon this body of

work.

The editors have assembled 16 chapters—which at first glance appear to be a collage of

introspective theories—into a thoroughly researched work that cohesively addresses the need for

immediate participation in and advocacy for reflective dialogue within libraries and their immediate

communities. The book, divided into four themed sections, contains extensive reference lists and

further reading selections within every chapter. The first section of the book, "Libraries as Dialogic

Spaces: Limits and Possibilities," offers eclectic examples for utilizing the library, not only as a space

for dialogue but also a much-needed place to safely examine and reconstruct how individuals process

the experiences that shape their ideology. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the process and outcome of self-

reflective library group workshops. In order to succeed in promoting open communication and social

change, participants must endure intensive self-examination and exhibit a willingness to lower

defensive, psychological walls. According to Damasco (2019), participants that use the Intergroup

Dialogue Model (IGD) learn to "reflect upon their own social identities and how their social identity

group memberships are impacted by historical and contemporary factors" (p. 16). This method of

group dialogue requires extended time commitments from participants to build trust and to deliver a viable social justice plan. The inclusion of chapters on the limitations of dialogue, provide a sobering balance of perspective. The chapter, "Confronting the Limits of Dialogue: Charlottesville, 2017," presents a behind-the-curtain view of multiple librarians' experiences during the Summer 2017 Charlottesville chaos. The closing chapter addresses the often-ignored challenge of library workers to feel free to express gender identity and sexual orientation without fear of reprisal or termination. "Dialogue amid Polarization and Extreme Skepticism: Challenges and Opportunities," the second section of the book, focuses on information literacy in terms of weighing personal beliefs and intuitive biases with the same diligence shown in the examination of unfamiliar information. The struggle here is the identification and acceptance of "information that conflicts with our worldviews" (Shermak, Swanson, & Sweet, 2016, p. 94). When librarian instructors begin teaching, we gift students with crafty acronyms to examine information methodically. Authorship is customarily stressed as an indicator. The authors remind us to revisit the Framework concept that authority is determined by construct and context. Our classrooms and lives are composed of individuals with diverse backgrounds and beliefs. Subsequently, we, as librarians, are accepting the task of objectively affirming multifaceted ideals of authority while simultaneously justifying personal definitions of authority.

Librarians may find the chapter, "Unpacking Critical Pedagogy in Classrooms and Conferences," especially noteworthy. As stated earlier, the editors disclosed the library truism of a predominantly liberal-leaning profession. Brayton and Casey, however, present luminous examples of how easily even those dedicated to teaching critical thinking can inadvertently fall into insular and identity-protective behavior. The authors cite instances of liberal librarians while participating in critical pedagogy conferences, dismissing or disparaging questions and comments posed by the (fewer

in number) more conservative librarian attendees (Brayton & Casey, 2019 p.176). Similarly, examples of instructors rebuffing the conservative comments of students, demonstrate comparable hypocrisy. Brayton and Casey (2016) maintained, "Critical pedagogy has truly lived up to its ideals only when students feel free to authentically express the ideologies they hold and respectfully disagree with each other and the teacher" (p.182).

The authors illustrate the relevancy of archives in recording the past with full transparency in the section, "Special Collections and Archives: Past and Present in Conversation." Interestingly, the two chapters that compose this third section focus on the acquisition and use of archive collections within two South Carolina colleges. The first chapter presents an intriguing case study on the necessity of open dialogue during the acquisition of potentially polemic collections. The catalyst for this study was the 2017 donation to the College of Charleston of a collection of archive materials created by the neo-Confederate group, the South Carolina Secessionist Party (SCSP). The breakdown in communication occurred when faculty learned of the acquisition through a taunting post on the SCSP's Facebook page. The authors insist that censorship of the material was not a motivation for conflict.

Subsequently, the content of the donation, though incendiary, was never the origin of the faculty's exasperation. "Responsibly accessioning archival material requires us to transcend legacy decision-making models rooted in outdated power dynamics" (Brown, Fairchild & Haykal, 2019, p. 249-250). The authors offer multiple illustrations of how the college's exclusionary past and the city's recent incidences of violence made dialogue essential before acceptance of this collection. The significance reiterated throughout this chapter is that lack of communication blocked an excellent opportunity for dialogue between the administration and faculty. The second chapter details a case

study on the structured use of archival collections to colligate the history of South Carolina's past to the events of the state's present. Saunders (2019) asserted, "Using historical documents to highlight nuanced political stances in the present helps student better analyze the information they receive throughout their day" (p. 262). The chapter continues with additional details of the assignment that demonstrate several exercises that lend themselves to information literacy instruction. With the introduction of this lesson plan, the author presents concrete examples that allow students the opportunity to practice critical reflection in more objective terms. Subsequently, students are able to study areas of past contention without personalizing present-day outcomes.

The fourth and final section, "The Information Literacy Classroom: Uneasy Questions, Creative Responses," examines the use of reflective dialogue inside the classroom to improve student engagement. Each chapter explores creative methods to meet students at their place of identity and aid them in developing clear lines of reasoning using information literacy principles. The authors of "The Earth is Flat and Other Thresholds" discuss the possibility of using critical thinking to develop students' scientific information literacy skills. Another chapter within this section delves into the use of satire to stimulate critical thinking. The author gives examples of tasking students to view clips from late-night comedy shows staring hosts like John Oliver and Trevor Noah. Afterward, the students participate in a class discussion that critically examines misinformation. Krutkowski (2019) stated, "By incessantly holding people and issues up for scrutiny and questioning, satire makes us pay closer attention to what is actually being said" (p. 313). Additional subjects in this section discuss the viability of librarian neutrality, how the use of Open Educational Resources aid in the sharing of ideas and building of knowledge communities, and an examination of how political indignation serves as a roadblock to constructive dialogue.

Libraries promoting reflective dialogue in a time of political polarization will make an excellent

reference source for teachers and librarians that are interested in the pedagogy of critical reflection. In

addition to the numerous supplemental resources recommended by the writers, each chapter contains

a treasure trove of information within the reference lists.   The text reveals a myriad of perspectives on

delving into the work of identifying personal belief systems while simultaneously accepting beliefs that

differ from our own. The connecting theme of all the chapters is that, as information professionals, we

must be open to utilizing reflective dialogue to teach and communicate with logic and empathy.

"Dialogue can be a tool that allows us to better know our user communities, our colleagues, and

ultimately ourselves" (McElroy & Marlow, 2019, p. 44).

References

Graf, A. J. (2016). Learning from teaching: A Dialogue of risk and reflection. In N. Pagowsky & K. McElroy

(Eds.), *Critical library pedagogy* (p. 9). Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.