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Ethics and Judgments of Value in Library Science

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Lisa Rose-Wiles: Ethics and Judgments of Value in Academic Libraries

Phrases such as “the value of the library” and “return on investment” abound in the world of academic libraries, typically associated with attempts to increase or at least maintain funding. We use such strategies to cope with the expanding commercialization and demands for assessment in higher education ordained by those Bernard Lonergan calls the educationalists: the “group that has the power and the money, that runs the bureaucracy, that makes the decisions”.

As a result, library “value” is often calculated in dollar terms, or measured in terms of variables such as student retention or grades. The third “frame” of the American College & Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education is that “information has value (as a commodity, as a means of education, as a means to influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world”). While this sounds like more in the same economic vein, the associated “knowledge practices” include giving credit to “the original ideas of others through proper attribution and citation” and “understand[ing] how and why some individuals or groups … may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information”. These are ethical propositions that involve value judgements, particularly the observation that students should be encouraged to “examine their own information privilege”.

As a librarian and educator, I see the overarching value of teaching information literacy (a critical function of academic libraries) as promoting critical thinking and value judgements that lead to ethical choices and the greater good of society. The ACRL Framework defines information literacy as
the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.

This focus on ethical participation in society resonates with Mark Miller’s explanation of value, the third level in Lonergan’s analysis of the human good, wherein “particular goods and the good of order are evaluated and criticized as more or less worthwhile based on a society’s values”. By encouraging our students to engage not only in critical thinking but also discernment, which Patrick Byrne describes as “keen perception or judgement … the process of identifying something of value” we can help them become better members of a society that is sadly in need of redemption.

This is not to ignore the individual “particular goods” that our students need: finding and using information resources in order to complete assignments, pass their courses (hopefully with good grades) and ultimately graduate and find fulfilling employment through which to pay off their student debt. The latter is of enormous practical importance and a source of considerable stress for many of the students I see. Student debt is arguably the worst product of our consumerist society and the commercialization of higher education because it restricts the horizons of many students and educators (including librarians) to a preoccupation with grades and the short-come utility of learning rather than larger goals of self-actualization and good citizenship. Lonergan notes that the fundamental problem in higher education today is the horizon of the educationalist, to which I would add the imposition of their financial-driven horizon on educators and students.

There is a dilemma here. As enlightened educators, we want to move beyond the current obsession with the financial bottom line, continual assessment of short-term “outcomes”, and the
often deceptive “marketing” of ourselves and our institutions to our prospective consumers – students and their families. But like student debt, the need for a university (and its faculty employees) to remain solvent is always with us, or the whole enterprise collapses. The University Libraries are particularly vulnerable here because we do not “generate revenue” and tend to be seen as an at best an essential service and at worse an unwarranted expense (I have heard high level administrators say “isn’t most of this information free on the internet?”). Nonetheless, I believe we do not further our cause by engaging in quantitative “return on investment” type pleas for our value. As Stefan Collini notes, the most important goals of a university [and its library] can’t be measured … they need to be judged”⁵. Perhaps the most helpful way that we can help ourselves as well as society in the long run is by cultivating this habit of judgment – of discernment – in ourselves and our students, the population from which our future educators, educationalists and other society leaders is drawn. This is a challenge, particularly for those of us who do not teach full courses, but we can build on students’ own curiosity and desire to succeed by showing them the value of both information itself and a clear the research process. This is essentially what we try to do in our information literacy sessions, which are increasingly moving away from a simple “show and tell” how to access and use library databases and tools to more interactive, enquiry-based sessions grounded in critical pedagogy.

Patrick Byrne’s seminar “Ethics and Our Disciplines” helped me to frame the missing piece of our endeavors to both shape our future instruction program and help to broaden the horizons (or at least lessen the grip) of the educationalists by focusing on developing the discernment needed to recognize and make good value judgements. This aligns very well with our current direction and emphasis on critical thinking, simply expanding the term “critical” in order to orient it toward the ethical as well as the intellectual value. Since “processes of value
reflection in general, and ethical reflection in particular, bear similarities to the process of reflection that occur within [Lonergan’s] cognitional structure⁶ p 105 and many of us are already using that structure (experiencing, understanding, judging, acting) in our teaching, this is surely something that we can reasonably work toward in our library⁶.

References


Biographical Note.

Dr. Lisa Rose-Wiles is a University Associate Professor at Seton Hall University Libraries. She is library liaison to the sciences, Department of Sociology, Anthropology & Social Work, Psychology, and the University Core. A GEM fellow and Praxis peer leader, she recently began a blog *Catholic Higher Education Bibliography* https://blogs.shu.edu/cheb/author/rosewili/