

THE LIBERAL ARTS FOUNDATION OF LIBRARY USE INSTRUCTION

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In the past twenty years user instruction has emerged as a growing phenomenon in academic libraries, making greater demands on reference services and functions than ever before. Programs designed to teach students how to use libraries have attracted a small but vocal chorus of critics who describe user instruction as superficial, repetitive, and self-defeating. More specifically, one of the foremost critics, William Katz, complains of a lack of thoroughgoing analyses of the assumptions underlying library use instruction.¹

The need for instruction librarians to examine more closely the conceptual and philosophical assumptions that support their work is corroborated by Deborah Lockwood. After scrutinizing more than 900 publications for her bibliography on library instruction, Lockwood urged the profession

to begin reaching beyond the library field and to start thinking in broader terms than individual programs and develop a philosophy and a concept that will be acceptable to our clientele and colleagues.²

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The purpose of this paper is to respond to Katz and Lockwood by identifying one assumption in which library instruction is grounded. In short, a workable foundation of academic library use instruction is inherent in the purposes of a liberal arts education. My discussion of the relationship between library instruction and liberal arts education will include an identification of the essential philosophical similarities between the two enterprises, examples of three undergraduate subjects in which the relationship has become apparent, and a rationale for affirming that there is a need to acknowledge the value of this relationship in the academic marketplace.

Why is a liberal arts education important? And how does it relate to library instruction? We know that a good liberal education introduces students to a cross section of cultures, great ideas, and literary masterpieces, thereby providing broad, historical, and humanizing perspectives for personal and intellectual growth.³ The resources and search strategies of library instruction can serve vocational, technical, and professional curricula as well as more traditional subjects. However, library use instruction and the liberal arts tradition share a purpose, and merit closer scrutiny. To gain perspective on this important similarity, we turn first to that great nineteenth century apologist for liberal learning, John Henry Newman.

Newman's orientation to rational philosophy is apparent in his classic, *The Idea of a University*. Newman saw knowledge as "taking a view of things."

When I speak of knowledge, I mean something intellectual, something which grasps what it perceives through the senses; something which takes a view of things; which sees more than the senses convey, which reasons upon what it sees; which invests it with an idea. . . . The principle of real dignity in knowledge, its worth, its desirableness, considered irrespectively of its results is this germ within it of a scientific or a philosophical process. This is how it comes to be an end in itself; this is why it admits of being called liberal.⁴

Just as knowledge is taking a view of things, so learning or "enlargement" of the intellect involves weighing and comparing points-of-view. There is no enlargement unless there is a comparison of ideas one with another, as they come before the mind, and a systematizing of them.⁵ Thus, the mere taking in of facts and ideas does not constitute a liberal education. The "enlarging" element in liberal learning is the taking in and the considering of facts and ideas, the weighing and comparing of them, the processing and systematizing of them. To digest thoughts, facts, and ideas, comparing them with and integrating them into what we already know, is to partake of

liberal learning. Brubacher writes that "the mind succeeds in doing this through its ability to conceptualize: by inspecting a multitude of particulars, it is able to grasp the essence or universal that underlies them all."⁶ Despite the lack of consensus about what individual courses belong in a liberal arts curriculum, many educators would agree that the ability to handle knowledge and information as suggested by Newman and Brubacher is essential to being liberally educated.

Similarly, the purpose of library use instruction involves weighing and considering books and writers, their facts, ideas, and opinions. William Warner Bishop, for twenty-six years Director of Libraries at the University of Michigan, placed this issue within the context of library use (or bibliographic) instruction. In answering the question, "What should result from . . . bibliographic training?" He said that the student should show a certain readiness and ease among books and that he should use easily "bibliographic tools of all sorts from the simple to the erudite." Most importantly, the student should acquire

. . . the ability to judge the comparative merits of books both new and old. If he has learned to appreciate to some extent the personal equations of authors, publishers, and reviewers. . . if he has acquired some criteria for forming judgments of his own, he has gained from the college library, from his fellow students . . . from his earlier training, an attitude toward books which defies definition, but which may perhaps be best termed *discriminating*. Such a man cannot be 'dated' in later life by the opinions and view of his day in college. He is equipped to cope both with books, and, to a lesser degree, with men.⁷

Thus, Bishop emphasized the art of discrimination, the ability to make informed judgments on the basis of critical comparisons of authors, their ideas, views, and opinions. This same kind of intellectual activity, described by Newman as "enlargement," or the comparison of ideas and points-of-view, is what links library instruction and liberal education. They both seek to inculcate in students the art of discrimination, the ability to intelligently compare and critically judge. In this manner the liberal arts tradition supplies philosophical support—the conceptual foundation needed to help make library use instruction intellectually viable and academically respectable.

We can observe the library instruction/liberal arts relationship on a more practical plane by examining undergraduate course-related instruction in programs requiring students to compare points-of-view and make critical judgments. For purposes of discussion I have chosen political science, philosophy, and basic composition. These fields of study are responsive to the concept that learning is a process, and exhibit the same range of purposes inherent in library instruction and the liberal arts: inquiry, point-of-view, techniques of comparison, and the art of discrimination.

In addressing the Midwest Political Science Association, Evan Farber described assignments developed for political science students at Earlham College. The assignments required that the students have first hand contact with United States government publications and the indexes within this field. Farber stated that he and the faculty members who planned the courses wanted to familiarize students with the bibliographic tools for finding documents and to help them understand the purpose and function of those documents in relation to the work of the issuing agencies. "What we wanted them to come out with was not only a knowledge of the governmental process, but also, if one wants to find out about a governmental activity, where one gets background information and finds specific items."⁸

This rather normal objective of library instruction is followed by Farber's next comment which suggests that something more fundamental was at the heart of these assignments. Students learned to *compare* sources, assessing their value for particular purposes and choosing those compatible with their research needs: students "could. . .examine the governmental process and its primary materials in order to compare them with secondary sources—the newspapers and periodicals."⁹ The purpose of the library portion of the political science courses "was not only to improve students' bibliographic skills, but to permit them to become intelligent consumers of information."¹⁰ The object was to teach students how to critically evaluate government generated information. Students inquired, compared, and made judgments, based upon their newly acquired knowledge of sources and the ability to discriminate among them. Those who learned well were involved in a training lesson in the use of libraries and obtained a small portion of a liberal education.

Len Clark discusses library instruction from a philosopher's point of view. He uses the term, "perspective," defining it as a way of organizing information. He indicates that a natural and needed aspect of introducing students to a discipline such as philosophy is to show them how the library organizes information in that discipline. "Studying the structure of library organization is itself an education in the disciplines and an irreplaceable one at that."¹¹

Not only does library instruction involve teaching how the library arranges information in a field of study, it also involves teaching the internal structure and hierarchy of information peculiar to a field of study. Instructors in library use must teach a discipline's terminology, its patterns of research, and its uses of information. Clark adds that the crucial place for library instruction is in beginning courses where students are introduced to that particular view of the world which characterizes the intellectual content of a discipline.¹² When his students learn how the library organizes information in philosophy as well as how philosophers organize

information in their own subject, they begin to "take a view of things," to gain "perspective," in a liberal arts subject, and they also take part in liberal learning.

In his discussion of basic communication, Jon Lindgren agrees with Lockwood that librarians must present to the academic community a rationale for making library instruction an integral part of academic curricula. The rationale must be viewed as having intellectual validity and as supporting programs that meet obvious educational needs. Lindgren notes that library instruction is handicapped by the absence of a working tradition which encompasses "broad cultural support and a supportive 'pedagogy.'" ¹³ He states that there is a need to develop a philosophical foundation that will furnish librarians with the intellectual substance necessary to sustain curricular development.

Lindgren recommends language study (both oral and written), but especially basic composition, as an appropriate model with which to identify. Three aspects of basic composition merit consideration in relation to library use instruction: the existence of abiding philosophical support from the academic community, a persistent search for theoretical and methodological bases, and efforts to refine new theories into effective techniques. ¹⁴ Experienced practitioners recognize our deficiencies in these areas; it is hoped that we can continue to develop the expertise necessary to insure continued progress.

As an inheritor, perhaps unwittingly, of the ideas of Newman and Bishop, Lindgren stresses the value of (1) showing how library materials "may be crucial to an examination of the major and minor premises that underlie logical analysis," (2) of teaching "the process of selecting and shaping workable topics," and (3) of showing how students can use the library's and their own resources in "exerting critical judgments." ¹⁵ So we see that the elements of comparison and discrimination are as persistent in user instruction for communication as they are in user instruction for political science and philosophy. Programs such as these demonstrate that the essential purposes of library use instruction coincide with those of the liberal arts education.

Librarians committed to user education may well find the immediate future a most opportune time to articulate the link between library instruction and the liberal arts to their faculty colleagues. Colleges and universities are increasingly interested in restructuring and re-emphasizing liberal arts curricula. Harvard's recent review of its own undergraduate curriculum resulted in a stronger core requirement based on values inherent in a liberal education. Harvard's changes could conceivably have an impact similar in scope to its 1945 report, "General Education in a Free Society," which helped stimulate renewed interest in a liberal edu-

cation in numerous other institutions.^{1 6}

Many educators see the liberal arts as the most appropriate vehicles for the transmission of western culture. The foregoing arguments suggest that librarians should bring their own understanding of user instruction into the mainstream of the liberal arts tradition and thereby further assist in the processes of liberal education for all patrons.

NOTES

¹ Katz summarizes his opposition to user instruction in *Introduction to Reference Work, Vol. II, Reference Services and Reference Processes*, 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974, pp. 61-65. His ideas on this topic are especially in need of a response as the three editions of his text have been frequently used in library schools and presumably influence hundreds of people as they enter the profession.

² Deborah Lockwood, *Library Instruction: A Bibliography*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1979, p. viii.

³ An extensive discussion about the nature of the liberal arts is beyond the scope of this paper. The issues of what it means to be liberally educated stem from Aristotelian thought and, having taken on various forms throughout the centuries, may be argued *ad infinitum*. George Schmidt offers a good working definition of the liberal arts. He writes that the hundreds of thousands who have experienced a liberal education are "convinced there is *something* there and *that something* is priceless. A liberal education—to state the consensus—means knowledge of the world of nature and of men. It means a disciplined mind, and this includes the effective use of language and the ability to think critically and to judge intelligently among alternatives." In "A Century of the Liberal Arts in College," in *A Century of Higher Education; Classical Citadel to Collegiate Colossus*, W. W. Brickman and Stanley Lehrer, eds. New York: Society for the Advancement of Education, 1962, p. 63.

⁴ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959, p. 138. Originally published in 1853.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156. Recent proponents of liberal education have stressed the importance of the concepts of process, inquiry, point-of-view, comparison of ideas, and the art of discrimination. See Daniel Bell, *The Reforming of General Education*, New York: Columbia University, 1966, pp. 171, 219; Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum; A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977, pp. 260-264; and Robert N. Broadus, "Library Science and Liberal Education," *Journal of Education for Librarianship* 7 (Spring 1967): 204, 207. These goals for liberal arts curricula are not universally appreciated. Bard College president, Leon Botstein, decries their over-emphasis in "A Proper Education," *Harper's* 259, September 1979: 34. A fine summary of these concepts is John Passmore's chapter, "Teaching to Acquire Information," in *The Philosophy of Teaching*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1980, pp. 56-83.

- 6 John S. Brubacher, *On the Philosophy of Higher Education*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977, p. 71.
- 7 William Warner Bishop, "Training in the Use of Books," *Sewanee Review* 20, July 1912: 279-280.
- 8 Evan Ira Farber, "Teaching the Use of Government Documents for a More Effective Introductory Course," mimeographed paper delivered at the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 21-23, 1977, p. 2.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Len Clark, "Library Instruction from the Philosopher's Point of View," in *Faculty Involvement in Library Instruction*, Hannelore B. Rader, ed. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Pierian Press, 1976, p. 34.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
- 13 Jon Lindgren, "Seeking a Useful Tradition for Library User Instruction in the College Library," in *Progress in Educating the Library User*, John Lubans, Jr., ed., New York: Bowker, 1978, pp. 74-75.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 79. Patricia Knapp outlined a model library instruction sequence that she believed to be appropriate for institutions offering a liberal education in *The Monteith College Library Experiment*, New York: Scarecrow, 1966, pp. 80-113.
- 16 Harvard's curricular reform is not an isolated event. A policy statement issued by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, representing 323 institutions, was published in February, 1977, and called for stronger undergraduate requirements in the humanities. The Manifesto of Liberal Arts College Presidents was issued in April of that same year; representing Bard, Bennington, Scripps, and Wheaton Colleges, it, too, urged a renewal of liberal education studies, as did a 1977 report issued by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.