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A Christian Librarian Praxis



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What does it mean to be a Christian librarian? This statement attempts to provide an answer rooted in the Wesleyan Holiness tradition and is based on the practices and reflections of an academic librarian at a Nazarene institution where the author contributes to the Wesleyan tradition of whole-person education and the university's mission to form students' intellect, character and faith in a community grounded in truth, grace and holiness. This combination of scholarship, reflection and practice has resulted in a new *Christian librarian praxis*.

As an academic librarian, teaching information literacy dominates my calling and vocation. My philosophy of teaching is centered on the pedagogical premise that students learn when challenged in a supportive environment. Coincidentally, learning and Christian hospitality both take place in community. Several frameworks form my theoretical and theological foundation, or my *Christian librarian praxis*, including social constructivism, *confessional hospitality* or *shalom*, Critical Information Literacy Theory, and the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. My philosophy of teaching built on the social constructivist Lev Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development* acknowledges that for learning to happen, learners must be challenged and potentially made uncomfortable about what they do not know or are not able to do alone. Hospitality is key to my teaching because through hospitality I create a safe space where students can overcome challenges. I strive to embody hospitality in my classroom in order to facilitate student learning and to encourage students to come back to the library to ask for help later when needed.

Further, my purpose in extending hospitality is twofold. In addition to helping students feel supported as they overcome learning challenges, hospitality is also integral to my *Christian Librarian praxis* and specifically my Christian conviction to incorporate social justice into my teaching. I have incorporated Critical Information Literacy theory into my pedagogy as a way to address discrimination and diversity in the form of racism and sexism within library and information science to the benefit of all students, whether from a privileged or diverse background. According to Fister (2013) "Critical information literacy asks librarians to work with their patrons and communities to co-investigate the political, social, and economic dimensions of information, including its creation, access and use." Diversity is both a reflection of the complex beauty of God's creation and it is our reality, as according to the Pew Research Center (2015) "Non-Hispanic whites are projected to become less

than half of the U.S. population by 2055 and 46% by 2065. No racial or ethnic group will constitute a majority of the U.S. population.” In her book *The Very Good Gospel* Lisa Sharon Harper describes Christian *shalom* as a calling to bring peace and wholeness to a fragmented world plagued by racism and discrimination. As an academic librarian I interpret the call to *shalom* as the call to bolster diversity within my institution and within my teaching and scholarship. A pedagogy framed by *shalom* and Critical Information Literacy is in line with the ACRL Threshold Concepts *Information Has Value* and *Authority Is Constructed and Contextual*, which are used to teach students information literacy-related practices and dispositions, as put forth by these statements: “Learners who are developing their information literate abilities ... recognize the value of diverse ideas and worldviews”; “understand how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information”; “recognize issues of access or lack of access to information sources”; and, “are inclined to examine their own information privilege.” These big ideas give structure to my lessons and provide a foothold for students to acknowledge and explore their own assumptions and biases.

During classes I regularly teach with our College Composition program, I engage students in a discussion of privilege two ways. First, we discuss who has access to high quality peer-reviewed journal articles, which are typically accessed through university library databases, and who does not have access. Students often admit during this discussion that they have never considered before that they are privileged in their status as college students with a university affiliation, which gives them access to high quality content that is not available to the general public or even to students and scholars at institutions that cannot afford the high cost of database subscriptions. A good way to drive this point home is sharing an example of hitting a paywall in Google Scholar that requires a payment to access a scholarly journal article. The second way I discuss privilege with students is through a close inspection of who is represented and who is underrepresented or marginalized in students’ results lists from library databases and from Google. We discuss such questions as: *Who’s more likely to be a scholar and why? Who traditionally has had more access to higher education and who hasn’t? Do the authors of your results list represent a homogenous worldview or do the authors represent a variety of backgrounds and experiences?* These discussions lend themselves better to some research topics than others, but, regardless of individual research topics, these class discussions always improve student engagement.

Shalom is another expression of the Wesleyan *confessional hospitality*, which is a gracious and welcoming hospitality that calls for recognizing the dignity and image of God in all people. Embodying *shalom* and *confessional hospitality* in my interactions with students works by modeling Christian hospitality to all, not just those who are systematically discriminated against or those who are privileged. By doing so I hope to give courage where needed and challenge discrimination where it is found.

I teach students that engaging in research is engaging in a conversation with others (scholars, authors, different people in general) who have contrasting viewpoints. By teaching students to engage in civil discourse by respecting people who are different or who just have different points-of-view, I'm more easily able to address diversity and teach students how to break past their echo chambers and confirmation biases. Progress cannot be made unless we respect diversity and one another's differences of opinions with humility and grace. Instead of approaching another who has a difference of opinion with fear and hostility, the Wesleyan *via media*, or middle way, honors the tension between disparate views and traditions. This Wesleyan foundation has prompted my conviction to address diversity in my teaching, which I do through Critical Information Literacy. By engaging these topics with respect and humility in my classroom and in all my interactions with students, I embody my *Christian librarian praxis*. †

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