

Emerging Visions: Libraries and Education in the 21st Century

Summary by Sharon Ladenson, Michigan State University
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As reported in the LIRT Newsletter, September 2002

The 2002 ALA/LIRT Conference Program, entitled "Emerging Visions: Libraries and Education in the 21st Century", attracted more than 160 conference attendees from a wide variety of institutions, including (among others) academic, public and school libraries. The program took place on Sunday, June 16 at the Marriott Marquis, and featured three impressive speakers: [Dr. Louis Schmier](#), Professor of History at Valdosta State University, and author of [Random Thoughts: The Humanity of Teaching](#), and [Random Thoughts II: Teaching from the Heart](#); Tim Grimes, Associate Director of Community Relations at the [Ann Arbor District Library](#); and [Dr. Jean Donham](#), College Librarian at Cornell College. The speakers focused on innovative methods, programs and theories for providing effective instruction in the 21st century.

The first speaker, Dr. Schmier, delivered a dynamic presentation that captivated and engaged the audience. Schmier emphasized that all teachers are in the "people business" instructors should focus first and foremost on their students. As a college professor, Dr. Schmier began his student-centered approach to teaching in 1991, after experiencing an epiphany. Schmier realized that while he did not have control over the conditions of work, he did have control over his own attitude toward his job and his students.

Dr. Schmier utilized an interactive approach during the presentation by distributing a picture of a dandelion, and eliciting definitions of the picture from the audience. Definitions included a weed, a flower, wine, and a lion's tooth. Schmier pointed out that our own perceptions shape our reactions and attitudes; one person may view a dandelion positively (as a pretty flower), while another person may view it negatively (as a nasty weed). We choose our own attitudes toward all aspects of life, including our jobs.

An instructor's attitude has a strong impact on students. Students deserve to be taught by someone dedicated to helping them realize their full potential. Each day, teachers should ask themselves if and how they have improved the classroom. Time spent with students is limited, and, consequently, instructors should use it well. One small gesture, such as encouraging a student to meet outside of class, can make a big difference. Teachers should realize that every positive action, no matter how small, could have a strong impact on the lives of students.

The program continued with Tim Grimes' presentation on innovative instruction programs in the Ann Arbor District Library. Grimes stated that while public librarians are less likely than academic or school librarians to view themselves as teachers, they do indeed provide instruction. The Ann Arbor District Library (AADL) has a wide variety of instructional programs that serve people of all ages and backgrounds.

Grimes emphasized that assessing the needs of a community is essential to creating effective instructional programs in public libraries. For example, in order to assess the instruction needs of senior citizens, librarians from the AADL met with residents of a local senior center. The librarians learned that the seniors wanted in-person instruction (rather than online tutorials), and that they were interested in learning computer basics. The AADL staff also learned that many of the senior center residents were Chinese, and had a strong interest in learning how to access Chinese newspapers online. The AADL staff designed an instruction program accordingly, and conducted classes in the senior center.

The AADL has also created instruction programs for youth. A recent program involved using music as a pedagogical tool to teach history and library skills to middle-school students. After working with musicians to identify a specific genre of music from a particular historic period, students came to the library to learn to research that musical genre. The students not only learned about library resources, but also about how to put music in historical context.

The AADL also meets strong community needs by providing instruction and resources to residents of diverse backgrounds. One project involved designing an exhibit of the history of the local African-American community. The library also created a video that featured interviews with community residents that was aired on local television. The AADL also promotes resources and services for the visually impaired, such as closed-circuit television (CCTV), and PW Webspeak software, a program that facilitates access to the text of web sites.

Dr. Jean Donham, the final speaker, focused on the theory and practice of teaching and learning in academic and school libraries. Donham emphasized that instructors should know the learning needs of their students. She outlined research indicating that while teens and young adults may have a strong command of current technologies, they do not have the ability to perform efficient, precise information searches, or to identify reliable, authoritative information sources. The literature also indicates that significant numbers of undergraduates have low levels of information literacy; for example, such students do not know how to identify a scholarly journal or a primary resource. Thus, instruction is a fundamental activity in libraries.

Donham emphasized that learning is a constructive process. Students derive meaning from new information by relating it to their personal experiences. Allowing students to reflect during and after an instruction session can facilitate the learning process. Furthermore, learning is a social activity, and, consequently, instructors should provide opportunities for students to verbalize what they have learned.

Donham also indicated that librarians should teach search concepts and processes, in addition to providing information on tools and resources. For example, when presenting a specific database, a librarian can use the opportunity to teach search concepts that apply to all databases. Librarians should share their knowledge of search processes with faculty members, so that professors recognize that we can help students during every step of the research process. This will also help faculty to understand that we promote and foster lifelong learning.

The speakers presented a thought-provoking and informative program, enhancing the awareness, among those who attended, of the importance of their role as educators.

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