

Summary of 2003 LIRT Conference Program

Critical Thinking: Teaching Thought and Process

Summary by Cynthia Akers, Emporia (KS) State University

Joyce Kasman Valenza posed a question to attendees during her presentation at the 2003 LIRT Conference Program: In a time of more information than we may ever need, are we living in a "good enough/why bother" world? And, is there still a place for critical thinking in our own world of library instruction?

These concerns were covered extensively at LIRT's ALA Annual Conference Program, "Critical Thinking: Teaching Thought and Process." The program was held on Sunday, June 22 at the Westin Harbour Castle. A receptive crowd enjoyed considerations of critical thinking theories and practical techniques from two very qualified speakers.

After a welcome and introductions by Deborah Bernnard, the 2003 LIRT Conference Program Chair, Craig Gibson began his remarks about "Critical Thinking: Definitions and Dispositions." Gibson, Associate University Librarian for Public Services at George Mason University, noted that librarians tend to include critical thinking as a goal in many mission statements. However, the degree to which critical thinking is defined remains a "mysterious concept".

Gibson offered the audience various explanations of critical thinking from theorists such as Robert Ennis, Richard Paul, Albert Andrade, and Shari Tishman. Then, to promote active involvement, he invited the audience several times to pair off and discuss barriers to critical thinking as well as awareness of the use of critical thinking in situations.

Tying in critical thinking theories to the work of Carol Kuhlthau's research process approach and Michael Eisenberg's Big 6 research skills, Gibson challenged the audience work toward the creation of a "culture of thinking" in which critical observation is a part of every interaction. He encouraged the incorporation of critical thinking dispositions into every aspect of the typical one-shot library instruction session, hoping that students will see other students reviewing and questioning the information before them.

After a short break, Valenza began her presentation on "Research/Thinking is Everybody's Business: Spreading the Gospel of Information Literacy and Critical Thinking in the School Program." Valenza, the librarian at Springfield Township High School Library and the techlife@school (mailto:techlife@school) columnist for the Philadelphia Inquirer, related her experiences working with teachers at the high school in making critical thinking a core competency of every assignment.

In a revealing video, Valenza showed the before and after effects of this curriculum transformation. The video showed several high school students talking about their approaches to research. Before the emphasis upon critical thinking, students said that they went directly to Google, Yahoo!, or AltaVista to type in topics and then used the first few sites for their information. According to one student, "Books have become obsolete." After Valenza worked with a planning team to design subject-specific projects for critical thinking practice, she interviewed some of the same students to see if their research attitudes had changed. She showed through another video clip that the students thought more in-depth about all types of information - print and electronic - that were the most appropriate for their information needs.

Gibson's presentation are available at <http://www.ala.org/rt/sites/ala.org.rt/files/content/03programgibson.ppt> (/rt/sites/ala.org.rt/files/content/03programgibson.ppt).

During the break and after the program, the audience viewed a selection of poster sessions covering other

practical applications of critical thinking in library instruction.

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