

The Quarterly Interview: Ellysa Stern Cahoy

Penn State University

-Edited Transcript-

LOEX: *Where do you work? What is your job title and main responsibilities? How long have you been in this position?*

Stern Cahoy: I work in two roles at the Penn State University Libraries, University Park: as an Education & Behavioral Sciences Librarian and as the Assistant Director of the Pennsylvania Center for the Book. As the EBS librarian, I work closely with primarily graduate students and faculty studying post-K-12 elements of education--higher education, workforce education, adult education, educational theory and policy. In my work with the Pennsylvania Center for the Book, I oversee a number of literacy-based initiatives, including the Lynd Ward Graphic Novel Award and the Pennsylvania Public Poetry Project. I have been in these positions in the Libraries since 2009; prior to that, I was Assistant Head of Library Learning Services focused on teaching first-level undergraduates, as well as developing services and programs for that population, both on campus and online. All told, I have been at Penn State for twelve years, and I've truly enjoyed both of my areas of focus tremendously.

What would you say is your teaching philosophy?

I just wrote an essay for an issue (vol7, iss 2) of *Communications in Information Literacy* that describes my teaching philosophy in detail. The essay is titled, "Affective, personal information management: Critical information literacy components." My friend Bob Schroeder from Portland State University emphasizes in his research that library instruction process is highly dialogic--that the teacher is student while the student is often teacher. It is this very level playing field between teacher and student that I try to create in the classroom and especially, in my individualized research consultations. My previous research has centered on affective, emotional learning as related to information literacy, and I try to apply affective learning components in all of my encounters with students. I feel that it is critical that students feel nurtured and accepted in their learning environment--this is central in addressing head-on any anxieties or learning barriers that students may have relative to library research.

I also feel strongly that students must master personal information management skills. In my mind, the most important library is not the physical one, but the online, personal library of articles, notes, and information that students are building on their laptops and other devices. I try to structure my graduate-level classes around this idea--that finding information is just one step in the process, and that storing, organizing, annotating, citing, and creating new information

is just as important. This focus on the entire research workflow adds depth to my work with both students and faculty.

What books or articles have influenced you ?

One of my favorite articles is "Information Literacy Makes All the Wrong Assumptions," by Stanley Wilder (2005).

When this article came out, it inspired a firestorm of debate on ILI-L about the role of librarians in the writing process and student acquisition of information literacy skills. I really love a good old fashioned screech, and sometimes it seems like we don't have enough of those in our profession. I am also a big fan of Tom Mackey & Trudi Jacobson's article (2011) "Reframing Information Literacy as a Metaliteracy." That article changed my conception of how I viewed the intersection between information literacy and other complementary literacies. Finally, I love Joan Lippincott's (2007) article, "Student Content Creators: Convergence of Literacies." I co-chaired the planning for the Penn State Libraries' new Knowledge Commons, and this article inspired the development of the entire space as one devoted not to just information retrieval, but multimedia content creation.

You were the chair of the ACRL IS Information Literacy Standards Committee from July 2009 - June 2011.

Immediately after that, a Task Force was formed to review the widely-used Standards and recommend possible revisions. Was there anything your committee did that led to the creation of this task force? Anything that surprised you in your work reviewing the Standards?

I was involved in the group that wrote the initial charge calling for the creation of the Information Literacy Standards Committee, and my sincere hope was that the Committee, as steward for the Standards, would recommend a comprehensive review. Since that time, I and others lobbied for revision, and when the Standards came up for review again, the support was easily there to form a Task Force to make a recommendation to the ACRL Board. Chairing the Standards Review Task Force was a terrific honor, and I worked with an amazing group of simply visionary instruction librarians, including Trudi Jacobson, now co-chair of the Revision Task Force. I think that the only thing that surprised me in reviewing the standards was how seamless and agreeable the process was. While several years beforehand there was little support for review or revision, now there was easy agreement that it was time to revisit the Standards with a fresh eye towards current and future students' information literacy needs.

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One of your areas of study is 'personal archiving.' Can you briefly explain what that is and how it is important to librarians? To students?

Personal archiving is the act of curating your personal and professional information collections in a very intentional and timely manner. I like to invoke the metaphor of the shoebox full of family photos when discussing personal archiving. We all have our shoeboxes of photos, passed down from year to year, and generation to generation. With online technology, it is harder to amass and especially, retain that shoebox for generations to come. I believe that one of the central roles of an instruction librarian is to help our faculty and students learn how to curate their personal and professional information collections, saving the significant works, and carrying forward their most important artifacts towards the future. If I could list another favorite article, one of the best on this topic is "The Long Term Fate of Our Digital Belongings: Toward a Service Model for Personal Archives" (2006) by Marshall et al. Cathy Marshall describes the critical challenges related to personal archiving: accumulation (too much stuff); distribution (too many disparate online collections in too many places); curation (too many copies and an unsure sense of what to save) and migration (carrying forward critical information from device to device and platform to platform). I believe that these are essential skills for our students to master. The forthcoming revision of the information literacy standards is slated to also address content curation.

Another big area for you is connecting K-12 IL learning with college. How did you first become interested in this?

I began librarianship as a children's librarian and then as a middle school librarian. When I arrived at Penn State as a new academic librarian in 2001, I set about trying to make sense of how my K-12 background connected with higher education. There is a disconnect between K-12 and college that remains pervasive to this day, although the two areas seem to be moving towards a more complementary and connected path. My first scholarly article (2002) "Will Your Students Be Ready for College? Connecting K-12 and College Information Literacy Standards," was simply me trying to make sense of the world I had been in, versus my new academic library environment. In my work as a middle school librarian, we were intensely focused on the AASL Information Power standards, and we mapped our entire library curriculum to those standards. It was an instructive exercise, and it laid the path for my continued focus on library standards as a beacon to illuminate instructional practice.

Related, you are a co-chair of Central PA K-16 Information Literacy Collaboration, a network of college, public, and school librarians. What does this group hope to accomplish? What has been the biggest challenge(s) so far?

A former Penn State colleague, Lesley Moyo, and I began this group in 2003, and it continues to this day with Emily Rimland as co-chair. We began it in an effort to connect with our area K-12 and public librarians and encourage a continued dialogue about our shared educational challenges and new initiatives. From the beginning our goal was simple: form a supportive professional development community. I think if we had aimed higher (i.e., lobbying for educational legislative change, engaging with superintendents and other upper-level administrators) we might have died off more quickly! By keeping our goals simple, we created a collective of local librarians at all levels of education who know one another and can readily collaborate between libraries. Our group has now also become a part of the Pennsylvania Forward Information Literacy Summit, which began this year and aims to bring together K-12, public, and school librarians annually from across the entire state of Pennsylvania. We hosted the first Summit at Penn State, University Park this summer, and are planning to reprise the event next summer, as well. I feel lucky to have a cohort of statewide colleagues who are committed to developing a collective and sustained K-16 conversation.

You've done presentations on affective learning outcomes. How has your work on this improved/changed your own library instruction over the years? Is integrating them into your sessions easy/hard?

I tend to structure my instruction sessions entirely around the assignment at hand (like most librarians!) Rather than drawing out affective learning as a specific component in the session, I try to embed it within my practices. Before class, I always try to go around the classroom and talk to as many of the students as I can, individually and informally. This reduces any perceived barrier between us, and makes for a more informal and receptive class. During class, as much as possible, I try to maximize individualized working time, and again I try to reach and speak personally with as many students as possible about their research topics. I find that this personal and individualized approach has positive affective benefits for students, and results in more follow up consultations after class, via email or in person. Whether we recognize it intentionally or not, affective learning is a significant component in every instruction session. When a librarian uses specific approaches to connect with or place students at ease, affective learning is at work.