

## The Quarterly Interview: Lane Wilkinson

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-Edited Transcript-

**LOEX:** *Where do you work? What is your job title and main responsibilities?*

**Wilkinson:** I am currently the Director of Library Instruction at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where I am responsible for scheduling classes, maintaining statistics, assessing effectiveness, developing curricula, leading a team of four-and-a-half library instructors, and advocating for library instruction across campus. I teach 40-50 instruction sessions each semester, hold 40-50 research consultations, and spend 4-6 hours a week on service desks. I've just started my seventh year at UTC.

**Librarians come from many different backgrounds. You have a bachelor's as well as a master's degree in philosophy, so how has that impacted your instructional efforts? What philosopher is most influential to your work?**

Philosophy is an incredibly diverse field, with several competing schools of thought. My background is in analytic philosophy, which stresses linguistic analysis, logical argumentation, knowledge, truth, and meaning. One of the big questions for analytics is "what does it mean to 'know' something?" It sounds like a simple question, but we've been wrestling with it since well before Socrates because it brings up so many important related questions. What is the nature of truth? What does it mean to believe something? How can we ever be justified in believing something? And so on. When I step into the classroom, I have these questions in mind and I do my best to impart David Hume's advice: always proportion your belief to the available evidence. Everything I do as a librarian is aimed at that maxim and, to that end, I find that library instruction is often the perfect venue to introduce philosophical concepts of authority, credibility, justification, reliability, and so on.

As to influences, I suppose it depends on the context: no one philosopher has a perfect system and I may find myself looking to guidance from John Searle and J.L. Austin on a language issue, Albert Camus on an existential issue, David Hume or Simon Blackburn on an ethical issue, or Alvin Goldman on an epistemological question. Perhaps the philosopher most influential to my current work in information literacy is Jennifer Lackey at Northwestern—her work on the philosophy of testimony provides an incredibly robust and compelling account of how we acquire knowledge through the reports of other people (i.e., through information).

**For those librarians who don't have a background in philosophy why might philosophical teachings be beneficial to instruction librarians?**

I think the clearest benefit of philosophy for instruction li-

brarians would be a clearer account of what, exactly, information literacy is. I mean, we can talk about whether a source is reliable, or credible, but can we articulate why reliability and credibility matter? Do we understand what reliability and credibility even mean? Even a cursory study of epistemology (the study of knowledge) will show that concepts such as reliability, authority, credibility, and truth have multiple competing definitions. To be honest, I don't think that—as a profession—librarians have really developed a convincing account of information literacy, and I would recommend looking to philosophy, along with sociology, psychology, and other fields for something more substantial.

**Your background in philosophy has also lead you into the classroom as a non-librarian teacher. How has that experience influenced your current instructional practices?**

I really wish that every instruction librarian could have the opportunity to teach a full three or four credit course at least once. Working with a cohort of students two or three times a week for an entire semester can give great perspective on things like classroom management, student learning, assessment, and more. For me, that background has helped me to control classrooms much more effectively by better anticipating when what I'm doing is working or when they're losing interest and adjusting accordingly. My experiences as an adjunct also help me identify with the instructor I'm working with. For example, when I teach students about research, I can draw on my own experience grading research papers and I can go beyond mere information literacy skills to include advice on writing a paper an instructor will appreciate.

**You have done work in the area of the flipped classroom. What are the keys to a successful flipped classroom? What resources would you recommend in this area?**

Perhaps the most important aspect of flipping a classroom in library instruction is achieving unanimous departmental buy-in from the teaching faculty. If I have 80 sections of ENGL 1010 spread across 25 instructors, I need to have 25 individuals agree to flip their library instruction. That's 25 agreements to make sure their students do the readings, complete a worksheet, watch a video, and take a quiz—all before coming to the library. Thankfully, we have near-unanimous buy-in here at UTC, but there is always at least one instructor who forgets the pre-class activities; you always have a handful of students who didn't complete their work. So, outside of buy-in, you always have to be prepared with a Plan B. If a class comes in without having done the pre-class activities, how are you going to fill those 50 minutes? We have developed a unique, modular "à la carte" curricu-

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lum that allows us to instantly pivot in cases where the pre-class work has not been completed.

***You have also done research in professional ethics. What is the “[P]rinciplism and the ethics of librarianship” for those who may have not read your 2014 article in The Reference Librarian?***

I taught professional ethics for several years before becoming a librarian, so it's always been something that interests me. When I became a librarian I looked at the standards of our profession, such as the ALA Code of Ethics, and I saw the typical bromides about privacy and intellectual freedom. I mean, the literature on library ethics is littered with scenarios of helping patrons build a pipe-bomb or commit suicide, but these are scenarios that virtually no librarian will ever have to deal with. What I didn't see was any discussion in the literature about how we should resolve the daily moral dilemmas where our values come into conflict with one another: when is it okay to give out the guest password, when is it okay to pay for a student's print job, when is it okay to intervene in a student dispute, when is it okay to refuse to help a patron, and so on. Principlism is a moral decision procedure coming out of the field of biomedical ethics that stresses four principles underlying all moral decisions: respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice. By tying principlism to the concept of professionalism (a tweak I added) I put forward six ethical principles for librarians: competence, diligence, respect for autonomy, fidelity, respect for community, and justice. For librarians stuck in a moral dilemma, the theory I put forth is that we should avoid dwelling on notions of right and wrong and instead seek ways to maximize those six principles. A librarian should ask what course of action is most consistent with their expertise, what action provides the highest level of service, and what action best demonstrates social value. There's a lot to go into with principlism, but overall it offers a great way of moving from broad, overarching professional values (like the ALA code of ethics) to concrete, actionable rules.

***Have you been able to utilize your philosophy and ethics research in your role as the director of your instruction department?***

In a roundabout way, I suppose. In philosophy we interrogate just about every idea we encounter and while that can frustrate others, and while it gives philosophers a sometimes negative image as overly-pedantic, I think it is important that we never simply adopt a standard, policy, or practice simply because it's the hot thing in library instruction or because it has the seal of approval from a professional organization. For example, because of my deep philosophical misgivings about the ACRL Framework, I haven't asked my team to adopt it. Likewise, I've encouraged them to find alternate ways of thinking about information literacy and they've come up with some amazing stuff.

***You have done several presentations for LOEX and they have all been received very well. What do you think is key to a successful conference presentation?***

I approach my presentations as if they were arguments being made to the audience. So, I follow a fairly consistent pattern where I introduce fairly simple and uncontroversial premises and demonstrate the logic of how they lead to surprising conclusions. My last time at LOEX, I approached the ACRL Framework this way: I presented basic, non-controversial facts about the Framework and showed the audience how the basic ideas underpinning the Framework are inconsistent and actively undermine the Framework itself. Really, it's less about getting in front of an audience and declaring what you think, and more about clearly laying out the stuff we all agree on and leading the audience to discover the truth on their own. It's a very Socratic style of presentation. Also, if you are going to present an argument, it helps to have slides that can carry the audience through. I spend a lot of time scouring Flickr for CC images that I can use to tell a story, and a typical 45 minute presentation will usually have around 60 slides following a common theme that build on each other progressively until the conclusion. Signposts help too, and I always make a point of letting the audience know exactly where we are at and where we are going. So I always have slides with things like “this is what we will talk about today,” “this is what we've seen so far,” and “here is a summary of the argument we've made.” Basically, when I present on a topic, my goal is to get my audience to reach the conclusion and understand the concepts on their own terms.

***What non-philosophy books have influenced you?***

- *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979) by Elizabeth Eisenstein
  - ⇒ A landmark work on the effects of communication technology on society, this blows McLuhan out of the water and remains the definitive account of the development of the printing press. I really believe that it was the prolific explosion in available texts at the advent of printing that moved the role of the librarian from preservation to include information evaluation as well.
- *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) by Richard Hofstadter
  - ⇒ If Richard Hofstadter came back to life in 2016, I don't think he would be surprised at all. So much of our current social landscape was captured perfectly in this nuanced assessment of the way anti-intellectualism and democracy are intertwined. This is not a plea for education inasmuch as it is a call for intellectual humility.
- *Gödel, Escher, & Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (1979) by Douglas Hofstadter
  - ⇒ *GEB* is a dizzying collection of poems, theorems, dialogues, puzzles, prose, and assorted word-play that marked my first exposure to information theory, logic, cognitive science, set theory, and linguistics. This book is directly responsible for why I studied philosophy *and* why I studied library science.