Book Review

Andretta, S. 2012. Ways of experiencing information literacy: making the case for a relational approach. Oxford: Chandos. 234 pp. ISBN: 9781843346807. £47.50. Pbk.

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As outlined in the first sentence of the introduction, this book is based on research undertaken by the author, Susie Andretta, for her doctoral thesis. For this research she investigated 'the experience of information literacy from the perspective of postgraduate information management students' (p. 1). She chose to focus on taught postgraduate students as she felt these had been less researched than undergraduates. She makes use of the Information Literacy Standards devised by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL 2000).

The book is very well structured; each chapter begins with an abstract and key words. It moves from an explanation of the relational approach to how Andretta used it in her research, followed by her findings.

Andretta uses the introductory chapter to outline the rest of the book and introduce some of the terminology that she uses later. This is a useful preparation.

In both her research and the book, Andretta draws heavily on the work of Christine Bruce and the relational approach she developed (Bruce 1997). In reading this book I certainly found it of value that I was already familiar with Bruce's work.

Andretta does however ensure that this book can be accessed by readers unfamiliar with Bruce's work and devotes the second chapter to explaining the relational approach in some detail. This is a very necessary section as the concept of 'the relational approach' is not an easy one to grasp even for someone familiar with Bruce's work. She also notes that Bruce's work was based on research with academics and so, to broaden this perspective, also consults work by Lupton (2004) and Edwards (2006).

Having explained the relational approach, Andretta moves on in the third chapter to outline how she employed it in her research. The empirical research was conducted in three stages, each developed from the one before. For each stage she outlines her rationale and the coding framework used for the results. The early stages confirmed that the students being researched were both studying and practising information literacy (IL). Their practice of IL occurred in two contexts: provision (e.g. working on help desks) and education (e.g. running formal training sessions). Because of this, interpretation of the findings required a multiple-context approach. Andretta ultimately identifies 32 codes as outlined on pp. 64–65 and repeated in tabular form on p. 98. She also explains in some detail various aspects of the methodology and research methods.

In the fourth chapter the multiple-context relational approach following from this research is examined in considerable detail. A significant amount of concentration is needed to grasp the various concepts considered and, throughout the book, Andretta assists with the use of tables and diagrams. Even with this support, I often found the need to go back to the definition of terms in frequent use, such as the four categories of IL and the various aspects within them as outlined in this section. The distinction between active and passive IL as outlined on p. 108 was, I thought, an interesting one.

There are a few points Andretta makes with which I take issue. She suggests (p.160) that 'being information literate has become a necessity as the traditional literacy, or reading and writing, is no

longer sufficient to function in the current digital environment'. I would argue that IL, despite the term not having been in use, has always been necessary and is not dependent on the digital environment. It is the proliferation of information as a result of the digital environment that has made this a bigger issue. A significant amount of research is still carried out in a non-digital environment.

Andretta also suggests (p. 160) that 'information literacy in an academic context is synonymous with research'. I would suggest there is overlap, or possibly even that IL is a subset of research in this context. But is she arguing that scientific research that takes place in a laboratory is IL?

The individual stories of four students told in chapter five help considerably, as case studies often do, in making sense of the general statements and categories outlined in chapter four.

The conclusion in chapter six explains how this study has extended the work of Bruce in a way that was not anticipated at the outset. One aspect of this is what Andretta refers to as the 'ternary relationship', which she identifies as 'the three-way interaction between educators, learners and information' (p. 11). She also outlines suggestions for future research that could take this further.

This book is not for the casual reader. It requires significant understanding of both the theory and practice of IL and of academic research in social science disciplines. I would certainly recommend that any potential reader familiarise themself with the literature on IL. A reader would undoubtedly benefit from having carried out some social science research themself. It is not a book one can easily dip in and out of; it needs initial reading with care from cover to cover, going back to study particular parts in depth. Having said that, I do believe it makes a useful contribution to IL research and is of value to those wishing to pursue similar research in this field.

References

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