

The Librarian's Guide to Learning Theory: Practical Applications in Library Settings

Ann Medaille. *The Librarian's Guide to Learning Theory: Practical Applications in Library Settings*. ALA Editions, 2023. 192pp. \$54.99. Paperback. 9780838939581.

Librarians working in nearly every department have an interest in learning theories, whether that interest is explicit or not. Library spaces, reference services, programming, and even circulation processes rely on understanding how learning occurs. Ann Medaille's book, *The Librarian's Guide to Learning Theory*, aims to "help librarians better understand how people learn so they can improve support for learning" in their communities (vii). Learning theories provide evidence-based or evidence-derived frameworks for explaining the learning process. Librarians can use this knowledge to better design spaces and services that optimally support the learning they intend for their communities.

Medaille is the director of Research and Instructional Services at the University of Nevada, Reno libraries. She holds an MS in library science and a PhD in education. She has written several well-cited journal articles on information literacy and the research process in university contexts. Medaille is also the current editor-in-chief of the librarianship journal *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP)*. These qualifications and experiences position her well to write this book geared toward helping librarians reflect on the learning process. It is part of an ALA Editions book series intended for professional development of librarians across public, academic, school, or special library settings. While some books in the series are suited for all library contexts, this book is geared particularly toward librarians in academic or secondary school libraries.

The book is organized into 14 different topics and could be read straight through or by focusing on the most interesting chapters. The topics are not based on various learning theories but rather concepts librarians might engage in their work, presented in topical chapters such as "Constructing Knowledge," "Attention," "Motivation," and "Imagination." Each chapter is consistently formatted to include (1) a Theoretical Overview (the most extended section of each chapter), which is a discussion of various learning theories and their connection to the specific topic, (2) an Implications for Libraries section, where the author provides advice for how to apply the ideas, (3) a useful Teaching Librarian's Corner that offers a small set of ideas for instruction librarians, (4) suggestions for Further Reading, and (5) recommended Questions to Consider. The organization of the chapters is quite reader-friendly and also suitable as a quick-reference primer on each topic. Most chapters also contain helpful charts or diagrams to aid in the reader's active engagement of the ideas. Many chapters engage the same learning theories as applied to distinct topics. Medaille usually signals this to readers and invites them to skip repetitive paragraphs, or to refer to earlier or later chapters for more information on a specific theory or concept. Librarians reading this book will likely gravitate toward some chapters over others, depending on the kind of work they are already doing or are interested in improving.

The main ideas presented throughout are well-summarized in the book's conclusion. Medaille provides evidence that learning always involves the learner's active engagement. No learning occurs passively. Social, cultural, and environmental factors—such as library spaces or an institution's learning culture—affect how or whether students learn. Guidance from an instructor is a critical part of learning, and instructors play the role of intentionally guiding learning as appropriate to the students' cognitive styles and stages of development. These central ideas can be applied in numerous ways in any library context. Instruction librarians will find, in nearly every chapter, much to benefit their efforts, with Medaille providing ample practical advice for them. Librarians designing or modifying

physical spaces, too, will find much to gain from this book, as Medaille carefully explains the role of the environment as it pertains to learners.

Regarding actual learning theories, Medaille most relies on constructivism and, relatedly, social constructivism throughout the book. The first chapter, titled “Constructing Knowledge,” begins with an extended introduction and explanation of the learning theories and concepts of both Piaget and Vygotsky. While this extended discussion may put off readers who don’t have a direct interest in the theoretical background of learning theories, it is well worth the effort since the theories come up in several additional chapters and form one of the book’s core frameworks. The chapters titled “Collaboration,” “Self-regulation,” “Dialogue,” and “Inquiry” all significantly rely on the opening chapter’s treatment of constructivism. The chapters titled “Motivation” and “Individual Differences” also heavily involve discussions of learning theories. Reader attention to those chapters’ theoretical overviews will be rewarded, however. “Individual Differences,” for instance, contains a helpful discussion of the difference between learning styles and cognitive styles. Learning styles, Medaille argues, have little backing in research. Many librarians may have previously encountered these ideas, such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learning preferences. On the other hand, cognitive styles are evidence-based individual differences, such as introversion and extroversion, and abstract and concrete learning. These research-based differences among learners have real implications for how librarians design spaces and services.

The primary virtue of the book—that it provides an extensive and broad introduction to several learning theories and their potential applications for librarians—also presents one of its main drawbacks. Medaille is clear from the beginning that librarians cannot put every learning theory into practice at once or perhaps even over the course of typical library programming. Since no single learning theory encompasses all forms of learning, there is no way to get around this fact. Also, the 14 chapters may sometimes feel disparate and disconnected from one another. It may be difficult for the reader to absorb the wide-ranging nature of the information Medaille presents. Similarly, the book is not written directly for any one type of librarian but rather for librarians dealing with learners of various ages and educational levels. For example, one may wish the book were written specifically for academic instruction librarians. Of course, that would severely limit the impact and import of the book and is not a fair critique of the author’s work, given the goals of the book and the intention of the publisher’s series. However, it does mean theological librarians will need to do a significant amount of extra work in discerning how to apply the ideas and best practices presented in the book.

The benefits, nevertheless, are clearly plentiful. This book provides an overview of learning theories and numerous opportunities for readers to reflect on how these could affect their work and libraries. Readers will certainly not complain about the number of possibilities presented in this book. Rather than allowing the wide-ranging nature of the book to dissuade, readers might instead choose to perceive it as an easy chance to immediately implement a few of its ideas. At points throughout the book, Medaille engages the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, so readers familiar with those frames may find themselves consistently scribbling different frames in the margins. Indeed, one primary takeaway from this book may be a better understanding that the ACRL frames have a substantial and well-grounded basis in learning theories. While I trusted the frames before, this book offers plenty of evidence to support their continued or increased use. Similarly, readers of this journal may also be familiar with the concepts of Virtue Information Literacy (VIL), which has been analyzed in *Theological Librarianship* (TL) as well as at recent Atla Annuals. Here, too, one finds significant support for those efforts in the literature on learning theories. In conclusion, librarians with any interest in learning or instruction would greatly benefit from a careful reading of this book. Librarians should also be encouraged and inspired to make continued use of the ACRL frames and, theological librarians in

particular, should reflect on the connection between these ideas and efforts to practice VIL. Using Medaille's provided tools, intentional focus on designing spaces and programs to support learning will likely pay significant dividends.

Vincent Williams

Virginia Theological Seminary