

Book Review

Dismantling Deficit Thinking in Academic Libraries: Theory, Reflection, and Action.

By Chelsea Heinbach, Rosan Mitola, and Erin Rinto

As instructional librarians, we are asked to help students locate “good” information, navigate databases in information literacy sessions, and become strategic consumers of information. Although these are pretty standard, normal, and expected tasks in academic libraries, there are tendencies for us to dwell on assumptions about what our students know or don’t know. We intentionally or unintentionally see ourselves as suppliers of knowledge to the unknowing. As noted by bell hooks (1994), a deficit mindset can easily take the shape of a teacher believing they are helping a student when they may, in fact, be expecting students to adhere to academic cultural norms that are left un-interrogated and continue to perpetuate harm. *Dismantling Deficit Thinking in Academic Libraries* makes the case that these assumptions and expectations can all be traced to the idea of deficit thinking. Rather than merely dwelling at the fact that deficit thinking exists within higher education and academic library spaces, this book is more of a call to action: how do we meaningfully shift away from “blaming the victim” and instead apply a strengths-based approach to our teaching? Not only has this book provided me with a roadmap, but it also gives off the impression that I would not be alone in doing this work (albeit challenging work) in the academic library community.

The first section excels at laying out how systemic forces such as white supremacy ideology, the culture of poverty rhetoric, and the “at-risk” construct influence how individual educators have conditioned themselves into buying into the idea that their role/purpose is to “fix” students who enter academic spaces. Drawing heavily from the works of Dr. Richard R. Valencia and Dr. Kim Morrison, the book interrogates deficit thinking in the context of institutions of higher education and its infiltration within academic libraries. This first section especially shines during its discussion of how librarianship’s legacy of perpetuating deficit thinking ideology can be traced to external pressures to prove relevance and worth to the broader academy: from buying into the idea that learning analytics effectively measure student success (pp. 33–45) or how scholarly information is inherently more valuable than community information (p. 36). These conversations provide a fascinating take on not just integrating theory of deficit thinking into the conversation of librarianship, but making a strong case on how unchecked pressures from administrative interests fall short in advocating for the learning and growth of our students.

The second section begins by giving a run down of existing pedagogies that aim to dismantle deficit-oriented teaching. Recognizing that pedagogies such as constructivism (Duffy & Cuning, 1996) or culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014) can and should converse with one another, the authors were able to produce five distinct principles (with accompanying mindsets and practices):

1. “honor prior knowledge” (pp. 72–76)
2. “create opportunities for genuine engagement” (pp. 76–81)
3. “center social interaction and community knowledge” (pp. 81–85)
4. “decenter classroom learning” (pp. 85–89)
5. “work against systems of educational oppression” (pp. 89–95)

I was pleasantly surprised with how pragmatic these principles are; specifically with the breadth of example “practices” ranging from recommended lesson content, classroom norms, and assignment/lesson design. The third section asks us to take a step away from individual classroom contexts and instead imagine how larger-scale strengths-based programming can help normalize strengths-based mindsets and practices; it’s here where examples from the authors’ experiences are the main focal point—from using a framework to clarify assignments to creating a graduate fellowship program that honors students’ prior knowledge while decentering classroom learning. I appreciated the transparency in not only the “wins” from these projects and initiatives, but also the mistakes coupled with institutional barriers.

Every section of the book is followed up by “perspectives” which provide valuable insight into the successes, lessons learned, and challenges of librarians who champion strengths-based ethos in their immediate practice. The book’s emphasis on praxis really shine in “perspectives” thanks to the diverse array of commentary from “boots on the ground” librarians: their individualized/contextual approaches to strengths-based teaching as well as the challenges they face at both the institutional level and how it can conflict with the ethos of librarianship.

Overall, I believe this work is a must read for academic librarians because it unabashedly challenges our profession to do the following:

- Recognize that synergies exist between different pedagogical approaches (both drawn directly or indirectly from the LIS field) so that we can become better teachers.
- Assert that, in order to holistically apply strengths-based perspectives, the work needs to also extend beyond the classroom and into larger-scale strengths-based initiatives and programming.
- Highlight the community knowledge of our students, our fellow librarians, and diverse constituents.

A limitation with this book is how barriers might exist for early career librarians or library and information science (LIS) students to build connections between standard/common teaching practices (that might be prone to deficit thinking) with strengths-based alternatives. In particular, the work assumes that readers have some familiarity with matters such as: how “one-shots” (where students in a given course

attend a single library session to learn about conducting research) and learning outcomes get developed, the benefits and challenges of creating effective assignments, the rationale behind assessment strategies (e.g., formative, summative, etc.), and so forth. But rather than suggesting that the authors cite more “foundational” LIS instruction literature, perhaps they could have honored prior knowledge by constructing more targeted opportunities for readers to reflect upon their personal experiences as past learners/students (e.g., what they remembered about their favorite teachers, what irked them about an ineffective assignment, etc.). Overall though, as someone who identifies as an early career librarian with experience in teaching, I felt encouraged to reflect upon my current praxis and was left feeling empowered to answer to the book’s call to action.

I can envision myself revisiting this work over and over again as I continue to grow as an inclusive instructor. I appreciate how the authors succinctly highlight the importance in how having the mindset for strengths-based approaches should be coupled with active practice. In doing so, “those who are more action-oriented will find opportunities to explore and reflect upon the mindsets that drive [suggested] actions, while those who have already internalized [the suggested] ways of thinking may find news strategies and opportunities to put their thoughts into practice” (p. 69). To me, *Dismantling Deficit Thinking in Academic Libraries* is an incredibly practical guidebook that I would continue to have by my side while doing any sort of lesson planning or when putting together programming that intentionally involves students.

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