

The Quarterly Interview: Andrew Battista

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-Edited Transcript-

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

Battista: Currently, I am the Librarian for Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) at New York University (NYU). I work in a unit called Data Services, which is a collaboration between the Libraries and University Information Technology (IT). We provide a range of data-related support for quantitative, qualitative, and geospatial data research for all members of the NYU community, and the partnership between the libraries and IT allows us to expand our service portfolio and draw from levels of quantitative and technological expertise that are not typically held by people in libraries. In my role, I focus on geospatial data collection, teach with online and desktop GIS software programs, develop our spatial data repository, and help patrons find data and integrate it into their learning. I have been in this position for six years.

What kind of background or degree does a GIS librarian typically have? What background do you have?

Many GIS librarians have degrees in social sciences, environmental sciences, or geography, but I would say that our educational backgrounds run a gamut. Most of us have some experience working with geospatial software, but familiarity with GIS tools and concepts now comes from many places, not just traditional geography or urban science programs. And some but not all GIS librarians hold an MLS. I have taken a nontraditional path by earning a Ph.D. in English Literature after earning an MLS. I did not do any work in spatial humanities until after I graduated and became a librarian, and I did not become familiar with advanced desktop GIS software, such as ESRI's ArcMap or QGIS, until I started my job at NYU. But this is what I appreciate about librarianship and the Data Services environment at NYU: there is room for growth and a support network to learn new applications and technologies and apply them to a larger community of library services.

As the librarian for Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) Services, what types of campus community members do you work with the most? And what are the most frequent types of assistance that you provide?

Although we at Data Services work with everyone in the NYU community, the majority of people I interface with are graduate-level (Master's and Ph.D.) students. These students study in many disciplines, but some usual suspects are politics, digital humanities, environmental studies, and sustainable urban engineering. I have also liaised with schools in Public Policy and Politics. In each of these contexts, I tend to help students find data, interpret it once they've downloaded it, and perform basic analyses in GIS platforms. In addition to students, I often work with faculty who are either engaged in their own research, are looking to integrate GIS tools and technology into their pedagogy, or sometimes both.

How does your role as a GIS librarian intersect with your previous role as an information literacy librarian? How do these roles inform each other?

I am a GIS Librarian now because I began my career in libraries focused on information literacy. Even before the 2016 Framework for Information Literacy, I was drawn toward learning that requires students to locate and visualize data. Perhaps because of its structure, data invites students to frame intellectual questions in terms of discrete categories of meaning instead of broad topical categories. For example, rather than writing about gentrification abstractly, data-involved learning requires students to understand how complex social patterns can be extrapolated to measurable indicators, such as median household income or average travel time to work. Being able to crosswalk between disparate kinds of evidence is pivotal in one's ability to make claims about how places change over time and articulate how those changes affect the quality of life for people who live in an area. The added step of integrating data into maps is not only exciting, but it also invites students to think about the ways in which knowledge about society is produced in and through data. I began to see that geospatial learning is closely related to the kinds of inquiry that the Framework cites: “[s]tudents have a greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge, in understanding the contours and the changing dynamics of the world of information, and in using information, data, and scholarship ethically.” To me, there is a deep connection between geospatial learning and information literacy?

How can critical pedagogy be applied to data visualization?

Critical pedagogy applies to data visualization in many ways, especially because data is seen as currency for meaning in many social science and interdisciplinary programs. No matter which aspect of data visualization and analysis I talk about, I try to orient discussions toward the concept that data is not a “natural,” value-neutral register of the world, but rather a constructed artifact that encompasses and reproduces all of the biases and assumptions of those who created it. In my teaching, I assign Trevor Muñoz and Katie Rawson's “Against Cleaning” article (see <http://curatingmenus.org/articles/against-cleaning/>). Their idea is that cleaning data is not a separate part of the visualization process; instead, it is an active extension of interpretation and meaning-making that can influence claims and arguments. In the data visualization classes I teach, I also ask students to think about the implications and ethics of accessing and visualizing public data. Is it always better to have data available for public use? Does the greater good for society overrule an individual's right to privacy? What is the rhetoric of data visualization? Critical library pedagogy provides a robust set of frameworks and polemics to think about these questions.

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You've taught an undergraduate course titled, "Politics of Information," which was taught using metacognitive teaching and learning techniques rather than what you describe as the more traditional, skills-based information literacy instruction. Could you give an example of the differences in those teaching and learning techniques? Also, why was it especially important to you to use metacognitive instruction in this class in particular?

It's important to note that I co-taught and co-designed this class with Lauren Wallis. The Politics of Information emphasized ways that the dissemination of and access to scholarly information is an instrument of social control, within and beyond the academy. The class was unique because Lauren and I, the instructors, decided to complete all of the assignments with the students and submit them in line with the semester's schedule. More than any other class I've taught, this decision reinforced the idea that I am a co-learner with students. Every assignment included some element of reflection about what it means to produce and circulate information on digital interfaces, and this integration of metacognition allowed us to introduce many important ideas about learning with digital technologies, and creating information on them, while still maintaining a critical stance toward them. This dimension of co-participation, co-creation, and co-learning suggests a different way of teaching information literacy. It certainly is much different than approaches where one person shows a class how to search in a database. It posits that the consumption of information is inherently tied to power and authority in higher education. By locating information produced within the ecosystem of scholarship (especially proprietary peer reviewed journals and university press books) and integrating such information as evidence into their writing and other work, students consume a product that doubles as a currency, which marks and even creates status and authority. When introduced to this conception of information as currency, students see information literacy less as something to acquire and more as something that develops and evolves in tandem with one's education and participation in society.

I'm interested in writing you've done about the role that social media and curation should be playing in information literacy instruction. Could you explain why you consider them to be important drivers of engaged learning?

It's a little sobering for me to reflect on my chapter (in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*) almost a decade later. A lot has regressed in the world, and social media has often been a conduit for these regressions. Without Facebook and the data provisioned to Cambridge Analytica, Donald Trump would probably not be the President of the United States. And without Twitter, Trump would probably not have an unregulated platform with which to incite hatred and racial violence. We now have evidence to suggest that social media is much more apt to corrode democracy than cohere it. Of course, fluency with information on social media is important and can produce an engaged citizenry, but I now wish that I had written with more reservation about social media and its role in civic life. I do think instruction librarians have an imperative to integrate social media platforms into information literacy learn-

ing, and many are. However, I do not think that social media is inherently a driver of engaged citizenship. It is (or should be) integral to any engaged learning process, since social media exists as a vehicle to organize, evaluate, and circulate information. At this level alone, social media is a useful starting place to introduce concepts of attention and metacognition to students.

What do you wish that academic librarians would change about the way they think about and teach information literacy?

I do wish that people teaching in academic library contexts would expand their thinking about documents like the 2016 *Framework for Information Literacy* or the metaliteracy model developed by Mackey & Jacobson. These documents aren't just instruments to assess or measure the impact of library instruction; instead, they are compelling treatises about what it means to teach and learn effectively, and I think that they should be brought into library instruction itself more than they are. I know of many librarians who adopt such a strategy, and I am aware of resources like the ARCL Framework for Information Literacy Toolkit (see <http://acrl.libguides.com/framework/toolkit>). Unfortunately, though, the language and discussions around these resources seem to treat the *Framework* as something librarians should think about themselves, in advance of in-class instruction and as they craft learning outcomes or in-class activities. I would like to see more librarians actually bring the *Framework* or the metaliteracy model to students directly and have them work with these texts *as documents* by considering the claims they make about learning and applying those claims to their own information-seeking practices.

What books or articles have influenced you?

One influential book is Char Booth's *Reflective Teaching, Effective Learning: Instructional Literacy for Library Educators* (2011). I met Booth at the 2012 LOEX annual conference, where I was also introduced to her notion that effective learning happens when teachers develop a reflective practice and think about their skills. The ideas in this book have been a foundation for me as I've grown as a teacher, and I especially appreciate how this book unpacks the diverse teaching contexts that those in academic libraries often encounter. Another book that has shaped my thinking about teaching is Malcolm McCullough's *Ambient Commons: Attention in the Age of Embodied Information* (2013), which integrates a nice mixture of studies on human cognition, attention, information superabundance, and spatial design. To me, McCullough's book is highly relevant to information literacy; it begins with the idea that in the age of superabundant information, human attention is something to guard and manage with care. People teaching in libraries need to think about the relationship between the design of discovery tools and information superabundance. *Ambient Commons* provides a vocabulary for designers and library instructors to show students how cognition can enable us to process information more effectively, by capitalizing on the intrinsic structures and cues that convey meaning.