

Transcript

[00:00] [Intro music]

Derek Bruff: [00:05] Welcome to “Leading Lines,” a podcast from Vanderbilt University. I’m your host Derek Bruff, the Director of the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching.

[00:13] In this podcast, we explore creative, intentional and effective uses of technology to enhance student learning, uses that point the way to the future of educational technology in college and university settings.

[00:24] In this episode, we feature an interview with one of our own. Melissa Mallon is on the Leading Lines team and she’s Director of the Peabody Library and Director of Liaison and Instruction Services here at Vanderbilt.

[00:34] She has a new book out and my Center for Teaching colleague Stacey Johnson had a lively conversation with Melissa about the book. Part of Melissa’s work at Vanderbilt focuses on faculty-librarian partnerships to support student learning. Particularly, helping students develop research and digital literacy skills.

[00:50] That’s what her book is about, the role that librarians can play in helping students develop these skills. She and Stacey talk about that role and the increasing importance of critical media literacy.

[01:00] [background music]

Stacey Margarita Johnson: [01:00] Melissa, you recently published a book all about digital learning in libraries, right?

Melissa Mallon: [01:09] I published a book.

Stacey: [01:11] Tell us a little bit about it.

Melissa: [01:12] The title, officially, of the book is “The Pivotal Role of Academic Librarians in Digital Learning.” It is an eight-chapter epic tome [laughs] all about how libraries and librarians can support digital learning in higher education. Very appropriate for this Leading Lines podcast.

Stacey: [01:36] You are a librarian, so you’re coming from an insider perspective. I have to tell you, as someone who’s taught in higher ed for years, I haven’t had that many close working relationships with librarians in my teaching context.

[01:48] What kinds of things could I be doing in my courses that I’m teaching to leverage all the wealth of expertise we have in our library?

Melissa: [01:57] Part of my goal with this book is to expose that librarians are educators.

[02:05] There is such a role to play, especially with critical thinking, information, and digital literacy skills that our students need to succeed, not only on campus during their time as students, but also as they go out into the world and they have jobs or they become researchers themselves, whatever career path they end up taking.

[02:27] A lot of the skills that they can build on campus during their time as college students can then extend well beyond their collegiate education. This is not something that instructors and faculty have to do themselves. We are here. We can help.

[02:45] Whether it’s teaching students how to critically evaluate information that they find online, which now especially is a hot topic with the “fake news” issue. Just the idea of being an informed citizen, especially where the book is concerned, when it comes to digital life, so being a good digital citizen.

[03:12] I think that there’s a real opportunity for librarians to partner with instructors to build assignments and projects that incorporate research, but that also help focus on some of these foundational skills.

Stacey: [03:25] Let me give you an example. In a class I’m currently teaching, my students are getting introduced to the research literature in a new field. I curate a few articles that I want

them to analyze critically, and then they have to find some follow-up articles to explore similar topics and present them.

[03:51] How could I be partnering with a librarian to make sure my students are getting those digital literacy skills that I'm trying to promote?

Melissa: [04:00] Even as you're thinking about the assignment and you're trying to come up with the outcomes of what you want the students to get out of this, is it the analysis of the articles? Is it that they can delve into the wide expanse of disciplinary research and pluck out some of the more important pieces?

[04:20] Just collaborating on that assignment design can help save you a lot of time. Your librarian can help streamline the process a little bit. Particularly for your example, if it's in a new discipline, then that can often be a little overwhelming to students, but it's also a situation that they run into all the time.

[04:42] They maybe, let's say, a psychology major, but they have to take...probably they don't have to take an engineering class. [laughs] They have algebra or biochemistry or something like that, so they're always...

Stacey: [04:56] Or adult language learning.

[04:57] [laughter]

Melissa: [04:57] Or adult language learning.

Stacey: [04:57] For example.

Melissa: [04:58] Just to throw that out there. I think that can be an overwhelming piece of the puzzle just by itself. There's a certain amount...I don't know. I think this is going on a tangent a little bit, but...

Stacey: [05:14] I like tangents.

Melissa: [05:15] [laughs] I think librarians, part of our maybe behind the scenes role is that of research therapist. Maybe it's a matter of looking at the assignment to see the least stressful

way that students could incorporate learning about a new discipline and doing research in an area they are not familiar with.

Stacey: [05:39] You mentioned that the core audience is librarians.

Melissa: [05:41] I would say, ideally, we've got a 50-50 split.

[05:45] [laughter]

Melissa: [05:45] We have librarians, but then also disciplinary faculty, or instructors, in whatever role that looks like.

[05:55] There's a lot of great examples, a lot of example assignments and research projects, but I'm hoping that it can be used as a way to spark conversation, to help, just like with your question that you asked, "How could a librarian make a difference in my class, or partner with me to improve student research?"

[06:14] Hopefully, the book will help spur some of those conversations. Maybe it is a librarian approaching their faculty, friend and saying, "Hey, take a look at this." I'm trying to generate readership right now.

[06:26] [laughter]

Melissa: [06:32] I've tried to write it in a way that it would be very relatable to non-librarians. There is even a section, at the end, specifically geared towards administrators.

[06:43] Maybe that as a librarian, that needs to approach their administration and say, "This is why we're valuable. This is the library's role within student learning." There's a lot at that point about strategic planning and how to incorporate that within the library's mission.

Stacey: [07:02] I think on our campus, one of the things that's happening right now, two-fold, there's a new push to think about digital literacy, in general, as a skill that our students seem to have. You and I worked on a committee [laughs] together about that. But there's also a lot of new digital learning projects popping up in different departments.

[07:24] Whereas Vanderbilt has had a more additional approach to a liberal arts education,

our undergraduates and graduate and professional students, more than ever, have options to do online learning or hybrid learning, exploring some new avenues. What do you see as the opportunities for your book to contribute to those conversations?

Melissa: [07:47] That's a really good question and it's something that I've thought a lot about as I was working on the book. I think anyone who works with technology at all, but especially educational technology, knows that it will change. There's no question it's going to change.

Stacey: [08:04] Probably before you even get the book published. [laughs]

Melissa: [08:06] Yes. Here's another example. I talk a lot in the book about using Twitter as a way to teach students how to synthesize information, and how to succinctly explain the point of maybe a lesson or an article they read, something like that. When I wrote the book, Twitter limited their tweets to 140 characters, and now that's been expanded. You can fit a lot more in a tweet.

[08:36] I had this moment of panic, like, "Oh No."

[08:42] [laughter]

Melissa: [08:42] It's irrelevant already, and it hasn't even been published? That being said, I tried really hard, to focus on, not necessarily the tools, but the skills. I think that that's something that makes up, at least in my perspective, a huge part of this digital literacy push, is that we're teaching students the skills they need to be a digital participant, I guess you could say.

[09:14] The tools that they use to accomplish conversation, collaboration, creation of information, those will change. They are changing all the time, so how do we focus then on the things like evaluation, and critical thinking, and being able to synthesize and communicate without just focusing on the tools that people are using to do those things.

[09:43] I knew that looking at tools was important because it sets a specific example for how you can incorporate some of these skills. I think that's what we talk a lot about on the Leading Lines podcast.

[09:57] Here are some ways that we're incorporating educational technologies into the

classroom. Different projects that students are working on, but then what are those underlying skills that we're really teaching students? What are the outcomes of having them use these tools?

[10:15] I focused a lot on that and this idea of digital literacy, and how it can be applied in undergraduate education, graduate and professional education. How online learning can really strengthen a student's relationship with research and how they communicate their ideas.

Stacey: [10:36] Yeah. I think that's great. One of the things that I resist a little bit in the technology conversation is the techno-enthusiasm around tools. Like, "This new tool is going to revolutionize..."

[10:49] Really, the human brain cannot be revolutionized. We take in information, we process information, we communicate information. We use, historically, lots of different tools to do that, but I resist any excitement over the next big thing. By the way, some of us refuse to use all 280 Twitter characters, so your example is so perfectly relevant.

[11:10] [laughter]

Melissa: [11:14] Well, see, I need that. I need it to stop me from writing. I'm like, "All right."

[11:16] [laughter]

Stacey: [11:17] Well, that's true. I've actually written tons of tweets that I was like, "Ah... I'll send it." It's not worth it to divide it into two anymore [laughs].

Melissa: [11:26] I think that is an interesting thing, too, is now, even just looking at something like Twitter where it used to be that you would need to just stuff everything into that 140 characters, now we're seeing this more interesting way of almost curating a whole bunch of tweets together.

[11:47] You see people posting something, and then it just says "thread." You're expected to read, what, 20 to 30 tweets within this thread. It is interesting to me and I think this does have some impact on how we talk with students about communicating and sharing information.

[12:08] That's changing all the time, too, even within the individual tools. It's interesting how people take things over, especially with different social media in particular, but all sorts of technology. Like, "I'm going to use that for this purpose."

Stacey: [12:23] They bend it to their own experiences.

Melissa: [12:25] Yeah. Absolutely.

Stacey: [12:28] I think that the new thread phenomenon on Twitter, this is definitely a tangent, but I'm really interested in this. One reason is because you mentioned earlier that Twitter is a place where you can synthesize and succinctly communicate ideas. With the new thread movement, the longer characters and the thread movement, now Twitter is becoming a place where you craft arguments.

[12:52] The succinct synthesis is no longer the organizing principle for a lot of users. It's the curation and argumentation that you can do by bringing in other people's tweets, by bringing in different evidence, and by crafting something that's really compelling. Even when you want to give up on the thread, you can't because you have to see what comes next.

Melissa: [13:16] Yeah. You need to follow it through. I like that you bring that up because it has a lot of implications for scholarship too. That basically is turning into an article. Especially when you're incorporating other's arguments, what does that mean for the future of scholarly writing?

Stacey: [13:33] I don't know. Should I ask a librarian?

[13:35] [laughter]

Melissa: [13:35] Well, you're going to have to read my book.

[13:41] [laughter]

Melissa: [13:41] No. That's the next book, I think.

Stacey: [13:43] Yeah. I think that's also perhaps...I'm not even sure how to say this. It might be the first time that I've been an insider to watch this sort of a shift happen. I know social

media, in general, is new. I'm not on a lot of social media. I am really on Twitter, and so watching changes happen...I first joined in 2009, when it was mostly inspirational quotes.

[14:08] [laughter]

Stacey: [14:09] Watching it go through these transformations and become useful in different ways has been really interesting. What I'm not doing a great job of, and I know there are faculty who are, is I'm not doing a great job of figuring out how that connects with my teaching. I'm really interested in, maybe, unpacking a little bit more.

[14:29] Can you give me an example of a time in the past, maybe, when you've been able to do this? To use the Twitter format, or the Twitter sensibilities, to help students learn specific skills. I hear you say it. It sounds awesome, but I can't actually visualize what it would look like. So can you unpack that?

Melissa: [14:45] The way I look at this is that you're getting your students to do the sorts of activities that you've always wanted them to do, but you're having them use a different format. That way, you're accomplishing several different things at once.

[14:59] You're incorporating the research part, the research skills, but then also the use of digital tools to communicate. I worked with a class once, this was a journalism class, so they were talking about marketing for different non-profit companies.

[15:18] Instead of having students have to create a Word document that has a list of four or five articles that they've written a paragraph about and turn that in, for their eyes only, and the instructor's eyes, of course...

[15:35] I worked with the faculty member to recraft the assignment to use Twitter so that the students would have to create their annotation within the tweet limit then also, post a link, or post the citation information for the article. We also have this added component that they were sharing with a bigger audience.

[15:59] The additional piece of that was having a hashtag that all the students used on their tweets, so we could collect them at the end and then we could share out the hashtag. This assignment had another side benefit of getting students to communicate and connect with other non-profits that were similar to the group they were working with.

[16:22] For example, one of the students was working with the YWCA. They found some other YWCAs in different cities, in different states, and then shared their tweets with that particular group.

Stacey: [16:37] That's great.

Melissa: [16:38] It's a way of getting them the traditional skills that help them research and understand and make connections between different articles, but then sharing that information, looking at it from a bigger picture than just, "Oh, this is an assignment I have to do." Does that make sense?

Stacey: [16:58] Yes. It also has another level of permanence for them also, because it's not confined to the class. It's available to them out in the world after they finish the course.

Melissa: [17:10] That's another thing that I'm really passionate about, the idea of eportfolios, or just any kind of portfolio in general. I'm always thinking about how students can have something that they can share beyond that semester.

[17:23] This semester, I'm working with the Buchanan Library Fellows with Vanderbilt Libraries. Our students are creating an exhibit on propaganda. It's really cool. They're using some of the special collections that we have at the Vanderbilt Libraries.

[17:39] Thinking about the idea of propaganda, both historically and contemporary propaganda. At the end of the semester they will have an exhibit where they've got physical cases with items from special collections. A secondary piece of that is throughout the semester, they are going around the world, just their regular lives.

[18:03] They're finding examples of propaganda and then sharing those on either Twitter or Instagram with the hashtag #VandyLibraryFellows. At the end of the semester then, we're going to create an online component that includes an archive of all of their posts that they found just out in the world.

[18:25] That will be able to go with them for a resume, for job interviews, whatever. It's just a way of taking the physical and then giving it that extra little digital, virtual piece that can carry on.

Stacey: [18:41] We're definitely going to put that hashtag in the show notes also, so if listeners want to see what kind of propaganda materials people are finding out in the world, they can check in before the exhibits finish even.

Melissa: [18:53] Good. Great. I love it. That's fantastic.

Stacey: [18:55] I'm really interested in critical media literacy and propaganda as a subject matter. From my disciplinary perspective, I'm always thinking about how foreign language instructors help students learn to analyze and evaluate what they're reading in a more critical way. I know you're always doing the same thing from your disciplinary perspective as a librarian.

[19:19] Let's talk a little bit about critical media literacy. When students encounter information in the world, what are the skills that they need in order to evaluate that for accuracy and reliability and maybe some other factors, also? What sorts of skills do librarians bring to that to help students develop?

Melissa: [19:41] I think that there's a foundational set of skills that students need that is even beyond just incorporating social media or things they find online because the issues that you're talking about can crop up anywhere -- a newspaper, a flier that somebody is handing out on the street.

[20:05] How do you know what the information contains, where it's coming from, who put it out and why? There's all of that to consider, no matter what type of information you're coming across. I would say even when you're doing scholarly research, there's a lot of that that comes into play too.

Stacey: [20:23] That's why our articles have limitation sections in them. As a qualitative research that's why I always talk about my own biases in all the papers I write because even accurate, reliable information has perspective.

Melissa: [20:36] Absolutely. I think that there's a piece there that doesn't always get exposed and the bias piece is so huge. In terms of skills that are necessary, there's a few things that librarians are just used to doing. It's part of our training. It's part of what we do just in our own work.

[20:59] That's this deep dive that doesn't always take place, especially at our current saturation of media that it is so hard to not just skim and you see something and you share it without taking that deep dive. To me, that's one of the biggest skills that is necessary, is to understand what you're looking at, you often have to do a lot of background digging.

[21:33] Not taking something at face value, but trying to do just a little bit of an investigation, clear back in the early days of teaching students about using websites and looking at their domain.

[21:46] .gov versus .org versus .com. What do all of those different domains mean and what do they traditionally tell you about a website? These sorts of conversations have been going on for a long time. Arguably, it's even more complicated now if you are looking at .orgs or .govs. Those used to be touted as the most reliable domains and now, there's so much more to it than that.

[22:13] Doing the investigation of where a source is coming from, who posted it, the propaganda issue comes into play here a lot now that we're finding out that some things aren't as innocent as they have appeared with various postings and news articles and things like that. There's just such a need to investigate and to look closely. That's a big part of it.

Stacey: [22:46] Just to be a little bit more clear, are you talking about possibly bots or foreign agents who might have been sourcing information that we thought was sourced in a different way?

Melissa: [22:56] Yes, I am. Yes. I don't know that that's really something our students think about. There's something to be said for not thinking about that. It also depends on how you're using information. I think the danger to me is when students, or any of us, not just students, but anyone is just blindly sharing or consuming information without really critically examining it or thinking about it.

[23:27] Again, it's really hard to take the time right now because everyone's busy and there's so much coming at us.

Stacey: [23:37] I'm going to interject also that I think even sources that have traditionally been trusted sources are consuming media so fast and replicating it so fast. We as a culture trust certain people or certain channels to give us right information, but they're actually

consuming and sharing media so fast they're not doing that deep dive either. It's on us.

Melissa: [24:00] Yeah, it is. As educators, we have a responsibility to help our students stop and take a moment and realize that there's not really any trusting anymore. You're giving each student individually the skillset of critically reading and investigating and asking questions, not taking things at face value, so that they can decide for themselves.

[24:29] There's so many pieces of that that just to me all come back to this idea of critically analyzing and deep reading.

Stacey: [24:37] That's awesome. I'm going to turn back to the book. I'm really interested in all of these topics. I'm going to get your book. What are the key takeaways for higher education professionals who read the book? What are they going to leave with?

Melissa: [24:57] Probably the key takeaway is to work with your librarians.

Stacey: [25:01] Right, I get that one already. I'm already convinced about that.

[25:09] [laughter]

Melissa: [25:06] I didn't mention this earlier, but in addition to some of them are practical research projects and assignments that are listed within the book.

[25:15] There's also just a lot about how librarians can provide research support to bolster student work and how we can communicate with students using different digital tools in a way that makes librarians more accessible than I think they've ever been before.

[25:36] Being creative, thinking outside of the box about how students and librarians can work together to learn how to do research and how to be supported in that way.

[25:50] Also, just that there is so much more than the traditional research paper when it comes to teaching students research skills and how to be literate in using and communicating information and all of the forms that that takes.

[26:11] One of the struggles is that research assignments don't always evolve as information involves, like the annotated bibliography example, but also just writing a 25-page research

paper. That's important.

[26:28] Writing is so important and the connection between reading and writing and research is...It's hard to separate those out, but that those skills don't always have to be displayed through the traditional research paper.

[26:44] There's a lot of different ways students can still exercise critical thinking and engaging with information, and then communicating about it that may look a little bit different and maybe a little scary for how that works, but that librarians can help with that.

[27:04] We can help design assignments, we can help create creative ways of students demonstrating these skills.

Stacey: [27:12] Awesome. I hope everyone checks out your book.

Melissa: [27:16] Me too.

[27:17] [laughter]

Melissa: [27:17] It's available at Peabody Library.

Stacey: [27:19] Awesome.

[27:19] [laughter]

Stacey: [27:19] To literally check out.

Melissa: [27:21] Right, you can check it out. There's a physical copy.

Stacey: [27:25] That's wonderful. Thanks for chatting with me today.

Melissa: [27:29] Thank you so much, Stacey.

Stacey: [27:31] Melissa, I know you know this because you are actually one of the contributors to the podcast, you're on the podcast team. One of the things we always ask our guests is what is their favorite analog technology?

Melissa: [27:44] I've had months to think about this question.

[27:46] [laughter]

Melissa: [27:48] I think a lot of the answers that people usually say, pencils, whiteboards are very good answers, but I'm going to go back to my days as a graduate student and say note cards, index cards, especially if you're thinking about the research process and research design.

[28:09] Note cards, especially if they're color coded. [laughs] If you know me, you know I like mine color-coded. [laughs]

Stacey: [28:17] I did not know that about you, but I feel like I'm really getting to know you. [laughs]

Melissa: [28:24] Yes. It's not a secret, but it is something...Yeah, I would say note cards.

Stacey: [28:30] That's great. You color code your research notes on three by five cards to this day or it's something you did...?

Melissa: [28:35] I don't do it so much myself anymore, but I'm still a strong advocate for students to just lay it all out in front of them. I love concept maps and my mapping for beginning research projects. That's one of my favorite things to teach students on how to organize their research. I usually use some online tool for that, which is in the book.

[28:59] [laughter]

Melissa: [28:59] But I think that there's something to be said for having just a moveable process. You can move your cards around and then when you color code them, you can divide them up by research source, ideas, authors, all sorts of things. It's a pretty way to jump into research.

Stacey: [29:25] Yeah. One of the constraints with digital technology in the stage it's in right now is screen size and most of our screens are getting smaller, not bigger. Having an analog space like a table or a wall where you can physically move things around and create really big concept maps or hierarchies is cool.

Melissa: [29:46] There's just something about being able to see that in your workspace too, that I think you don't get that from having an online version.

Stacey: [29:54] Right. Thank you so much for being here today.

Melissa: [29:58] Absolutely. This was such a pleasure.

Stacey: [30:00] I'm going to end up by saying that you can find the show notes for this episode as well as past and future episodes of Leading Lines on our website, leadinglinespod.com. Follow us on Twitter, @leadinglinespod or send us a voice memo with your thoughts on this episode to leadinglinespod@vanderbilt.edu.

[30:19] We would love to hear from you. Leading Lines is produced by the Center for Teaching, the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, the Office of Scholarly Communications, and the Associate Provost for Digital Learning.

[30:32] This episode was edited by Stacey Johnson and Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. Thanks for listening.

[30:41] [music]

Transcription by CastingWords