

# **Meet Them Where They Are At**

*A reflective essay on learning, growth, and goals*

By Lyra Alley

## **Introduction**

When asked about why I got into library work I have a canned story I always tell. I was working in insurance before and realized that at each of the jobs I previously had they always, in one way or another, hurt people. I looked at public libraries as a place that, at the end of the day, was always doing something aligned with my personal values: giving people access to things for free. While this story is an oversimplification, the heart of it is true. While working on my e-portfolio and thinking about what I considered my best work and why, it always came back to a core concept: to meaningfully serve the underserved by meeting people at the nexus of their needs and interests.

To best understand how this concept evolved we will start by examining the four artifacts whose creation was most influential to this evolution as well as the context for their creation. After this I will discuss the degree program as a whole and the various learning experiences that shaped my view of the profession. I will then conclude by tying these experiences and artifacts to my understanding of the learning goals and how they are contextualized by this core concept.

## **Influential Artifacts**

### **Queering Library Leadership**

I consider this artifact to be the culmination of my time in the program, which may make it seem like an odd place to start. However, it offers a greater contextual framework which can help us to interpret the other artifacts that were made previously. It shows up in my e-portfolio in two places, outcome 1b and 5c, which concern themselves with theories of library practice and leadership respectively. That this paper applies to both of these outcomes speaks directly to the wide scope of what it seeks to cover and how it can be applied. Before we move into the greater concepts I explore, let us first discuss how this paper came to be.

It is impossible to deny that my own queer identity has greatly shaped the topics I have chosen to explore during my time in the program. So when I was asked to write about leadership, I wanted to better conceptualize myself as a leader. While typical leadership advice is sure to be helpful in some respects, I wanted to explore more deeply how I could bring the insights granted by my life experience into my work as a librarian.

However, once I started researching the topic, I found that there was a deep lack of information and advice for queer leaders in libraries beyond a few resources for gay and lesbian librarians. My focus then shifted from finding information for my own needs into creating information for others to use. I developed a theoretical model for queer library leadership:

*“Queering Leadership is a radical approach that seeks to actively oppose the cis-heteronormative, patriarchal, colonialist, racist, and capitalistic hegemony that oppresses non-normative ideas, identities, bodies, spaces, and peoples, while simultaneously acknowledging one’s own positionality within these systems. Queering Leadership rejects hierarchical power structures and acknowledges that leadership is not dependent on one’s job title, as each member of an organization can lead and contribute. Although the methods of opposition are contextual, depending on one’s position and the organization they are working within, they share the same goal: to undermine the oppressive hegemonic power structures and ultimately dismantle them.”*

These are lofty ideals and potentially alarming words to some, so much so that I debated their inclusion in both my e-portfolio and this paper. The irony was not lost on me that I discussed this quieting hegemonic pressure in that paper (see pages 7-9), particularly how it could lead one to have the impression that I am “single-minded.” While not an unfounded concern, I believe that I cannot present my passion for the library field while leaving these aspects behind (not to mention some of my best work).

In the context of the core concept I presented in the introduction, this paper directly addresses how to “meaningfully serve the underserved.” While the hegemonic pressures in question can silence

queer leaders, those pressures are also very much at work on our patrons. I believe that in order to foster access for all, librarians of all kinds should work towards breaking down those barriers to access. Later in the paper I discuss the practical applications of how to utilize this framework in a way that is sustainable in a library setting which is a trend in my work. Theory is nice, but it cannot remain theoretical, so I continually seek actionable ways to put it into practice.

This artifact is also an example of another trend in my work: when I see an information gap I want to fill it. I want more people to have access to the information and tools necessary to have a seat at the table. As a wise woman once said when discussing diverse perspectives in literature:

*“I don’t just want a piece of the pie, I want the whole pie!”*

-Janice Del Negro

So I see this and many of my artifacts as contributing to the pie so that we may all enjoy as much as we please.

### **Public Libraries, Intellectual Freedom, and Social Justice**

If the previous artifact was the culmination of everything I learned in the program, this artifact is the origin point of me examining how to practically apply social justice perspectives to library work. It was through researching this paper in my ethics class that I began to realize the disconnect in the discourse surrounding library ethics/theory and actually putting it into practice. There were many words and arguments on how things ideologically should be done but no reasonable way to do it, especially when reasonable people could view some of the ethics as contradictory.

In fact, I was one of those reasonable people when I first conceived the idea for this paper. While I end up finding ways around these contradictions, it does not mean that there is not a paralyzing effect on many other librarians who do not delve so deeply. So again, I wrote this with those in mind who were paralyzed. I wanted to provide actionable ways to implement the social justice imperative in the ALA code of ethics into their practice.

Of particular note from this paper is how it helped me to realize how long-running and systemic this false dichotomy of intellectual freedom versus social justice has been going on. It provided nuance into how the field as a whole has decided to treat these issues that was initially disheartening. Despite that, it spurred me to want to provide actionable resources and in general advocate for ways out of the holding patterns established by the hegemonic powers within the library profession itself. At the end of the day this is about how we can best serve the patrons who need us the most, which I choose to believe is what the majority of library professionals want.

### **Cisgender Issues in Public Librarianship**

This paper feels like an extension of the previous paper in a way, but with a more nuanced perspective and a more narrow scope. It is also notably more strongly worded than any of my other writings. Part of this was due to seeing the holding pattern set up by hegemonic pressures echo into something closer to home and the simplicity of the solutions available to make actionable change. We've moved from reconciling interpretations of the ALA code of ethics to what constitutes as a checklist of actions that could be taken but are not. I sought to bring nuance to the conversation by addressing the real and present dangers associated with being transgender in the United States as well as recognizing that the issues lie in the hearts, minds, and actions (or lack thereof) of cisgender librarians.

My actionable suggestions at the end of the paper are more directed at things one can actually achieve in day-to-day library work. This is an example of how my perspective shifted as time went on in the program, in particular with my public libraries course. During my time in that class I began to struggle with how delicate public libraries can be, given that their funding is often entirely at the whims of the people they serve. While the recommendations I offer are more focused towards working within supportive communities, there are elements of them that could reasonably be implemented anywhere. I think one of the suggestions, "actively seek programming that is *for* trans people as opposed to simply

about trans people”, really speaks to what I mean when I say I want to “*meaningfully* serve” my patrons.

### **Manga: History, Genres, and Appeal**

With this artifact, we see the continuation of the trend of “when I see an information gap I want to fill it” and the context of its creation speaks most directly to that idea. While taking my Library Materials for Young Adults class there had been some discussion of manga, but only a few examples being discussed. I had noticed that many of my classmates were either completely unaware of notable works in manga, had sort of written it off as a thing to not be seriously studied when compared to graphic novels, or treated it as this unknowable Japanese format that was only for niche interests. This troubled me, particularly because I am very aware of how popular manga is as a format with teens (3 manga titles are in the top 10 most circulated list of my entire library consortium as of the time of writing) and to be oblivious to it does teen patrons a disservice.

So I approached my professor about changing an author spotlight that I was assigned during the graphic novels week into this presentation of an overview of manga as a format to provide a very condensed manga 101 style presentation. I wanted to cover how manga is made, notable works, the genres that are unique to manga, why they appeal to our patrons, and collection development recommendations that are unique to the format. There was a lot of grace afforded to how much class time I was given for this presentation (thank you Janice) as it came out to over an hour’s worth of content.

This is, by and large, the most practical application of my ideal of meaningfully serving the underserved by meeting people at the nexus of their needs and interests. Teens in particular are often maligned by library workers as being rowdy trouble makers and their needs and interests are relegated as “teen things” and not taken very seriously. This presentation is not only an extension of my own particular interests but it is encouragement for others to meet patrons where they are at. More

importantly, it is encouragement for myself to meaningfully engage with the interests of the patrons I wish to serve.

## **Overall Reflection**

When I consider the chronology of many of the works that I chose to use for my e-portfolio, there is a clear through line of my educational experience. I started off a bit idealistic, and I think that I still am to some extent, but eventually I came to a place where my expectations are more nuanced. That does not mean that I do not wish to still hold myself and my fellow librarians to a high standard. Instead, I mean that I now see the very real difficulties that libraries face that can make meeting those expectations difficult.

I think the class that was most pivotal for this was my public libraries class. During my time in that class, I read an [article](#) about how the Patmos Library in Michigan was defunded after it did not comply with very vocal requests to remove queer books from the shelves. I found this both shocking and disheartening, but it made me realize something. As much as we want to advocate for things, no matter how passionately we care about them, we cannot do so if we no longer have the space to do it. Now this should not be misconstrued for me advocating for censorship if you are pushed around hard enough by the community, far from it. It granted me a degree of empathy that I did not previously have for the struggles of librarians in communities where this a real and present danger.

On a different note, I want to discuss some things that I wish I could have included in my e-portfolio, which is much of my work from the youth services certificate part of my degree. I struggled to find ways to make what I could find fit cleanly into the learning outcomes, and I do worry that it shows a deprioritization of my chosen area of focus in library work. So I would like to take a moment to examine what I learned in that part of my education and how it ties to the overall themes of my work.

I consider kids and teens to be a particularly vulnerable population, which is likely fairly obvious, but I mean this in ways beyond what one would normally consider. Particularly, I mean that their interests, thoughts, and opinions are often disregarded by adults. Something that was said time and again in my time in the program is how important it is to listen to your patrons. With kids and teens, this is particularly important as there is often outside influences that get in the way of their ability to express their needs and interests.

Caregivers can dictate what they think the kid or teen's interests are during reader's advisories. The kid or teen might be shy, or used to being disregarded, or they may be very young and words are still hard. Over time I've realized that, to best serve young patrons, one needs to be particularly sensitive to this. You need to be a patient and attentive listener, you need to go outside of your own interests, and you learn about what they talk to you about so you can be excited with them. In a world that by and large does not care about their needs and interests *you* have to be the one that does. I believe it was Faith Rice, my professor for Library Services for Children and Young Adults, who said this simple line "meet them where they're at." That really stuck with me.

## **Learning Goals**

I have, in many ways, been discussing the learning goals throughout the paper without directly addressing the learning outcomes. However, we are nearing the conclusion of this reflection, so I am going to take the space to formally address them. I do not want to go point by point and risk repeating what is already stated in the rest of my e-portfolio. Instead, I will be taking a broader view of looking at the five learning goals and how I understand them in the context of what I have chosen to discuss throughout the rest of this paper.



At the beginning of this paper I stated rather directly my developed professional identity and philosophy as a librarian: “to meaningfully serve the underserved by meeting people at the nexus of their needs and interests.” I’ve demonstrated extensively how that philosophy came to be through my most influential works. This is directly tied to the nature and relevance of information, in particular how that relevance is defined contextually through the patrons that we choose to serve. By meeting them where they are at, we can learn that relevance and meet their needs in a meaningful way.

I have also discussed the theme in my work of “when I see an information gap, I fill it.” This is, in essence, how I interpret goal three of navigating, curating, and creating information in a more practical setting. While there are more pointed examples available in my e-portfolio addressing the learning outcomes that point to a different interpretation, I believe this theme speaks to the spirit of the goal. To find ways to give people more access to as much of the pie as we can.

In my first three examples of my notable works I discuss how I conclude each of three papers with direct, actionable suggestions on how to put the information in the paper into practice. Goal four directly calls for this synthesis, and I think it is a particularly important one. I’ve noted a trend of writing where important issues get stuck in a holding pattern of being relegated to only theory. It is my hope that we can break out of one day because all the theory in the world does not help our patrons until we act on it.

Finally, there is goal five, which I see the themes discussed so far as a bridge to how it can be accomplished. Until we know how the information is important and contextually relevant to the direct needs of our patrons, we cannot meaningfully advocate, market, or deliver the services in our library. This goal is also where my discussion of idealism tempered by the realities of a public library come into play, given that each of the activities are focused on how the library interfaces with the public as a whole. While we cannot let ourselves be ruled by fear, it is important to keep in mind that it’s hard to do the work that needs doing without a library.

## **Conclusion**

It is my hope that my e-portfolio shows I am deeply passionate about meeting the needs of my patrons. This paper alone demonstrates that in my eyes. Looking further down the path, if I had my druthers, I will be working at a library with kids or teens. They're excitedly telling me about the new video game they are interested in or random facts about armadillos. I'm putting on programs that they find fun and exciting, where I get to teach them new things and skills so they can go out into the world to be the incredible people they will become. Hopefully, many years later, a few of them will think of me in passing with fondness as the cool librarian who met them where they are at.