Philosophical Scaffolding for the Construction of Critical Democratic Education, by Richard A. Brosio
New York: Peter Lang, 2000
reviewed by Michael J. Carbone

The connections between librarians and teachers are deep and historically rooted, and in this vein Richard Brosio’s most recent book provides a useful and insightful resource for librarians in grappling with the fate of their profession and their institutions. Like Maxine Greene before him, Brosio challenges teachers to not only be philosophers but to “do” philosophy. As Greene wrote in Teacher as Stranger in 1973, “If [the teacher] can learn to do philosophy he may liberate himself for understanding and for choosing. He may liberate himself for reflective action as someone who knows who he is as a historical being, acting on his freedom, trying each day to be” (p.7). (One can very easily and legitimately substitute the word librarian – and adjust the use of gender – in that statement.)

In his most recent text, Philosophical Scaffolding for the Construction of Critical Democratic Education, Brosio aims for an education of teachers that will enable them to actively engage the most fundamental questions regarding education and the human condition, to realize themselves as historical beings. Brosio notes in the introduction to his text that all discussion of educational problems ultimately leads to a discussion about the nature of the good society. It is the teacher’s/citizen’s (and by extension, librarian’s) job to fully engage these questions as he/she prepares to participate in formal and informal educational settings. Brosio is a tireless advocate for the right and central role of foundation courses in the education and formation of a teacher. He argues persuasively that teachers (both those in-training and in the field) must be fully equipped to define and frame their own educational projects within the larger issues which only philosophy can raise. He writes, “we must position ourselves on the side of the perennial philosophical quest for understanding, especially in radically altered socio-economic and political global systems…” (p.28). The challenge of the modern educator and librarian is to think about, frame, create and act upon a professional vision that will enable democratic empowerment, social justice and bona fide diversity in American life. This can only be done however through an active intellect fully engaged with the social, political and material conditions of the modern world.

In order to prompt this discussion, shape this intellect and engage the questions, his text models an active dialogue among what he calls significant “intellectual workers” of our times. This concept has of course, clear and immediate relevance to librarianship, and I would argue, it is what makes his framework of analysis highly useful to education as well as allied fields. It is in this ongoing historical/contemporary conversation that he invites his
readers to become active members. He beckons students to a feast of ideas to be savored holistically and digested slowly. This is a project of the many, a group effort so to speak. These ideas must take life for the individual but clearly within the context of collective dialogue and debate. His text is designed as an active experience prompting discussion with great ideas, and in the best Deweyian sense, the construction of meanings within the context of full reader engagement.

The chapters are organized around those issues Brosio believes have defined the human and historical quest for a decent social order in which men and women can realize their potentials as citizens/workers and full human beings. The reader is moved along from the questions of classical Greece to modern times and the struggles for free and democratic forms of existence. The works of Dewey, Marx, Freire and Camus among others are offered as the scaffolding upon which teachers can begin to build their own philosophical understandings and “do” philosophy. This posture, this position is central to making sense and meaning of the complex job of educating for authentic forms of democracy in an increasingly media dominated world driven by the imperatives of market capitalism. Especially important to the text are small sections entitled “Suggested Task for the Reader”. These are more than places to pause and take stock of the arguments. They are points around which a dialogue with the various theorist/theories and the author can begin. They are moments of synthesis and application. The questions these sections raise are big ones and almost impossible to leave alone.

The text is not only a well organized and significant compilation of important ideas, but it is also a workbook of sorts. It is also clearly the product of long and careful study by the author. There is no doubt in my mind that this text is singularly rich enough to sustain a course and to be of use in philosophically grounding the progressive practice of librarianship. If its ideas are debated, judged and engaged in the way that the author intends, students/readers will quickly be astonished at how effortlessly, yet powerfully, one can be provoked to become a teacher/librarian/philosopher.