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Not Just Where to Click: Teaching Students How to Think about Information Chapter 14: Librarians and Students: Making the Connections

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Librarians and Students: Making the Connections

Julie Obst and Joe Eshleman

“What’s my motivation?” asks the method actor before plunging into an emotionally wrought performance. Perhaps the same thing can be said about the mindset of students beginning to wrestle with research papers on subjects that they may not find personally engaging. Students who are required to locate three “good” sources to support their ideas may struggle to be motivated and even question the point of research assignments. Librarians can facilitate this understanding by fostering connections with students and learning more about how they approach the research environment. This can enable librarians to develop instruction sessions and assignments that expand beyond “how to” and focus on this question of “why.” In reaching the “why” questions, students can reflect on their own research process and better recognize their own motivation and incentive. Librarians who implement these types of reflective strategies and who connect with students “can also ease one of the most common frustrations of teaching librarians—not being able to interact with learners long enough to form a real connection with them.”¹

This chapter explores ways in which different types of students approach the information landscape and how this can impact the tactics and pedagogy of the instruction librarian. More importantly, assignment strategies are presented that connect students to

librarians and also push students to think about how they interact with information. A close connection between librarians and students can provide a foundation that can help both. Librarians can expand their understanding of how individual students approach research; students can benefit by gaining a better grasp of the role of the librarian and how librarians can help them.

Knowledge of the potential chasms in the library instruction environment can promote empathy and build stronger bonds between librarian and student. How does the librarian reach out to the student and build a connection so that moving away from “where to click” advances to “who is clicking” and “why are they clicking”? Also considered in tandem with strengthening librarian and student bonds is how to respond as broader conceptions of information literacy emerge in reaction to an ever-changing information environment. Although proposed changes being made to the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) are still in process at the time of this writing, in the current phase there is a shift from a set of “how-to standards” to a “why-based framework.” It may be easier for the librarian to show “how to,” but it may be much more important to answer “why” when it comes to students’ motivation and approach to research. Although changing habits and commonly held beliefs require a great deal of effort from the student and the librarian, the potential transformation benefits both. Librarians can accomplish this student conversion by making concerted efforts to meet specific students on their plane of research understanding. Then they can use that knowledge to connect to students in a personal way. Finally, librarians can impress upon students the creative and transformative nature of research. This allows a student to feel a close connection to the work they create. Close connections help alleviate misunderstandings and diminish “why” questions.

Getting to Know Students

When students lament “Why do I need to do research?,” what exactly is a student asking? Beyond the initial thought that they are protesting more work, perhaps there are additional concerns for students such as lack of confidence in their research skills or not understanding the need to support their ideas with sound evidence. The value of research can be expounded upon in a library instruction session, but students’ self-questioning about their ability to do research still

needs to be addressed. It is in the librarian's interest to make attempts to assess the research skills that students have so that there will be a teaching and learning parallel.

Making a rigorous effort to meet students on their plane of research understanding may be a bit easier than it seems. Just as any instructor must understand that different students have different learning styles, the librarian must realize that a full array of research styles will also be met in the library instruction classroom. Shouldn't the instruction librarian focus more time and energy communicating with individual students? Ask them how they feel about doing research? At first glance, getting to know students and working through a short hour-long transitory session appear to be incompatible. Yet what if some time was given towards connecting to the various types of students that are on campus? This effort could help when designing assignments and pedagogy that may be beneficial to those skillsets and needs. What strategies that can be employed by instruction librarians to get a clearer picture of student capabilities and demographics? As an example, as part of a personal librarian initiative on one of our campuses, the instruction librarian reached out through the learning management system (LMS—in this case, Blackboard) two weeks beforehand to students who would be attending a session and asked them to respond to some questions about their previous experiences (or lack of) with library instruction. This short foray into preparing for the differing types of student research experiences can aid with preparation and help to create both empathy and understanding.

There are a number of research skill sets, experiences, and dispositions in play, and library sessions and assignments need to take this into consideration. As in all classifications, it can be difficult to discern how to divide and define a whole group into smaller demarcations. Jessica Lange, Robin Canuel, and Megan Fitzgibbons are speaking directly about adult learners and continuing education students here, yet their assessment seems apt:

The authors have found that for meaningful learning to take place it is essential to acknowledge this diversity and avoid making assumptions about students' background knowledge and skills. Some students, for example, have never used an open-stacks library and therefore need very explicit instructions on how to physically borrow a book. Others have not used a computer before coming

to the university. Yet others have completed advanced degrees and are quite experienced in research in other languages and settings. If the librarian targets the class at just one point of skill level along this continuum, the majority of students will not have their needs fulfilled.²

Further interrogation of the library literature supports the idea that librarians should acknowledge the diversity of their student populations and recognize the need to connect with different students in different ways. In 2000, Trudi E. Jacobson and Helene C. Williams edited *Teaching the New Library to Today's Users: Reaching International, Minority, Senior Citizens, Gay/Lesbian, First-Generation, At-Risk, Graduate and Returning Students, and Distance Learners*. The authors sought input from numerous librarians in order to gain perspective on multicultural and diverse students and then presented assorted approaches and strategies when teaching in the library. In the introduction, the editors point out that the underlying theme of the book (which is composed of individually authored chapters) is to treat students as singular entities, even if they are part of a group, and be aware of their differences.³ As an excellent introduction into considering the extensive assortment of students that instruction librarians come in contact with, each chapter of *Teaching the Library to Today's Users* takes a look at separate types of viewpoints and gives valuable ways to address them. For example, Kwasi Sarkodie-Mensah offers a table that maps cultural groups to their predominate learning styles; in the international student focused chapter, Sara McDowell gives a self-assessing checklist that leads to insight that can help lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered college students; and David A. Tyckosen suggests six ways to assist the first-generation student: schedule sessions during evening and weekend hours, design library assignments that do not discriminate, provide a family friendly environment, offer personalized service, establish a peer-mentoring program, and make an effort to become part of your campus's first-year experience. Tyckosen's focus on first-year and first-generation students makes for the best example here because it often the case that these primarily undergraduate students would be those most likely to struggle with doing research and have the most questions and frustration.

A more recent perspective can be found in the Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) Project. This project, a 21-month research study conducted from 2008 to 2010, investigated how different students conduct research and use library resources and services at five Illinois universities. A

number of student populations were studied in the project, and first-generation students were of particular interest to several of the participating institutions. The book, *College Libraries and Student Culture: What We Now Know*, based on the findings of this study, examined how these students approached research. The ethnographic approach of the study was qualitative, which we appreciate because multiple viewpoints are considered and relationships are a key element. Challenges for the first-generation student included “limited technology and information literacy skills and a lack of familiarity with the research process.”⁴ Unfortunately, these students are not turning to librarians for assistance. The researchers concluded that the first-generation students at their institution “primarily turned to their instructors and their TA’s for all kinds of help, including areas in which librarians could be most helpful.”⁵

The growing interest in retention within higher education has led to more work that highlights at-risk students or those who may be candidates for leaving school. Often a formalized first-year experience program, sometimes with a library instruction element, is used as a salve to help with retention efforts. A chief reason for students leaving school is the feeling that they are alone on campus and have difficulty approaching others. Dona McDermott concentrates on library anxiety as a main impediment for students; she traces Long Island University’s efforts to identify and work with students who might have difficulty understanding the library’s (and the librarian’s) role in their academic lives. She concludes that “one of the factors for achieving academic success in college is the recognition of the need to seek help; library instruction can encourage even reluctant students to feel comfortable doing this.”⁶

Peter Collier and David Morgan see first-generation students as needing more time allotment and more detailed assignment definition than other students; differences occur between first-generation and traditional college students’ understandings of faculty expectations.⁷ As instruction librarians who have worked closely with faculty to create assignments, the authors can attest to numerous revisions that work towards highly detailed assignments to improve student understanding. These experiences reinforce the position that certain students find aspects of research difficult and clarification of terms sometimes need to be “spelled out.” Oftentimes, library jargon can be a culprit as well as assumptions made about the research skill competences of students. However, adding more detailed explanations to an assignment can make it seem more complicated or difficult, creating a bit of a conundrum. A suggestion here would be to work with students when developing assignments to avoid excessive trial and error.

Stacey Brinkman, Katie Gibson, and Jenny Presnell find that first-generation students may experience more confusion about how services operate on campus and potentially feel as though they are outsiders. They suggest four tactics that directly target these students: be aware of library jargon to minimize anxiety, work towards creating a diverse staff, establish and foster relationships with other campus departments to connect to students' everyday lives, and seek to be mentors and/or become involved in student life and academic affairs programming.⁸ Tiffany Wang also suggests the mentorship approach for first-generation students.⁹ Gaining a better understanding of what the first-generation or first-year student may be experiencing when approaching research gives the instruction librarian the ability to step back and start from square one and then synchronize their teaching with the student's starting point.

Getting to know students may not always be at the forefront of a librarian's mind, yet the rewards for this type of outreach can benefit both. One consideration for the librarian when reaching out to students is the importance of emotion in both the students' worldview and in their information-seeking process. Studies show that emotional as well as cognitive dynamics affect research strategies. Carol Kuhlthau's landmark demarcation of the student's emotional stages: going from uncertainty, confusion, and frustration to optimism, confidence, and satisfaction form the basis of the information search process as seen through the user's perspective.¹⁰

Others support the value of the emotional component. Miriam L. Matteson, Omer Farooq, and David B. Mease explore how emotions affect information literacy competency and conclude that "understanding how emotional intelligence aids in prioritizing thinking and enables students to manage emotions in all aspects of their academic information-seeking behavior can help librarians decipher the points at which students might need intervention during information literacy instruction sessions."¹¹

The litany of terms such as "not understanding," "misunderstanding," "intervention," and "unfamiliarity" portend that the instruction librarian should take caution to proceed slowly and stay with students. One concurrent theme in this literature is that there are additional challenges simply within the collegiate environment that many students bring with them to the library and these also must be considered. Instruction librarians can teach to diverse groupings of students within a semester, sometimes even within a day. The more that can be done to "line-up" teaching materials, activities, and outcomes with students' capabilities, the more familiar and understandable information literacy

concepts will be. A deeper understanding of the variety of students and building connections to them can make for a more level situation.

Meeting the Students

How then does the librarian meet the student at the level that makes for the best progression? One of Susie Andretti's three concluding strategies in *Ways of Experiencing Information Literacy: Making the Case for a Relational Approach* is "start with the learner-information relationship and develop a customized information literacy profile for each learner."¹² Although it may seem as if this would require an inordinate amount of work, Andretti goes on to explain that "in practice, this means profiling the learners to establish from the outset what they 'don't know' in order to stimulate their motivation, and what they 'do know' to foster their confidence."¹³ Alison Head recommends that "both professors and librarians may want to expand, if at all feasible, the hands-on services and support that are already provided to students... students valued one-on-one coaching sessions with these research 'experts.'"¹⁴

Research consultations between librarians and students often go undocumented and can seem to exist between the demarcations of instruction and reference. Yet it is here where a great deal of progress is made because there is an opening for the librarian to gain a better awareness of the research problems students might be experiencing. Additionally, students can take the time to ask questions that they may not in an instruction session. Offering these types of meetings to students should be a goal of the librarian who desires to create connections.

Steven Bell has commented that developing a meaningful library experience requires librarians to expand the role of gate-keepers to one of gate-openers: "Our future may depend on our ability to differentiate what libraries offer and what library workers contribute to communities. The library profession should consider an alternate vision for our future: the library worker as gate-opener. In that role we shift from a focus on creating access to resources to creating meaningful relationships with community members—both those who use and those who don't use our libraries."¹⁵

In a related vein, the question "Why don't students ask librarians for help?" is often raised and has been addressed by such factors as library anxiety and students not understanding librarian roles.¹⁶ Susan Miller and Nancy Murillo

tick off a number of other reasons from the library literature: Students do not want to be bothersome; they believe librarians would not necessarily want to help them; or they may feel foolish for not knowing how to do library research.¹⁷ Miller and Murillo conclude that “students will seek help from those with whom they have established relationships ... With institutional support, librarians can foster these kinds of relationships via peer-mentor programs, graded library assignments that emerge from faculty-librarian collaborations, and increased librarian outreach efforts to meet students in-person and online.”¹⁸

In Project Information Literacy’s report *Learning the Ropes: How Freshmen Conduct Course Research Once They Enter College*, one large insight and solution became clear: “Many freshmen appeared to be unfamiliar with how academic libraries—and the vast array of digital resources they provide—can best meet their needs. Included are recommendations for how campus-wide stakeholders—librarians, faculty, and administrators—can work together when instructing freshmen to be better researchers.”¹⁹ In essence, the report suggests four recommendations for helping incoming students: building bridges between high school and college libraries, creating an integrated approach to teaching information competencies, emphasizing the role of faculty and the value of apprenticing in the research process, and resetting expectations of the Google generation. As a final recommendation, the researchers conclude,

One starting point could be to initiate a campus dialogue to increase awareness about the information practices of today’s freshmen, including both the strengths and weaknesses they bring to the college. What challenges do freshmen themselves mention about completing course work that calls for finding, using, and retaining information? What do freshmen say helps them most when learning how to navigate the complex information landscape of their new campus?²⁰

Working towards meeting students and creating relationships that foster an atmosphere in which students and librarians might thrive together is a goal worth pursuing. Imagine addressing students by first names as they enter the library and how that could diminish certain preconceived notions students may have regarding libraries and librarians. Of course, the size of the library and the responsibilities of the librarian are factors that influence this capability.

Despite that, there might be a lessening of mumbled “students these days” if librarians knew more about students. Once students become more three dimensional to librarians (and vice versa), an empathetic understanding and collaborative mindset might take hold. Possibly, the student sees the librarian as a steady and reliable source, an anchor on campus, or just another person to converse with minus any barriers. The librarian sees the student as a distinctive face in the library instruction classroom crowd and a researcher with his or her own set of challenges and achievements. Another benefit to reaching out to students in the library instruction is the building of authenticity that supports a sense of connection. Char Booth feels that to convey a sense of self is a large motivating factor for teaching and “authenticity is the capacity to communicate yourself—your personality and sense of identity—during instruction, an overarching concept that covers many qualities of instructional effectiveness.”²¹

With this in mind, an assignment that would push students to think about information use and create an opportunity to form a relationship with a librarian (or at the minimum, get to know a librarian by name) would seem to be of assistance. Appendix 14A shows an example of an assignment created by one of the authors, which was given in a communications class in conjunction with library instruction. Concepts such as evaluation of information and using the information responsibly are presented and discussed in the session before handing out the work. This assignment requests that a student take some time to find a source, give some reasons for why it is reliable, and think about how the information fits properly into their demonstration speech. An additional element here is that the students are required to e-mail this information to the instruction librarian, who provides each student with feedback about the source, the evaluation, the citation structure, and how the information is being used. Also, as a way to show an example, the librarian sends back their response with an additional source that can help the student with the research for their speech. In this particular case, the assignment is not graded.

This exercise goes beyond a student’s desire to quickly fulfill a research requirement and creates a communication opportunity for both student and librarian. Although there has not yet been any qualitative assessment of this assignment and concrete evidence does not currently exist for whether a consistent bond is forged, informally there have been conversations with students about how this type of exercise clarifies the importance of the research element of their speech and there is a broader sense of purpose and connection is established

between student and librarian. An initial connection is forged, and students have spent some time amplifying their understanding of information use.

Establishing a connection is just the beginning, and more work may be required to keep the relationship moving forward. One way to further develop the relationship is to contact students after an initial meeting. A personal librarian program or an embedded librarian can send e-mails to students throughout a term. Linking to a class through the LMS provides current updates to assignments so that just-in-time correspondence can take place. This type of relationship can also be reinforced by taking a prolonged and discerning look at the diverse types of students librarians encounter every day. Thinking about the different types of students is a start to a deeper connection because understanding someone on a personal level can create stronger bonds. In our case, the realization surfaced that a great deal of students are unfamiliar with many aspects of the library and the role of librarians as well as how to accomplish college-level research. Familiarity with students lessens these issues.

Students Connecting with Research

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, struggling with a research paper can often be associated with the undergraduate student experience. In addition to some of the hurdles already mentioned such as unfamiliarity with research and hesitation to ask for help, other difficulties arise when students do not connect to the material or understand the reasons for doing research. Jody Passanisi and Shara Peters posit that “students can be overwhelmed by tasks that require time consuming research and they unsuccessfully scan pages of text as opposed to reading these pages of text for comprehension, therefore, they cannot tell whether or not the source they are looking at is applicable to their research question.”²² This is where the hard work of research comes in, and it should be something that librarians need to be honest about with students. Mixed messages can be sent when a “how-to” instruction session is presented as an easier way to find information and cite sources. The point here is to help show students how knowledge creation does not come easy, yet when it does, it can be quite rewarding. Margit Misangyi Watts quotes a student who expresses it this way: “Clearly knowledge is having an in-depth understanding of something that you can make useful in your own life. Merely storing information for keepsake is useless. Knowledge that proves to be useful has meaning; it actually benefits us to have obtained

useful knowledge.”²³ Once students understand that research is rewarding in this way, they are better able to articulate why research is necessary.

A great deal of conversation in the literature revolves around students becoming more aware of the creative nature of research and how that can lead to a greater ownership of their work. Barbara Fister has frequently explored the design of the research paper in her blog *Library Babel Fish* and writes about connecting to the process in a similar fashion, “When students realize that research is creative, that they can come up with ideas nobody has had before, that they have agency in the world of ideas, it’s a huge revelation.”²⁴ One substantial change for the instruction librarian would be presenting research as a way to enter a conversation and avoiding using terms like “finding sources” in an instruction session in favor of “learning about” so that there is a distinction between merely accessing information and creating something more than a short-lived work.

The steps outlined in the introduction have been followed. First, an effort by the librarian has been made to gain a more robust understanding of different student experiences and capabilities. Then some more work is done to develop relationships that help both librarian and student. How then to get students to understand why they are doing research and have a more vested interest in the creative and pragmatic aspects of the research paper? Librarians, in partnership with faculty could break the research paper into smaller components and emphasize the importance of each. Annotated bibliographies and literature reviews can accomplish these goals, especially when the objectives behind these exercises are highlighted. One overlooked element of the research paper that can offer introspection is the importance of topic choice. Students often wait until the final hour to pick a topic and seem to have a tendency to view this decision as an unimportant one. Yet this decisive moment may show whether the student is committed to the project at hand and how much ownership they will take when researching.

Appendix 14B provides an example of the type of assignment that may allay some of the research paper concerns that a student may have. A first step in realizing a more robust library instruction session is getting an individual to reflect upon or analyze his or her own motivation. This metacognitive approach is valuable because it can prompt the student to move away from rote information satisficing and can pave the way to a deeper understanding of the motivations behind the process. For example, pacing students through the steps that they take when choosing a topic and having them reflect upon why they are choosing it can lend more ownership to an aspect of a research paper that was formerly “glossed over.”

This assignment was delivered by one of the authors in conjunction with English composition library instruction and was graded by the librarian. The feedback that has come from both the instructor and the students has been positive and generally involves comments that highlight the importance of spending more time thinking about topic choice and taking more initiative and ownership of the topic. Because the librarian was able to provide feedback, there were numerous cases where a student would suggest more than one topic and ask for advice from the librarian about which one to choose. This type of assignment can help students who struggle with choosing a topic before searching and complains when they cannot find anything about their last-minute choice.

A strong, impactful idea is sometimes referred to as a threshold concept, which at the time of this writing, is being considered as a supporting tenet for revising the 2001 ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. The theories behind threshold concepts were developed by Ray Land and Jan Meyer and can be described as core concepts within a discipline that are central to a mastery of a subject. While the threshold concepts are yet to be fully defined within information literacy, the idea that a threshold concept is transformative, troublesome, and irreversible can help us to understand some of the ways it will be explored in this field.²⁵ The assignment described above aligns with the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* threshold concept example of "scholarship as conversation," that is, how students can gain an understanding of the ways in which the conversational and creative nature of research differs from merely finding and accessing information.

How can a student be able to converse in a scholarly way if the topic was chosen for them or they had no personal motivation to explore their choice? Showing a commitment to a topic (the main goal of this assignment) fulfills both an opportunity to become part of a conversation and a beginning consideration of the information landscape. Students also benefit by beginning to understand their own research habits and becoming more than passive observers of library instruction.

The aforementioned framework attempts to prompt all information users (not just students) to think more about the how the information ecosystem is constructed. One might say that there is more of an inclusive nature regarding the new framework because it attempts to move away from rigid standards and become a more expansive way to get students, librarians, and all information users to think about the whys of information use rather than stating they are information literate when a thoroughly checked list of standards is met. Another

goal of implementing the framework is moving the responsibility for advocating for information literacy away from the sole province of the library. Advancing student understanding of information literacy involves many different strategies and many more promoters than the library and librarians. As a way to converse with other stakeholders on campus, the framework will allow for more discussion about how to advance students to the “next level,” transforming them from consumers of information to active and committed creators.

Although a goal is to move information literacy initiatives beyond the realm of the library, perhaps students could also begin to understand librarians. At the core of this chapter is the threshold concept “librarians are resources.” The transformative nature of this concept has yet to dawn on many students, particularly first-year students. Often, some of the more basic or ingrained ideas such as the understanding the goals of research and recognizing the helpfulness of librarians, go passing before our eyes because we think everyone already knows or values what we value. These basics are glossed over in an effort to get to concepts that appear more important at the time. But what could be more important than taking some time to sit down with a student and help to answer the question “Why do I need to do research?”

Appendix 14A: Demonstration Speech: Resource Assignment

Finding good, solid research sources about your topic is an important way to provide information to your audience. As part of your research, you will need three sources to support the information you present in your demonstration speech. You will need to e-mail one of the resources (or a link to it) plus the following information to the librarian who taught your class, Joe Eshleman (joe.eshleman@jwu.edu). You will receive confirmation and feedback on your source and citation, and you will be sent another source for your speech.

What is your speech topic?

Source Information

List your source using MLA format. The research goal for your source is finding information that is factual and interesting. Remember that just finding a website about your topic is not a source. For example, finding a website about how to make chocolate cheesecake or one with a recipe is not in and of itself a source (unless it does provide some interesting historical or statistical fact or perhaps a quote for your speech).

What are two reasons that your information qualifies as a reliable source?

What interesting fact (biographical, statistical, or historical information; quote; etc.) are you using from this source in your speech?

Appendix 14B: Thinking about Writing the Research Paper: Picking a Topic

Asking and Answering the Question, “What Can I Do to Make My Research Paper Experience Better?”

Step back for a moment and reflect on the reasons that you write a research paper and how you can improve your experience. In some of your other classes, for example, why you are practicing a particular skill in the kitchen, studying a trend in a certain hospitality industry, or learning how to write a particular business letter may be obvious. Take some time to think seriously about the ideas explored here and answer the questions honestly. Write complete sentences in paragraph form to answer each question.

The Importance of the Topic

When you are choosing a topic for a research paper, pick something that motivates you and creates passion about wanting to explore that idea. The topic is very important because what you choose motivates you to find information on it.

What specific topics would you choose to create an assignment that would produce enthusiasm and motivation?

Why would that choice of topic or topics get you interested in finding information about it?

Finding Information about Your Topic

Now that you have a topic that interests you and you are eager to find information about it, what do you want to find out about it?

Where could you find this information?

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