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Embracing Geek Culture in Undergraduate Library Instruction: The TIL Subreddit For Resource Evaluation And Qualitative Assessment

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A case study of a library instruction teaching experiment using the “Today I Learned” forum on the website reddit.com, this paper addresses teaching and assessment methods intended to promote self-monitoring in both the library instructor and student. After experimenting in the context of one-shot, lower-division, library instruction sessions, the TIL structure demonstrated strong opportunities for 1) eliciting declarative feedback from students about what they learn in library instruction sessions, 2) discussing how appropriate resource selection can effectively support a claim, and 3) modeling behaviors of lifelong learning while introducing unfamiliar students to an online forum founded in that spirit.

KEYWORDS: *library instruction sessions, pedagogy, assessment, metacognition, educational psychology, reddit, TIL*

INTRODUCTION

In “We’ve reddit, Have You? What Librarians Can Learn from a Site Full of Memes,”

Sanderson and Rigby issue a challenge:

We think libraries should in fact not try to market on reddit, but rather librarians should explore reddit to observe how this community shares information, engages in discourse, and what it can teach us about information literacy, information activism, scholarly communication, and marketing skills. (2013, p. 518)

If reddit can be approached as a community with much to teach us about information literacy, a corresponding question arises-- what potential does reddit have for information literacy skills instruction?

This paper explores the practical intersection of how these questions about a popular online forum influenced an approach to qualitative assessment that promotes self-reflection

about learning (instead of expectations), and naturally developed into classroom discussions about resource selection. Evolving out of a teaching experiment using the “Today I Learned” forum on the website reddit.com as a case study, it presents a qualitative method for academic library instruction and assessment that is exciting to share, especially to those grappling with how best to translate the new Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) frames in practical terms, and those trying to forge headway with evergreen questions: How can a teaching librarian best impact a student’s ability to choose resources that seed intellectual growth? And, how can we assess learning and information literacy skill development in ways that truly nourish student and instructor advancement, while simultaneously demonstrating value?

BACKGROUND

“On reddit, everyone gets to post and vote. Everyone gets to say, yay! You know what I say to that? Boo.”

– Stephen Colbert, 11/18/13

reddit is a news aggregation platform founded in 2005 by students at the University of Virginia (Massanari, 2015, p. 2). In the words of founder Alexis Ohanian: “it is a platform for online communities to share links and have discussions about what’s new and interesting on the internet” (Clem, 2013). Site content is not mediated by a proprietary algorithm, but by user upvotes or downvotes. Since 2008, reddit has been an open source project (Huffman, 2008). Because reddit collects minimal user data, the privacy policy is straightforward; no personal information is required to join--not even your email address. The policy puts it in plain words: “Our goal in developing our privacy practices is to allow your participation to remain as anonymous as you choose, and we don’t sell or profit from the information you share with us” (“reddit.com: privacy policy,” 2015). reddit functions as an umbrella for a diverse set of smaller

communities or subreddits. Human moderators, who volunteer their time, manage these subreddits. The moderators also help enforce the guidelines of each subreddit, known as “reddiquette” (“reddiquette - reddit.com,” 2014).

On one popular subreddit, TIL, which is an acronym for Today I Learned, users or redditors post singular examples of something new they have learned. Since reddit is designed so that posts serve as hyperlinks to news stories hosted elsewhere on the internet, TIL posts serve as hyperlinks to the webpage where instances of new knowledge have been acquired. Viewed from the context of library pedagogy, the TIL subreddit is remarkable; TIL posts attempt the very practices academic librarians strive to assist with— (lifelong) learning and (appropriate) attribution.

LITERATURE

In library literature, as well as education literature, assessment of student learning and pedagogy tend to be treated separately. Because this paper is an account of an assessment method that evolved into a strategy for teaching resource selection, the ideal that assessment of student learning might mingle with the learning itself is a welcome and exciting phenomenon, but comes with the disadvantage of not being well mirrored in the literature.

Assessment of student learning within one-shot library instruction sessions is a tense subject. John Riddle and Karen Hartman distill the problem: “In many ways a single library class can be seen as a guest lecture. How does one measure the impact of this brief experience?” (Riddle & Hartman, 2000, p. 61). Steve Cameron Newsome states that potential methods are always context-dependent: “There is not one particular measure of performance which can be universally employed to assess effectively students’ library skills. The method of assessment

used or developed is dependent upon the goals of the instruction program and of the evaluation itself” (Kirkendall, 1982, p. 366). Put another way: “Assessment of library instruction may have a variety of meanings: evaluation of the instruction session, evaluation of the librarian, evaluation of student learning, or evaluation of the library instruction program” (Colborn & Cordell, 1998, p. 125). Thus, a focus on student learning should not be taken for granted. Virginia Tiefel elaborates: “There are two purposes for evaluation. One is to measure the effectiveness of instruction for guidance in how to improve the program (formative evaluation). The other is to measure the effect of library instruction on the students and their performance (summative evaluation). Most evaluation of library user education has been formative” (1995, p. 321).

If focusing on student learning is the objective, the literature of educational psychology provides guidance about what kinds of strategies tend to yield retention. The theories and practices of self-regulated learning (SRL) are particularly resonant in this context. In the chapter *Self-Regulatory Mechanisms* in his influential text *Social Foundations of Thought and Action*, Albert Bandura describes Karen Simon’s (1979) findings that a person’s valuation of an activity influences her motivation (theorized as a root of learning in SRL): “People are more self-approving for high attainments and more self-critical of low performances on a task they believe taps intellectual creativity than if they believe it taps nonintellectual skills” (Bandura, 1986, p. 349). To practically interpret this, creating the goal that a student’s participation in an activity should be intellectually creative can motivate her psychologically to exert academic effort.

Research into the value of notetaking is a genre of its own within education literature; it is both a process and a product (Kiewra, 1985). It involves both interpretation of new information (encoding); and yields an artifact that can be referenced without memory (external

storage); both notetaking and review are associated with long-term retention (Benton, Kiewra, Whitfill, & Dennison, 1993). College students adjust their notetaking “as a function of experience and feedback in the course” (Hacker, Dunlosky, & Graesser, 1998, p. 355), usually in response to the nature of exams. Knowledge self-appraisal (practices like identifying something that was learned within a given experience) is something that researchers associate with achievement, but concede that it is a metacognitive skill that most students do not practice and would do well to make a habit of (Jones & Idol, 1990, p. 17).

Findings suggest that identifying resources for students to use through librarian-curated resources guides is not by itself successful in yielding improved resource selection (Lara Ursin, Elizabeth Blakesley Lindsay, & Corey M. Johnson, 2004). For this reason, tackling the “why,” and engaging students in problem-based inquiries within popular and mass media contexts is a topic of great interest among teacher librarians partly since it lends itself well to face-to-face teaching modes (Boss, Angell, & Tewell, 2015; Friese, 2008; Tewell, 2014).

TIL FOR ASSESSMENT—METHODS & DISCUSSION

To explore the perceived potential of the TIL subreddit, a trial was conducted within one-shot library instruction sessions. Generally, these were lower-division undergraduate Composition classes within a large, public research university.

Initially, as a method for prompting declarative feedback, students were offered a quarter-sheet of paper at the beginning of the lesson with three opportunities to fill in the blank after the phrase “TIL,” which is the preface of every post in the Today I Learned reddit community. The possibility of doing this electronically and even in conjunction with the reddit platform itself,

were considered and abandoned for various reasons involving difficulty, and student privacy/anonymity. Using a paper system as an analog approximation of the TIL format was both simple and workable in context.

After the quarter-sheets of paper were distributed, students were asked if they recognized the format. If there were students in the classroom who were familiar, they were invited to describe this subreddit. In the cases where students were unfamiliar, the librarian provided a brief description. Then, the class was briefly shown a few examples of TIL posts from reddit. This segment of the instruction session was usually no more than 2-3 minutes. Since some reddit content is not appropriate for the classroom, an account was created and the save feature was used to flag example posts to share before the session. Then, at the end of the session, students were given 3-5 minutes to complete three TIL statements about their learning; these were collected by the librarian for her use in evaluating the trial (if future iterations could involve both the librarian retaining evidence and the student retaining the artifact, it would be ideal).

The immediate advantage of this method is that it illuminated what the students understood, but more importantly, it identified what they were not quite getting and where the gaps were. In their summaries of new concepts, students would often reuse the terms and descriptions provided by the librarian. In the cases where language or wording was imprecise, or there were implicit assumptions about the students' general knowledge, the instructor librarian could recognize misapprehensions that would otherwise be unrecognized, and recalibrate for future sessions.

Reviewing student TIL statements also helped identify what information was new, and also what students perceived to be important. In a context where there was previously no student

assessment of library instruction, these advantages helped the instructor learn student perspectives and seek to improve communication.

Finally, this trial yielded a surprising and unexpected degree of participation on the part of the students. While there were certainly instances of bare minimum participation and nonparticipation, in general, students were thoughtful and their responses exhibited both intellectual rigor and creativity.

If we revisit Virginia Tiefel's schema:

There are two purposes for evaluation. One is to measure the effectiveness of instruction for guidance in how to improve the program (formative evaluation). The other is to measure the effect of library instruction on the students and their performance (summative evaluation). Most evaluation of library user education has been formative (1995, p. 321).

It is fair to say that the trial functioned as useful for the purposes of *formative* evaluation while modeling the metacognitive skills required for students to perform meaningful *summative* evaluations or knowledge self-appraisal.

Discussion of this assessment practice with colleagues identified the concern that students were not being invited to identify gaps in their understanding. An idea for improvement emerged which would capitalize on the concept behind yet another subreddit, ELI5, or "Explain Like I'm 5." Inviting students to identify concepts that they still don't understand has potential disadvantages, (educators often remark that students *don't know what they don't know*). However, education literature suggests that self-monitoring including "identifying the gaps," is a metacognitive learning strategy strongly associated with student achievement (Cook, Kennedy, & McGuire, 2013).

TIL FOR RESOURCE EVALUATION—METHODS & DISCUSSION

Since this initial experiment proved successful in rousing informative and thoughtful feedback, the experiment expanded into discussion of resource selection and included brief discussions of the credibility of resource choices of individual TIL posts from reddit.com (as part of the main library instruction session). Since each TIL post functions as a hyperlink to the website that prompted the insight, students were invited to critique the sources of learning. These real-world examples proved to be fruitful in discussing the many dimensions of resource selection (timeliness, author expertise, credentials, bias, etc.), and were object lessons in the worth of the offerings of the academic library-- students were confronted with the fact that primary sources about new knowledge are often only available through the libraries' subscriptions and collections.

The students participating in this trial seemed to have an intrinsic interest in examining the truth-value of Internet content, which perhaps stems from an interest in identifying misinformation and avoiding mistakes in their own online activity. These reddit exercises seemed to tap into those impulses and redirect students toward considering the resource choices made in their own academic assignments.

Over time a few routines evolved:

- Students were invited to consider and discuss whether the source website, which is in parenthesis in TIL posts, is credible (e.g. Is *sparknotes.com* (dustofoblivion123, 2015) sufficiently credible, does it usefully participate in the conversations and scholarship about Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*? Why or why not?)
- Students were invited to develop examples of how the credibility of a given claim could be improved

- Students were invited to imagine the perfect resource to cite for a given claim and to speculate on how such a resource might be acquired

While no measurements were conducted to evaluate this part of the trial's effectiveness for teaching resource selection, overall student engagement in discussions was notable and will seed further investigation.

CONCLUSION

If library instruction session (LIS) assessment must always be context-dependent, qualitative methods that encourage self-monitoring strategies and critical thinking skills for both teacher and student make sense as an avenue for experimentation and exploration. A turn toward teaching metacognitive strategies to students may still be the frontier of LIS, but much of the inspiration for the ACRL frames can be traced to aligning pedagogies.

The TIL structure for eliciting feedback from students within LIS has advantages over methods that focus on having the student rate the session or identify positive or negative qualities. It is a strategy that puts emphasis on what was new and important material for the student, and it puts less emphasis on expectations. Measuring whether expectations have been met is one of the more inexplicably popular tactics of *formative* assessment—how, if students *don't know what they don't know*, are they supposed to identify what could be better about a session? Within the context of one-shots, what is their reference for comparison? Focusing awareness toward the student's own *summative* assessment of their own learning, while not a slam dunk for demonstrating value, may represent the bottom rung of a ladder LIS assessment should strive to climb.

After experimenting in the context of one-shot, lower-division, library instruction sessions, the TIL structure demonstrated strong opportunities for 1) eliciting declarative feedback from students about what they learn in library instruction sessions, 2) discussing how appropriate resource selection can effectively support a claim, and 3) modeling behaviors of lifelong learning while introducing unfamiliar students to an online community founded in that spirit.

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