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# Start with the learner

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## **Abstract:**

Who comes first – the learner or the teacher? The growing body of literature on information literacy is focused more often on content and process rather than the transformative impact on learners. The learner needs to be at the heart of the process, especially in the many informal learning engagements with library and information services.

Combining extensive experience and evidence from small-scale studies in the UK, this paper will argue that in order to create empowered and engaged learners, irrespective of our occupational context, we need to focus on their needs, wants and expectations. This requires us to professionalize our practice in pedagogy. This session is intended to be complementary to the conference workshop, 'Shrugging off the cardigan: learning and teaching identities for the information professional', although it will be of value in its own right.

The facilitators are both senior librarians in UK universities and have been recognized for their outstanding impact on the student learning experience through the award of prestigious National Teaching Fellowships. They co-authored *Teaching information skills: Theory and practice* (2004).

# Start with the learner

## Introduction

Wherever we work, one of the goals of library and information professionals should be to create an information and knowledge empowered community of users. The way in which we seek to achieve this goal has evolved through time and varies depending on the kinds of organizations in which we work. Management values, resources, culture and technology have all contributed to a fundamental shift in power, knowledge and control to the user, customer or learner.

And yet, to what extent have we changed our values to recognize a move away from a dependency model of library and information use? And do misguided assumptions and prejudices have a negative influence how we engage in teaching, training or supporting learning and development activities amongst our users?

Empowering users is not about defining a framework or curriculum for information literacy. There is certainly a place for advocacy and content development. But in order to develop an information literate community we need to build our learning and service infrastructure (how we design and plan what we do) on what we understand of learning and motivation.

This paper will explore the practice of teaching and supporting learning applied to our specific occupational context and set out a simple and practical pedagogical (or andragogical) framework that can be employed in so many of our encounters with learners.

But first of all, it is important to give you some definitions, so our use of language does not seem too exclusive to those of you not working in academic libraries.

### *Teaching*

This is the process of shaping a learning experience for an individual or a group. Teaching may take place face-to-face or in virtual environments, it may be formal (like taking a class) or informal (helping people with enquiries).

### *Learning*

We use the definition produced by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (a UK Government body) also called the MLA.

'Learning is the process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do to make sense of the world. It may involve the development or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, awareness, values, ideas and feelings, or an increase in the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more' (MLA, 2004).

## The changing face of the learner and library user

We must be conscious of the preconceptions and prejudices we have about our learners. We might think that learners are:

1. Time poor
2. Intellectually lazy
3. Digitally savvy
4. Customers who want value for money
5. Anti-intermediary, anti-expert and ignorant about libraries?

*Time poor.* Surveys (Populus, n.d.) suggest that although many people actually enjoy longer holidays and a richer opportunities for leisure activities, they feel time poor. This is particularly the case in the UK when working hours are 44.6 a week – compared to 39.6 in France (EIRO) or 38.5 in NZ (EMNZ). The majority of full time students in UK universities work in part-time paid employment in order to support themselves through their studies – although the average debt on graduation in England and Wales is about £12000 (\$31,811NZ). Yet our educational system and values are still built on the expectation of a considerable amount of independent study and that in particular, university students will be effectively prepared culturally, intellectually and psychologically for a demanding learning experience. There is considerable demand for 24 hour service availability and remote access, a demand met in the university sector, but sadly, not by many public libraries which continue to reduce opening hours of their services. There is also a perception that people are unable or unwilling to commit time to learning new things, hence “I want the answer, not you to show me how to find it myself.”

*Intellectually lazy – or strategic learners?* Michael Gorman (Britannica.com, 2007) recently accused students of being intellectually lazy, and experience would suggest that the Google generation has less inclination to think things through, certainly in terms of evaluating the material they find or producing work free from mouse click plagiarism. During the 1990s one of the key debates in UK was about the need to develop deep learning rather than surface learning. It is important to remember that many of us have been deep and surface learners at different times, depending on our motivation and circumstances. Sometimes, in an outcomes-oriented educational culture we encourage strategic or achieving learning - getting good results – without necessarily engaging with the content.

*Digitally savvy?* We are often told that those under 25 are digital natives, a population completely different from older digital immigrants who can never have the same relationship with technology. Our digital natives love SecondLife (SL), Facebook, MySpace and YouTube and are most comfortable online. This is too simplistic. We cannot assume that all younger people like or have access to technology: the digital divide exists across all generations. This was tested recently at the University of Northampton, where we ran an Information Management module. Fewer than a third of our (18-25) students had ever heard of a blog, and needed considerable amounts of

support in order to write the reflective blog required as part of their assessment. The digital divide remains, irrespective of age.

*Value for money.* Whether this is in the form of students paying fees or a public expecting more value from their taxes, our users are now more likely to see themselves as customers. This significantly changes the power relationship in learning encounters.

*Perception of libraries.* Although public libraries are the most frequently-accessed local government service, in the UK at least we still struggle with outdated perceptions, reinforced by unhelpful stereotypes. But have we also been our own worst enemies? In the UK the new focus on reading in public libraries has been led by non-librarians and academic libraries outside universities struggle. Librarians have traditionally operated a dependency culture – we have the materials, and the knowledge of how to find it. Pervasive access to information through the agency of the internet has challenged this, The culture of the web, in particular web 2.0, is anti-intermediary and anti-expert. Everyone is a publisher, everyone's opinion is valid. Where do we fit in a wiki world?

### **What do students really want?**

It might be helpful to explore some of these assumptions in more detail by reviewing the results of research projects at both our universities. At Northampton, the focus of the investigation was to identify what influences students in selecting sources of information for their studies. At De Montfort we are exploring how students seek out assistance. The findings are not particularly encouraging for librarians:

1. *Reading lists rule.* If material was not on a reading list, it was worthless. This may relate only to our students, but it did not match the expectations of their tutors when devising the lists. We read what those in authority tell us to, or what other people want to read – compare with Harry Potter and Dan Brown fever or the power of the Oprah (and her copycats) book club.
2. *Influences.* Although we like to think that we have a huge impact when teaching or helping learners, we are rarely their first source of help. Our students turned to their peers, their teachers, their family and then finally, us. We need to reach out to all groups of learners – those who are successful but could improve, not just a deficit model of learning support.
3. *Ease of use.* When faced with a choice of materials, most students would choose short articles and books with pictures. Our interviews found that our students hated text in more than one column and lots of references. Even though many indicated that they were aware of the differences in academic value, they still went for the easy rather than the high-quality read.
4. *Search skills.* Most students had good search skills, which was contrary to the researchers' assumptions. What the students lacked were effective skills at evaluation.
5. *Traditional library tools and sources.* We can promote the value of controlled vocabulary, thesauri, abstracts and indexes, but

straightforward access to full-text is key. Many of our interviewees did not use or understand indexes.

6. *There is hope...* Library staff were seen as experts in online information and generally were respected once a student had asked for assistance.

## **Expectations**

So learners are hopeless! But what do they expect from our interventions? First of all, they probably do not have very accurate expectations – either too high or too low.

Most people remember their experience of formal teaching as passive and boring. Even more importantly, in academic cultures where league tables and standards determine funding, learners are taught for assessment, which can limit the scope of learning. In particular, consider the ways that virtual learning environments are used: are they learning or teaching spaces? Many of our students have access to comprehensive online materials – all classroom handouts, scanned articles, model assignments, study skills materials. Why bother attending or even engaging if you have all you need to get through?

On the other hand, sometimes learners expect more than you give. They may have heard great things about you from their teachers or friends, and think that you can help resolve all their difficulties. We suspect that our focus on service and support means that it can be particularly hard to draw a line between what is and is not appropriate in terms of the help and information we should provide.

## **Don't assume - find out**

So instead, rather than focusing on second-guessing the ways that our professional practice can respond to such a confused and complex picture, we need to go back to first principles and make the learners our focus. If we audit learner needs and expectations we can build the learning and teaching event around them. This can be done in a variety of ways:

1. *Ask them.* If you are planning a formal learning and teaching event, this is best done before the start of the session. It may be done directly with the learners, through a questionnaire or a pre-meeting – visiting a previous class with students for example. This is not a perfect approach, for learners are not always aware of what they do not know – or of what they know already.
2. *Discuss with stakeholders.* It can be helpful to explore learner needs with a range of stakeholders – academic staff, IT colleagues, other library staff – and thus get a more rounded view. For example, it would be very helpful to know in advance what previous experience your learners have had of library-led learning activities or whether a large proportion of your learners will be dyslexic or be international students.
3. *Triangulate.* Compare your sources to get a balanced view

## Learners and learning styles

Once you have information about what the learners expect, then you can start to plan your teaching session. Before moving into the practicalities of delivery though, we need to spend a little time on learning styles, attitudes and habits. The motivation to learn can be diverse. Race & Brown (2001) identify five factors:

- Wanting to learn (or intrinsic motivation). Not all learners demonstrate this. For every motivated family historian there is a disaffected student who falls asleep in class. It can be possible to find ways of engaging most learners through effective planning and design
- Needing to learn (or extrinsic motivation). The most obvious example here is when learners need the skills or knowledge to pass an assessment.
- Learning by doing. Active learning is generally believed to be more motivating, especially with adult learners.
- Learning from feedback. Let the learners find out how they are doing.
- Making sense of what has been learned. Developing understanding must be at the heart of teaching. Anything else is just training or passing on information.

In order to motivate your learners you need to identify ways of maximising each of these five influences. Some of this will be through the way you design the learning opportunity and the techniques you use; another part will be what the learners bring to the experience and a final element will be the way you can respond to the learners.

## Theories of learning

Many theories, based on different assumptions about human nature and society, are used to explain how people learn.

1. *Behaviourism*. The focus of learning is a change in behaviour.
2. *Cognitivist theories*. These consider how awareness of the outside world is internalized either through assimilation (or fitting the ideas into your mind) or accommodation (by changing your existing knowledge or understanding), perhaps by extending learning potential through effective support. This has influenced much learner support and informal teaching activities.
3. *Social learning*. This term is used by Jarvis, Holford and Griffin (2003) to discuss the influence of sociology and social psychology on learning theory. We exist in society and therefore learn within it. Our learning is naturally conditioned by our environment, be it our national culture, gender expectations, social class or immediate peer group. For example, if you work with learners from more than one country or ethnic group, you realise very quickly how this diversity influences approaches to learning and motivation.

4. *Experiential learning*. This is the process of taking the learners' experiences and turning them into learning. This is most widely known through Kolb's learning cycle. Experiential learning approaches are often used when working with adults and Kolb's learning cycle (1984) can be a very powerful way of structuring a learning and teaching event.
5. *Andragogy* is a term created by Malcolm Knowles (1970) for his theory of adult learning. Knowles emphasizes that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for decisions. Therefore if you are working with adults you need to recognize their experience and motivation. In practical terms, it is suggested that instruction for adults needs to focus more on the process and less on the content being taught. Strategies such as case studies, role playing, simulations, and self-evaluation are most useful. Instructors adopt a role of facilitator or resource rather than lecturer.
6. *Constructivism*. The underlying assumption of constructivism is that learners do not absorb knowledge passively, but rather construct their learning on the basis of prior knowledge and experiences. Learning is more effective if learners are encouraged to try out and test what they have learned through problem-solving.

## **Personality and learning**

Curry (1983, 1990) provides very helpful classification of learning styles which may relate to:

- personality type (for example introverts and extroverts)
- information-processing preference
- instructional preference

Some of the most popular cognitive style descriptions are:

- Kolb's experiential learning style. Kolb's description of the learning cycle is also translated into individual learning styles, starting along two axes. The first dimension relates to whether you are a concrete or an abstract thinker. By this we mean whether you think in terms of real things or events or are drawn to ideas and theory. The second dimension relates to whether information is processed in an active or reflective way. The two dimensions combine to form four different learning styles:

*Diverger* - You think in concrete terms and process what you learn reflectively. You need to be personally engaged in the learning activity

*Converger* - This person perceives information abstractly and processes it reflectively. You need to follow detailed sequential steps in a learning activity

*Assimilator* - You think in abstractions and process your new knowledge actively in the company of others. You would need to be involved in pragmatic problem solving in a learning activity



*Accommodator* - You think in concrete terms and process it actively. Needs to be involved in risk-taking, making changes, experimentation and flexibility

- Honey and Mumford (1982) applied Kolb's theories approach in a widely-used questionnaire, which describes four different learning styles most often applied to management development:
  - *Activists* respond best to learning situations offering challenges, and enjoy new experiences, excitement and freedom in their learning. You could describe their preference as 'learning by doing something new'.
  - *Pragmatists* like relevant learning opportunities with scope for theory and practice - 'learning what is useful'
  - *Reflectors* prefer structured learning opportunities which provide time to step back and observe, reflect and think about what has happened. They often seek out detail - 'learning through reflection'
  - *Theorists* like logical, rational structure, clear aims and the opportunity to question and analyse what they have learnt - 'learning from theory'
- Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner (1983) used biological as well as cultural research to formulate a theory of multiple intelligences, which are:
  - Logical-mathematical - to detect patterns, reason deductively and think logically
  - Linguistic - to use language to express oneself and to remember information verbally
  - Spatial - to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems
  - Musical - to recognize and compose musical pitches, tones and rhythms
  - Bodily-Kinesthetic - to co-ordinate bodily movements
  - Interpersonal and Intrapersonal - to understand your own feelings and intentions and those of others.

According to this theory all intelligences are required and it is important to find ways of supporting and developing them all, unlike traditional education which has favoured logical-mathematical and linguistic intelligence most of all. Everyone has different strengths in each of these, and the level of these intelligences will often determine preferred learning styles.

- VARK. This stands for Visual, Aural, Read/Write and Kinesthetic. This starts from the assumption that people have a preferred sense which dominates the way information is processed. If you have a visual preference, you learn best from seeing, if kinesthetic you learn from activity.

The important principle to remember from all of these theories is that you should always try to provide a mix of teaching and learning activities in order to accommodate diversity. For example, try to include activity, theory, thinking space and relevant examples in what you plan, linked perhaps to images and diagrams. This applied also if you want to make your teaching inclusive, so that a learner who is dyslexic would gain as much benefit from the learning experience as anyone else. Inclusive learning and teaching is less about accommodating people with any different needs and more about good planning and design for all.

### **Putting into practice**

These are some approaches that you can adopt that might make your learning and teaching event more effective for all your learners.

1. Your teaching persona. Just by recognising your own preferred cognitive style should make you more sensitive both to how you like to teach and what assumptions you have about learning and learners. You do not need to be a chameleon to be an effective teacher. But if you are an abstract thinker you might need to pin your examples down when working with adult learners.
2. Variety and variation. Consider how you can incorporate inclusive practice in your work. It can be helpful to think of ways of breaking your teaching session into 20-minute blocks of time, and then changing what you do in each block. There are also opportunities in informal encounters: when answering a question at a reference desk, you may find it disconcerting that your customer is shutting her eyes. It may be that she is a visual learner and is constructing a visual representation of your words – try using flow diagrams as handouts.
3. Effective teaching is a conversation. Effective teachers create opportunities to listen to their learners, allowing them to ask questions, get clarification and engage as individuals. Remember, in any other context, 'to lecture' is very negative.
4. Be innovative. We do not think you should seek novelty for its own sake, especially in applying new technology. At the same time, each time you teach, you should think about whether there are ways you can change or develop what you do. Finding out about new ideas to apply in practice should be a focus for your continuing professional and personal development.
5. Make the learning active. We learn more when learning engages all of our senses, so try to find ways of engaging your learners in doing things for themselves
6. Make it challenging. We should aim to make our content simple to understand, but not dumbed down. Find ways of testing your learners within your teaching by using quizzes, questions and answers or other kinds of assessments.

## Teaching in practice

We have explored some of the key elements to incorporate when planning a learning and teaching event, so we will now move on to how to put this into practice.

The first thing to do is to provide a rationale for what you are doing. Do not assume that your learners know why they are there or what you are trying to get them to learn! You might do this in the form of aims, objectives and learning outcomes, but this is not the only approach. Providing a rationale helps to make learner expectations realistic.

Secondly, remember that nothing motivates learners like early success. Find ways of instilling confidence and enthusiasm in your learners by finding something they can do and then build on it.

Next, feedback is important. Not all of us can be involved in summative assessment, but we can all give feedback to learners either to reinforce positive behaviour or to correct where they are going wrong.

As we have suggested above, learners often turn to their peers rather than authority figures for support and advice, so use the group. This can be in the form of peer tutoring or group work, or just enabling a relaxed dialogue to take place.

Unfortunately, things can – and frequently do – go wrong. This does not mean you are a bad teacher, or that the fates are conspiring against you. If you cannot do what you need to, just stop. It is not really feasible to demonstrate how to use a catalogue through the medium of mime, if the systems are down. Finally, and linked to this, if you are working with adults, treat them as such. You may encounter challenging behaviour, and should consider carefully how long you wish to continue. After all, you may be working with groups of people who expect to fail and seek only to reinforce their own negative self-concept. If you persevere, you can sometimes transform. On the other hand, a group of students turning up after a liquid lunch and shouting out swear words as search terms is never acceptable.

Fundamentally you must make your teaching relevant and interesting, focused on learner needs rather than the intricacies of specific resources or the constraints of a service, or in Eric Lease Morgan's famous phrase, 'Librarians love to search, everybody else likes to find.' By focusing on the learner you can build a connection between learner and your professional knowledge, identifying ways of making complex and / or routine library issues seem straightforward and practical. Sensitivity to their world is important. If you are working in a university, remember that there are significant differences in learning and teaching practice between disciplines, even at the level of whether lecturers prepare PowerPoint presentations, give papers, or teach from notes on an interactive whiteboard. Knowing the level, subject and discourse of your community is vital, rather than falling back into a generic library-centric mode of delivery.

Finally, teaching is a performance. We need to inspire confidence amongst our learners, and being comfortable with our teaching persona is important. We are hesitant of suggesting any recipes for success, as this depends very much on your own personality and teaching style. Whether or not you use humour is a good example – some teachers are comfortable making jokes or telling amusing anecdotes, as a way of making their teaching more memorable, others do not. Alternatively, some people are able to deliver a brilliant spontaneous teaching session, whereas others are only comfortable if everything is planned meticulously.

As we have mentioned earlier, do not let technology mask the purpose of your learning. We suspect that classes in SecondLife will spend more time exploring SL than learning anything else at the present time.

We will explore some of the ways we can develop our confidence and skills as teachers in the workshop, 'Shrugging off the cardigan'. As a taster for this, we do commend team teaching. Over the years we have learnt a huge amount from working with many different kinds of colleagues, inside and outside the library. Before then, our message is simple: learners want teachers to help shape their learning. You must be convincing in your role as teacher, and this means having authority and control to shape events around the needs of the learners. Knowing your own power gives you the opportunities to empower the learning community and start and end with the learner.

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