Seeing College Students as Adults: Learner-Centered Strategies for Information Literacy

Instruction

Sarah Dahlen

California State University, Monterey Bay

Abstract

Information literacy instruction is a responsibility of many academic librarians and much has

been written about approaches to this endeavor. This article explores ways in which pedagogy

from the field of adult education can inform information literacy instruction in higher education.

A review of the literature on adult learning is followed by suggested ways that academic

librarians can incorporate these learning strategies into their instruction. A case description

examines how librarians at one institution have addressed adult learning styles and classroom

realities by using surveys for instructional pre-assessment. While further research is needed to

assess the impact of these techniques, this article suggests that academic librarians can provide

effective information literacy instruction and promote lifelong learning by treating students as

adult learners.

Background

Signed into law in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act significantly changed the landscape of public education in the United States. By requiring that public schools report numerical data on student outcomes and by tying federal funding to these outcomes, No Child Left Behind has prompted schools to place additional emphasis on standardized examinations. Because of the high stakes of the outcomes, teachers tend to focus their instruction on areas that they know will be assessed, concentrating more on math and reading at the expense of science, social studies, humanities, and other areas (Berliner, 2009). Standardized testing encourages factual recall over other aspects of thinking and learning (Cole, Hulley, & Quarles, 2009), and critical thinking in particular may be deemphasized by this focus on test preparation (Berliner, 2009). It should be of no surprise that college students coming out of the public school system may, through no fault of their own, be underprepared for the critical and reflective thinking required of them in higher education. In the context of information literacy instruction, librarians may observe this lack of preparation in students' difficulty in evaluating the credibility of information, as well as in other areas.

Academic librarians and other educators have often been enjoined to meet students "where they are" with regard to their levels of knowledge and experience in a particular area. The critical and more challenging next step is to help students move beyond their current developmental level. Kitchener and King (1990) have addressed this concept as it relates to reflective thinking, defined as the ability to identify a problem and analyze it or solve it using critical judgment. To describe developmental stages of reflective thinking, these authors have developed a "Reflective Judgment Model," comprised of seven stages. Kitchener and King suggest that many first-year college students are at stage three, characterized by trouble

differentiating fact from opinion, a lack of understanding that evidence can be used to support a

viewpoint, and difficulty recognizing that certain authorities are better positioned to make

judgments or draw conclusions than students are themselves. In order to promote the

transformative learning that will move students to the next developmental stage, Kitchener and

King posit that educators should structure their assignments to require critical reflection skills

one level above where students are currently. For first-year college students, this might mean

having them evaluate arguments based on evidence or identify multiple points of view.

Kitchener and King's (1990) model addresses the types of activities that should be

assigned to students in order to help them move to the next developmental stage, but does not

speak to the pedagogical techniques to be employed to this end. If the level of reflective thinking

can be raised by challenging college students to perform at a higher developmental stage, it may

follow that using pedagogical practice designed for adult learners would have a similar effect,

that of encouraging students to adopt characteristics of adult learners. These characteristics

include being self-motivated, goal-driven, and able to connect new knowledge to prior

experience, each of which can be viewed as contributing to a propensity toward lifelong learning

(Knapper & Cropley, 2000).

!"#"$%&'()*+&),$-."/0)$1)%+&)2&3)4&56&.')7$-"#)*/60&!

acknowledged and built upon (Brookfield, 1986; Deshler, 1990; Freire, 1993; Knowles, 1980; PCAE, 1991; Worthman, 2008). While some of these practices are increasingly embraced in K-12 and higher education, they are a clear departure from "traditional" educational settings in which the instructor was seen as the sole expert, delivering lectures and discipline based on perceived student deficiencies.

Another approach to adult education involves the related practices of intentionality and transparency. Freire (1993, p. 79) describes intentionality as being the "essence of consciousness" and a quality to be invoked in learners. I would add that intentionality is critical for educators as well, meaning that there should be a specific intention behind each element of instruction. Instead of employing practices based on precedence or habit, educators must be conscious of the choices that they make in the classroom and the educational justification of each choice. To take an example from adult education, a teacher asking her ELA students learn a song in English would need to ask herself what she expected students to get out of this activity. If the intention were merely to keep students occupied or entertained, the activity would not be educationally justified. Choosing this activity because it would aid students with pronunciation and fluidity of speech is sufficient justification, and the teacher's reflection allows her to be conscious of that intention. One's consciousness as an educator is only the first step, with the equally critical next step being transparency, or the communication of these intentions to students. Because adults are goal-driven, it is important for them to know the purpose of a project or activity at the outset, a desire that may also be seen in college students (Huba & Freed, 2000). Adult education instructors who are

application to information literacy instruction of non-traditionally aged college students (Gold,

2005). I posit that many of the above educational approaches can be helpful in teaching

information literacy to college students of all ages, and may potentially help them transition to

the next developmental stage as learners. As noted above, adult learners tend to be self-

motivated, goal-driven, and able to connect new knowledge to prior experience. These

characteristics can be fostered in college students with the intention of creating lifelong learning

habits. Thus, in addition to conveying the content of information literacy instruction, librarians

and other educators are poised to develop student inclination toward lifelong learning. The adult

education approaches described may be particularly useful for new instructional librarians who

need a foundation for their intentional practice. Following are some general suggestions for using

adult education approaches in information literacy instruction.

Librarian as Facilitator

The instructional librarian should play the role of facilitator in the classroom, whether it

be for a one-shot library workshop or a semester-long, credit-bearing course. In a participatory,

learner-centered model, the instructor facilitates

experience to build upon. It thus responds to both the adult characteristic of being defined by

one's previous experiences and the nature of the multi-level classroom, in which student

backgrounds and knowledge may vary widely. While this variation might be viewed as an

obstacle for instruction, in a participatory, assets-based approach, it acts as an advantage, with

the librarian facilitating knowledge transfer among students with different levels of experience.

Intentionality and Transparency

Students will be more motivated to take responsibility for their learning if there is

transparency around the intentions of classroom activities, and if these activities are tied to their

needs and experiences. This speaks to the importance of timing when scheduling a one-shot

library workshop; if students are not yet faced with a project that provokes a need for library

resources, they are unlikely to fully engage with information presented on these resources. A

new librarian may assume that because she has been invited to do a library session with a class,

the instructor will have already framed the session, explaining how it relates to upcoming course

assignments and, for first-year students in particular, how library research fits into the larger

academic paradigm. Such assumptions are often unfounded, and it may be useful to start a class

session by asking students to describe the assignment they are working on, what role library

resources play in their assignment, and where they have found useful information resources in

the past. This framing of the session allows students to consciously identify their need for library

resources and build on past information-seeking experiences, all while actively

Case Description: The Pre-Assessment

To further illustrate the classroom application of some of these approaches to adult education, I will describe in detail a practice of several instructional librarians at a small, public university that encompasses many of the learning characteristics and approaches described above: teacher as facilitator, intentionality, transparency, and participatory, learner-centered, multi-level instruction. At our institution, we have found that using online pre-assessment surveys to frame one-shot information literacy sessions allows us to be intentional and transparent with our instruction in a way that caters to adult learning styles. In advance of instruction, we assess students' information literacy needs and interests by using SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool that offers basic survey capabilities for free (our institutional subscription grants us additional functionality). Classroom response systems (clickers) or low-tech solutions such as chart paper and markers could be employed in a similar fashion.

The primary motivation behind administering a pre-assessment to students in advance of library instruction is to determine their information literacy strengths and needs, allowing librarians to build on prior student experience. Given that students may overestimate their abilities in certain areas, the pre-assessment should be used to determine a session's content in conjunction with librarian expertise and, importantly, the observations and needs of the course instructor. A typical pre-assessment survey (see Appendix) may include some general

citation styles. Final, open-ended questions on what students hope to learn from the session or

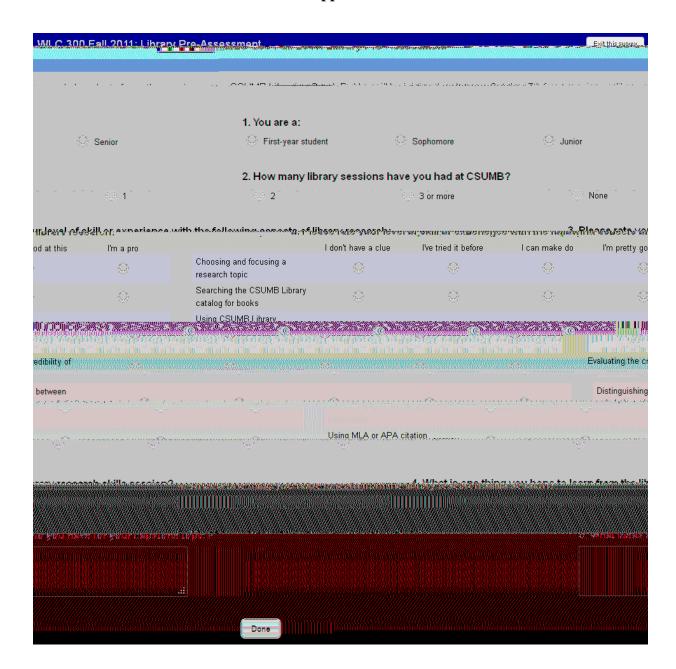what their topics are for the assignment at hand may also be included.

student development of the characteristics associated with adult learners and encourages lifelong

learning.

Conclusion

In order to be confident and intentional educators, instructional librarians must have

specific educational motivations behind their classroom practices. The justification of practice is

often grounded in educational theory, or, in a field such as adult education where empirical

research is notably absent, grounded in approaches based on observed characteristics and

developmental theory. This article has attempted to provide new librarians with a basic

understanding of the characteristics of adult learners and the instructional approaches that may

best meet their needs. I acknowledge that many college students do not share the profile of a

typical adult learner but argue that we do them a disservice by not treating them as adults. By

fostering adult learning preferences such as being goal-driven, self-motivated, and defined by life

experience, librarians are poised to assist students in their transition to the next developmental

stage and to create lifelong learners.

This article has explored some general ideas for librarians to apply learner-centered

approaches from adult education to information literacy instruction, such as taking the role of

facilitator and encouraging students to take active responsibility for their learning. The example

of using pre-assessment surveys to frame multi-level class sessions illustrates

Appendix

WLC 300 Fall 2011: Library Pre-Assessment   Exit this survey

1. You are a:

○ Senior   ○ First-year student   ○ Sophomore   ○ Junior

2. How many library sessions have you had at CSUMB?

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3 or more   ○ None

ur level of skill or experience with the following concepts of library research

			I don't have a clue	I've tried it before	I can make do	I'm pretty go
od at this	I'm a pro	Choosing and focusing a research topic	○	○	○	○
		Searching the CSUMB Library catalog for books	○	○	○	○
		Using CSUMB Library				

edibility of   Evaluating the cr

between   Distinguishing

Using MLA or APA citation

Done

References

Berliner, D. (2009). MCLB (Much Curriculum Left Behind): A U.S. calamity in the making.

    Educational Forum, *73*(4), 284-296. doi:10.1080/00131720903166788

Brock, S. E. (2010). Measuring the importance of precursor steps to transformative learning.

    Adult Education Quarterly, *60*(2), 122-142.

Brookfield, S. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning: A comprehensive analysis*

    of principles and effective practices. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Burns, A., & de Sylva Joyce, H. (2008). *Clearly teaching: Explicit ESL pedagogy in action*.

    North Ryde, N.S.W., Australia: AMEP Research Centre.

Cole, H., Hulley, K., & Quarles, P. (2009). Does assessment have to drive the curriculum?

    Forum on Public Policy Online, *2009*(1).

Deshler, D. (1990). Conceptual mapping: Drawing charts of the mind. *Fostering critical*

    reflection in adulthood (pp. 336-353). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Deshler, D., & Hagan, N. (1989). Adult education research: Issues and directions. *Handbook of*

    adult and continuing education (pp. 147-167). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th ed.). New York: Continuum.

Gold, H. E. (2005). Engaging the Adult Learner: Creating Effective Library Instruction. *portal:*

    Libraries and the Academy, *5*(4), 467–481. doi:10.1353/pla.2005.0051

Huba, M. E., & Freed, J. E. (2000). *Learner-centered assessment on college campuses: Shifting*

    the focus from teaching to learning. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Johnson, D. (2005). It's not what we expected! A case study of adult learner views in ESL

    pedagogy. *TESL Reporter*, *38*(2), 1.

Kaufmann, J. J. (2010). The practice of dialogue in critical pedagogy. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *60*(5), 456-476. doi:10.1177/0741713610363021

Kitchener, K. S., & King, P. M. (1990). The reflective judgment model: Transforming assumptions about knowing. In J. Mezirow (Ed.), *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning* (pp. 159-176). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Knapper, C., & Cropley, A. J. (2000). *Lifelong Learning in Higher Education* (3rd ed.). London: Kogan Page.

Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Wilton, CT: Association Press.

Mathews-Aydinli, J. (2008). Overlooked and understudied? A survey of current trends in research on adult English language learners. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *58*(3), 198 -213. doi:10.1177/0741713608314089

Merriam, S. B. (2001). Andragogy and self directed learning: Pillars of adult learning theory. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *2001*(89), 3-14. doi:10.1002/ace.3

Mezirow, J. (1990). How critical reflection triggers transformative learning. *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (pp. 1-20). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pascual-Leone, J., & Irwin, R. R. (1998). Abstraction, the will, the self, and modes of learning in adulthood. In M. C. Smith & T. Pourchot (Eds.), *Adult learning and development* (pp. 35-66). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Pima County Adult Education. (1991). Learner-directed, participatory ESOL curriculum. Pima

County Adult Education.

Stevens, K., Gerber, D., & Hendra, R. (2010). Transformational learning through prior learning

assessment. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *60*(4), 377.

Worthman, C. (2008). The positioning of adult learners: Appropriating learner experience on the

continuum of empowerment to emancipation. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*,

27(4), 443-462. doi:10.1080/02601370802051355