Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries (QQML) 6: 599-607 2017

Reflective journaling in information literacy courses

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Abstract: In order to meet the challenges of the shifting landscape in which information is disseminated it is crucial that students learn knowledge seeking behaviors that include constructing complex searches, evaluating information, and reflecting on the research practice. In order for students to develop critical thinking skills, academic librarians must position themselves as guides throughout this process. In online and in-person environments librarians may employ reflective practice and reflective journal writing as a means for deeper engagement. In-person, it is possible to begin conversations in the classroom that will stimulate reflective thinking. This paper presents a summary of reflective journaling used in several one-credit online information literacy courses as a method for achieving deeper engagement while ensuring students are acquiring information literacy skills.

Keywords: academic engagement, academic libraries, information literacy, online education, reflective practice, reflective journal writing, self-efficacy

1. Introduction

Student self-efficacy and critical thinking skills have become important factors in determining the ability of students to both adjust to the structure of undergraduate life and succeed in their academic endeavors. The ability to reflect is an invaluable skill at any age and since college is all about thinking, students in information literacy courses are ideally suited to begin formally learning this process. Reflective writing is a skill set, like any other learned over the course of an undergraduate career, which encourages students to examine their learning process and thus asks them to look at their own self-efficacy. Writing reflective journal entries addresses a number of critical thinking skills undergraduates are often lacking when they enter an academic setting. Through reflective journals students will learn how to examine what they have experienced, read, or heard, and draw connections between these events. Reflective journal writing invites students to examine what they have learned, the process by which they learn, how to synthesize that information and to thereby take ownership of their academic careers.

Received: 31.7.2017 Accepted: 21.11.2017 ISSN 2241-1925

Students are inundated with information and all too often classrooms become models of "banking education" wherein we just deliver content, and as educators get in the habit of ticking off the skills we want them to learn. Paolo Freire introduced the banking concept in education as "the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; the individual is a spectator, not re-creator" (2003). This concept casts the student as a vessel to be filled with predetermined content, rather than as a co-creator within the classroom. The dynamic examined by Freire exposes that many classrooms treat students as empty minds that are "passively open to the reception of deposits" (2003). So instead of thinking of constructing as class that views students as repositories we are seeking to fill, we want to shift the teacher/student dichotomy to engage in conversation and embolden students towards inquiry.

Inquiry within our classroom spaces, especially when introducing the concepts of evaluative skills and information literacy, is an essential component of academic and civic engagement. If students are only attempting to memorize the content presented then they are less likely to develop critical consciousness, Freire (2003). Information literacy courses must engage students and lead them to question their place and responsibility within society and the information landscape. This is especially significant when dealing with an information society that is inundated with clickbait headlines, compelling images, and an overall mish mosh of media. Both traditional publications and myriad internet sources must be evaluated carefully and it is the mission of academic libraries to prepare students to engage with the wider world of information. In an environment where content providers are racing to break news first, or worse project a bias or particular slant, many of these pieces are rife with errors and misinformation which have left a sense of distrust or confusion amongst learners. In the case of students they often have not developed the critical thinking or evaluative skills necessary to navigate our expansive information society or they might not realize they should be skeptical to begin with.

Examining the history of information and intellectual discourse we find that it is "a chronicle of the anguish and suffering of men who tried to help their contemporaries see that some part of their fondest beliefs were misconceptions, faulty assumptions, superstitions, and even outright lies" Postman and Weingartner (1969). As we work with students through course integrated instruction and information literacy sessions we must cultivate learners who are prepared to critically engage with information and society as a whole. In their book, *Teaching as a subversive activity*, Postman and Weingartner envisioned a framework for educators that would seek to establish experts at "crap detecting." (1969). This idea was partially inspired from an interview with Hemingway when he was asked what it takes to be a great writer, and if there was an essential ingredient. He responded that the person must have their own version of a "shockproof crap detector" If we think of teaching, and even

learning, as a subversive act then we acknowledge that we cannot shift paradigms without good research. In order to engage with the wider world, forward social justice, or even just write a paper with credible sources for a history class, students need to be able to detect reliable information.

Regular writing and thoughtful reflection on new experiences and information enables students to make connections, understand practical application of abstract concepts, and to incorporate information gained through reflection into their own learning processes and problem solving abilities. Reflective journals can prove a powerful tool for instructors and are simultaneously empowering for students. Through the process of writing these journals, students are encouraged to express and reflect upon their feelings, beliefs, knowledge, and skills. Instructors are able to gain insight into their students' thought processes and concerns which consequently could impact lesson planning. Changes made could potentially be made based on common issues raised in the journals and students feel a greater sense of ownership over the course content, potentially altering their motivation, Henter and Indreica (2014) and Everett (2013).

Through these "introductory" journals, students are introduced to the process of reflective writing at a structured assignments that ask them to directly engage with course content. Requiring students to reflect on a regular basis through a blog or online journal has been referred to as "low-stakes" writing and asserts that students take more personal risks and engage in emotional labor to process assigned materials when they are writing personal reflective journals, Foster (2015). Through the use of online journals students will be able to explore the reflective process, ask questions of the instructor, work through personal challenges, and come to terms with their adjustment to academic research. The dialog established through these journals makes it possible to shift the teacher/student dichotomy and move into a space that allows for the classroom community to remain focused in inquiry.

For the instructor, these entries can be used as a valuable tool for understanding how each student learns, their personal motivations, their self-efficacy and keys to the various issues their students may be having understanding course materials. Establishing a dialog within the journals validates the students' thoughts, keeps track of their experiences and encourages them to take ownership of their education. These journals become the spaces in which students foster their critical consciousness, examine biases and preconceived notions, explore their own identities, and question the status quo of the social order, Ladson Billings (1994). Students should be encouraged to use their reflective journals to understand their information seeking behaviors. Reflective journal entries are meant to develop analytical skills, promote the continual exploration of knowledge construction, and instigate the examination of beliefs, biases, and philosophical beliefs Gay, G., and Kirkland, K. (2003), Stronge (2002). Using these journals within the framework of information literacy courses provides a forum for students to work through all stages of the research

process as they develop their critical thinking and evaluative skill sets.

2. Reflective Practice in Information Literacy

In order to situate information literacy in a society that is inundated with new information every minute - from myriad resources, and content providers - we must engage students in meaningful ways. As information and media resources are mired in phrases such as “fake news” and “alternative facts” academic libraries are poised to make an impact on this generation of students. Our concern now becomes one of responsibility within a “knowledge society” to provide information literate graduates that are empowered to significantly contribute across various industries and job markets, Mittermeyer (2005).

Academic librarians must explore a holistic model for empowering students to engage with the research process within the scholarly community and understand how information functions in the wider world. In this environment librarians may act as guides since they are pivotal as information professionals, but the ultimate development of critical thinking skills and the ability to synthesize information rests with individual students Simpson, Jackson and Aycock (2005). Students today are eager to share their opinions, their entire lives in many cases, on a number of online social platforms, so why not encourage them to construct thoughtful reflections in an online learning environment?

The reflective journal provides a forum for students to develop their critical thinking skills and construct meaning for themselves from the course content. Entries are not graded on grammar or mechanics, but on their ability to demonstrate through these journals that they have understood overarching themes of the course, Boden, Cook, Lasker-Scott, Moore, & Shelton (2006). Learning reflective journaling as a metacognitive strategy will ensure student engagement with coursework and promote engaged learning. Reflective journals pair content delivery with critical thinking and reflection allows for creativity and *informed learning* in a discipline that does not typically focus on using information to learn so much as teaching the skills to acquire information, Bruce and Hughes (2010).

Information literacy - in the purest sense - is teaching a specific set of skills, but in the modern era of digital literacies and personalized learning it is no longer just a skill set that can be delivered through a focused lecture. Today our students need to be engaged on multiple levels and the information we impart must be made relevant in order for an understanding of the research process to take place. The goal of any information session is for students to leave with the confidence to access the information they need and the ability to seek additional help in navigating those resources.

Many instruction sessions are rooted in content delivery, so much so that students are often overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information they are

expected to absorb. Our primary goal as librarians is to ensure our students gain a research skill set, but we must also ensure that they truly understand the research process. Reflective writing allows for students to document their information seeking behaviors, their reactions to learning information literacy skills, and their thoughts about the research process in its entirety. Examining our practices through assessment methods also highlights the imbalance in instructional practices as the focus is often on adopting behaviors or technical skill sets, rather than reflecting on the overall synthesis of information seeking behaviors, evaluation of resources, and metacognitive strategies McGuinness & Brien (2007). Instructors may then use common concerns expressed in the journals to adjust or change future lectures and course modules.

There are many techniques for engaging with students, and no one size fits all model, but reflective journaling can be adapted to suit the delivery of content while ensuring the research process is understood. We cannot just show students a database and how it functions, we must try to convey the reasons why they cannot just jump into a Google search and expect the information returned to be equitable to library databases. As librarians in an age of myriad digital literacies we must be mindful of student self-efficacy, as well as their understanding of research and reliable information. We must encourage students to take ownership of the research process.

3. Reflection in Practice

Reflective journals as resources within information literacy coursework are equally engaging for academic librarians and students. There is a direct relationship between reflective practice and the learning process from which both instructor and student are able to take advantage, McKinney & Sen (2012). Journals serve as a direct communication with the instructor that students often think of as their personal connection and space to explore and share ideas about the course content, as well as insights into their own learning experience. Throughout the reflective journaling process information literacy instructors, as well as students are able to best explore how to promote conversation and reflection that facilitates continual learning for all parties and expands roles from mere content provider and receiver, Jacobs (2008). The emergent themes and patterns that can be excavated from targeted journal entries often provides a platform from which instructors may adjust course materials, create new lesson plans, or adapt future course models. Students benefit from a forum in which to express concerns, celebrate achievements, and explore their learning processes.

In a study of three for-credit online information literacy courses, delivered over nine weeks, students were able to explore reflective journaling. The LMS Blackboard Learn provides a journal feature that allows for both public journals shared with all course participants, or private journals locked to just the instructor and student. An initial introductory journal was assigned which introduced the concept of reflective journal writing and an exemplar of the instructor's own introductory journal entry was shared with all students. Several

resources were provided in the first week's module that provided an overview or reflective journal writing and students were encouraged to learn from each other's entries as the introductory entries were visible to course all participants.

After the initial journal entry all subsequent reflective journal entries and assignments were kept private between the instructor and student. Students were aware of the privacy of the entries and were often able to take advantage of the latitude this afforded them in making candid responses to open-ended journal assignments and those that solicited their feedback. Students were also apprised of the grading schema for the entries which kept their reflections candid, but thoughtful and demonstrative of their development as critical thinkers.

Course content was delivered in a series of "weekly lectures" that opened as independent modules at the start of each week over the nine-week period. Reflective journal assignments were paired with specific lectures and course topics. In some instances students were to reflect upon that particular lecture and all associated course readings and materials. Other weeks students were assigned a particular set of readings that they were instructed to reflect upon. In lieu of a mid-term project, students were asked to write a reflective piece that focused on their understanding thus far in the course, their own assessment of their progress, what (if anything so far) had significantly impacted their learning and what they hoped to achieve by the end of the course.

Responses varied, but on average students were expected to write between 250 - 300 words per journal. Some assignments promoted longer entries, and there were instances when students fell short of the minimum and expressed they were unable to write more on that particular topic. In those instances students typically expressed frustration and were generally unable to write more because they did not understand that particular week's content. These instances on abbreviated journal entries, especially when it was several students within the same course expressing a lack of connection with the content, were an excellent opportunity for the instructor to reflect and adjust or expand course materials as necessary.

Most reflective journal assignments resulted in patterns of responses that could be grouped into emergent themes or similar categories. In the weekly lecture on plagiarism and citation management students were asked to read select articles on profiles of public, or famous, individuals "caught" plagiarizing. Reflective journal responses could be grouped, across the different courses, into five categories. The most significant of these categories was the group of respondents (47.4%) that narrated their own experiences, made connections to ethics and the wider world, as well as reflected on what bearing these cases might have on future instances. The next largest group (31.6%) discussed aspects of academic dishonesty policies and thoughts about their own undergraduate experiences at their institution.

Remaining responses could be grouped into three groups that reflected on more focused aspects of the readings. One such grouping of respondents (8.7%) looked at the individual figures involved in these cases and reflected on their feelings about the individual's circumstances and consequences to their actions. Several other students (7%) wrote reflective pieces that explored their feelings on the "rarity" of cases like these since they considered them "high-profile," but did reflect that plagiarism was "wrong." Remaining journal entries (5.3%) were placed into a category of generalized positive responses and these students did not write true reflective journal entries, but commented on the "benefit of the reading exercise" or that the readings were "interesting."

A challenge of reflective journal writing is the adjustments students often need to make to transition their writing from summative to actual reflective practice. Initially students are tempted to summarize what they have read in the course materials to "prove" that they have done the coursework instead of reflecting on their experience reading the martials, completing the week's exercises, or their feelings about participating in the course. Generally these issues could be addressed in the instructor's response to that particular week's journal entry.

Student response to the reflective journal entries varied. In many circumstances responses to the entries were a few sentences, but in some instances - such as an entry that was too much of a summary of activity - a longer response was required. In rare instances no response was given, or just a few words addressing a salient point of the student's reflection to acknowledge that the entry had been read. Based on student responses, and back-and-forth dialogue with the instructor, it became clear that there was a correlation between instructor feedback and student enthusiasm or quality of the reflective journal entry.

4. Reflections

Reflective practice resonates deeply with the new *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* adopted by the Association of College and Research Libraries "out of a belief that information literacy as an educational reform movement will realize its potential only through a richer, more complex set of core ideas." Of particular significance when engaging students with reflective journaling practices are the concepts of: Research as Inquiry, Scholarship as Conversation, and Searching as Strategic Exploration. The *Framework*, like reflective journaling, expects students to engage with information on a deeper level than prior iterations had prescribed.

Today's students are being called to "a greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge," as well as "use research tools and indicators of authority to determine the credibility of sources" ACRL (2016). In addition to the generation and evaluation of information students are challenged to confront biases and explore diversity, and to "develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and

worldview." For information literacy instructors the *Framework* lends itself to the incorporation of reflective practice into any instruction session or course. Academic librarians, scholars, and students are all being invited to engage with information production, dissemination, evaluation, and uses. In order to understand the complexities of information in the new digital landscape, clear, open-minded reflection is a necessity.

In order for students to appropriately "articulate the capabilities and constraints of information developed through various creation processes" as required by the *Framework* students will need to wholly understand the information landscape from scholarly communication to news media. Reflection and continual commitment to the evolution of learning are crucial to future information literacy instruction practices. Academic librarians may consider the incorporation of reflective journal practice as a means to encourage students towards perpetual inquiry.

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