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Experiential and Transformational Learning Theories as they Apply to Library Information Literacy

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Abstract: Experiential and Transformational Learning Theories have strong potential for application in a setting in which academic library skills are taught. These theories imply greater immersion in the academic library environment and scholarly library research and, thus, promote a deeper understanding of information literacy than traditional methods of library instruction. Along with this, both theories involve social change. The social change for the adult learner includes self-actualization, personal growth, and empowerment. For librarians and the field of librarianship the potentials for social change are even more profound. Experiential and Transformational Learning Theories allow librarians to challenge all of their assumptions of how to promote information literacy and offers them new, and hopefully, more successful ways of creating a library learning and research environment that truly addresses the goals of life-long learning.

Introduction

Adult learners who are returning to higher education face many challenges. One of the challenges is using a modern college or university library. This is not only a challenge for the adult learners, however, it is also a challenge for the librarians who serve them. The reasons for these challenges are many and include:

- Library online catalogs that are more sophisticated and flexible than ever before and can be confusing to novice users.
- The databases used for library research that provide full-text for journal, magazine, and newspaper articles have vastly different layouts and search protocols.
- The computers that are available to students in libraries now provide software that can be used for producing research documents as well as retrieving them.
- The nature of library research has changed and the amount of information available to students has increased dramatically in recent years.

The application of two theories of learning can help librarians and adult learners meet the mutual goal of achieving information literacy for adult learners. These are the theories of Experiential Learning and Transformational Learning.

Theories of Experiential Learning as they apply to Adult Learners at Libraries

According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999, p.17), "Having access to unlimited information is not the same as being able to search efficiently for the most significant information, or to even know what is most significant." Each day librarians grapple with this issue as they attempt to help students become not

only information literate but also try to help them perform efficient and fruitful library research. This is especially true with respect to returning adult learners.

For adult learners who have not been in a library in recent years the library can seem an intimidating and foreboding place. Navigating a library website to find the online catalog and research databases is only the beginning challenge. The next challenge is learning how to use them.

At this point, with regard to experiential learning, the question might arise, "How does someone with little or no experience in a modern academic library rely on prior experience in using it?"

The first answer to this question is to do what one often does when confronted with a library conundrum: begin asking the reference librarian questions. As in the past, the reference librarian is a good point of entry to the library's resources. Reference librarians are at the reference desk to assist with library research and to teach, in a one-on-one setting, how to do library research.

The second answer, if the adult learner has prior academic experience, is to rely on what might be a distant memory: they might remember the publication timeline. As a freshman in college most students have an introductory English composition course. In this course the publication timeline is usually explained. This explanation is normally simple and informs students that for the most currents events, such as something that happened yesterday, newspapers are excellent sources. Next on the timeline, for the most current research on a topic, such as using selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors to treat depression, academic journals are often the best resources. And, finally, at the opposite end of the timeline from newspaper articles are books. Books are time consuming to produce, require extensive research and editing, and can take many years to write. Thus, books can provide a comprehensive view of a topic. One drawback to books, however, is that by the time they are published some of the information contained within them may be obsolete. While the adult learner may not remember the publishing timeline or may have never been introduced to it, the reference librarian can explain the nature of it in a reference interview.

From the preceding discussion it becomes apparent that an adult learner who is returning to higher education can exhaust his/her experiences rapidly and, thus, needs new experiences to become a literate library user. At this point, drawing from the research of Jane Henry and others in the field of experiential learning, a librarian can provide the experiences necessary to assist the adult learner in becoming an independent learner and researcher.

Henry (2000) provides practitioner definitions of experiential learning that include the orientation of "Humanist, Personal Development" and its related definitions of "Experience>Reflection>Learning." This orientation and definition is well suited to librarians working with adult learners.

Librarians can use the Experience>Reflection>Learning approach in the informal individual setting discussed earlier or in a more formal group setting. In either setting, instruction may begin with showing students the links on the library's web page to the online catalog and research databases. These links can be explored and examples can be given to illustrate the flexibility and limitations of each. Following this, students can use reflection-on-action strategies such as asking why they would choose an academic journal article on a subject instead of a newspaper article on that topic. They can also use reflection-in-action while they are using a database to see if they can develop a search strategy that will provide them with the library resources most relevant to their research.

The result of the above experiences would be learning to use the library and its resources in an efficient and literate manner and would fit into Dewey's (1938, p.13) posit that, "all genuine education comes from experience."

Active learning approaches facilitate the aforementioned type of experiential learning. Cudiner and Harmon (2000) describe a librarian/faculty collaboration in which an economics class is given two workshops in which they learn to navigate the web, the library's web page, and learn how to use online databases. In the first workshop they learn to use Web Search Engines and Boolean Operators. In the second workshop they learn how to use Academic Databases and the Boolean Logic requisite to using them effectively. In addition, students are given online quizzes to test their knowledge. According to Cudiner and Harmon (2000) through experience, students quickly learn to navigate the information stream. This type of learning through experience provides a strong foundation on which students can build in the future.

While Cudiner and Harmon taught their classes on campus it is important to realize that the resources their students were using were online and, thus, they were operating in an online environment. Dewey's (1938, p.41) second principle that "an experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at that time, constitutes his environment" is, therefore, important to remember as, increasingly, the adult learning environment is online and, often, at a distance.

In addressing this, Jean Caspers (1999) discusses a web-based tutorial that she designed to teach the literature review process to distance learning students. This tutorial was assigned to the 1997 entering cohort of fifteen doctoral students in a distance education program in the field of Education at Oregon State University (1999, p.193). Caspers' (1999, p.196) tutorial included strategies for identifying a topic, creating a synonyms list, using Boolean Operators, navigating the Library Web Site, obtaining library materials and evaluating them. According to Caspers (1999, p.193), "The professor for the course reported that students who used the tutorial were more successful and positive about the experience than those who did not."

Within the online environment it is important to note that design aesthetics and ease of use are also important to the adult learner. As Cudiner and Harmon (2000, p.57) state, "A second lesson is that it is easy to underestimate the powerful effects that attractive presentation, active learning components and the lure of vocational value of IT skills have on increasing student interest in these workshops." Clearly, while the active learning components and vocational value of the workshops are important; the visual presentations of the workshops were vital as well. While Cudiner and Harmon (2000) comment on the importance of attractive design; Sanchez-Franco (2005, p. 41) concurs by stating that "increasing the perceived enjoyment of a web site could increase the perceived usefulness among experiential users."

In the final analysis, experiential learning appears to have great utility with regard to adult learners who need to learn library research skills. Henry's (2000) definition of "Experience>Reflection>Learning" coupled with Cudiner and Harmon's (2000) and Caspers' (1999) ideas for online learning environments can provide powerful experiential learning experiences for adult learners. Along with this, librarians and faculty members alike might do well to remember the closing thoughts of Cudiner and Harmon's (2000, p.57) article: "Lest they forget their new skill, it is necessary for other classes to draw on this skill base. Hence, it is important that the use of the electronic library become an important part of the university curriculum and teaching culture."

Transformational Learning and the Adult Academic Library User

Transformational Learning Theories have a great deal to offer to the field of library instruction and information literacy. Mezirow (1990, p.14) states that, "More inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative perspectives are superior perspectives that adults choose if they can because they are motivated to better understand meaning from their experience." In learning to use the library and becoming information literate adopting "inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative perspectives" is necessary because much of learning the library and its resources is foreign to adult learners who are returning to academia. Along with this, learning to be information literate is necessary for successful functioning in every setting of higher education.

In discussing Transformational Learning Merriam and Caffarella (1999, p.321) write that, "According to Mezirow, the process is most often set in motion by a "disorienting dilemma." I have often witnessed this disorienting dilemma in adults as they enter the modern academic library environment. One particularly powerful instance of this came in the summer of 1996 when I was Interim Library Services Coordinator for Walden University. To illustrate this more fully some background information on Walden University's residencies and students needs to be presented.

Walden requires their students to attend a first year residency within nine months of starting their program. Many of these students attend their first residency at the Indiana University campus in Bloomington, Indiana. During this residency the fledgling Walden students are required to learn many things one of which is library research skills.

Walden students are mid-career professionals seeking advanced degrees for professional and personal advancement. Grossman and Blitzer (1992, p.68) describe well a prevalent thought pattern of Walden students when they write, "Career advancement comes to those who consciously assess their direction, answer questions about what they want, and then set out to achieve specific objectives that move them closer to their career goals." With this in mind one can intuit that most Walden students are capable of fitting into the definition of transformational learners. To go through the process of transformation, however, they need to make the transition from novice library user to expert library researcher.

Early on, many Walden students seemed to respond to their new library environment with fear, frustration, and sometimes even anger. To address this, students were given instruction classes in how to use library resources. Then, while doing research in a local area network set up for them, they experimented with their new skills and were given further instruction in using and refining their skills to fit their research topics and directions.

Through successive sessions in which they received additional research assistance they became more adept at selecting the proper databases to use and what search techniques to employ to obtain the results that best suited their inquiry. It was through this type of immersion in a modern library research environment that within two weeks these students went from needing my assistance with virtually every aspect of library research to barely needing me at all.

Their transformation was complete: they went from being novice library users to being expert library researchers and, as a result of this, became information literate. As pointed out earlier, "Having access to unlimited information is not the same as being able to search efficiently for the most significant information, or to even know what is most significant" (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p.17). Walden students, by the end of their residency, were able to search efficiently and were capable of discerning the information that was most significant to their research.

While one might question whether or not these students actually had a transformational learning experience I would assert that they did. In fact, they seem to have gone through several of Mezirow's steps of transformational learning as delineated below.

- Disorienting dilemma. Arriving at Indiana University with few or no skills applicable to a modern research library.
- Assessing their assumptions. Will they be able to learn the skills necessary for library research? Do they want to learn those skills? What happens if the skills are not learned?
- Recognizing that others have gone through a similar process. There have been successful Walden students in the past who have had to learn library skills and they, indeed, learned them.
- Reintegrating themselves back into their lives with transformed perspectives. They conquered the electronic library environment and went from fearing the library to feeling empowered in it.
- Exploring options for new roles. Students who are prepared to do independent library research have acquired a skill base that helps them through their coursework and prepares them for new personal, professional, and peer roles.

After working through these steps the Walden students conquered the electronic library environment and went from fearing it to feeling confident in it.

Why did this transformation occur? One reason is that the Walden students were inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and adopted the integrative perspectives necessary for transformational learning. There are other reasons as well.

While assisting the Walden students with their research we engaged in active discourse. This discourse usually involved me working with students in using research databases and instructing them in how to use the databases effectively. We developed search strategies and, depending on the success or failure of or searches, we reflected on our strategies to find out why they succeeded or failed. Based on these interactions Walden students came to understand the fluid nature of library research.

What can librarians involved in teaching information literacy learn from the above example? One thing is that using a modern academic library is often a disorienting event to the adult learner. They no longer feel confident when confronted with the array of electronic resources they encounter when entering such an environment. Another is that in a relatively short period of time these very same adult learners can make a transformation from novice user to literate library user when given instruction that is appropriate to their skill level and the instructional environment that they are in.

Conclusions

Experiential and Transformational Learning Theories have strong potential for application in a setting in which library skills are taught. These theories imply greater immersion in the academic library

environment and library research and, thus, promote a deeper understanding of information literacy than traditional methods of library instruction. Along with this, both theories involve social change. The social change for the returning adult learner includes self-actualization, personal growth, and empowerment. For librarians and the field of librarianship the potentials for social change are even more profound. Experiential and Transformational Learning Theories allow them to challenge all of their assumptions of how to promote information literacy and offers them new, and hopefully, more successful ways of creating a library learning and research environment that truly addresses the goals of life-long learning.

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