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Education Theory and Pedagogy for Practical Library Instruction: How to Learn What We Really Need to Know

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PEDAGOGY FOR PRACTICAL LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

What do we *really* need to know?

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The majority of librarians who have taken on instruction responsibilities have had little to no formal training in educational theories or pedagogical practices. We do the best we can without a foundation for our teaching. This Perspectives column looks at how much theory we really need to know, and how can we gain this knowledge in order to become effective and engaging instructors.

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INTRODUCTION

First, a confession: It took me six attempts to make it through the new ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education (ACRL, 2015). I attribute this to my own general aversion to theoretical concepts, and to language that is written to sound more complex than is necessary. Second, a more embarrassing admission: I didn't know how to pronounce the word "pedagogy" until about two years ago, almost ten years after I graduated with my MLS. It's not that I hadn't ever thought about teaching and critically evaluating how I taught. Mainly, it was because most of my early career was spent as a special librarian where teaching was a minimal part of my job. Educational theory was simply not on my radar until I accepted my current position at a university library and began teaching regularly.

These days I'm spending a lot more time learning about the theories surrounding effective teaching. It has been a steep and, at times painful, learning curve. My MLS program did not offer classes on educational theory or pedagogy, so I felt I was entering the world of instruction blind. This raised the question in my mind of how much theory librarians need to know in order to be effective instructors, and how we can go about teaching ourselves to be good teachers.

I know I'm not the only librarian who has had this fish-out-of-water experience. Few library science programs require or offer courses on learning theory or even on general instructional approaches (Booth, 2011). If we're lucky, the institutions we work for offer mentoring programs for new

instruction librarians or provide financial support for us to gain additional training via classes or conferences. The disappointing truth is that our profession does not adequately prepare us to become informed educators. In this article, I will share my own experience and strategies to provide some guidance for how we can learn educational theory without falling asleep or bursting into tears. Next, I'll list some ideas for how we, as individual librarians, can empower ourselves to learn and apply educational theories in order to engage our students, facilitating learning that is meaningful and even fun!

DIVING INTO THEORY (WITHOUT DROWNING)

I have been teaching a credit-based, online information literacy class for four semesters. I was dropped into this position with zero knowledge of either online learning or educational strategies and theories. In short, I had no idea what I was doing. So I did what any good librarian would do: I started researching how to teach information literacy. Much of what I found on library instruction and information literacy terrified me. I recognized that these books and papers were written in English, but they were filled with jargon and theoretical concepts that I could not grasp. It almost felt like the authors were creating a purposeful barrier to keep those of us without an educational background from fully engaging in the world of information literacy instruction.

I wanted to learn more about educational theory and the art and science of pedagogy. I was sure that it would improve my teaching to have more of a theoretical

[PERSPECTIVES]

foundation. What I struggled with was a problem almost all of us face: A complete lack of any extra time to take on such an endeavor, particularly when doing so requires learning what is essentially a new language. I was willing to learn the content, but I didn't want to devote all of my working life to mastering the theories of adult education. I also found it challenging to take these high level concepts and figure out how I was going to apply them practically to a 45-minute workshop.

I asked myself if librarians really needed to know everything about pedagogy and educational theory in order to teach effective one-shot sessions, or even semester-long courses? I didn't think that so. Still, I thought we can't be completely ignorant of all of pedagogical practices and educational theory either. There *are* accessible theories that have real world applicability. Some of these can lead to ideas that will improve instruction and allow us to be a more reflective and engaged teachers. The trick is knowing how to sort, as a former supervisor used to say, "the need to know from the nice to know."

When I started teaching myself pedagogical methods and educational theory, I dove right into the deep end. I tried to read both library science and education books and articles that I thought would help me become a great instructor. But they did not make much sense to me, and I ended up feeling frustrated and more ignorant than when I started. This is one of the first lessons of adult educational theory that I would learn firsthand: information will not be processed and retained if the learner can't see the use or applicability to their needs.

I was trying to take too much in without any context or knowledge as to how I would apply what I was learning. I switched my strategy, and started to slowly wade in by figuring out what my biggest challenges and frustrations were as an instructor. This included how to liven up one-shot sessions that were boring (for everyone), and how to foster more student-instructor and student-student interactions in an all-online class. I scoured the library and educational literatures for ways to address just these two issues, and had much more success. I found that taking a bite-sized approach to teaching strategies and educational theory was the best method to keep me from feeling lost and overwhelmed. The theories were still a bit over my head, but I could start to see how they fit with my personal teaching style and goals for my classes.

Student engagement, student-centered learning, and active learning were all terms that kept coming up again and again as I looked for ways to make my short instruction sessions more interesting. Digging deeper, I found that many of these techniques come from constructivist learning theory. When I first started my 'teach yourself to be a teacher' project, I had seen reference to this theory, but I'm pretty sure my eyes glazed over and I may have dozed off. Now that I had a specific reason for applying the theory, it made a lot more sense. Basically, constructivism states that knowledge is constructed through real-life experience (Merriam, 2007), and it emphasizes hands-on, collaborative learning (Cannon & Boswell, 2016). This really spoke to my desire to be a facilitator versus a director of student learning.

Now that I had a theory that matched my

teaching philosophy, I could look for instructional strategies built on constructivism. While some sources focus on practical ways to use theoretical concepts (Accardi, Drabinski, & Kumbier, 2010; Cook & Sittler, 2008), most librarians don't refer to their teaching as explicitly following a particular theory. I gravitated toward teaching methods that were problem-focused, student-centered, and social: core tenets of constructivist learning theory. As a result, I started applying strategies that reduced the time I spent behind a podium. These included facilitating group learning, having students teach the class, and a stump the librarian game based on medical subject headings. Admittedly, I experienced a few epic failures, but overall the classes are much more entertaining than they were.

The constructivist theory has quite a bit to add to the world of online learning (Anderson, 2008), but the emphasis on social interaction has been challenging to incorporate my course. I had assumed the 'sage on the stage' position where the communication was unilateral. I didn't feel that I got to know my students, and I know they didn't know me as more than a voice talking over a narrated PowerPoint slide. To foster more student-to-student engagement, I divided the class into smaller groups and then added more opportunities for discussion. Students in these smaller groups evaluate each other's work; they serve as both peer editors and cheerleaders. The smaller group size reduces the time students spend reading through comments (important in a class of 35 to 45 students). Perhaps best of all, this structure allows students to get to know each other throughout the semester.

LESSONS LEARNED

Teaching myself theory and pedagogy through books and journal articles has been a good start, but I am one who learns by seeing and doing. Organizations such as ALA, ACRL, Library Juice Academy, OCLC's WebJunction, and others provide both free and fee-based training via webinars and online classes that I have used extensively. I have pretty much gorged on all the free training related to instruction that I can find. Most of these opportunities avoid theory and rarely mention the word pedagogy, but they provide practical advice and application, and I found them to be a solid foundation for learning what I needed to know.

Above all, I found that I can't be afraid or hesitant to ask for help. In the summer prior to teaching my first online class, I asked many of my colleagues about strategies for online learning. Did I mention I had no idea what I was doing? Thankfully, fellow librarians, faculty within my institution, and educators from all backgrounds were patient with my nonstop questions and shared their advice freely. By reaching out and being willing to admit what we don't know, we create our own support communities, whether within a library, an institution, a local library group, or even through social media.

In addition to reaching out to individuals, I found that many universities have a faculty development and/or an instructional design department whose mission is to support teaching faculty. Even when librarians hold faculty status, they may be overlooked by those institutional support services. My advice is to seek out those services and ask

for help! Many offer support, training, and one-on-one help with designing classes. Even though I used this internal support primarily for my online course, I found what I learned made my one-shot trainings better too.

Do I sometimes want to bury my head in the sand when I hear someone bring up learning theory and pedagogy? Definitely, yes. It is never going to be my favorite topic. But I have found educational theory can be made much more approachable and manageable by first identifying an instructional challenge, and then looking for theories and strategies that can help solve that problem. I don't think that all instruction librarians should run out and get another Master's degree in an education or instructional design field in order to be effective teachers. We CAN teach ourselves to be awesome instructors, even if we just take a bite-sized approach to learning theory and pedagogy.

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