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Affective Learning and Personal Information Management: Essential Components of Information Literacy

Ellysa Stern Cahoy
Penn State University, ecahoy@psu.edu

AFFECTIVE LEARNING AND PERSONAL INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Essential components of information literacy

Ellysa Stern Cahoy
Pennsylvania State University

We are in this together. Nearly every weekday during the semester, I meet with students in our shared "office." I meet some students there on a monthly or even weekly basis. The office doesn't have a desk or a computer in it. Instead, there is a large, eucalyptus-green, U-shaped couch, with a table and a very large computer monitor in front of it. This is a media:scape unit from Steelcase, and up to four laptops at a time can plug into the table and easily project onto the big screen. The media:scape sits in a large glassed-in group-study room in our Knowledge Commons, surrounded by students working at individual workstations.

I love our "office" (although truth be told, I hold no ownership over this space, and reserve it just like everyone else) for several reasons. The setup of the couch and table provide a level playing field for my students and me. We sit together side by side on the big green couch. We are equally in charge, and typically, we project from the student's laptop onto the big screen. The student drives the session. This is neutral ground for both of us—I am not at a reference desk, or sitting behind my own desk. We are sitting together, and the student's needs drive the focus of the session.

The couch and the informal environment can often make our research consultations feel more like therapy sessions. There have definitely been tears of frustration shed in that room as students confess their fears about finishing a dissertation or master's paper. There has also been laughter, and confessional sharing (on my part as well as theirs) about the frustrations of finding information, managing articles and bibliographies, and mastering new (and sometimes, not so new) technologies.

We are in this together. That is the message that I hope our shared "office" brings to my students. We are working together to find great, relevant information, and we are collaboratively learning how to manage and organize it, for this semester and for the future. This is my personal challenge as well as theirs, and we tackle it as a team. At the heart of this approach is a commitment to affective, emotional learning, and a focus on the underpinnings of personal information management. Affective learning and personal information are inexorably linked, and they are the central focus of our collaborative work.

How does affective, emotional learning begin? Constance Mellon wrote, "Where anxiety is present, it must be allayed before the work of instruction can begin" (Mellon, 1988). All of our students come to us with some level of anxiety surrounding their research work. Whether it is nervousness at meeting one on one with a librarian, discomfort at laying bare their level of understanding on finding scholarly information, or fear of tackling new software or technologies, anxious emotions are almost always present at some level in a research consultation. Implicitly acknowledging students' fears does not need to happen verbally. Acceptance can come implicitly through listening carefully to a student articulate his or her research topic and scholarly challenges. Acceptance can be non-verbally implied by having students drive the session and guide the instruction toward their articulated needs. A neutral, accepting environment sets the tone for learning to begin. *Affective competence*, managing the feelings and emotions that students encounter throughout the content creation/research process, is essential to academic success. Affective information literacy researcher Carol Kuhlthau suggests that underdeveloped affective skills can hinder student learning and motivation:

"When students think they are the only ones confused or unsure, they lose confidence in their own ability to accomplish the task, and they lose motivation to press on. They need to learn to expect certain feelings and to develop strategies to work through each stage of the research process." (1985, 23)

The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000) (the Standards) are cognitively focused on the skills students need to find, evaluate, ethically use, and cite information. These are core abilities, and the next revision of the Standards will reflect affective, emotional competencies as well. Embracing the spectrum of cognitive and affective learning in the Standards will enable more thoughtful, emotionally responsive teaching strategies. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (2007) include affective competencies (framed as "dispositions" within the Standards) and provide a K–12 model for acknowledging students' emotional challenges in the research process. Just as it is crucial for our students to acquire core literacies, it is essential that they learn how to manage the anxieties and emotions that will emerge throughout all phases of the learning process. The tears that come as students share their frustrations or worries with regard to their academic work are not a bad thing. Academic work is cloaked in emotional layers. Librarianship that acknowledges students' affective learning needs can be messy, but is always intensely rewarding for the student and the librarian.

We are in this together. Remembering students' affective emotional needs (and designing an environment that comfortably addresses those needs) is critical. Just as important is bringing a personal focus to every facet of the learning session. Cortada (2012) wrote, "All researchers are archivists, whether they know it or not" (p. 165). This applies to faculty, but also to students, who are not just gathering information or data, but are building their own personal libraries and archival collections of their work. These nascent personal libraries will (hopefully) stay with them throughout their coursework, into the paper/dissertation-writing process, and migrate with them into their professional careers. In an ideal world, scholars begin building a "library" of research materials, including articles, research data, notes, and citations, during their academic years, and migrate that library from platform to platform as technologies die and new ones emerge, adding new artifacts and articles to it regularly. The personal scholarly library should, in effect, be a malleable collection of information that builds throughout a scholar's career.

For every student interaction, the focus should be on the student's immediate and forecasted future research needs, and on the foundational steps in creating the student's personal research library. Are students using Mendeley, Zotero, Endnote or another bibliographic citation manager? Are they using Dropbox or other cloud storage? What is their plan for managing files? Where do they annotate and write research notes for their articles—online or offline? Have they found technology solutions that match their needs? Assessing comfort with and needs related to technology is an important component in affective learning and in reinforcing personal information management: Has the student achieved a research workflow that is comfortable, intuitive, and linked with scholarly

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practices? There is no right answer to this question; what matters is that the student settles upon an online (and/or offline) workflow that meets his or her needs.

The forthcoming revision of the ACRL information literacy standards will also cover the skills inherent to personal information management and content creation. While the previous iteration of the Standards centered on information use, the scope of how students employ, organize, and archive information has radically changed. The significance of the physical library has receded, and in its place of importance is the individual user's library. Our goal as teaching librarians is shifting to a focus on the building of the user's library, entwined with and enabled by use of the communal, physical (and more often, virtual) library.

Affective learning and personal information management are the guiding tenets of my work with students in our shared office. The questions that I ask during each research session are guided by informal assessment of students' affective needs, and a focus on guiding each student towards continued personal library creation and information management. This approach brings repeat customers; as students work through one phase of their workflow, they may come back for another consultation session when they encounter challenges or difficulties during another part of the process. Ultimately, the papers and dissertations are finished, and my students move on. As they leave, my hope is that they carry with them the ability to view the research process in a positive emotional light, and that they understand the lasting significance of the information they have gathered (as well as the information they have created) during their academic work. We must approach information literacy as an emotional and

ultimately rewarding process, and we must frame information creation as a personal act that contributes to a student's individual and lifelong information collection. Each day in my "office," my students and I work toward this goal, and I look forward to having new Standards to guide my work, reflecting these focal and essential areas of learning.

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