Unlearn What You Have Learned: Digital Disorganization and Information Literacy Instruction

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INVITED COLUMN [PERSPECTIVES]

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ABSTRACT

Traditional organizational schemes utilized for class design and for the organization of research materials means little to students comfortable with the disorganized internet environment. This article examines how constructivist principles and the disorganization of the internet was utilized to design a unique online information literacy course.

INTRODUCTION

When I was challenged to design an upper division research and information literacy course to be delivered wholly online, I hunted through the literature for those perfect articles that would give me all the answers about designing online information literacy classes. What I found instead were two publications that altered my view of online learning altogether.

The first of these was an article by Roy Rosenzweig titled "Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past," in which Rosenzweig analyzes the accuracy of history articles in Wikipedia and speculates how such a tool may be utilized by historians.

In 2006, when this article was published, many librarians and academics were skeptical that unmediated publication would ever have any kind of academic authority and actively sought to discourage any student use of Wikipedia. Rosenzweig, however, called Wikipedia "the most important free historical resource on the World Wide Web (Rosenzweig, 2006, p. 119). He also states, "One reason professional historians need to pay attention to Wikipedia is because our students do" (p. 136). Rosenzweig acknowledges that the articles in Wikipedia reflect the specialized interests of the contributors and that the articles lack the literary sophistication and voice of well known historians. Based on those observations, he presents this intriguing idea: "Could we, for example, write a collaborative U.S. history textbook that would be free to all students? An open source textbook would not only be free to everyone to read, it would also be free to everyone to write" (p. 145). Wikipedia's alternative publishing model with its collaborative nature, suggests an alternative not only to the traditional publishing industry but also to the self-contained tutorials and lessons commonly used in online class design. As technology changes the scenario for the production and presentation of research material, can the accepted format for information literacy instruction likewise shift? The ideas presented in Rosenzweig's article started to push my ideas about the pedagogy for online learning and online class design in a new direction.

A second publication shifting my view of online learning was David Weinberger's book "*Everything is Miscellaneous*, *The Power of the New Digital Disorder*" (2007a) in which he explores the implications of the complete lack of formal organization that information in digital format offers. No matter how often librarians show them the tricks of the trade and espouse the virtues of subject headings and controlled vocabularies, students merrily search Google first with whatever keywords come to mind. Searching our precious databases in the same way, they click through catalog records and article titles with lightning speed and show no regard for the painstaking work required to create the databases and indexes. Reading Weinberger's book made me realize why this is so. Most students now entering college have no experience with the print-based organizational methods of library catalogs and databases. Traditional organizational schemes mean nothing to students who are learning research skills in the random, digital, free-for-all of the internet. Anyone can, as Weinberger explains, create unique organizational schemes based on what is relevant to each individual.

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UNLEARNING TRADITIONAL RESEARCH INSTRUCTION

Rosenzweig's article about Wikipedia and the creation of information and Weinberger's book about the organization of information are just two examples of what the online environment demands of information literacy instruction. Designers of online courses must heed Scott's (2008) advice to "unlearn what you have learned about controlling your online content." This quote comes from an article about marketing, but some would say that librarians are marketers of sorts and students are customers. "Face it: Nobody cares about your products and services except you and others in your organization. What your potential customers do care about are [sic] themselves. They care a great deal about solving their problems."

It struck me that presenting students with problems to solve using the research resources available through the library and general internet provided a good framework for an online class, so the final design of my class included 13 modules in which students are given problems to solve. While they are directed toward library-based resources, they are not restricted to specific methods of searching or to the use of library vetted material.

The first 10 modules require students to explore resources and write a 4 to 6 paragraph evaluative essay at the end of each module that they post on a class wiki. The final three modules require more research and longer writing assignments. Group work is not required at any point, although the students often form study groups, and the wiki does allow for interaction between students. Students receive some investigations mandates. For example, when reviewing and comparing reference sources, students must include comments about the organizational structure, be it print or online. The modules build on each other so that the students' skills continue to expand as they move through the course. Students choose the subject areas they wish to explore, personalizing the research experience. Because students are writing about personal experiences in a public wiki space and everyone in the class can read the posts, they have little to no opportunity to plagiarize.

The assignment for which the students show the most enthusiasm involves investigating and analyzing hoax sites. My favorite one to read is a module in which the students choose an area of research, find five important books, authors, or journals related to the research subject, and justify their choices. In a final essay, students read a lengthy web "rant" by Jaron Lanier about the wisdom of trusting the collective unconsciousness of the internet, then argue for or refute one or more of his points by employing their research skills.

STUDENT REACTION

Most students expect an online class to consist of a series of hoops to jump through in an orderly checkbox fashion. Students find the first 2 weeks of this online class difficult because few of them have used a wiki (although the WetPaint wiki used utilizes many of the features of Facebook), and most of them have done no more than skim the surface of the internet for academic research. Even juniors and seniors in the class have little experience using library resources. Usually by the third module, the students realize that they can control the manner and content of their learning and become comfortable with the structure and pace of the class. They become confident

researchers as they delve into the complexities of both the internet and of research. Without heavily structured course content, I am free to act as a facilitator and a guide, responding to students as their individual level of research sophistication develops.

The following quotes are excerpts from student essays written during a module that focused on ways students experienced information organization presented by library databases and internet resources. In this lesson, students were to watch David Weinberger's Google Tech Talk about his book (2007b), then find the book in the University Library catalog, note the subject headings, and use those subject headings to search an article database of their choosing. Next they were to use those same subject terms to search Google and Google Scholar, comparing the results. What they learn from that experience is unique to each student.

"I must say, this assignment felt quite daunting to me at first. However, I feel that I have learned quite a bit about how information is grouped and categorized in specific places. I know that, depending on what I am looking for, some databases will be better than others. I know that being more specific in search terms will yield more specific results."

"I learned the importance of paying attention to the subject heading and using the drop down menu to refine my search. The results were entirely different when I did this."

"I had never looked up subject headings when doing my research. I found it extremely useful."

"I work in the law library at a prison.

I found it interesting that David [Weinberger] mentioned that writers and publishers determine what is printed in encyclopedias. The inmates are always complaining if there is a certain topic they are trying to find that isn't in the book. I always tell them to complain to the publisher."

"That tree diagram he [David Weinberger] showed was very similar to the Incident Command System used in the military and fire service."

"What I learned was that WHERE you do your searches is just as important as what you enter into a search engine."

The learning outcome for this module was for students to critically analyze and evaluate materials and information. These comments show the variety of learning experiences that can result from the same investigation. In a traditional class setting, the professor may have provided a bulleted list of the organizational features of the online resources and set the students to investigate each one. With little direction, students discover the importance of those features on their own.

Assessment

In designing my class, I sought to provide students the freedom to explore various subjects and approaches to research. There is a wide range in the level of research maturity demonstrated in postings for assignments, making it difficult to apply simple assessment tools.

Assessment is necessary of course, not only for grades, but also for determining if the course design was effective. I decided to use a rubric and established what I believed to

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be measurable criteria for each of my learning objectives. As anyone who has used rubrics can attest, they are tricky to construct and very tricky to apply! In spite of this, I felt that when I chose this teaching method, using a rubric was the best way to assess the effectiveness of assignments. One of the things I have learned through this process is that using a rubric as an assessment method served mostly to force me into an awareness of what I was asking students to learn. My students are not the only ones constructing new knowledge!

CONCLUSION

Naomi Baron, a professor of linguistics at American University, organized her book *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World* so that "depending on your interests you may gravitate to some chapters more than others" (Baron, 2008). Baron goes on to explain to readers that they can skip around her book to find the type of information they seek, in the same manner they use the internet to jump back and forth between topics.

Technology has made some aspects of academic research much easier, but the tools can be more complicated and confusing than the more ordered and straightforward methods of the past. By looking past the tendency to reduce learning to a series of ordered steps to the final goal of information literacy and "unlearning" preconceived notions about the structure of the digital world, designers of online courses can give students control of their learning, making every class and library visit meaningful.

Even as I work to update and improve the class content, ongoing research reveals new challenges to my shifting paradigms. "The Internet has always been a machine of many

contradictions, both in the way it works and in the way it is used and perceived. It's an instrument of bureaucratic control and of personal liberation, a conduit of communal ideals and of corporate profits" (Carr, 2008, p 110). As long as this is true, helping students to become thoughtful, critical consumers of information will continue to be a challenge for reference and instruction librarians who are designing and teaching information literacy courses.

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