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Review of Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice

Rachel A. Koenig

Virginia Commonwealth University, rakoenig@vcu.edu

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**Review of *Learner-Centered Pedagogy:
Principles and Practice*
by Kevin Michael Klipfel and Dani Brecher Cook**

Reviewed by Rachel A. Koenig, Virginia Commonwealth University

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As the volume of information expands and the complexity involved in conducting research at the college level rises, librarians play an increasingly important role in helping students and faculty gain the skills necessary to navigate and access the complicated world of scholarship. Librarian job descriptions contain far more language about instruction than ever before, and many librarians are required to teach instruction sessions even if instruction is not one of their primary job responsibilities. At the same time, the concepts of pedagogy and instructional design are missing from the curricula of most library science degree programs. This decades-long issue dates back to 1993, when a study by Diana Shonrock and Craig Mulder found that instruction librarians acquired teaching skills on the job through trial and error. Instead, librarians would have preferred to learn pedagogical skills during library school (Shonrock & Mulder, 1993). Kevin Michael Klipfel and Dani Brecher Cook's *Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice* helps to rectify this issue and supplies much-needed foundational theory as well as practical advice and anecdotes from personal experience to help librarians work with their students from a more personal and empathetic perspective.

Klipfel and Cook, both seasoned librarians and instructors of information literacy, begin their monograph with an introduction summarizing the current predicaments outlined above concerning instruction and the library profession. Additionally, the authors outline the methodological foundations for the book, maintaining that the theories employed, including those from the education literature, such as counseling psychology and learner-centered teaching, are soundly based on evidence and that "the ultimate arbiter of whether to include any theoretical idea is if it has been demonstrated to facilitate learning" (p. xiii). As a health sciences librarian, this reviewer appreciates and acknowledges their call for a practical guide to teaching that is based on evidence-based principles. The reader may replicate or experiment with Klipfel and Cook's suggestions knowing that they are validated and based on quantifiable data or on multiple successful experiences in the classroom.

The next three chapters examine learner-centered pedagogy in more depth and separate the theory into digestible portions focusing on a number of important associated concepts, including motivation, empathy, and the establishment of meaningful relationships between librarians and students that can be applied to library instruction. According to Klipfel and Cook, learner-centered pedagogy "encourages library educators to encounter the learner as an individual with personal interests, preferences, and motivations, and a uniquely human set of cognitive capacities" (p. 2-3). The authors examine the correlation between student

motivation and classroom engagement and explain that a student's personal experiences and sense of self influence learning. Students are more likely to experience success when they feel a personal connection to the subject, trust that they supported by their instructor, and believe they have some autonomy in the classroom. Therefore, it is important for the librarian to place the student at the center of everything they do during instruction sessions. This, the authors argue, will improve student engagement, content retention, and future transfer or application of what they learn to new settings. Klipfel and Cook suggest librarians would do well to question, "What is it like to be a person learning something?" In doing so, librarians become empathetic toward their students while also discovering students' interests.

In Chapter 3, Klipfel and Cook discuss six cognitive principles all librarians should keep in mind when developing instruction sessions: (1) limit learning outcomes, (2) focus on a problem to solve, (3) build a narrative, (4) activate background knowledge, (5) focus on deep structure, and (6) active learning is practice of deep structure. The authors explain the theory behind each principle but also provide concrete applications of how these principles might be put into action in an instruction setting. The efforts taken by the authors to provide examples, tell stories, and model their behavior in the classroom aligns with the tenants of the learner-centered approach. In other words, they anticipate the needs of their readers and attempt to understand the ways in which they learn while reading and digesting the book's content.

One of the most poignant and practical examples provided by the authors focuses on the development of learner-centered research questions. Klipfel sets the stage through his narration of an experience in high school when a teacher dismissed his idea to write a research paper about Johnny Rotten, a 1970s punk rocker. The teacher did not view this individual as an important historical figure, and thus Klipfel disengaged from the assignment which led to "a significant decrease in his motivation throughout the rest of his high school career" (p. 18). In so many words, Klipfel is explaining that instructors, whether they realize it or not, have a profound impact on the psyche of their students. To ensure this experience does not happen to their students, Klipfel and Cook developed a Topic Selection Flowchart that walks students through choosing a research topic based on their own personal interests, no matter the content of the course. While instructors in high school and in higher education often allow students to write about a topic of their own choosing, this allowance is not enough. The authors assert that students ultimately choose a topic they

believe sounds scholarly or because they believe it will be easily researched because “learners simply may not see how to bridge the gap between their authentic selves and academic demands” (p. 29). The Topic Selection Flowchart, however, provides students with a tool to establish authentic curiosity about a topic. Klipfel and Cook argue the importance of engaging with teachers and faculty in a dialogue about this low-hanging fruit. Librarians are often asked to provide instruction for courses around the time when students are choosing a research topic. This, the authors declare, is an opportune time for librarians to showcase their expertise and understanding of learner-centered pedagogy to facilitate student success.

In the final chapter, Klipfel and Cook discuss current technologies librarians might utilize in the classroom setting. These technologies include clickers, Prezi, and library research guides. The authors also mention more low-tech technologies such as handouts and how these may have a greater impact on learning, retention, and engagement when compared to technologies that are more of a novelty. While this chapter is informative and asks librarians to consider whether the technology enhances or detracts from the learner-centered process, it reads more as a supplement that was added at a later date. The book concludes with a wrap-up of the ways in which learner-centered pedagogy can be applied to several aspects of librarianship outside of instruction, including reference, outreach, collection development, and cataloging. For instance, reference librarians (who sometimes fill a counseling role when helping students interpret their assignments) should listen to a student’s needs and interests during the reference interview, whereas collection development librarians have the opportunity to become learner-centered in their collection of items that reflect the needs and interests of the student body. Advocating for increased open access initiatives may be a good example of these collections-based and student-focused interests.

Klipfel and Cook are systematic in their organization of the book. They highlight key objectives at the beginning of each chapter and end each chapter with references and additional materials that may be useful for librarians interested in further exploration of topics. However, in-text citations are lacking throughout the monograph and there are often instances when the authors employ sweeping statements. For instance, they mention that “Psychologists and information scientists have studied...” (p. 65), but no psychologists or information scientists are named or cited.

Some additional critiques concern the book’s relative simplicity. Some items discussed by Klipfel and Cook are not as surprising as the authors would like to suggest. For instance, in

Chapter 3, they mention that students retain less information as the amount of classroom content increases. This concept is not novel nor is it surprising, and most instruction librarians are aware that two or three learning outcomes are appropriate for any one instruction session. Furthermore, in Chapter 5, the authors discuss the importance of fostering a growth mindset and how to connect this to ways in which librarians interact with students in the classroom or at the reference desk. Their inclusion of this information is useful; however, their practical suggestions are lacking. They suggest modeling at the reference desk an imperfect search to demonstrate how even an expert researcher is vulnerable to mistakes and failed searches. This is not the most novel suggestion, and instead it might be more productive for the student to actively practice their search (rather than the librarian leading the search) and be allowed to fail. The librarian at that point can assist, employing the tenets of learner-centered pedagogy, and model how the search could be improved. Additionally, the authors discuss the importance of students' abilities to transfer skills into new settings, but they never discuss the ways in which transfer of skills might impact the student when he or she enters the workplace. This maybe have been a lost opportunity.

Overall, Klipfel and Cook validate the many roadblocks librarians encounter when designing an instruction session (faculty want them to teach everything, students lack interest, etc.), but they also provide evidence-based theory and experience-tested examples of the many opportunities for librarians to promote information literacy instruction on their campuses and make it more meaningful and personal for students. Librarians who do this successfully have the potential to enhance retention efforts on their campuses, especially at a time when student engagement and success must be the goal of every faculty and staff member on campus regardless of their department or field of focus. Finally, after discovering Klipfel and Cook's *Rule Number One: A Library Blog* as a new instruction librarian back in 2013, this reviewer is pleased to discover that the authors continue to advocate for humanistic education via publication of an ALA edition. *Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice* is a great read for library students who would benefit from developing a stronger theoretical foundation related to library instruction. The content is additionally relevant for current librarians who are looking to improve their teaching practice or become more learner-centered elsewhere in the library.

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