Hybrid Pedagogy

"Hands-Off" Teaching: Facilitating Conversation as Pedagogy in Library Instruction

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> "Knowledge creation is a conversation."
> — R. David Lankes

> "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions — a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom."
> — bell hooks

Genesis

I have an abiding belief that learning begins in conversation. Both instincts and my own experience in the classroom tell me that when you engage a student in conversation about their "topic" you are often engaging them in a way that gives voice to an idea that has just been rolling around in their heads, one they may be really struggling with and not even know how to approach. When they engage with each other, they become part of what I have previously called a community of scholars — making meaning and contributing to knowledge together. Which is also how learning happens.

I and my fellow librarians have, over the years, spent untold amounts of time in meetings together discussing information literacy, our personal approaches and practices and all that they encompass, but most particularly how these things impact our actual classroom teaching. There has been an evolution of practice, to be sure, in that amount of time as we have consistently reflected on our collective and individual practice. We have grappled with standardization, best practices, the framework, one-shot instruction, and discouragingly, the seeming lack of interest or attention from students and their professors for our efforts, which seemed then and still seems now stubbornly persistent despite all of our strides in practice.

Years ago, when everything in librarianship seemed to be in flux while at the same time being evaluated and given dire prognoses, there were voices raised over the role of librarians in the classroom (a viewpoint I felt extremely limited by) as well as the endless (though necessary) discussions of the best way to both deliver and assess information literacy, I began to very seriously reevaluate my own practices as a librarian in the classroom. The times are changing, for sure, and while I don't normally mind getting caught up in the controversy, I have come to the conclusion that the endless debates that those in our profession engage in effectively displace our attention from our current practice and our own agency. Instead, we need to think about how we can make a difference in our sessions, one class at a time. One hardly needs a mandate in order to reflect on our own practice and to simply try something different. Trust our own instincts? Absolutely. But this trusting of our instincts was and in some places still is a radical act in the pedagogical practice that librarians have been engaged in.

In my own experience, as a new librarian teaching what was then called "bibliographic sessions," it was expected that the professor who asked you to come to class would both set and drive the agenda. In the beginning of my career, I found that comforting, since I was unsure of what I was doing and would not have particularly known how to drive the agenda if I had been asked to. The professor in the class always had clear expectations of

what I was expected to "deliver" prescribed beforehand. Usually I was told to "show them databases, keyword searches, how to find a book." This was easy — too easy in fact. I very quickly became disillusioned with the role of some sort of ersatz instructor, merely auxiliary to the learning process. Often I was asked to come into the class too early in the semester (especially for freshman), frontload all that the professor thought would help them. Often, upon my first meeting with students, I was expected to deliver my information literacy content *before* an assignment was even given! The students had no interest in instruction, most especially when it was not tied to an assignment they would be responsible for — they did not perceive the need for any investment on their part. The professors' unconvincing exhortation to students to seek a librarian's help if they had difficulties had no focus — *What do you actually ask a librarian?* they seemed to wonder, as they had little or no knowledge as to what I actually *could* help them with.

The ACRL Framework, a recently revised document of information literacy standards exemplifies the fact that librarians are no longer (if we ever were) "point and click" instructors, but partners in the educational process both *in* and *out* of the classroom. The very basis of what we do in the classroom can be found in the conceptualization of ideas and the preparation to work with other realms of information and knowledge, all in the spirit of inquiry, a term I prefer over "research" since it implies an active and willing participation in knowing and understanding, rather than the simple amassing of sources, usually in the form of downloaded articles, for instance. Not surprisingly, one of the frames in the framework is "research as inquiry".

My frustration rose as professors were often happy to get the library portion out of the way as though it were more of an obligation or expectation (something to check off the list) than a *strategic* and much need information literacy *collaboration*. What I felt, out of (good) instinct was the desire to simply walk into a class, work hard to make connections, and get a conversation going. *It was really as simple as that.*

Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, I came to realize that I could not simply talk to a professor whose class I was asked to do a session in about collaboration. It didn't work that way. I created lesson plans that were unique and off the beaten path of what professors were expecting, though I sought to cover what was needed — just not in the same way. My credibility and the credibility of my colleagues grew with not talking about our strategies, but simply enacting them in the classroom, showing an ethic of care for the student and striving to eliminate the "one shot" instruction sessions we were often restricted to. One-shot sessions are those in which a professor will ask you to come to class and cover numerous points of instruction involving databases, keyword searching, annotated bibliographies and any other number of things. It was impossible to cover everything, and in the attempt, students got little more than frustration as a result —

something I could sense in the classroom. All instructors need time with students to build trust, rapport, and relationships that make them conducive and receptive to learning. We were always under pressure to cover too much in one session. As a result, I began abbreviating my lessons and then asking for another session, which, to my surprise, I was often given, though reluctantly. After a time my strategy paid off and instead of being the drop-in in the class, collaborations began to form, almost all of which continue to give me a tremendous sense of satisfaction.

PRACTICE

Because I have often been met with that glazed-over look by the students whom I stand before, I decided to take a "hands off" approach during my first (and often subsequent) sessions with students in any given class. What that means, specifically — and this is important — is that the students before me and all of their attendant informational needs are, in that moment, more important than the technological tools and databases both they and the professor in the class expect me to use. In fact, I prefer to have my first (usually of three) sessions with students in a regular classroom and not a computer lab for this very reason, where I will compete for their attention with the large screens in front of them. That means I get to look them in the eye, and they, too, get to size me up — and they do, to be sure. They cannot hide behind a computer screen and I cannot use my "bag of tricks": keywords, Boolean searches, etc. to deflect the "conversation," where I believe the seed of real learning takes root.

I have learned so much about teaching in the tradition of the great radical educator Paulo Freire who rejected the "banking" system of education — the notion that we, the educators, stand up in front of a room and "deposit" knowledge into the heads of our students who come to us as "blank slates" with nothing to offer and everything to gain — that is, what we as the "all-knowing" librarian can give them. *I seek to do exactly the opposite.* I want to break down those barriers and engage them in what *they* may be thinking. I will often begin with a conversation about the expectations they may have for the session — which are usually pretty low — I joke about how tired they look, how much coffee I myself just slugged down, how I know how difficult it is to go from an idea to a topic to a paper. *I empathize.* I give them permission to dwell in the phase of confusion and unknowing. I meet them where they are. They begin to open up. But more importantly than getting them to speak to *me* in class is getting them to speak with each other. *I encourage a loud class*. I like to pair them up and hear their conversations. I encourage crosstalk. I like to "tag team" with students as they throw an idea out — I will add something to it and encourage others to do the same. We conceptualize out loud. We "crowd source" for ideas, mine the wisdom of the group. In this way they can see for themselves how knowledge is made, which is not in the dark and dank vacuums of our

themselves how knowledge is made, which is not in the dark and dank vacuums of our their own heads, where ideas not fully formed bump and bristle not against one another, but *with* and *among* others. I never remind them to keep on topic — conversations go where they need to go. And often their conversations will take some arterial routes and go off the beaten path. In that case, I let them go where they thing they need to go. Here are students, for a time, "unplugged" and it is both a rare and a beautiful thing to behold.

Not surprisingly this approach has required me to teach with the courage of my convictions. If I am asked to a class because of my professional expertise, then I can act in partnership with the professor to come to agreement on expectations, but I no longer take orders. Information literacy is not about "service"; it is about *learning*. Professors will often ask me: *What about databases? Key words? Boolean searches?* I make it clear that all of that cannot and should not be frontloaded into the first session. That students do not learn to do research by searching strategies — it is not a "search and find" problem — it is a problem of conceptualization and thinking. The constructivist approach works as we build on knowledge — first by tossing out ideas, putting flesh on bare bones, providing a context for where to begin. For lack of a better term, the conversation that leads to conceptualization "primes the pump." I encourage them to write down the ideas that come to them while we are all processing out loud — sometimes with words and sometimes with sentences that they will access later on. I tell them that "ideas get tested in paragraphs," that writing in narrative form will naturally encourage and generate more connections, more ideas.

Educational theories are continuously changing to reflect the time and place in which we and our students find us. *This is a good thing*. Encouraging our students to begin to converse with themselves, with us, and with each other is far from radical — although in the present climate of tools-based learning, where content knowledge is packed into databases just waiting to be unlocked with an imaginary and magical key, it can seem as though it is.

All of learning begins with inquiry; of this there can be no doubt. J.F Lyotard, the French philosopher, sociologist and literary theorist asks the questions all educators should ask themselves: "*Can learning be transmitted? Facilitated? Through which medium?*" Librarians, in thinking about their approaches to information literacy, may want to begin with what seems most natural for them. For me it was rejecting the popular "tools" (considered 'low level') approach and, instead, working hard to get in touch with my students through conversation and surveying the landscape of their thoughts. I encourage students to recognize that *progress is made through process*. One can, for instance, begin by creating a climate that is hospitable and safe for the verbalization and articulation of thoughts, fears, and their intellectual anxieties. What, exactly do students, in that moment, that

place in time, actually need? We need to be mindful of the anxiety that students often feel around librarians, which in my opinion, occurs, at least in part, because of not only stereotypical representations, but also because they are not (and may have never been) very clear on what our role actually is. We can help by adding to the conversation of who we are and what they can reasonably expect from us in and out of the classroom. Then the conversation becomes reciprocal. If we ask of them their honesty and courage in putting forth their unformed ideas and thoughts, we must do the same. According to Klipfel:

> This approach to understanding students' needs — where an information and educational need is taken to be equivalent to understanding a student's individual interests — suggests a shift in perspective on the part of the educator from viewing oneself as an expert transmitting information to others, to a student-centered focus where the educator inhabits a more facilitative role (23).

Kenneth Bruffee has written extensively about the importance of conversation in education and learning. Bruffee has so astutely stated, "Conversation is of such vital importance to learning that without it, few of us would stand a chance." Conversation forges community and in community learning and *support* of learning happens. This is the fuel behind what Klipfel terms the *authenticity* in learning and teaching.

Karl Attard who has written extensively on the reflection process states, "Conversing with someone else offers the possibility of feedback and exposure to different viewpoints." A lovely byproduct, too, is that while engaging students in conversation, you are laying the groundwork for a connection to be made with a librarian that will go beyond that particular classroom experience. It almost always follows that if a student can make a connection with you in class, he or she will be more likely to seek you or a colleague out in the library having begun a conversation with one of you *outside* of it.

When students can make connections with others in class, with you as the facilitator of those conversations, they can begin to see themselves think in the classroom and begin to build the muscle that critical thinking calls for. There are limits, reasonably, to what we can achieve in one, two, or even five sessions in any given class, but what we can do is to lay a foundation for students to create their own process, to show them a way to begin, and to reassure them that it is okay not to know what you don't know. Further, we can steer them in the right direction so that they can say what they think and hear what they say while at the same time receiving feedback, sometimes in the form of questioning — this helps them to either solidify their positions or rethink them altogether. The "hands off" approach respects student thought and disabuses them that all they need to know can be found with their hands on a computer keyboard — when, actually, it begins within them, first.

In an age of technical rationality, we tend to favor what can be proven, that knowledge is in the domain of the experts and, when we must rationalize the use of the tools we pay for, we have forgotten that, as Parker Palmer states, "When we think things together, we reclaim the life force in the world, in our students and in ourselves." Further, he goes on to state the dangers of separating teaching from learning resulting in "teachers who talk but do not listen and students who listen but do not talk." A holistic classroom, ideally, will begin with conversation and end, quite possibly, in enlightenment and delight, for librarians, professors, and students alike.

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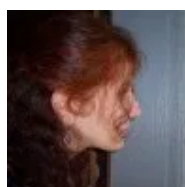
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