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Cornering the information market

Metacognition and the library

There we were, monitoring the Miller Library table at the Washington College Academic Resource Fair, coordinated annually as a preorientation activity for incoming freshmen. We had decided to try a new tactic in an attempt to appeal to the freshmen, which involved creating an interactive game to try to reach them at their own levels. We thought we had been fairly successful too, when a mother took one look at who we were and asked: “So. What do they need the library for, now that everything is on the Internet?” If parents exhibit this skeptical resistance, how does the library successfully appeal to their children, a generation that’s been dubbed “the instant generation,” who have been said to “believe their unalienable rights include instant service, easy assignments . . . and straightforward answers,”¹ all of which the Internet appears to provide?

As any experienced researcher realizes, finding good, reliable information is hardly ever as easy or straightforward as the Internet might lead users to believe. Arguably, the advancement of the Internet makes the existence of libraries, and, in particular, librarians, that much more essential; however, it clearly takes more than rhetoric to drive this point home.

The question, then, is how to guide students to an understanding of the complexity they face and of the necessity of the structure and guidance that libraries provide.

The current information environment

From the return of deliberately biased search results to a lack of clarity over what is complete and reliable, and what is not, the

Internet makes it difficult for researchers to realize the vast amount of information that they have missed. But this is not the only frame of reference that students lack in their approach to research, nor is it the only frame of reference that college educators assume is in place in student thinking. Our academic resource fair presupposes that students will come to a table if they are interested in the resource, that they will approach the needed authority and ask questions. The problem becomes the fact that many incoming students often do not even know what to ask. When they find themselves at the library’s booth, being questioned by a friendly librarian about whether they have any questions, many are at a loss and shake their heads. Students often know the basics and may, on some level, realize that there is more, but they either do not know how to ask about what more there is or they do not understand how it applies to them—why what they think they know isn’t good enough for their purposes.

Coming to these types of realizations about the information environment is not simple or straightforward. It requires what educators call *metacognitive awareness*. In the most basic terms, metacognitive awareness allows someone to “step back” and realistically assess what they do and do not know. Freshmen have difficulty with this type of thinking, on a variety of fronts. And,

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problematically, it is often the “[s]tudents with low level skills [who] hold inflated views of their own competence in information seeking and don’t know their own weaknesses.”² These students are also the least likely to seek out instruction and more likely to rely on self-taught research models; competency theory backs up this characterization of deficits when it comes to information literacy skills.

In a 2010 Project Information Literacy Report, self-taught methods were prominent in student’s research process. Moreover, self-assessment was the second most problematic area for students.³ In order for self-assessment to work, students must have practice applying metacognitive evaluation on their own research process; there is little indication that this happens on its own. While the challenge is significant on all academic fronts, librarians can assist students in terms of developing their metacognitive abilities. Libraries can be places where students take their prior knowledge and build upon it, both for their coursework and in learning how to collect and organize information.

Using popular culture to start the conversation

One way for libraries to begin to foster metacognitive awareness is to engage students in a dialogue that introduces the academic library by means of a common language. With the help and input of colleagues and student workers, we created an interactive game for our first-year students. We hoped that the fact that our game, Miller-opoly, was based upon Monopoly would help to create a common language with which we could communicate what we had to teach to the students. The properties became different resources our library has to offer; in the center of the board, we had printouts of our library’s floor plan and our Web site’s homepage. Participants were asked to locate the resource on which their piece had landed within either our library itself or our electronic real estate. Many of these decisions were made because student workers related

their own experiences with the fair and what it was like to attend, especially the feeling of being overwhelmed and unsure of how to even begin asking questions.

If a quantitative objective was the goal, the game didn’t work at all. Students could choose to play as many rounds as they liked, and not everyone who played took advantage of how much they could learn. However, if the objective was to create an opportunity for discussion, our game was successful. Miller-opoly provided students with basic facts about the library that could help them formulate questions on the spot. They were given the opportunity to acknowledge that they didn’t know what certain terms meant, such as *periodical*. As such, they could confront gaps in their knowledge in a very low-stakes situation. Moreover, the game gave students a frame of reference that might not have been there otherwise. From a metacognitive perspective, the game provides opportunities for students to recognize what they do and do not know by building off of a pre-existing framework.⁴

The truth is that students’ limitations both in knowledge and understanding have always been only half of the problem. What we have realized is that an understanding of the library and its purpose can only occur through collaborative effort. We need to recognize our own part in this misunderstanding and take steps to better understand where both parties are coming from. We must become aware of the fact that the “givens” of our everyday operations as libraries functioning in an academic environment are not necessarily part of our students’ frame of reference and act accordingly to help fill in that knowledge gap.

If we are having trouble communicating with students, we should step back and take advantage of our own metacognitive capabilities, using them to reflect on how well our current practices engage with our students and relate to the culture at large. Consulting our student workers and inviting them to actively contribute to our outreach

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It includes numerous photographs of people engaged in everyday activities, profiles of young Muslim Americans who have successful careers, basic demographic statistics, a timeline of Muslim history in the United States, and brief biographies of prominent Muslim Americans and their contributions to America. *Access:* <http://www.america.gov/media/pdf/books/being-muslim-in-america.pdf#popup>.



• **U.S. Relations with the Muslim World.** The Military Education Research Library (MERLN) mounted a huge collection of links to a wide variety of resources on the relations between Muslims and the United States. Included are U.S. government

“official” statements, Congressional hearings, special reports, and research done by organizations such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Brookings Institution. The time frame is 2001 through 2011. Although this site is decidedly more international than domestic in scope, it is included because federal actions and policies influence and reflect America’s complex relationships with Muslims both here and abroad. While the National Defense University Library maintains this site, a group of “military education research libraries” collaborate on its content. *Access:* <http://merln.ndu.edu/index.cfm?type=section&secid=265&pageid=35>.

Note

1. Pew Research Center survey *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/329.pdf. ❧

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efforts can aid us in our self-reflection, and incorporating popular culture can facilitate students’ understanding of what we’re about: Miller Library’s table at the academic resource fair attempted to do both.

Notes

1. Paige Jaeger, “Metacognition and learning in the library,” *Library Media Connection*, November-December 2007, http://static.schoolrack.com/files/20261/218668/library_diff_instr.pdf (accessed April 5, 2012).

2. Melissa Gross and Don Latham, “Attaining information literacy: An investigation of the relationship between skill level, self-estimates of skill, and library anxiety,” *Library & Information Science Research* (07408188) 29 (3) (09): 332–53.

3. Alison J. Head and Michael Eisenberg, “Truth Be Told: How college students evaluate and use information in the digital age,” (Seattle, WA: Project Information Literacy

Progress Report, The Information School, University of Washington, November 1, 2010), http://projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL_Fall2010_Survey_FullReport1.pdf (accessed April 5, 2012).

4. Unfortunately, we had no way to assess how effective the game was in terms of the retention of this new knowledge. One way to begin to assess this would be to use the game as a training device for new student workers, a suggestion that was made by a colleague. Our sample would be skewed by the fact that these students willingly volunteer to work at the library, but a more systematic exploration of the game would provide opportunities to measure how effective the game is in concrete terms. More players and more opportunity to measure their retention of knowledge would be optimal in terms of gauging how much students can learn over the longer term, when using this type of educational scaffolding. ❧