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MATERIAL-MIND-METHOD: ON THE TEACHING OF REFERENCE



Helping LIS Students Understand the Reference Librarian's Teacher Identity

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The library and information science (LIS) classroom setting for reference education is complex and busy. In a semester-long class, students are taxed with understanding concepts and acquiring skills. They take the first steps toward the challenging act of defining a reference source. They begin to acquire close knowledge of many information sources as they evaluate their structure, compare their content, and extract relevant information by using them to answer simulated and real patron questions. In practicing the stages of the reference dialogue (i.e., the reference interview), LIS students start to visualize their personal contributions to the reference encounter. Adler (2013) suggests that we reassess the label of the *reference interview* by renaming our interactions the “reference dialogue” (p. 2). The premise for this change in terminology is to construct an authentic space allowing for generative conversation, a balanced exchange where patrons not only bring their questions and experience but also bring substantial disciplinary knowledge. Through all of these efforts, LIS students become aware of the multiple roles of the reference librarian who serves as listener, inquirer, searcher, and provider of information. In 2002, James Elmborg argued, “the reference desk can be a powerful teaching station—more powerful, perhaps, than the classroom” (p. 455). Although the traditional reference desk has undergone changes in recent years with libraries shifting focus to virtual reference, the development of personal librarian services, and with some libraries closing their desks entirely, working with patrons in one-on-one reference interactions continues and it is the responsibility of the LIS educator to help students prepare for this changing reference environment. Through learning how to enhance a reference consultation with intentional teaching strategies, LIS students can promote learning among their patrons while creating an intellectual space for library patrons to personally connect with their librarian.

Elmborg proposes a student-centered pedagogy for the reference desk that mirrors the work of teaching in a one-to-one writing conference. LIS educators can replicate this model by challenging their students to practice

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asking thoughtful questions; listening to patrons as they talk through the research process; and, perhaps most important, paying close attention to not overstepping the learning process by answering questions beyond the level of patron expertise. Still, helping prospective reference librarians to craft their reference approach in a patron-centered manner is not enough. Elmborg asserts, “Above all, we need to oppose vigorously the notion that power and professionalism depend on maintaining special skills that librarians withhold from patrons or students” (2002, p. 463). In other words, LIS educators need to help their students understand how to share their expertise in a manner that encourages library patrons to model similar ways of thinking and practicing as they develop from novice to experienced researchers. One way to accomplish this is for us to help LIS students to actively cultivate their teacher identity during reference interactions and, in so doing, break down barriers of power between the librarian and patron.

We propose three principles for LIS students to consider as they strengthen their inner teacher for reference service. We ask them to (a) adopt a deep understanding of critical pedagogy and its impact on patron learning; (b) explore learning styles through the lens of diverse cultures and; (c) implement a critically reflective practice before, during, and after the reference conversation.

Adler reminds us that, “Dialogue is at the heart of critical pedagogy, and it is at the heart of critical thinking” (p. 4). Critical pedagogy (or critlib, as it is known in the library community) is a theory and approach to learning meant to guide the patron in questioning elements of power that influence beliefs and practices throughout political and social systems. One way to assist LIS students to implement critical pedagogy into their reference dialogue is to encourage them to examine the effects of power on information structures. For the purposes of developing teaching skills, we must turn critical pedagogy back onto ourselves as LIS educators. In other words, we need to make sure that we are not unintentionally reinforcing notions of power by the choices we make in teaching in our reference courses. For example, a reference desk can be seen as a place of power, creating a physical and metaphorical barrier that LIS students can learn to easily fix by coming out from behind the desk to work with a patron side-by-side at a computer station. Another troublesome example that can be addressed through critical pedagogy is to avoid continually demonstrating the same resources for all patrons as if a single database can solve each and every research question. In modeling how, as experts in finding information, we should be able and willing to help our LIS students learn to locate alternative voices represented in the scholarly conversation. Our students, in turn, can learn to assist patrons during the reference dialogue in contextualizing the notions of authority. Furthermore, new librarians should be cognizant that most often, our teaching role does not align with providing a specific answer for

the patron. Rather, we need to help our students learn how to work through a process of asking questions that will guide patrons through the research process.

These are just a few examples of how LIS educators can incorporate the principles of critical pedagogy within their classrooms to guide reference students in more closely evaluating the role power plays during the reference dialogue. By actively working to break down barriers between themselves and their patrons, LIS students will improve their teaching skills and increase communication and hopefully illuminating a clearer path to increased learning during the reference dialogue. How can LIS educators and students learn more about critical pedagogy? There is a growing *critlib* community in librarianship, with a steadily increasing number of publications, conferences, as well as a weekly *#critlib* chat on Twitter.¹

Diverse learning styles

The second step in strengthening our student's teacher identity is to assist them in greater understanding of the impact of diversity of learning styles in the way we approach the reference dialogue. A first step is to help students to examine their own assumptions about learning by completing a learning style assessment for themselves. We both use the Kolb Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, 1976). Even in a small graduate class, I have found that all four main Kolb learning style preferences will be apparent; at least one student will prefer to start his or her learning with concrete experience, whereas others will prefer reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, or active experimentation. While Kolb helps LIS students become more aware for how they like to learn, it is also important to help them learn how to apply this information not only to their own learning but also to their interactions with their fellow classmates and to their library patrons.

Although Kolb helps highlight diversity in learning styles, it is important to recognize that it does not fully address the cultural diversity that LIS students and their library patrons bring to the reference dialogue. LIS students can learn from direct interactions with international students and with others from diverse backgrounds. For example, as an American Indian woman, I often follow a protocol or etiquette in introducing myself that not only delineates aspects of my genealogy but also hints at my responsibilities and how I view the world. In joking, I sometimes say that I come from a land of corrupt politicians and bossy women. Other American Indians catch this inside joke when they realize that I am enrolled or listed on the roll of Ojibwe Indians of the White Earth Reservation and am a member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. By saying that I am *mukwa* or bear clan, I am disclosing that I am supposed to exhibit strength and courage (Johnson, 1976). As with other Native people, I might have a dark sense of humor, enjoy visual

learning and learning by doing, and be less likely to self-promote. All of these characteristics illustrate the cultural influences that patrons and LIS students bring to the reference dialogue.

Critical reflective practice

One of the most common inclinations of new teachers in the classroom is to assert a “sage on the stage” presence by acting as a lecturer of knowledge instead of engaging students in their learning process. In the reference dialogue, this may translate to an authoritarian presence (e.g., a lack of awareness of body language or tone of voice) that can put up walls between a librarian and a patron. One way to help LIS students counteract unintentional behavior is to assist them in learning how to adopt a critical reflection strategy, a strategy that has been discussed in the education literature and is increasingly used in assessment of information literacy instruction. Stephen Brookfield (1995) defines critical reflection as a process through which a teacher considers how power can frame and distort the educational process and by examining our assumptions that, on the surface, may make teaching easier but ultimately impede learning. Critical reflection is the glue that brings together critical pedagogy and an understanding of learning styles in the LIS students’ “learning to teach” toolkit.

Establishing a routine of critical reflection can be as simple as advising LIS students to take a few minutes after a reference dialogue to answer their questions about the interaction. Some questions to consider include the following: When did I feel connected/disconnected from the patron? Was there anything about the interaction that made me feel anxious? What would I do differently if I had the chance for a do-over? What do I need to learn in order to improve my reference skills? Did I adapt my knowledge to the patron’s level of understanding? In addition to collecting insights through self-reflection, Brookfield offers three additional critically reflective lenses through which to view teaching including referring to the professional literature, seeking input from our patrons, and asking for feedback from our peers.

How can critical reflection influence our work as reference librarians? Ultimately, the focus for LIS students should be on improving the reference dialogue across a spectrum of skillsets. Brookfield points out the need to establish credibility with a patron but also emphasizes the need to refrain from blaming ourselves when teaching does not go as planned. In addition, critical reflection can also assist in controlling how we approach a reference dialogue so that we do not leave the outcome of an interaction to chance. A practice of critical reflection sets a foundation for examining a rationale for how librarians teach during a reference dialogue. In reenvisioning Brookfield’s theory for the reference dialogue, LIS students learning about reference can lean on a theoretical underpinning to make informed decisions regarding how to approach working with patrons.

Summary

LIS students developing reference skills can be supported in understanding their identities as teachers by considering critical pedagogy, the effect of diversity on learning styles, and engaging in self-reflection during and after the reference dialogue. This triad of concepts and skills is important as students navigate the potential power differential that occurs between the patron and the librarian. Through learning how to welcome the patron as a partner in their research process, LIS students will acquire behaviors that are supportive and empathetic of their patrons.

Note

1. Learn more about critical pedagogy at <http://critlib.org/about/>.

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