Addressing the Need for Multiple Sites of Learning: A Response to Lauren Collen’s ‘Teaching Information Literacy in the Public Library’

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Review

Most teachers appreciate the many archetypes of student research papers: the student who couldn’t find “enough information” about her topic, the student who found the one source that said “everything” she wanted to say, and the student who found three websites through Google the night before the paper’s deadline.

There are others, too, but these three cover the basic patterns: students have difficulty finding enough information or the right information. The best information. Too often they keep their searches too narrow, or too broad, or give up because they run out of time. They’ve started their research too late and the paper deadline looms. For many, research is something to manage in the eleventh hour; and why not, since we live in the information age, when everything one could want to know is just a few clicks away?

Educators agonize over how to break these students habits. They prep students for research by assigning sample research syntheses, introducing library services, and asking for sources ahead of class time. They design curricula around information literacy and the immediate information-searching skills they hope students can acquire, but rarely do they think about the skills students may have already developed. College professors don’t devote enough time to considering how, by collaborating with multiple education platforms, they may have helped their students develop these information-literate skills even before entering the university.

Which is why Lauren Collen’s study, “Teaching Information Literacy in the Public Library: or, Why a Public Librarian Would Take on the Role of a School Librarian” is useful not only for public librarians but also for instructors at all levels of secondary and post-secondary education.

Collen, a librarian at the Niles County Public Library in Niles, Illinois, created a “computer camp” for students in grades 4-7 with the goal of helping these students develop transferable information-searching skills outside of a formal school
setting. Part of the goal of this camp was to help students grasp the recursive process of research, letting them experiment with word and keyword searches to create trails of information branching out from an initial word search. As she states,

When we [librarians] look for information on a topic, the more we search and the more we learn about the topic, the more we refine the keywords we use to search for more specific information...And it seemed to me that children needed permission to do the one truly important task of searching for information – to learn how to play with words (p. 13).

The problem her students faced should sound familiar to those teachers who have witnessed their time-crunched students fail to “play with words.” One of the hardest research tasks for students involves translating research questions into researchable, concrete search terms, perhaps, Collen suggests, because research feels too restrictive. As teachers and librarians, we understand that the key to finding information is to through linguistic experimentation. If “deforestation in Brazil” does not retrieve sources of value, we try synonyms like “logging” or “degradation.” We try broader searches – “logging in South America” – and we hop databases. In short, we play with language like children should; and it is this mindset which Collins seeks to promote within her students.

At the local level, her experiment provides an interesting concept for further collaboration between public libraries and schools, which could help students see information literacy as a transferable commodity to use in multiple educational platforms. This type of collaboration could be easily replicated across a number of local institutions and would carry much educational benefit: what better way to instill transferable skills than to let students actually transfer knowledge gained across these multiple platforms?

Perhaps what’s most enduring about Collen’s experiment is her desire to awaken in her students a curiosity about research. If from an early age colleges can collaborate not only with secondary schools but also with public libraries, we can help foster a love of learning which students will carry with them to their university careers and beyond – and the research skills to find what they need.

**Author Information**
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