

A SURREALIST REFRAMING OF THE RESEARCH PYRAMID

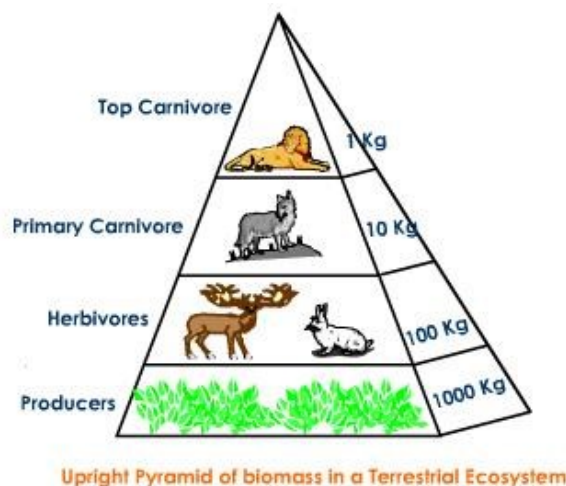
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BACKGROUND

At Furman University, the revised General Education Requirements (GERs) implemented in 2008 state that each of our new thematic First Year Writing Seminars (FYWs) will include a research paper and will have a library faculty member paired with it to work with students in developing the foundational information literacy skills for college-level research. Getting this statement included in the formal description of the FYWs was a big win for the library. All new students, even transfers, must take an FYW, so for the first time, we would be able to reach every first-year student. And the work that we did with them wouldn't be just a tour or general orientation unrelated to their current assignments. It would be course-integrated and focused on a very specific assignment that they needed to begin working on. We would be immediately relevant.

We developed a set of objectives that we would try to achieve with students in each of these courses. One of the main things it included was an understanding of various types of research sources and the recommended method of moving from broad sources, such as encyclopedias, to gradually more narrow sources as they refined and developed their topic. And of course to illustrate this process, we used the research pyramid—showing encyclopedias as foundational and ascending the pyramid through books, articles, then more specialized sources such as blog posts, media, etc.

Students have typically seen dozens, if not hundreds, of pyramid analogies/metaphors by the time they reach their freshman year. They've seen them for the food chain:



Upright Pyramid of biomass in a Terrestrial Ecosystem

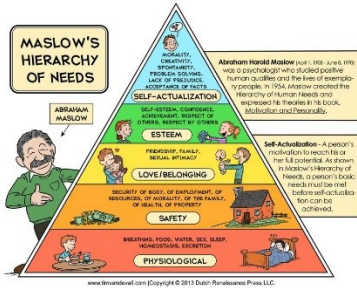
(<http://biology.tutorvista.com/ecology/ecological-pyramid.html>)

They've seen them for the ascension from data wisdom:



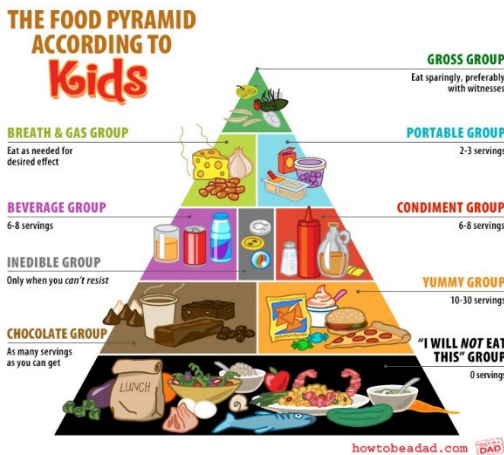
(<http://interactivemultimediatechnology.blogspot.com/2010/03/data-information-knowledge-wisdom-ibms.html>)

For Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:



(<https://storify.com/CLAU88HOTMAIL/maslow-s-hierarchy-of-needs>)

And, of course, there's the old FDA Food Pyramid. Though decidedly not created by the FDA, here is one of my favorite versions of the Food Pyramid:



(<http://www.howtobeadad.com/2012/10063/food-groups-according-to-kids>)

The reason pyramids are used to explain so many things is, of course, because they make good sense. They're a clear, effective analogy for the relationships among various categories. But I began to wonder whether all those pyramids stay distinct in student minds, or whether, instead, they all begin to blur. Perhaps into something like this:

(Unlabeled pyramid source: <http://www.karateobsession.com/2015/04/specialization-of-styles.html>)

In all honesty, though, my growing dislike for use of the pyramid metaphor for the research process was likely fueled as much by burnout as by concern over student discernment. I had been using that metaphor for twenty years, initially at the request of the faculty members with whose courses I was working, but eventually just by the demon of habit. In all of that use, however, I had never really considered the fact that pyramids are tombs. We're using a death metaphor to describe a process we're trying to bring to life for our students. We need a better metaphor. I tried a ziggurat—same shape, but different purpose, elevating priests above the flood waters and so on. Some of the faculty members enjoyed this, but students, understandably, didn't get the relevance.

EXAMPLES

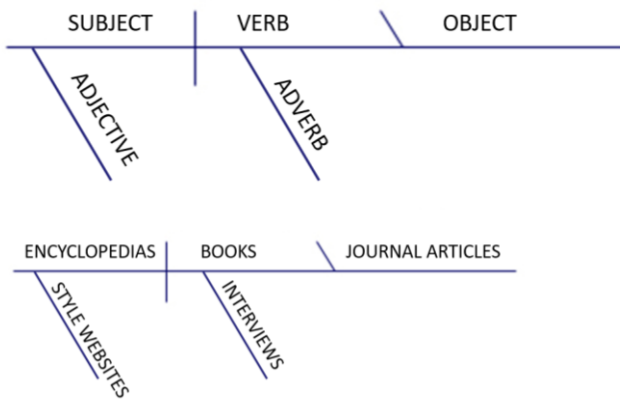
Given that each FYW has its own specific topic, and that the students we meet with are immersed in that content, I began to seek metaphors that connected with that content.

With an FYW called "Food as Metaphor," I use a recipe for my favorite vegan stew as the metaphor. I compare building from the most prominent ingredients to the ones you might use just a dash of. Encyclopedias are like the broth—they give an overview of a topic in which you simmer everything else. Books and scholarly journal articles are like beans and potatoes—hearty sources that give substance and credibility to the research paper. Newspaper articles are like flavorful ingredients used in smaller quantities—in my recipe, tomatoes and onions. And finally, more esoteric sources like photographs, blog posts, and so on, are like the spices—you might only use a tiny amount, but they make the difference between a palatable project and a delectable one.



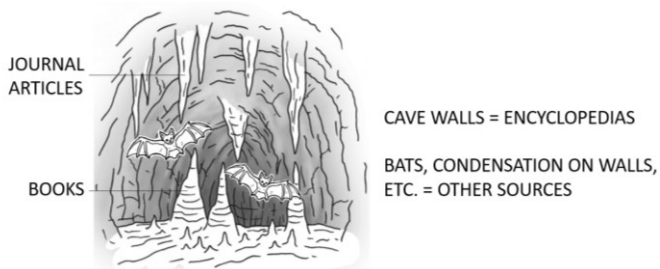
(Blank cauldron image source: <http://frompond.blogspot.com.au/2012/10/a-spooky-stew.html>)

Another seminar I work with is called “Who Speaks Bad English?” and has a research project about grammar rules. A sentence diagram can be used to parse various source types in the research process much like it can be used for understanding the interrelationships in parts of a sentence.



The starting point of a sentence, the subject, is correlated with encyclopedias. Books and journal articles are also crucial—like the verb and object of a sentence. After that, you add in modifiers such as adjectives and adverbs, in the same way you might add highly specific research sources such as interviews or personal web pages.

A third example is for an FYW entitled “Caves and the Literary Imagination.”



(Cave image source: <http://www.thunderboltkids.co.za/Grade6/02-matter-and-materials/chapter3.htm>)

Bat image source: <http://www.coloring-pictures.net/drawings/chiroptera/bat-is-flying-in-sky.php>

Encyclopedia articles are like the earth or rock enclosure itself. Then books and journal articles are the glittering stalagmites and stalactites. But beyond that, other research sources can be like the things such as condensation on the walls, bats that take you by surprise when you think the cave is uninhabited, bioluminescent flora, and other objects that can give a cave its personality and add an eerie magic to it all.

INTERACTION

At the LOEX 2016 conference, we began our creative process for our interactive workshop with destruction. I asked each participant to take one of the small, three-dimensional, paper research pyramids available on the front table. (See Appendix A for the template.) Then I asked them to destroy them—to smash them, rip them to shreds, incinerate them with their laser eye beams, or whatever. I asked them to use the catharsis to erase the pyramid from their minds.

I explained that the times when my brain works most creatively are when I am doing something that requires physical action but not much by way of conscious thought, like driving or showering. Taking them into a car or a shower was clearly not an option there, so I needed some other technique of stimulating the creative frame of mind. One of my favorite methods of doing that comes from the Surrealist movement in art, music, and literature. The Surrealists believed that you could access the subconscious and its rich creativity by banishing logic and rationality. To this end, they used games, stirring playfulness and chance into the machinations of their minds. The best known among the Surrealist games is called Exquisite Corpse. Playing it has nothing to do with corpses. It got its name from the first sentence that was created with the method: “The exquisite corpse shall drink the new wine” (Gooding, 1995, p. 25).

A worksheet guided participants through the Exquisite Corpse game—concocting nonsensical sentences with the others at their table. I told them that the sentences need not (and in fact should not) have anything to do with research or librarianship. I also told them that the activity would move very quickly. They should write the first thing that came to mind, automatically. On the worksheets were blanks labeled with various parts of speech. On their own handout, each person filled in the first two blanks, which asked for an article (an, an, the) and an adjective. They then folded the paper backwards on a printed line so their words would not be visible to the next person, and they passed it to the person next to them. That person would write the first noun that came to mind, then they would once again fold the paper backward and pass it to the next person. The third person would add a verb, fold, and pass. Then another adjective, then a final noun. Once the papers had

been passed such that all of the blanks were filled, they went around the table reading the resulting sentences, top to bottom. I asked that they try to visualize the events described in each sentence as they were read, but not to work too hard to understand it. They should let themselves wander into the dreamlike state you encounter when you realize it's OK for things not to make sense. Some of the resulting sentences follow.

“A mossy nugget screams delicate velvet.”
“A lovely turkey pontificated brilliant stars.”
“A wet skyscraper jumps quick coffee.”

The next activity was a little more directed toward research instruction. Each participant had a handout entitled Free Association. I asked them to take a moment to think of a course they work with that for which they'd like to have a new research process metaphor. Then they should think of three visible objects related to the course topic. I explained that these need to be objects that have several parts, so a football stadium would work, but not a football. A flower would work, but not a flower petal. I asked them to write the three objects on the three indicated lines on the worksheet. They then folded the paper on a line below their first word's section and passed the paper to the person next to them. That person was to read the object listed and write down the first object that came to mind in response to it. For example, if the first thing listed was “hand,” I would write “foot” in the box below it, because it is the first thing that comes to my mind. That person folded the worksheet backward after their response and passed it to the person next to them. That person would see the originator's second object in isolation so as not to be influenced or distracted by the other words on the paper. They would look at the object listed in the second section and write the first thing that came to their mind, then fold and pass again. The next person would read the object written in the third section and write their immediate response. Then the worksheets were passed back to the original person, who imagined a course they worked with and wrote the original three objects. At that point, they had six objects—their own original three and then three written automatically by three different people, each unaware of the topic of the course or of the other words on the page.

As we moved to the third worksheet, I asked if they felt loosened up, less bound into the straightjackets of logic and rational thinking. Many replied affirmatively. I asked them to take the handout entitled “Create” and write the name of the course they had decided on for the free association activity immediately before. Then, they should choose one of the six objects that they and their free associates had written on it. Unlike in the previous activities, I asked them to spend some time thinking about the components that made up the object and how they might assign aspects of the research process to each component, metaphorically. I acknowledged that we would not be able to create a polished product in the fifteen minutes allotted for the exercise. They should just try to get the metaphor started, then could continue to explore its possibilities during their own creative brain times

After some thoughtful silence and then vivacious writing and sketching, I asked them to volunteer to share their metaphors. They did a wonderful job with it. One participant was working with a course called “Writing War.” Their metaphor was an army, with the research process symbolized by a plan of attack. Books were the cavalry. Articles were the infantry. Other “weird” sources were the Reserves. Librarians and classroom faculty were the CICs. Database search techniques were the tactics. It was a clear and effective metaphor, remarkable in the speed of its creation. A participant working with a First Year Experience course called “Minds, Robots, and the End of Humanity” used the brain as their metaphor. They equated reference sources with dura mater and books and articles with grey matter. Other types of sources were like gyri and sulci.

CONCLUSION

Reference and Instruction Librarians have been among the most creative, ingenious, and generally cool people I've known. I would never have considered a degree and career in library and information science without those mentors and muses. The fact remains, however, that we teach the same techniques, concepts, and strategies to hundreds of students each year. The repetitive, methodical nature of this can sedate if not suffocate the creative process if we're not careful. One of the participants in the workshop came up to the front after the session and told me that she was so glad she had come to my workshop. She explained that she has to take a medication which halts creativity, but that the workshop activities helped her regain some of that type of thinking. The nature of our work can have the same neurochemical effect. I suggested that the creative parts of her psyche are still there—just as they are for librarians suffering from burnout or simply boredom. They're merely masked. The surrealist games allow us to access the spaces behind the mask—activating the subconscious powers of invention and association that can return interest and joy to us, and our students, in our pedagogy.

REFERENCES

Gooding, M. (Ed.). (1995). *A book of surrealist games: Including the little surrealist dictionary* (A. Brotchie, Comp.). Boston: Shambhala Redstone Editions.

APPENDIX A

Template for 3D research process pyramids:

