

LOEX 2015 Conference Report: Denver, CO

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The 43rd annual LOEX conference was held April 30-May 2, 2015 in the Mile-High City: Denver, Colorado. With an overall theme encouraging us to *Perfect Your Craft*, over 375 librarians were in attendance to learn from presenters and from each other. After a sampling of activities on Thursday, including a craft brewery tour and a stimulating pre-conference on using student artifacts in assessment, attendees enjoyed Friday and Saturday morning plenary sessions and then selected from a invigorating brew of 61 breakout sessions. Some highlights:

Reflections on Reflection. Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace the Meta

The first plenary speaker, Anne-Marie Deitering, talked about how reflection can improve teaching and inspire meaningful change. She is the Franklin A. McEdward Professor for Undergraduate Learning Initiatives at Oregon State University, and Head of the Libraries' Teaching and Engagement Department.

Deitering qualified her presentation by indicating that the meta, or thinking about reflection, is personal and autobiographical. What is enlightening for one person may be obvious to another. We reflect to inform our practice as teachers. Deitering's reflection was influenced by several books, including Char Booth's *Reflective Teaching, Effective Learning*, Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner*, Stephen Brookfield's *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, *Engaging Imagination* by Stephen Brookfield and Alison James, and *Feeling Power* by Megan Boler. She also conducted a study with colleague Kate Gronemyer where they analyzed stories of teaching practice told by librarians. Eight themes were identified, and an important one was power, mostly experienced in the negative, and often related to interactions with teaching faculty. A related theme dealt with flexibility, in being able to deal with uncertainty in the learning environment (such as changed assignments). These themes taken together mean that as instructors, we can become hung up in our reflections on perceived "failures" (e.g., not being flexible enough) as we compare ourselves to stories or ideals and find a mismatch.

She noted that hegemonic assumptions, Brookfield's term for those ideas that seem fine but may oppress and undermine us, need examination. For example, the practice of using varied teaching methods when giving a reflective assignment is misguided as it tries to make everyone (including teachers) comfortable. Instead, we should be trying to make students uncomfortable, as they are more likely to see things in new ways when shoved out of their comfort zone. The mind/body or thinking/feeling binary assumption – the idea that logic and reason are separate from emotion – also should be challenged. Emphasizing the thinking aspect too much can interfere with learning because experiences are tagged based on how others react to us, and are stored in the emotional part of the brain.

Strong emotional reactions to learning experiences are important and create a need to reflect. They help us transfer knowledge from past experience to new ones.

The "pedagogy of discomfort" emphasizes resisting simple binaries (e.g., thinking/feeling, novice/expert, scholarly/popular, and objective/subjective) to embrace a more complex world view. When we buy into the good/bad binary, we feel guilty when we do something as instructors that we think may have hurt students. This leads to rationalization during reflection to make the original self-critique go away. Working in the middle between the binaries (i.e., we're not good or bad) requires us to accept the discomfort of uncertainty and complexity.

Deitering stated that our aim in teaching should be to encourage students to question core beliefs through open-minded inquiry; and to consider bodies of works and be skeptical and reject sources that they "know" are right. Asking students to question what they believe, and their sources of information, is threatening. But to be information literate means that what we accept today may be wrong tomorrow (with new, better information). Academia tends to emphasize control of emotion to focus on thinking, but if we don't reflect, we lose something. Librarians may be in the best position to help students explore the gray areas. Because we are typically not grading students, we as librarians can focus on the transfer of knowledge rather than performance on an assignment. As instruction librarians, we want students to be able to take what they learn from us and use it later. We should point out how we differ from other instructors on campus and emphasize the unique and added value we bring, rather than taking the comfortable path. Choosing the path that feels safe, really isn't.

Deitering's blog, *Info-Fetishist* (<http://info-fetishist.org>) contains additional musings, as well as a Zotero folder containing references relating to reflections on teaching practice.

Groups and Games and Flipping, Oh My! Remaining Purposeful Amidst a Multitude of Teaching Options

The second plenary speaker, Bridget Arend, Director of University Teaching at the University of Denver, called on attendees to be purposeful in their choice of teaching methods. Arend has over 15 years of experience consulting on teaching, assessment, and educational technology and received her Ph.D. in Adult Learning and Higher Education from the University of Denver.

Arend observed that the popularity of active learning and proliferation of online, web-enhanced, and flipped delivery has left many college teachers feeling overwhelmed by all the classroom options available when they simply want to teach

well. Though well-intentioned, many instructors decide which teaching method to use based on what they've always done, how they like to learn, or how they imagine teaching should be done rather than on what the research suggests is best for student learning. Arend shared a framework for sorting through the education literature to help instructors decide what the best teaching method is for their intended learning outcomes. She then focused on two of the seven ways of learning described in her framework: cognitive learning and learning with mental models.

When teachers hope students will acquire knowledge about a field of study, then presenting and explaining information is the most effective teaching method. This way of learning, cognitive learning, draws from the cognitive psychology literature on attention, information processing, and memory. Arend offered the following takeaways from this literature: 1) attention is like a spotlight – people are good at focusing on one thing at a time 2) what students learn is based on their prior knowledge, the context of the information and the relevance to the learner, and 3) memory is limited so focus on what students really need to remember. The lessons instructors can draw from this to make presentations most effective include capture students' attention, help learners focus their attention on the most important information, activate students' prior knowledge, provide information in context, help learners create meaning, be mindful to not overload memory, provide students with memory aids, and remember that just because you say something, doesn't mean students learn it.

If teachers hope students will develop problem solving and decision making abilities (like those required for evaluation, searching, and broadening or narrowing a topic), then providing problems, case studies, labs, or projects is the most effective way to teach. Learning with mental models draws on literature that tells us that experts think more efficiently and more conceptually than novices. The trouble is that experts have difficulty remembering what it's like to not know. Instructors can draw the following lessons from this literature: focus on the process, model and provide opportunities for practice, and identify common pitfalls for students.

Arend concluded by encouraging attendees to reflect on how the seven ways of learning (behavioral learning; cognitive learning; learning through inquiry; learning with mental models; learning through groups and teams; learning through virtual realities; and experiential learning) apply to their own teaching. Specifically, she asked attendees to think about the percentage of time they, as teachers, want to spend on each kind of learning based on their learning outcomes. She also encouraged attendees to think about whether the type of learning desired would more effective in-class or out of class.

For more information, see Arend's recent book, co-authored with James Davis, *Facilitating Seven Ways of Learning: A Resource for More Purposeful, Effective, and Enjoyable College Teaching*.

Breakout Sessions

Actively engaging students in learning about source types and the publication process can be challenging. Meagan Christensen, Todd Burks, and Meridith Wolnick from the University of Virginia solved this dilemma by developing three hands-on activities using a customizable deck of cards, or Source Decks. Conference participants tried out these group activities in an interactive session, "**Getting Carded: Threshold Concepts in One-Shot Sessions.**" Each card contained an image and corresponding citation, reflecting a publication timeline ranging from initial news sources to older research studies, related in some way to a single recent news event. Each card was numbered to facilitate class discussion. See examples of a Source Deck at <http://www.library.virginia.edu/sourcedeck/>.

Working in pairs, each student is instructed to locate sources based upon their partner's description of the information presented on their partner's Source Card. This activity is aimed at teaching students how to use and craft a citation. Librarians observe the students' progress and can tailor the session based upon it. In a second activity, groups of three or four students discuss the source types represented on their cards. What type is it, such as a primary newspaper article, scholarly book or a tweet? How would the source be useful, such as for background information, or an argument? Would they use the source? Students then reflect on the exercise in facilitated class discussion about the information creation process (e.g., students typically will not recognize the usefulness of older materials). A third activity involves asking students to line up in chronological order with their source cards in relation to an event card (e.g., date/time of the Ferguson shooting). Some card sources will predate the event (such as journal articles), while other card sources will follow the event with varying lag times (such as social media accounts or magazine articles). This exercise readily lends itself to discussion of how scholarship is a conversation, evolving through the publication cycle/timeline, and how different types of sources and their characteristics are related.

Student athletes have a negative reputation amongst some faculty on many campuses – they're lazy, they can't write, they don't come to class – but when Lisa Burgert starting working with this population at the University of San Diego, she found that actually many were driven but just extremely busy. Between travel, practice, work, and classes, these students are often forced to choose between eating, showering after practice, or making it to class on time. In her session, "**Crafting Peak Performance with Student Athletes,**" Burgert discussed her experiences revising Library 101: Research Methods, a 3-credit course for student athletes, and shared tips for successfully working with time-pressed student athletes.

When redesigning the course, Burgert focused on creating hands-on, high energy activities that would be a good fit for her athletes, like an Amazing Race style tour of the library to keep students engaged. She observed that athletes are competitive and used that to her advantage, creating competitive quizzes

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with kahoot.it. She also took the time to incorporate high-impact practices into the course like the campus-wide read and extracurricular activities like author events – pieces of the student experience that athletes often miss out on. To address challenges created by travel, Burgert added readings, videos, and tutorials to the campus learning management system so that students could access course materials while on the road. Finally, Burgert recommended that librarians working with student athletes get to know the people in Athletic Academic Advising services. They want the athletes to be successful in their courses and are a good source of support if there is trouble with a student.

An alternative approach to the common problem of limited available time for librarian-led information literacy instruction is to enlist the assistance of course instructors via a train-the-trainer model. Susan Mikkelsen (Instruction Librarian) and Heather Devrick (Writing Lecturer) successfully employed this approach at the University of California Merced within the English writing curriculum. They shared their experiences in the session, **“Think Like a Researcher! A Library/Faculty Collaboration to Improve Student Success.”** Their purpose was to refocus instruction beyond the one-shot by teaching research as a process rather than as an event in order to improve the quality of student papers. Mikkelsen recruited five introductory composition faculty to a new program called TRAIL (Teaching Research and Information Literacy) that she co-developed with UC Merced’s Writing Program. Instruction elements were standardized, including assignments, grading, scheduling, readings, course themes, and assessment. The librarian role involved being an organizer/facilitator, creating tutorials for flipped classroom use, developing assignments, and delivering one-shot instruction.

During the TRAIL’s initial semester, Mikkelsen embedded in one of the six class sections to monitor how well lessons were progressing. Students were observed to struggle with reading assignments and had trouble distinguishing opinion from fact and recognizing bias. They were unable to identify the underlying problem for a topic or question. Thus, based on consultations with the other Writing faculty, changes were made to assignments, the course text, course theme, and the one-shot content. Biweekly check-ins with course faculty were also added. Lesson plans were developed around what makes a good topic or research question. Emphasis was placed on drawing conclusions from evidence rather than trying to find evidence to support opinions.

After the second semester, comparative assessment was done between course sections that used TRAIL, traditional one-shot, and no information literacy instruction. Under the TRAIL program, a majority of students expressed greater confidence as researchers, anticipated using their learning in future classes, and made source changes (e.g., more with diverse perspectives). TRAIL students scored higher on source suitability, and argument and evidence. However, they scored lower for source integration; time may have been a contributing factor, as TRAIL students used more sources and were learning new

skills. Course faculty identified balancing of course content as a challenge, as less emphasis was placed on writing skills to accommodate added emphasis on the “thinking like a researcher” content. Scaffolding of assignments was determined to be essential to student success. See http://libguides.ucmerced.edu/think_like_a_researcher for instructional materials.

Concerned that using checklists to teach students source evaluation is too simplistic, Juliet Rumble, Toni Carter and Nancy Noe of Auburn University sought a different approach that would focus on assessing the appropriateness of an information source for an information need. During the session, **“Teaching Students the ‘How’ and ‘Why’ of Source Evaluation: Pedagogies That Empower Communities of Learning and Scholarship,”** the presenters shared three class activities they developed based on the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.

First, Rumble shared an activity framed around the idea that students have to make strategic choices in the research process and that there is no ideal or perfect source. For this activity, she assigns research scenarios to small groups of students and asks them to select, from a wide-range of options, the most useful type of source for addressing that scenario. Each group reports back and questions about credibility, accuracy, etc are addressed in context by the instructor. Next, Carter talked about an activity she uses to teach students that the information creation process can serve as an indicator of authority. Working in small groups, students look at four instructor-selected examples of popular and scholarly sources that relate to the course topic and discuss the research process the author used to write the source and the review and revision process the source went through pre-publication. After a class discussion comparing students’ responses, students reflect on how the creation process affects whether or not they would use the source. Finally, Noe shared an activity designed to help students understand that scholarship is a conversation and that disciplines tend to organize their knowledge about a subject. In this Family Feud-style game, students first identify important words or concepts in an abstract, then compete to uncover the most appropriate subject databases for the topic, understanding it might be necessary to search multiple databases to get a different perspective.

 For more information about the conference, and the PowerPoint and handouts for many of the sessions, including from all the sessions listed in this article, visit the website at <http://www.loexconference.org/2015/sessions.html>