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Article

Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom: Library Instruction that Gives Voice to Students and Builds a Community of Scholars

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Abstract

When librarians apply critical pedagogy in a classroom, they can both impart knowledge and ignite breakthrough thinking among students. By partnering with professors and decentralizing the “power” in the classroom, librarians can tap into knowledge that students already possess and encourage them to express their own ideas. This article describes the process in a 200-level literature interpretation course taught primarily to English majors at Arcadia University.

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

~Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Necessity Really Is the Mother of Invention

I am the first to arrive at the small computer lab in the library. I watch as 12 students from English 299 trickle in and take their places in front of computers across the room. Soon the room is filled with students who are riveted by Facebook or YouTube on their computer screens. I wait for the professor to arrive, and then I tell them to log on to the university portal and go to the library's homepage. The professor, a distinguished looking, though laid-back man, comes in with a cup of coffee, and sits in the last row. He introduces the purpose of the session and then me. I hear someone in the back say, not so quietly, "not again," and laughter ripples across the lab. Not yet discouraged, I begin in a fairly standard way---the way in which the professor, Dr. Tom Hemmeter, wanted me to begin: with an overview of the library website and a foray into databases where students could find information on their topics. I then move on to a discussion of their topics.

The professor prods them, good-naturedly, then perhaps, with less patience, chooses one young woman, who clearly does not want to be called on: "I don't know what my topic is yet," she says, with slight irritation. It will not be until much later in my own process that I will realize it for what it really is: bafflement. The professor chooses another student, a young man with blonde hair behind his ears and a baseball cap slung low over his eyes. "James Joyce?" the student responds, as though it is a question. I look at the professor, who answers: "That is a question. You are supposed to supply an answer." This response elicits some laughter. The professor moves on to a third student, who provides this response: "I start at Google. I know - that's bad, right? I shouldn't start there. Then I kind of, um, I don't know just put in *Emma* and Jane Austen and manners."

But by now, the students are really too bored to even be amused by a classmate's lack of an answer. And what is worse, what actually alarms me, is that they don't seem to trust their own knowledge. That is, they don't understand that research is a process and they do not need to have the "right" answer.

My palms sweat because I know I have lost them. At 45 minutes into an hour long session, I feel that the students have failed to grasp anything of import. I stayed true to my lesson plan and taught everything I thought they needed. But in the end it wasn't what they needed. I wanted to tell them "It's not you. *It's me.*"

How This Process Began

Librarians are consistently challenged to present information literacy in ever more dynamic ways. We encourage students to use technology, introduce new databases, and attempt to teach the importance of the keyword search – all valuable learning tools. Even so, librarians often have difficulty convincing students that what we are trying to teach them is not only valuable, but applicable. Students may receive multiple library sessions in a variety of classes, thus tuning out most of the information, especially if they deem it to be repetitive. In my own experience, professors are often disengaged, in some cases using the library session as an opportunity to catch up on their own work or to take a break, using the librarian as a substitute teacher for the session. I have also

encountered instructors who feel as though they know more than we do about the library field (always a frustrating experience), and will interrupt a session with comments or misinformation, diverting the session from the learning objectives. My sessions are usually more productive and I receive more buy-in from students when the professors are actively engaged in the learning process. Paradoxically, students often do not absorb all that they could at library sessions since librarians are not always scheduled to meet them at the exact point in time of need; therefore, what they learn is not immediately applicable.

Arcadia University, just 25 minutes from Center City, Philadelphia, is a small liberal arts university, with a strong focus on study abroad. Serving approximately 4,000 students, Landman Library employs six faculty librarians, all of whom are engaged in various levels of teaching – first year seminars, capstone and thesis classes, and teaching our own courses according to our specialties. Librarians at Arcadia University enjoy the camaraderie and respect of faculty members on campus and are involved in many areas of collaboration, such as serving on committees and developing and co-teaching courses.

At the time I became a librarian in 2009, I had been working as the manager of Access Services. I was fortunate to have been offered a faculty librarian position upon completion of my MSLS. I was anxious to teach in the bibliographic instruction program. As a staff member, I had heard many librarians bemoan the fact that students simply do not seem engaged in library instruction classes and often do not retain what they are taught. As the liaison to the English department and recipient of undergraduate and graduate degrees in English from Arcadia, I was attempting to forge a professional relationship with the professors I worked with. They knew me as a student years ago, and now I was their colleague. I needed to develop a way, a bit off the beaten path, to connect with the students, while at the same time ensuring that the instruction I provided would propel their research efforts in the right direction. I needed to develop my own way based in a pedagogy in which I believed, and I needed a class whose topic I felt fluent enough to teach.

Enter English 299

English 299: Interpreting Literature II is a required class for English majors at Arcadia University. This class prepares students to do advanced research built upon a critical theory and is intended to increase their ability to interpret literary texts. Ultimately writing projects that the students engage in allow for the synthesis of research and theory. The students in this class focus on *Emma* by Jane Austen, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, *The Dead* by James Joyce, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare. The students are allowed to choose which text they will work on for their paper. They are given supplementary handouts on various poems, short stories, films, and literary theory. They reflect on their reading each week in journals that are collected and graded.

A Better Way

About a week later, after having done a few more sessions in other classes, I felt unsettled about the English 299 session that I had taught, knowing that it could have been much more dynamic. It lacked energy and, worse, I felt that the students were not any better prepared to do research.

I e-mailed Dr. Hemmeter and suggested another session, something that would build (or tear down and *re-build*) upon what we had started. Dr. Hemmeter readily agreed, having also sensed that perhaps the first session did not accomplish what we both would have liked. Two weeks later, when we re-convened in the same lab, I started by asking the students:

- What did you think about our first session?
- Did it help you with your search process?
- Did you actually find some articles directly related to your topic?
- Do you know how to get to your next step?

They responded honestly. Nearly everyone had felt the way that I did: that not a lot was accomplished in our first meeting. While students seemed unwilling or unable to articulate, exactly, why, one student simply said “After class, I still didn’t know what I was doing.” The others mumbled their agreement. In essence it seemed that my first attempt was in the parlance of the day, an “epic fail,” but there was the opportunity to learn from what didn’t work.

Dr. Hemmeter required a “zero draft” before students began writing. This is a draft that does not require a structure, per se, but records first thoughts or impressions of the topic at hand. I went around the room and asked them about the text they chose to work with and a little bit about their process up to that point. Basically, they all told me the same thing: they chose the book they liked best, but were having trouble determining a topic of interest. The professor had urged them to pursue ideas that “had legs.”

When we finished going around the room, I related my desire to make the session interactive (quite different from the last one) and stated that the class would be a workshop. Dr. Hemmeter put the pen that he had been scribbling with on a yellow legal pad down and looked up, and narrowed his eyes a bit. I told the class that we were a *community of scholars* and that we would be working *together*. They would bring their ideas into the open by conversing with each other, their professor, and me. Because I did not want students to think that the research process begins with database searching, I commanded good-naturedly, “Hands off the keyboards.” Instead, I urged them to start by engaging the text and discussing it with each other. Database searching would come soon enough, but when students start that way, it often results in frustration because they aren’t focused yet and don’t have a grasp of the language of their topics.

I paired students who were working with the same text and asked them to work on conceptualizing their partner’s text into possible topics and then viable, searchable

words or phrases. Students do this by talking with each other about their feelings concerning the text, as well as its meaning and subtext. While this happens, students will naturally begin to gather a set of vocabulary terms that will help them choose keywords for their research. The students seemed skeptical at first, perhaps thinking that library sessions should not be interactive at all – don't librarians just come in and do their thing? At the time, I did not realize I was forging a new model for teaching this class in the future.

Because the students needed to interpret their topic through a critical lens, and theory was proving difficult for them, we engaged in a bit of role-play: Dr. Hemmeter (as the student) and I (as the professor) demonstrated. The students observed our interaction, which went something like this:

Dr. H: I'm interested in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Michelle.

Me: Cool. What about it interests you?

Dr. H: Well, there was the specter of war, everywhere.

Me: Yep. There was.

Dr. H: And that really had to affect Virginia Woolf.

Me: It did. How did you know that?

Dr. H: I didn't, but I am sure it did.

Me: Well, think about Septimus.

Dr. H.: Right.

Me: He suffered mental illness that was the cause of his demise.

Dr. H: Exactly. I'd like to know how this affected people at the time.

Me: Good way of thinking, because no one writes in a vacuum. Woolf would have been very affected by the specter of war. I believe she had a brother go off to war.

Dr. H: I want to look into that.

Me: Good place to start. You might want to use a New Historicist approach, which would help to understand the book in its historical context.

Dr. H: Ahh! Okay.

It began as simple as that. The verbalization of thoughts and ideas can strengthen and clarify them.

Much to my satisfaction, they recognized how simple taking those first steps toward thinking about their topic(s) could be. Because theory tends to make students squirm and because they often think that it is too difficult for them to understand, I asked them to imagine theory as a lens that is placed over the text in order to see it in a different way. I also confessed to them that while I enjoy reading theory, I have to work very hard to understand it (despite my degrees). This led to sighs and moans about their own experiences with theory. In another context, this might have been frustrating to an educator – to hear students complain about what they don't know, because the traditional goal of teaching is mastery of the content, which does not always leave room for uncertainty.

But imagine how liberating it might feel to be able to say in a classroom, with acceptance and safety: "This is tough. I just don't get it." When this happens, as it often does, I realize a door has opened, not closed.

Enter Paulo Freire

As both a librarian and an educator I am interested in the implementation of Critical Pedagogy in the classroom. Critical Pedagogy, in its simplest terms, is a philosophy of education that empowers through connecting knowledge to power, allowing one to act constructively and to recognize the relationship between teaching and learning. This is an attempt at the "transforming of oppressive relations of power in a variety of domains that lead to human oppression" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 45). I reject the "banking system" of education, the concept developed and termed by Brazilian educator and ideologist, Paulo Freire (1993) in his famous book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he posits that the traditional way of educating is to see the student as an empty vessel just waiting to have knowledge poured into them by the sage.

For me, operationalizing Freire's philosophy and pedagogy in the classroom begins by seeing my students holistically, in other words recognizing that they come with thoughts, feelings, perceptions and many other human attributes that influence not only how they learn, but their capacity to learn. And that I am the guide who will help them along the way as opposed to being the authority who expects them to have the "right" answers. This approach empowers students to trust their own thoughts in exploring a topic. Inspired by Freire, I have them draw on their own experiences and feelings as they become emotionally involved in the text. Freire believed neither education nor its processes is ever neutral. Students need to learn how to find their voices, which in turn becomes liberating, allowing them to fully engage in their own intellectual and educational process. I want the classroom to be a safe place in which they can think out loud and get feedback not just from the professor and me, but from their peers as well. To me liberation in the classroom means removing traditional constraints, such as students having to sit and be lectured to (without the chance for participation) and providing opportunity in the class (each of which should be a learning lab) to ask questions of themselves and *each other*. Critical Pedagogy raises consciousness, is hopeful, is active, and allows for questioning and critiquing the subject at hand and by extension the world at large, by developing a way of thinking and questioning that extends beyond the classroom and into other areas of their lives.

When I teach, particularly in English 299, I stress to students that literature is not written in a vacuum. They can apply knowledge from their lives and their own personal experiences to understand and illuminate texts. And they can do this with every text they will encounter. I ask them to “dive deep.” Then I ask them to “surface”.

As the librarian in the class, I partner fully with the professor and then partner with the students, encouraging interaction at every turn. All the students make sense of the texts at hand and are free to express their thoughts and opinions. I benefit by witnessing the transformation and am able to better understand my own teaching methods. This model of teaching contrasts with the traditional one in which a librarian visits a class, makes a “deposit,” such as Paulo Freire describes when talking about the banking method of education, and then becomes frustrated when students forget what was told to them. It is through dialogue, relentless questioning, and the de-centralization of authority that a level playing field is created where students are encouraged to express their own thoughts and come to their own conclusions. Students learn from the outset that forming paper topics and locating sources for research is a process and they are not expected to have the answers immediately. If critical thinking is a muscle, the classroom is the place where they strengthen it.

It Can Be Different

The challenges of teaching are numerous, perhaps especially for the academic librarian. While one of our mandates is to instruct, we are often limited in our capacity to do so since the class we are instructing is not really “ours.” We are visitors in the classroom, with the perception that we will be providing a lesson on skills, though not necessarily knowledge. When on the professor’s class, the librarian may also have to negotiate how much time he, or she, can spend there. Professors often expect librarians to cover a lot of material in an unreasonably short amount of time: so not all of the ideas described in this article can likely be implemented in the majority of classes (at least not right away). But librarians can transform their teaching by choosing one subject that they are responsible for and revolutionizing their approach. Here are some things that have worked for me in advancing the new model:

- Recognize that it may be difficult for some professors to allow a shift in power in the classroom if they, themselves, have not done this before. Schedule a visit with the professor beforehand to explain your teaching model and to emphasize you are a *partner* with the professor in the session, not someone who will monopolize the class or stand by and do nothing to contribute. The relationship with the professor is just as important as the educational content and will go a long way in helping to foster good group dynamics. Do not be afraid to go “off the program”; often energy is created in a class when the agenda is loosened and we respond to what the students really need rather than what we think they should know. It is much easier to be adaptable, however, if you are carefully prepared in the first place.

- Surprise students by doing something they won't expect. Allow them to take the lead with idea generation and in-class discussion. In the process, they will be trying to work out a lot of things---out loud, so it helps to reveal something of your own struggles with the research process. For example, my students are often surprised when I tell them that I struggle with theory despite my Master's degree in English. Far from thinking I am not qualified to speak to them about theory, they admire and gain confidence from my disclosure that theory takes work.
- Know your discipline and get to know the professor. For instance, I could not do this with a Biology class as well as with English simply because I do not have the language or knowledge of the discipline to be able to fully engage students in dialogue. But if I have to, I will learn.
- Reflect on your process. I keep a small notebook and jot down my process, unobtrusively, while it is happening, often just a small note here and there for those breakthrough moments. Later, I write more complete notes on how the session went and note where I might have done better, the kinds of discussions that took place, etc. In one instance it helped me to reflect on how a very vocal student who often participates in the class helped a more shy and reticent student to define her position on feminism in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. My prolific participator got up from her desk to go and sit with the shy student who was struggling with her topic, and working alone. Soon, they were brainstorming together. This gave me the idea of pairing students up during the next session to help each other: yet another attempt to have the students engaging with one another, peer-to-peer, in order to benefit from each other's opinions and ideas.
- Only you can properly communicate the importance of your role to students and professors. Students and professors do not consciously think that we are an insignificant part of the research process; but in many instances, if we are not right in front of them, they may not think about us at all. Take the lead in advocating for yourself, your students, and your profession.

Dr. Hemmeter has expressed to me that, consistently, each semester the process has taken on a whole new meaning because of my participation and instruction. The students become more confident, express themselves more, and do better research. Sometimes students ask Dr. Hemmeter to bring me in for an extra instruction session, and I am always happy to oblige. I am now up to doing at least three sessions per semester for English 299. It is worth mentioning that each session almost always begins with me asking, with an encouraging smile, "Okay. What are we doing and where are we at?" A big question for sure, but it is the only encouragement they need before the room is

buzzing with conversation. I stand back and let my community of scholars get busy. It is then that the real work begins.

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