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CHAPTER 12*

Teaching the Teachers: The Value of Information for Educators

Jess Haigh

This chapter examines how a university subject librarian in the United Kingdom used the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)'s threshold concepts as a jumping off point to designing information literacy skills training for classes of trainee teachers and other education and childhood studies students.

In the United Kingdom, the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (Framework) is much discussed yet not formally implemented. Each university within the United Kingdom may have its own information literacy policies, but they are often informed by the Seven Pillars of Information Literacy, formulated by the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL), which represents all university libraries in the United Kingdom and Ireland.¹ The Seven Pillars model was first formulated in 1999 and has since been revised in 2011 and reviewed in 2015. The model recognises that the development of Information Literacy is not a linear process, using the metaphor of a series of pillars on which people can be higher or lower, depending on individual competency. Based on a series of statements related to competencies and understandings, the model theorizes that the more information literate a person, the more attributes they can display.

This librarian, however, found the theory of information literacy as a series of threshold concepts, rather than stated competencies to be learned and

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assessed through practical application, more valuable in planning teaching sessions, mostly supplementary, non-credit bearing information skills classes. This librarian's understanding of threshold concepts is that through the acquisition of knowledge or understanding, one steps through a metaphorical doorway from a previously perhaps misunderstood or comfortably uninformed place to a more enlightened, transformed way of knowing, even if that knowledge is troublesome.² The concept that one encounters on the threshold that leads to a greater understanding is one that can be then applied to other uses of the subject; for example, when learning to bake, once it is understood that it is heat that affects a food's texture, one can then apply this threshold concept to other applications of heat on a substance, such as hairstyling.

The Seven Pillars model, although revised to be more focused on learning through personal experiences, is still a model of definite capabilities that are then expected to be performed. The use of thresholds concepts as a learning framework returns the agency to students, allowing them to find their own conclusions about the application of that concept in their own and other's lives. The threshold concept Information Has Value, as described within the Framework, speaks of several dimensions of value, the understanding of which can then be applied to various situations, including within academia and within future teaching practices. The wider, more troublesome concepts raise ethical questions and force choices in the lives of the students who are thinking about them. Rather than just knowing a list of information dos and do nots, the student is fundamentally changed by their awareness of the concept and its implications within their own life. This approach to teaching was more relatable to this librarian in terms of her own journey of information literacy and education, as well as her preference for using a more critical pedagogical approach to her teaching.

This chapter focuses on the librarian's class application of the threshold concept Information Has Value. Once it is understood that information "possesses several dimensions of value," one can then apply this to thinking about how information can be used, or misused, withheld, bought, and sold.³ A greater awareness of how personal creation of information is valuable to others as well as oneself is troublesome as it leads to questioning how one can or should have power over this, and can lead to a possible change in behavior.

This chapter examines the current information literacy skills of students and teacher trainees, instructing teacher trainees as an example of teaching practice, the use of critical pedagogy within library instruction and problems that may arise, and the context of Information Has Value within the classroom. The chapter also gives examples of using digital resources, including videos, within teaching sessions and describes a learning activity developed by this librarian specifically for trainee teachers.

This chapter focuses on the discipline of teacher training and childhood and education studies. This discipline supports students in becoming competent professionals working alongside children, young people, and adults in educational settings. This discipline values making a positive difference in the future lives of the people the students will be working with. Being able to debate and effectively challenge oppression and critique existing power structures are important skills that should be encouraged in trainee teachers and, in turn, their future students. By being able to answer questions relating to the commodification of personal information and intellectual property laws confidently, new teachers encourage their students to take information seriously as a commodity, and to value themselves as information producers. In addition, teachers must be aware of how online interactions influence their students as information producers and consumers and be able to guide young people in making positive choices about what personal information they reveal and discuss online. These skills are important to teachers in particular in order for them to understand the oppressions their students may be experiencing that will lead to their information access being marginalised. Teachers will also expect their students to use academic conventions, such as citing sources, and should understand why this happens first themselves if they are to encourage this behavior.

The skills of students and of trainee teachers

In 2011, United Kingdom think tank Demos published a report on the Internet use of young people. The literature reviewed, and their survey of 509 teachers in England and Wales showed, that while teenagers of that time were confident users of the Internet, they were not necessarily competent. Although most teachers reported that information found on the Internet is important in the formation of their students' beliefs, less than one in ten of these students ask, when using information found online, who made the website and why.⁴

The twelve- to eighteen-year-olds of 2011 are the trainee teachers of today, and there is little evidence that shows their digital and information literacies have improved. Godbey and Fabbi, for example, reported in 2014 that the majority of their research sample of teacher education students did not have the information literacy skills to navigate and appraise information available through the digital environment.⁵ This is a concern, as without these skills trainee teachers will not be able to fulfill the value of their discipline: to make a positive difference to the future lives of their students.

Using a more critical pedagogy

When instructing teacher trainees, educational practitioners are demonstrating teaching in practice. This demonstration of practice can be used to communicate the experiences of teaching as a wider discipline. Librarians can be models for good teaching practice, while not being teachers themselves, in that they can use innovative and creative teaching methods to explore threshold concepts such as Information Has Value, which is a concept that can be interrelated with many disciplines and specific subjects. This gives student teachers an example of teaching outside of their subject specialty that still showcases positive pedagogical practices. It is therefore imperative that the education librarian makes informed choices about the teaching methods and pedagogies they use, as an educator modelling teaching. Furthermore, explaining the theories behind teaching styles and the content of the lessons enables these theories to be contextualised by experiences in the wider world, and to relate this discipline with wider educational practices, such as the practice of critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy is, first, the acknowledgment that traditional educational methods of teaching by rote, with the student passively absorbing information as communicated by the presumed authority figure of the teacher, are complicit in perpetuating oppression. In his exploration of critical information literacy, Elmborg describes traditional “banking” education methods as training students in capitalist ethics, becoming passive receivers of knowledge.⁶ Cited by many as being first outlined by Freire in his 1967 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, critical pedagogy actively reflects on and challenges oppression and its causes. Teachers and students meet on the same level and can engage in a dialogue that allows the students to critically reflect on their perceptions of reality.⁷

In a classroom using a critical pedagogy, students are given the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills to question their own realities and engage in challenging social injustice. In examining the value of information, this could include appraising what information students have access to compared to other members of their communities, who owns or has influence on the information students use, and why that information is available.

In designing teaching sessions that aim to empower students with the ability to question assumed authorities, the use of the ACRL Framework is a good starting point. This is due to the Framework being composed of threshold concepts to be explored, as opposed to statements to be taught by rote or aptitudes that must be then assessed. While exploring the threshold concept Information Has Value, students could question how they value information both as a consumer and a producer. This may then lead to thinking about choices they have previously made about information production and pub-

lication, and how a greater understanding of the value of information can affect these choices in the future. The nature of threshold concepts means that, in designing instruction that incorporates them, the agency of learning is placed in the hands of the learner, rather than students learning something by rote.

In order for a learning environment to be truly critical, one must develop an approach based on the specific needs of the students involved in that particular environment.⁸ Education students can have very specific needs; they must learn the practicalities of designing and implementing effective teaching sessions and the theories that underpin them, while also encountering positive models of teaching themselves in order to inform their future practice. A class session that incorporates a critical approach might include students exploring library systems and databases and presenting them to the class, reversing the power hierarchy between librarian and student. This demonstrates that students both have pre-existing knowledge of how to search and that they too can be competent demonstrators, as well as highlighting that their voice matters in the classroom.⁹

Problems that may arise

Students who may be unfamiliar with a critical approach to teaching may be reluctant to participate and even believe that the approach is ineffective. Many students unused to anything other than lecture style teaching methods are unable to view teaching practices, such as active learning, student story-led discussion, and critical information literacy, positively in terms of how engaged they feel they are and how much learning happens.¹⁰ Students may feel uncomfortable without a checklist of recognizable learning goals or things that they will have been expected to memorize by the end of a session. In the case of teacher trainee students, explaining the pedagogical approach you are using not only makes the learning approaches used easier for students to accept, but also involves the students in reflecting on what paradigm they as future teachers will be embodying.

One of the most frustrating things for teaching librarians, especially if, like this librarian, one is a lecturer by nature, is knowing when and how to shut up. By structuring lessons around activities, videos, and class discussions, this librarian is attempting to force themselves to say very little; in this way, they are trying to not let an authoritative voice dictate student learning. By shutting up and allowing natural discussion and storytelling to happen in the classroom, perhaps guided by asking pertinent questions, the aim is for students to come to their own conclusions and develop their own values.

The argument for Information Has Value within the classroom

Within information literacy sessions, in order to explore the threshold concept Information Has Value, students should be able to discuss their own opinions and experiences about how information is created and consumed in their own lives, and, in the case of trainee teachers, in the lives of their future students. Through a facilitated, open discussion, students can learn from each other's wider experience the value of information in other spheres to their own.

The threshold concept Information Has Value is about gaining an awareness of how and why information can be used and to think more critically about who it is currently being used by, and how. Students, whose first experience with information having value may be in being warned against plagiarism, may find this troubling, as they may be used to an environment where sharing information without credit or reference is the norm. Without understanding why referencing within academia is important, students may struggle to include proper attribution and citation.

Without being able to appraise how and why the information gathered is available, there is a risk of being manipulated by those who control the publication or access of information. Members of marginalized communities, who may not have access to information sources available to other, more privileged groups, may be making important life and economic choices, such as what to buy or how to vote, based on restricted information. In an environment where information can seemingly be accessed and shared for free easily across several platforms, gaining an understanding of the value of information could be especially troublesome. Students may have never experienced information behind paywalls and may not appreciate the different source types and how they can be accessed. This knowledge of the value of information leads to an understanding of the rights and responsibilities of information consumers and creators, such as accrediting information used and deciding where and how to publish information created, as well as a greater understanding of what source types higher education library collections may be composed of.

Newly qualified teachers should be aware of the value of information if they are to successfully teach within the information society. Unless all teachers understand how information is restricted and how intellectual property laws and a lack of general open access stifle education to marginalized communities they will be unable to serve these communities fully in the future. Teachers should be able to have a dialogue with students about how they can make better informed choices about what information they use. Moreover,

they should be prepared to make informed choices themselves about how they share information about their practice that allow for all communities to learn from them, for example, through publication in open-access publications. Exploring the threshold concept Information Has Value within the classroom would allow for trainee teachers to form their own ethical stances on information access, and where and how they would choose to publish their own work in the future.

Learning activity: Videos in learning digital literacy, online status, and value

In their 2011 report, Bartlett and Miller recommended that evaluating digital sources should become a core part of teacher training, with understanding search engines, propaganda techniques, and source attribution being taught as part of teacher training programs.¹¹ Through best practice use of digital sources within classroom teaching, librarians can demonstrate how they evaluate resources themselves.

Teaching resources should use the same techniques that are used by the trainees. As an example, YouTube, the second most popular website in the world, is also a very popular teaching tool. Within lessons, I often break up sessions with clips from YouTube videos or other video-sharing platforms, such as Vimeo. Not only is this an easy way to break up the sessions into manageable chunks, it also reinforces the lesson message and can kick-start discussions.

Using YouTube also helps in starting discussions about the commodification of personal information. In one class, when having to wait for a YouTube advertisement to play before a video, I asked the class what advertisements appear for them; this prompted a discussion on how this varied throughout the class based on their age. Through me explaining how search histories can be cached and used by websites to determine which advertisements are shown (Facebook showing your Amazon wishlist is an example), the trainee teachers become more aware about how their personal information and online interactions affect the information they receive online.

Librarians should be wary, however, as teaching using videos can lead to the assumption that everything the video says is true. The rise of people using face-to-camera videos, or vlogs, to learn about the world and make choices based on this learning is interesting, given the parallel rise of the theories underlining critical pedagogy within teacher education. Students spend their days engaged in critical discourse only to watch a “sage on the stage” at home by choice in their informal learning activities. The use of any teaching aid

should be questioned within the classroom, to allow for trainee teachers to think critically about the use of it for their future classes. Videos can prompt discussions; they should not dictate learning.

Students often report that they regard YouTube as an information retrieval platform, rather than one they can collaboratively use to create content or to critically engage in.¹² Why not encourage students to participate in the online video culture themselves, as critical commenters or creators? YouTube can also be a place for critical thinking and appraisal of information, and by demonstrating the value of YouTube and other video sharing platforms to trainee teachers, librarians can more effectively use online sharing platforms as teaching tools.

Learning activity: Sources

Sources is a game I developed to help my teacher education students to think about issues of access to information sources. It involves students thinking critically about how information access affects people's choices regarding the information they use. The game is played cooperatively—everyone versus the board. This game therefore makes an excellent ice breaker as it gets students talking to each other and making decisions cooperatively.

Having trainee teachers think about access to information sources is important because unless teachers understand that not all access is equal, they will be unable to fully support the needs of the communities they will work with in the future. Otherwise, they will be ill-equipped to critically discuss with their students why some people are limited in their information access and how it affects their lives.

The game involves students first individually thinking about when and how they might want to access information, for example, in writing an essay, following a recipe, or finding a bus timetable. These instances are then written on Post-its (one instance per Post-it) and placed randomly on a grid placed on a table, a large piece of paper, or even the wall. This becomes your communal game board. Do not tell the students the purpose of this until after they have finished writing their Post-its.

Students then randomly pick a “character” card pre-made by the librarian. Characters have varying levels of information access. You could create different characters based on the communities your students are from or from marginalised communities you are aware of. Each character card lists the value of their access points, such as online access, library access, and educational institution. These access points are between 0 and 5 points. Some examples of characters' access points could be: Character A: Online Access (3), Educational Institution (2), Library Access (4), Information Literacy (4);

Character B: Online Access (5), Educational Institution (0), Library Access (0), Information Literacy (0).

Students will likely question why certain people have certain points, which could lead to a discussion on why levels of access are different. You could choose to write down student questions to return to a longer discussion after the game, or discuss as you go. Rather than answer students' questions directly, I ask them instead what they think. A student may ask why Character A has 4 online access points and Character B has 0, and instead of giving them a reason, I would open this out to the whole group, asking the broader question of what might limit Character B's access. I have had some players be very invested in their characters, creating lives for them based on their attributes.

The players can then buy "sources" cards, depending on the total value of their access points. Students can choose which of the following source cards they purchase: book, blog, general website, trade journal, academic journal, dictionary, or encyclopedia. You could adapt these sources to suit your library holdings, including a specialized database, for example. Source cards are worth varying points to better reflect the information environment, for example: a general website (1 point), an academic journal (3 points), etc. So, for example, a player with 10 access points in total could buy two source cards worth 3 points, and one source worth 4 points. These are then the source cards students play with; they cannot swap cards after this point in the game.

Players then place their source cards, in turn, on the game boards under examples where they think the information need matches the source used, with the player with the highest information literacy access points going first. Other players can challenge the source; if a challenge occurs, the group must reach a consensus as to whether the play is allowed. If the play is allowed, the student removes the Post-it with the information need from the board. The game ends when either the players use up all their source cards or every information need is removed from the board. If there are Post-its left on the board at the end of the game, the game has won, if all the Post-its have been removed, the group has won.

The aim of this game is, first, to get students talking about how they use information, what sources they use, and how this is different for others. Students then consider issues of access to information and how this varies, as well as how much certain information types may cost and how this affects satisfying their information needs. The game characters aim to represent the inequality of access that happens in the real world.

You can make various adjustments to this game depending on circumstances. Smaller groups could play from one large game board or you could split larger groups up to create game boards of their own. By having students first create their own game boards, the whole game revolves around their own

information needs and experiences, central to the idea of locating learning in real life. You could also lead a discussion afterward on how the game could be made more equitable, for example, making the academic journals worth fewer points. This could initiate a discussion about open-access resources and paywalls.

When I ran this game in a workshop with some postgraduate teacher trainees, the response was very interesting, as the students became quite passionate about defending the sources they used for their information needs, and the longest discussions were about how they would justify using certain sources. When I then asked if they would expect their students to use those sources, their stance changed; trainee teachers that I have spoken to often have different perspectives of themselves as students to the student they themselves teach, or will be teaching in the future.

Students came out of the session thinking more about how access varies depending on institution: some students did not previously know that college libraries' online holdings are paid for by the college, rather than being free to external parties. If students have moved directly from high school to college, they may have very little understanding of communities without access to the Internet, library holdings, or paid-for content.

Most of the learning from this game comes out of the discussions. This is when it is important, as a facilitator, to allow students to lead discussions, to encourage storytelling and honesty, and to have a safe environment to be able to do this effectively. By using reflective questioning within conversations brought about by game playing, I am creating a playful, safe environment to have challenging discussions about troublesome threshold concepts, such as Information Has Value.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored my understanding of threshold concepts, how they relate to using a critical pedagogy within teaching, and how I apply this to teaching around the concept Information Has Value.

Through the critical discussion of information and its value, sparked by active teaching methods, including games and the use of digital resources, trainee teachers can move further through the threshold concept of Information Has Value. Using a critical approach to library instruction for trainee teachers is particularly important because it demonstrates pedagogy in practice, as well as allowing students to gain understanding informed by their own experiences.

Notes

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