

Multimedia and Internet @ Schools

Pipeline Column:

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K-12 Reference Work:

Learning to NOT answer their questions

There are many ways to teach information literacy - the formal classroom way, library visits, team and project-based methods and more. No matter how you define "reference work" today it likely involves the process of accessing sources both print and electronic, understanding a variety of containers from books and videos to websites and serials, understanding how to ask questions – of people in person and virtually through search engines and of ourselves. It's more than just a research skill. True information literacy has emerged as one of the defining life skills of our century. Building a citizen, who can learn and inform themselves, throughout their lives in a new century of predictable massive change, is the Holy Grail of our era.

How many types of literacy are there?

- Literacy: Definition: The ability to read and write.
- Information Literacy: Definition: The ability to find, evaluate and use information.
- Media Literacy: Definition: The ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms.
- Digital Literacy: Definition: The ability to use digital technology, communication tools or networks to locate, evaluate, use and create information.
- Critical Literacy
- Media Literacy
- Visual Literacy
- Computer Literacy
- Multimedia Literacy
- Information Literacy
- Health Literacy
- Scientific Literacy
- Economic Literacy
- Technological Literacy
- Multicultural Literacy
- Global Literacy
- Cultural Literacy
- Social Literacy



- Natural Literacy
- Artistic Literacy
- Ethical Literacy

(Source: <http://www.nirak.net/2007/09/12/information-media-and-digital-literacy/>)

There's just a lot to learn before we're ready for the wider world.

Teachable Moments

I am a great believer in the power of the teachable moment. In the classroom of programmed teaching goals related to thinking and problem-solving skills, this might mean tying or enlivening our lessons to local events, elections, autumn leaves, hurricanes, the Olympics, current events, newspaper units and more. No doubt the gift of a space shuttle launch during an astronomy unit or a national election during the government class truly helps to make the lessons real and tangibly relevant to our students' view of their lives.

Learning Styles

Another emerging fact about the web is that it can more easily and sustainably support a wider range of learning styles than some of our more traditional sources. We've long recognized that our learners come with a mosaic of learning styles, most articulately described by Bloom's taxonomy of learning styles. As early genomic research is starting to discover, humans may be predetermined to certain behaviours, including our learning preferences. When they discovered the gene for shyness, the behavioural cat was out of the bag. So now we're ready to embrace the question 'space' of our learners. It's an exciting time! So many questions, so little time!

Not Answering Questions

What do I mean – "Don't answer the questions"!?

The goal of most education is not to install a fact. We want our learners to think. In our modern output oriented educational pedagogy we know that mere facts have a very short lifespan.

- It means little to promote a specific fact into their heads. Water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit (100 degrees Celsius)? Well not too often – only perfectly clean water, perfectly still water and only at sea level.
- What's the population of China? Today's answer won't be the same as next year's. Why memorize that?

- The Periodic Table? It has changed too as new elements are discovered or theorized.
- Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492. Nice mnemonic but really, he sailed three times to America and the answer is at best incomplete.

So, what is the point of giving a learner an answer? It merely fills them up like candy with the knowledge nutrition that comprises the life skills they'll need to be successful adults.

Follow along with me here.

Technological opportunities

We've always used technology well to empower our users with the answers to their questions. In that last century, less than a decade ago, we went beyond our walls with tools like the telephone, e-mail, letters and reference forms to get the best answers to their questions. Indeed many libraries still depend on these tools.

In this century, we have a number of new tools that allow for conversations, such as IM, instant messaging, Meebo, Trillian, Chatango, Facebook, Bebo, Skype, MySpace, and more.

What is the major difference in these tools? Well for one they enliven the web experience with real people talking to real people. It's not just text or graphical content. Unlike forms, letters and e-mails, these tools go beyond that and model the telephone's modality – the conversation. What happens in conversations that happens either not at all or less in text-based tools? The answer is social interaction, emotional content and clarification. This is very important. We now have the tools that align with the primary mandate of reference work. We can improve the quality of the question in real time. We can return to our roots and enable the reference interview again! We can compete with what Google and their ilk do very poorly. We can relate to the user's needs and not just give them an answer that the computer algorithm assumes is right. Feh!

This is exciting. It also requires us to remind ourselves why we exist. We're not about answers alone. Every interaction with us improves the user. In no environment is this more evident than in school libraries. Each learner can leave every reference transaction and be a better informed and more capable person. That's pretty amazing.

The Reference Relationship

So, we're imagining the best scenario. We want to put content at their fingertips when they need it. We want to be there when they need it. We want to create

intelligent, informed and competent graduates. And we need to be there when they need us. I admire those libraries and boards that provide reference services through the telephone but mainly IM and virtual reference services. Many just target the critical homework hours – 3-6 pm – though, truth be told the midnight cramming student is not a myth.

So here's the scenario – Paul, a grade 8 keener, messages in with his question on MSN - "What's the population of China?" It would be so easy for Mary, the media specialist to give him the answer but she knows that Paul will be no better for the provision of the fact. She asks Paul where he thinks he'll find the answer. He answers Google or Wikipedia. She says that's fine, but is there a better place? Paul remembers his class visit and the Encyclopedia Britannica is online on the school library's website. Mary also reminds him that there are excellent sources on the web too on the library pathfinders and recommends the CIA Handbook resource. Wow – in less than 4 minutes, Paul has answer from several sources and is empowered with new resource-based knowledge. Mary encourages him to question all the sources and theorize about why there are differences in the numbers. For 90% of this transformational reference experience Paul was NOT getting the answer he asked for, but was getting the experience and learning he needed. That's a far sight better than just ticking off the transactional experience and giving him a number. Paul will go farther for having had this experience.

So, this is exciting. For our questions, and especially L-12 learners, we have a magic moment with every reference transaction to transform our learners or life. For the better! We do this by respecting their real needs, understanding the variety of learning styles and knowing deeply the literacy skills that we need to endow them with.

When you leave the reference desk you should leave a better person – informed, empowered and better skilled. Answers are just the beginning in education. It's the process that creates the teachable moments.

I once read that a huge proportion (if I remember right a ratio exceeding 75%) of autobiographies of famous, successful, opinionated people (who else would write one?) have positive passages of their memories of libraries and librarians impact on their lives. As teacher-librarians you have hundreds of moments of truth every week to create these memories.

Don't answer their questions right away – create memories. Our society depends on you.

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