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Learning in Process: Forming Student/Teacher/Librarian Research Partnerships

By P. Yuill

Librarians and teaching faculty recognize that research is more than the "necessary evil" many students consider it to be. Doing research provides an ideal opportunity to develop and apply creative, analytical and reflective thinking skills to a real problem originating in the need to know. By linking new information to what is already known, and engaging in a dialogic process with both the literature and the subject of inquiry, the student researcher constructs and articulates knowledge.

While recognizing the learning potential of the research process, we are also aware that it often does not live up to its educative potential. The prospect of designing and completing a research project can be more than a little intimidating for many graduate students. Students whose academic experience is weak and / or out-dated are particularly anxious about their research competencies. The prospect of a lengthy and complex research project tends to undermine these students' self-confidence and sabotage a potentially positive outcome. This phenomena is called "library anxiety," has been well documented. (Leverence, 1997; Jiao & Onwuegbuzi, 1999) Studies have shown that library anxiety is particularly marked in non-traditional and graduate students who perceive faculty expectations exceed their abilities. (Bergquist & Smith, 1992) Assuming that as graduate students they should already know how to how to do research, and that their class peers are more skilled then they, these students are reluctant to ask for help. Anxiety produces tension, fear and mental disorganization, all of which frustrate the potential that the research experience will be educative.

Our observations as librarians and teachers validate these findings, and have led us to consider how to address both psychological and cognitive modalities in teaching the research process. Caroline Kuhlthau (1989) has investigated the importance of affective and cognitive aspects of learning and has developed a model of the research process that provides insight into the role of both thinking and feeling components. She identifies six (6) stages of the research process:

1. task initiation, accompanied by feelings of uncertainly and apprehension
2. topic selection, accompanied by a feeling of optimism
3. topic exploration, accompanied by a feeling of confusion and discouragement upon finding inconsistent and incompatible information
4. focus formulation, accompanied by a feeling of resolution if successful and discomfort if not
5. information collection, accompanied by a sense of direction and feeling confidence
6. the conclusion of the search process influenced by finding increasing redundancy or diminishing relevance combined with an approaching deadline.

The accompanying feeling is, naturally enough, relief (Kuhlthau et al, 1989).

Librarians and faculty have discussed how we might do a better job assisting graduate students as they become researchers. Naturally, we want graduates who go on to become school administrators and teachers to understand the implications of research, to be comfortable using the research process themselves, and to model that process for others. Our discussions have evolved into a pilot research project that is reported in this paper. Our goals were to explore the effects of forming librarian/student/teacher research partnerships. Our outcome measures involved gauging student satisfaction with the course, noting the quality of the student research projects, and increasing student

confidence / decreasing student anxiety related to research activities.

The Pilot Design

The research team is made up of one teaching faculty and one librarian. Together they began a pilot project this past summer to create a formal partnership to work together in an advanced level (EdS) research class. The general design involved the team co-teaching several classes in the semester in which the students would gain familiarity with the librarian. A goal was to foster relationships with students and encouraging them to work with the librarian more readily given that burgeoning relationship.

We developed and distributed a pre-assessment questionnaire on the first class meeting. The instrument addressed the students' perception of their own competency, prior experience with research, and level of anxiety at the first class meeting. The self-reports of student anxiety levels were much higher than the pilot team had anticipated and confirmed our perception that some intervention was appropriate.

The librarian and teacher team partnered in several selected class lectures and discussions in the semester. The students self-selected for participation in the partnerships. Twelve (12) of the fourteen (14) students in the class volunteered to use the partnership model. Given the extra time commitment the meetings involved, the teacher and librarian team perceived a high degree of enthusiasm for the project. The librarian met with each student for an initial two-hour session on the first class. Much ground was covered, including clarification of the assignment, ownership of the research problems proposed, defining terms and discussing the scope and analysis called for in the literature review. We found that we had essentially covered Kuhlthau's first three stages of research: task initiation, topic selection, and pre-focus exploration.

Triad partnerships (librarian/student/teacher) were established and sustained throughout the semester by meetings that took place outside of class meetings. The triad team continued to meet throughout the semester at selected times largely focusing on selecting and using preliminary resources such as catalogs and indexes, and developing effective search strategies to identify information, and selecting a topic of appropriate size and scope. At the end of the semester we worked on analyzing and reporting findings; in the last session we tackled APA citation guidelines. During the last class we distributed post-assessment questionnaires and reviewed our methods and results.

Conclusions

Student's anxiety levels were markedly lower than in the pre-assessment instrument. Their familiarity with research activities had greatly increased, which was to be expected. Descriptive data cited wholly positive experiences associated with the triad partnerships in the form of increased confidence and pride in their accomplishments in the semester. The teacher perceived a vast, qualitative improvement in the class projects, with course evaluations much higher for that semester than ever before. The librarian observed reduced "library anxiety" among most of the students who took part in the pilot.

We plan to extend this pilot, employing some modifications, based on feedback from the students and our own observations. We look forward to establishing ongoing relationships with research students. This focus is increasingly important in view of the new doctoral program our University has begun; as our doctoral students approach their dissertation stage, we plan to use what we learned in the pilot to assist them.

We continue to experiment, reflect, and learn.

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