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Title: Shrugging off the cardigan: learning and teaching identities for the information professional

Date: 9th-12th September 2007

Originally presented to: LIANZA Conference 2007, Rotorua, New Zealand, 9th-12th September 2007.

Conference URL: http://www.lianza.org.nz/events/conference2007/

Example citation: Powis, C. and Webb, J. (2007) Shrugging off the cardigan: learning and teaching identities for the information professional. Paper presented to: *Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) , Rotorua, New Zealand, 9-12 September 2007*.

Version of item: Conference Paper, Author copy

Shrugging off the cardigan: learning and teaching identities for the information professional

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Abstract:

We now accept that teaching and supporting learning is part of our professional domain, irrespective of the sector in which we work. We may achieve this in very diverse environments: teaching information literacy in a university, school or college, helping users on an enquiry desk, producing guides to services or engaged in reader development and other community librarianship. Although many of our examples will naturally stem from the authors' university working environment, we believe that whatever the context, we need to understand the learning process and be able to plan, deliver and assess effective learning engagements.

However, although our changing role is apparent, how clearly do we understand what it means to be a teacher? This interactive workshop will explore what we understand of identities as teachers and ways of developing confidence and expertise in this role. We will focus on the concept of a teaching team as a means of constructing a holistic learning experience for our users and as a focus for personal learning and development.

The facilitators are both senior librarians in UK universities and have been recognized for their outstanding impact on the student learning experience through the award of prestigious National Teaching Fellowships. They co-authored Teaching information skills: theory and practice (Facet Publishing, 2004).

Shrugging off the cardigan: learning and teaching identities for the information professional

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the professional identity of the librarian. We are particularly interested in the librarian as teacher and so we will review what it means to be a teacher, how that fits into our professional identity and how we can work with others involved in teaching and learning to create a holistic learning experience for all.

Teaching and learning – a very short introduction

There are many theories about learning and a good definition from Barker (1998) is that it involves 'permanent or temporary change in behaviour or knowledge that arises in consequence of internal or external stimulus'. This contains several important ideas:

- Learning involves change
- That change may be permanent or temporary
- Behaviour and/or knowledge may be affected (and feelings and values)
- Learning may be in response to internal stimulus (you decide for yourself whether or not you want to learn)
- Learning may be in response to an external stimulus (shaped by a teacher or a learning experience)

We can probably think of examples when each of us has learnt independently but most often we need a teacher to help make sense of the learning experience.

For a teacher to be effective we would maintain that they should:

- Show enthusiasm for their subject and for teaching itself
- Care for learners as individuals
- Have the ability to see themselves as learners
- Trust the learners
- Have a commitment to the learners and the learning process
- Be flexible, adaptive and innovative in their teaching

Within the UK at least these are the commonly-held characteristics of a good teacher. Alongside personality traits, these attributes all share a commitment to the learner and the process of teaching. This is particularly important when considering what is sometimes a burning issue – who is responsible for teaching information literacy. Knowledge and command of the subject is important, but the qualities, skills and attribute of the teacher matter more.

There may also be interesting differences depending on the cultural perspectives of participants. Following Hofstede (2001), we may include:

Power distance – the extent to which less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. In countries with a low Power Distance Index (PDI), teachers will treat students as equals, education is described as student-centred and education is seen as a two-way process between the student and

the expert teacher. This is very much the working context of teachers in the UK. So when we work with students from Confucian heritage cultures we are aware they they have been used to being much more dependent on teachers who initiate all communication in class, demand respect and authority and will not be challenged or contradicted.

Uncertainty avoidance - In Germany and France, students and teachers favour structured learning. Timetables and precise learning outcomes are valued. Academic language is often impenetrable, rules are prescriptive and there are intellectual absolutes. In low UAI countries intellectual disagreement is valued, unconventionality tolerated and conveying complex ideas simply and effortlessly is the mark of the expert

Individualism and collectivism - Individualistic societies value personal opinions, expect conflict and encourage students to speak up. In collectivist societies harmony reigns supreme, and the needs of the group come first. If a teacher wishes students to speak in class, they must be addressed directly.

Masculinity and femininity - These classifications relate to the relative importance of social goals (like relationships, helping others) which are defined as feminine, compared to the masculine ego goals of career and career. In masculine societies, academic failure is unacceptable. Awards and public praise for excellence are highly valued. In feminine countries, weak students are encouraged and more often students will be self-effacing about their own performance. You can mistake the level of motivation if you apply measurements established with a sample from a masculine society like the US.

The functions of a teacher

We will now move on to reflect on the functions of a teacher, so you can reflect on how well you match against these roles. This list is taken from Geoff Squires (1994) whose excellent work synthesized much previous research in an accessible guide on what a teacher does – and therefore what we should be doing, face-to-face or online, in formal or informal settings.

So the functions of a teacher are to:

Motivate. Not all your learners will come bursting with enthusiasm. In particular you may be working with groups who do not have positive self-concepts and limited belief in their own self-efficacy. It is your responsibility to motivate learners, by providing a rationale, by rooting your teaching in their own practice and by your performance.

Audit. You should try to discover what your learners want, expect and need from your teaching. There are several approaches to do this, as we have already discussed in our earlier paper at this conference (Powis & Webb). Audit (also called needs assessment) is vital, otherwise you risk basing a session around content that is not needed or is already known.

Orientate. It is important to give learners with some notion of what they will be taking away from the session and why.

Explore. Teachers need to provide opportunities for learners to explore for themselves – to go beyond the workbook.

Develop. Learning requires change and for effective learning that change needs to be permanent.

Exercise. Teachers need to give learners the chance to exercise and use their new skills and knowledge. This is particularly important within the skills focus of much library instruction.

Appraise. Teachers need to mark or assess whether learning has occurred and praise or identify ways of amending behaviour accordingly.

Reinforce. Teaching does not end when the learner leaves the classroom or switches off the computer. You should try to give the learner chances to practice and apply your teaching, ideally as part of an assignment or task that he or she will do better because of your input. You also need to think of how your wider organization supports and enhances learning outside this learning and teaching event.

Variables in teaching

Squires (1994) has also identified key variables in teaching.

Rationale. This can be one of the most challenging aspects for library and information professionals. Sometimes we are asked to provide a teaching input at the wrong time or without sufficient resources to make it effective. The result is that you feel like a babysitter, taking a session without a clear belief in its value, but knowing that the learners will be well-looked after.

Level. You might refer to Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) to give you some insight into progression with learning activities, but how easy is it really to map this in to information literacy teaching. When working at a university, do you sometimes find that you cover the same material with undergraduates, masters and research students?

Group dynamics are a key variable. You can run identical sessions with supposedly similar groups but have very different reactions.

Individual. The effectiveness of any learning depends on the learner. If for whatever reason, the individual is not prepared or able to commit to the learning activity, then it will be difficult for you as the teacher to succeed.

Self. Each teaching performance will be a test of your abilities. You cannot expect to be at your best every time, but remember that your variable performance will have an impact on the learners.

Physical setting. The design, lighting, temperature and layout of the space you are using for your teaching will have an impact on its effectiveness. This also applies to e-learning environments, where functionality and design of your software will influence the nature of your teaching.

Organizational setting. The organization of you team, your department and your wider organization will have an influence on your teaching. For example, you may work in a converged service which includes learning technologists and thus have lots of opportunities to develop e-learning. Alternatively, organizational priorities in areas like

social inclusion and widening participation may determine which the learner groups get priorities.

Content. You may feel more comfortable teaching some subjects than others. This may influence your effectiveness. If you are working in a university, here may be different expectations of content, depending on the subject. For example subjects like Law and Pharmacy are very information intensive – teaching is about imparting facts and knowledge. By contrast, teaching English Literature is more often about developing critical thinking.

Process. What you do with the learners will change. There are many different ways of teaching to reach the same learning outcomes.

It is important to understand that these variables affect all teaching. Our situation as teachers is not unique. If we are to see ourselves as teachers – and more importantly act as teachers – then we need to recognise these issues and approach them professionally.

The librarian as teacher

Having spent some time reflecting and discussing the nature of teaching and applying it to our specific contest, we will explore some of the questions for librarians in developing their teaching identities.

Identity
It is important to believe that we are teachers, not just in a rhetorical sense but as a fundamental part of our professional identity. We need to accept that much of our work with learners is about empowering and enabling them to learn and change. This is the work of teachers. We cannot just evolve into professional teachers without development and training. There is limited formal input during professional training in library and information studies in the UK, but is increasingly recognised as a priority area for continuing personal and professional development. We believe that the best way to develop your identity as a teacher is to work alongside other teachers. We have experience of teaching and assessing on university courses, studying for professional teaching qualifications, joining in teaching and learning seminars and undertaking pedagogic research. We should recognize that we have specific issues in the teaching we undertake, but this is no different from the way that those teaching in the disciplines have their own specific challenges and questions.

We should reflect on the extent to which we are involved in the learning process. When you ask a learner about the value of the library and librarians to them, is it central or peripheral? The library should be at the heart of the learning process and this belief must influence all of your activities. This means that when you are writing guides, designing web pages or on an enquiry desk, your role is to explain, not to tell; to develop, not to serve.

This shift in our culture and values requires a new or rather a parallel professionalism. We are not advocating any denial of our discipline, in fact if we are to acknowledge fully our role as teachers, we need to be sure of our own subject. Confidence as a teacher is achieved through mastery of subject content as well as the technical skills of teaching.

Visibility
Personal acceptance of our role as teachers is not enough, We also need to ensure that we are recognized for our contribution to learning and teaching by the wider community.

We do not wish to dwell on the endless debate about the status of librarians, but we would assert that recognition for your role, especially your excellence in teaching and supporting learning, will lead to increased recognition for other aspects of your work. Certainly at one of our institutions local and national recognition as a Teacher Fellow has been a benefit not only for the individual, but for the service as a whole.

Teachers exercise a different kind of power from librarians. We should not underestimate what power we sometimes have in the normal run of things, but we rarely have control over the learning process or over learners. Let us hope that we use this for good!

Librarians often have considerable expertise in teaching and learning, but often are too reticent to share this outside their professional community. Obviously it is much easier to talk to people who share a common professional language and mindset and with whom you have so much in common. But surely this is rather too self-limiting? Personally, both authors have benefited significantly from opportunities to work alongside non-librarians. We suggest it is important for you and the profession to engage and collaborate outside your immediate comfort zone. Collaboration and sharing outside the library and information science world is a sign of real maturity in teaching.

Such approaches help to build your reputation in learning and teaching. Most librarians who approach teaching professionally are very good, and often underestimate the high quality of their practice. Learners will certainly benefit from your expertise, but so should others. We need to get involved in initiatives like peer observation of teaching and staff and curriculum development. It is possible for us to develop a reputation as an expert in learning and teaching, alongside your original identity as a librarian, and at the same provide opportunities for synergy between the two.

As your reputation grows, so too can the amount of control you have over your teaching. If your input starts to become an essential course component, with positive learner feedback, you will be in a more powerful negotiating position over when and where you will teach. By being perceived to be a peer and a respected colleague, some of the longstanding issues of power and equity in relationships with other stakeholders may be reduced.

In the UK, and in many other countries, there is often a tension in universities between the support of teaching and the support of research. Some might argue that as the status of teaching continues to decline in the face of the greater risks of research selectivity, it is easier for para-academic groups like librarians to get more actively involved in leading teaching, especially with undergraduate students. There may be some truth in this, but we should always acknowledge that for many staff – of all levels – teaching is still central to the idea of the university. Indeed, developing our practice and identity for teachers will provide us with opportunities to carry out our own research and evaluation, in teaching and information science. Research-informed teaching has the potential to unite our dual professionalism.

We will now move on to consider the final part of the teaching identity – an element which librarians are good at – collaboration.

Collaboration
We need to establish formal and informal groups and alliances to deliver effective learning and teaching opportunities. Integration with the life and culture of your organization is critical to the recognition of information literacy and learning support and working with

colleagues inside and outside our department is a key part of work life. Yet we often start the collaboration full of misconceptions and prejudices. Yet the benefits include:

- Increased motivation of learners and teachers
- Improved reflection through peer observation, team teaching and new networks
- Better auditing (using information from your colleagues)
- Variation to keep the learners interested
- Innovation and breadth of content and delivery by pulling together diverse knowledge, experience and skills
- More reliable environment and infrastructure (by getting your IT people engaged in the front-line)
- Greater visibility and political influence

We could summarize this list of benefits in the following way:

- *Collaborate* – because together we are stronger
- *Engage* – because we do not need to hide inside our cardigans
- *Reflect* – because reflecting on our action and in our action helps us to shape the future.

The future of the cardigan - developing a professional identity as a teacher

So what future for our librarian cardigans? In conclusion we suggest that it is important to incorporate a teaching identity into our professional identity but this should not be at the expense of surrendering our existing professionalism. Jane Clarke and Roy Seden have written on the importance of dual professionalism in higher education in the UK – the need to develop your practice in your discipline and in learning and teaching.

Our closing advice is as follows:

- Integrate your scholarship in librarianship with your teaching. Share what you know and learn from your work as a library and information professional in your teaching, to keep your content and curriculum fresh.

- Develop yourself. Continuing personal and professional development is vital. A professional qualification does have a sell-by date – you need to keep yourself refreshed – are you ready for library 2.0 and learner 2.0?

- Engage in the debate about your identity, not just from the sidelines or by carping about pay and status. If you prove your value, rewards (of many kinds will follow)

- Reflect – the model of the reflective practitioner (Schon, 1982) is a powerful one, as relevant to our teaching as it is to our practice overall.

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