
The 'cut and paste' of undergraduate research

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I heard the following conversation in the library recently: 'How's it going?' one student asked another. 'Oh, OK. I've been doing a bit of reading and some writing. Been copying bits out of books, but then I thought, "What's the point? I'm not going to put it in the essay."'"

Earlier in the same day, I had been helping a student who said that he had been having difficulty in finding any information on a certain topic. He said he had searched the catalogue, but was surprised when I showed him the list of databases and how to locate journal articles. He was also unclear about the precise subject of the essay that he had been asked to write. He gave me the general topic, but he had no idea of the question he was trying to answer. After five minutes of searching databases, he was restless to be gone. It reminded me of the many school students I met when I worked in public libraries who came in with a confused idea of what they wanted. It was necessary to ask in which lesson they had been given the homework in order even to establish the topic of their enquiry. However, this case was an even greater cause for concern as the enquirer was a third-year student.

A second example the same day was a student who had been asked by her tutor to find a copy of a play, a production of the same play, a book and an article about the play. 'Any will do' remarked the student with the expectation that I would produce them for her. I am new to the role of subject librarian in higher education and, although I have had a long career in librarianship and have more recently been a research student myself, these examples have come as a revelation to me. Although these are not isolated examples, I must add here that I have also met students who are much more engaged with the learning process.

Commenting on the NUS/HSBC Student Experience Report of 2009, *Times Higher Education* noted that only one in five students said that 'the desire to be stretched intellectually is the main reason for going to university'¹. According to this report, the majority see studying at university as a means to an end, as a means to increase their chances of a 'good' job at the end of three years. But it seems to me that until students desire to engage fully with the learning process, much of what we do in teaching information skills is ineffective.

Much is written on the advantages of current technology that allows the student to access a variety of texts, through a wide range of media, at the time they choose. The use of new technology for making information accessible is to be welcomed, and I am particularly conscious that without it my own doctoral research would have been impossible within the timescale. There are some fine examples of initiatives designed to introduce students to the world of learning and I am aware that much time and effort is put into devising mouth-watering morsels, such as sessions on how to find information, save it and cite it. Yet this abundance of library skills advice tends to concentrate on procedures for information retrieval, 'the pressing of buttons', rather than to encourage a more reflective, deeper learning. I wonder how effective is this acquisition of knowledge in producing thinking, discriminating students? Or does it just feed the students' own utilitarian approach to learning?

The sociologist, Andrew Abbott has written some stimulating analysis of the way the library profession is being changed by modern technology. At a talk given in 2009, he pointed out the great difference between knowing and knowledge:

There is something fundamentally different about knowing and knowledge, at least as we usually use those words, and that figuring out what knowing is may be more important than figuring out where knowledge is going.²

Abbott has worked with both undergraduates and postgraduates at the University of Chicago, teaching library skills to both groups. He found amongst students a basic misconception of the meaning of words such as 'index' or 'reading'. Students, he found, believed that back-of-book indexes were constructed by manually counting up the number of keywords in the text, rather than by recording concepts and ideas contained within the text. The idea of subject indexing was novel to them. Reading was seen as an 'extraction

task' rather than as a process for understanding an argument which had logical progression. Many students were unable to read text and re-form concepts into their own words, or use the text as a springboard for their own reflections. As a result, Abbott tried to develop his students' reading skills by encouraging students to read more slowly and carefully, and to take time to think about what they were reading. He found that after practising this technique, students reported that they began to focus more on the meaning of the sentences and less on deciding which of them to underline. As Abbott records:

These are students who have begun to realize that reading is not a process whereby they must simply select text, but rather a process of knowing wherein they must engage with, reflect about, and respond to the text.³

He observed that, for those students who had spent their school life using the web, their 'model of cognition' had been formed by the characteristics of web pages. Good practice in the design of websites encouraged skills directly opposed to those required for reading books. It was, he suggests, a 'model for selling rather than knowing', thus leading him to conclude that students believed knowledge itself was a commodity to be acquired, possessed and consumed. It shaped the undergraduate experience of knowing so that their learning was 'intuitive, disorganised, non-hierarchical' with 'almost arbitrary-related bits of knowledge'⁴.

Abbott found that there was little difference between the undergraduates and the postgraduate students with whom he worked. He found from an initial survey of their study skills that students perceived themselves to be 'pretty high or highly skilled' at using the Internet, but at a 'basic level of skills' when it came to using the physical library. From their answers, Abbott discovered that few had contacted their subject librarians, nor had they used the subject guides or research tools such as word clouds. Most were not aware of reference-handling tools such as RefWorks, and although they did use databases, the range that they consulted was very narrow. Their perception was that most of the printed sources had now been published electronically and were thus obsolete. Abbott discovered that it was not just in regard to library organisation that postgraduates lacked understanding. They also failed to develop skills in judging the suitability of the texts they had found. Given the distinction between knowl-

edge and knowing, how then does knowledge become knowing?

Abbott suggests that knowledge cannot exist 'by itself and of itself' and that it only becomes knowing when placed in the context of a research question. 'A given piece of information or interpretation', Abbott considers, 'is knowledge only with respect to a particular project of knowing'⁵. From his observations of students, Abbott surmised that a more effective approach to library skills was to embed skills learning firmly into a research project so that students became aware of the context for their knowing. Without a clear research question that provides the context for knowing, students cannot formulate their hypothesis nor can they make any critical evaluation of the pieces of knowledge they will accumulate.

I have recently completed an experimental course for second-year drama students. In place of the usual one-hour demonstration of the catalogue and searching techniques that had been originally scheduled, I devised a series of one-hour sessions over five weeks which set such instruction within a context for learning. The course was presented to the students as preparation for the third-year dissertation and covered not only information searching skills, but also planning the dissertation, shaping a research question, forming an argument, critical assessment of the literature, reading and note-taking, writing and proofreading. Some of these subjects were already on offer as workshops, but offering them within the context of the students' forthcoming dissertations gave a purpose and shape to the course delivery. Forty-eight students attended this voluntary course. Disappointingly, only one student attended all five sessions. Not all the feedback forms from the students have been returned yet, but from those who have responded, the comments have been favourable. Most importantly, the students gained an appreciation of how information and study skills contributed to the overall process of doing a dissertation. They had become aware of the importance of the context for knowing.

Currently there is a great deal of discussion about students' expectations, patron-driven learning and value for money. If we are looking for ways to provide better value, even to include the notion of sustainability, then inventing ways to engage students with the learning process so that they become critical, thinking students should be emphasised. Students need both information and study skills, but more importantly they need them to be delivered within a subject context that will

create effective learning, in order to produce not only critical, thinking students but also critical, thinking people in the work place. We should not simply be feeding students on demand with bite-sized pieces in a takeaway, 24/7 atmosphere. Rather, I believe, we should be presenting a feast of well-prepared, nourishing food so that students will grow and be sustained by it in the years to come.

REFERENCES

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- 3 Abbott, *The future of knowing*
- 4 Abbott, *The future of knowing*
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