Out of the boot camp and into the chrysalis: A reflective practice case study

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Abstract

From the information literacy educator's perspective, librarians have the potential to play important roles in strengthening information literacy elements within curricula learning scaffolds. While there needs to be an increased awareness amongst academics about the forms of assistance teaching librarians can provide teachers as integrated curriculum support resources, there is also a need for information literacy librarians to engage in reflective practice in order to break down the self-perceptions and taken-for-granted attitudes that can represent barriers to professional growth and development. In this article, I present a personal case study of one information literacy librarian's experience of coming to accept the role of educator in a tertiary education context.

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Introduction

From the information literacy educator's perspective, librarians have the potential to play important roles in strengthening information literacy elements within curricula learning scaffolds (Bruner, 1986). I suggest that two elements must be addressed to fulfil this potential. Firstly, there needs to be an increased awareness amongst academics about the forms of assistance teaching librarians can provide teachers as integrated curriculum support resources in order to, to adapt Ramden's (2003) idea, make student learning of information literacy possible. At the same time, self-perceptions of teaching librarians can also raise significant challenges. Secondly, there is a need for information literacy librarians to engage in and grow through reflective practice, which Brine and Feather (2002) regard as 'a hallmark of any competent and committed professional' (p. 259). In this paper, I demonstrate the positive power that reflective practice can have in questioning the self-perceptions and taken-for-granted attitudes that can become barriers to professional growth and development.

The importance of reflective practice for information literacy educators

Rethinking the way one teaches, learns and perceives one's role as both teacher and learner has the power to enhance the way one supports learners (Quinsee 2005, p. 151), creating a better space in which to practise alignment with one's commitment as a teacher (adapted from Palmer, 1998). Reflective practice is necessary to ensure growth, not only for the benefit of individual practitioners but also for the profession to ensure that it does not become blinkered in its disconnection from 'best practice and best thinking, and one which, by default, often resorts to advocacy and position as a bid for survival' (Todd 2003, in Hallam 2005, p. 4). The Australian Library and

Information Association (ALIA) recognises that a sustainable future library and information workforce requires professionals who have, amongst other qualities and skills, the ability to engage in reflective practice (ALIA National Advisory Congress 2008, p. 2). Boud (1996) argues that critical reflection is a requirement of effective practice (p. 115), an assertion expanded upon by Haddock (2002) who views it as an essential part of critical, evidence-based professional practice and research (p. 95). Although recognised as a professional development practice of great importance, reflective practice often struggles to gain status as a higher priority in time-poor work schedules (Dorskatsch 2002, para. 1), suggesting in part why the experience can be so personally challenging when we do engage in reflective practice (Burge & Haughey 2001, p. 4).

Hallam (2005) states that reflective practice is:

a crucial tool to manage the constant change in our workplaces, from both the perspective of the social developments (which influence the expectations of users of the information services we provide) and the perspective of the technological changes that affect the development and delivery of these services (p. 4)

This argument is pertinent in the case of information literacy librarians who are positioned as discipline specialists and people who liaise with university faculties. I argue that it is important for teaching librarians to understand and appreciate not only their own roles and responsibilities but those of others within the collaborative relationship (Payne 2005, p. 210), particularly in relation to developing a sophisticated and confident understanding of education language, frameworks and pedagogy. Professional development courses in education for information literacy librarians are becoming more popular as a professional development strategy (Peacock 2001b). However, the specialist, theoretical language used by academic educators can present a barrier to effective communication (Allan & Burridge 2006) for teaching librarians who lack teaching qualifications (in the same way that the language of the information literacy specialisation can seem alien to the uninitiated). Harvey & Mason (1996, p. 27) assert that the 'combination of reflection, transformation and the acquisition of the high-level skills of critique, analysis and interpretation, forms the basis of the reflective practitioner'. This assertion applies equally for librarians and the students whom Harvey and Mason discuss.

Peacock (2001b) raises the pressing need for academic librarians to engage in proactive training as educators inclusive of reflective practice, pointing out that:

As information literacy pushes the reference librarian squarely onto [the] stage [as educators], they must be fully equipped to take on the challenge ... demand[ing] that the librarian attains a high level of educational credibility by demonstrating sound pedagogical knowledge and reflective practice, and by communicating effectively with faculty colleagues (using mutually understood language) (Peacock, 2001a, para. 3).

Teaching librarians often perceive themselves primarily as 'a librarian first, teacher or trainer second' and are 'restricted by operational boundaries that work against the implementation of information literacy' (Lupton 2002). This is in contrast to the experience of the teacher trained in the theories and methodologies of education as their primary focus; the study and growth of personal pedagogy — as well as confidence in the craft of teaching — is a taken-for-granted part of professional development for the teacher librarian. Given that the teaching librarian's work involves collaboration with educators (as well as students) from other specialist fields, reflective practice is:

...more than an examination of personal experience; it is located in the political and social structures which are increasingly hemming professionals in ... In order to retain political and social awareness and activity, professional development work needs to be rooted in the public and the political as well as the private and the personal (Bolton, 2001, p. 3).

From this perspective, teaching librarians work under the same obligation as their academic peers to 'adopt a reflective stance, to continually expand their understanding and repertoire of practice. In doing so they realize both the challenges and benefits of lifelong learning' (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghore & Montie 2001, p. 11).

An accidental educator in the boot camp

Bolton (2001) describes reflective practice as an act of making sense of our chaotic world by making it appear strange; in telling our stories from different — and critical — perspectives, we construct new worlds that do not have 'true' accounts or given endings (p. 2). The beginning of the story, however, 'defines its boundaries, creating a framework into which the body of the story fits' (McKay & Dudley 1996, p. 15). I was not meant to become a teacher in my story. From an early age I knew I was going to be a librarian and took the position that while I might be capable of being proficient in teaching, I was not passionate about the idea of my future self in the role of a teacher. This decision was the result of mentally trying on professional characters to find the best fit. It did not occur to me that my decisions were informed by my limited understanding of what these roles can actually involve. Even as a tertiary student who daydreamed about lecturing, the teacher character was still confined by my assumptions to a set comprised of four walls and an ensemble cast of children. I made no realistic connection between adult education, career teaching and myself until I became an information literacy librarian in a tertiary institution. However, it took several years to make the internal transition from accidental teaching librarian to information literacy educator. The main catalyst for change was a reflective practice exercise involving analysis of a metaphor that encapsulated my teaching practice.

The boot camp metaphor was partly inspired by Gunnery Sergeant Hartman's opening monologue in *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick 1987). With the exception of a pilot library skills course designed for non-academic, adult learners of English as a second language (Macdonald 2008), the scope for teaching information literacy to students I have experienced during my five years as an information literacy librarian has been limited to roles as a guest trainer in one-off tutorial sessions, rather than an embedded part of the learning scaffold (Bruner 1986). Because classes are often booked by curriculum teachers during the early period of courses, these sessions sometimes seem like boot camps for newly recruited soldiers, in which we cover a comprehensive content in a short space of time. Although it is perhaps contrary to the concept of a drill sergeant, I feel empathy for the students having to digest yet another lot of information when they may already feel overwhelmed, particularly when library sessions are scheduled in the first week of orientation. Certain elements of Hartman's albeit extremely belligerent address echo the rationale behind students engaging in introductory library skills classes. Assuming that I may not have another opportunity to speak to some (or even many) of the students who attend these one-off classes, there is a need to impress upon them the importance of the primary objective of information literacy education:

If you leave my island, if you take on board the information and strategies I will share during information literacy recruit training, you will be empowered. You will be a

scholar of knowledge enhanced by learning and assessment. But without information literacy you may struggle (adapted from Kubrick 1987).

The military metaphor was also inspired by Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) metaphor of 'rational argument is war' (pp. 61-5). These metaphors are particularly relevant to research and debate within the academic context; strategies are formed and deployed, and arguments are won, lost, attacked, counterattacked or abandoned on the basis of strength and defensibility (p. 4). Information literacy, in the context of this metaphor, is about student survival, just as military literacy is essential to the survival of military recruits. It is recognised — at least, on paper — by my university as a graduate attribute, expressed in terms of self-reliance and 'the ability to analyse and synthesise information (that is, be information literate)' (Hastings 2007, p. 3). More than this, information literacy is recognised in the *Prague declaration* (Information Literacy Meeting of Experts 2003) as 'a prerequisite for participating effectively in the information society, and ... part of the basic human right of lifelong learning' (p. 1).

The boot camp metaphor is not simply about preparing students for tours of duty during their period of active service with the organisation (that is, assessment tasks during study at university). It also involves helping students gain survival skills for future life as individuals, students, practitioners and members of the community in an information society. Information literate rookie students are equipped with the capability to learn:

... because they know how knowledge is organised, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information for any task or decision at hand (American Library Association 1989, para. 3).

If information literacy equates with empowerment, what then are the consequences of poor information literacy for a tertiary student? There is no collateral damage if a student does not know how to search the catalogue or databases or does not understand why and how they should cite references, for example. However, the fewer requisite information literacy skills or competencies the student has, the less well equipped the student is to engage in effective research practices. To extend the metaphor, I would suggest that the information jungle is an overwhelming enemy. It is unpredictable; the soldier (student) cannot trust anything at face value and must evaluate every source. Tours of duty (study periods) are intense, relentless, requiring stamina and knowledge of which weapon to use in a given situation, including calling on reinforcements (such as the reference or information literacy librarian). Rest and Recreation (R & R — the non-teaching periods) are few and far between. The rookies will find themselves tired and stressed in the information jungle with an overwhelming burden of expectations and deadlines. The rookies need to know how to defeat enemy with speed and efficiency, and be ready for the next battle (study task). They will need to know how to cope and how to draw on their boot camp training (having the initiative and confidence to seek intelligence through the information desk).

While militaristic domination and bullying are decidedly absent within my metaphor and teaching style, there is — like the military drill sergeant — a strong sense of duty to help enable the rookies to equip themselves for survival and to conquer their (combative or scholarly) assignments. I teach them about the weapons (search tools and research skills) they will need to be able to use. The weapons have complex functionality (for example, advanced search strategies) compared to the 'pop-guns' on which they have conceivably relied (such as quick-and-dirty Google searching). The purpose of the classes is to teach them to fight like soldiers (search and respond like researchers). A further reason for the drill sergeant metaphor is the personal

distance from their troops through nature of the role. Given the nature of my one-off teaching assignments, I do not have the opportunity to establish the same sort of rapport with students as, for example, those who have them over the course of a semester. Students who actively use the library's information desk service pose an exception. However, there is not the deeper engagement of the student/tutor relationship; in the context of the military training metaphor, the tutor would be the platoon sergeant who guides the rookies through the information jungle on their tours of duty.

There are also similarities between the military recruitment and student enrolment processes. In both cases, the new member signs oneself (and certain freedoms, such as time and informality of expression) over to the institution, receives a number and a physical form of identification to be carried at all times (a student identification card or dog tags), and then subjects oneself to learning the ropes in an environment with its own language, code of conduct and set of expectations. The rookies are raw, in need of refinement. They are, as yet, ineffective as practitioners of scholarly and military literacy. The students' newness is also sometimes associated with demands on time and patience by some more experienced members of the institution. I would stress that this is not a derogatory attitude towards new students, but recognition of the metaphor of 'inexperience is down, experience is up', to add to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) arsenal of metaphors. Some rookies I see in my classes seem disempowered, fearful and overwhelmed as they begin their boot camp training; it is a personal measure of success to witness the empowering influence of information literacy skills and knowledge as they progress through the educational battle fields.

Attempting to enable students to increase their information literacy in a non-integrated curriculum can place intense demands on the librarian to impart — and the students to take in — knowledge and information about a whole arsenal of requisite tools and strategies that the rookie will need to be able to deploy when dealing with the pressures of the scholarly battle. The idea of the teacher as transmitter is at odds with that of the teacher as constructivist facilitator or collaborator (Scheurman 1988). To admit teaching in a prescriptive style may be regarded by many educators as archaic and patriarchal and I expect my nominated metaphor would be unpalatable to some educators. Koo (2006), for example proposes that teachers:

...cannot erect infinitely high seawalls against a rising tide of information and opinions -- indeed, given the reality that ... students will step into as practitioners, such an approach may even be harmful. Rather, perhaps professors are increasingly being called on to serve as **architects of an educational space** that students create together and not just as **drill sergeants of knowledge** (Koo's emphasis)

However, it remains that this approach dictates a certain amount of prescriptive teaching methodology, particularly in cases where the curriculum teacher expects that I will 'teach the students everything they need to know about the Library', as some teachers have phrased it. At least, it did remain so until this exercise in reflective practice.

Looking beyond the chrysalis

This reflective practice exercise had a curiously and unexpectedly unsettling effect. Instead of increasing assuredness of the subject, the more I examined my metaphor and its implications, the less certain I felt about my pre-existing self-concept of accidental teacher. For example, to what extent are my teaching methodologies and sense of pedagogy a product of my environment or my own self-perception — or

perhaps more accurately, self-deprecation? Engaging in this critical reflection, I became my own drill sergeant, breaking myself down to build myself back up.

Rather than maintaining a cause-and-effect assumption that my educational environment induces a prescriptive teaching style, further reflection on the educational literature suggested that I might unconsciously employ a variety of teaching methods. This exercise in reflective practice enabled, for example, an awareness that my existing teaching style is influenced by my perspective as a pragmatic learner; helping students make connections between the subject, the new search tool and the techniques with which they are already familiar (such as Google), rather than teaching in a way 'where the learning event seems to be all theory and general principle, distant from their reality' (Mumford 1986, p. 8). Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989, cited in Laudrillard, 2002) summarise this perspective in the following manner:

We should abandon once and for all any notion that a concept is some sort of abstract, self-contained substance. Instead, it may be more useful to consider conceptual knowledge as in some ways similar to a set of tools (p. 14).

This echoes Krause's (2004) argument that education is to be experienced, not delivered. In this sense, the drill sergeant metaphor is still appropriate; the education process involves enabling the drill sergeant's rookies to draw on their internal resources.

To draw on a metaphor from the natural world, my experience of reflective practice resulted in an unexpected journey into the educational chrysalis; entering as a 'librarian who also teaches' and emerging as a librarian (through training), an information literacy practitioner (through employment), an educator (through calling), an academic (through research application) and a lifelong learner. Realising that I am not alone in my tendency to apologise for my audacity in claiming the title of educator or teacher as an information literacy librarian (Peacock 2007) has been both a reassurance and a motivation to change. Bullough (2001) warns that exploration of teaching self 'can be risky and fraught with danger' (p. 21). This exercise of aligning self-perceptions with a metaphor has uncovered more questions than I expected.

Conclusion

The drill sergeant/boot camp metaphor began as somewhat of a confession of a perceived prescriptiveness in my approach to teaching based upon a lack of formalised training as an educator and the sense that my potential value in enabling students to become information literate scholars is restricted by an educational environment where the role, purpose and function of information literacy librarians are not widely understood or accepted in the curricula. In questioning the very metaphor I initially chose, my teaching self-perception became overwhelmed by new possibilities rather than devoted to a particular viewpoint. Through this critical reflection, I discovered — or rather, accepted — that my character involves not only the roles of librarian (by training) and teacher (through employment), but also educator through professional development, academic through presenting research and a lifelong learner in both the external world of information and also of the personal world of self-reflection. To be the change we want to see in the world (a phrase attributed to Mahatma Gandhi) is perhaps the essence of reflective practice; the positioning of ourselves to be able to focus upon and increase our self-awareness as a vehicle of self-efficacy.

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