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Threshold Concepts: Challenges & Possibilities for Library Instruction

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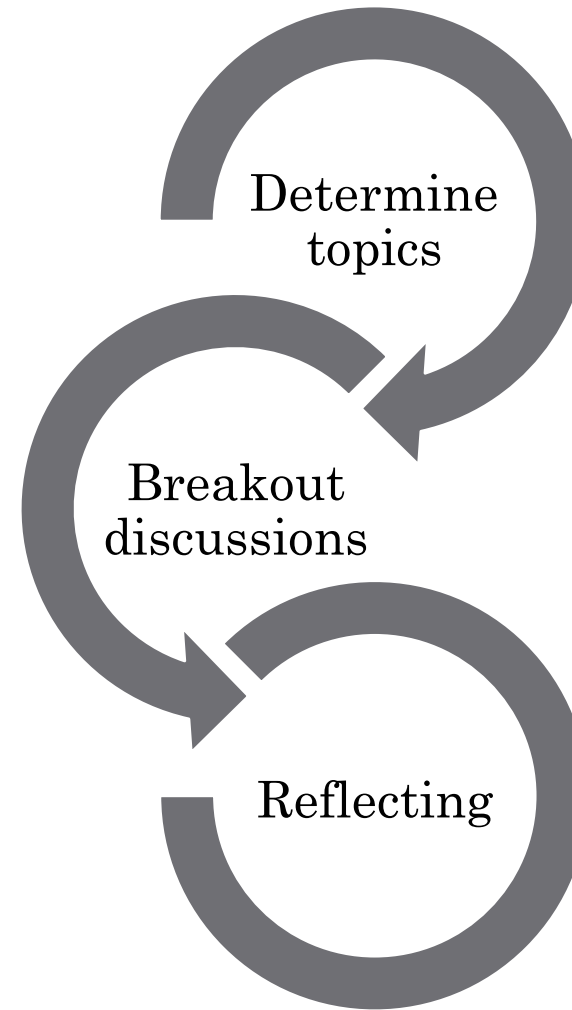Andrea Baer, Indiana University
Clarence Maybee, Purdue University

Why an unconference?

- Characteristics of unconferences:

  - Informal
  - Participant driven
  - Low cost
  - Local

Lawson, 2010

Determine topics

Breakout discussions

Reflecting

Our Morning Session

- Overview
  - ACRL Information Literacy Framework & threshold concepts
  - ACRL's 6 proposed threshold concepts

- Discussion
  - Challenges and opportunities of working with threshold concepts in information literacy instruction

- Selecting breakout session topics

What are threshold concepts?

"Core or foundational concepts that, once grasped by the learner, create new perspectives and ways of understanding a discipline or challenging knowledge domain."

(Land, Meyer, & Baillie, 2010, cited in ACRL New Framework, Draft 1, Part 1, lines 651-656)

Characteristics of threshold concepts

- Transformative

- Irreversible

- Integrative

- Bounded

- Troublesome

(Meyer & Land, 2003)

Threshold Concepts & the New ACRL IL Framework

Why new IL standards?

According to ACRL, a response to complex information landscape and changes in higher education:

- Active and collaborative learning

- Need for developing critical thinking, communication, and metacognitive skills

- Students as creators and participants in research
- Multimedia assignments

- Inter- and cross-disciplinarity

(ACRL, 2014 Jun., p. 21-22)

ACRL's new definition of IL

"Information literacy is a **repertoire of understandings, practices, and dispositions** focused on flexible engagement with the information ecosystem, underpinned by critical self-reflection. The repertoire involves finding, evaluating, interpreting, managing, and using information **to answer questions and develop new ones; and creating new knowledge** through ethical participation in communities of learning, scholarship, and practice."

(ACRL, 2014 Jun., p. 24)

Why threshold concepts and IL?

- Emphasize IL as higher order thinking which is "an integral part of the learning process within disciplines, and across them"

- Address "bottlenecks of understanding"

(ACRL, 2014 Jun., p. 25)

The Proposed ACRL Threshold Concepts

Scholarship is a Conversation

"...refers to the idea of sustained discourse within a community of scholars or thinkers, with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of competing perspectives and interpretations."

(ACRL, 2014 Jun., p. 5)

Sample assignments

- Assign class to investigate a particular topic from its treatment in the popular media, and then trace its origin in conversations among scholars and researchers.

- Select a topic on which students have some knowledge or experience. Have students examine a venue (blog, discussion forum, other social media site) in which a scholarly conversation is taking place.

(adapted from ACRL, 2014 Jun., p. 14)

Research as Inquiry

"…refers to an understanding that research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex questions whose answers develop new questions or lines of inquiry in any field."

(ACRL, 2014 Jun., p. 6)

Sample assignments

- Students in a first year course reflect upon the steps they went through when researching a major purchase or event in their lives (buying a car, selecting a college, etc.).

- A researcher/guest speaker attends the class and describes a research project from conception to conclusion. Students then journal about how their research process relates to that of the researcher.

(adapted from ACRL, 2014 Jun., p. 15)

Format as Process

"…refers to understanding that the processes of developing information resources originate from different needs, motivations, values, conventions, and practices, and result in different formats, but the underlying questions about value of the information and its potential use are more significant than the physical packaging of the information source."

(ACRL, 2014 Jun., p. 9)

Sample assignments

- Students will find sources about the same topic in two divergent formats, e.g. newspaper movie review and literary journal, compare them and describe the processes underlying the creation of each format.

- Ask students to transform information they have created in one format to another format, and to write a reflection on what they needed to consider as they went through the process.

(adapted from ACRL, 2014 Jun., p. 16)

Authority is Constructed and Contextual

"Authority of information resources depends upon the resources' origins, the information need, and the context in which the information will be used. This authority is viewed with an attitude of informed skepticism and an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought."

(ACRL, 2014 June, p. 7)

Sample assignments

- Have students look at some type of social media regarding a contemporary event (e.g. demonstrations at Tahrir Square during the "Arab Spring" events). Ask them to describe how they would analyze and evaluate the authority of the author(s).

- Ask students in professional or career-focused programs to consider who has authority within their areas of study and the origins of that authority.

(adapted from ACRL, 2014 Jun., p. 15)

Searching as Exploration

"Locating information requires a combination of inquiry, discovery, and serendipity. There is no one size fits all source to find the needed information. Information discovery is nonlinear and iterative, requiring the use of a broad range of information sources and flexibility to pursuit alternate avenues as new understanding is developed."

(ACRL, 2014 June, p. 10)

Sample assignments

- Students must identify one or two important databases for the project they are working on and analyze why they consider them to be an effective resource for their research.

- Ask students to write an I-Search paper, whereby they journal their searching processes, including key terms, tools used, and resources/results at each step.

(ACRL, 2014 June, p. 16)

Information has value

"Information has Value acknowledges that the creation of information and products derived from information requires a commitment of time, original thought, and resources that need to be respected by those seeking to use these products, or create their own based on the work of others. In addition, information may be valued more or less highly based on its creator, its audience/consumer, or its message."

(ACRL, 2014 June, p. 12)

Sample assignments

- Ask students to find several images that would enhance the project or paper on which they are working. Then ask them to determine which can be used without asking permission. What would they need to do to use this material?

- Discern between the economic processes behind different types of information, e.g. newspaper articles vs. 24-hour TV news, edited academic volume vs. popular title on a top 10 list.

(ACRL, 2014 June, p. 17)

Free write

What is an example of a way that you address one of these concepts in your current instruction?

- Scholarship is a Conversation
- Research as Inquiry
- Format as Process
- Authority is Constructed and Contextual
- Searching as Exploration
- Information has value

Questions to consider:

- What challenges might threshold concepts bring to our work as educators?

- What possibilities might threshold concepts bring to our work as educators?

Identifying Session Topics

Instructions

1. As a group
   a) Determine 3 topics you would like to be the focus of breakout sessions.
   b) Write each topic each on a separate sheet of the paper. Pass the sheets to a facilitator.

2. Facilitators will read the list of topics aloud.

3. If you wish to add topics not yet listed, write each topic on a sheet of the provided paper and pass it the facilitator.

Voting for breakout session topics

- On your way out of the room:

  Vote on **3 topics** that you want to be breakout sessions
  (You don't have to go to the one's you vote on.)

- A schedule for the breakout sessions will be shared by the end of the morning coffee break.

References

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