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Technical services librarians and outreach

Communicating our value to engage students in critical thinking about information

The work of technical services is often invisible to users, even as it ensures their seamless discovery of and access to curated content. In order to address the invisibility of their work, technical services librarians in academic library settings increasingly seek opportunities to communicate its importance and impact on student learning and engagement. Initiatives to make the work of technical services visible increasingly appear in the scholarly literature and in academic library outreach.

Rhonda Y. Kauffman and Martina S. Anderson, for example, wrote about integrating diversity, inclusion, and social justice into the daily responsibilities of technical services librarians.¹ When technical services librarians organize the crowdsourcing of metadata or host Wikipedia edit-a-thons, it makes their contributions to the organization and discovery of information quite clear to a broad range of constituents. Despite an increase in such literature and library programming, however, there are few examples of technical service librarian participation in information literacy outreach.

At the University of Memphis (UM), two technical services librarians were inspired to present at an institutional conference with the goal of engaging students in building professional competencies and, specifically, enhancing their understanding of an increasingly complex information landscape in which they learn and work. This case study presents an example of technical services out-

reach outside of the library, shares methods used to engage students in thinking critically about the behind-the-scenes work entailed in resource management, and explains some of the ways in which technical services relates to the information students encounter as researchers.

Background

As technical services librarians, information literacy instruction is not one of our primary job responsibilities. We are nonetheless expected to fulfill an instructional load of three sessions per fall and spring semesters. When special requests are received from individual instructors, and especially requests coming from our areas of liaison responsibility, we make our best effort to oblige, which consistently leads to an even greater teaching load.

While this teaching load may be modest compared to our instructional services colleagues, achieving it can become complicated when technical services is chronically understaffed.

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In fall 2019, we represented two out of only three faculty librarians in the university libraries' technical services department. When fully staffed, there should be at least double that number of librarians across the areas of collection management, cataloging, and library systems. Despite understaffing within the area of technical services, we wanted to contribute to the university libraries' goal of enhancing the university libraries' instructional services in order to improve the perception of the libraries across campus.

At the beginning of the fall 2019 semester, a call for presentations went out to UM faculty and staff, as well as selected community professionals, for the annual Student Leadership and Professional Competencies conference.² Career

Services and the Office of Student Leadership and Involvement jointly host this conference, in which 298 predominantly undergraduate students had participated in 2018.

Accordingly, it presented UM librarians a unique opportunity to interact with undergraduate users outside of traditional library instruction or classroom contexts.

Six Student Leadership and Professional Competencies provide a framework for conference content:

- Teamwork & Collaboration
- Learning & Reasoning
- Professional & Strategic Planning
- Communication & Digital Technology
- Self-Awareness & Personal Behavior
- Leadership & Civic Responsibility

Potential presenters were charged to relate how these competencies “impact student leaders and how they will translate to life after college.”³ “Learning & Reasoning” and its prescribed outcome, “students will understand and demonstrate the importance of gathering data to make informed decisions,” was the competency we agreed was most relevant to work in technical services.⁴ Our proposal, “Critical Thinking Beyond the Classroom,” outlined a highly interactive session that included three activities built into

the 50-minute session and reserved ten minutes for questions and answers at the conclusion. The proposed session was accepted, and we began to design content that would address the role of critical thinking

in both educational and work environments, while also helping us to highlight the value of technical services work.

The nature of technical services work can limit our face-to-face interaction with the public—we spend less time in the classroom or staffing a public service desk. Despite our in-person interactions with students and faculty being less frequent than those of our public services counterparts, we make meaningful connections through curating resources and providing technical support. The instruction we provide in pursuit of resolving an e-resources access issue facilitates students' increased confidence in their research skills and a more highly developed understanding of library resources and systems.



Promotional posting for the Student Leadership and Professional Competencies conference.

Working in technical services focuses our efforts on resource discovery and access on a daily basis as we troubleshoot diverse information platforms and formats. Because we cannot expect platform or resource stability or rely on scripts, we instead have to think critically about what factors might be contributing to problems; ask questions of colleagues, vendors, and patrons; and collaborate to execute solutions. In this respect, our dynamic responsibilities provide us with a unique

perspective on information literacy. As teachers, we can model the process of posing questions and remaining flexible as we critically investigate information sources and their utility to our specific needs.⁵

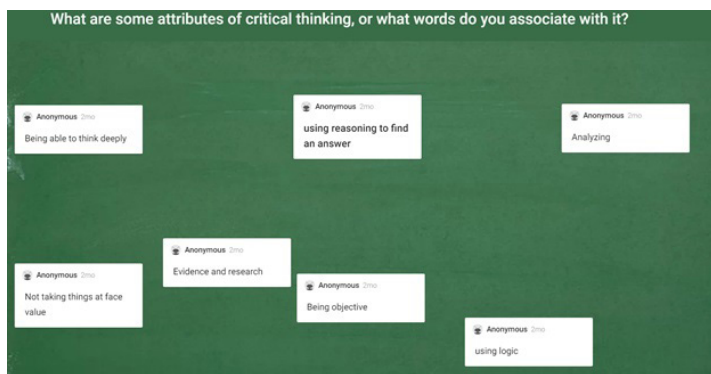
We developed the presentation with a few goals in mind. We wanted to illustrate the importance of critical thinking and information literacy in the professional workplace and to emphasize the information privilege that the audience of UM students was currently benefitting from. The work of acquiring, describing, and licensing resources provides us with certain “behind-the-scenes” insights that we hoped to convey to students. We were not attempting to share the complicated decision-making process that goes into assessing serials packages, for example, but we did want them to appreciate that presently they were benefitting from access to highly curated information resources that were designed with their ease and curricular needs in mind. Information seeking outside of academia would require their critical thinking and information literacy skills to a degree

that most of them had not yet experienced.

Critical thinking beyond the classroom

The presentation opened by citing a report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) with a provocative press report headline: “Employers More Interested in Critical Thinking and Problem Solving than College Major.”⁶ This approach was intended to pique the interest of those

going into the job market by demonstrating how highly employers value prospective employees’ critical thinking and problem solving. It



Student responses in Padlet.

would also allow us, as librarians, to draw on some familiar language and frameworks related to critical thinking and information literacy.

We used Padlet, an interactive digital board, to invite students to share the words or phrases they associate with critical thinking using their smartphones or laptops. Padlet responses were anonymously displayed to encourage creativity without the risk of speaking up. The students participated well, offering such insightful responses as “using reasoning to find an answer,” “not taking things at face value,” and “applying evidence to a problem.”

After discussing these definitions and ideas, we proceeded to offer some formal definitions of critical thinking, including those in P21 and the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.⁷

After asserting the importance of critical thinking to prospective employers and

discussing a variety of definitions of critical thinking, we engaged students in the following information-seeking scenario: “You work in the City of Memphis Parks & Neighborhoods department. This division is considering adding a senior center in Orange Mound.” We encouraged them to work individually or in a small group to brainstorm what sort of questions one might need to ask in this scenario and to outline a strategy for finding definitive information sources that would support decision making. We followed up on this activity by posing a variety of questions:

- What issues did you identify as relevant to making this decision?
- What kinds of sources did you identify?
- How did you determine that the sources were authoritative?

Again, students participated well and offered a diverse array of concerns, questions, and insights into the information needed. After encouraging a discussion of the themes that arose, we offered a brief demonstration of a licensed libraries’ database, PolicyMap. This resource employs GIS and numerous data sources to allow users to conveniently investigate a number of data points related to the proposed scenario.

The authors used PolicyMap to show students how it could have served as a resource to answer some of their questions regarding the senior center in the Orange Mound neighborhood. Unlike searching Google, this database overlays GIS data with topical data (including demographic, housing, health, etc.). This makes user queries more successful than conducting keyword searches online. Demonstrating this reiterated the value provided by the library to student participants and showed the limitation of any single platform or source to fulfill complex questions.

In order to make this value more explicit, we concluded the presentation with a discussion focused on scholarly communication. To convey the relative privilege of students’ information-rich environment, we differ-

entiated between the resources offered by the university libraries and those resources available after graduation. Information does not organize or evaluate itself, we explained, and connected this to the opening theme of critical thinking. Participants were reminded that employers and professors wanted them to think critically about information and to get in the habit of asking questions about information before using it. We discussed some of the work of technical services to curate and make resources available to them, and to highlight the value this adds in the information-seeking process. Upon graduation, we explained, the onus would be on them to continue to think critically about the information they sought and used.

The impact on the participants was obvious in their responses to a casual post-session assessment. Using a Visible Thinking routine,⁸ students were asked to anonymously share, if they felt comfortable, responses to two questions: “I used to think critical thinking was . . .” and “Now I think critical thinking is. . . .”

An overall theme in their replies was a perceived accessibility of critical thinking, as in, “I used to think critical thinking was a difficult process” and “Now I think critical thinking is a skill that we can all develop.” By telling the story of technical services to these students, modelling how we ask questions to critically engage with information, and demonstrating our comfort with dynamic situations, we contributed to their preparation for “real-world” critical thinking with and about information.

Notes

1. Rhonda Y. Kauffman and Martina S. Anderson, “Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice in Library Technical Services,” in *Library Technical Services: Adapting to a Changing Environment*, edited by Stacey Marien (Purdue University Press, 2020).

2. University of Memphis, “Student Leadership and Professional Competencies [SLPC],” 2019, <http://memphis.edu/studentinvolvement/communityengagement/competencies.php>.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Rachel Scott, "Accommodating Faculty Requests and Staying True to Your Pedagogical Ideals in the 1-shot Information Literacy Session," *Communications in Information Literacy* 10, no. 2 (2016): <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2016.10.2.29>.

6. Association of American Colleges & Universities, "Employers More Interested in Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Than College Major" [press release], April 10, 2013, <https://www.aacu.org/press>

/press-releases/employers-more-interested-critical-thinking-and-problem-solving-college-major.

7. ACRL, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," 2015, www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework; Battelle for Kids, "Frameworks & Resources," 2019, www.battelleforkids.org/networks/p21/frameworks-resources.

8. Ron Richart, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison, *Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for All Learners* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2011). *✍*

("Fact or fiction?," continued from page 552)

en courses participated in the fall course cluster, reaching nearly 400 students, or a quarter of our student body. Student feedback regarding the theme has been positive. In particular, they liked the fast-paced and highly interactive kick-off event. The provost also reported hearing good feedback from students about this event. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated sending our students home after spring break and transitioning to online instruction. During the remainder of the spring semester, Fact or Fiction courses were taught online, but organizing any additional theme events, including a virtual spring open house, proved untenable.

From a library faculty member perspective, coordinating this intellectual theme was a rare opportunity to make a significant contribution to the university's curriculum beyond standard instruction sessions and reference support. In this context, coordinating the theme was certainly rewarding work, but given shrinking library faculty numbers, leading another theme anytime soon is unlikely.

The Intellectual Theme Committee is considering transitioning to team-based theme leadership that would reduce the overall workload and lower the barrier

to future participation. Whether or not a given theme is led by the library, we have found it beneficial to continue supporting this unique curricular effort.⁶

Notes

1. School of Thought's website at <https://yourlogicalfallacyis.com>.

2. Christopher Sweet, "On Bullshit, Skepticism, and Belief," (Keynote Speech, Fact or Fiction Kick-Off, Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, Illinois, September 11, 2020), https://works.bepress.com/christopher_sweet/47/ (accessed April 10, 2020).

3. Lenore Sobota, "Fact or Fiction? Illinois Wesleyan Students Study the Difference," *Pantagraph* (Bloomington, Illinois), December 4, 2019, https://www.pantagraph.com/news/local/education/fact-or-fiction-illinois-wesleyan-students-study-the-difference/article_58e0e1af-2a6a-5ee6-b0ba-4f91ff1dca4a.html (accessed April 10, 2020).

4. AAC&U. "High Impact Educational Practices," <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips> (accessed April 10, 2020).

5. Tara Westover, *Educated: A Memoir* (New York, Random House, 2018).

6. Further details about Illinois Wesleyan's Annual Intellectual Themes can be found at <https://www.iwu.edu/annual-theme/>. *✍*