

Critical and Creative Thinking Program ~ UMass Boston

Master of Arts Synthesis Proposal

I am a community college librarian, charged with helping students develop information literacy skills. My research interest is how to integrate critical thinking into the library courses, orientations, and workshops we teach, particularly as I view 'information literacy' as a bundle of life-long learning strategies. **The specific goal of my synthesis project is to develop a set of original curriculum materials for an undergraduate online course in "Fundamentals of Library Research." My accompanying paper will explain how and why the materials were developed, what need they are designed to meet, and specifically how the approach I adopt will be used for instruction and assessment.**

I became interested in the relationship between critical thinking and information literacy when it occurred to me that to teach students how to use a database or how to structure a citation is putting the metaphorical cart before the horse. Students need to be able to analyze the kinds of information that are required for an assignment; to effectively formulate a search strategy by identifying concepts and keywords that will lead them to the desired information; to choose the appropriate resource or tool to search; to select relevant articles from a list of results; to understand and critique the information found in various sources, and to be able to synthesize and integrate this information in their essays or research papers.

I am inspired to adopt a problem-based learning (PBL) approach to critical thinking/information literacy because I have witnessed rather lackluster results from the way such skills are currently taught. Although most students we instruct are attentive,

they are passive. A semester-long online course will give me the chance to apply my approach with a discrete group of students; hopefully providing them with better tools than is the case with the “one-shot” orientation or workshop that most receive. The outcomes I seek are well described by the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy:

Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand (ALA, 1989).

Three literatures will be examined in the course of this project. Information literacy is a major topic in the literature of library and information science; critical thinking, as a movement, has produced many studies that can be usefully co-opted into my project; and there is now a considerable body of literature on problem-based learning. Studies that have investigated the triad of information literacy, critical thinking and problem-based learning are rare, but some are beginning to appear; this project will add to that work.

My synthesis project will also document my journey as a curriculum developer and instructor. The Library 101 course outline provides the content that must be covered in this 3 unit transferable course, but the theoretical and pedagogical approach to that content has always been left up to the instructor/librarian. Some tools I may take up in the course of this journey could include a personal/professional blog to document the stages of the project from a narrative point-of-view; a wiki to be used as a vehicle for students to record their

comments and insights on the progression of the course; and some of the features in WebCT such as the discussion board and live chat. Additionally, I will design qualitative assessment instruments such as rubrics that will allow me to evaluate the quality and depth of the final projects submitted by students in the course of the class.

Students, academic librarians and other educators will form the audience for my project. Librarians in general are very good at not re-inventing the wheel – if a successful and innovative course has achieved good outcomes; they want to know about it. Learning what others have done successfully is sometimes a goad for others to try something new and the project may have influence well beyond the local situation. When the project is complete and results have been disseminated, my hope is that other academic librarians, particularly in the community college sector, will be similarly inspired to effect change. Educators and librarians have much to gain by promoting critical thinking/information literacy as the basis for lifelong learning, but the real winners will be the students who ultimately “learn-how-to-learn.”

References

American Library Association. (1989). Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. Final Report. Retrieved September 3, 2006 from <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/whitepapers/presidential.htm>