



Classic

Constance Mellon Demonstrated that College Freshmen Are Afraid of Academic Libraries

A review of:

Mellon, Constance A. "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development." College & Research Libraries 47 (1986): 160-65.

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Abstract

Objective – To better understand the feelings of college freshmen engaged in their first research project using an academic library.

Design – Interpretive study involving analysis of personal writing describing the students' research process and their reactions to it.

Setting – A medium-sized public university in the southeastern United States.

Subjects – Students in freshman English courses.

Methods – English instructors assigned students to maintain search journals in which the students recorded a detailed description of their research process and the feelings they experienced while conducting research. In addition, students had to write an end-of- semester, in-class essay in which they discussed their initial reactions to the research project and how their feelings evolved over the semester. The journals and essays were analyzed using the "constant comparative" method developed by Glaser and Strauss to identify "recurrent 'themes'" (161).

Main Results – 75 to 85 per cent of the students reported feelings of “fear or anxiety” when confronted with the research assignment. More specifically, they expressed a sense of being “lost”. This feeling derived from four causes: “(1) the size of the library; (2) a lack of knowledge about where things were located; (3) how to begin, and (4) what to do” (162). Spurred by the question of why students did not seek help from their professors or a librarian, Mellon re-examined the data and uncovered two additional prevalent feelings. Most students tended to believe that their fellow students did not share their lack of library skills. They were ashamed of what they considered their own inadequacy and were, therefore, unwilling to reveal it by asking for assistance (162).

Conclusions – The original objective of Mellon’s study was to gain information that would be useful in improving bibliographic instruction in her library. The discovery of the extent of students’ apprehension when confronted with a library research assignment came as something of a surprise. Mellon later noted that, at the time she was conducting her research, she first became aware of the symptoms of math anxiety and realized that they closely resembled those she had identified in students confronting a library research assignment. At that point she coined the now widely used term “library anxiety” (Mellon, “Library Anxiety and the Non-Traditional Student” 79). She further realised that the research on math anxiety suggested the syndrome could be at least partially alleviated by simply acknowledging its existence to students. As a result, instruction librarians began openly discussing the affective aspects of library research in their classes, assuring students that their feelings of apprehension were both “common and reasonable” (164). They also devoted more conscious effort to presenting themselves as caring and approachable people who genuinely

understood students’ feelings and wanted to help them. In addition, English faculty began devoting more class time to teaching the research process, even spending some out-of-class time in the library working with reference librarians to assist students.

Commentary

Mellon summarized a very substantial two-year study in a remarkably brief article which failed to provide some important details. For example, it is unclear exactly how many students participated in the study or whether they all provided all requested data. Mellon is also not very specific in describing how she applied the constant comparative method. She never actively pursued the findings summarized in her seminal article, noting that “my personal research moved in another direction” (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, and Bostick ix). Nevertheless, her work caught the attention of other researchers who would seek ways to test her theory empirically. The first of these was Sharon L. Bostick, then a doctoral student at Wayne State University, whose dissertation research focused on developing a reliable and valid quantitative measure of library anxiety applicable to undergraduate and graduate students at all levels. The result of her research was the Library Anxiety Scale, a 43-question, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. This instrument was designed to measure what Bostick’s research had discovered were the five major factors affecting library anxiety: Barriers with Staff; Affective Barriers; Comfort with the Library; Knowledge of the Library, and Mechanical Barriers. (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, and Bostick 311-315).

Most subsequent research on library anxiety has been based more on Bostick’s work than on Mellon’s original study; in fact, the Library Anxiety Scale “has been used in virtually every quantitative study” (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, and Bostick 1). Two

particularly prolific scholars have done much of the work: Anthony Onwuegbuzie, a professor in the Education Counseling and Leadership Department at Sam Houston State University and Qun G Jiao, a librarian at Baruch College. Together with Bostick, in 2004 they co-authored a book, Library Anxiety: Theory, Research and Applications, which summarizes the research findings to that point. The book describes in detail the development of the Library Anxiety Scale, discusses the research based on it and offers suggestions for reduction or prevention of library anxiety.

Onwuegbuzie, Jiao and others have studied both the symptoms and the effects of library anxiety. These studies have confirmed not only that library anxiety is prevalent but that it can have a debilitating effect on the quality of student research. Expanding on Mellon's original work with college freshmen, researchers have examined the incidence of the syndrome in minorities and foreign students and looked for differences based on gender, age, educational level or learning style. Numerous studies have used other measurement scales to correlate library anxiety with various personality traits. The correlation between library anxiety and other anxieties such as math, statistics, writing and foreign language has been examined.

Of course, this research would have little practical value if it did not provide some guidance in eliminating or at least reducing the extent and intensity of library anxiety. Onwuegbuzie, Jiao and Bostick's book includes a chapter on "prevention, reduction and intervention". Suggestions are grouped in three main areas: improvements to the physical environment, library instruction, and effective reference service. Many of the suggestions related to environment and reference do not appear to be based primarily on the library anxiety research. Virtually all of them have

appeared frequently in the literature of academic librarianship and most fail to distinguish between those interventions focused specifically on library anxiety and those designed simply to improve the library experience for all users. In the area of library instruction, the authors stress, as did Mellon, the importance of recognizing and deliberately addressing the affective elements of the research process in all library instruction. They also argue that specific, targeted instruction is most effective in reducing anxiety because anxiety is situation specific (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, and Bostic 257-261).

A 2007 literature review indicates that the pace of research on library anxiety may have slowed somewhat since the publication of Library Anxiety: Theory, Research and Applications (Carlile). However, as with so many areas of library research, the question most requiring examination today is the impact of technology. Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, and Bostick readily acknowledge this, noting the change from "the location specific library environment to more open, virtual information settings" and asserting that the Library Anxiety Scale needs to be modified to reflect this change (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, and Bostic 289). Do today's students, many of whom display considerable, if often misplaced, confidence in their own ability to locate information online and who may conduct most if not all of their research without even entering the library, experience the same anxiety when confronted with a research assignment as did Mellon's poor freshmen over twenty years ago? This question deserves an examination it has yet to receive.

Works Cited

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