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Caught in the Act: An Autoethnographic Analysis of the Performance of Information Literacy Instruction

Abstract:

What factors comprise a librarian's performance within the act of conducting in-person information literacy instruction? This paper describes an autoethnographic exploration of this question, grounded in Erving Goffman's dramaturgy and Michael Kirby's matrix approach to acting and non-acting. The author argues that a more sophisticated performance-oriented understanding of instruction could benefit librarians preparing to teach. This work explores a complex phenomenon that has not yet been described: the performance of information literacy instruction.

Résumé:

Quels facteurs relèvent du rôle du bibliothécaire lors de l'enseignement de la maîtrise informationnelle en personne? Cette communication présente une étude exploratoire autoethnographique de la question, ancrée dans la dramaturgie d'Erving Goffman et l'approche matricielle de Michael Kirby au jeu et au non-jeu. L'auteure affirme qu'une compréhension de l'enseignement plus sophistiquée et axée sur le jeu serait bénéfique pour les bibliothécaires qui s'apprêtent à donner leur formation. L'étude explore un phénomène complexe qui n'a pas encore été décrit : la performance lors de l'enseignement de la maîtrise informationnelle.

One way to describe the act of teaching is that to teach is to perform; good teaching often involves providing a meaningful, specific, complex, objective-driven performance for a group of learners. Library and information professionals are frequently called upon to teach. What factors comprise a librarian's performance within the specific context of in-person information literacy instruction? This paper describes the findings of an autoethnographic exploration of this question, grounded in elements of Erving Goffman's dramaturgy and Michael Kirby's matrix approach to acting and non-acting. The author begins by deconstructing the prevalent way in which teaching is equated with performing. The paper concludes that a more sophisticated performance-oriented understanding of information literacy instruction could benefit librarians preparing to teach.

Globally, today's information environment is more complex and participatory than ever. Information literacy instruction is an important means through which librarians attempt to foster patrons' information-related abilities, ideally including foundational resource-oriented skills as well as higher-order thinking skills and the underpinning concepts.

The success of information literacy instruction hinges significantly on its quality. While definitions of "success" and "quality" vary, several predominant factors contribute to making instruction engaging and significant. Practitioner-oriented literature often focuses on harnessing the newest information technologies for instruction (Hoffman and Polkinghorne 2010). There are also growing bodies of research focusing on other important factors, such as librarians' reflective practices (Jacobs 2008) and effective faculty-librarian relationships (Julien and Given 2003; Julien and Pecoskie 2009; Polkinghorne and Wilton 2010). These bodies of research are valuable, particularly considering that librarians often express apprehension about their readiness to teach (Elmborg 2006, 192), and that instructional effectiveness is "threatened when those providing information literacy instruction are not fully engaged in their teaching roles" (Julien and Pecoski 2009, 149). Yet, there is no prior work exploring the instructional performance with the hope of enabling librarians to better prepare for and engage with the teaching role.

The casual equation of teaching and performing is rarely challenged: isn't a good teacher the one who can stand at the front of the class and entertain? This discourse functions widely within popular culture. For example, witness an episode of sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* in which the protagonist, physicist Sheldon Cooper, shocked that he cannot impress his students solely with his genius, seeks out acting lessons in an attempt to become a better teacher (Lorre and Prady 2011). Within library and information circles, the equation of entertaining with educating also influences mainstream concepts of library instruction. For example, a recent information literacy conference presentation reminded librarians that "Audiences demand entertainment," and invited attendees to learn how to "incorporate skills developed from stand-up and improv comedy to turn instruction sessions into entertaining workshops that keep student attention" (Mason 2009).

The appeal of this simple teaching-performing equivalence can be understood within the context of librarians' well-documented ambivalence toward instructional work. This ambivalence has a variety of causes, and librarians' expressed lack of preparation is certainly among them (Julien and Genuis 2011, 109). It is relatively rare for practitioners to have opportunities to learn about central pedagogical foundations such as learning theory, learning styles, instructional design, and instructor self-awareness. Much of the available literature and training focuses on more concrete topics such as instructional technology. Even when new instructional strategies are offered, as exemplified above, they are often proposed as appealing but deterministic hooks that will make library instruction irresistible to learners (Polkinghorne 2011).

Erving Goffman's wide-ranging dramaturgical perspective, closely related to symbolic interactionism, was driven by the sociologist's desire to expose the inherent theatricality of self-presentation and social negotiation in everyday life (Quinn 2005, 331). Elements of Goffman's framework have been applied to library and information studies to support explorations of service desk transactions (Chelton 1997), librarians' experiences of the

teaching role (Julien and Pecoskie 2009), and academic librarianship in general (Quinn 2005).

Goffman's dramaturgy is not universally admired. Chief among his framework's shortcomings is its relative disregard for larger power structures and the wider implications of the emotional and relational minutiae of everyday life (Scheff 2006, ix). However, since there is no extant research of the kind proposed here, capturing the complex experience of instructional work through detailed and focused observation is a necessary priority. Michael Kirby's acting/non-acting matrix provides a metatheoretical tool for analysing and articulating the degree of acting within given performances. It has not previously been applied within the library context.

Autoethnography has been selected because it will enable the author to capitalise on her subjective position as a librarian involved in diverse and intensive information literacy instruction during the period currently under study. The author is a "complete member in the social world under study," one of the core prerequisites of analytic autoethnography (Anderson 379). The author has full participatory access to the phenomenon being studied. The author has undertaken a structured journaling process in order to capture pre- and post-instruction observations related to the primary elements of Goffman's dramaturgy: performances, teams, stages, discrepant roles, communication out of character, and impression management (Goffman 1959).

This journaling is currently in progress and will encompass at least 18 instructional sessions designed for undergraduates and graduate students in several arts and social sciences disciplines between January and April 2012. The author's observations will be coded and performance-related themes will be identified. This is phase one of the research project, and it will be the focus of the conference presentation.

Triangulation, very important to the trustworthiness of autoethnographic work, is being conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews with other practitioners who have significant instructional responsibilities. The interviews will investigate participants' perceptions of the performative aspects of their instruction work. These interviews will form the second phase of the project, scheduled to take place during the summer of 2012.

The author's pre-librarianship background contributes to her ability to conduct analytical dramaturgical reflection. Before becoming a librarian, the author completed a graduate degree in Drama and worked professionally as a dramaturg.

It has been established that librarians often feel unprepared to teach, and that this can affect the effectiveness of the instruction they provide. An assumption fuelling the present research is that one of the ways in which librarians may feel unprepared is in the arena of performance. By beginning to identify and analyse the performative aspects of information literacy instruction, this work explores a context, more complex than the casual teacher-as-entertainer equivalence, that has not yet been described. While this is a small-scale, exploratory study, it may further encourage the reflection and awareness that

are important to building librarians' capacities to offer significant and engaging information literacy instruction.

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