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Falling out of Praxis: Reflection as a Pedagogical Habit of Mind

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Reflection as a Pedagogical Habit of Mind

Heidi LM Jacobs

WHEN I TALK ABOUT critical information literacy and reflective praxis, people often tell me, "I'm so busy, I don't have time to be reflective," or "I'd like to do more critical information literacy work, but I don't have time to redo all my class preparations." As this chapter will illustrate, I can most certainly empathize with this position: I too have fallen into the position where I didn't take the time to be reflective or make changes based on my reflection. Reflection and action are essential to the praxis of critical information literacy, and without them, I found myself teaching in ways I did not value. In this chapter, I will discuss how fostering reflective habits of mind helped me find a way back to praxis.

One day, while getting ready for a section of a first-year English class called Writing about Literature, I hit a wall that seemed like burnout. By teaching an array of different classes, amongst other pressing commitments, I was being torn in too many directions. Somehow I had been moving away from being what I strive to be—a reflective, creative, critical teacher—and toward something I do not want to be—a lecturing conveyer of information. Because my workload was what it was, I realized I was relying increasingly on what seemed to be the easy way to teach: tell students what I think they need to know about thinking critically about information literacy and then move on to the next class.

That day I was feeling particularly frustrated with my inability to distill the problems of seeking scholarly information into yet another PowerPoint-laden lesson. It would have been easy enough to tell my students, "Use these schol-

arly resources at the library instead of *SparkNotes* or *Wikipedia*." The reality of doling out such advice, however, is that students generally do not learn to think critically about these resources, but only learn to hide their use from us by not including them in their bibliographies. Moreover, I realized that to approach undergraduate scholarly research in this way, I was using "banking" education techniques: merely depositing information into my students that they "patiently receive, memorize, and repeat."[1] Equally troubling was the fact that the class plan I had developed had me doing almost all of the talking while the class sat virtually silent and still.

As my mind wandered in frustration, my gaze turned to my bookshelf where the bold yellow cover of bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* reminded me that classrooms are "the most radical space of possibility in the academy."[2] Nearby sat Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature,* which convinced me of the importance of teaching students the conflicts within our disciplines.[3] Next to Graff was Maria Accardi's *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction,* which reminded me that the thinking I had done as a literature teacher regarding feminist pedagogy was equally relevant and vital to library instruction.[4] Char Booth's book title summarized everything perfectly: *Reflective Teaching, Effective Learning*.[5] I felt like all of these books were staging a pedagogical intervention: I had fallen out of praxis and needed to do something.

Less than an hour before students were to arrive, I scrapped my Power-Point slides and selected a story from the class syllabus—Alice Walker's "Everyday Use." I printed off scholarly articles about the story, *Wikipedia* entries about Walker, *SparkNotes* summaries of "Everyday Use," Literature Online's biography of Walker, and I copied chapters from monographs and scholarly encyclopedias about Walker and African American women writers. I dashed off to the classroom with my documents still warm from the printer.

With little introduction to the activity, I put students into groups and gave each group a printout of a resource. I asked them to think about what the resource was, what strengths it had, what weaknesses it possessed and asked them to consider if and when they might use it in their coursework. As the groups talked, I wandered around and listened to their conversations. I asked them a few questions, but the students were keenly forging ahead, exploring this new terrain. Within five minutes, I knew I had made the right decision in abandoning my PowerPoint presentation and foregrounding their ideas and thinking instead.

When they were done talking about their resources, I asked each group to report on their discussion. Groups talked about a range of topics from how easy or difficult a resource was to read, to how some authors had PhDs and publications in the area, to how some resources had no author listed, to how extensive a works cited list was (or wasn't). In less than an hour, students had taught themselves, each other, their professor, and me vital lessons about what

kinds of information exists for literary study and also about how they might go about using and evaluating information on their own.

What the students presented collectively was a timely, honest, passionate, nuanced, and complex discussion of information, information needs, and the information world. As our discussion drew to a close, I tossed out a question, unsure of where it would take us. I asked, "Who has the 'best' resource in the room?" At first a few students argued for and against different resources, and increasingly students started looking a little confused. A student who had been looking tentative finally raised her hand and said, "Doesn't it depend on what you need? Some resources are great for some things, and some resources are better for other things." The class discussion then turned to how any thinking about information needs to be highly contextual and how we need to think carefully about that context whenever we make decisions about information needs. This idea about information needs being contextual was one that I would have addressed in my Power-Point-driven presentation, but coming from the students themselves it had more poignancy and power. My PowerPoint version of this idea would have been like banking knowledge: having students engage with questions related to information needs themselves and find ways to navigate the issue situates students as agents in problem-posing education instead of vessels in banking education.[6]

When I got back to my office, I saw the books that made me rethink my teaching earlier in the afternoon. I imagined them saying, "That was better. But don't get complacent. What are you going to do tomorrow?" The thing we need to remember about reflection is that it's not like a yearly vaccination. We cannot get complacent, or our thinking and teaching can start to stagnate and develop in ways reflective of workload rather than pedagogical goals. Reflection has to be a habit of mind: we need to make considering what we do in the classroom and why and how we do what we do a regular part of our teaching lives. Moreover, we need to put our reflections into action so that we can stay in praxis, that dynamic space between theory and practice.

At the end of the class, I realized that I'd created a very engaging activity in class that did more than I could have imagined. Since that day, I've created versions and variations on that initial activity. The other thing I learned from that day was how easy it is to get too busy and caught up in the minutiae and practicalities of teaching and neglect the vital work of creative, reflective teaching.

As I have argued elsewhere about *Wikipedia*, it is not helpful for information literacy or literary studies purposes to pretend that things like *SparkNotes* don't exist, to create false dichotomies between "good" and "bad" sources, or to denigrate them without understanding the very valid reasons why students use these resources. When we ban, ignore, or dismiss resources like *Spark-Notes* without having honest, reflective, critical conversations with our stu-

dents about the kinds of literary information students need and use, we are giving them only half the story of literary information.

I continued to consider that Writing about Literature class over the weeks and months that followed. In addition to realizing that I needed to bring student voices back into the classroom, I kept returning to the discussion we had had about *SparkNotes*. While students did see limitations of the advertisement-laden *SparkNotes*, particularly in its absence of a listed author, a number of students confessed with both guilt and passion that they felt they needed *SparkNotes* to understand the basic ideas, plot, and characters of a story or a novel. While I am far from suggesting that *SparkNotes* are a quality source of scholarly literary information, I do believe we need to understand the impulse behind students' use of them. As the students talked, it dawned on me that many years ago when I was an undergraduate, I struggled in a full-year Chaucer class. As a way to understand *The Canterbury Tales*, I turned to the pre-Internet, Canadian precursor to *SparkNotes*—the *Coles Notes* guide to Chaucer. I read the *Coles Notes* guide alongside Chaucer's original text and, like these students, I knew *Coles Notes* weren't scholarly and I shouldn't cite them in my papers, but I felt I needed them to help me understand what was happening in the work at a very basic level. *Coles Notes* helped me develop a base from which I could then develop a deeper understanding of Chaucer. In order to have a meaningful discussion about information sources with our students, we need to understand the complexity of our students' contexts and acknowledge that our students bring a wide range of experiences to our discussions of information. Perhaps most importantly, we also need to remember to acknowledge, validate, and *engage* these experiences within our classrooms.

In information literacy classes—in literary studies and elsewhere—it is easy to focus on what we think students need to know, and in so doing we run the risk of pushing our students' lived experiences as fledgling scholars to the shadowy margins. Acknowledging that *SparkNotes* might be like academic training wheels—something you don't want to rely on forever but something you need to get you going when you're starting to learn something new—can validate student experience. Further, it reminds both us and them that reading academic prose and scholarly studies is not an innate ability but something learned over time.

In providing students with an opportunity to actively learn and present their thoughts to the class, and to allow those thoughts and ideas to shape and move our discussions, we are, as Accardi has written, finding "ways of teaching that respect student agency, autonomy and knowledge. And when student agency is respected, students are empowered to learn and bring about social change rather than being passive consumers of knowledge and culture."[7] If I had gone with a prepackaged PowerPoint presentation about information literacy and literary studies that day, the presentation would have entirely by-

passed topics like what students feel is helpful about *SparkNotes*. My presentation would not have left room for their experiences.

Reflection doesn't need to be a long, overdrawn process (though it certainly can be); nor does it need to (or should it) be a process that you do once a year and you're done with it. Instead, I want to argue that reflection (and the corresponding actions that work to create praxis) should be a habit of mind that we strive to naturalize. It should be something we do (and heed) regularly—before class, during class, after class. Sometimes, though, juggling many classes alongside our many other commitments means reflection is something we either put aside for a different day or something we think we should act upon only when more time presents itself.

If we think about reflection as a habit of mind, however, it reminds us that praxis—reflection and action—should be intrinsic to the work we do as teachers. What I learned from this Writing about Literature class was, in many ways, accidental: it was a spur-of-the-moment action based on a quick reflection on why I was feeling burned out. As teachers, however, we shouldn't count on accidental actions; we need to be, in Char Booth's words, intentional. Thinking of reflection as a habit of mind also asks us to develop what Booth has described as "intentionality" in teaching:

> Intentionality is constructive self awareness in teaching. Intentional teachers do more than communicate well or design strong assignments, they methodically consider the impact their actions have on learners, understand the knowledge they possess, use evidence to support the strategies they select, and strive to improve their effectiveness over time.[8]

There are many things I like about Booth's description of intentionality in teaching, but one phrase I'd like to underscore is "strive to improve their effectiveness over time."

One could read Booth's statement as a call for a grand longitudinal study to collect "evidence to support the strategies" we select as teachers. Indeed, this interpretation is not precluded from that statement. But the collection of evidence does not have to be wide-reaching and extensive. Nor does evidence need to come from surveys, focus groups, user studies, and so on. If reflection is a habit of mind in our daily work, then the evidence that we can collect can be local, immediate, anecdotal, and observational. Evidence for reflective teaching can be things like noticing "I talk more than my students do" or "The students all tuned out right about here," or "When I ask if anyone has questions, the class is silent. Yet, in the hands-on part of the class, they have a million questions. Why is that?" or "Students really got engaged once we started talking about ___." In many ways, reflection is a kind of evidence gathering.

One of the ways we can practice reflection as a habit of mind is to read, re-read, and use the stellar work in our field both as inspirations for new ways of thinking and as reminders to consider what we do and why we do what we do as academic librarians. Part of the reason I was pressed toward reflection and action in the example I described above is because I had the ideas and thinking of others pushing me to think more critically and creatively, reminding me of the ideas and ideals that I think are important. While I have long identified with feminist pedagogy, reading Maria Accardi's book about feminist pedagogy within librarianship was really helpful in reminding me to be more be vigilant about the things that I have grown so comfortable with that I have become complacent. In discussing intentionality, Char Booth gave me the language I needed to remind myself to practice particular pedagogical habits of mind. Likewise, Emily Drabinski's work has reminded me that we have myriad opportunities in our everyday work as librarians to ask difficult and vital questions of our students and ourselves: "library access structures," for example, can be turned into pedagogical tools that allow librarians to "teach knowledge production as a contested project, one in which they themselves can engage."[9] Similarly, Nicole Pagowsky and Niamh Wallace inspired me with their reminder that "the practice of examining, questioning, and researching strategies for undoing oppressive institutional structures should be part of our ongoing work in academia."[10] Reflection can be both solitary and communal. Part of what moves our field's thinking forward is that collective reflection that happens when we share our ideas at conferences, in articles, and on blogs.

Reflection—as a habit of mind—can help keep us on track, can help us (re)align our theories with our practices and vice versa. It invites us to take a step back and talk stock of what we're doing and why. As I consider that Writing about Literature class, I am reminded of Stenberg and Lee, who wrote, "What prepares one to teach isn't mastery, but a willingness to give up the very notion, to make learning—on the part of the students and the teacher—the center of the classroom."[11] I firmly believe in what Stenberg and Lee describe here. But I also have seen, firsthand, how, when I get busy and torn in too many directions, it often appears "easier" to rely on mastery and banking education. But mastery and banking never push us to listen, to be reflective, to learn new things, to foreground the ideas and experiences of others. Mastery and banking only push us out of praxis.

Notes

1.   Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000), 72.
2.   bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.

3. Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature*, 20th anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
4. Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press), 2013.
5. Char Booth, *Reflective Teaching, Effective Learning* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2011).
6. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72.
7. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction,* 25.
8. Booth, *Reflective Teaching, Effective Learning,* 17.
9. Emily Drabinski, "Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction," *Library Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (April 2013): 108.
10. Nicole Pagowsky and Niamh Wallace, "Black Lives Matter! Shedding Library Neutrality Rhetoric for Social Justice," *College and Research Libraries News* 76, no. 4 (April 2015): 200.
11. Shari Stenberg and Amy Lee, "Developing Pedagogies: Learning the Teaching of English," *College English* 64, no. 3 (January 2002): 333.

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