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# Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

## Crossing the threshold: innovations in information literacy

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**Abstract**
This case study reflects on the use of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003) within the teaching of information literacy. It describes three embedded classes which were devised and delivered by an Academic Support Librarian, alongside a Fashion Management Course Leader at London College of Fashion. The article examines how and why the sessions were structured around threshold concepts of information literacy, reflecting on the benefits of the intervention.

**Introduction**
In this current climate – whether one is working with students in the arts, humanities or sciences – never before has the facilitation of critical thinking been so necessary. The role of the librarian has been transformed. Rather than simply being custodians of knowledge there is space for us to consider the evaluation of information instead of simply showing others where to find it, now we facilitate rather than just support learning (McGuinness, 2011). This places a new responsibility on us as information literacy practitioners to truly consider whether we are equipping our students with the skills to proceed as agile and interrogative researchers, able to question, evaluate and respond to information. As bell hooks would ask, are we sharing information or 'sharing in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students' (hooks, 1994, p.13)?

Freire's critique of teacher-centred pedagogy in his landmark work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) gave an impetus for teachers to move towards a model of problem-posing education. In the problem-posing model, students are encouraged to critique, to question, and, through dialogue with their teacher, form knowledge. Over the last 50 years this work has arguably shaped pedagogical practice across many subject disciplines, but in my experience it has taken somewhat longer for the field of information literacy to catch up. Traditionally library teaching has often tended towards the transmission model, which involves a librarian presenting a series of resources and/or research strategies to the student(s). Recently critical pedagogy as a concept has been embraced within information literacy. As Tewell (2015) notes, in the last decade librarians have made significant progress in moving from the transmission model to embracing a critical one that at once acknowledges and emboldens the role of the student within the pedagogical process.

**Background**
Those of us who work as hybrid librarians – acting in functional capacities as well as in teaching – are well aware of the difficulties inherent in evolving our teaching practice. Everything must be balanced and whilst I, for example, would of course like to spend my days considering pedagogical theory and its possible impact; I may instead find myself putting in extra hours on the enquiry desk, recruiting and training new staff, shelving resources, conducting a usage survey, inputting statistics, or involving myself in any other part of the minutiae required to run a library.

The demanding nature of performing both roles simultaneously in a busy academic art library setting means that strategic pedagogy often takes second place to frontline service considerations. Additionally, information literacy techniques designed for students engaged in science, technology or even humanities subjects are not always appropriate for use with art students, who may have different requirements and competencies (ARLIS/NA, 2007). Despite this, the last few years have seen innovations in art librarianship teaching, from the introduction of simple techniques like the involvement of mobile technology or peer learning, to more sophisticated embedded information literacy instruction, delivered as part of an academic course. The profession is moving away from a more traditional teaching culture to one centred on active learning (Fisher, 2012, cited by Lotts, 2016). In light of this, and my recent temporary cover of an Academic Support Librarian (ASL) role at London College of Fashion (LCF, UAL) in late 2016, I saw an opportunity to legitimately experiment with threshold concepts in information literacy.

Threshold concepts, it is noted by Meyer and Land (2003), exist in every discipline and can loosely be understood as hard-to-grasp concepts which once understood are, amongst other things, transformative and irreversible for the learner. Students will not only come up against threshold concepts in their main study disciplines; they will also be confronted by them within information literacy. By this I mean that students often struggle to grasp the more 'meta' concepts behind the research process. These include but are not limited to: the nature of information and the processes behind its creation; the structure of the information landscape and the understanding of information itself as a commodity; the notion of authority and the idea this can be constructed and contextual; and confusion between the metadata describing an item and the item itself. These are just some of the most familiar concepts that librarians witness students struggling with (Bravender, McClure and Schaub, 2015).

**Implementation**
In commencing the role of ASL at LCF I met with a number of Course Leaders from the Fashion Management programme. In the course of a lively discussion with Tim Williams, Course Leader for the Graduate Diploma in Fashion Management, it became apparent there were recognisable issues in the students' research behaviours that he had noted over time. These included struggling with digital source formats, some confusion over the different search techniques often required for online research, not knowing when their research was 'complete', unformed critical evaluation skills – particularly when faced with the bias inherent in much self-published online information, and finally a perceived lack of engagement with research in general. Both I and the Course Leader had noted a tendency with many students, particularly when engaging with written elements of their work, to use research as a tool to back up what they already know rather than as an opportunity to explore their subject area. I had spent some time attempting to address similar ideas with students at Central Saint Martins and proposed delivering an information literacy session built around those issues, rather than just introducing students to the library and its resources. In response the Course Leader requested I design a series of three sessions to be embedded in the curriculum of their Research Methods unit. The sessions would need to address the issues previously discussed and have an overall focus on digital literacy.

Although digital literacy is distinct from information literacy, in the Venn diagram of literacies the two heavily intersect, hence it made sense to proceed in this vein. Partly because the issues discussed with the Course Leader did relate to research patterns caused by the digital realm, but additionally because, in the way such things occur within an educational context, the term digital literacy had become a hot topic at the University; affording more interest, respect and ultimately time and resources than information literacy ever had been.

Considering the issues outlined by the Course Leader, it became apparent how closely they aligned with generally accepted threshold concepts for information literacy, as laid out by Bravender, McClure

and Schaub (2015). Teaching around threshold concepts involves considering the why rather than simply the how, for it is only when one understands the context in which something sits that they are able to understand how and why it has come about, and therefore be emboldened to actively and independently participate in the process. Teaching information literacy through the lens of threshold concepts is an effective way to enable transformative learning. As Townsend, Brunetti and Hofer posit, 'it is the acknowledgement of more complex and interesting content beneath the surface of information literacy's lists of tasks and processes, and a simpler way to uncover and explain that complexity, that makes threshold concepts so exciting' (2011, p.858).

During a follow-up meeting I proposed structuring the three sessions around key information literacy threshold concepts, ensuring that each time they would be viewed and understood through the digital lens. These of course had to be compatible with the perceived research issues of the students, and should in turn be able to be addressed both in the lectures and using a series of tasks designed with active participation in mind. After a wide-ranging discussion on everything from Melvyn Dewey to Bloom's digital taxonomy it was decided the curriculum would be built around the following threshold concepts:

1. The information landscape and the value of information.
2. Searching as strategic exploration.
3. The concept of 'authority' and evaluating sources.

The Course Leader had been generous with the time allocated for this, and had stipulated that each session would encompass an hour long lecture in the morning, during which an afternoon brief would be given to the students to work on in groups for the following three hours, before finally concluding with two hours at the end of the day in which the groups present their work to each other. One of the stipulations I had in designing these sessions was that each embody peer learning techniques, as I strongly believed this kind of 'interteaching' has proven beneficial results (Saville, Zinn and Elliott, 2005). Having made a personal commitment to moving away from a transmission model of teaching it was critical that, even in the morning lectures, the students be asked to actively participate in some way, whether through simple exercises or peer to peer discussions.

It felt that we were exploring new ground and that the process itself, structure of the sessions and some basic observations could be shared. As we asked ourselves (and attempted to outline) what had happened, we felt that the response could be given in the form of a case study. Yin (2012) notes that descriptive questions such as 'what has happened' are particularly suited to case study research (rather than alternative methods such as experiments or surveys). We proceeded following the basic case study methodology, again outlined by Yin; designing the study, collecting the data, data analysis, and presenting and reporting the results. For us the most significant part of the process was designing the study itself, so the majority of the report focuses on this, as well as the content of the sessions, with later consideration given to the data – which in our case was both observational and took the form of anonymous feedback from the participants (fully anonymous in the case of the written feedback, and latterly anonymised in the case of informal verbal feedback).

**Session one: the information landscape and the value of information**
Focus:        How and why information is structured.
Aim:          To more fully understand the information landscape (and therefore the notion of information having value), and how to navigate it more effectively.

In session one the students were introduced to the meta-concept of the information landscape, specifically focusing on mapping its digital elements: the visible, deep and dark web. Discussions then took place over where different types of online resources sit within this 'map', with the realisation that

most are situated behind a pay wall (meaning you have to pay to view that content). Thus, the understanding of information as a commodity was born.

The rest of the lecture examined the structure and access of information. Strategically placed breakout discussions ensured that the students were kept engaged and made their own contributions. The Course Leader required that the students complete their brief using digital tools, so OneDrive was used to both assign groups and provide access to all documents.

For the brief each group was allocated a topic. Topics were pre-selected by the Course Leader and ranged from ideas such as the multi-cultural marketplace, the relationship between design and marketing in fashion, and the 'technopocene'. Using both the visible and deep web the group would need to work together to source a mix of eight resources on their allocated topic. Each resource needed to be catalogued (essentially 'tagged' using controlled vocabulary) and classified using a system of their devising. The classification element was a lot to ask of them but had been introduced so the students would start to consider how resources can be arranged and therefore retrieved more effectively. This also underpinned the notion of separating metadata from the item itself, particularly when dealing with digital resources. Ultimately the idea was for them to create their own version of a library catalogue, using Excel to store the metadata. Each group would then need to present their results to their peers at the end of the day.

**Session two: searching as strategic exploration: mind-mapping and citation chasing**
Focus:          Using strategy to enable exploration in research.
Aim:            To consider research as exploration rather than as a tool to back up what you already know.

The Course Leader felt the students were not engaging with their subject area. They would read in order to underpin pre-formed concepts in their own understanding, or in a sense to 'cross off' resources from reading lists. There seemed to be a lack of understanding of scholarly conversations on topics and, in turn, of their own place in it. Session two was devised to give them practical techniques to encourage wider reading and engagement with their subject area.

In this session students watched a short video clip together, pre-selected by the Course Leader, and used a digital tool to create a visual chart of synonyms related to the subject covered in the video clip. The video clip selected was from Peter York's BBC programme on authenticity, and the digital tool used to unpick this was Mindmeister. Mindmeister is a freely available software that allows groups of people to collaborate on a mindmap in real-time. Once the map was created and sufficiently populated, the class worked together, under the guidance of myself, to select some of the keywords generated to search for a relevant article on Articles Plus, UAL's e-library. Together they read through the article, following the research trail laid out by the citations – locating these in other online resources, and in turn, following the citations they found within those.

For the brief they were again put into groups and allocated topics. They needed to replicate what had been done in the classroom, and at the end of the process to have compiled a bibliography of at least six online articles related to the topic. Their mindmaps and bibliographies would need to be presented to their peers at the end of the day.

**Session three: authority and the evaluation of sources**
Focus:          The idea of 'Authority' within a discipline and how to evaluate sources.
Aim:            To understand the range of resources available to them within research and be able to critically evaluate information regardless of format.

The final session was used to highlight the lack of formats within the digital landscape and therefore

why it is important to be able to critically evaluate sources. The students were asked to rank examples of sources according to authority and currency, and by doing so understood that sources are not always strictly 'academic' so they must be able to match the appropriate source to the appropriate context. The class looked at the whole idea of 'authority' and, through peer-to-peer discussion decided it was constructed and contextual, then went on to consider critical evaluation and what might indicate a 'good' source.

For their brief they were put into groups and given printed copies of reputable and non-reputable digital fashion resources to evaluate. These were a mix of fashion advertorials and features (from the magazines *Vogue* and *Just-Style*), and fashion related articles from academic journals and predatory open access journals. They were asked to devise a list of criteria for evaluation, and apply these to each source, clearly marking the pages with their thoughts. Again, at the end of the day each group were expected to present their findings to their peers.

**Data and feedback**
As a librarian, having the luxury of not only three embedded sessions but a day allocated for each, was a fairly unique arrangement. Having so much time to introduce difficult concepts and devise briefs designed to both challenge and encourage, resulted in genuine engagement and interest on the part of many of the students. Although surprised at first to be asked to spend time on briefs not part of their main study, and to be asked to present on work decidedly out of their comfort zone, the students soon adjusted and by the end of the final session were much more comfortably presenting and discussing concepts essentially still new to them, and confidently challenging the content of questionable sources.

As previously mentioned, the course leader and I wanted both quantitative and qualitative data; this took the form of fully anonymous written feedback (a series of questions requiring numerically ranked responses, as well as some further free-text responses) and an informal group discussion during which responses were recorded in writing and anonymised. From the extensive feedback collected we were confident that the students understood the worth in what they had been taught, with the vast majority of participants using the numerical ranking to indicate the sessions had been useful. Out of 18 completed sets of written feedback, 14 indicated the sessions were either useful or very useful.

The free-text feedback helped to corroborate this, with 57% of all useful/very useful responses augmented with accompanying text:

> I found it relatively unexpected how easy it is to find source [sic] that are unreliable. It made me realise how important it is to evaluate a source before using it', and 'it will definitely be useful, especially on how to determine reliable source [sic] to be used for assignment
> (participant feedback, Duncan, 2017)

During the group discussion at the end of the final session, where students were asked their thoughts on some of the complex concepts which had been raised, responses were varied. They included feeling surprise at the quantity of digital information not accessible on the visible web, frustration at seemingly reputable publications putting out questionable information, and the realisation that they must be responsible for checking the credibility of their sources. One student explained that they 'had never before distinguished between good and bad resources, I just used what I needed to back my own work up' (participant feedback, Duncan, 2017).

The following question was posed to the students – 'is there such a thing as a neutral publication?' The general consensus was that there is no neutral information: that we all must be empowered to understand and judge information for ourselves. Here was our threshold crossing (Kiley and Wisker, 2009).

## Conclusion

For a librarian, having this much time with the students is a rarity and is not easily integrated in most course schedules. Although there was enough data to suggest a reasonable level of success we also know from the same data that there were some elements related to either the delivery or content of the sessions which required modifying or changing altogether. As this was a fairly sudden curriculum development opportunity we were primarily focused on the practicalities of designing and delivering the new content, but given the evolution of the project it would have been ideal to understand this as a case study from the start and have more focus on methodological and ethical considerations. In any case, the encouraging response from that first cohort of students has resulted in not only this particular programme continuing but additionally many elements from it being successfully replicated in single session information literacy teaching at UAL. Elements such as examining information structures, research narratives, critical evaluation, these are the concepts at the heart of information literacy and its facilitation, and whether one is given three days or one hour, they are what is vital in establishing independent lifelong learning (Lloyd, 2005) in students.

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**Biography**
*Alexandra Duncan* is an Academic Support Librarian at Chelsea College of Arts (UAL), supporting the Interior and Spatial Design programme. Previously Assistant Academic Support Librarian at Central Saint Martins, supporting the Fashion, Textiles and Material Futures programmes, she has over 10 years' experience in art librarianship. She serves as Communications Officer for the Art Libraries Society UK (ARLIS/UK) and is the co-Host of ARLISmatters: the art librarianship podcast, and co-Editor of ARLISmatters: the UK art libraries and archives blog.