

Sarah Morris
Student in Transition Conference - October 2014

[Welcome slide]

[High school to college transition slide]

Transitioning from high school to college is a tricky process socially, emotionally, and mentally. One particular source of transitional stress for incoming first-year students is the library – conducting research, using unfamiliar tools, completing difficult projects, and even navigating the space of the library can be cause for a fair amount of anxiety in many students.

[Library anxiety slide]

Constance Mellon coined the term library anxiety back in the 1980s to encompass the many issues students might have navigating the library, from feeling uncomfortable in the space (often a large, imposing building) to being unused to the terminology to feeling overwhelmed with the work they are asked to do. Mellon, and others after her, have placed an emphasis on working to build up student's confidence levels to help them deal with anxieties surrounding the transition to college which, unlike *Saved by the Bell* the College Years, is not always an easy and fun continuation of high school. One way to build up confidence levels is to help students develop new skills and competencies.

[Today's focus slide]

Some ways to go about doing this will be a key focus today. But first, let's discuss some terminology and key concepts that we'll be unpacking today.

Students come in to college with a range of complex experiences, assumptions, knowledge, and capabilities.

And expectations on students can be high and teaching librarians and their faculty partners can misjudge where first-year students are in terms of their learning process more generally and their information literacy skills more specifically.

[information literacy slide]

By information literacy, I'm referring to the skills a person needs to think critically about information and to use information effectively in a variety of situations.

The knowledge and skills often referred to under the umbrella term of information literacy are, at heart, critical thinking skills. An information literate individual is able to critically engage with information and possesses a series of skills and understandings that let them find, analyze, and use information in a variety of situations to solve problems and share ideas.

I'm going to focus on information literacy instruction today for two reasons. First, because it is what I teach and my experience working with first-year students in large part centers around information literacy instruction. Second, information literacy is, as I noted, closely related to critical thinking skills that are of core importance in a variety of learning environments for first-year students.

[Cognitive development slide]

Cognitive development is the idea that learners pass through different developmental stages of learning and understanding. We'll look particularly at William Perry's work in this field, which focuses specifically on learning at the college level.

This session will look at a variety of approaches to student learning that take cognitive development into account and will draw upon examples from first-year information literacy programs conducted at Loyola University Chicago.

[Cognitive development - in depth slide]

Rebecca Jackson's work on cognitive development draws from William Perry, first-year student learning, and information literacy skills. Jackson looks at the reality of where first-year students are versus the expectations inherent within the research assignments they often receive.

Jackson explores cognitive development theories in relation to first year students. In her work, Jackson draws upon William Perry who looks at different areas of cognitive development and how individual learners progress through different areas as they learn and gain new skills and concepts in college. Perry notes that many first-year students are in a 'dualism' position, which means the following.

Tend to view the world as good or bad; lack of nuance

oRight answers exist for every question

Trust in authority for answers

Find information that reinforces pre-existing views

Will ignore uncertainty

Jackson notes that many first year students might be given assignments or be exposed to environments that do not line up with where they are cognitively. For example, many college level research assignments ask students to be able to evaluate and synthesize source material together, something that can be quite difficult for students who, for instance, tend to trust authoritative sources and lack a degree of skepticism.

[Threshold concept slide]

Another concept which can shed additional light on this potential skills mismatch is the idea of threshold concepts. Threshold concepts as a theory have recently found traction among teaching librarians and is, in a nutshell, a concept area where a student gets stuck and cannot proceed to new levels of learning. Some traits of threshold concepts include concepts that are transformative for students (once learned it can't be unlearned) and troublesome, meaning that the ideas are hard to grasp and master.

There are a number of research skills and concept areas, for instance, where a student can get stuck due in part to a mismatch of what the skills demands, in terms of learning and cognition, and where a student actually is in terms of learning and cognition.

Threshold concepts as a theory aside, the main point here is that we, as educators and others who work with first year students, need to be audience-conscious and try to be mindful of areas where our first year students can encounter roadblocks in terms of their learning.

Threshold concepts and cognitive development theories can help instructors and others who work with first year students recognize roadblocks in learning and development, and begin to identify the reasons behind these roadblocks.

[Assessment slide]

These are common trends found among first-years but you should always seek to learn more about your students. Perry and Jackson do not try to argue that this dualism phase of development is universally true.

Jackson quote - First, no one can assume that a student of a given age or year in college is within a particular stage. To help ascertain a student's stages, librarians need to spend some time talking to them, getting to know how they perceive their assignments.

What cognitive development concepts can do is to help educators identify trends and processes of learning that can be employed to help a wide variety of students. We'll go over some strategies for learning about and working with students now.

[Benefits slide]

The benefits of utilizing an understanding of something like cognitive development when developing first-year curriculum are two-fold. First, the ideas of cognitive development can help to foster conversation and collaboration between first-year faculty and instruction librarians and other campus partners who work with first year students by providing a language, as well as ideas, to discuss first year learning and related issues, such as anxiety.

Second, understanding cognitive development can help educators make informed decisions about effective classroom content for first-year students.

Perry quote on warm environment in *Different Worlds in the Same Classroom: Students' Evolution in Their Vision of Knowledge and Their Expectations of Teachers.* - No matter what their stage, Perry's suggestion was that "the learner requires the support of some elements that are recognizable and familiar."

Let's talk about how to use our understanding of where students are and what struggles they might be having to create a supportive learning environment. We'll focus on three different areas: scaffolding, integrative course design, and learning styles

[Scaffolding slide]

Understanding where students are at, cognitively, and how they best learn can help instructors scaffold assignments. Instructional scaffolding is a learning process that focuses on providing support and guidance to students as they learn and master new tasks. Support is gradually lessened as students develop autonomous skills. Scaffolding starts from a familiar place and, and an instructor guides students to higher level skills and concepts from that familiar place.

By scaffolding instruction, library educators can draw on what is familiar to students, such as real world examples or content mediums they find familiar, such as social media, to draw connections to new concepts. Library educators and their faculty partners can develop curriculum and use a scaffolded approach to learning that meets students where they currently are and guides students towards higher level information literacy skills.

[Integrative course design slide]

A practice known as integrative course design, designed by Fink, can also play a key role here in helping educators and others who work with first-year students gain a deeper understanding into that student population. Integrative course design is a variation on backwards design, which is a course design practiced developed by McTigh and Wiggins. In backwards design you start with something you'd like students to be able to do - a skill, a concept, etc. and then design activities and class content backwards from that endpoint. Integrative course design takes a similar approach but in this design process you also consider factors that influence and shape the student population - demographics, educational background, prior coursework, language skills, etc. By focusing on obtaining data about who students are, and by designing and implementing assessment when able, educators working with first-year students can design more meaningful educational experiences that consider factors like a student's cognitive development phase.

[Learning styles slide]

Learning styles are the ways in which people process information and, as with cognitive development levels, different students can have different preferences for how they learn, and those preferences can alter over time. There are a number of learning style theories but the main point here is that it is important to offer diverse classroom experiences to meet the needs of a variety of learners, This is important because different learners might respond to different approaches to overcome roadblocks in their learning or to progress along the cognitive development spectrum.

[Loyola example slide]

For first-year library programming at Loyola, I've endeavored to draw upon cognitive development principles, scaffolding and integrative course design approaches, and campus partnerships to facilitate meaningful experiences for my students.

First I work with campus partners to obtain data about the first-year students, like my school's assessment office. Who are these students and where are they coming from in terms of their educational background?

Next I engage in continual dialogues with others who work closely with first-year students in different capacities, from faculty to advisors to ResLife staff to get a sense of first year student interests, schedules, skill sets, areas where they struggle, etc.

With this knowledge in mind I then design learning experiences like targeted workshops that focus on helping students develop new, higher-level information literacy skills.

For instance, after hearing from multiple first year writing program instructors that students had trouble identifying different types of information, like scholarly sources, I designed a workshop to teach students skills they need to identify and evaluate different types of information. Working backwards from that end goal, I started things off at a familiar place for students - analyzing a text like they would in a high school English class. In the class we'd move from textual analysis up to evaluating and identifying different types of information. By showing my students that skills they already have can be repurposed and applied in different ways, I could guide my students to more advanced skills and ways of thinking. And by recognizing that tasks like critiquing the authority of something might be a new, and uncomfortable, cognitive place for first-year students, I could avoid the trap of tossing them in to the deep end of source analysis and could instead use scaffolding to deliver a more guided learning experience for them.

Understanding where students are does not mean accepting that is where they will remain.

Using an understanding of cognitive development, librarians and faculty partners can work together to develop meaningful learning experiences that support, guide, and challenge first-year students as they work to develop valuable information literacy skills as the college level.

[Questions slide and close]