STUDENTS AND DOCUMENTS: MINDSETS AND OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

The library contains documents in a variety of formats. As a matter of course, students access these documents as a normal feature of "getting" an education. This poster illustrates three mindsets students adopt as they engage with library documents:

1. Learning -- readers absorb the content into their knowledge base trusting the reliability and authority of the creator of the work. The mindset of the reader is passive.
2. Information Seeking -- readers have a question for which they are seeking an answer, and are assuming that someone who knows the answer has documented it where they can find it. The mindset of the reader is instrumentally active, but cognitively passive.
3. Doing Research -- readers are analyzing an "object." The authors that are consulted are cited as either giving evidence or as conversation partners. They assume these library mediated documents provide only partial answers and clues. The desired outcome is the creation of new knowledge. The mindset of the reader is cognitively and affectively active.

This framework of the mindsets of students as they use library documents is illustrated by referencing typical Seminary course assignments.

When this understanding of doing research is explicit in classroom research assignments, it encourages rigor in research performance. A corresponding focus in the library resource access experience reduces the students' ambiguities and uncertainties.

Problem Statement

Much of the academic class work commonly labeled "research" does not meet the expectations in the following definition:

Research is the grounded, intentional and savvy analysis of an "object" in conversation with a community of peers/experts for the purpose of creating knowledge. The definition assumes a "published" document as closure.

Where does "information literacy," "information seeking," and "critical thinking" fit into the rest of the learning that engages documentary sources such as those mediated by the library?

DOCUMENT MINDSETS

Assignments that engage the literature of a field, including those literatures mediated by the library, are designed to increase the knowledge base of the student.

Depending on the assignment, students adopt three different mindsets as to the documents they are reading. While the distinctions between these mindsets on an abstract level seem clear enough, it is recognized that in the real life activity of completing assignments, these distinctions are taut, not explicit. And certain types of assignment may fully engage all three mindsets simultaneously.

LEARNING

The reader trusts the author, and learns from the author as a mentor. This includes reading assignments, text book assignments, any assignment where the documents accessed are considered reliable. Learning, the incorporation of information into a knowledge base, takes place as the reader engages the document. This occurs whether the reader critically evaluates the text or not. Thoughtful readers engage the text from beginning to end, filtering the content based on prior knowledge and epistemic commitments. But the mindset is one of trusting the text unless there is a compelling reason not to.

INFORMATION SEEKING

The beginning point is a perceived information need, a question that needs an answer. Using the tools and opportunities at hand, the information seeker then attempts to find the documented answer to their question. The assumption is that such an answer exists. The challenge for the seeker is to evaluate whether or not the findings are accurate and sufficient. Often, the seeker relies on how well the found answer reflects the desired answer. Levels of confidence or certainty rise or fall based on the viability of alternative answers. Nevertheless, the mindset is one of trusting the text unless there is a compelling reason not to.

DOING RESEARCH

For the person engaging in research according to our definition, the suggested answers, if any, to a question or a problem are not sufficient. The role of a literature search is for finding evidence with which to construct an argument, not an answer to a question. Two metaphors help explain this mindset as it engages with documents:

Journey metaphor: the documents are like maps. Maps are useful constructions using symbols that can aid the informed user in making their journey. But maps serve different purposes, were created at a specific time, and are subject to the limitations of the creators. Maps do not make the journey, the reader does.

Legal metaphor: the documents are like witnesses in a court case. They give evidence in the form of testimony to what they know. Lawyers build a case, an argument on behalf of their client, to convince the jury of their position. The jury must weigh evidence and come to a verdict. But no single witness can provide all the evidence that is needed. It is the careful and convincing accumulation of valid evidence from many sources that wins the argument.

Doing research does require grounding, and this is achieved through learning. Many of the clues are gathered by information seeking. But the mindset is one of knowledge creation, continuously evaluating the sources and the validity of the evidence.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Particularly for research level assignments, a distinction needs to be made between routine "information seeking" and "doing research." The task defines the role and function of the literature, and therefore how the reader engages the documents. This mindset also clarifies the appropriate use of sources, because it is necessary to document the evidence, and it is necessary to defend the argument against real authors who are not made of straw. For this level of argumentation to be credible, the reader must be able to verify and validate the evidence and test the propositions. Full academic citation is essential.

References
