

Mary Francis

Fulfillment of a higher order

Placing information literacy within Maslow's hierarchy of needs

For those involved in instruction in the field of librarianship, information literacy has become the rallying call and the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education have become the goal by which all success is to be measured. Students, however, continue to fall short of the skills and competencies described within those five standards.

Articles and testimonials try to offer explanations for why students do not appear to succeed: a one shot does not allow sufficient time to teach, there is poor or no faculty involvement, instruction sessions do not correspond to assignments, we have little influence over student participation or grades, Google has killed a traditional search, Wikipedia has killed evaluation, learning is continual so our efforts must be considered as one step in a lifelong goal, and so on.

Yet, perhaps a more fundamental reason for poor student learning habits can be taken from the field of psychology, with a consideration of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Abraham Maslow was an American psychologist during the early 20th century and is considered the founder of humanistic psychology. His theory holds that there are basic needs that must be met by individuals before they can devote energy to the fulfillment of higher order ideals. It is Maslow who developed the term self-actualization as the pinnacle of an individual who has realized his or her full potential. It is the desire of librarians to provide the access to information necessary for an individual to realize that potential as well as the skills required to use that information.

While the standards of an information literate student can be seen within self-

actualization, we must consider the varied and hierarchical needs of students. We cannot address information literacy in isolation. Therefore, in our instruction and daily interaction with students, we must also give attention to their more basic needs, for it is only after the fulfillment of those needs that an individual can focus on those skills required for information literacy.

Physiological needs

The most basic needs addressed by Maslow's Hierarchy involve the physiological needs of breathing, water, food, sleep, sex, and excretion. It is the fulfillment of these basic needs that often leads to the most interesting, humorous, and frustrating stories in the library. Now, the ever popular "Where is the bathroom?" question can take on new meaning for the librarian who considers the answer as a way to fulfill a basic and important human need. Consideration of this need also adds a new dimension to the debate of whether food and drink should be allowed in the library.

Can we expect patrons to find satisfaction with the library when we take away access to a basic need? Considering basic needs also allows us to look with leniency on that patron who falls asleep on the comfortable seating. And, of course, we have all heard the tales of those students using a quiet section of the stacks for a romantic tryst. We must concede the importance of providing methods for students to fulfill these needs in

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order for their advancement to higher levels of personal development.

Library anxiety

After our physiological needs are met, the next level of need is safety. For Maslow this includes security of body, security of employment, security of resources, security of morality, security of the family, security of health, and security of property. In relation to the library, the need of safety can be seen most clearly in the patron's level of library anxiety. In Constance Mellon's 1986 study, the concept of library anxiety was established. Her study, which has been confirmed throughout the years, put forth three concepts related to library anxiety: students feel their own library-use skills are inadequate while the skills of other students are adequate, students believe the inadequacy is shameful and should be hidden, and students think that the inadequacy would be revealed by asking questions so they chose to not ask any questions.¹

A study of graduate students on the impact that library anxiety has on a student's ability to learn found that those students with weak dispositions towards critical thinking had high levels of library anxiety.

Librarians could also encourage students to approach library and information systems with positive attitudes and with confidence in their own critical thinking abilities, motivate students to apply systematic thinking skills, and stimulate students' intellectual curiosity in the context of information seeking and use. By incorporating these critical thinking dispositions as an important learning component, academic librarians could help to dissipate students' feeling of uncertainty and confusion that are encountered during their library use process.²

The connection between library anxiety and critical thinking was circular with decrease in one resulting in an increase in an-

other. Kwon found that library anxiety could be overcome by those students who had high dispositions in critical thinking. "With regard to the development of library skills, it seems that confidence breeds competence and vice versa."³

By working to decrease library anxiety in students, we will be increasing their ability to use the library. Comfort within the library often involves the creation of an atmosphere that is welcoming and accepting. This includes both the physical library and the disposition of the staff. The purpose of the library is not to judge a patron's interests or need for information. The patron must know that we consider their privacy of upmost importance and feel no judgment in whatever question he or she may ask.

A sense of belonging

The next level of need relates to love or belonging. This corresponds to friendship, family, and intimacy. Patrons must not only feel physically safe in the library, but they must also possess the confidence that it is someplace they belong. To help facilitate this level of need, libraries can offer the patron with specialized services, which places the library the third place of importance behind the home and workplace. Gaming tournaments, coffee shops, popular fiction, and foreign language collections are some of the numerous examples of how libraries have developed programming and collections to give nontraditional library users the sense that they are welcome and a part of the library. Personal relationships also develop through one-on-one reference interactions. The openness and friendliness of the library staff is critical in creating an atmosphere where patrons feel they belong.

What makes a student comfortable in the library? Some answers to this question may be found in a study by Antell who was looking at why students use public libraries over academic libraries. Among some of the themes discussed by the participants in the survey include: ease of use and familiarity, staff, and subjective appeal. Students felt

comfortable at a library where the staff appear friendly and helpful.⁴

Esteem

The fourth level of need addressed by Maslow is esteem. This is addressed through self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of others, and respect by others. Esteem can take several forms in the library. For some patrons, the importance of the library is seen in the respect they are shown by the library staff. Their reading habits are not questioned and they are allowed time and space to conduct research. The library is also a place for patrons to increase their knowledge, which will correspond to an increase in self-esteem. Also, through the use of the library, patrons develop confidence in the skills necessary for research, such as performing a search in a database or evaluating a source. This confidence is displayed when they share these skills with others by helping a friend find a book or telling neighbors about what they have found in the library.

Self-actualization

The final level offered by Maslow is self-actualization. Aspects of this level include problem solving, lack of prejudice, acceptance of facts, morality, creativity, and spontaneity. These traits correspond readily to the outcomes set forth within the ACRL Standards. Problem solving is addressed when a student is able to create search strategies in order to effectively and efficiently search for information. Lack of prejudice is an important mindset when evaluating information. Acceptance of facts is seen when a student incorporates information into his or her knowledge base and value system. Morality is addressed by using information legally. These outcomes imply the use of high-order critical thinking skills. An information literate individual requires the traits and skills portrayed within the level of self-actualization.

We cannot let ourselves become obsessed solely with providing information literacy instruction to students. We must focus on the

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- **Freedom Press.** One of the largest and oldest publishers of anarchist material in the world, Freedom Press was founded in 1886 and based in Whiechapel, East London. While representing the mainstream tradition of anarchism, anarcho-communists, this press has published a diverse number of anarchist thinkers throughout history including, but not limited to, Peter Kropotkin, Alexander Berkman, and Gustav Landauer. Today, the Freedom Press is a publisher, bookshop, and news portal. *Access:* <http://www.freedompress.org.uk/news/>.

- **Green Anarchy.** One of the most noted radical environmental publications discussing green anarchist and anarcho-primitivist theory and practice. Published out of Oregon twice a year, this journal is edited by noted anarcho-primitivist John Zerzan. *Access:* <http://www.greenanarchy.org/index.php?action=home>.

- **Institute for Anarchist Studies.** A nonprofit foundation based in Washington D.C., the institute provides grants for the

writing and translation of radical texts from around the world. The institute also sponsors the Renewing the Anarchist Tradition conference, providing a scholarly forum in which contributors explore the past, present, and future elements of anarchism. Additionally, the institute publishes the online journal *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*. The journal includes comparative book reviews, news on current activities within the institute, and essays. *Access:* <http://www.anarchist-studies.org/perspectives2009>.

Institute for Anarchist Studies

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- **Voices of Resistance From Occupied London.** A relatively young publication, with only five issues released, this journal is particularly focused on current movements against institutional repression from around the globe. A convergence of anarchist and nonanarchist contributors, this journal attempts to facilitate a broad conversation on what exactly constitutes the “antagonist social movement.” *Access:* <http://www.occupiedlondon.org/>. ♪

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student as a whole individual. This requires time and energy focused on addressing their needs beyond the time we see them during instruction sessions. This places importance on topics such as library anxiety, the library as place, and user experience. By looking to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and working with the whole student, we will be able to reach them and aid their development into information literate individuals. As teachers in the library, our focus must be three-fold. Our instruction must consider pedagogy, content, and the needs of students.

Notes

1. Constance A. Mellon, “Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development,”

College & Research Libraries, 47, no. 2 (1986): 160–65.

2. Nahyun Kwon, Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, and Linda Alexander, “Critical Thinking Disposition and Library Anxiety: Affective Domains on the Space of Information Seeking and Use in Academic Libraries,” *College & Research Libraries*, 68, no 3 (2007): 268–78.

3. Nahyun Kwon, “A Mixed-Methods Investigation of the Relationship between Critical Thinking and Library Anxiety among Undergraduate Students in their Information Search Process,” *College & Research Libraries*, 69, no. 2 (2008): 117–31.

4. Karen Antell, “Why Do College Students Use Public Libraries?” *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 43, no. 3 (2004): 227–36. ♪