

Information Literacy in the 21st Century Multicultural Classroom: Using Sociocultural Literacy

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Abstract

Sociocultural literacy guides an instructor's pedagogy in the multicultural university classroom. By employing sociocultural literacy in the information literacy classroom, the instruction librarian can better teach students from all cultures including international students, first generation students, or students from a wide array of socio-economic status. Sociocultural literacy goes beyond cultural sensitivity and awareness. Through small changes in the classroom environment, communication behaviors, and ways to teach information literacy, students are encouraged to relate the presented material to their own lives. Such changes require effort on the part of the sociocultural literate instructor to learn more about each student and teach in a wider perspective.

Keywords: information literacy, sociocultural literacy, classroom instruction, teaching practices, multicultural classroom, classroom diversity, cultural literacy, socio-economic diversity, international students, first-generation students

Introduction

The cultural background of students in higher education changes with each new class. In 2011, over 19.9 million students were enrolled in some sort of higher education institution (National Center for Education Statistics). These students, both domestic and international, hail from a wide variety of cultural settings. Understanding the basic elements of a student's culture empowers instructors to teach effectively, building on a shared foundation of knowledge. "Local classrooms shaped by historical local norms, existing within shifting sociopolitical dynamics and the contradictory emphases of institutional missions seem to offer little opportunity to promote inclusivity" (Turner, 2009, p. 244). As the population of students becomes more and more socioeconomically and culturally diverse, information literacy educators must become sociocultural literate to demonstrate the uses for research in a variety of contexts. "Educators must be aware of different worldviews they may encounter in a classroom and work toward the understanding and knowledge of the culturally different students" (Nieto & Booth, 2010, p. 409).

Understanding Culture

"Culture is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. It is the *collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others*" (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 4). A culturally-acclimated individual will abide by those rules, norms, and mores, both spoken and unspoken, to achieve a goal, usually prosperity or power. On a basic level, culture explains how people relate and understand the world, providing "... beliefs that allow and provide a frame of reference for the interpretation of the information our senses bring us" (Maehar and Stallings, 1975, p. 5). Traditionally, cultures are associated with nations, but Minkov and Hofstede argue "... that nations are somewhat arbitrary political formations that are not necessarily formed along stable culture lines" (2012, p. 134). Thus many cultures may exist in a single society or country. Culture lines exist not only in ethnic or racial groups, but between socioeconomic classes, varying levels of education, domestic or international home environments, rural or urban settings, community service groups or personal causes, and first-generation students to students who come from a long line of college graduates.

When identifying cultures within a broader society, such as a country, "...we should keep in

mind that the very obvious (and some not so obvious) gaps in knowledge and technology in a cultural group may or may not represent inferiority or a disadvantaged state of affairs" (Maehler and Stallings, 1975, p. 5). Because so many cultures can exist in a single society, it's impossible to know how many cultures are represented in the 2011 student population of 19.9 million. Equally impossible is the challenge of knowing all possible cultures within the society. Sociocultural literate instructors can focus on knowing cultures represented in their individual classrooms, bringing the number to a much more manageable number.

In the education environment, diversity encompasses a wide variety of characteristics. Universities may define diversity as differences of sex, race, religion, national origin, first generation, and other various traits. Some institutions include socio-economic status, recognizing that the background and socioeconomic class of a student greatly affects the educational experience due to prior educational opportunities, college preparedness, and general study skills. Knowing a culture's beliefs and how individuals use these beliefs to interpret information, or sociocultural literacy, proves important in formal education because "...learning depends on communication, and effective communication depends on shared background knowledge." (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 2002, p. xv) Without establishing a starting point of common knowledge, educators cannot build upon a foundation and expect students to learn presented material. A shared foundation could be the educator's knowledge of the students' culture, vice versa, or an understanding of a shared, neutral culture. Knowing the students' cultures is only one step in the process: "Teachers should be given opportunities to examine their own cultural backgrounds and key underpinning values that may predispose them to differential interpretations of the values of culturally different groups of students" (Gabb, 2006, p. 362). The instructor's culture should be recognized as one of the represented cultures in the classroom.

Understanding the cultural background allows sociocultural literate instructors to forge relationships with their students, establish a common foundation necessary for education, and teach them in the classroom. "Different cultures emphasize different values as they teach and train, and this emphasis has a primary influence in directing the interests, aspirations, and goals of the children" (Maehler and Stallings, 1975, p. 15). Knowing these challenges beforehand gives the educator the opportunity to prepare strategies and discuss possible approaches with colleagues. However, knowing this background can cause problems for both instructors and students by way of stereotypes. "Regardless of their familiarity, students have preconceived notions, conscious or subconscious, about what various groups of people do, what their values are, how they act, or worse, why some are inferior or un-American" (Wells, 2012, p. 143). Educators should guard themselves against accepting stereotypes as a way to define students, as accepting stereotypes can be detrimental in the educator/student relationship.

Awareness of students' cultural backgrounds opens the possibility of sociocultural literacy, based on sociocultural theory. As quoted in Rezaee, Scott and Palinscar state in their 2009 work, "The work of sociocultural theory is to explain how individual mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional, and historical context; hence, the focus of the sociocultural perspective is on the roles that participation in social interactions and culturally organized activities play in influencing psychological development" (2011, p. 1). Nieto and Booth go on to say "... to truly *understand* each other requires more than language proficiency, as sociocultural differences provide just a great a challenge for students and teachers alike" (2010, p. 406).

Thus, sociocultural literacy is the ability to navigate a specific sociological environment,

with regard for cultural, institutional, and historical context, and knowing and abiding by the norms and mores of the specified group, with regard to participatory roles in social interactions and culturally important factors that can impact the educational experience. Nieto and Booth say "...the ability to be culturally competent is central in increasing understanding and improving relationships across cultures" (2010, p. 408). Sociocultural literate educators tailor their lessons to their students' cultures, letting the students make meaning in the context of their individual culture, a practice known as constructivism. When students internalize the lessons in relation to their own lives, the students are more likely to recall and use the skills learned.

If the instructor does not know the students' backgrounds or cultures, the instructor may choose learning activities or examples that violate students' ingrained cultural beliefs about how a class should be taught, how the classroom should be organized, or how the world operates. In violating these ideas, the instructor discourages the students from participating. James, Bruch, and Jehangir (2006) paraphrase psychologist Robert Kegan, saying "...to help students construct bridges between their personal and cultural knowledge and that of the academic world, educators must be willing to learn from students' experiences and ways of knowing" (p. 10). Sensitivity to students' cultures allows the sociocultural literate instructor to design lessons and activities with these perimeters, ultimately maximizing the impact of the lesson by making the students comfortable in the learning environment.

In The Classroom

The gargantuan task of making the lesson personal to each student, while encouraging constructivism and demonstrating sociocultural literacy, makes planning lessons overwhelming. "One of the most difficult aspects within this discussion is the degree to which HE [higher education] classrooms remain configured according to implicit local norms that silently privilege home students over others" (Turner, 2009, p. 243). Gabb adds that "...good teaching should take account of both the social and cultural background contexts of the student cohort and of the teaching staff, and the resulting dynamics contained in classroom interactions" (2006, p. 358). Such a student-centered approach in the classroom is part of the sociocultural literate instructor's teaching style.

Though institutions have made attempts to teach instructors how to create sociocultural literate, multicultural lessons and become more sensitive of students' diverse cultural challenges as part of a teacher pre-service orientation (Brooks et al, 2012), "... multicultural educators have many legitimate concerns about the potentially negative effects of poorly developed global examples to teach multiculturalism." (Wells, 2008, p. 142) Instructors can become more sociocultural literate without these formal training sessions. By changing the focus of the questions slightly, getting to know their students and the represented cultures in the classroom, and learning about those cultures' values and taboos, the instructor can gain valuable background knowledge to establish a shared sense of sociocultural literacy in the classroom. "The only way to be successful in a cross-cultural relationship is to understand each other's culture" (Nieto & Booth, 2010, p. 419).

The following list of suggestions to address sociocultural literacy in the classroom doubles as a list of best teaching practices to get to know students.

- On the first day of class, set the tone for the semester by encouraging students to participate in class. Ask students to share a biography of themselves, including hometown and other significant locales, and preferred learning and teaching styles. Learn the correct pronunciation of students' names. Gabb states that "...by using this first session to shape the social environment, it is possible to elicit further interaction around the subject content, which is then likely to become more

collaborative and cooperative” (2006, p. 363). Set the tone for a respectful, inclusive classroom in which students may learn the presented material as well as how to interact with other cultures.

- In the first few classes, encourage students to participate in class by speaking up. Students should feel comfortable asking questions of the instructor, be it during class or an email following class. Some students will resist for various reasons. For instance, some students may have been taught not to question the instructors for fear of showing disrespect. Or students may simply be shy. Be flexible and encourage students to submit their questions in other forms, such as emails or discussion boards. Enunciate words clearly for students who are learning English and encourage students to speak up if they cannot understand (De Vita, 2000).
- Use active learning techniques such as pair and share, encouraging students to talk to someone they don't know well. Students may open up about previous educational experiences. For those classes who are not as vocal, use a fishbowl activity in which students can write questions on a slip of paper and place them in a fishbowl or hat, then the instructor pulls a question at random. One minute papers reflecting on the lesson can give insight to a student's culture, allowing the instructor adjust the next lesson slightly without identifying the catalyst student. De Vita states that “...in the multicultural classroom, no successful pedagogy based on students participation can take place unless at the start of the course the tutor sends an unambiguous message of equality to students, a message that promotes an environment which embraces cultural diversity and within which all students feel they have something significant to contribute” (2000, p. 175).
- Let students work in small groups, where students who are learning English may practice their skills. Emphasize to students the value of participating in small groups and brainstorming sessions (De Vita, 2000). Rather than letting students select their own groups which will generally be made up of their own cultures and friends, assign groups and mix represented cultures (Croese, 2011). In these small groups, students will have the opportunity to learn more about other culture, increasing their own sociocultural literacy skills.

Such minor changes do not overburden any party in the classroom and work to include students from various cultural backgrounds. Though these changes to lessons may seem an afterthought, any alteration to a lesson plan must be done intentionally and for the entire length of the class, be it all semester or a number of weeks. “Casual approaches to intercultural integration in the classroom may risk implicitly supporting equality imbalances in which those who are perceived as outsiders are required to adapt to local practices while local insiders feel less need to change” (Turner, 2009, p. 241). As cited in Croese, Eaves (2009) says “By being aware of the various cultures in the classroom, faculty can address cultural inequalities that exist in order to balance access to learning opportunities and equal engagement of all students in the classroom. By doing so, faculty members will avoid skewing the learning environment towards the host culture and students, effectively neglecting a portion of the classroom population” (2011, p. 389). Intentional sociocultural literate lesson plans should not alienate or privilege any student or culture, but instead should provide steps for students to learn about each other and acquire the skills of becoming sociocultural literate.

While educators fall back on teaching from their own perspective and culture, students need to identify uses for the lesson in their own, often different, cultural context. Brooks et al state that “In today’s classroom, it is critical for teachers to be able to provide quality instruction to all students that affirms their ethnic, linguistic, and/or socioeconomic

background” (2012, p. 350). Much as students appreciate educators knowing their names, they also appreciate cultural sensitivity in the classroom as educators demonstrate sociocultural literacy. “In every social situation with people from distinct cultures, understanding the rationale for habits, assumptions, values, and judgments will guide the shaping of new attitudes about the other” (Nieto & Booth, 2010, p. 419). Both the instructor and the students can leave the classroom more sociocultural literate.

Demonstrating sociocultural literacy in the classroom could also increase the likelihood of students forming a relationship with their instructors. “Developing trust and solidarity at the individual level with these students is essential if we are able to assist them to succeed academically and to avoid the forces of attrition that are often attached as aspects of disadvantaged socioeconomic background and unfamiliarity with tertiary education demands” (Gabb, 2006, p. 360). Creating an inclusive sociocultural literate environment encourages students to ask questions about how higher education in general and the institution specifically work.

Modeling sociocultural literacy skills could address potential xenophobia in the classroom. Instead of students forming in-groups based on culture, assign groups so students would have the opportunity to learn more about an unfamiliar culture. Whether or not a student adjusts his or her own viewpoint is beyond the instructor’s control, but it is possible for these students to demonstrate sociocultural literacy skills as part of interpersonal communication within the classroom based on the guidelines set forth on the first day off class.

Information Literacy

Librarians can take advantage of sociocultural literacy when teaching information literacy sessions or classes when introducing research skills. “Cultural differences can also adversely affect international students’ ability to develop information literacy skills” (Morrissey and Given, 2006, p. 223). Other cultural differences make learning information literacy skills difficult for domestic students, such as learning how to navigate the library and other skills outlined by ACRL’s standards. The ACRL Information Literacy Standards outline that the information literate student is able to identify and define the need for information, locate the information, evaluate the information, organize the information, and communicate the information in such a way to answer the original need (2000). Teaching information literacy in a sociocultural literate classroom means incorporating the historical and cultural context of the students.

The sociocultural literate librarian should take steps to use information about the cultures represented in the lesson. For instance, when demonstrating a sample search or formulating a search strategy, the library instructor could use scenarios that resonates with a non-majority culture, be it an international perspective or another socioeconomic class. “The challenge for first-generation, low-income students—many of whom are also students of color and immigrants—is that the academic environment may do little to reflect their multiple identities or create avenues to explore believes in context of their lived experiences and new life at school” (Howard, 2001, as paraphrased in Jehangir, Williams, Jeske, 2012, p.269). Plan the examples ahead of time rather than rely on spur of the moment inspiration, which will be based on the instructor's experiences or current research. Such examples tend to favor the majority culture, ignoring the representative population in the classroom and marginalizing some students. Presenting more than one scenario may help students understand the method rather than focus on the specifics. “Even when students superficially appear to embrace the concepts presented, some still may not understand them thoroughly.

For these students, it can be hard to separate the construct being learned from the cultural context and from a familiarity, or assumed familiarity, with the issue” (Wells, 2012, p. 143).

Students in the information literacy classroom may represent cultures in which librarians are considered gate keepers of the books and who only retrieve books from closed stacks (Morrissey and Given, 2006) or cultures in which public schools lack a trained librarian or even a library. The sociocultural literate librarian can lead a tour of the library and model the services the library provides. The information literacy classroom session is a starting point for students to learn about how a library works and how a librarian can assist their studies.

When teaching how to identify and define the need for information, a sociocultural literate librarian will choose a controversial topic that is not taboo to any culture represented in the classroom. “If students are not pushed out of their comfort zones in reference to multicultural issues, true learning is unlikely to take place” (Wells, 2012, p. 143). Using several topics that do not offend any cultural beliefs will allow students to explore other cultures as they learn about the method of research. Knowledge of culturally important beliefs is critical when introducing possible topics to research. Sociocultural literate educators can identify safe, interesting, yet still controversial topics as research questions for classroom examples to minimize distraction without crossing a taboo.

The librarian should explain the use and need for keywords, encouraging the students to volunteer their own ideas for topics. “International students will assume, even more than domestic students, that a good use of search terms will inevitably produce a solid, relevant set of results” (Badke, 2011, p. 53). Incorporating time for students to practice searching during class allows students to test their keywords in close proximity to a librarian who can offer suggestions and help students think of, or look up, synonyms.

Locating information in a library can be done in the catalog, databases, or online, and can provide a lengthy list of results for a single search, overwhelming students from any culture. “Information literacy instruction for international students must, therefore, go out of its way to emphasize a narrow focus, both to avoid surveys and help them go deep in their analysis of an issue” (Badke, 2011, p. 53). Take the time to vary limiting factors. Include a represented culture in a sample search. Instead of doing a search for education factors in women ages 16-20 in the United States, look for education factors in another culture of women, such as race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class. The idea of narrowing a topic will be just as clear to students as previous teaching methods, but includes more of the class in the information presented.

When physically locating information, the sociocultural literate librarian will be sensitive to the students’ home culture. For instance “...many libraries in China continue to have closed library stacks, so students’ experiences with library collections are quite different from those of individuals studying in North America” (Morrissey and Given, 2006, p. 221). Students from a rural or low socioeconomic home culture may not have had access to materials and must be introduced to how a library is organized. Active learning activities that encourage students to practice searching databases offer opportunities to internalize the presented lesson.

Evaluating information can pose some problems to a class. Sociocultural literate librarians should consider the biographical information from students’ online introduction posts when writing the evaluation lesson plan and decide how to approach the topic sensitively. If a

represented culture views evaluation as criticizing the author and taboo, the sociocultural literate librarian must anticipate that objection. Focus the practice of evaluation as a way to identify the sources most useful to the topic. If some students hail from a culture in which information is heavily censored by the government, work with them to explain that if this source does not meet the information need, another search can be done to find more relevant information. “Western culture tends to accept a high level of opinion and defends freedom of speech, while other cultures rely heavily on the consensus of the entire community or accept the arbitration of clearly defined authority to define an acceptable or not acceptable intellectual position” (Martin, Reaume, Reeves, Wright, 2012, p. 362). After introducing the idea of evaluating information, sociocultural literate librarians should reiterate the purpose of the activity as deciding to use information for the need, and discuss possible ways to study the presented material.

To some cultures, evaluation may mean looking at certain parts of an article or website for relevance and reliability, but in others, doing so may be seen as a personal attack on the author or authors and is taboo. The criteria of reliability “...including a component that asks the student to evaluate the web site for bias, presented a much greater challenge for teaching pedagogy. ...it became apparent that the concept of “bias” is as much a Western cultural assumption as it is clearly defined, and therefore teachable, cognitive concept” (Martin, Reaume, Reeves, and Wright, 2012, p. 362). Students from various cultures struggle with the idea that a source can be biased. The sociocultural literate librarian must introduce the idea of bias and opinionated sources while demonstrating how to proceed with research and the intended project.

Organizing information varies from keeping notes to typing up quotes. This step presents the opportunity to address keeping track of citation information. Writing citations often rates as students' least liked, and most often skipped, step in the research process. A sociocultural literate librarian will not only explain the need for citations as a way to give credit, but explain the American culture of paraphrasing and giving credit to original sources. Amsberry summarizes a 2003 study by Russikoff et al by saying “This study suggests that although American students may have a different view of the general concept of plagiarism, in practical application their understanding of when citation is necessary seems similar to that of their Chinese peers” (2010, p. 34).

Common knowledge should be discussed in the classroom as it differs from culture to culture: “...what is obviously common knowledge to one person may not be so for another” (Amsberry, 2010, p. 33). Common knowledge is closely tied to culture and the environment in which students were raised. The sociocultural literate librarian should discuss with the class what constitutes common knowledge in their home cultures as a way to provide examples to the rest of the classroom.

Amsberry, writing about international students, states “Some of these students had not encountered the English word plagiarism until arrival in North America; some claimed there was no equivalent for plagiarism in their own language or, if they were aware of a similar word, the meaning was quite different” (2010, p. 33). As a North American idea, plagiarism deserves additional explanation in the classroom. Depending on the culture, domestic students may also lack the knowledge about what constitutes plagiarism. “Because plagiarism is ultimately a matter of degree rather than kind, the best course of action here is to start by being clear ourselves with what are the rules to be adopted, and where we intend to draw the line, and then proceed by making sure that our rules on bibliographic and World Wide Web referencing, on what constitutes plagiarism and on what is and is not allowed are

clearly spelt out to students so as to avoid any misunderstandings” (De Vita, 2000, p. 173). Badke address only international students, but his statement can be applied to domestic students from various cultures as well: “Paraphrasing, for someone who speaks English as a second language, almost inevitably leads to reproducing the original almost exactly, because it is so difficult to think of synonyms” (2011, p. 53). Students from all cultures should be challenged to understand why credit is important and taught the proper way to paraphrase and give credit.

A sociocultural literate librarian will allow students to communicate the information in a meaningful way, be it a paper, presentation, or website, to demonstrate authentic learning of the process of information literacy and research. “By constructing their own ways to integrate personal and cultural knowledge with the course content, students acted as creators of knowledge and partners with instructors rather than passive consumers” (James, Bruch, & Jehangir, 2006, p. 15). Instructions for the assignment should be explicit and include rubrics to be used for grading. Explicit and clear instructions allow students to question and discuss unclear expectations (Croese, 2011). Following the constructivism theory, students will better retain information if they can make it meaningful to their own contexts within the parameters of the assignment. A website can encourage better retention of research practice in some students while other students prefer a written paper. Sociocultural literate instructors should be prepared to grade either format.

Additionally, students may not be familiar with the idea of collecting information from various sources and using it to support or demonstrate an idea. Previous education experiences may have been only reproducing the instructor’s words on a test rather than using the library or even outside materials, including the internet (Morrissey and Given, 2006).

Today’s university student population is comprised of a mixture of cultures, both nationalities and socioeconomic classes. Information literacy educators and librarians, knowing the classroom’s make up, can focus the lessons on one service or another, depending what will be available to the students after the semester and post-graduation. Information literacy is a skill that serves students and graduates well after leaving higher education institutions. With such a variety of cultures represented in higher education institutions, educators must adapt their teaching methods and become sociocultural literate to teach their material effectively. By asking slightly different questions in introduction discussion board posts or in the classroom, educators and librarians can learn about their students and incorporate that knowledge into lessons. Representing various cultures by way of example topics in the classroom encourages students to contextualize the information using constructivism, internalizing the new material into the students’ knowledge bases. Educators who understand the basics of a student’s culture can build on shared knowledge, utilizing the technique of scaffolding. The sociocultural literate educators and librarians demonstrate the uses for research in a variety of contexts and cultures, encouraging students to make the knowledge their own.

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