“I felt like such a freshman”: Weaving first-year student identities through collaborative reflective learning

Paula R. Dempsey
Research Services & Resources Librarian
University of Illinois at Chicago

Heather Jagman
Coordinator of Reference, Instruction, & Academic Engagement
DePaul University

Introduction

Research question: How does a brief reflective writing exercise integrate student identity as learners?

Why it matters: Awareness of how first-year students understand themselves in the academic environment strengthens campus partnerships.

Theory: Symbolic interactionist perspective on identity as rooted in previous experience, present goals, and interaction with others.1 Constructionist theory of learning as a social process.2

Data & method

• Essays (n=97) by first-year students enrolled in academic skills unit
• Assignment developed collaboratively by University Library, Writing Center, Office for Academic Advising, and Center for Students with Disabilities
• Students asked to think of an item of interest, figure out how to find it, and reflect on their experience
• Essays written for peer mentors (not librarians)
• IRB exemption for anonymized essays
• Qualitative analysis with NVivo software
• Open coding for aspects of student identity
• Codes categorized under previous experience, interaction with others, and present goals

Conclusions & recommendations

• Embedding a library activity in a broader co-curricular program helps students integrate information literacy with broader goals.
• Low-stakes learning exercises allow safe space to practice new identities: “After all, it is easier to learn when it is not for a grade, and you are not under pressure” (essay 3).
• Evidence of affective gains from anxiety to pride, confidence
• Provide peer mentors summary data to help them understand the value of the exercise and to guide class discussion.
• Be aware of intellectual dishonesty: 5 students plagiarized or invented search strategy.

References


Results

92 students reflected on previous experience
• Size (29) and scope (33) surprising
• Easier than expected (44), more difficult (21)
81 students reflected on present goals
• Connected library use with both major/career (23) and intellectual interests (27)
• 41 planned to use silent study space
59 students reflected on interaction with others
• 17 saw library staff as friendly/helpful
• 5 relied on help from friends

Threads appearing in at least 6 essays

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE
Differences from Other Libraries
Scope of academic collection
Size of building
“Nothing new”
Age of material
Expectations for the Exercise
Easier
More difficult
Library anxiety
Type of Library
School library
Public library
PERSONAL HISTORY
Family/childhood
Hobby/extracurricular
INTERACTION WITH OTHERS
Helpful/friendly Circulation Reference
library staff
17
16
15
Help from friends
5

“I was ecstatic, through some hard work and learning from my mistakes I was able to find the book and realize how resourceful and organized the library actually is.” (essay 95)

“I hope to learn more on the issue so I can develop my own opinions based on facts from this book.” (essay 19)

“I was scared to go into the library because I felt like such a freshman. I had no idea of how it worked” (essay 3)

“Honestly, I was scared to go into the library because I felt like such a freshman. I had no idea of how it worked” (essay 3)

“What was new for me at the DePaul library was the massive amount of periodicals, encyclopedias and reference books.” (essay 45)

“I was able to find the book and realize how resourceful and organized the library actually is.” (essay 95)

"When I entered the library and sat down at the search catalog, my mind immediately began to search for books about Brazilian Ju Jitsu and music production, my two greatest passions.” (essay 20)

“I think the librarians become very essential when it comes to research projects that require a lot of digging around. They know the library like the back of their hands while most of us are oblivious - I think they would really come to be helpful when looking for a very specific material or item.” (essay 90)

“I feel like such a freshman”: Weaving first-year student identities through collaborative reflective learning

Acknowledgments

Lisa Davidson, Lauri Dietz, Jodi Falk, Antonieta Fitzpatrick; Image: Don Pablo/Shutterstock