INFORMATION BEHAVIOR OF ADULT LEARNERS

FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT A FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

Information seeking theories

Krikelas (1983) set out to describe the set of decisions an information-seeker makes when he has a question. As he defined early on in this seminal article, "information seeking begins when someone perceives that the current state of possessed knowledge is less than that needed to deal with some issue (or problem). The process ends when that perception no longer exists," (p. 7).

The challenge here is that Krikelas (1983) spends a great deal of time considering the inner thought process of someone with a question, particularly how much one relies on one's own experience to determine the answer. While this may be true – Silva et al. (2018) found that while first-year students often say they don't rely on previous knowledge to evaluate sources, they often do – the framework Krikelas creates at the end of the article ends with one box to refer to research, merely noting that if information seekers go outside themselves for information, they either get the information from other people (through "direct/interpersonal contact") or from researching the related literature (p. 17). So Krikelas observes the process by which people determine whether research is necessary, but not how such research is done. In particular, Krikelas (1983) discusses in depth the decision an information seeker makes when determining whether to reference internal knowledge (experience) or external knowledge (either interpersonal communication or research), but when writing about "source preference" he notes that within his framework, "no effort is made to judge the accuracy of the information," (p. 15).

Kuhlthau (2021), on the other hand, has been refining her theory of information seeking as it relates to research since 1985. The information search process she outlined in 1991 defines six stages of information seeking, from initiation of a question to presentation of understanding. The middle phases of her process, of exploration, formulation (of a hypothesis) and collection, allow for such evaluation, not only of whether the information is accurate, but also whether it relates to the question at hand.

One of the differences here is that Krikelas' (1983) theory would be fitting for a scientist or professor who commonly asks questions and then searches for answers. But when considering theories of searching for information with regards to university students, particularly those in their first year, most students do not have such weighty internal queries that lead them to the library; it is an assignment, created by a professor, that prompts them to research possible answers. As Ikoja-Odongo & Mostert (2006) point out, "Kuhlthau (1991) conceives information seeking as a user's constructive effort to derive meaning from information in order to extend their state of knowledge on a particular issue or topic," (p. 148) – which is exactly what many college students are doing when writing a research paper. So Kuhlthau's (2021) viewpoint of how research can be used to explore and consider ideas is more fitting when pondering how college students, particularly first-year students, will approach their information seeking.

Information seeking and first-year college students

Several years ago, in an article with Leslie K. Maniotes, Kuhlthau (2014) bemoaned the traditional research assignment given in a high school, where the teacher determines the topic, the students get one hour in the library to research and find five sources, and the paper is completed within a week before the students move on to another topic. While one can hope that more secondary teachers are embracing inquiry-based research as described by Maniotes & Kuhlthau, many first-year students do not have such experience in high school. In addition, as previously noted by Dixon (2017), first-year students at colleges and universities "enter with widely varying levels of information literacy," lacking experience with the evaluation of resources and the scope of academic library resources (p. 32).

Furthermore, many students enter the university with simple, binary ideas about knowledge: an idea is either right or wrong. Insua et al. (2018) note that it can be challenging to help students evolve from such concrete thinking to more fluid ideas of scholarship as defined by the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2016) – that scholarship is a conversation, or that authority is constructed, for example.

Giving students a framework for their research can help them adapt to research as inquiry and exploration rather than research as assignment, as well as the new scope of available research at an academic library. Kloda et al. (2020) found that the specific framework is not as important as having a guide to frame the research. And Insua et al. (2018) noted that using the BEAM method ("background, exhibit, argument, or method") can also help students evaluate and compare resources (p. 155), which relates to Kuhlthau's (2021) phase of formulation.

Librarians need to remember how overwhelming an academic library can be for first-time students. As staff or faculty members that are not usually grading students, librarians can be less intimidating than professors, and good sources of both empathy and knowledge. By sharing a framework for research and teaching students how to access the plethora of resources available through the academic library, librarians can help first-year students shift to a mindset of research as inquiry, setting them up for a lifetime of learning.

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