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Project report

Using coaching techniques to teach information literacy to first year English undergraduates

Sarah Wolfenden, Senior Lecturer in Academic Professional Development, Brunel University. Email: sarah.wolfenden@brunel.ac.uk. mailto:**ORCID: 0000-0002-2768-3919.** **Twitter: @SarahWolfenden.**

Abstract

This is a report on how I integrated coaching techniques into my teaching of information literacy (IL) to 28 FHEQ Level 4 (Year 1) English undergraduates at Brunel University London, UK, during January 2021-April 2021. This was part of a compulsory module, titled Digital Literacy. During this time, it was held online due to COVID-19 lockdowns and, since restrictions have been lifted, I have started teaching this face to face in a flat classroom on the University campus.

Keywords

Coaching; COVID-19; digital literacy; higher education; information literacy; UK; wellbeing

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Introduction

Information literacy (IL) has many definitions and is sometimes conflated with digital literacy. I took the approach espoused by Secker and Coonan (2011) that digital literacy is part of IL and I have used the 2018 definition provided by the Chartered information and Library Professionals (CILIP, 2018, p. 3):

> Information literacy is the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to reach and express informed views and to engage fully with society.

I chose this definition, above others, as it fits in with the English QAA subject benchmark statement. It describes English as making 'a vital contribution to national cultural life' and that one of the aims of such a degree is to develop 'high-order critical, analytic and research skills' (QAA, 2019, p. 3). Coaching likewise has many definitions so I will use the one provided by Carol Wilson, who describes coaching as a process which 'works on improving the performance and wellbeing of an individual or group through setting goals, exploring values and beliefs, and facilitating … plans of action' (2014, p. 11) as this refers to groups and most closely links to the activities I will be describing.

For some context and background, I am a Senior Lecturer in Academic Professional Development. I work in a small team of three, including myself, plus an administrator. I have a library background, having been an academic librarian in further and higher education roles since 2004, but it is not a prerequisite for the position. The primary role of the Academic Professional Development Unit (APDU) is to support the professional development of academic and professional staff, as well as doctoral and post-doctoral researchers in relation to learning and teaching. This includes supporting staff to achieve Advance HE recognition for their professional practice. In addition to this, we are contracted to use 20% of our workload teaching

in a cognate subject area. While my colleagues have a distinct subject area to work in, having PhDs in their subject, I have had a squiggly career (Tupper & Ellis, 2020). I have a background in social sciences librarianship and English Literature, and my ongoing PhD is in the interdisciplinary area of coaching and staff wellbeing. This has led to me spending 10% of my time in the English department and 10% in the Business School.

I have been interested in the benefits of coaching for a long time as it involves many of the skills librarians have; for example, good listening skills, the ability to ask open and perceptive questions, and the ability to select from a range of tools to support users. I acquired a Level 5 Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) qualification in Coaching and Mentoring in 2018. After this, I began providing coaching and mentoring services to staff across the University and applied it in my teaching practices to both students and staff. I took this approach because coaching enables people to realise their potential (ILM 2018). They discover answers they already have, articulate them, and become more confident (ILM 2018). It 'emphasises reflection, self-analysis and self-evaluation' which are useful behaviours when studying or going into employment (Devine et al., 2013, p. 1383). Coaching is empowering and those coached are more likely to take responsibility and put their thoughts into actions (Devine et al., 2013). At a time when student wellbeing is high on universities' agendas (UUK, 2020), this seems more important than ever.

The focus of this report is my work in the aforementioned English department where I teach on the compulsory module, Digital Literacy for year 1 undergraduates. The layout of this report is an adapted version of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988) (Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Conclusion and Action Plan). I have chosen this format as it is a commonly recognised tool for reflective writing and the inclusion of an action plan within it ensures that we constantly engage in praxis.

Description

The aim of the module is to enhance and develop students' engagement with the concepts around which digital literacy is developed as both criticism and practice. Students have three objectives: to analyse and interpret the internet as a text, through conceptual analysis and online participation; to engage with the idea of critical reading as a practice-based and culturally informed act that must be learned and developed; and to create a useful web presence which highlights their intelligence, creativity and values. The students are asked to create 8–10 pieces of publishable content reflecting their learning. The sessions took place once a week for an hour, with tutorial tasks which students would do in their independent study time and take to their tutorials to discuss.

The department already has a subject librarian who teaches the students how to use and access relevant databases, as well as how to reference. They also have an Academic Skills tutor who teaches students how to engage in academic writing. It was important then that I did not repeat their work or be seen to be taking their place. It also provided me with an opportunity to move away from the skills-based aspect of IL. The module lead and I discussed the content and he was happy for me to take on themes of identity, values, and self-awareness — well known coaching practices — in my sessions.

The module leader covered topics such as trolling, slacktivism, memes, blogging, influencers, and the idea of digital literacy as participatory. I attended all the sessions run by him to support the students in their breakout room activities and to ensure my own would fit seamlessly. When modules are delivered by more than one person there is a tendency for them to become

fragmented and disconnected (Money & Coughlan, 2016) and I did not want this to happen, especially during a pandemic when students are already struggling with their mental health and wellbeing (Nurunnabi, 2021).

Interspersed with these sessions, I led three which I will describe here.

In the first session I led, I focussed on how information empowers us as citizens to develop informed views and engage fully with society (Smith, 2016). Using a 'think, pair, share' activity, I asked them to consider definitions of information and digital literacy and why they might be important. I showed them newspaper headlines on topics such as Brexit, Trump, Coronavirus, and 5G, as well some information about echo chambers. We discussed the importance of widening our sources of information while also being mindful of our wellbeing.

To emphasise transferability, I shared the story of 11-year-old Tilly Smith and how her successful efforts to save lives during the 2004 Thailand tsunami led to her being referred to in the Alexandria Proclamation (UNESCO, 2006). I followed this by sharing the UNESCO and CILIP IL definitions, highlighting the social justice elements. Students considered the types of information they used, as well as where, how, and with whom this took place. They were asked to consider what this said about their own behaviour and they produced a 'visitors and residents' (White & Le Cornu, 2016) diagram to illustrate this. This links directly to the definition of IL and how this might encourage the students to move from being passive consumers to engaged and conscious citizens. Additionally, it highlighted the participatory requirement of digital literacy. I linked this to coaching by emphasising that these activities were about analysing behaviour and creating self-awareness, rather than a separate concept of identity, as the students set to creating their own maps. I shared my map first because, as bell hooks reminds us (1994), to encourage students to share we also need to express our own vulnerability. Finally, for the portfolio task they were required to write a short reflective piece about what this activity taught them about their own behaviour.

The following week I introduced more overt coaching activities. The purpose of this second session was for students to consider how to start producing content in a digital environment. I focussed on the 'why' (Sinek, 2011), rather than the tools and explained to the students that doing so would help them decide what to prioritise posting. After introducing some rules of respectful enquiry to establish a safe space (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2016), I asked them to create a map of the experiences that had led to them choosing to be where they were at that moment - studying English at Brunel University London. I shared my own map, for the same reasons mentioned above, and a quotation from Terry Pratchett:

> The past needs to be remembered. If you do not know where you come from, then you don't know where you are, and if you don't know where you are, then you don't know where you're going (Pratchett, 2017, p. 223).

The students identified the multiple identities they maintain and deconstructed how these have developed (Burke & Stets, 2009) and whether there was any overlap. We then moved onto values. For this activity, I shared Brené Brown's definition of values (2018a), and shared the University's values and my own. I then asked the students to identify their own personal and professional values from Brené Brown's list to enable them to create their own authentic space in a digital environment (2018b). In subsequent face-to-face sessions, I have shared stacks of old magazines to help them collage a response (Gat et al., 2019; Gonzalez & Baker, 2019). Students found this fun and the activity instigated lots of questions and conversation. For the

portfolio task they were required to consolidate their responses to the activities into a piece of reflective text.

In the third session I led, I linked the work on values and identity the students had completed with the information about them currently available online, and asked them whether there was a mismatch. In pairs, they googled themselves and then each other and discussed the results. As some had found different results than their partner, we were able to have a chat about algorithms. Linking this activity with Heathcliff's lament in Wuthering Heights, 'by this curious turn of disposition, I have gained the reputation of deliberate heartlessness; how undeserved, I alone can appreciate' (Brontë, 1847/1992, p. 27), I asked students to write what methods and tools they currently used to manage their profile. They then considered how they could develop this further to ensure they are reaching their desired audience, which might help their future career (Busuyi et al., 2021; Habets et al., 2021). In the final part of the session, we discussed how the pandemic has affected their own sense of private and personal space and what effect this had had on their boundaries. They were then encouraged to calculate the benefits, implications, and practicalities of constructing strong boundaries when writing (Brown, 2015; Ray, 2021). For the portfolio task they were required to consolidate their responses to the activities and add them to the previous task.

Feelings

At the time of teaching this module, the UK had entered its third national lockdown and students were being taught online. Student (and staff) wellbeing was at a low point and people were feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and disconnected. As a large part of my APDU role, I talk with and support other lecturers and I had heard how others were faring with students who refused to turn on their cameras or participate online. This was making it difficult for both the members of staff teaching and the students who did want to learn. This was my first time teaching on this module at all so I was a little nervous.

Like many of the students, I also had my own background noise and interruptions to deal with as I was currently home-schooling a primary-aged child while looking after a toddler and inquisitive cat. As these conversations had prepared me for what to expect, I ensured I included Zoom and breakout etiquette, outlined the principles of respectful enquiry, and regularly encouraged participation. There were times students did not wish to share their stories and I was careful not to place pressure on them to do this. I phrased the questions so they focused on the student's experience of the process rather than their personal information and this seemed to help.

Evaluation

Overall, there was a mixed response. The module lead and I received feedback halfway through the course which stated that some students did not see the connection between digital literacy and an English degree and so did not want to engage with the module. We revisited this in the following weeks to make the connections more explicit. Someone also took something I had mentioned from my past about being on the development team for a Sociology programme and they then assumed I was a Sociology lecturer who did not belong in the English department. I did bring this up in a subsequent lecture with them as it seemed pertinent when discussing identities. This felt like a vulnerable moment but if I wanted the students to feel comfortable discussing identity then it was important for me to model this (hooks, 1994). Students liked the practical activities but also wanted more lecture content. In response to this, the module leader and I met and both agreed that meeting the learning outcomes and trying to create connection

within a group needed more than one hour. Fortunately, we were able to double the time allocated by combining the lecture and seminar. Finally, some students did not feel comfortable publishing material on social media and, while this was never a compulsory task, we made it clearer to students that this was not necessary.

As in the rest of the country, and indeed the world, the students and staff were struggling during this period of lockdown. However, the majority of students contributed to the sessions; they engaged in conversations and module activities and they continued working on the tasks in their tutorials. While there is a lot to learn from how the module went, everyone did the best they could at the time. Students were under the impression they needed to publish online at a time they felt vulnerable, they were also asked to deconstruct their own identities at a time when many felt they had lost control. The open questions and focus on their own beliefs recreated a sense of ownership and control which was evident in the questions they raised and the work they produced. While these activities were created to help wellbeing by creating self-awareness, autonomy, and agency, we do need to be more explicit in our intentions from the very beginning.

Conclusion

Going forwards, the module will be running for at least two more terms with the first in January 2022 to April 2022. As things currently stand, government restrictions have been lifted and the module is now, at the time of writing, taking place face to face in physical teaching spaces. While some content can be re-used, the format needed to be readjusted to take this into account; for example, as mentioned previously, I took in a large stack of magazines to help with the identity activity.

As a response to the feedback previously received, the two-hour length will continue. It will be interesting to see if this makes a difference. I will retain the rules of respectful enquiry as these work whether online or not and are particularly pertinent when we have become disconnected and nervous of one another. The department is going through a portfolio refresh at the moment so it remains to be seen whether the module will continue in its current form. There is some possibility that it may become a Level 6 module (Year 3 for undergraduates) to more closely align with students' focus on future employment.

Action Plan

Going forwards, if you are thinking of doing something similar yourself, it would be worth considering the following:

- Is a coaching approach appropriate for your cohort and subject?
- Learn about coaching tools and techniques, especially and most importantly the ethics of coaching. The International Coaching Federation Code of Ethics (International Coaching Federation, 2020) is a good place to start.
- Ensure you have the backing of those in your direct teaching team; for example, the module lead.
- If asking people to take part in activities related to their personal lives, do not pressure them to share. Be prepared for silence and be willing to share your own (relevant) stories.
- If you are encouraging people to share stories, set clear boundaries. Are you going to be recording the session; for example, and if so what will happen to the recording?

- Be clear from the outset what you are doing and why you are doing it. Reiterate this in each session and before each activity.

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