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Along a Continuum: Moving in Theory and Practice through the Collaborative to the Transformative in Teaching College and University Students to Use Government Documents in Research

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Abstract

Government documents have been a neglected resource in research among college and university students. While collaboration is recognized as an important element in teaching more effectively the nuances of using government documents, some librarians at Louisiana State University have discovered, based on insights into educational theory and process, that collaboration is not enough. A genuine enthusiasm about government documents is needed and this has led to certain transformations among teachers and students alike at LSU where the manner in which government documents is taught has fundamentally changed, as well as how these materials are used by students.

Introduction

Existing literature addressing the need for better library instruction in the use of government documents identifies problems, poses solutions, and acknowledges barriers to better instruction. While many of the solutions posed already involve collaboration between government documents librarians and discipline-specific faculty or between government documents librarians and instructional librarians, this article expands on this principle of collaboration to include insights on educational theory and practice. One of these insights is the important role of acceptance and enthusiasm, signified by a clear affirmation of the value of government documents in student research, in transforming the instructional experience. Following an overview of some recent literature on this topic and a very brief description of some insights on educational theory and process, an account will be given of one instruction librarian's experience at Louisiana State University in moving from the collaborative to the transformative in teaching college and university students about government documents. It is hoped that this testimonial will not only inspire others to take such specialized library instruction to new levels of effectiveness, but also help to

bring about transformations in students and teachers alike.

Literature Review: Ideas, Ideals, and Harsh Realities

For several years now, articles have appeared in academic library literature confirming that students, mainly undergraduates, are neither sufficiently cognizant of government information nor are they comfortable with seeking and using this type of information during the research process. The Asher, Yi, and Knapp article of 2002, "Effective Instruction Needed to Improve Students' Use of Government Documents" reveals this concern. They interpret a study of printer data and circulation statistics to determine government documents usage at Walter W. Stiern Library at California State University, Bakersfield. The study shows "that students are neglecting important materials in their research and that instructors need to further incorporate the use of government documents into their course requirements."¹ The authors further noted that having valuable government documents available online – thus making them accessible to students even when the library is closed – contributes to an educational environment that promotes their use. They ultimately assert that government docu-



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ments instruction should be “part of an overall information competency program.”²

Other articles delve more deeply into the details of developing such instruction. In 1997, Sheehy and Cheney published “Government Information and Library Instruction: A Means to an End.” They describe the efforts, beginning in 1979, of the Pennsylvania State University Libraries to provide various credit courses in using government resources. Models for the courses involved collaboration primarily between librarians and academic faculty, and the results were viewed favorably. However favorably the results may be viewed in hindsight, the authors acknowledge that the paths to those results were challenging on many levels. One of the greatest challenges was the amount of time needed to balance the extra workload taken on by a librarian teaching a credit course. While these courses on the use of government documents for research present challenges, Sheehy and Cheney believe that this specialization is preferable and actually less challenging than incorporating government documents modules in general library instruction. Reasons for this position include the awareness of “significant instructional and learning challenges” for both the librarian and the students. They explain, “despite efforts to catalog a growing number of government collections, users must still locate much government information through highly specialized and separate indexing tools . . . [and] librarians providing introductory library instruction, with its focus on basic library skills, rarely have time to address these special challenges.”³

In 2004, *DttP: Documents to the People*, the journal published by the Government Documents Round Table (GODORT) of the American Library Association (ALA), began a series of articles devoted to the topic of teaching government documents resource material. Judith Downie authored a two-part article, the first published in the series. Part I referenced the information literacy movement in terms of the Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for*

Higher Education (2000). Downie argues that while government document resources “fit into the information literacy movement,” they “are not well-represented in general IL [Information Literacy] instruction provided to students”; in fact, they are “frequently . . . omitted from library resource instruction sessions.”⁴ In her opinion, academic libraries that do not include government documents in their IL instruction do not fully meet those ACRL standards.

Downie’s suggested remedies for this lack of fulfillment of standards essentially reflect those of Asher, Yi, and Knapp, as well as Sheehy and Cheney. She concludes that “[t]here are few opportunities indeed to develop a credit-based semester-long class on government information resources as discussed by Sheehy and Cheney.”⁵ Besides the lack of opportunities and the time needed to teach this material, she notes several other impediments — primarily attitude-based — that are attributable equally to faculty, students, and even librarians themselves.

A Closer Look at Downie

The discipline-specific faculty attitude problem referenced above can be summed up as follows. Faculty do not always realize the depth and breadth of government information, thinking that the relevance of government documents is limited to political science and other social science disciplines. Another issue is that faculty, legitimately disturbed by students’ indiscriminate use of internet resources, may disallow the use of those resources, overlooking the fact that many excellent government resources are available exclusively on the internet.⁶

The student attitude problem, while likely common to all forms of research, seems to impact the use of government documents more dramatically. Students, particularly undergraduates, will often use materials that are most quickly and easily found, whether or not these materials are best suited to a specific research query. For example, undergraduates may not have a sense of the importance of longitudinal re-



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search and may look for only the newest material. Related to the attitude and perception issues, these students are not always aware of the importance of primary source materials (which are often government documents materials) or may be unable to distinguish primary from secondary source materials. This lack of awareness prevents students from taking the extra steps to find primary sources.

Sadly, and equally relevant, it is not only students who are unfamiliar with government resources and how to use them, but many librarians themselves are also unfamiliar with and hesitant to use government documents. There are many good reasons for this lack of familiarity – a classification system entirely different from the common subject-based systems of Dewey and Library of Congress, a sometimes convoluted system of indexes and other finding aids (necessary because of the backlogs of uncataloged older government materials), and the unfortunate fact that Schools of Library and Information Science (SLIS) do not always offer courses in government documents. Regarding courses on government documents, it commonly is the perception among SLIS students that these courses are especially difficult and not worth the effort unless they plan on specializing in government information.

Downie's second article, appearing in the Winter 2004 issue of *DttP*, begins with a summary of the many perceived barriers to incorporating government documents into literacy instruction, but it offers solutions as well. Barriers include resistance to more work by instruction librarians; students' perception that everything is on the internet; an overwhelming number of formats of government documents; the classification system of the Superintendent of Documents (SuDocs) reflecting agency rather than subject categories; structural changes in said agencies; lack of full-text or even bibliographic access in online catalogs, databases, and the internet. Some of Downie's solutions include government documents librarians' working collaboratively with faculty

and instruction librarians to validate and promote the use of government websites for research; comparing the nature of the SuDocs classification system with other multidisciplinary research strategies; emphasizing the unique point of view that each agency would have about any particular topic; creating pathfinders and other instructional aids to familiarize general reference librarians and students alike with commercial finding aids – both in print and online – that are unique to government information resources.⁷

This last solution mentioned is, in part, an acknowledgment that many of the older documents are not yet cataloged in library OPACs – a problem that persists because of the lack of funds to mount large-scale retrospective conversion projects by either the Government Publications Office (GPO) itself or by libraries housing these older print materials. Downie's phrase, "validate and promote," once again reinforces the idea of acceptance being an important component of successful instruction in the use of government documents. Of course, this emphasis on acceptance assumes that there is already a bibliographic instruction and/or information literacy program in place at any given institution.

On the one hand, then, teaching government documents is recognized as an important service libraries ought to offer students and library patrons, but on the other hand, this mandate runs up against a number of challenges. An additional piece of the puzzle is the nature and experience of teaching and learning. When these elements factor into the picture, as has been the experience at Louisiana State University, certain insights come into play. These insights related to educational theories can motivate and enliven the various dimensions of teaching about government documents. In what follows, a few important insights into the elements of educational theory and process will be considered, followed by an account of one instructional librarian's practical experience with teaching government documents at Louisiana State University.



Theoretical Basis of Transformative Learning and Teaching

Since it is expected that librarians who teach government documents actually have experience in the field and know the key nuances, “testimony” in fact plays an important role in the teaching-learning process. In fact, the epistemological value of testimony surfaces as a relevant philosophical and educational consideration. On the theoretical front, then, speculative reflection suggests how teaching and learning operate.

We often talk about knowledge being transferred or transmitted via testimony. This suggests two things: (1) that hearers can acquire knowledge via the testimony of others; and (2) that speakers must themselves have the knowledge in question in order to pass it to their hearers. In this way the picture we have of testimonial knowledge is like a chain of people passing buckets of water to put out a fire. Each person must have a bucket of water in order to pass it to the next person, and moreover there must be at least one person who is ultimately acquiring the water from another source.⁸

These insights of Jennifer Lackey, philosophy professor at Northwestern University and noted authority on the epistemological role and educational function of testimony, also highlight the importance of collaboration in teaching and learning. “The Epistemological Problems of Testimony” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* also affirms the notion that testimony warrants epistemic justification if the testimony bearer participates in an “epistemic community.”⁹ Applying this concept to the transmission of knowledge of government documents again brings to the fore the importance of an instructor’s membership in and collaboration with a specialized community.

In harmony with this is the related concept of transformative learning. Patricia Cranton defines transformative learning as a “process of becoming aware of one’s as-

sumptions and revising these assumptions based on critical self-reflection.”¹⁰ Developed in the early 1990s, theories of transformational learning deal essentially with two aspects of the learning process. First, “instrumental learning” explores task-oriented, problem-solving activities and highlights cause-and-effect relationships. Second, “communicative learning” addresses issues related to the role that feelings, needs, and desires play in teaching and learning.¹¹ When applying educational theory to bring about a change in viewpoints and behavior related to understanding and using government documents, the theory of transformative learning suggests that attitudes need to change, especially among educators. Changes in attitude can bring about a significant positive movement along the continuum of teaching government documents.

Drawing various elements together – the collaborative nature of teaching, the transformative effect of challenging assumptions and all that entails, and the importance of testimony in knowledge transmission – leads to the following sections that describe an instruction librarian’s experience of teaching government documents at LSU. We hope our testimony will encourage and inspire others to embrace more enthusiastically the teaching of government documents.

The LIS 1001 Model – the Basics Must First Be in Place

The acknowledgment that all undergraduate students, even lower-division students, can successfully be taught to use government information is implicit in the “Library Research Methods and Materials” (LIS 1001) coursework offered by the Louisiana State University (LSU) User Instruction Group/Information Literacy Instruction program. As is common in university libraries, the librarians at LSU offer multi-level instruction, from the online tutorial to the one-shot demonstration to, ultimately, the LIS 1001 half-semester credit course. As described in the University course catalog, LIS 1001 is part of the course numbering series



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that is specifically for “undergraduate students, primarily freshmen; [and] for *undergraduate credit only*.” Upper-division students are warned that they will not receive any degree credit for taking this course.¹²

The LIS 1001 Common Outline and the detailed course description linked from the Library Instruction Home Page indicate that government information and documents are vital parts of the course and its objectives.¹³ To recall Downie’s article, government documents constitute an important focus in teaching information literacy, a focus that LSU affirms explicitly in its course description.¹⁴ Here LSU escapes Downie’s criticism that academic libraries do not include government information in their information literacy instruction. LSU embraces government information as an integral part of meeting the ACRL standards.

With the basics in place—a clearly stated and well developed course of library instruction that includes a significant focus on government documents—various other aspects of teaching and learning at LSU are addressed.

Successful Collaboration—A Case for Enthusiasm

It is recognized at the outset that even if all the LIS 1001 instructors address government documents in their coursework, the level of instructor engagement will vary due to time constraints, depth of familiarity with the material, and other complexities of teaching this material. These are all familiar reasons that appear in the literature or are given by library instructors at other colleges and universities for covering government documents poorly or not covering them at all. Thus, while it is important to applaud LSU’s dedication to including government information in its library instruction, it is as important to pay special attention to a characteristic without which no amount of simple inclusion of government materials into the syllabus will suffice or be effective. That characteristic is, not surprisingly, “enthusiasm,” a corollary of our old friend “accep-

tance,” and an important aspect of the affective dimension of transformational teaching and learning. Moreover, as has been the experience at LSU, “enthusiasm” can be both the cause and the effect of successful collaboration. As well, the LSU experience is testimony to Downie’s contention that acceptance and collaboration go hand in hand, and exemplifies Lackey’s model of knowledge transmission.

It is often from enthusiasm that the desire for collaboration springs. Without the enthusiasm to teach government materials effectively, the idea—and follow-through—of instruction librarians’ asking the government documents librarians to collaborate on this portion of the course work might never emerge. Likewise, by collaborating with government documents librarians, instruction librarians can become enthusiastic about this genre of material, and the learning experience can be enhanced for all participants.

One LSU instruction librarian in particular, Mitchell J. Fontenot, with a background in law librarianship, has made special efforts to expand his emphasis on government documents research. Collaborating with the Government Documents Department’s librarians has been a key part of those efforts. Not only does he spend more class time on government information than most of his fellow instructors, he also schedules class sessions that meet with government documents librarians inside the Government Documents Department. Given such solid preparation, students arrive in the Department prepared to see and touch those resources that already have been made familiar to them through reading and lecture. Surprisingly, Fontenot was not always this thorough—surprising because of his familiarity with legal research that utilizes government documents to a great degree. His gradual return to teaching government information in a more in-depth manner signifies his acceptance of the importance of government documents and is testimony to his growing enthusiasm for this type of research material.



Transformative Dimensions – Further Testimony

Instructors must continue to *learn* in order to *teach*, as described in the following testimony about the transformative learning that takes place during the act of teaching. Fontenot shares his experience of teaching sections of government information as part of his charge as an LIS 1001 instructor. He recounts his personal “conversion” to including government information in his class structure and begins by confessing to having been dismissive of government documents resources.

When first teaching government documents as part of LIS 1001, I taught my students the basics. I conveyed to them that we received government documents through the Federal Depository Library Program and that we were fortunate to be one of the few regional depositories. In the midst of my nine assignments and final exam constituting LIS 1001, government documents were relegated to the back burner of the class, something merely to fill in at the end when I was getting tired at the end of the semester.¹⁵

Moving along a continuum, Fontenot came to realize that he was in the special position to make government documents a vital part of his course. Part of this realization came as a result of collaborating with government documents librarians.

As the years progressed and interaction and collaboration increased with two outstanding government documents librarians, I felt I was doing government documents, as part of the overall scheme of instruction, a grave disservice, especially with my former background. I began to incorporate vital information such as how government documents were free information to the public, no matter what the socioeconomic status of a patron. I emphasized more of the history of the Federal Depository Library Program and how tax-

payer dollars funded this great free government information to the public. I appealed to students’ capitalistic side, showing them how they could find information on scholarships and grants and even jobs when relocating to a new city to begin their careers. This also provided me the opportunity to illustrate that while commercial databases that they use as students are no longer available to them after they graduate, government information is available to them at anytime in their careers and lives.¹⁶

Fontenot has now become a convert in the truest sense of the word: he has embraced the philosophical foundations of free government information and has moved enthusiastically to teach the process of using government materials for both academic and personal research. Having his earlier assumptions challenged, as Cranton pointed out, has led him to accept a new approach. In effect, he has experienced transformation.

His transformation also has produced a new “hands-on” approach. Fontenot brings his classes to the Government Documents Department for presentations and tours by government documents librarians. He creates assignments based on government documents with specific questions that require use of the materials rather than general questions about the nature of government information. He dedicates two class sessions to government information—one on print resources, the other on electronic—in order to cover a greater number of materials and to clarify why both print and electronic resources are useful to the researcher, depending upon the nature of the research, nature in this sense being allied with discipline, chronology, and/or authenticity (official versions, primary sources, and so forth). Fontenot’s visible level of enthusiasm is infectious to students and, in the experience of the LSU Government Documents Librarians who lead the student tours, his LIS 1001 students are among the most likely to ask substantive questions. One lasting effect of this, and a testimony to the depth of trans-



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formation of all involved, is that the extra time and heightened enthusiasm given to government documents by Fontenot cause his students consistently to come back to the Documents Department to use government resources long after the required LIS 1001 assignment is over.

Conclusion

While it is widely acknowledged that collaboration is a vital component in efforts to instruct students in the value and use of government materials, like a stew in which several ingredients are mixed, collaboration is not sufficiently effective – palatable – without the addition of seasoning. This seasoning, to stretch our metaphor, is enthusiasm for the materials being used to bring about the desired full and satisfying outcomes. Collaboration alone, as has been the experience of some at LSU, is not enough to ensure successful, transformative outcomes in teaching college and university students to use government documents. Since teaching and learning depend in part on transformative experiences, that transformation from simple awareness and acceptance of government materials to enthusiasm for government materials has proven to be an essential element in the success of at least one instructor's effort in teaching college and university students about government documents.

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