

ASIS&T ANNUAL MEETING AWARD WINNERS

Outstanding Information Science Teacher Award Teaching, Writing and Reflective Practice

by Lisa P. Nathan

2016 Annual Meeting Coverage

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

Lisa Nathan is an assistant professor at the iSchool at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and recipient of the 2016 ASIS&T Outstanding Information Science Teacher Award. She creates “real-world” assignments and thoughtful activities in order to develop students into critically thinking information professionals. Lisa outlines four teaching techniques she uses and provides examples of each one. In a method she calls reflective reading, she asks students to come up with discussion questions based on the weekly reading materials, and the originators of each question run a discussion with other students. She promotes effective communication by building up writing and oral skills for each student to allow them as many outlets as possible to express their opinions thoughtfully. Finally, she extends her teaching outside the classroom and was awarded funds from the UBC's Remote Community Based Learning Fund in 2016 and 2017 for graduate students to work with the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre.

KEYWORDS

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As the recipient of the 2016 ASIS&T Outstanding Information Science Teacher Award, I have been asked to share my views and experience about teaching in this field. In some ways writing about my teaching contrasts with my approach to teaching. I don't think the educator should be at the center of attention. However, I also agree with Gibbs' statement: “While theorizing without practice is pretty much useless, unreflective practice is also pretty much useless” [1, p.3].

My intention as an educator is to design a learner-centered pedagogy that is responsive, flexible and engaging, developing students' critical thinking skills as they develop into engaged, ethically reflective information professionals. Grounded by my experience as coordinator of the First Nations Curriculum Concentration (FNCC) at University of British Columbia's (UBC) iSchool, I encourage students to identify and work with tensions of inequality, marginalization and oppression embedded in dominant information practices, the ways information is organized, shared, stored and managed.

Philosophy

I draw inspiration and guidance from the experience focused, ethically grounded, pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey, for example, [2] [3]. In my teaching and mentoring activities I position myself as a facilitator, striving to enhance students' education by crafting learning environments where they face challenges similar to those they will confront in their future professional roles. Together we work to cultivate the skills and habits of mind that will ground them as critically engaged information professionals, such as interpreting privacy legislation, addressing repatriation claims or crafting copyright policy.

I have developed courses for undergraduates (for example, information

policy), masters students (for example, information practice in support of indigenous initiatives) and doctoral students (for example, doctoral pro seminar). Students I work with develop their aptitude for insightful investigation, critical reflection and thoughtful expression. These competencies provide them with the research, decision-making and communicative expertise they need to function effectively and ethically in an ever-shifting information landscape. I provide experiences in making informed choices in response to problematic situations [3] by assigning provocative course material, crafting demanding design activities and developing *real-world* assignments (which is to say, not essays). Below I provide examples of activities and assignments I draw upon to support student competencies.

Reflective Reading

Students skilled in developing constructive questions in response to readings are well on their way to becoming reflective practitioners.

Example: In a blended class on information policy each week I assign a few students to independently craft discussion questions based on the week's assigned materials. Their classmates respond directly to these questions, and the student who made the initial query facilitates the ongoing discussion thread. Students find this assignment far more challenging than they originally anticipate, and they develop an appreciation for questioning the author's positioning rather than passively accepting the arguments as presented. Students experience how a reading is valuable not only for the information that it conveys, but for the questions that it elicits within the reflective and critical reader.

Effective Communication

Students need to develop competencies in creating multiple expressions of their informed opinions.

Writing Literacy: After almost two decades of performing school, the majority of our graduate students enter our program well skilled in writing long, academic essays. Through a topic briefing assignment with multiple support mechanisms, the students develop their skills in conveying

information in a concise, structured, highly readable format in alignment with the requirements of the contemporary workplace.

Oral Literacy: Many students I work with are resistant to rehearsing and timing their oral presentations. They prefer to wing it and riff on a topic. In my face-to-face and blended courses I incorporate at least one assignment that involves an extremely short (for example, two-minute), timed presentation. Students experience firsthand the benefits of tightening their points and timing their presentations, a key skill as they enter the workforce.

Class Environment

In order for any of the above activities to be successful as learning opportunities I find it essential for students to experience a respectful environment. My ongoing collaborations with life-wide educators at the University of British Columbia, such as Kim Lawson, Xwi7xwa reference librarian, and Amy Perrault from the Aboriginal Strategist Center for Teaching and Learning Technology have deeply informed my ability to create an atmosphere of trust, developing activities that encourage students to acknowledge, consider and respect a plurality of positions and practice cultural humility.

Beyond the Classroom

In addition to facilitating student engagements in classroom settings, I also support students in a range of experiential learning opportunities. In 2016, I received funds from UBC's Remote Community Based Learning Fund to take graduate students in the First Nations Curriculum Concentration to work for a week with the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre on the island of Bella Bella off the central coast of British Columbia. This collaboration has been years in the making, and I am thrilled that we received a second year of funding to bring another group of students in the spring of 2017. The learning opportunities made possible through this collaboration exemplify the type of experiences that enhance students' critical thinking skills, supporting their development as engaged, ethically reflective information professionals.

I share my teaching statement above with some discomfort. However, I recognize that I learned so much from those who shared their teaching philosophies with me. The variation across the statements helped me realize

how personal teaching is. Educators must develop and reflect on the philosophies and practices that work for them and for their students. ■

Resources Mentioned in the Article

- [1] Gibbs, G. (April 2015). Much learning is acquired by doing, but seldom only by doing (53 powerful ideas all teachers should know about, Idea Number 31). Staff and Educational Development Association. Retrieved from www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/publications_181_31%20Much%20learning%20is%20acquired%20by%20doing,%20but%20seldom%20only%20be%20doing.pdf
- [2] Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as Experience*. New York: Milton, Balch & Company.
- [3] Dewey, J. (1959). *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan.