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# SOCIAL POLICY AND CONSTRUCTIVISM USING CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING THEORY IN TEACHING SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS RESEARCH SKILLS

“What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing.” Aristotle

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## Introduction

Principles of constructivist learning theory were used in developing a process-oriented approach to research skills instruction as applied to real world social problems and social policy responses. Building upon past experiences in establishing collaborative relationships with social work faculty, the theories of constructivism, Kuhlthau’s Information Search Process, and collaborative learning were incorporated into the framework of efforts to provide library instruction at important developmental phases, also known as “zones of intervention”, in student coursework involving three successive social work classes. This article will attempt to describe the above concepts and articulate how these concepts were employed in efforts to improve student-learning outcomes in library instruction aimed at the undergraduate social work program at Eastern Kentucky University.

## EKU Instructional Background

Eastern Kentucky University is a comprehensive public university offering bachelor and masters’ degrees with a full-time student enrollment of 14,322. ECU undergraduate social work students are required to construct portfolios through three successive courses in their social work curriculum. Their assignments progress from the general— identifying a social problem, to the specific—proposing legislation that addresses a particular problem within a larger social issue. The students’ skill set progressively improves in each class because each assignment requires

students to build upon their acquired knowledge and to develop new competencies to meet new goals. Skills progress from basic research skills involved in writing a research paper to the intermediary level of public policy research to the specific skills used in legislative history research and finally to proposing change with supporting argument and evidence as to the need and effect of the proposed change.

## Constructivism

Constructivism is a broad descriptive term for a set of theories that focus on the student, not the instructor as the driving force behind learning. The student actively constructs knowledge utilizing prior knowledge and experience as building blocks. Knowledge construction is an active rather than a passive process, students must become actively engaged in their learning experience rather than act as passive recipients of information. (Leonard, 2002).

## Information Search Process

Kuhlthau’s Information Search Process (ISP), is an application of the constructivist learning theory. The ISP is useful when working with students who have different levels of experience and confidence in using the library and finding appropriate information resources. Kuhlthau advocates a constructivist (a building-upon-knowledge) approach to teaching rather than the traditional transmission (a transferring-of-knowledge) approach. The ISP outlines six stages of the information search process with corresponding emotions and thoughts involved in each stage. These stages include: initiation,

selection, exploration, formulation, collection, and presentation. Active learning opportunities known as “zones of intervention” emerge within each stage for librarian and instructor to collaborate with each other and students. (Kuhlthau, 1988).

### Library Instruction and Constructivism

In surveying the literature for new approaches to library instruction, ECU librarians discovered constructivist learning theories and were struck by their applicability to their instructional needs. The work of several researchers and authors helped identify areas of concern and define the needed approach. Leckie (1996) and Bodi (2002) describe how faculty, through their experience and training, are typically regarded as “expert searchers.” Faculty members understand the methods of communication in their disciplines and are familiar with the experts in their fields. Undergraduates, on the other hand, are “novice searchers.” They lack subject expertise and therefore lack confidence in their ability to conduct research, or even worse, are over-confident in their research ability until asked to perform real research. Students’ lack of knowledge extends beyond their unfamiliarity with the subject matter of a discipline. Many undergraduates do not understand basic research-related concepts, such as when and how to use a book index, an encyclopedia, an online database, or a library catalog. In an attempt to fill this research gap, many instructors schedule library instruction limited to a “one-shot” session for their classes.

In this session, the librarian may have less than one hour in which to cover accessing print and electronic resources, evaluating information, and determining which resources to use at various stages. Kuhlthau’s ISP model emphasizes that in the initial stages of choosing a topic or exploring a topic, students may be confused and not yet aware of their actual information needs. At this stage in the search process, a library instruction session may prove relatively useless to students. Unfortunately, this session may be the only formal library instruction session for the research assignment. This scenario often results in an inadequately researched and poorly constructed

paper, instances of plagiarism, or a non-learning experience.

Academic librarians recognize the inherent problems of one-shot instruction and the frustrations students feel over the research process and recognize that research-skills instruction, like subject-specific instruction, works best when process-based. Christopher Hollister and Jonathan Coe (2003) surveyed a group of librarians on their views of patterns of library instruction. Eighty-nine percent of the librarian respondents indicated that a departure from the traditional one-hour/one-shot model of library instruction was a positive development. Thirty-six percent indicated that the one-time session is “counter-productive and pedagogically ineffective.”

Research supports the idea that the teaching of research skills should be integrated into the curriculum in a process-oriented approach rather than covered in one isolated library session. Linda Stein (1998), from the University of Delaware, designed a program to expand her one library session into a program of continuous faculty-librarian support for senior-level psychology students. The results indicated that the students increased their confidence in their ability to complete the assignment, their understanding of the multiple steps required in the research process, and their enthusiasm for their work.

Edward Owusu-Ansah (2004) proposes that the two most viable vehicles for integrating information literacy into the curriculum and bridging the research-skills gap are course-integrated instruction and an independent credit course. Ruth Small (2004), who found that collaboration between librarians and professors is essential to the success of IL skills instruction, has provided additional support. Research and practical experience in teaching indicate that students respond to instruction that is connected to the curriculum and tied to course activities or assignments. Without some concrete goal or perceived utility by the student, the efforts of the librarian are most often wasted.

## Collaboration, EKU Librarians, Social Work Faculty, and Students

Librarians and social work faculty members collaborated on improving the assignments, discussing the students' experiences and examining their learning outcomes of the past semesters. Strategies were developed for changing the assignments, examining the goals and objectives of the class, and improving students' learning outcomes. Most importantly, the social work professors were willing to devote time in class to time in the library.

Librarians collaborated with students by providing increasingly focused instruction, in formal class group meetings, to small groups of students, and individually, at each course level. These meetings served as actual work time where the librarian and students worked together on developing solutions and answers for their projects. Students were not just passive receivers of knowledge in this partnership. They met with librarians via reference appointments at important stages in the research process that parallel Kuhlthau's zones of intervention in order for librarians to help them build upon the knowledge and skills acquired in each previous class. In these meetings, librarians allowed students' learning styles to guide the settings that best suit their styles; for example, some students learn better in a smaller group of their peers and some prefer a one-on-one approach.

Students also had access to the librarians through email. Email serves as a useful communication tool to most students and offers opportunities for open communication and collaborative learning. The additional flexibility also helped students through the emotions and anxieties of the information search process as discussed in Kuhlthau's research.

## Results

Did we improve student outcomes? Unfortunately, we do not have statistical data to provide quantitative evidence of our impact. This project grew organically from the need of the social work faculty and students without the librarians' full realization of the potential of the

project. However, qualitative evidence does support the argument that the librarians' presence and guidance have provided a positive change in the students' experience in the research process and have improved students' knowledge of the legislative process and the politics of public policy. Students actively utilized prior knowledge at each level to construct new ideas.

The students gained a broad knowledge base of important legislation and sources of the legislation affecting the social work profession and client base. The students' and professors' overwhelmingly positive response to the librarians' presence in the class provides the most compelling evidence of the need for instruction suited to many learning styles and taught over multiple sessions. One library instruction session would not have been nearly enough to help students through the completion of their successive assignments or through their own personal learning processes and anxieties.

## Next Steps

As we look to the future, we examine the lessons we learned the most from our experience with this pilot project. We discovered that students need discussion, flexibility and personal interaction to successfully navigate the research process. It has become clear to us that Web 2.0 technology offers the flexibility we need in order to reach out to students in a variety of ways, such as blogs, libguides (online subject guides), wikis, and social bookmarking tools and we are beginning the process of integrating these tools into our efforts. The combination of meeting face-to-face combined with the power of Web 2.0 tools enables the librarians to be even more integrated into the classroom experience and serve in the role as an information consultant.

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