

Historicizing the Library: Using Decoding the Disciplines and the Framework in General Education History Courses

In the summer of 2011, Georgetown University's Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS) held its annual symposium on teaching and learning. The theme of the symposium was "Bottlenecks and Thresholds" and workshops focused on both threshold concepts as theorized by Meyer and Land and historian David Pace's Decoding the Disciplines project. Decoding the Disciplines "is a process for increasing student learning by narrowing the gap between expert and novice thinking. Beginning with the identification of bottlenecks to learning in particular disciplines, it seeks to make explicit the tacit knowledge of experts and to help students master the mental actions they need for success in particular courses."¹ "Bottlenecks" are stumbling blocks in learning, where students consistently get stuck, and if they can't move beyond them, they cannot truly engage in disciplinary work. These bottlenecks may meet Meyer and Land's criteria for threshold concepts, or they may not.

Two years later, the history department at Georgetown decided to review and revise the structure and goals of the general education courses in light of the Bottlenecks and Thresholds symposium. They were particularly interested in using the approach of Decoding the Disciplines, and I was invited to participate in the workshops and discussions around the general education courses. I was quite excited about this, since participating in curricular discussions is not something librarians usually get to spend a lot of time doing, and also since the history curriculum at Georgetown lacks methodology courses. The history department is one of the largest departments on campus, and has a well-established doctoral program as well as a master's program that focuses on global and comparative history. It stretches across two colleges, Georgetown College and the School of Foreign Service, serving undergraduate majors in both, but also offers many courses that meet the various distribution requirements for all students. While graduate students in both the master's and doctoral programs are required to take a methodologies course, undergraduate majors only have requirements in terms of regional focus. The general education courses that were the focus of the Bottlenecks and Thresholds work had traditionally been survey courses and because they met the humanities distribution credit, had tended to be filled with students who were not

¹ <http://decodingthedisциплиnes.org/>

history majors or minors but rather in the business school, nursing and health sciences, and so on. They were and continue to be not open to students who have any sort of AP credit for history, which many students at Georgetown have. The history department was very much interested in thinking about how students in these general education courses could actually experience and do historical work, and included this in the learning goals for these courses: “students will be introduced to the rudiments of historical research, including the use of library and online resources, basic notions of historiography, and the purpose and practice of proper citation methods.”² In our discussions and workshops, we thought through the bottlenecks in historical research and writing, and tried to break down the tacit knowledge, thought processes, and practices (the bottlenecks) that we as experts brought to our own historical research and writing. We also worked towards identifying how to model and have students practice working through these bottlenecks during what we called “History Lab,” since, like science labs, it would entail students actually doing historical research and writing. The bottlenecks we identified included: reading a scholarly article, finding both primary and secondary sources, reading/analyzing primary sources, using textual and non-textual primary sources (art, music, maps, data, material culture/archaeology), and citations. Each of these would eventually become the subject of a History Lab. These were contextualized by broader bottlenecks of historical practice - perhaps threshold concepts? - that history is not a series of facts, but analysis and interpretation based on evidence; the importance of contingency; and that as interpreters of history, we too are situated historically, and our viewpoint is not neutral, objective, or transparent.

When I first began designing library instruction sessions for History Lab, I focused on two elements that always inform my own work with library research. The first is an understanding of the overall history of library systems and how that general history can be traced in the ways systems are currently structured. For example, online library catalogs still rely on metadata and controlled vocabulary as access points, just like physical card catalogs did, while article indexes duplicate indexes that once appeared in print format, like Historical Abstracts. The second element I focused on was library system architecture. This included making distinctions between different types of searching (e.g. full-text, record, specific field) and introducing concepts like metadata and controlled

² <https://history.georgetown.edu/learning-goals>

vocabulary. I structured my library instruction around these concepts because they are central to how I conduct library research but are often not articulated; they get at the how and why of library systems, and once students begin to understand how these systems work, they are better able to use them effectively in their own work, regardless of disciplinary context. Emphasizing the how and why of library systems is a move towards historicizing them, and this, too, was a factor in why I designed my instruction sessions around these two ideas; they fit in thematically with the rest of the course, which looked at the how and why of specific historical moments like the American Revolution, Great Depression, Italian Renaissance, and World War I.

Many of you who are familiar with the development of the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education will undoubtedly be aware that the Framework was being drafted and revised almost simultaneously with the work I am describing here, albeit approved somewhat more recently. Setting aside the question of whether or not the Frameworks are “actually” (whatever that means) threshold concepts or whether LIS or IL is “properly” (whatever that means) a discipline, they are often bottlenecks to learning how to engage in library research as described in the Decoding the Disciplines project. I would suggest, even, that the Framework exemplifies the second step in Decoding the Disciplines, which is to “uncover the mental operations that students must master to get past the bottleneck;” it is “a systematic process of deconstructing disciplinary practice.”³ It is an attempt to articulate the tacit knowledge, processes, and practices that undergird and inform how librarians do library research. The Framework itself even makes this connection in its use of the notion of experts and novices.

Since the creation of the Framework, I have begun adding elements from it to my library instruction sessions for the history general education courses. I have previously written about how the Framework has a somewhat conflicted relationship to the notion of power, but it does point to questions of power and inequality, and it is that element that I have most worked on incorporating into my library instruction sessions, both for these general education history courses and other courses. Historicizing and deconstructing library systems is a key element in locating them within larger systems of power and inequity; to historicize and deconstruct is to denaturalize and make obvious the constructedness. Locating library systems historically situates them within specific social

³ <http://decodingthedisciplines.org/step-2-uncover-the-mental-task/>

formations and power relations. These moves work to introduce a critical distance between students and other users of library systems and those systems themselves. That distance is necessary for questioning, challenging, and also effectively using those systems (see, there's way less tension between helping students do their research and critical information literacy than a lot of people seem to think).

In practice, now, when I introduce the concepts of metadata and controlled vocabulary, I will also point out that even though controlled vocabulary is often a great way to search, since it is the language the library catalog uses, and so it is good to develop some familiarity with it, it is also often inaccurate, uses dated terminology or terminology that is no longer preferred, uses racist, sexist, heterosexist, etc. terms, and understands whiteness, maleness, cis-ness, etc. as "normal" and therefore unmarked in controlled vocabulary. This approach incorporates Frame 6: Searching as Strategic Exploration in its focus on how database and catalog searches actually work but also situates library systems and their implicit ideologies within historical and existing power inequities.

When I talk about databases for both primary and secondary sources now, I continue to talk about their histories as, for example, print indexes in the case of America: History & Life and Historical Abstracts, but also about how information functions as a commodity. I describe how article databases cover different sets of journals due to their origins as print indexes, but also how that is unlikely to change given the economics of scholarly publishing, and add that they will no longer have access to these resources once they are no longer Georgetown students. When I work with primary source databases, I try to briefly outline the labor and costs that go into producing these products, as well as how the library is able to provide these databases by spending massive amounts of money to purchase them; sometimes this includes a discussion of copyright when working with twentieth-century primary source databases. It also often includes a discussion of which primary sources we have access to, and why. Both Sabin Americana (from Gale) and America's Historical Imprints (from Readex, aka Evans and Shaw-Shoemaker) are based on bibliographies of books about the colonies/United States compiled by wealthy white American men during the end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. The sorts of sources in these databases, the sources students have easy access to for their papers, are necessarily subject to contemporary notions of value, importance, and authority at play in the creation of the bibliographies. The same is

true of historical newspaper databases; not everything has been preserved, of course, but even the creation of those sources was subject to contemporary power relations. In this discussion, I try to get at Frame 1: Authority is Constructed and Contextual, Frame 2: Information Creation as Process, and Frame 3: Information Has Value.

In any discipline, it is vital to understand how and why sources came into being, what is accessible and what is not, what has been preserved for analysis and interpretation and what is lost, what was never created, and what can't be known. That this is explicitly connected to social justice has become more and more apparent on my campus with the work of the Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation Working Group.⁴ For those of you unfamiliar with what has been going on at Georgetown, I'll briefly summarize. In 1838, two Jesuit priests, one of whom was the president of Georgetown, sold 272 enslaved persons owned by the Jesuits in order to help the university become fiscally solvent. Following student protests and genealogical research funded by alumni that located descendents of the 272 in Louisiana, the university formed the Working Group to draft a series of recommendations. The university community has been engaged with this effort in myriad ways, one of which is courses that directly engage students in researching African American history at Georgetown, within D.C., and within the broader D.C., Maryland, and Virginia region. These questions about how library systems and the sources students find within them are absolutely crucial to conducting research on these subjects, as are questions about what we can and cannot know about history. In a recent library session for a class entitled "The Other Washington," which covers the history of African Americans in D.C., I showed students how to access 18th and 19th century newspapers from both D.C. and Georgetown, which used to be a separate city. When students searched for information about slavery, though, they primarily found ads for slave auctions and sales and notices for enslaved persons who had run away. These students are not naive or uninformed, but they were disappointed to find very little information about the lives of enslaved persons or sources authored by them beyond already known "slave narratives." We were able to engage in a fairly deep discussion of why we have access to the sources that we do - drawing on all of the ideas that I mentioned above - and it worked particularly well in this instance because students were

⁴ <http://slavery.georgetown.edu/>

confronted with a very concrete example of the ways in which information and library systems are always inflected by the power relations, inequities, and biases of the social world.

But to engage in social justice work in library instruction is to understand these questions as the ground on which any sort of library research, in any discipline, takes place. A very straightforward way to begin with this is by historicizing and deconstructing library systems. Articulating the hows and whys of the tools that we use opens up a critical distance between students and those tools; it provides an opening where questions can be asked and moreover, students are empowered to ask them once they become aware of their constructedness. The Framework's articulation of the tacit knowledge, thought processes, and practices of librarians uncovers the what, how, and why of what we do. To uncover is to denaturalize and make legible. Once something is legible, it can be read, understood, and deployed by others. Being able to explain disciplinary practices, whether in IL or history, to students and then show them how to do those themselves ultimately empowers students to participate in disciplinary conversations, to learn on their own and destabilizes notions of disciplinary power and authority. Disciplinary research and practice becomes something anyone can engage in to some extent and less of an exclusive club with limited membership. Integrating either the Framework or something like *Decoding the Disciplines* can help us move towards social justice in library instruction, even when discussing ideas as mundane as controlled vocabulary and article databases and indexes.