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Transitioning Students Transforming Higher Education

by Robert Schroeder



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Look around you—the students you see in colleges and universities are drastically different than the students of 50, or even 20 years ago, and I’m not talking about the iThings in their hands and ears, or their colorful and metallic ornamentation. Today, when it comes to students, non-traditional is the new traditional in many universities, including Portland State. More than ever before, a larger percentage of PSU students are either first-generation college students, non-white, lower socioeconomic class, English as second language speakers or foreign-born, parents, LGBTQ, differently-abled, or a combination of many of these characteristics.

These new students are just as intelligent as the “traditional traditional students,” but there is a large and often unacknowledged barrier many of them encounter as they move through academe. Historically in the United States, the more affluent, white, Christian, male, heterosexual, and abled members of our society created the higher education system for people like themselves. Even when small numbers outside of this small group gained access to higher education, they most often received an education that was geared to replicate the society of the powerful minority. Today, many of our new students experience academic culture shock and they struggle, not because they cannot do the intellectual work, but because they cannot quickly enough acclimate to a foreign academic culture. They need “cultural ambassadors” to help them navigate this new world and to give them what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called “social capital.” Social capital is seen as functioning

*If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up
with mine, then let us work together.*

—ABORIGINAL ACTIVIST GROUP,
QUEENSLAND AUSTRALIA, 1970S



somewhat like economic capital, but in the societal and cultural realms. Economic capital is the money or other assets you build up and eventually use for your own benefit. Social capital arises from the privileges you gain from your position in society and the social networks, cultural resources, and tacit knowledge that you gradually acquire as part of your social position. It is capital that helps you navigate society (and, in this context, academe) as you move through life.

At Portland State, there are a variety of programs that attempt to provide academic social capital to students in order to level the academic playing field. Librarians are embedded in many of these programs, and I have worked with two in my ten-year tenure at Portland State, which I will highlight here.

The first is our Summer Bridge Program. Summer Bridge is part of Portland State's TRiO Student Support Services which administers federal programs aimed at helping "... students overcome class, social and cultural barriers to higher education" (TRiO). To be part of Summer Bridge a student needs to apply and meet one of the following conditions: be low-income, a first generation college student, or have a documented disability. Over the course of three weeks in the summer, TRiO staff work to acculturate students to life at a university. Students meet with members of Academic Advising, Tutoring, Career Counseling, and the Library to learn how these centers on campus can contribute to their college success. Students also learn writing, study, and research skills as they research and write about potential majors and occupations of interest to them. Over the last seven years, I've worked with these students in the library on not only their cognitive information literacy skills but also on their affective dispositions (such as motivation and perseverance) when doing research. In one respect, the social capital they gain from our interactions is information literacy skills and knowledge that other freshman may have received in their home from college-educated siblings or parents, or from top-rated high schools or advanced placement programs. In addition, the students begin to build a relationship to an academic librarian (myself) and to the library, and my hope is that they then see the library and librarians as potential allies in their academic success network.

The second program in which I've had the opportunity to work with transitioning students is the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program. This program "... works with motivated and talented undergraduates who want to pursue PhDs. It introduces juniors and seniors who are first-generation and low-income, and/or members of under-represented groups to academic research and to effective strategies for getting into and graduating from PhD programs." (McNair Scholars). Over the course of a year, these undergraduates take on additional academic work in which they model the behaviors of academics in PhD programs. These scholars create original scholarship and present it at an Undergraduate Research Conference, and much of their research ultimately gets published in the *McNair Scholars Journal* (http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/peer_review_list.html) or another publication. By doing this, these students build their confidence and skills to the point where they feel qualified to potentially pursue a PhD in the future. I've worked with the McNair Scholars for many years, helping them with their immediate research and also exploring the ways doctoral students relate to research. As with the Summer Bridge students, I have begun to explore how I might increase the social capital of the McNair Students. By initiating a relationship with them and by modeling how the library and librarians can be an integral part of their successful academic careers, all the way through a PhD, I believe I have made a deposit in



Suggested Readings in Critical Theories and Libraries

Accardi, M.T. (2013)
Feminist pedagogy for library instruction.
Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press.

Accardi, M. T., Drabinski, E., & Kumbier, A. (Eds.). (2010).
Critical library instruction: Theories and methods.
Duluth, Minn: Library Juice Press.

Gregory, L., & Higgins, S. (2013).
Information literacy and social justice: Radical professional praxis.
Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press.

Leckie, G. J., & Buschman, J. (2009).
Information technology in librarianship: New critical approaches.
Westport, Conn: Libraries Unlimited.

Roberto, K. R., & Berman, S. (2008).
Radical cataloging: Essays at the front.
Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co.

their social capital accounts. As part of my library sessions with these students I share my own educational journey, as I come from a lower socioeconomic background and am a first generation college student. By doing so, it is my hope that the students will see librarians and other faculty as not too different from themselves, and as part of their growing support system at the university.

Connections between faculty and students in both the Summer Bridge and McNair Scholars programs are further facilitated by the faculty members' academic backgrounds. Many of the educators associated with these programs, the staff who administer the Summer Bridge program, and the faculty mentors who work individually with the McNair Scholars, come from a background in a critical theory—theories such as Feminism, Queer Theory, Marxism, or Critical Race Theory. What these theories have in common is that in order to understand the world they critique what they see. They are not necessarily critical in a negative way, but they invariably ask questions of our society and culture that relate to power and power dynamics between different groups. As you can imagine, these theories naturally resonate with the students in such programs as they speak to their lived reality as people of color, members of a lower socioeconomic class, women, gay or lesbian students, differently-abled students, or other groups who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

The students in both the Summer Bridge and the McNair Scholars programs certainly benefit from these programs, but the staff and faculty associated with these programs and



Portland State as a whole also benefit greatly as well. I have been personally enriched in many ways by my association with these students. The students in these programs have helped me to see us (these students and myself) as not just consumers of education but as questioners and co-creators of our education. Working with these students has opened up the possibility of incorporating more critical practices into all of my information literacy sessions (for a selected reading list, see sidebar on page 42). A number of years ago I was inspired by a student who was researching various treatments for Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). He has ADD and he was doing a systematic review of various treatment modalities for ADD students in high schools. What he found, for the most part, was that the success or failure of treatments in most of the studies was measured by either the high school teachers or the parents of the students with ADD—not the ADD subjects themselves. Through his research he was creating space for, and advocating for, people like himself with ADD to be included in the analysis of what “successful treatment” would look like.

Another student I worked with is a Native American woman who was researching her hometown’s relationship to her high school team, “The Indians” and other appropriations of native imagery in her hometown’s local businesses. As we were exploring databases for her search she shared with me a book by Shawn Wilson titled *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, which I found very intriguing as it dovetailed well with my burgeoning exploration of critical theory. In fact, reading this book has inspired my current research project, which is researching critical and indigenous research methods and their relation to library and information science with the help of a digital research community.

Working with these students has also helped me to make sense of my own educational journey. By their actions, and by engaging with many critical theories, these students are not only learning about education, they are transforming it through their scholarship—making space for visions of education and society that reflect themselves and their values. As Paulo Freire says in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (p. 13).

I invite you to look around your school, college, or library and begin to see who is there. Are there minority students, speakers of different languages, athletes, international students, returning veterans—any group of students who may find your library culture foreign to them? Find ways of inviting them into your library culture. I’ll wager, as you share many rewarding experiences you will find that both your library and your individual library practice will be transformed as well. 

References

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth, Eng: Penguin Books.

McNair Scholars <http://www.pdx.edu/mcnair-program/about> Portland State University.

TRiO website <http://www.pdx.edu/dmss/TRIO-SSS> Portland State University.

