

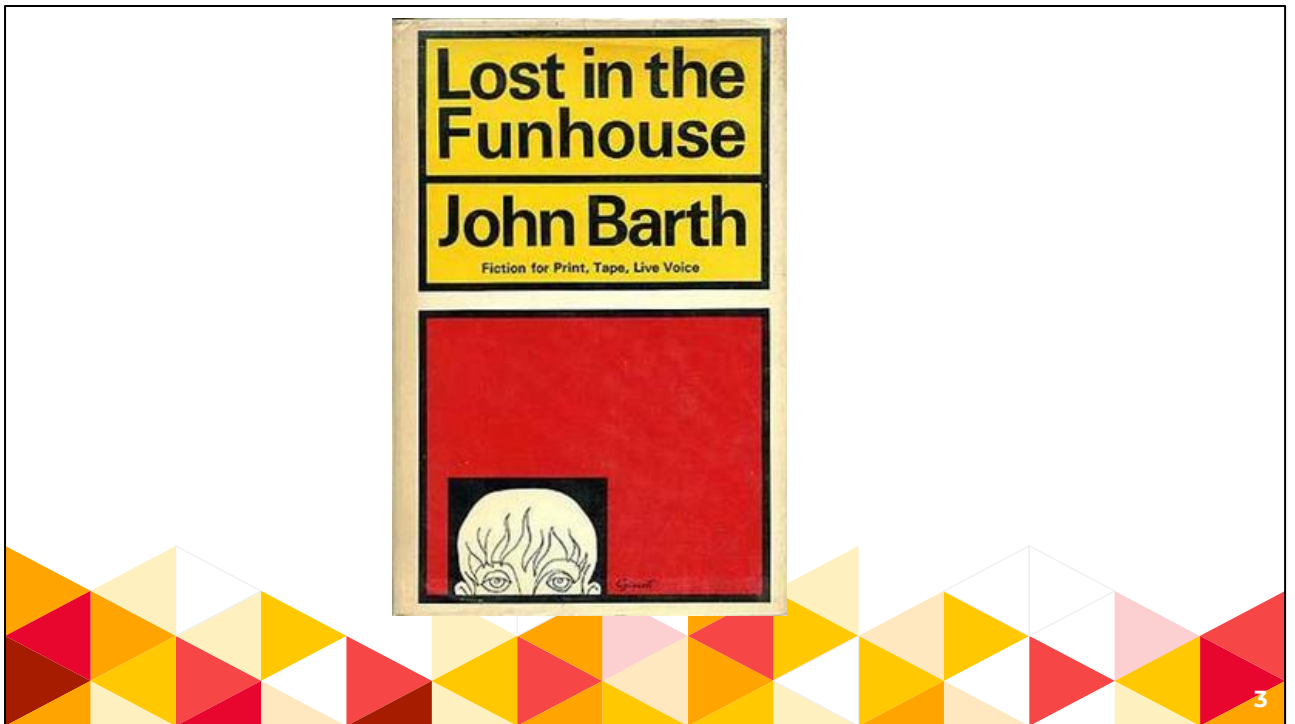
Lost in the funhouse: reflections on teaching a course about reflections on learning

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- This past semester, Melanie and I co-taught for the second time a credit course we created called “Becoming a 21st century learner.”
- The course is intended to encourage first year students to become more reflective learners while enhancing their digital literacy skills.
- In this session I will give you a taste of this course and share some of the work done by the students.
- The course was taught within our university’s First Year Seminar program.
- This is a program designed to give first year students a small classroom experience where instructors and students can really get to know each other.
- Melanie and I had slightly different personal and professional goals for teaching this course.
- Having been an Information Literacy instructor for several

- years, Melanie was keen to stretch her teaching beyond “one-shot” classes and to engage with students over the course of a semester.
- As a UX librarian I wanted to learn about students’ self-understanding of their university experience and their identities as learners.
- Both Melanie and I also wanted to teach a full semester course for the opportunity to reflect on our teaching practice in order to become better teachers.



- The title of this session *Lost in the Funhouse* is stolen from John Barth's collection of stories of the same name. His stories weave in and out between the narrative and reflections on the narrative and the writing style itself.
- Putting together this session felt a bit like being in a funhouse: reflecting on a course that was about reflecting on learning.
- Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* has a secondary meaning for me: I discovered Barth when I was a first year university student and it takes me back to that time.
- I envisioned our First Year seminar course as an opportunity for students to have the space and time to devote to reflection.
- I wanted it to be a course where students could pause, look around, and take stock.
- I wanted them to be able to speak and write in the first person

- and place value on their own perspective and experiences.

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1. What is the role of reflection in learning?
 2. How might I incorporate time for reflection in my teaching?
 3. How might I use the *Framework for Information Literacy* as a reflection tool?

So why should you listen to me share our reflections on our course for the next 40 minutes? I hope this session will have some value for you if you consider these 3 questions:

1. What is the role of reflection in learning?
(for your students, and for you as a learner and teacher)
2. How might you incorporate opportunities for reflection in your teaching?
(What kind of activities might work as an IL instructor to promote reflections on learning?)
3. How might you use the Framework as a reflection tool?
(In other words, could the Framework be used not just as a guide for preparing IL classes but retrospectively for reflecting on teaching them?)

1. What is the role of reflection in learning?

- The primary learning objective in our course was to help students become more reflective learners.
- What does it mean to be a reflective learner?
- “Reflection” is an everyday human activity: We think about our experiences to make sense of them, and perhaps act differently in the future. Some people are more inclined toward reflection than others, and have different levels of reflective ability, but reflection can increase and improve with practice.



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Reflection is “the continual re-evaluation of personal beliefs, assumptions, and ideas in the light of experience...and the generation of alternative interpretations of those experiences.”

-John Dewey

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- John Dewey is one of the early theorists on reflection and its role in learning. He believed reflecting not only helps you make meaning out of experience, but is what leads to growth and change.
- Since Dewey, the role of reflection in learning has been further theorized in a growing body of literature.
- Reflection is not just a purely introspective activity, but can impact how we teach, learn and act in the world.
- Reflection is about both self-awareness and applying critical thinking to one's beliefs and actions.



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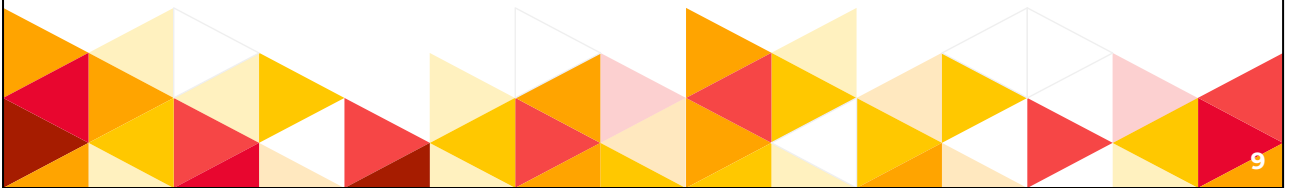
“For reflection to be considered critical it must have as its explicit focus the uncovering, and challenging of power dynamics that frame our decisions and actions.”

-Stephen Brookfield

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- Stephen Brookfield’s *The Critically Reflective Practitioner* was a helpful text for my understanding of reflection in our course.
- Reflection isn’t an end in itself or only for oneself.
- Being a reflective learner means taking a critical stance towards knowledge and learning, examining and challenging one’s own assumptions and developing greater awareness about about how one affects and is affected by other people.
- Critical reflection is about examining power and creating change.

- i) Reflecting on educational goals and motivations.
- ii) Reflecting on learning and studying strategies.
- iii) Reflecting on personal interests and curiosities.
- iv) Reflecting on the learning context



- We hoped our course would help students reflect in these areas.

i) We wanted our students to become more self-aware of their motivations and educational goals. We wanted them to dig deeper into the reasons they had chosen the path to university education, at the University of Guelph in particular, and what that meant for them. We wanted them to become actors in their own education, and not just passive recipients of knowledge.

ii) We wanted them to develop their metacognitive awareness: to reflect on how they learn and how they study so they could become more effective learners.

iii) We wanted to validate students' questions and interests as legitimate starting points for academic research. We wanted

students to consider and reflect upon what they really care about.

iv) We wanted our students to see how learning is not just an individual activity that goes on in the head. We wanted to encourage them to think critically about *why* the university they encounter is the way it is, *what* it means for their education, and to consider *how* things might be different.

There are so many factors that influence learning: the learner's own personal biography, their relationship with instructor and peers, how semesters and timetables structure their time, how classrooms are designed, the centrality of grades, financial pressures, and so on.

We wanted them to reflect on the ways that university culture, politics, systems, and structures shape learning.

- We provided many different opportunities and ways for students to practice reflection: through class discussions and activities, and through assignments which also gave them the opportunity to develop practical digital literacy skills.
- Students kept a personal blog throughout the semester and produced a culminating final project which was a podcast.

2. How might I incorporate time for reflection in my teaching ?

- I want to give you a taste of one of the in-class reflection exercise we did at the start of the course. It is an exercise I have experienced myself in a workshop, and it is described in the book *Reflection: Turning Experience Into Learning*.
- This is a chance for you to experience a reflective exercise and start to think about how you may wish to apply a reflection exercise similarly or differently in your own classes.



Think back to some past experience of learning--it could be at school, in sports, in a hobby, or anything that was **particularly awful**--it may have been boring or humiliating or you simply learned nothing at all.

Jot down a few notes about why it was so bad.



Take a minute to complete this exercise on your own. (1 min)



Now do the same for a **good learning experience**-where you learned a lot, were successful and were interested.

What was it that made the learning so good?

Jot down a few notes.



Take another minute to complete this exercise on your own. (1 min)



What are the main similarities between what makes learning good or bad for you?

In what circumstances do you thrive?

In what circumstances do you suffer?



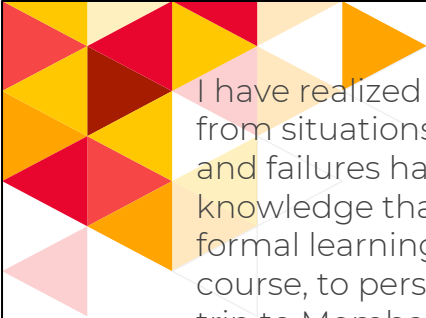
A a small group or pair, take a few minutes to discuss what you jotted down.

- Important for us as teachers to think about our own learning experiences and remember what it's like to encounter both good and bad experiences.
- It's also useful to experience a reflection activity yourself to anticipate how it might excite, or be resisted by your students.




Student reflections

- One of the weekly blog assignments asked them to reflect on key moments and milestones of learning in their life. We asked them to consider formal learning experiences, as well as times they learned from sports, hobbies, travel, life events, and relationships. We asked them to consider why these learning experience stuck with them, what the experiences taught them about themselves.
- Many students recalled fears, failures, and problems which they used as opportunities for growth and learning. Many expressed great appreciation for parents, siblings, teachers, and coaches who had guided them. Travel was also a big part of many of their learning journeys.



I have realized that my best learning experiences came from situations I did not expect to appreciate. Successes and failures have both provided me with invaluable knowledge that has shaped who I am as a person. From formal learning experiences, such as my MATH*1080 course, to personal learning experiences, such as my trip to Mombasa, I have found that it is possible to derive meaning from all aspects of life.

I would like to continue being open to new learning experiences to see what positive effects these can have on my life as I have come to learn that I have gained the most knowledge from situations I did not expect to learn from, but was open to gaining knowledge from.



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These blogs had the added benefit of:

- Helping us get to know the whole student better--what was on their minds, what they worried about.
- Showing us development of self-expression, writing skills.
- Giving us insight into what they were learning and getting out of the course.



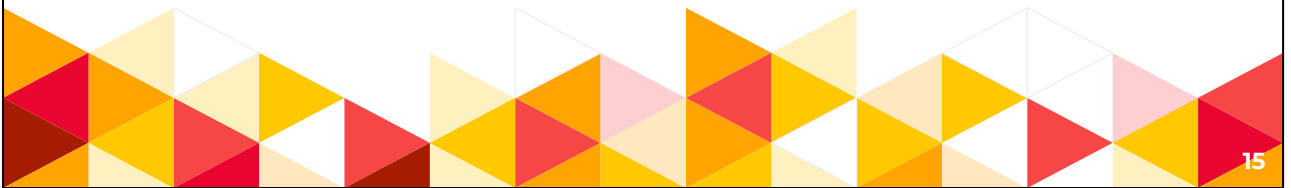
LONELY

- Students worked on creating a podcast throughout the semester.
- We introduced skills of interviewing and researching, writing for the ear, recording and editing, voice work, and giving and receiving constructive feedback.
- Beyond these skills, we wanted students to have the opportunity to work on a topic they found personally meaningful and connected with their experience as a first year student. We wanted them to start to see how these experiences are shaped and influenced by the particular social context in which they find themselves.
- The goal was for students to be able to critically reflect on their university experience and challenge their assumptions and preconceptions about the university and their own learning.
- The podcast project was a way for them to explore a topic of

- personal interest, something that puzzled or concerned them, and about which they were genuinely curious.
- The podcasts ranged from dealing with procrastination, the value of electives, managing stress and failure, negotiating a religious identity on a secular campus, and life as an international student.

I want to start off my reflections by saying I really regret choosing a topic talking about my experience with loneliness....I didn't realize I'd really have to talk about my experiences. I have always hated talking about my struggles to others so this experience was a real struggle for me....I thought maybe talking about my struggle and talking to other students would help me find a resolution. In a way, it did help me by showing me I'm not alone in being lonely but all the students I spoke with hadn't really found a solution either. Yes, accepting the fact that you weren't going to have a lot of friends is a method of coping but what a dismal resolution to the problem. Also after showing the podcast to my parents, it made them feel really sorry for me. I never wanted to be a person you feel bad for. In general, I wish I choose a topic that was less close to me.....

I go back and forth with how I feel about this project. I'm glad it put me out of my comfort zone and got me to talk about a topic I normally wouldn't. I also made a new friend but like I mentioned, in the beginning, it saddens me that the solution everyone found was to just accept things as they are.



**At the end of the course, the students wrote a final blog post reflecting on their experience creating the podcast.
The student whose podcast you just heard wrote this:**

3. How can I use the Framework as a reflection tool?

- Since our course was all about reflection, Melanie and I spent a lot of time reflecting on the course and on our teaching, both during and after the semester.
- We found the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education very useful to guide our reflections on how we might have been more effective teachers, and how we might have structured and scaffolded the course better to help our students.
- While the original purpose of the Framework is to guide information literacy education, we found it can also be used as a tool to guide reflection.
- I will share how two frames, “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” and “Research as Inquiry” helped us review and rethink our teaching and our course.

Authority is Constructed and Contextual

Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required.



- In the IL context, authority normally refers to selecting credible sources from acknowledged experts in their subject domain.
- In our course, we focused on the students' own agency & authority for their learning and their identity as students.
- All assignments required them to speak and write in the first person voice.
- At the same time, we wanted them to view critically their own power and agency within the university and see how learning experiences are constructed and constrained by the learning environment, including the power and authority of the professor, the design of classroom, the bureaucracy of course selection, grading, program requirements, and so on.

However, upon reflection, we feel we were often not explicit enough about the topic of authority, nor did we raise the issue consistently

enough.

- We did not explicitly raise the question about how the podcast project required students to balance their own perspective with the other perspectives they encountered through interviews and secondary research.
- We missed opportunities to discuss our own roles as instructors and the authority we hold in the classroom.
- We could have talked about authority in the context of peer feedback. Students provided feedback to each other on several occasions. What authority does this feedback have? When do you accept feedback and when do you hold to your original convictions?
- We invited several guest speakers to our course. Unfortunately, we felt they did not always deliver what we had hoped. What happens when you place trust in the expertise and authority of a colleague and they don't provide what your students need? (This is particularly a propos to think about as IL librarians going into other people's classrooms).
- As we reflected on our own teaching practice, we thought about our own struggles with imposter syndrome and seeing ourselves as an authority. (Am I qualified to teach this course? What *is* my expertise?)

Research as Inquiry

Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers in turn develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field.



- The frame “research of inquiry” describes research as an “open-ended exploration” where intellectual curiosity is valued and ambiguity is embraced.
- This idealized description of research strongly resonated with us.
- One of our goals for this course was for the students to have time to explore questions of personal meaning and relevance to their identities as learners.
- We set assignments which gave the students the latitude to pursue research driven by their own interests and curiosity.
- We hoped that by starting from a place of curiosity, the students would be motivated to do research, explore, ask new questions, and experience deep learning and growth.
- But truly embracing open-ended exploration, ambiguity, and intellectual curiosity proved to be more difficult than we anticipated.

- Our idealized vision of research as inquiry was not realized to the extent we had envisioned.
- Why did this happen? Because we unreflectively succumbed to the pressures of what we believed was expected of us and our course by both students and the administration :
 - Like having a fully filled in course outline available on the first day. We pre-planned each teaching hour in advance and scheduled many guest speakers --leaving little room for spontaneity and true exploration.
 - We ended up with very little flexibility left to make changes on the fly and respond to our students' learning needs and interests.
 - We assigned marks to everything with the (correct) assumption that if we didn't, our students wouldn't do the work. And as a result, we spent our time and energy marking assignments and justifying grades rather than truly listening to the students.
 - We tried to fit in too many different pieces into the course. Beyond developing their ability to reflect, we wanted to make sure our students had the chance to develop some relevant and useful skills like conducting interviews, crafting stories, speaking with a well modulated voice, editing sound files, writing catchy show notes, creating an attractive podcast logo....you get the picture. We sorely underestimated the time it takes to practice so many diverse academic and technical skills. And as a result, most of these skills got short shrift.

Ironically, as librarians, we particularly failed to provide enough scaffolding, support, and guidance to facilitate

the research itself and help the students develop fundamental information literacy skills for using the library and find sources.

Why was this? Why did we resist the area where our expertise lies?

And why did we find ourselves unable to resist the conventions of creating of an overly determined, teacher-centred course despite our best intentions? We think this comes down to two things: time and trust.

With respect to time (or the lack of it)

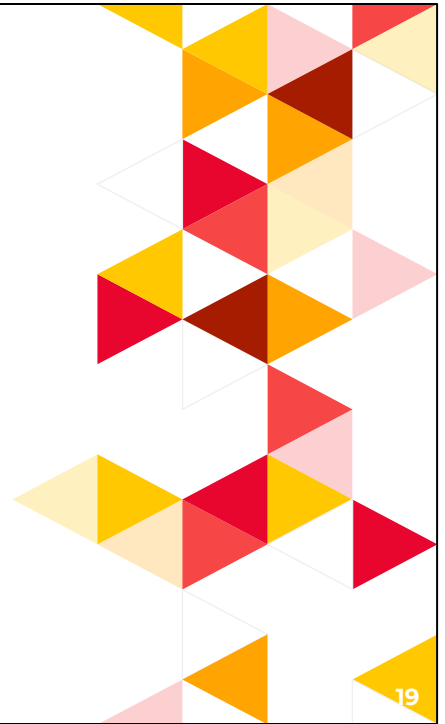
- We felt we needed to have most of the course prepared and in place in advance in order to manage our full time library jobs while teaching the course through the semester.
- We were scrambling to make sure we “got through” all the skill development pieces of putting a podcast together so that the students would be able to succeed with a polished podcast.
- We intended to do our own blogs and podcast and co-learn and model research processes along with the students. Guess what? No time!

With respect to trust (or the lack of it)

- Did we trust our students could or would embrace research as inquiry? No, we did not. And so we capitulated to giving frequent graded mini-assignments to keep students on track, motivated and engaged.
- Did we trust our students enough to let go of some control of how the course might evolve and allow the students’ needs

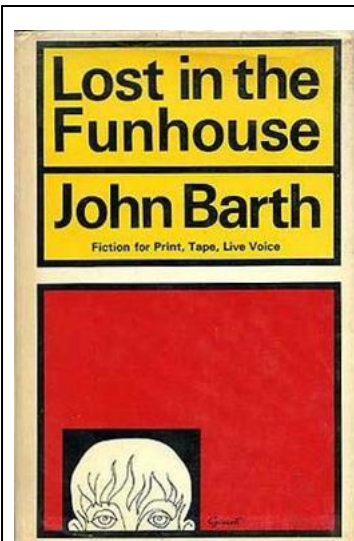
- and interests guide the course. No, we did not, and so we missed opportunities to co-construct with our students the assignments and the rubrics for their assignments so that they feel more empowered in their learning. For example, we could have had the students determine the characteristics of an effective podcast rather than imposing our ideas on them. We had hoped to use questions generated by the students as prompts for reflection assignments; this never came to be.
- Did we trust our students to tell us what they needed and respond to them? No, we didn't. It is hard to anticipate when students will need more support and guidance and when they can be more self-sufficient. The first time we taught the course, our students had very different needs than our most recent class. But we stubbornly kept treating these students as if they were the first class and were disappointed and frustrated when they didn't respond the same way as the first class had.
- Did we trust ourselves enough to be present in our teaching, and to respond to where the students were at and what they needed. No, we did not. As the authors of *The Slow Professor* put it: "We often plough on no matter what's going on in the room".
- Did we trust ourselves to introduce and discuss real and challenging issues that came up on our campus and in our class? No we did not. For example, after one particularly poor guest speaker experience, we could have (but didn't) address the problem head on through a discussion about how we felt about the experience, how professors are vulnerable and take risks.

Reflections on team teaching



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- We've both really benefited from the opportunity to team-teach this course.
- We learned from each other's strengths and coached each other through our weaknesses to grow as teachers.
- We had someone to share our reflections on the course on a daily basis. We always left the classroom debriefing and discussing what had happened and what we could have done better or differently
- Extend this to the value of peer teaching observations.



“This can’t go on much longer; it can go on forever.”





Birds of a Feather: Questions for Reflection

1. What is the role of reflection in my own learning?
2. How might I provide opportunities for reflection in my teaching?
3. How might I become more reflective in my teaching practice?



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