Using the "Humble Inquiry" Approach to Cultivate Flourishing Librarian-Learner Relationships

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https://tinyurl.com/loex24-hisession

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, participants will . . .

1. Recognize the role of social dynamics in patron-librarian learning interactions.
2. Describe how the humble inquiry approach equalizes this social dynamic, particularly benefitting marginalized patrons.
3. Apply strategies from the humble inquiry approach in order to provide a patron-centered learning experience.

What does it mean to provide "good" help as a librarian?

Helping as a social process

"[Helping relations] reflect the workings of two fundamental human needs: **to belong** and **to be independent**...Helping others in need and relying on their help when we are in need are behavioral expressions of belongingness. ...Yet alongside the need to belong, people also want to be independent...In fact, because helping is associated with having more skills or resources, giving to others in the group promotes the helper's prestige and status, whereas dependency is considered a marker of one's lower prestige or status." (Nadler (2020). *Social Psychology of Helping Relations*)

Social Consequences of Receiving Help

Positive
- Getting help which relieves a difficulty can feel socially and psychologically supportive
- Can affirm and amplify feelings of belonging
- Can inspire feelings of gratitude

Negative
- Threat to desire for independence
- "Comparison stress": Negative comparison between knowledge of helper vs. recipient
- Feeling for indebtedness to helper which limits comfort/freedom of recipient

Nadler (2020). *Social Psychology of Helping Relations*

Social Characteristics which Impact Help-Seeking

- Age
  - Adolescents and older people are more likely to be resistant to the dependence which accompanies receiving help
- Gender
  - Help-seeking literature shows that women seek help more often than men, across a wide range of situations (Lee, 2002)
- Culture
  - People from more individualistic cultures tend to value self-reliance over seeking help
  - However, studies have found that people from more collectivist cultures are LESS likely to seek support than peers from individualistic cultures (Nadler, 2020)

Humble Inquiry

What is humble inquiry?

"Humble Inquiry is the fine art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person" (*Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling,* Schein, 2021)

Image: Edgar Schein,
MIT News

People practicing humble inquiry…

- Ask open ended questions
- Listen and figure out what is going on before taking action
- Don't jump quickly to demonstrate expertise or provide solutions
- Exhibit "here-and-now" humility by acknowledging they are dependent on others for information and task completion (p. 5)
- Build trust by showing genuine interest and revealing ignorance
- Value relationships, not merely arriving at task outcomes

Example
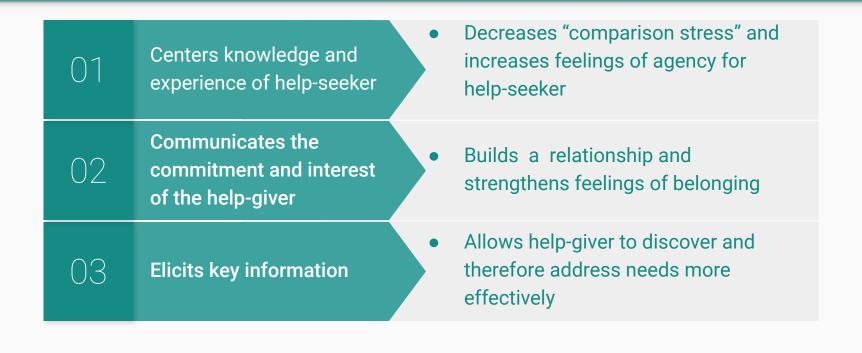

[Photo](#) by Kampus Production

The Culture of Do and Tell

- "Culture of Do and Tell" (Humble Inquiry, Chapter 4)
  - U.S. culture values task accomplishment over relationship building
  - Knowing and telling valued over not knowing and asking

Photo by Direct Media on StockSnap

How does humble inquiry address social consequences of seeking help?

01 Centers knowledge and experience of help-seeker

- Decreases "comparison stress" and increases feelings of agency for help-seeker

02 **Communicates the commitment and interest of the help-giver**

- Builds a relationship and strengthens feelings of belonging

03 **Elicits key information**

- Allows help-giver to discover and therefore address needs more effectively

Why use humble inquiry as a teaching librarian?

- Disrupts the traditional power dynamic
- Elevate student/patron voices
- Strengths-based approach
- Complements the RUSA 2023 Guidelines (open ended questions, active listening)

Using humble inquiry

- When: Interactions that could turn into teachable moments
- Who: Student has time and is open to questions
- Where: The environment is conducive to private discussion
- Why: The librarian is interested in providing high-quality assistance and inviting the student to return for assistance again in the future

Scenarios

https://tinyurl.com/loex24-hiscenarios

Sample Language

What/why/how questions. Minimize assumptions.

- Why did you choose this topic?
- Can you tell me more about your topic?
- How has your search gone so far?
- What are you finding to be the most challenging?
- What are your goals for our time together today?
- Why did you choose this database/source/quote?
- What are your next steps for this project?

Challenges

- "Telling" feels so good!
- May be uncomfortable at first; it exposes vulnerability
- Perceived tension with building a reputation as an "expert"
- Takes time
- Not all situations are appropriate for a humble inquiry approach
- RUSA 2023 Guidelines
  - "listen as the patron fully states their need"
  - Signal understanding

Proceeding Pre-Print

https://tinyurl.com/loex24-humbleinquiry

References

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