Library Anxiety

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Constance Mellon first became aware of library anxiety when she noticed that the symptoms of math anxiety in students were similar to those her own students had when faced with a library research assignment (Bailey, 2008).

She noticed that: “The library phobia that they described seemed to tie in loosely with the work being done on math and test anxiety. It thus seemed logical to describe students’ fear in the library as library anxiety and to consider treating it within the anxiety framework” (Mellon, 1986, p. 163).

She was told by reference librarians “We’ve known about this for years…but no one had given it a name” (Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. x) and providing a name seemed to legitimize this topic for study (Onwuegbuzie, 2004).
Mellon first identified library anxiety as the “negative and overwhelming feeling many students experience when needing to use the library for an informational need” (Mizrachi, 2010, p. 3298).

- Mellon conducted a two-year qualitative study in which over 6,000 first year English composition students were asked to journal their processes and emotions as they conducted research for term papers. Students were encouraged to use an informal style in journaling. At the end of each semester, students were asked to write an essay about their experience and answer the following:
  - What were your experiences using the library to find the information for your research paper?
  - How did you feel about the library and your ability to use it?
  - Did these feelings change over the course of the semester?
  - How do you feel about using the library now?” (Mellon, 1986, p. 162)

- Journal entries were analyzed by using the constant comparative method. By using this method, four themes that created library anxiety formed:
  - The size of the library
  - Not knowing where resources were located
  - Not knowing how to begin library research
  - Not knowing what to do with library research (Mellon, 1986)

- She also found that students in the study felt that other students knew more about how to maneuver the library, and this added to their anxiety. She found that students became anxious “…due to a feeling that other students were competent at library use while they alone were incompetent, that this lack of competence was somehow shameful and must be kept hidden, and that asking questions would lead to a revelation of their incompetence” (Mellon, 1986, p. 163).
Outcomes of this Study Valuable for Library Instruction

• Documented students’ attitudes toward library research and presents theory to explain these attributes.
• Provided new direction of research for the library instruction field.
• Provided instruction librarians with a new standard of documenting the effectiveness of their programs (Mellon, 1986).
**OTHER OUTCOMES OF MELLON’S STUDY**

Two years after Mellon published her study, Carol Kuhlthau published her study on the emotional aspects of research (Mizrachi, 2010).

Mellon’s study led to the development by Sharon Bostick to develop the Library Anxiety Scale (LAS), a 43 question, 5 point Likert scale questionnaire (Bailey, 2008) and it has been used in “virtually every quantitative study of library anxiety” (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, & Bostic, 2004, p.1).

Bailey (2008) states more subsequent research has been based on the LAS, rather than Mellon’s original study.

Mellon (1986) predicted of her study that “…it may also provide a fresh approach toward user services and a research option for a different type of researcher” (p. 165).

The LAS is a 14 step scale that consists of:
1. Developing a list of key components relating to library anxiety
2. Sending the list to experts for validation
3. Examining responses or commonalties and contradictions
4. Restructuring the outline
5. Resending the outline to experts
6. Linking items with a list of key components
7. Sending items to a panel of experts
8. Developing a pilot instrument
9. Assessing the scale for readability and clarity
10. Editing items based on assessment
11. Conducting a pilot study
12. Performing an exploratory factor analysis
13. Editing instrument and retaining viable statements

The LAS measures 5 components:
1. Barriers with staff
   • Refers to a library patrons perceptions as being too busy, intimidating and unapproachable
2. Affective barriers
   • The feeling of not knowing what to do, that was first identified by Mellon.
3. Comfort with the library
   • Refers to the physical comfort levels of the library building
4. Knowledge of the library
   • Refers to student’s perceptions on how familiar they think they are with library and its resources
5. Mechanical barriers
   • How students interact with library equipment, such as printers, photocopiers, computers, etc. (Mizrachi, 2010).
Using Mellon’s research, and the LAS Anthony, J. Onwuegubuzie and Qun G. Jiao further studied Library Anxiety, and identified major factors of high levels of library anxiety, which include:

- A non-English speaking native
- Working full-or part-time while studying
- Not being a frequent visitor to the library
- Being a high achiever
- Displaying high levels of perfectionism
- Not receiving library instruction
- Negative self-perception in scholastic competence, intellectual ability, creativity and social acceptance
- Low cooperate attitudes in group tasks
- Poor study habits (Mizrachi, 2010)
Mellon suggested that library anxiety should be recognized and the anxious person be given positive experiences in which they could succeed and felt that library instruction she be broadened to include comfort and ease “rather than trying to teach the specifics of research too quickly” (Lawless, 2011, p. 17).

Mellon states that acknowledging the anxiety and legitimizing it, then provision of successful experiences by librarians this anxiety may be alleviated (Mellon, 1986).

“Librarians should do a great deal more to ‘encourage questions’ from library users, even though many authors acknowledge that users are shy, reticent and often unwilling to approach library staff or the reference desk” (Brown, 2011, pp. 310-311).

Reference librarians have the responsibility to patrons to alleviate this anxiety. Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, & Bostic suggest improvements to libraries’ physical environment, library instruction and reference services (Bailey, 2008). They also believe that because library anxiety is situation specific, targeted instruction is the most effective in its relief (Bailey, 2008).
References

Bailey, E. (2008). Constance Mellon demonstrated that college freshmen are afraid of academic libraries. Evidence Based Library & Information Practice. 3(3), 94-97.


