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Teaching the Library: Best Practices

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Introduction

Whether it is called bibliographic instruction, library instruction, or an information literacy program, the teaching of library and research skills to college students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels is a hot topic. There is much debate both in the literature and in the classroom about how best to engage the students' attention and ensure that they understand what is being taught. When establishing a program of instruction in academic libraries, bibliographic instruction librarians have to consider their audience, their content, and their methods of instruction.

Who is the Audience?

In order to create a program that will be effective for the greatest number of people, instruction librarians must first understand their audience and its needs. There is a variety of methods for determining audience needs, including user surveys, focus groups, and anecdotal evidence.

At first glance, the audience in an academic library may seem to be more homogenous than that of a public library. Most college students are about 18 to 22 years old, having come to college as soon as they finished high school. The majority of the students are probably American, and speak English fluently. In a private college, with an expensive tuition, most of the students might be of particular socioeconomic background. But with a closer look the librarian will notice that in fact there are many differences among the students, even in an academic library.

Most colleges have some sort of program for adult learners, people who did not attend college after high school and who are returning to school later in life. Likewise, if the college offers graduate degrees, there will be some older students in those programs as well. Many schools also accept international applicants, and even of those students who are American citizens, not all will be native born, or have the same language proficiency. Finally, with scholarships and loans, some economically disadvantaged students will be able to attend expensive schools that they otherwise could not afford. Thus, though the patrons of an academic library may seem very alike at first, they do in fact come from all different backgrounds. Moreover, no matter how similar students might otherwise be, there will be students with all different learning styles in every classroom, and these differences in style must also be taken into account.

Basic Needs

The basic physical and psychological needs of the audience must be accommodated first. For instance, how can we schedule the workshops so as to reach the greatest number of students? The instruction librarian must keep in mind that adult students might have full-time jobs that they must go to after their classes, or families to care for. Even traditional students often have to work many hours in order to meet their expenses. When the librarian is invited into a class to teach library research skills, this problem is averted, but many libraries also offer informal workshops to cover subjects or skills outside of the classroom. Jacobson and Williams suggest scheduling some workshops during weekend and evening hours, to try and reach students who are not available at other times. The librarian should also be prepared to make individual appointments with students who simply cannot make any of the scheduled times.

Physical Comfort

Jacobson and Williams encourage the librarian to consider the comfort of the students as well. No matter what learning style a person may have, almost everyone will become physically and psychologically distressed if they have to sit still in uncomfortable chairs and listen to a lecturer drone on for hours on end. Thus, they recommend that the librarian “attend to the physical and psychological needs” of the learner by trying to schedule workshops in comfortable settings, using a variety of methods to deliver the information, and taking breaks when necessary (LIRT, 1999).

Academic Difference

Finally, different members of the audience will be at different levels academically and intellectually. The Library Instruction Round Table (LIRT) of the American Library Association (ALA) has a “Technology in the Classroom” tip sheet that suggests that extra patience may be necessary to encourage students who are nervous or anxious. The pamphlet also exhorts the librarian to explain what she is doing and to do it slowly, and to always leave time for questions (LIRT, 1999). Likewise, Jacobson and Williams maintain that the librarian must be “concerned with the success of the student” (Jacobson, 2000), or to take a deep interest in each student and find ways to value her so that the student feels secure and supported.

Avoiding Discrimination

Another way to ensure students feel secure is to be very careful that all library assignments, and all content covered in the session, are non-discriminatory. Although most librarians would not consciously include discriminatory materials in their workshops, some practices could be inadvertently discriminatory. For instance, requiring students to purchase expensive books or materials might seem discriminatory to low income students. On the other hand, the use of jargon could be confusing to non-native speakers, and certain types of cultural, religious, or political examples might be offensive to some students. Thus, the

librarian must be very careful when choosing her content, and setting up her program (Jacobson, 2000).

What to Teach?

Part of determining the content also entails deciding what concepts or skills to teach. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) offers a number of suggestions on its website. ACRL defines information literacy as the ability to recognize a need, and to locate, evaluate, and use the information to meet that need. In order to do this, ACRL suggests that a student must be able to make a distinction between keyword and subject searching, and to distinguish between types of information resources. They must also be able to focus the search, evaluate resources, and cite sources. An instruction librarian, then, must be prepared to teach to each of these concepts and skills (ACRL, 2000).

Preparation for Instruction

Just as the librarian must consider her students' physical and psychological needs when creating a program, she should also be sure to attend to her own. Too often, the librarian believes that she is so familiar with the content that she does not have to prepare her lecture in advance. Instead, she expects to ad-lib her session, maybe even believing that such an approach will make the presentation more relaxed, and encourage discussion. However, even seasoned public speakers have moments of crisis when they might freeze, or forget what they had planned to say.

To avoid this, LIRT suggests writing out a script for the presentation, and practicing in front of a colleague or friend. The librarian might also want to take notes or an outline of the presentation with her to refer to in case of emergency. Likewise, she should try to prepare the room and the equipment in advance. If the room booked for the presentation is available beforehand, LIRT suggests spending some time in the room prior to the presentation.

The librarian should take some time to locate lights and equipment controls, and experiment with lighting, especially if using PowerPoint or other screen projections during the presentation. She should also practice with the equipment in the room, and be sure she knows how to set up, turn on, and restart any equipment she plans on using. Finally, the pamphlet suggests having a low-tech backup plan in case there is an irreparable problem with the equipment the day of the presentation. For instance, the librarian might make transparent overheads of PowerPoint slides in case there is a problem with the software (LIRT, 1999).

Teaching Styles

The main issue that the instruction librarian has to deal with, however, is the style or method of teaching she will use. The literature is rife with tips and techniques for making a presentation as effective as possible for as many students as possible. In planning her instruction sessions, consider different learning styles, students' motivations, and the techniques and training methods that will best suit these things. The best practices for academic bibliographic instruction include student-centered, active learning; discovery learning; the use of humor; and teaching to different learning styles.

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Learning Styles

Learning styles refer to the ways people acquire, process, and apply new information. Different people think and learn differently, and will respond better to certain types of teaching styles than to others. When preparing a lesson plan, instruction librarians must understand these different learning styles and find ways to teach to as many of them as possible. Litzinger and Osif describe different types of learning style theories and suggest practices to reach them. There are several different theories of learning styles, including those proposed by Jung, Witkin, Kolb and Barbe and Swassing. Litzinger and Osif briefly describe each theory. However, as the authors point out, it would be impossible to incorporate every learning theory into every lesson, and therefore each librarian might choose to focus on one. Litzinger and Osif focus mainly on the 4MAT theory of David Kolb as adapted by Bernice McCarthy. This theory divides learners into four types:

- those who perceive concretely and process reflectively
- those who perceive abstractly and process reflectively
- those who perceive abstractly but learn by doing
- those who perceive concretely and learn by active practice.

Litzinger and Osif then go on to describe teaching techniques specific to these different learning styles. For example, the first type of learner, the concrete experience/reflective observer, would find a combination of lecture and hands-on experience most effective, in which the lecture would focus on the specific information needed to perform the exercise. In a library instruction class, this might mean that the librarian would spend the first half of the class explaining how to search a database, and then give the class time to search the database on their own to answer specific questions, or to explore on their own. The type two learner, the abstract conceptualization/reflective observer, tends to prefer an organized delivery of knowledge, and generally respect the teacher's expertise. They generally like questions that have a "right" answer. This type of learner would probably prefer a lecture and demonstration followed by a workbook exercise. The type three learner is an abstract conceptualization/active experimenter, and generally likes to solve by doing. These learners might benefit most from a computer-based tutorial, or any other type of instruction that allows for hands-on experience. The last type of learner is the concrete experience/active experimenter, and they are also active learners who like independent discovery. They, too, would benefit from techniques such as computer-assisted tutorials, workbooks, and exercises where they can actively participate (Litzinger and Osif, 1992). Ideally, an instructor would do some sort of assessment before an instruction session to determine the variety of learning styles within the group, and then try to structure the lesson accordingly. Often, however, it is impossible to test the group prior to meeting, so each instructor must simply try to incorporate a variety of activities and techniques into each session, so that learners are acquiring the information in several different ways at once.

Bicknell-Holmes and Hoffman describe a variety of teaching methods that would appeal to most learning styles. These techniques are active or discovery learning, which means that the student is able to actively participate in the learning process, in direct contrast with a teaching method like lecturing, where the student is a passive observer. Discovery learning is based on the theory that "students favor instruction that permits them to use their

own skills and experiences as a foundation” for new knowledge (Bicknell-Holmes and Hofmann, 2000). Discovery learning, according to the authors, has certain attributes that further characterize it. For instance, this type of learning emphasizes learning over content, uses failure as an opportunity to learn, and involves students in higher levels of cognitive processing. Some of the methods of discovery learning include case-based learning, incidental learning, learning by exploring, learning by reflection, and simulation-based learning. LIRT endorses active learning techniques, maintaining that “more is learned by doing than by watching” (LIRT, 1999).

Active Learning

Case-based learning is a fairly common active learning strategy in which the students are able to participate in the decision-making or problem-solving process. Generally in case-based learning, students are given a story or situation which provides them with the background information, and a problem or difficult situation. The students then have to come up with a solution, or maybe several solutions, to handle the situation, and predict the outcomes of various courses of action. In this way, the students can become personally involved in the story by living vicariously through the characters, and they can draw on their own experiences to help them solve the problem (Bicknell-Holmes and Hoffman, 2000).

Incidental learning, another active learning technique described by Bicknell-Holmes and Hoffman, takes place when learning is linked to fun activities or games. In this scenario, information is presented to the students in a game-like environment, so that the learning is gained indirectly, as a by-product of the entertainment.

Incidental Learning Example

The Simmons College Libraries made use of this type of active learning with their freshman writing class in 2001. Each section of the class spent one session in the library. During the first half of the class, students took a self-guided tour of the library. At different points along the tour they found poster boards with library facts and information on them. When they regrouped for the second half of the class, they were broken into two teams and played a *Jeopardy!* game with questions based on the information they had learned during their tours. The students generally had fun, and enjoyed the competition while they learned information about the library (Bicknell-Holmes and Hoffman, 2000).

Learning by Exploring

Another type of active learning described in this article is learning by exploring, in which a collection of questions and answers on a particular topic are organized into a system and students can explore the various topics at their own pace. In this system, the students would be able to move through the questions in any order they desired, and therefore could focus on areas of particular interest to them. The idea of learning by exploring is to simulate a question and answer session with an expert on the topic (Bicknell-Holmes and Hoffman, 2000). By this definition, a FAQ page on a website could qualify as learning by exploring. A list of questions on a subject could be hyperlinked to their answers, and users could go through the list at their own pace, reading as much or as little as they liked. However,

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learning by exploring could also be a live question and answer session with students having free rein to ask the instructor any question on a particular topic. Again, LIRT recommends this style of instruction, encouraging the librarian to “engage your audience by asking questions” and “ask questions to break up the sequence of your lecturing” (LIRT, 1999).

Learning by Reflection

Learning by reflection is a type of active learning which involves higher level cognitive skills. In this type of discovery learning, students are expected to model certain skills or concepts which they have acquired through their instructor or through another system of learning. Thus, they will demonstrate understanding by actively applying what they have learned. As an example of learning by reflection, Bicknell-Holmes and Hoffman describe a scenario in which students are shown two websites, a “good” one and a “bad” one. They are then asked to write a brief statement evaluating both sites. Next, the instructor gives a presentation on how to evaluate sites, and what features to look for in judging websites. At the end of the session, the students re-evaluate both sites, and then compare their first evaluation to their second, to see what they have learned (Bicknell-Holmes and Hoffman, 2000).

Simulation-based Learning

The last kind of discovery learning described by Bicknell-Holmes and Hoffman is simulation-based learning. In simulation-based learning, the instructor creates an artificial environment in which students can practice skills or apply concepts that they have learned, without the pressure of a real-world situation. An example of simulation based learning would be role-playing. For instance, in a library program, students might take turns pretending to be the reference librarian, while other students in the class would approach the desk with made-up questions. The student playing the reference librarian would then have a chance to practice the reference interview and answer the question using real reference sources, but would not be under the pressure of a real reference desk (Bicknell-Holmes and Hoffman, 2000).

Other Techniques

Most of the discovery learning techniques described above work perfectly well on their own, and one or more of them could probably be worked into virtually any instruction session. However, there are a few other practices that can help make each lesson even more effective.

Real-life Examples

One technique that can engage students and keep them more involved in the lesson is to use real-life problems and examples in the session, to make the information more relevant to the students’ lives. Kaip describes how she did this with a one-credit library skills course at Wilson College. Kaip’s argument is that if library instruction sessions are always tied to

research papers, students will be uninspired, and will come to view research as something needed only to complete an assignment.

Kaip had each student choose an actual problem or decision that they were dealing with, and their assignment throughout the semester was to do the research and obtain the information necessary to solve their problem or make their decision. Some of the problems people used were selling a house, buying a car, and coaching a teenage hockey team. By tying library research into their real life problems, students can learn “how information empowers us to make responsible and informed decisions” (Kaip, 2001).

Relevant Instruction

Jacobson and Williams also endorse the use of real life problems when they recommend that the instructor “create relevant and meaningful instruction” (Jacobson and Williams, 2000). They maintain that instruction should be practical and that the examples and exercises should be important and meaningful to the students, because students often need to know why they need to learn a particular skill or concept, or how it will be useful to them in their everyday lives (Jacobson and Williams, 2000).

Humor

Finally, Trefts and Blakeslee promote the use of humor in library instruction to help keep the students engaged and interested. They describe different types of humorous approaches, and how they can be integrated into instruction.

For instance, the instructor might make up jokes about the material, or start off the class with a joke to break the ice. Other instructors might banter with a particular student, or continually joke back and forth with that student. However, the use of many kinds of humor demands a certain sort of person. The instructor must be very confident, and to some degree naturally funny, to be successful with this type of humor.

On the other hand, there are types of humor that almost anyone can integrate into lessons without much risk of failure. For example, instructors can pull cartoons out of the newspaper, or graphics from the web to intersperse with PowerPoint slides or overheads (paying careful attention to copyright). Or instructors could use humorous audio or video clips during the lesson to make a point or simply to break the ice. As an example, a management instructor once showed a clip of Mary Richards’ job interview from an episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to make a point about illegal questions. The important thing is for the instructor to find a method that she is comfortable with, and not to give up if the humor does not work the first time (Trefts and Blakeslee, 2000).

Conclusion

The literature on library instruction in academic libraries seems to agree that the most important aspect is finding ways to keep the students interested and engaged in the material. Different students have different learning styles, and the instructor has to be aware of this and try to find ways to accommodate as many students as possible.

Active learning techniques, such as case-based learning and learning by exploring, seem to appeal to the broadest number of students, and have the added advantage of allowing

the students to actively participate in the lesson. Instructors can also help make the lesson more interesting and engaging by incorporating humor, and by using exercises and examples that relate to the students' lives. Finally, instructors should be sure that they feel comfortable with the material and the methods themselves, so as to give the most seamless presentation possible.

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