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BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION LESSONS FROM A NEW LIBRARIAN

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Although I have worked in the library profession for two years, it has taken longer to understand the phenomenon of bibliographic instruction. My pre-library school background is in education, but marrying the two disciplines has not been as easy as I first assumed. I had read a lot of helpful articles about library instruction in general, but ran across very few that were geared towards best practices and advice for new librarians. In this article I will address some of the key issues that I faced when first confronted with the challenge of library instruction.

In preparation for my first dozen or so library instruction sessions, I spent a good deal of time creating inordinately long handouts. They included various pieces of directional information as well as emails, phone numbers, and URLs. The amount of time I spent at the photocopier could have easily rivaled the amount of time I spent teaching. The heft of papers that I brought to each instruction session had to be carried in a separate bag. I felt wasteful, even though I imagined the load of handouts would far outweigh the benefits of being environmentally conscious, but I was wrong. During these sessions, I realized that the students were more involved with social networking or hastily trying to best their solitaire scores. I couldn't figure out why, but then I began to realize, "Hey, they aren't paying attention because they don't need to, I have written everything down for them. Maybe I am making this class is too easy." As I began to lighten the length of the handout, I realized there were more students asking questions and trying to follow along as I executed searches on the overhead screen. I still use handouts today, but they are less voluminous than they used to be.

Lesson one: Students quit paying attention when they think they have all the information they need.

The second problem I encountered was how to motivate the students to do a little practice research. However, my example searches centered on subjects such as "Parisian architecture" and "Cooking with a crock pot," were not necessarily the most appealing. In one of my sessions as I was slogging through the databases with a half-awake body of students I thought, "Hmm, it is September, and I bet most of these freshmen are thinking about football." So instead of searching for "French cooking in Lyon," I typed in "Alabama football." Suddenly there was lively discussion and interest in what I was teaching. Even though the first comments did not involve technical questions, I soon began getting questions such as "Why can't I see the whole article?" and voilà, they were hooked.

Lesson two: If it is a beginning bibliographic instruction session, choose a subject that may actually interest the students.

Over time, my instruction sessions took on a more focused and fun tone. Despite the enthusiasm, there were still distracted students who failed to do any research. At this point, I began to realize that they might be feeling a little overwhelmed with all of the communication and bored at hearing me ramble on for thirty minutes. Therefore, instead of combining both the search for books and the search for articles, I began breaking down the instruction session into two parts. The first lesson dealt with searching the catalog and the second consisted of searching databases. After the discussion of each search method I would circle the classroom and check to see how the students were performing. In this way I could address individual questions and make students feel that I was accessible. By giving the students time to apply what they had learned, I could see where they were having trouble or perhaps decide to show them more advanced search techniques.

Lesson three: Pare down the information, and give the students time to practice what they have learned.

Each class is different. In the more advanced classes, it is easier to capture the students' attention and help them focus on their research to find what they need. In the freshman and introductory classes, it is a struggle to get the students motivated to begin learning how to research. Keeping the lessons simple and to the point makes it easier. When students see how to apply their knowledge of the library, the information becomes more relevant. The best teachers often come in with a specific assignment for their students, but that is not always the case. In some instances, teachers drop off their students without a lesson or a focus for their instruction session. The challenge within these sessions is learning how to motivate students. Part of this motivation lies within the librarian. If the students do not have a specific task at hand, it is the librarian's job to create one. When the freshmen first come into the library, I try to encourage them to use the library as their hangout. It is free, and it is a great place to meet people and mingle. There are magazines, books, and even CDs that can be checked out without spending a dime. Once students begin to find their own interests within the stacks, they see that the library is not just for class but also for recreation.

Lesson four: Be willing to transfer your own enthusiasm for the library to your instruction sessions.

While researching this article, I ran across several recent publications that addressed the basics of library instruction. Lisa Nichols from Morehead State University writes a wonderful article entitled "Pushing Your IL Program Forward: Five Lessons from My Immersion Experience." In it she describes several difficulties in teaching library skills.

Too often we feel the pressure to teach students everything we can possibly cram into one session for two reasons: one, we fear this may be our only opportunity to reach this student; and

two, we don't really know what these students in this class already know. If our goal is to help students develop the ability to think critically and use information effectively, we must face the reality of the situation: this ability may not be demonstrated in the same way by every student and cannot be learned in one 50-minute session. (Nichols 5)

Understanding that the goal of library instruction cannot be accomplished within one class session is important. Rather than talk nonstop throughout an entire class, it is vital to allow sufficient time for the students to absorb what they have learned. In another extremely helpful article by Annie Downey, Lilly Ramin and Gayla Byerly entitled "Simple Ways to Add Active Learning to Your Library Instruction," they discuss methods to get students more involved in the library instruction class. These practices reflect the idea in lesson three which centers on the concept of giving students time to execute their own searches instead of passively watching the librarian do all of the work. The following tips the authors give can be incorporated into your lesson and allow the students to participate more fully in the instruction session.

- Talk informally with students as they arrive in the classroom
- Expect participation
- Rearrange the classroom to make it better at facilitating discussion
- Provide non-threatening opportunities for everyone to participate
- Give students time to think when asking questions
- When students answer questions, reward them with praise or small treats
- Reduce anonymity by asking students about their previous experiences in the library
- Draw students into the discussion by making eye contact with students that look interested
- Allow time to answer questions informally at

the end of the session (Downey, Ramin, Byerly 53)

There are many simple methods and techniques for the beginning library instructor. Sometimes you have to use trial and error to learn how to best manage a class, however these ideas have

been tried and tested many times. You will find your own methods that work best for you. Every class is unique, and not all of the methods described here will apply one hundred percent of the time, but have fun, be enthusiastic and positive with your class, and you will see your attitude reflected in that of your students.

References

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