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Active learning for the Millennial Generation

by Amy Harris

In my first year of teaching information literacy skills to undergraduates, I stood at the front of the classroom and lectured. I demonstrated the many resources available on the library home page, showed all the LibGuides that I had worked so painstakingly to create, and passed out handouts. I wanted my students (freshmen taking English Composition I) to become independent library researchers. And I wanted to accomplish all of this in one 50-minute class.

What I neglected to find out was what the students really needed and wanted. I also neglected to figure out how to keep their attention. Often I noticed students who were texting and surfing during my lectures. I was doing a lot of work but did not feel I was making much of an impact. This became painfully obvious when a student greeted me at the reference desk saying, "I was in your class, and I can't remember what you said." As a new undergraduate services librarian, I am always trying to stay abreast of current trends in teaching information literacy. Many articles focus on the different ways people learn, based upon both individual preferences and what can best be described as generational differences. Reading through these articles, one wonders how to pick a method that

is comfortable for the instructor that will also work for the students in the classroom.

It helps to begin by examining the institution's current student population. The majority of the students in my freshmen library instruction classes in a large urban university are traditional students, part of the generation called Millennials or Generation Y. Gen Yers are commonly characterized as having low thresholds for boredom and showing short attention spans. Simultaneously, these students run laptops, listen to cell phones, have iPods plugged in and keep their textbooks wide open. Seemingly unable to memorize information, they are said to prefer education in entertaining forms.¹ If so, the question becomes, how does one teach in an entertaining way? Specifically, how can I make information literacy relevant and interesting for my students?

Felicia Smith contends that student boredom is a pedagogical obstacle to true learning. Research suggests that mandatory classes can make students feel like academic hostages resentful of classes for which they do not perceive a real need.² To engage her students, she dressed up as a pirate for the information research skills

class that she taught at the University of Notre Dame. Using piracy as her theme, she developed games, exercise and other collaborative activities. For students used to being entertained, this seemed to be an impetus to be more involved in the classroom. Interaction, group activity and levity became essential practices.³

Smith is a proponent of active learning within her classroom. Active learning has numerous definitions but in essence is anything taught within the classroom other than an instructor's lectures to passive students. Most educators have recognized for a long time that students need to be actively engaged with the material that we are trying to teach them. Angela Provitera McGlynn, in her research in cognitive psychology, has observed that active engagement promotes deeper levels of processing and learning because it creates stronger connections.⁴

In her classes, Nancy Remler validated her assumption that the more active students were in the lesson, the more engaged they would be with the subject matter and the better opportunity they would have for learning.⁵ Her methods for teaching included breaking up her class into small groups and having the students

take leadership/teaching roles while she sat at a student desk taking the role of student. This technique allowed her to raise her hand to ask questions to direct the flow of the instruction.

For many students, learning by doing is more effective than learning by listening.⁶ This approach is supported in activity-based instruction by having the students do actual searches in library resources. When I teach, I do a quick overview and demo of our catalog and of one or two general databases. Then I ask for volunteers or, if necessary, just call on them. Students come up to the front computer, present their topic and then do a hands-on search for all to see. They can call on their peers for help, and I am also standing right there to give clues and tips — such as, don't forget to click the full-text box. Failed searches demonstrate the need for exploration of different keywords and subject terms. Successful searches yield articles that look useful for the topic. Students then get the reward of e-mailing useful articles to themselves to jump-start developing their annotated bibliographies.

Academic libraries are using online and video games as tools for teaching library skills. The librarians at Pennsylvania State University have developed a Jeopardy-style game similar to one developed at Georgia State University. They discovered that use of the game encouraged active participation, reinforced student learning of information literacy concepts and were fun for both instructor and students.⁷

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro has developed a software program — the Information Literacy Game — that can be downloaded and customized for individual libraries.⁸ These are creative methods

in engaging students and are fine examples of active learning techniques.

Detractors might question the need for entertainment in classes. At the college level, many instructors still use traditional methods such as lectures, demos and assignments to deliver instruction. Just as creating lesson plans for library skills in different subjects takes work, adding learning opportunities that are seen as entertaining may be time-consuming.

Numerous methods abound to generate student activity. I have successfully used riddles, trivia questions and wiki races as supplements to my instruction. A number of games have emerged from *Wikipedia*, the popular online Web encyclopedia. Although the techniques are slightly different in each type of game, they basically involve starting at either a keyword/subject term or a specific article and navigating to another chosen word or article that appears distinctly unrelated. The game involves getting between the two disparate points in the least amount of steps. Students can play either in teams or individually.

As most instructors will not allow *Wikipedia* as a resource, I use the library's electronic Encyclopedia Britannica and other databases such as EBSCO Academic Search Complete and ProQuest Research Library. Students can play either as individuals or in teams. Certain rules can be set, such as requiring an explanation for the chosen strategies of the search techniques. Starting with simple keyword searches, the students use their own knowledge of the subject, creative thinking and the suggested links and subject terms within the databases. The races are an entertaining way to start exploring databases and keep the students

active and engaged, and the winner gets a prize.

To promote learning, students need to be engaged and involved. Today's students reap greater benefits when they actively engage with the material and can relate it directly to their research.⁹

Simply put, greater student participation equals greater knowledge of the subject. Developing instruction sessions that appeal to the Millennials takes only a bit more effort and creativity on the part of the instructor but results in greater student enthusiasm and a more positive experience within a library setting. And isn't that what all information literacy skills classes should be about? ►►

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Endnotes:

¹ Kate Manuel, "Teaching Information Literacy to Generation Y," *Journal of Library Administration* 36 (January 1, 2002): 195-217.

² Felicia A. Smith, "PERSPECTIVES ON ... The Pirate-Teacher," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 33, no. 2 (March 2007): 276-288, doi: Article.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Angela Provitera McGlynn, "Teaching Millennials, Our Newest Cultural Cohort," *Education Digest* 71, no. 4 (December 2005): 12-16, doi: Article.

⁵ Nancy Lawson Remler, "The More Active the Better: Engaging College English Students with Active Learning Strategies," *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 30, no. 1 (2002): 76-81.

⁶ Richard Anderson et al., "Supporting Active Learning and Example Based Instruction with Classroom Technology," *SIGCSE Bull.* 39, no. 1 (2007): 69-73, doi: 10.1145/1227504.1227338.

⁷ Billie E. Walker, "This Is Jeopardy! An Exciting Approach to Learning in Library Instruction," *Reference Services Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2008): 381.

⁸ "The Information Literacy Game," <http://library.uncg.edu/game/>.

⁹ Maureen E. Wilson, "Teaching, Learning, and Millennial Students," *New Directions for Student Services* 2004, no. 106 (2004): 59-71, doi:10.1002/ss.125.