

BREAK THE ICE, BUILD THE MOMENTUM: SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES FOR BEGINNING A LIBRARY INSTRUCTION SESSION

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Many teachers can relate to the experience of beginning class and feeling overwhelmed by the stares of students (or fighting to gain their attention) and the expectation to transform an assembled group into an organized class of learners. The first five minutes of a class are when students will remember the most information (Burns, 1985), as well as a chance to establish an atmosphere for the remaining learning time. Active learning has been accepted in education as a way of engaging students and promoting their learning. Does beginning a library instruction class with an active learning activity result in students retaining more information by capturing their attention? This article examines higher education literature and presents results from an original study to improve library instruction and student learning, and serves as complement to a LOEX 2010 interactive session.

One common theme within pedagogy is the importance of connecting with students. Parker Palmer (1998) notes that, “Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves” (p. 11). This sense of connection provides a helpful introduction, establishes an atmosphere that is conducive to learning, and determines whether students pay attention (Tileston, 2007). Research suggests that students are likely to be engaged in their learning if the material has personal interest, relevance and meaning (Tileston, 2007;

Keller, 1987). Regardless of strategy and execution, effective teachers connect with students, making the material something to which they can relate.

Considering attention spans is also key. Middendorf and Kalish (1996) noted that students tend to focus for no more than fifteen minutes. Burns (1985) concluded that the first five minutes of a lesson are the most crucial for capturing attention and retaining information. Grassian and Kaplowitz (2001) also note that, “What you do in the first five minutes of a session will determine how effective your session will be” (p. 292). Placing active learning activities throughout a class and beginning the class in a way that grabs student attention are solid pedagogical practices.

One instructional design model with a strong opening activity is Keller’s ARCS model (Keller, 1987), an acronym that represents attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction. Keller describes attention as a “prerequisite for learning” and emphasizes the importance of “find[ing] a balance between boredom and indifference versus hyperactivity and anxiety” (p. 4). According to Keller, capturing and keeping student attention, when combined with clarifying relevance and structuring the lesson in a way that leads to student success, leads to positive instruction experiences.

Active learning is one technique that works well with ARCS for creating a dynamic classroom. Often called participatory learning, active learning can be defined as educational activities where students are engaged and practicing skills, applying concepts, or exploring ideas (Grassian & Kaplowitz, 2001, p.116). Active learning builds on the idea that students learn best by doing and through authentic applications, and it also allows the instructor to assess where students may need support. Middendorf and Osborn note that, “Starting a class with

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activities that put students in conversation immediately can lead to more comfortable peer interaction and increased learning” (p. 2). However, with the limited time that library instructors often have with students, does beginning a class with an active learning activity increase in significant student learning?

This paper examines the actions and perceptions of library instructors with five years or less of library teaching experience and focuses on one-shot instruction sessions. Between October 2009 and March 2010, new library instructors (instruction assistants, or IAs) at Indiana University were encouraged to reflect on their teaching experiences and to participate in a focus group each semester. An explanation of warm-up and introductory activities was provided on the departmental wiki with several suggested approaches, many from Sittler and Cook’s *Library Instruction Cookbook* (2009). To expand the reach of this study, a survey asking about teaching experiences and strategies was distributed on the ILI-L and ACRL Immersion alumni listservs in October 2009.

Common themes arose from each of the data sources. IA focus group participants mentioned that classes offered a more positive teaching experience when students were engaged. One respondent noted, “The first time I didn’t use [active learning] activities right away and the second time I did and I preferred it where there were activities.” A different respondent noted that his or her most positive and memorable teaching experience was “the session when students were really engaged and I played different games and they [the students] were out of their seats.” Another said, “My most memorable moments were all of the times that I really tried to get students involved.” Focus group participants also mentioned that when active learning activities were used, students paid more attention, creating a more positive experience for both instructor and students, and that this resulted in an atmosphere where students were more receptive to learning. This data suggests that active learning activities result in a positive learning experience, which supports the literature.

The reflections from the IAs also supported using active warm-up activities for implementing variety, grabbing student attention, and establishing a learning environment. One IA noted, “I have a hard time teaching Boolean so this [starting class with Boolean Operator Simon Says] helps me as much as it helps them. With all the sitting in these sessions, it’s nice to get students moving.” One instructor said, “Students really liked it. Some smiles and laughs!” Student response from multiple sections was reported as “favorable—some were creative and all were attentive,” “very enthusiastic,” “excited,” and that “students enjoyed the activities—they made an impression”, suggesting that warm-up activities captured student attention and set a positive tone.

The most popular response (70 affirmative responses) on the ILI-L/Immersion survey on how to begin a class was with some kind of activity that involved immediate student engagement in the form of a game, questions, poll or pretest. The second most popular response (61) was to present the reason for students to be in class and learning about the library. Free

responses to the question about how their teaching has changed since starting teaching also indicated support for active learning. Several instructors said that “students are enthusiastic” as a result of incorporating more active learning, that instructors ask students more questions, and build in “more and more active learning elements so that students stay engaged.” When asked if they began with a warm-up or introductory activity in sessions, 61 instructors responded yes, 113 no. Of those who responded yes, one librarian was particularly supportive of these activities, saying, “Absolutely. It could be really simple. It helps establish rapport, it feels natural, and it engages students right off the bat.”

Survey data was also gathered from instruction sessions at Indiana University to gauge the student perspective on the effectiveness of their instructor and memorable aspects of their class. Of the 100 student responses, 87 enjoyed the activities and 98 found the class beneficial for a variety of reasons. Several students specifically mentioned instructors’ energy/enthusiasm or the interactive activities as what they will remember most about the session.

Despite these benefits, it also appears that active learning warm-up activities may pose concerns. One of the most common problems reported the issue of respecting students. Some IAs indicated they weren’t comfortable using activities because it seemed too “forced” or “juvenile” and they were worried the students would feel the same way. Others reported that some students were put off by particular activities. Survey responses from librarians mentioned risk of “talking down” to students, which student survey responses also support. One student requested that instructors “maybe not make it too over the top interesting, it’s just weird,” and another noted, “not so cheesy please.” While active learning activities at the beginning of class may sometimes be effective, they are not a teaching panacea.

Another commonly reported problem was time. One IA mentioned that there simply was not time for “any activities or games” in order to cover all the requested material. Several librarians also mentioned that, even if they would like to begin with activities, there is not enough time. In one-shot library classes, it is common for a librarian to only have fifty minutes to cover material, so including additional activities may serve as another source of pressure.

Introductory activities may also prove difficult for instructors to offer comfortably because of personality, experience, or communication with the course instructors. In reflections, several IAs noted that they didn’t like the activities or structure, even if the students did. Focus group comments indicated a concern of losing control of the class by beginning with a high-energy activity or of burning the students out with too many activities throughout a short class. Other instructors noted that course faculty specifically requested that librarians “stick to business” and not include activities. Another IA noted in reflection, “I feel like an activity right at the beginning eats up a lot of time, and then I’m rushed at the end to get in everything.” Introductory activities may lead to discomfort for the librarian,

particularly those with less teaching experience.

Every activity may not always be appropriate for every class. In several cases, an IA noted that an activity worked well in one class but not in another. Several respondents also noted the importance of tailoring to individual classes and approaching each class differently, which warm-ups may not always do.

Despite the potential benefits to students, introductory warm-up activities may not be the most appropriate teaching strategy for beginning library instructors. They do not offer guaranteed success, as indicated above, at a time when many instructors already feel anxious. Both focus groups and librarian surveys indicated that library instructors incorporated active learning activities gradually as they became more confident in their teaching. For new teachers, these activities may offer more risk.

Qualitative data inherently relies on anecdotal evidence. This study was limited since much of the data was gathered from a small staff in Bloomington, Indiana. Findings here cannot be generalized for all library instruction, are not statistically significant, and further replications of this study are necessary for more conclusive data. Future studies would benefit from clarifying the term “warm-up” more explicitly, as well as surveying a greater geographic range. However, despite these limitations, these preliminary findings support trends in teaching and higher education outside of librarianship. Beyond the quantitative data that indicates an overwhelmingly positive experience with these kind of activities, this study offers practical advice “from the trenches,” which may also aid librarians.

The beginning of class is a crucial time for instruction. Active learning increases student motivation, and models like Keller’s ARCS can provide guidance, particularly to beginning instructors. Ultimately, effective student learning is rooted in practicing authentic teaching, finding what works best for individual teachers, continually engaging in experimentation and learning as teachers, and connecting with subject and students. As Palmer says, “In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood—and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning” (10). Active learning, particularly in the form of warm-up activities, provides another option for connecting both.

In the LOEX workshop, participants warmed up by writing about the most memorable teaching experience they have had. After a brief presentation, they returned to their reflections for a discussion. Common themes that arose from discussions were surprise and fun as key for starting a class and for making instruction memorable.

Creating new activities can grab student attention and keep instruction fresh, surprising, and fun for both instructors and students. Turning to creative writers can provide insights on how to design innovative activities to engage audiences. When preparing an activity, it is helpful to envision students and strive

to understand the target audience. As Goldberg says, “When I teach a beginning class, it is good. I have to come back to beginner’s mind, the first way I thought and felt about writing. In a sense, that beginner’s mind is what we must come back to every time” (p. 5). In the same way, remembering and reflecting on a student’s frame of mind will allow for a learning experience that is richer for both students and instructor. Think about details is also important: “You must render these ideas in a concrete way with descriptive sensory details, details, similes, and metaphors” (Bernays & Painter, 1991, p. 187). In other words, it is helpful to clearly define the session objectives, aiming to over-define them for the sake of exercise and clarity. Beyond this point, it can be helpful to try to connect seemingly unrelated ideas and to aim for surprise (LeGuin, 1998; Bernays & Painter, 1991; Cameron & Bryan, 1992).

Being open to all ideas, including strong emotions or the seemingly taboo, may reveal other insights and allow for connections between instructors, the material, and the students. As Cameron (1992) notes:

Too many writers avoid their own strongest feelings because they are afraid of them, or because they are afraid of being sentimental. Yet these are the very things that will make beginning work ring true and affect us. Your stories have to matter to you the writer before they can matter to the reader; your story has to affect you, before it can affect us. (p. 39)

By being open to ideas and willing to experiment, teachers may be able to create meaningful connections and activities.

Other applications from creative writing and releasing creativity require a shift in attitude and perspective and longer-term change. Several handbooks stress the importance of being forgiving and open to new ideas. Cameron advises, “By holding lightly to an attitude of gentle exploration, we can begin to lean into creative expansion. By replacing ‘No way!’ with ‘Maybe,’ we open the door to mystery and to magic” (p. 95). In the same sense, teachers can let go of fear and trust their ideas: “Play around. Dive into absurdity. Take chances. You will succeed if you are fearless of failure” (Goldberg, p. 67).

In the workshop, participants were encouraged to think of creating warm-ups as four steps: 1) Know your learners 2) Define your outcome(s) 3) Brainstorm, let the crazy out 4) Create an activity/deliverable. They were offered scenarios defining learners (see appendices) and asked to collaborate in groups. After fifteen minutes, the groups presented ideas. Warm-ups ranged from polls and leading questions to playing “operator/telephone” as a way of leading into discussion of authority and scholarly information. Participants left with concrete ideas and plans, which are documented at <http://librarywarmups.pbworks.com/>.

While warm-ups have risks, they offer many learning opportunities. Parker Palmer says that by moving beyond fear, teachers offer themselves the opportunity for connectedness

with their students and world (p. 56-58), regardless of teaching methods. For library instructors, creative exploration of self, subject, and teaching strategies can provide a unique opportunity for captivating learning—both for librarians and their students.

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APPENDICES

Instruction Assistant Reflection Form

Date:

Class Taught:

What were your teaching objectives?

What activity did you use?

Had you used it before?

Had you used one from this category (video, activity, other) before?

Did it help you achieve your objectives?

How did the students react?

Would you use this again?

Would you change or modify it?

Any additional thoughts?

Focus group questions

Overall, how would you describe your instruction experience this semester? Have you had any particularly positive or negative experiences? If so, please describe.

What do you find the hardest aspect about teaching one-shot classes?

Have you done any teaching before becoming an instruction assistant? If so, do you think that experience changed the way you approached library instruction? If so, how?

How long have you been teaching as an IA and how do you think your teaching has changed since you started?

How do you like to start a class? Do you always start the same way? How do you decide how to start?

Do you use activities as opposed to demonstrations? If so, what kind and where and how do students react?

Did you use any of the warm-up activities listed on the [departmental] wiki? If so, did you notice a difference from classes where you used them or classes where you didn't?

Did you use any of the warm-up activities at other points in the class? For example, did you play Guess the Google during the middle of a class instead of the beginning? If so, did that make a difference?

Did you use the reflection forms in the blue folder after teaching this semester? If so, did reflecting on your activities and less plans change the way you approached future sessions? If so, how?

From your IA training, did you feel prepared to teach? Are there areas you would like to see covered more in training or in IA training that would help you to be better teachers?

Are there any thoughts about library instruction, warm-ups, starting classes and hands-on activities that you would like to add?

Anything you'd like to add about other topics?

Librarian survey questions

1. How long have you been giving library instruction?
2. Did you have any teaching training or experience before beginning library instruction?
3. Did you take an information literacy class or other course that taught teaching pedagogy and/or strategies for library instruction in library school?
4. Have you participated in ACRL's Immersion program?
5. Have you attended other professional development related to library instruction that presented teaching pedagogy?
6. After introducing yourself, what is the first thing that you would typically do in a class?
7. Do you have a "typical" structure for a class?
8. If you answered yes to the previous question, has your structure changed since you started teaching?
9. Do you use hands-on activities when you teach?
10. Do you use warm-up or introductory activities in your instruction sessions?

Student Survey

1. Have you had a library instruction class before?
2. Did you enjoy the activities in today's library class?
3. Was today's class beneficial to you in helping you understand the research process and library skills and resources?
4. What will you remember about this class?
5. What, if anything, would you like to see changed of this class?

LOEX Session Personas

Karlie is a first-year student who has had a basic introduction to the library during freshman orientation, but beyond that, has little knowledge of the libraries' resources or services. Her research experience includes term papers for her high school classes and searching online to satisfy her own personal (e.g. non-academic) information needs. You will be meeting with Karlie in the context of her introductory writing/composition course in which she is expected to turn in a final paper that is a comparative analysis of two films of her choosing.

Sarah is an upper-division student majoring in a humanities discipline. She has used general library databases for research to find articles, but she tends to use the same one, regardless of her information need. Though she is adept at online searching, Sara's understanding of scholarly information (e.g. how it is created, published, disseminated) and how to recognize it is limited. You will be meeting with Sara in the context of the required, writing-intensive course in her major in which she is expected to turn in a reflection paper surrounding the identification and analysis of a scholarly source.

Mack is a graduate student at the master's level. He has a teaching assistantship for an introductory-level undergraduate course while taking courses and preparing to write his thesis. While his advisor and the faculty in the department are encouraging, they provide little support or education in the identification and use of resources to support his thesis research. Mack is familiar with the libraries and the research process for his field, but he is ill-equipped to conduct a complete literature review and maintain a systematic approach to documenting and tracking the sources he finds and uses. You will meet with Mack as part of a cross-listed pedagogy course he is required to take as a new instructor in his department.