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Rhonda Huisman

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SMOKE AND MIRRORS: HAVE YOU BEEN FAKING YOUR TEACHING?

RHONDA HUISMAN

REFLECTION

When students aren't grasping the contents of your instruction session, do you blame a variety of factors—they aren't adequately prepared, not paying attention, or simply don't care? Have you considered that it might be "It's not you—it's me?" Gazing into the instructional mirror might give powerful reflection on your teaching, including the time you take to plan or revise content, in-class time, giving feedback, and assessment strategies. Librarians should face their instructional image to determine if they are utilizing all of their strengths in teaching, as well as to identify some possible touch-ups needed to frame a better professional picture.

INTRODUCTION

Many librarians have instructional duties thrust upon them, often in areas that they have little background knowledge of, or have so many sessions to cover that it seems impossible to spend time to develop not only an understanding of what students need to know, but what they should be doing during the time that they are given in the classroom. "Learning is most effective if it is embedded in social experience" (Whitelaw, Sears, & Campbell, 2004, p.10), but how often do librarians get the chance to learn about teaching and learning methodology? Library instruction (and teaching in general) is often a solitary, isolated experience, with little interaction from peers or colleagues. Additionally, there is a bounty of literature on student library anxiety levels (Mellon, 1986; Kwon, 2008, Onwuegbuzie 1999) and confidence levels in information literacy skills (Kuhlthau, 1991; Grimble & Williams, 2004; Abbott & Peach, 2000) but rarely do librarians consider their own anxiety about instructional strategies, or whether they may have untapped talents or approaches to library instruction.

Transformative or transformational learning, as outlined by Mezirow (2000), can be summarized as a "process of acquiring new knowledge during which adult learners critically examine their core beliefs, assumptions, and values" (p.11). This includes learning new frames of reference, transforming points of view, or habits of mind. Being more confident in what is expected or what works in a classroom environment can have a great impact on staying focused as well as better outcomes for students. While Oakleaf (2011) and others have inundated the academic library literature with learning outcomes and assessment in recent years (with good reason), going back to basic, simple considerations of what the expectations are for not only their own andragogical behavior but attitudes, skills, and pre-and post-instructional reflection are necessary for best practices in the instructional setting.

KNOWLEDGE

"The ability to create the illusion of power, to use mirrors and blue smoke, is one found in unusual people." (Breslin, 1975, p.35)

The first step in understanding responsibilities, strengths, and possible weaknesses in your teaching methods is taking stock of not only your own expectations about what the student experience is in the classroom, but gazing at your instructional image:

does it live up to best practices in terms of time management, student participation, assessment techniques, and evidence of learning? While librarians may not have the luxury of repeated visits to the same classroom or even making contact with students more than a few times in their college careers, the principles and evidence of good teaching are the same, each and every time you step into the classroom.

So, are you faking your teaching? What does it mean to have “withitness”? What is “proximity control” and is it really necessary? How can you be sure that you are able to connect with each student, establish trust, and give timely feedback? Your image as an educator isn’t dependent on how well you know the databases, can breeze through a run-down of library services, or are able to accurately cite an article in APA format: the curriculum doesn’t matter. In order to be an effective, efficient, and well-rounded educator, there are principles of learning and teaching that are proven to yield the most success with students, and ultimately, will empower you to be a better educator. During the interactive session at LOEX 2014, participants were given a checklist of educational terms included in the text (as part of the later discussion), both as an example of a pre-knowledge assessment exercise (*adapted from Angelo & Cross, 1993*) as well as a way to engage participation amongst all attendees.

Table 1: Teaching Terminology

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TOUCHSTONES

Nationwide, nearly twenty-five percent of all students fail to graduate with their peers (Aud et al, 2012), and nearly 1/3 of those students are not sufficiently prepared for college or employment (Green & Foster, 2003). Decades of teaching evidence, method, theory, and research have led us to understand that doing things differently might actually make a difference—not more hours, more lesson planning, more assessment, more than a one-shot session. It takes just one thing to possibly change the course of your teaching, and therefore, the course of student learning. Connecting to deep principles and having a theory of action can help you filter and assimilate a barrage of new ideas about teaching information literacy, information fluency, critical thinking skills, and threshold concepts.

Goodwin and Hubbell’s book *The 12 touchstones of good teaching: A checklist for staying focused every day* provides not only the “ah-ha” moments about the principles of effective teaching methods, but offers practical solutions, connections to literature and research, and lays out a course of action that is useful for both those that are experienced classroom teachers as well as newbies in the field. While the text doesn’t specifically mention librarians and the unique situations we face in carrying out curriculum plans, assessment, and evaluation, the basic concepts apply across all disciplines and education levels. They focus on the following basic principles:

- Be demanding: Align teaching with high expectations for learning
- Be supportive: Provide a nurturing learning environment
- Be intentional: Know why you’re doing what you’re doing

Through these straightforward edicts, Goodwin and Hubbell (2013) layout a course for specific daily teaching ideals, and reflect on some of their own experiences in teaching, many of which might strike a chord with librarians:

Goodwin: It was my first year of teaching high school. My ethnically diverse 10th grade American Literature class was reading and discussing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I had created what I believed to be thoughtful prompts for classroom dialogue on the delicate subjects of prejudice, feuding gangs, and social conformity—topics I thought my class of sophisticated, articulate students would eagerly discuss. Yet, somehow, the unit had fallen flat. Their gazes were wandering. Their answers seemed pat. Finally, I asked what was going on, a bit worried that perhaps the themes were too sensitive.

"Well, you know we all read this book in 8th grade," a student offered.

This sense of not only failing to make a connection with students during the instruction session, but realizing that students may have already had the “library spiel” is one that may be familiar to many librarians; flexibility, a sense of humor, and intentional curriculum planning may be key in avoiding this type of scenario. While we can’t prepare for every situation, using the standards as a guide offers a significant and solid way to craft an instruction session that connects to prior knowledge and transitional skills. In the “Be

Demanding” section, the authors go on to further explain the principles of tough, but achievable guidelines that can be applied daily, or over a period of time in the classroom. During the interactive session at LOEX, small groups discussed whether they were “faking” particular touchstones, and they also reviewed possible scenarios at their tables that might be achievable in their particular instruction setting. Furthermore, the “Be Supportive” and “Be Intentional” sections (Appendix B) unpack the importance of making connections with each student, giving positive feedback, and “coaching students to mastery” which can be extremely difficult given the typical one-shot sessions faced by many librarians. The chart can be used as a worksheet, to encourage deeper thinking about the setting that might be appropriate for each of these touchstones, as well as expanding upon standards and alignment with curriculum or professional outcomes or objectives. There is additional space for tools or resources that might be necessary to carry out the touchstone (objective), but this is not restricted to tools like technology: time, people, space, or materials can and should be considered in order to achieve the goal on the list.

CHECKLISTS

A step-by-step approach in many professions and industries, a simple checklist, is often one of the most straightforward procedures we can engage in. Library instruction isn’t life or death, but even surgeons, pilots, and those in high-stakes jobs use a low-tech checklist. Librarians may be deemed as experts in their field (of library science), but basic teaching concepts and theories, require a different strategy for being successful, one that builds on experience and takes advantage of the immense knowledge we all have in our brains, and in our hands, but also makes up for possible inadequacies (Gulyani, 2013). According to Gawande (2012), there are two main reasons why experts fail: first, lack of knowledge or ignorance, and second, ineptitude. Gawande’s solution is as simple as checklist. Utilizing Goodwin and Hubbell’s touchstones in a checklist can help to narrow down the areas that may need further attention, but also serve as a reminder for each time you are in the classroom (Appendix A).

Table 2: Touchstone #1

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APPLICATION

“In short, these 12 items may appear to be somewhat vanilla and unremarkable. Indeed, you might look at them and say there's nothing terribly new about any of them. After all, hasn't something like checking for understanding been around since, well, Socrates?” (Goodwin & Hubbell, 2013, p. xxviii). The ideas presented here certainly are not going to win any awards for ground-breaking research in education or librarianship. But, they do provide a basis for beginning to think intentionally about teaching practice versus information literacy, and concentrating on the holistic student versus low-stakes skills or outcomes. Considering just one or two of these simple ideas each time you are preparing for an instruction-like scenario (whether with students, faculty, online, face-to-face, or at the reference desk) will engage your thinking about the big picture, through simple, defined instructions rather than grandiose, intangible ideals. Give the touchstones a try, and the days of faking your teaching might be nothing more than a misty shadow in the mirror.

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APPENDIX A

I do, I don't, I fake it: A Checklist for Understanding and Reflection

Answer the following using the scale by filling in the blank with “DO” (I do this on a regular basis), “DON’T” (I don’t do this on a regular basis), or “FAKE” (I think I do this, but sometimes I fake it).

_____ **I use standards to guide every learning opportunity**

_____ I ensure students set personal learning objectives for each lesson

_____ I peel back the curtain and make my performance expectations clear

_____ I measure understanding against high expectations.

_____ I engage student interest with every instruction

_____ I interact meaningfully with every student

_____ I use feedback to encourage effort

_____ I make the most of every minute.

_____ I help students develop deep knowledge

_____ I coach students to mastery.

_____ I help students do something with their learning.

APPENDIX B

Teaching Touchstones Inventory: The 12 Step Process Every Day

<i>Be Demanding</i>					
	What it looks like	Standard or Outcome	Setting	Tool or Resource	Example, Action, or Reflection
<input type="checkbox"/> I use standards to guide every learning opportunity	Unpack standards—what do students need to know, do, and identify big ideas. Not one size fits all, but a platform for creative lesson planning and self-directed learning.				
<input type="checkbox"/> I ensure students set personal learning objectives for each lesson	Help students challenge themselves in short and long term goals. Achievable, bite-sized chunks, guided by learning objectives.				
<input type="checkbox"/> I peel back the curtain and make my performance expectations clear	Use performance rubrics to guide improvement and shift the role of librarian to coach, guiding them to accomplish learning goals.				
<input type="checkbox"/> I measure understanding against high expectations.	Course grades or assessment reflect actual academic performance, through use of appropriate assessment to encourage critical thinking; challenge students to meet high expectations.				

<i>Be Supportive</i>					
	What it looks like	Standard or Outcome	Setting	Tool or Resource	Example, Action, or Reflection
<input type="checkbox"/> I engage student interest with	Hook student interest from the beginning, use				

every instruction	variety motivational techniques or provide choices.				
<input type="checkbox"/> I interact meaningfully with every student	Interact with students, recognizing individual learners and how their subject area interests are worthy of lifelong pursuit.				
<input type="checkbox"/> I use feedback to encourage effort	Provide growth-oriented feedback frequently and in a timely manner that links to learning objectives, helping students see how their efforts are key to success. Opportunities for self and peer assessment. Feedback is actionable and tailored to individual student needs.				
<input type="checkbox"/> I create an oasis of safety and respect in the classroom	Establish clear rules for behavior and consequences, ensuring all students feel safe to learn and contribute to classroom discussions. Display “withitness” by responding to concerns as they arise. Enlist students in creating a positive environment by calling out positive behaviors.				

Be Intentional					
	What it looks like	Standard or Outcome	Setting	Tool or Resource	Example, Action, or Reflection
<input type="checkbox"/> I make the most of every minute.	Plan lessons to ensure “bell-to-bell” learning for students. Routines for classroom logistics, minimized interruptions, and fulfilling activities for each instructional session.				
<input type="checkbox"/> I help students develop deep knowledge	Introduce new knowledge by helping students connect to prior knowledge. Assemble disparate bits of information into meaningful patterns, focusing on deep knowledge.				
<input type="checkbox"/> I coach students to mastery.	Use frequent checks for understanding to know which concepts or skills students are struggling to develop to mastery. Provide opportunities for hands-on practice, application, and synthesis.				
<input type="checkbox"/> I help students do something with their learning.	Structured classroom discussions and writing assignments, use project-based learning and complex or heuristic problem-solving assignments to integrate and apply new knowledge in novel or authentic situations to build on content knowledge.				

Images for Tables and Figures (Editor will put in body of the text later)

Table 1:

Can you define or teach (+), identify (--) the following ideas or concepts? If you haven't heard of it, answer (0).

Critical Thinking	+ - 0
Differentiation	+ - 0
Proximity Control	+ - 0
Andragogy	+ - 0
Declarative Knowledge	+ - 0
Socratic Seminar	+ - 0
Problem-Solving Heuristic	+ - 0
Withitness	+ - 0
Axiomatic	+ - 0
Anticipatory Set	+ - 0
Summative Assessment	+ - 0
Final Word Protocol	+ - 0

Table 2

Be Demanding	What it looks like:
<input type="checkbox"/> I use standards to guide every learning opportunity	Unpack standards—what do students need to know, do, and identify big ideas. Not one size fits all, but a platform for creative lesson planning and self-directed learning.
<input type="checkbox"/> I ensure students set personal learning objectives for each lesson	Help students challenge themselves in short and long term goals. Achievable, bite-sized chunks, guided by learning objectives.
<input type="checkbox"/> I peel back the curtain and make my performance expectations clear	Use performance rubrics to guide improvement and shift the role of librarian to coach, guiding them to accomplish learning goals.
<input type="checkbox"/> I measure understanding against high expectations.	Course grades or assessment reflect actual academic performance, through use of appropriate assessment to encourage critical thinking; challenge students to meet high expectations.