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"I Wasn't Excited for This Assignment, But I Am Now": Increasing Morale in Political Science Undergraduates Through Engaging Practices

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Introduction

The school year of 2020-2021 has been a year full of unexpected events. In the past year, undergraduate students at UC Berkeley have had to face many difficult situations that could affect their ability to do coursework. This past year has included a global pandemic and the isolation that came with it, police violence against black and brown bodies, and a very emotionally draining US presidential election (a factor that can have effects on finding information on candidates (Valentino et al, 2008)). This is on top of the constant stress and difficulties of being a college student. In a student pulse survey administered by the Division of Undergraduate Education, 38% of responding undergraduates reported dealing with symptoms of depression, and 41% reported symptoms of anxiety (VCUE, Graduate Division, VCSA, 2020). All of these stressors can really affect the motivation to complete assignments and overall morale. As the liaison for Political Science, I noticed that this was especially true with assignments related to recent elections. One course, The American Presidency, assigned students to compare the 2020 presidential election with the 2016 election. Another, California Politics, had students follow the campaign of a recent state ballot initiative, from when the initiative made it onto the ballot, to the election outcome. These assignments result from library instruction session that focuses on primary resources, government information, and ephemera related to these campaigns

Understanding the mental and emotional issues facing these students, my lesson plan needed to help spark as much enthusiasm as possible for these assignments. I decided to implement teaching pedagogies that focus more on the critical aspects of information literacy, as opposed to solely focusing on showing databases and resources like in a traditional one-shot session. Following these teaching methods, I was able to increase enthusiasm and get students to become more interested and curious about these topics; they were able to develop interesting and innovative topics related to these political campaigns.

Theory for Lesson Planning

There are various theories that I rely on heavily for planning my lessons for these sessions. One is the concept of Learner Center Teaching, which is focused on the way the student learns as a pedagogical approach, as opposed to focusing on the instructor (Megwalu, 2014). It also gives legitimacy to the methods and tools students are already familiar with in terms of information searching, instead of banning certain resources based of perceived lack of authority (McDonough, 2015). Learner Center Teaching focuses on the balance of power between instructor and student, and allow students to be able to have some control and some agency in the sessions.

Critical information literacy, in which information literacy instruction focuses on the social power in information creation and access, has been another important pedagogy for the lesson planning. It focuses not on the student's ability to navigate a database, but to critically assess the resources and information they find (Tewell, 2015). Critical information literacy helps students also understand the agency they have, whether it's through the methods addressed in Learner Centered Teaching, or through the ability to understand underlying messages in political messaging (Smith, 2013), or through understanding the importance of their lived

experiences (Giroux, 1988), or even the role communities have in understanding the production and reading of texts (Elmborg, 2006).

In her article about the mental effect on students enrolled in courses on heavy subjects like genocide, Zartner (2019) introduced a few methods that have helped keep her students engaged without suffering residual trauma. She noted the importance of this consideration:

> Given the potential for burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious traumatization for both students and educators working with subjects that tend to be difficult or depressing, it is important to think about how we can frame our subjects and structure our classes in such a way that students come away with an understanding of the realities, but also of the possibilities.

Some of these methods she lists include humor and enthusiasm. Zartner noted that humor can be used as a coping mechanism, one that is "essential to maintain our compassion and inspiration" (p. 360, 2019). Enthusiasm can also give students extra motivation to approach a subject (Mahler et al., 2018. The use of humor and enthusiasm allows students to be open and free while also understanding the human aspects of many of these heavy topics.

LIMITATIONS

Both of these sessions were done in the "one-shot" format: 50-minute sessions in the beginning of the semester. Each session had a class size of more than 50 students. While some of these methods discussed in this paper were still useful in conveying useful understanding of information literacy in regard to campaign elections, it did prevent some very active engagement and active learning styles that could have been implemented. Ideally, library instruction sessions would be taught over multiple sessions, with active learning activities that engage the students with the resources in a group session. My hope is that other library instructors can apply these methods, or even apply it through an embedded librarian structure, similar to the methods conducted by Brooke and Wiebe (2017).

Lesson Planning and Action

Each session started with what we call a "check-in", in which I asked the students to discuss how they're feeling and their mental state before the session. It gives a chance for the students to be open, and for me to understand how they're feeling at that time. It is often one of the few times that they have during a library session to talk about the emotional and mental toll that they may be facing. These check-ins also give a chance for me to learn what tools they are using to learn and a little bit more about what's going on around them. What I found from the sessions was that the majority of the students were overwhelmed; with everything that was going on around them it made it difficult for them to be able to concentrate on their school work.

Using the information from the check-in helped me determine what literacy skills were more valuable for these students, as well as highlight resources similar to the tools that they are already familiar with. For example, many of the students knew of some various sources for following election campaigns; if a student says they were following the New York Times, I was able to point students to the Times' GitHub repository page to explore more of their publicly available data, especially in relation to voting and polling. Many of the students pointed to podcasts that they used to stay up to date, so I expanded their knowledge of podcasts by pointing to some similar in themes. Podcasts such as those produced by the site FiveThirtyEight that go deeper into the value of polling, plus other podcasts that explore different aspects of government and campaigns, such as the one from the LA Times, called "Battle of 187", about the campaign for the ballot proposition 187, calling for cutting off public services--like schools and hospitals--to undocumented immigrants in the 1990s.

I also collaborated with the instructors for these sessions to think of a way to explain the resources that fits the students understanding and made it easier for students to understand what kind of resources they needed to find. We end up referring to this planning as the "Election Life Cycle." Searching for campaign information starts with the basic information of either the candidates themselves or with the text of ballot initiatives. We then moved on to campaign financing, sources of funding and contributions, how much the campaigns were raising, and what that said about the type of campaigns. Students then moved on to the campaign advertising, including the use of ephemera from those campaigns. Next, students searched for public opinion polling and the public perceptions of these campaigns. Finally, the end of the campaigns, with the elections results. The "Election Life Cycle" gave a clear pathway for the students to understand how and where to find the information and be able to explain the general elections that they were following, reducing the cognitive load for these already overwhelmed students.

The sessions move on to the resources that best fit the students' projects. I focused on resources that were freely available and mostly online for easier access. Such examples of resources included the Living Room Candidate from the Museum of Moving Image (http://www.livingroomcandidate.org), the campaign ephemera archive from UCLA (http://digital.library.ucla.edu/campaign/), and social media platforms such as Twitter. Focusing on freely available resources

eliminated the extra concern of having to make sure the students understood the use of proxies and VPNs, skills that can be taught through a short video instead of using the limited session time. Looking at these archives also let the students explore their own understanding of these elections, as well as dig into the historical context of many of these campaigns.

Highlighting these resources also allowed the usage of the students' agency and for them to display their humanity, which gives them a different perspective of these resources. For example, for the presidential campaign resources such as the Living Room Candidate, I was able to display how the campaigns were summarized by the museum staff and curators, such as their noting that the Walter Mondale campaign of 1984 try to show the theme of the United States in a dire situation with musical scores in each campaign similar to the movie "Halloween." Students were also introduced to all the different incidents in election campaigns that seem humorous now, but had an impact at the time. such as the incident of Gerald Ford eating the corn husk on a tamale during the campaign in Texas. For the ballot initiatives projects, using the UCLA campaign archive collection highlighted recent campaigns for ballot initiatives and some of the more useful and humorous ways these campaigns were reaching out to communities. For example, Proposition 64, which pushed for the legalization of marijuana, campaign events and outreach were named after certain stereotypical associations (an example being a Halloween event called "the Dankening"). I highlight these events and resources, in connection with some of the other resources that lean more into humor. Social media platforms like Twitter are not only useful in understanding the public perception of campaigns, as well as the spread of misinformation, but it also allows students to witness some of the comedic takes on the election. Twitter comedy, like Kylie Brakeman's video detailing every Trump Bot, have been useful to keep the students engaged with the assignments.

Assessment

In order to assess the effectiveness of the sessions, our library instructors normally use a Google form, offered at the end of sessions, to understand if there were any barriers to learning or the students learned anything new. However, due to the conversion to online instruction, the response rate of these Google forms was lower than anticipated. Instead, in order to assess the effects of these sessions, I relied on noting the number of reference appointments made by the students in the following weeks and noting some of the topics that they had decided to use for their projects. One student decided to focus on the voting patterns of Yolo County in Northern California and why it has been consistently voted Democratic since the 1960s. Another student wanted to focus on the term "contributions" in campaign financing, plus look into the history of contributions to campaigns. The students who attended these one-on-one sessions are also more open about their feelings and why they ended up making an appointment when they normally did not reach out to the library for help. Many of the students felt that my approach in the sessions (my openness, my enthusiasm, my humor) created a more welcoming environment and made them more willing to ask questions.

Conclusion

This paper showed the various factors that were used to improve student morale during a very difficult year, especially in regard to assignments that forced students to work with materials that added on to their mental fatigue. I highlighted the fact that campaigns can have a lasting impact in ways that many would not have expected, especially on those people who are denied the ability to vote. I also highlighted that the personality and the tenor of the librarian can lead to a more open discussion and sessions, as some of the students became more comfortable and more willing to approach their assignments. Finally, I pointed to the various materials that are freely available not only to help students find resources for their projects but also to ease the load of having to deal with a VPN or proxy or extra tools that might cause a hindrance for their projects. With these methods, subject liaison librarians, especially those in subjects like Political Science, can apply them for their instruction sessions and their work with students.

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APPENDIX A

Free Resources for Campaign Analysis

- David Leip's Atlas of US Presidential Elections: https://uselectionatlas.org/

- FiveThirtyEight: https://fivethirtyeight.com/politics/elections/

- New York Times 2020 Elections: https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/2020-election

- Sabato's Crystal Ball: https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/

- Federal Elections Commission: https://www.fec.gov/

- Chicago Booth School Campaign Financing Index:

  https://www.chicagobooth.edu/research/stigler/research/indexes/campaign-financing-capture-index

- Open Secrets: opensecrets.org

- The Living Room Candidate: http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/

- Internet Archive Political TV Ad Archive: http://politicaladarchive.org/

- Spot the Troll: https://spotthetroll.org/

- Breaking Harmony Square: https://harmonysquare.game/en

- Kylie Brakeman's "This is every Trump bot account":

  https://twitter.com/deadeyebrakeman/status/1301196903229480960

- California Voter Guide: https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voting-resources/voter-information-guides

- UC Hastings Ballot Archive: https://repository.uchastings.edu/ca_ballot_pamphlets/

- Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO): https://lao.ca.gov/BallotAnalysis/Propositions

- Power Search: http://powersearch.sos.ca.gov/

- UCLA Campaign Literature Archive: http://digital.library.ucla.edu/campaign/

- Public Policy Institute of California: ppic.org