

LOLCATS AND CELEBRITIES AND (RED PANDA) BEARS – OH, MY!

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Madonna.

LOLcats.

Red pandas.

I'm already having more fun than I thought I would while writing a paper for a conference. How about you, dear reader? I bet I have your attention now, too; there's something to be said for the element of surprise, in reading as well as in teaching and learning. After just three years in my career as a professional teaching librarian, I've noticed two significant problems that I encounter pretty regularly: lack of attention on the part of the student (we've all witnessed the near-immediate eye-glazing and head-drooping from undergraduates in compulsory library instruction sessions) and burnout on the part of the library instructor (no matter how much we love our job, the excitement about Academic Search Complete and subject headings has worn off a bit after teaching 10 freshman English classes in a week). To combat these problems (that I suspect I'm not alone in experiencing), I offer solutions rooted in two theories: the role of humor in the classroom as an icebreaker and teaching tool, and best practices in starting and organizing lectures.

In her article about using humor in library instruction, Billie Walker (2006) notes, "One of the challenges facing the teaching librarian is in reaching students, particularly when they are tired and unmotivated" (p. 123). Walker cites several convincing arguments for introducing humor into the library classroom, noting that "Proponents of using humor in instruction

claim numerous benefits, including better retention of material, improved professor-student connection, greater attentiveness and interest, and less academic stress" (p. 118). Walker cites White, who, in 2001, argued that the use of humor in the classroom contributes to a "healthy learning environment," and Ziv, who found in 1976 that using humor significantly improved students' attitudes to the subject matter (as cited in Walker, 2006, p. 118). Jacobson and Xu (2002) also note the role of humor in the classroom by identifying it as a quality of teacher enthusiasm: "Enthusiastic teachers tend to speak with vocal quality and variety, move around while lecturing, gesture with hands and arms, show facial expressions, and use eye contact and humor" (p. 428). The authors cite Murray, who argues that teacher enthusiasm is the strongest predictor of instructional outcomes as well as a key factor in motivating students to pursue further learning (as cited in Jacobson and Xu, 2002, p. 428).

Higher education literature emphasizes the importance of organizing lectures so that students are immediately drawn into the subject matter. Erickson, Peters, and Strommer (2006) argue that "The first order of business is to get students' attention; the second is to focus it on the objectives" (p. 92). They discuss "the power of a telling example" (p. 93) in helping students draw mental connections between the material presented and how it affects their lives. They specify that "examples, illustrations, and problems should come from a variety of situations and settings" and caution us not to "underestimate the number of examples and illustrations that students require" (p. 94). The authors also advocate for the use of audiovisual aids, which are "helpful both in holding student attention and in explaining difficult material" (p. 95). Jacobson and Xu (2002) agree with Erickson, Peters, and Strommer regarding the importance of capturing student attention: "Instructors who make a concerted effort to capture students' attention with engaging topics and a

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range of goals and objectives will facilitate student learning” (p. 426). Jacobson and Xu also cite Keller, who says that in order to motivate students, “teachers need first of all to obtain and sustain students’ attention and to direct student energy toward the right cause...any sudden, unexpected change within the classroom – including voice volumes, physical movement, and humor – can activate students’ attention” (as cited in Jacobson & Xu, 2002, p. 429).

We all know that the first few minutes of an instruction session are critical for setting the mood and capturing students’ attention; and Walker, Jacobson, and Xu make convincing arguments for the role of humor in creating an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. I argue that humor can be found in truly unlikely places. I often start instruction sessions by asking students what they think is the cutest animal in the world. After a few people advocate for puppies and kittens, I Google the phrase “the cutest animal in the world.” The results page leads us to the Houston Zoo’s website for Toby the red panda (Houston Zoo, 2009). Red pandas have very little to do with library instruction – but I believe that the incongruity of talking about puppies, fennec foxes, and red pandas in a library class, combined with the fact that few students have even heard of a red panda before, helps to establish a convivial classroom atmosphere. What we hope to teach students above all is the process of discovery, and Toby, however abstractly, helps to model that process.

Using a common theme to tie a class session together has helped my students stay focused. Toby has been used as a theme throughout many classes I’ve taught, helping to bring students back into the fold when their attention starts to drift. Toby has a Flickr page of photos, so I like to put up Toby’s pensive face while talking about developing a topic or what makes a good thesis statement; Toby’s happy face goes up on the screen while the students are doing individual work in the databases and then talking about what they found. I have been known to use Toby, red pandas, and imaginary red panda scholarly journals in the process of teaching students how to use EndNote and how to create bibliographies. At some point it becomes something of a shtick – but the students in classes overseen by Toby are relaxed, focused, and enjoy themselves. On the one-minute papers students fill out at the end of our library instruction sessions, we ask students if they would like to leave their e-mail address and have a librarian follow up with them. After a recent session featuring Toby, 45% of the students asked for follow-up help (and several mentioned Toby the red panda as a factor that helped them learn). Perhaps more tellingly, the students’ attitudes and level of attention in that session were notably more positive than those in a very traditional library instruction session two weeks earlier, after which only 18% of the students asked for follow-up help. If we agree that asking questions and wanting to learn more are solid indicators of engagement with the subject matter, then it looks like Toby is doing his job.

We can look beyond simple hooks, too, in providing examples in lectures that pique students’ interest and bear relevance to the topics at hand. It turns out that everyday pop culture is often the best source of these illustrative examples.

Students encounter news stories, videos, and situations every day that can be teaching moments. One needs to look no further than Miss Teen South Carolina 2007’s interview response to understand the importance of creating logical, intelligent arguments (Fishbone4u, 2007). Also, the 2009 news story of the college student who embedded phony quotes into the Wikipedia entry on a musician who had just died, resulting in several reputable news sources publishing the quotes in their obituaries of the musician, hits home with college students who search Wikipedia every day (Pogatchnik, 2009).

My own particular guilty pleasure (besides red pandas) is celebrity gossip, which has proven to be a fertile ground for providing real-life examples of the principles of evaluating information. Talking about the evaluation of information is a critical piece of any library instruction session; but there’s only so much interest you can generate by writing a list of evaluation criteria up on a whiteboard. When it comes time for this topic in class, Madonna, Joaquin Phoenix, and Kim Kardashian are much more interesting teachers than I could ever be. I like to show a People.com article from July 2008 in which film director Guy Ritchie states, “My marriage to Madonna is fine” (Huver, 2008), then cut to an article three months later that announces their divorce. The lesson: that people and organizations do NOT always tell you the truth about themselves. Then we look at the Institute for Historical Review’s website, which touts the organization as “an independent educational research and publishing center that works to promote peace, understanding and justice through greater public awareness of the past, and especially socially-politically relevant aspects of twentieth-century history” (Institute for Historic Review, 2010), not as the Holocaust-denial organization the Institute’s research library proves it to be.

The celebrity gossip tack can be tricky – I make it clear at the beginning of my presentation that I am not in any way attacking or condemning the celebrities I use as examples; I’m just offering them up as lighthearted lessons about the importance of evaluating information. (Meghan McCain, the daughter of 2008 Republican presidential nominee John McCain, makes a name for herself as a savvy young Republican by making the talk show circuit; but then she’s caught by paparazzi having lunch with Tila Tequila. The lesson: An author’s reputation counts for a lot.)

In these non-traditional sessions, students are simply more engaged, more relaxed, and ask better questions. There’s something incongruous about seeing Guy Ritchie’s face in a class that’s supposed to be about scholarly research. But Billie Walker reminds us to “Use the elements of surprise to break the routine in your library instruction class” (2006, p. 121), and Guy Ritchie does just that.

I certainly don’t advocate that Toby the red panda and Guy Ritchie be used in everyone’s library instruction sessions from here until the end of time. Toby and Guy are the examples I use in my classes because I have particular obsessions with red pandas and celebrity gossip. The idea of harnessing the power of the unexpected in your class sessions is to find out-of-the-

box examples that are authentic to you and about which you are enthusiastic. Maybe you're a news junkie – Rachel Maddow from MSNBC has some great online clips that tie nicely into teaching information evaluation. Maybe you were born in another country – what little-known facts about your native culture can you share with the students in your class? Maybe you're a movie nut – what examples can you glean from your favorite films that illustrate what you're trying to teach? When it's something unexpected, it breaks the routine – which is exactly what helps to capture student attention. And when it's something in which you are particularly interested, it significantly helps to break up the boredom – both for the students AND for you. The first time I used a slideshow of celebrity gossip was towards the end of a particularly long and exhausting spring semester. The simple act of using something different, and something of interest to me, re-energized me for the remaining classes that semester. It reminded me that teaching can be fun. And it also helped me build a strong relationship with the students in that class, who still call me by name when they see me around campus.

Some summarizing thoughts:

- Think outside the box! Nearly any topic can be a platform for teaching...
- ...but also make sure it's something authentic to you as a person.
- Be fearless. (It helps if you have no shame.) Not every joke or story works all the time, and that's okay.
- Be considerate of your audience. (Walker points out that "divisive humor, such as sarcasm, irony, insults, and parody, tends to be biting and can often leave a student embarrassed. These types of humor can be extremely detrimental to learning and should be avoided" (2006, p. 119).)
- Remember that teaching AND learning can (and should) be fun!

Don't let lecturing take all the fun out of teaching research. Toby wouldn't approve.

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