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RIDING THE INSTRUCTIONAL RAPIDS: RECOGNIZING & REVELING IN SPONTANEOUS INSTANCES OF INSTRUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Like the fast-paced, turbulent water of river rapids, spontaneous instances of instruction appear randomly throughout the library, in the classroom, at the reference desk, in chat, or in conversation with library stakeholders, including students, subject faculty and instructors, administrators, and community members. These teachable moments provide library staff the opportunity to meet an immediate information need, and to impart important background or foundational knowledge that may help the learner grasp a concept or process affecting their information pursuit. Like individual drops of rain that become a roaring river that will eventually lead to an ocean, these moments may not seem like much, considered individually, but the cumulative effect can translate into increased patron understanding and added value to the institution.

On this river trip, you will gain the tools to successfully recognize, engage, and revel in spontaneous instances of instruction by understanding the characteristics of teachable moments, examining the mindset of an individual ready for instruction, adopting guidelines for interaction, and discovering how a culture celebrating spontaneous instruction can be created at your library.

RECOGNIZING TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Think about the term instruction. What comes to mind? Usually, visions of formal classrooms filled with bored students being talked to ad nauseam come to mind. Is a classroom the only place instruction can happen? No! Instruction can also happen informally through teachable moments. Teachable moments have been addressed in education research for over two decades (Hansen, 1998), demonstrating the positive impact engagement can have on a learner and continuing to be highlighted in other fields, particularly health science, as a method of knowledge transference from a practitioner to a patient (Zipp & Kolber, 2014). To a lesser extent, teachable moments have been featured in library and information science literature encouraging library staff to look for these opportunities to enhance the learning experience of library patrons (Avery, 2008).

Teachable moments, roughly defined, are instances in which the learner arrives at a point where they are open to instruction (Elmborg, 2002). The learner could be any library stakeholder—such as a student, subject faculty or instructor, administrator, or community member. Driven by a learner's need, teachable moments arise spontaneously as a result of acknowledgement that their current knowledge or skills may be insufficient. Teachable moments are situational, meaning that they occur in a variety of locations, including in the library classroom, at the reference or service desk, in chat or email, or during personal conversations, and require a response appropriate to the situation. They are unstructured, allowing for increased tailoring and flexibility in instruction to best address the learner's need. Often, this instruction includes sharing background or foundational knowledge and/or modeling a thought process, potentially leading to an improved understanding of a concept necessary to the successful pursuit of information.

PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Given its transient nature, a teachable moment is likely to occur outside of formal teaching and instructional settings. Therefore, while keeping formal learning theories in mind, we propose library professionals consider Maslow's Hierarchy of Basic Needs as a broader theoretical foundation for approaching teachable moments.

Teachable Moments for Different Levels of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy is the central organizing principle for research psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation. It states that all people are motivated by a shared set of needs and the fulfilment of certain categories of needs takes precedence over others. This hierarchy was first proposed by Maslow in 1943, and has since been refined and advanced by many others (Harper & Guilbault, 2008). In its most basic form, Maslow's Hierarchy proposes that, in preceding order, humans are motivated by: (1) physiological needs, (2) safety, (3) belongingness and love, (4) esteem, and (5) self-actualization needs.

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs **<Placeholder; Editors will place Figure here in final doc>**

Based on Maslow's model, the final self-actualization stage is the optimal state for learning and growth, because distractions created by needs deficiencies in the preceding four levels have all been sufficiently addressed. At this self-actualization stage, humans are the most motivated to reflect, process, and retain new information. They're also more open to new ideas that may improve or challenge their existing frame of knowledge and worldview.

Adopting Maslow's Hierarchy in Everyday Contexts

However, reality is more complex and chaotic than the theoretical realm, and the hierarchical order of Maslow's needs categories are more fluid in everyday life. For instance, an academic librarian may encounter a student patron who is eager for new knowledge (self-actualization needs) and has already established a sense of esteem and social connections with peers (belongingness needs), yet is experiencing food insecurity (lower level physiological needs). While the learner is open for instruction, they may be distracted by the deficits of other more basic needs during the learning process.

Conversely, potential learners could also be motivated by a lower level need to seek out information. For example, a student may be compelled to complete a required research assignment to keep their grades up for scholarship requirements (financial/safety needs) or to meet peer and family expectations (esteem needs). In such a context, the learner might be driven to obtain a piece of information to fulfill that immediate lower need deficit, but may be less motivated to learn and retain the knowledge required for long term growth.

It is impossible for library professionals to address all of a patron's needs during a single teachable moment. Nonetheless, we can identify incremental ways to maximize the effectiveness of such moments by striving to address or alleviate need deficits and minimize their distraction on the learner. In a physical library setting, the simple act of providing a friendly, open learning environment through mindful display of signage and furniture arrangement could strengthen patrons' comfort level and confidence, thus enabling them to be more open and comfortable in acknowledging and sharing what they do not know.

STRATEGIC ACTION FOR TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Our goal as librarians is to recognize when teachable moments occur, and be amenable to participating in them when opportunities arise. The recognition process, as well as our engagement and communication with users, however, should not be haphazard. Both are strategic processes which are best achieved by adherence to particular guidelines. Avery (2008) found that following five guidelines can aid librarians in recognizing teachable moments and using them to our patrons' advantage.

Guidelines for Action

The first guideline is listening, or the ability to recognize a teachable moment and take the necessary steps to impart knowledge. The process extends beyond merely providing a patron with the information they are seeking. Rather, it is giving them the tools necessary to engage in the research process on their own.

When a patron presents us with a research question, we are provided with the opportunity to act in two very different ways. On the one hand, we can simply provide the user with the answer they are seeking. Avery argues, however, that failing to take advantage of the chance to teach not only robs a person of an opportunity to learn but creates a dependency in that user that undermines the learning process. Our goal is to create independent information gatherers. By failing to take advantage of teachable moments, we do exactly the opposite: we encourage dependence.

The second guideline calls for combining patience and flexibility. Learning styles vary greatly from person to person. Therefore, it is very important that librarians not only recognize variance in skill level, but also be able to adapt teaching techniques to best suit each individual. This can be accomplished by being patient and open to helping our users learn in a variety of ways.

The third guideline is the observation of body language clues. Before a decision can be made about what method of teaching is most appropriate for an individual, we must first ascertain if that person is ready to take advantage of a teachable moment. Body language clues provide great insight into a person's readiness for instruction. A person might be hesitant to engage due to inexperience or anxiety about approaching a librarian. Others are simply unwilling to listen and learn. Apprehensive patrons provide golden opportunities for us to impart reassurance and lay the foundation for successful instruction. We should not however, force teaching on unwilling users. Librarians must evaluate each situation independently and act accordingly. In some situations, providing an answer without any further instruction is the best alternative.

Avery's fourth guideline is brevity. Overwhelming patrons with unnecessary information is counterproductive. Our goal is to provide concise and uncomplicated guidance. Simplicity is advantageous for two reasons: It fosters comprehension and it helps to reassure apprehensive patrons.

Our final guideline is utilizing graduated release. This concept varies slightly from Avery's (2008) guideline, which recommends that after instruction, students work independently to learn by doing. In graduated release, students learn by doing after being taught how to do the activity at hand. First, the instructor provides instruction. Next, both instructor and learner engage in the activity together. Finally, the learner performs the task independently. While both methods are effective means of encouraging retention, graduated release is particularly appealing because it provides an opportunity for the patron to have unclear concepts immediately resolved while simultaneously providing reassurance and encouragement at the point of initial engagement.

CULTURE AND VALUE OF TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Riding the rapids of teachable moments fosters an exhilarating feeling similar to successfully navigating a difficult whitewater course, both for the student and the instructor. To create a lasting culture of engaging in teachable moments in reference and instruction practices, and to demonstrate their value, librarians need to be willing to reassure patrons, to reinforce concepts, and most importantly, to revel in the moment.

Reassure Students They Belong

Library patrons at our institution are often first-generation college students who are unfamiliar with the culture of academia and may have few role models to emulate. Reassuring patrons that it is okay to not know something, understanding when they are in a vulnerable place in their information search (Kuhlthau, 1993), and taking time to explain key concepts through teachable moments assures a culture where those moments support and enhance patron learning. Encouraging a practice of reassurance and kindness allows teachable moments to happen in the first place, and fosters a sense of belonging and safety in your patrons, helping to fulfill their security and social needs.

Reinforce Teachable Moment Concepts

Patently remind and reinforce teachable moment concepts. When you provide an unexpected piece of information to a patron, repeat the teachable moment you have imparted at least once. It helps the receiver absorb the information, and allows them to connect the teachable moment back to the question that sparked it. It is imperative to create a culture of patience at your institution, and to understand that it might take several exposures for the information to sink in. Teachable moments happen spontaneously, they're ephemeral, and cultures that value reinforcing concepts will ensure those moments are truly useful and meaningful, as they answer patrons' security and esteem needs.

Revel in the Moment

Positively reinforce when a teachable moment happens, reward the participants, and revel in them. The librarian or staff member who chooses to engage a patron in a teachable moment is going above and beyond typical duties, and deserves to be rewarded and revel in the moment. We all want to provide the appropriate answer in our interactions with patrons, but we may not be as apt to engage in teachable moments for various reasons. Institutions who want to successfully incorporate teachable moments need to incentivize those moments in their culture, and joyfully celebrate them. This satisfies the librarian or staff member's social, esteem, and self-actualization needs as well, so it's worth celebrating! Create a "caught being good" bulletin board, or send out a weekly "shout out" email. You could challenge different departments to compete in participating in the most teachable moments. Whatever you do, publicly praise those who choose to engage in teachable moments.

Adding Value with Teachable Moments

Encourage teachable moments with praise, and remind librarians and staff that by giving patrons additional information above and beyond just a basic answer, they're providing added value for the library within the context of usefulness to its parent organization. With pressures to increasingly show a return on investment (Kingma & McClure, 2015), creating a culture of teachable

moments provides a way to create added value. Anyone who arrives in the library is seeking some kind of information—who does not love a little something extra? Durrance (1995) performed a study that showed the longer a patron engages with a librarian, the more likely the patron is to return to the library at a later time. A practice of reveling and rewarding teachable moments encourages librarians and staff to engage in them more frequently, which may improve customer/patron satisfaction and creates additional value without spending a dime.

CONCLUSION

In river rafting and in library reference and instruction practice, taking time to adjust your course by engaging learners in teachable moments will help meet their needs, and will create a roaring rapid of rewards for not only your users, but also for librarians, staff, stakeholders, the library, and parent institutions.

LOEX PRE-PRINT

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

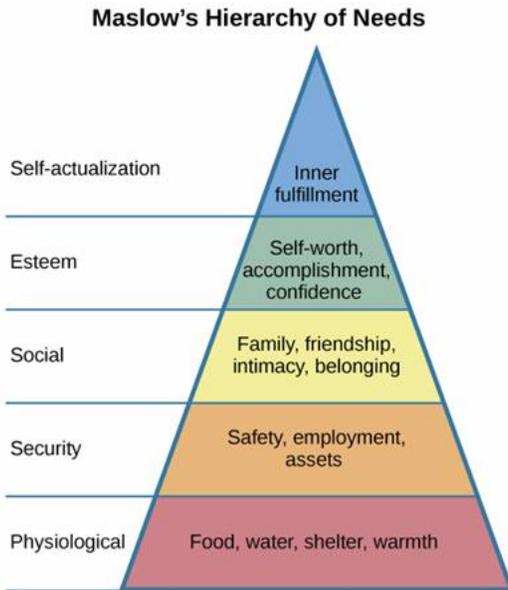


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Adopted from OpenStax. (2017). Emotions and motivation. In *Psychology*. Houston, TX: OpenStax CNX, p. 335. Mar 6, 2019 <http://cnx.org/contents/4abf04bf-93a0-45c3-9cbc-2cefd46e68cc@10.16>.