

STRUM A NEW CHORD: EMBRACING THE UNCOMFORTABLE & SHIFTING TO LEARNER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION

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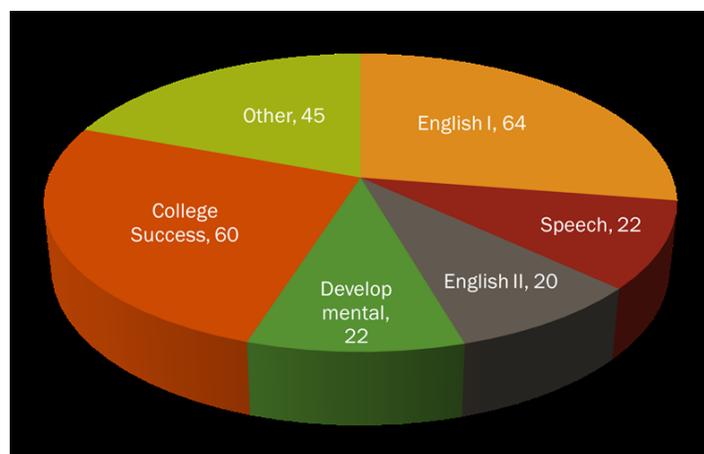
INTRODUCTION

Academic librarians often have teaching responsibilities on their campuses. Many academic librarians are considered faculty members at their institutions. The ironic truth is that librarians rarely have teacher certification and often have had very little experience or training in teaching. As a result, librarians can fall into the trap of not developing lessons with appropriately matched learning outcomes, activities and assessments. In this paper, Jim and I will discuss these pedagogies, with an emphasis on using learner-centered instruction to create better library instruction sessions.

Our institution, Northampton Community College (NCC), is located in Bethlehem, PA. Our campuses serve approximately 11,018 credit students, with 4,668 full-time students and 6,300 part-time students. NCC grants associate's degrees, as well as certificates and specialized diplomas. With so many students, the library runs a large number of instruction sessions through our strong information literacy program. Therefore, we must give some background on typical one-shot library sessions.

College classes typically meet three days a week for fifty minutes or twice a week for seventy-five minutes, over a fifteen-week semester. Most classes run during the day, but there are also evening classes and some Saturday sessions. The library's teaching staff is comprised of five full-time librarians who have faculty status, and one part-time reference librarian. In Fall 2012, the Library held 110 sessions. During the 2011-2012 academic year, librarians taught 233 sessions. (Please see Figure 1 for a breakdown of classes.)

Figure 1: Information Literacy Classes Taught during the 2011-2012 Academic Year



Key:

- English I**=64 sessions
- College Success** (developmental level)=60 sessions
- Other** (subject-specific)=45 sessions
- Speech Communication**=22 sessions
- Developmental Reading or Writing**=22 sessions
- English II** (Literature or Report Writing)=20 sessions

While the subject-specific lessons were usually successful, such as a nursing class with a specific assignment to find information about diseases, I noticed that English I and Speech Communication classes (often taken by students in their first semester) were having mixed results, and was unhappy with these sessions. One reason was that some classes were visiting without a research assignment. If they had an assignment, then students came to class without having thought of a topic—a barrier to a good session. Problems communicating with the instructor were another reason, where instructors would not share a research assignment, or did not seem interested in collaboration. Another big issue was lack of student engagement during the library class. While some students genuinely appeared interested, others were bored or checking their cell phones. Students came to library lessons with varying levels of library experience. While some students knew library basics, there were other students who did not have even rudimentary skills (like what a library catalog or database is used for). These differences in library experience only add to the challenges that a librarian faces in presenting the right amount of information to students. Lastly, a major obstacle to our librarian team is that we really do not have training as educators, yet we are expected to be teachers. If we had a better background of educational pedagogy, we would feel more comfortable in the role of faculty.

One big way this lack of educational training manifested itself was in the structure of library lessons, where everything was shoved into a single lesson. A typical lesson outline read like this:

- Choosing & narrowing a research topic
- Library tools vs. the Internet
- Searching databases for articles
- Searching for books in the catalog
- Finding books in the library
- Collecting citation information
- Evaluating research sources

It is no wonder the students seemed uninterested or overwhelmed: this is a lot to grasp in a short class session. Librarians seem to feel it is our duty to cover as much as possible, since that class may be the only chance to reach that group of students. But “coverage” does not equal student learning. (For more information, see Barr & Tagg article in Appendix: Recommended Readings.)

LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS

These frustrations led me to talk to Jim Benner, director of the professional development department that helps NCC’s faculty improve their teaching techniques. He introduced the concept of learner-centered instruction, as a solution to this problem. Learner-centered instruction shifts the focus from the teacher to the student/learner. Its orientation is to the natural processes of the human brain, our innate curiosity, our desire to answer questions that matter to us, and solve problems. Learner-centered teaching has a lot more to do with listening than with talking. Whether focusing on an assignment,

possible topics, or research methods, we must try to connect the content of a class with student needs; we must ask some questions to which we do not know the answers—an uncomfortable feeling. We need to engage in a conversation with the particular group of students in front of us, not use a pre-conceived or packaged plan, and we must have the students “do” something, in order for them to learn it. We must listen better, and we must have students do more than just listen. (For more information on learner-centered instruction and assessment, please refer to the books written by Huba & Freed and by Weimer, in the Recommended Readings appendix.)

After discussing learner-centered instruction, the two of us settled on some solutions: creating student learning outcomes for library sessions, encouraging instructor buy-in, creating learner-centered classroom activities, and assessing student learning. These four areas will be the focus for the rest of this paper.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

As we imagine a plan, we can keep the idea of “alignment” in mind, to create some structure to our more open, “uncomfortable” approach. We want to know what the learning outcomes are for a class, use methods that connect with those outcomes, and try to measure the extent to which students have learned/acquired the knowledge or skill embedded in the outcome’s language. We must create a specific context for learning, focus on the processes of learning, ask the students to self-assess, and document the learning in some way. As we develop Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), we can use the well-known heuristic, *Bloom’s Taxonomy*, to identify the level of cognitive challenge for the session, tying each outcome to one of the six levels: Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, and Create. It is probably true, in most one-time library sessions, we hope students can do higher-order thinking—like “evaluating sources”—but we need to match such SLOs to the specific group we are meeting.

SLOs express what a student knows or can do, usually at the end of a planned learning experience. They focus on the product rather than on the process. The outcomes must be measurable, identifiable and observable. They should be detailed and specific, and include action verbs such as: define, describe, demonstrate, compare, argue, and create. Jim asked me to write a list of current student learning outcomes for library sessions. My initial list contained about twenty items, too many for one lesson. Jim and I edited the list to three SLOs.

- 1) Student will create a starting search strategy.
- 2) Student will find library books and periodicals using online search tools.
- 3) Student will critically evaluate his/her research sources.

These are the most crucial learning outcomes, yet not every library session will cover all three outcomes. The best practice would be to assign one outcome to a class, based on the students’ research assignment or needs. SLOs will guide a

librarian in planning a class lesson, deciding which activities students should perform, and assessing whether students learned anything during the class session.

INSTRUCTOR BUY-IN

The second item on our list was to communicate with and encourage instructor engagement in the process of shifting to learner-centered library instruction. While librarians see the value of library sessions, information literacy instruction does not work unless the classroom instructor feels passionately about it, too. There are many frustrations that come with trying to communicate our value to professors. For instance, what kind of message do professors send when they schedule a library class, but do not attend that class with their students? The most successful sessions occur when students have a research assignment and have chosen a topic to pursue. When a class comes into the library without either of those things, the instructors are setting the students up to fail. A good library session happens when the professor communicates with the librarian ahead of time, and during the class itself, and assigns some value to it—meaning that the students get some kind of credit for participating in the library class.

To get instructors on the same page, it is important to speak with them prior to planning the lesson. Instructors should be made aware that the librarian has created learning outcomes for the class; outcomes can only be made when the instructor has shared information with librarians ahead of time. Professors should be encouraged to bring the class at their point of need, when a research assignment is soon due. If they are not ready for research, it is perfectly acceptable to ask them to reschedule later in the semester. If the professor has not handed out a research assignment, offer to help them create one. The easiest way to reach out to the instructor is with a confirmation email after they have requested a library session. Ask them as many questions as needed in order to create learning outcomes and a lesson plan. If the instructor does not communicate, well, the librarian cannot assume all of the responsibility for the session.

In response to these concerns of students' struggles, outreach to instructors, and working with a solid research assignment, I wanted to alter the ways that I teach during library sessions. This entailed creating learner-centered activities. In a library setting we need to approach learner-centered instruction differently, as there is only one encounter with students, as opposed to seeing them throughout an entire semester. The following sample lessons will demonstrate how to move to learner-centered instruction, incorporating methods such as less lecturing by the librarian, letting students make discoveries, more conversations, more problem-solving, and some pre- and post-reflective writing. This process may make the librarian feel uncomfortable, as some approaches may be new or more casual than normal.

THREE SAMPLE LESSONS

Jim and I began planning learner-centered classroom activities. We decided to break lesson plans into three groups,

each based on the learning outcomes that we created earlier in our process.

SLO #1: Student will create a starting search strategy.

Our first learning outcome indicates that students need a more basic introduction to the library and how to create research topics. Posting a blank Word document on a computer screen entitled "Our Agenda Today" will allow students to create the lesson. A group scavenger hunt is a simple way to get students to explore the physical library and online website; each group answers different questions and reports their findings to the rest of the class. Another activity is the minute paper: give students a prompt (such as, "Write down a topic you would like to research, and what your search strategy would be") with one minute to reply. Their answers will guide the lesson. Utilizing technologies like Clickers (audience-response systems) or websites like Poll Everywhere (free live polling systems) to ask questions will get the attention of millennial students. Questions like, "What do you want to learn about the library today?" can generate a student-centered lesson.

Another approach to this type of class is teaching how to choose and narrow a research topic. The librarian could post a broad topic on their screen, like "alcohol." Asking students to list the related Who, What, When, Where and Why of the topic helps break it down, while also teaching students how to identify keywords. Try a "Mind-Walk:" place flip charts around the classroom, each with a different, related word/phrase on them (e.g., violence, media, and aggression). Students circulate throughout the room and write down keywords or aspects of the topic. Everyone compares charts and creates a cohesive research topic. Another easy activity is to post a picture on the screen. Ask students to list the words that come to mind, remembering synonyms. Always end a library session with some form of assessment to see if the SLO was achieved. An assessment for this type of class may be to give students a broad topic, like, "divorce", and ask them to break it down to a narrow, researchable topic, on their own.. Students would hopefully brainstorm to a more focused topic, such as: "Low income levels and poverty frequently cause divorce." Assessment could involve reviewing students' new topics according to a simple checklist/rubric: Is it a full sentence?; Which are the strong words in the sentence? Are there at least three "keywords" for searching in the sentence? In other words, which parts of the sentence meet the criteria for a more "researchable" topic? There could be a conversation immediately with the class, sharing good examples from the students' work. Or, the librarian could collect answers at the end of class, and follow through with the instructor at a later date, via email, or even by visiting their classroom again, for a quick debriefing with the students.

SLO #2: Student will find library books and periodicals using online search tools.

When approaching a class that is more prepared for in-depth research, librarians should present activities that include critical thinking. One activity would involve traditional sources

like encyclopedias. Ask students to search and compare entries on a topic using a general encyclopedia, a subject-specific encyclopedia, and Wikipedia. Databases can be introduced at beginning levels, as long as the database is easy to navigate. Present the students with a scenario that gives them enough information needed to solve a research problem and name a simple database that they can navigate without much instruction. Take it one step further by presenting an in-depth scenario that involves searching a more complicated database, like ProQuest. A great learner-centered activity is to introduce peer-to-peer accountability. Pair up students and ask them to find research on their partner's topic. Ask them to explain to their partner why they chose a certain source. An assessment at this level could involve giving students a research scenario and giving them the option of where to start research. Ask students to explain what database they chose, why, and how they searched it.

SLO #3: Student will critically evaluate his/her research sources.

For a class that is more prepared or advanced, they can focus on source evaluation. NCC librarians typically focus on currency, reliability, and relevance. Having a good discussion of the three evaluation criteria is important. Do not just throw those words around; ask students what they think those words mean and how they would apply them to research. Show examples from library databases. Place three different article citations up on the screen and have a discussion about currency. To discuss reliability, place an article on the screen where students could identify where credible facts were gathered. From that same article, ask students to identify a sentence that would help explain that research topic, as this would demonstrate relevance. To assess this class, a quiz where students correctly define those terms is appropriate. In lieu of a quiz, ask students to define and explain those three terms in their own words.

CONCLUSION

Approaching library classes with learner-centered methods and pedagogy can be uncomfortable—embrace it! Be ready to embrace failure, too. Start out small and change one thing about teaching. Create learning outcomes that guide your lessons. Match those outcomes to library instruction activities. Pair those outcomes with assessments, considering different assessment techniques. Cover less, where appropriate, by “teaching” less. Let students plan the agenda or drive the discussion. Give the students time to explore library concepts on their own. Remember, you may try something, and even if it does not work, you may still learn something about yourself or about students that you did not know before! Learner-centered instruction is a shared process—you should not be in it alone. Be sure to have conversations with your colleagues and supervisors about your successes and failures. Teaching should always be an evolving process—think of learner-centered instruction as one more component of the entire process. Good luck in your teaching!

APPENDIX A

Recommended Readings (handout from session)

- Angelo, Thomas and Cross, Patricia. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993. Print.
- Bain, Kevin. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. Print.
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- Huba, Mary E and Jann E. Freed. *Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learning*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000. Print.
- Kaplowitz, Joan R. *Transforming Information Literacy Instruction Using Learner-Centered Teaching*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2012. Print.
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- O'Banion, Terry. *A Learning College for the 21st Century*. Westport, CT: Oryx, 1997. Print.
- Palmer, Parker. *The Courage to Teach: The Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998. Print.
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- Tagg, Robert. *A Learning Paradigm College*. Boston, MA: Anker, 2003. Print.
- Weimer, Maryellen, PhD. "Incorporating Active Learning Requires Purposeful Design." *The Teaching Professor Blog*. Faculty Focus. 29 Feb. 2012. Web. 29 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/questions-about-active-learning/>>
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- Wells, Veronica. "Learning to Embrace the Uncomfortable." *ACRLog*. ACRL, 2 Feb. 2012. Web. 8 Feb. 2012. <<http://acrlog.org/2012/02/02/learning-to-embrace-the-uncomfortable/>>
- Zull, Jason. *The Art of Changing the Brain: Enriching the Practice of Teaching by Exploring the Biology of Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2002. Print.

APPENDIX B

Questions to Help Guide the Learner-Centered Instruction Process (handout from session)

What is something that bothers or frustrates you in your own library instruction sessions?

Write down one possible learning outcome for your typical one-shot information literacy class.

Share any examples of your own successful methods of outreach to instructors or marketing your sessions.

What will you do differently as a result of this session?