

Engage Your Audience by Incorporating Personal Experiences and Enthusiasm into Instruction

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Soon after I return from a vacation, I'm anxious to print the pictures I took, tuck my souvenirs inside a scrapbook, and share my travel adventures with friends. However, if you're like me, as our daily routine takes over, those travel mementos can be overlooked as our attention turns back to regular daily life.

As Special Collections Librarian at Miami University, I've found that I can continue enjoying my travel experiences through the rare books and manuscripts in my care. Incorporating vacation photographs, souvenirs, and stories into instruction sessions not only offers a way to engage students right from the beginning, but also provides an instructive complement to the items I select to share with them. By dusting off my photo albums, digging out keepsakes, and integrating stories about them into the subject of my instruction session, I've discovered a great way to relive my travels, relate them to my work, and, most importantly, connect with students by conveying my enthusiasm for what I do, both on the job and in my free time. Even if you don't take to the road frequently, or you provide instruction on a topic that doesn't lend itself as easily to personal travel, you can still engage students by sharing relevant personal experiences and interests during conversations that can take place during instruction sessions.

Walter Havighurst Special Collections Library

Located on the top floor of Miami's main library, the Walter Havighurst Special Collections contains more than 65,000 volumes, plus numerous manuscripts and archives. These unique resources cover a variety of topics, from American literature and Russian culture to football and Native American traditions.

Recently, Special Collections moved into a renovated space that simultaneously allows us to serve individual researchers and provide student instruction. Despite our elegant, functional new quarters and a wealth of resources that can benefit virtually any class, it remains a challenge to raise awareness of our services among most undergraduate students and their professors. To help address this, we hold workshops and provide tours for faculty, send emails to department heads about new acquisitions, and share details of my latest discoveries in conversations with administrators, fellow University Senators and other librarians. Whatever the approach, we're hoping to bring more students and faculty alike to Special

Collections. Once they've flipped a book's pages to reveal a fore-edge painting or experienced the thrill of transcribing a letter written by Abraham Lincoln, we know they'll be back – and they'll share their discoveries with others.

Using Personal Stories and Experience

But what is the best way to engage students and show them the value of these primary source materials? Interacting with Millennials and trying to reach those with different learning styles has led me to explore how best to maximize their potential for success in the classroom. One of the ways I've found successful is to share travel personal stories related to books that are connected to the course they are taking. For example, during class visits focusing on 19th century children's literature, I often show our signed 1869 copy of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, together with a photograph of myself at 12, standing next to Alcott's grave in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts. The photograph gives meaning to my description of my pilgrimage to Orchard House, the Alcott family home in Concord, and how it influenced Alcott's work.

I've also relied on my personal experiences to make documents connected with Civil War-era individuals come alive. Attending Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia during my junior year of college makes me better able to interpret details about Lexington shared in a handful of letters in our collection that Mary Randolph Custis Lee (the wife of Robert E. Lee) wrote in 1870 to the sculptor Moses Ezekiel. Additionally, sharing photographs and souvenirs from my visit to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois has enhanced my work with letters and other items from our collections that are associated with Abraham Lincoln.

Magical, Mystical, Medieval Germany

Therefore, when a professor in the Department of German, Russian and East Asian Languages asked me to share Special Collections items pertaining to medieval Germany with first-year students in his "Magical, Mystical, Medieval Germany" course, my thoughts immediately turned to what I could share for this 50-minute instruction session from my treasures collected during three visits to Nuremberg, Germany during the past decade.

Before I showed the students any items, though, I asked how many of them had been to Germany. Three of the 15 answered affirmatively, and shared where they had traveled; casually talking about our common experiences helped to establish rapport. I observed that sessions like this one could inspire future study-abroad plans, or even just armchair traveling to some of the German cities we'd be "visiting" during our class.

Germany's role as a leader in book illustration and typography during the late 15th century allowed me to incorporate instruction about the history of printing into the class visit. An original leaf from the Gutenberg Bible served as a visual tool to describe how German printer Johann Gutenberg made people more comfortable with his innovation of printing with moveable type by making the Bible look like a handwritten manuscript. I also showed an original leaf from the Nuremberg Chronicle, which likely were made while famed artist Albrecht Dürer (*Praying Hands*) was an apprentice. I called their attention to my postcards and photographs capturing my impressions of Dürer's Nuremberg home, now a museum. Since museum visitors can try their hand at printing an image from a Dürer woodcut on a hand printing press, I also displayed to the class the print I made while in Germany from the Dürer woodcut depicting St. Sebaldus, the patron saint of Nuremberg. We talked about what it was like to operate the press, and how hands-on activities can help us remember our experiences (Willis & Thomas, 2006).

Evaluations proved that I had connected with these students. "It was amazing to see [a page from] the original Gutenberg Bible," one wrote. Another said that the most important thing she learned was "just how special, unique and priceless this particular collection of books actually is."

When assessing my greatest strength as an instructor, students repeatedly said that it was my knowledge and my enthusiasm for the material. Another student added, "She engaged each member of the class with the way she spoke and her personal things that correlated with the subject." This is gratifying and also productive, as it has been shown "teacher interest (is) positively linked with student motivation and learning" (Long & Hoy, 2006, p. 312) and, by Prenzel, Kramer, and Drechsel, that students are "more motivated by their teacher's demonstration of subject interest than an emphasis on content relevance or the quality of instruction" (as cited in Long & Hoy, 2006, p. 304).

A follow-up thank-you note from the class revealed further insights into how beneficial their visit to Special

Collections had been. "I'm so excited to now know about Special Collections!," one wrote. "I had no idea!" Another thanked me for my "time and knowledge about a rare collection of incredible books." "This was a unique experience I may have never had unless we came to see you," still another said. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," a fellow student agreed. And finally, a student shared, "I had a great time learning about the books you had chosen to show us. I really enjoyed your presentation and all the information you gave us. It was nice to see your own souvenirs, too!"

Why Everyone Can Do This

You don't have to have traveled extensively to give this a try. Just sharing details about your avocations or previous professional experiences can provide a way to convey your enthusiasm to others. Whatever your discipline as a librarian – English, Business, Sociology, etc. – there is some reason(s) you chose to support or to be a liaison to that field. You may not have photographs or centuries-old books to catch students' interest, but there very likely is something that you find interesting or fascinating – a personal story, a news article, a person you've met, a movie – in your field that can help not only illuminate for the students how to do their research, but why someone might be interested in doing it in the first place.

We're all likely to have some humorous or fascinating related experience to share that can catch the attention of even the most reticent, overworked, or sleep-deprived student. It all helps not only to make our topic of the day stick with our audience after the instruction session is over, but also to demonstrate our approachability and eagerness to help students discover resources or learn how to use them better. If you're like me, maybe speaking before a large group isn't your forte. But somehow, sharing an anecdote about a painting you saw while visiting the campus art museum during a lunch break, or a program you watched on television the night before, breaks the ice and establishes a connection with your audience. There's a lot of talk lately about connecting with students via social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), which certainly has its place, but these efforts to gain friends and followers should not replace other "in-person" efforts to humanize and demystify librarians.

It's sometimes not easy for us to pick the items we want to share and talk about with students during our instruction sessions, so we decide to solely "stick to the assignment." Likewise, it's tempting to want to cover a lot of material in a short time, without taking a few

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Image 1: A recreation of the organized brainstorm in process



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moments throughout the session to connect with your students as people. While it is certainly always good to find out what the students’ assignment/research project is (so our work is directly meaningful to them), instruction sessions still can be greatly helped by showing research tools in a way which makes it clear these resources are meaningful to **you**. Engaging students with what you want to impart can become enjoyable and fulfilling when you integrate your own experiences – whether through travel or other life lessons – into instruction. Before you know it, you’ll have new friends who see you not only as a resource to consult for future research projects, but also a kindred spirit in a previously unknown section of the library.

References

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