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A STRONG START OUT OF THE GATE! BUILDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT BEFORE CLASS BEGINS

LINDY SCRIPPS-HOEKSTRA

INTRODUCTION

It's ten minutes before the start of your library instruction session. The students are trickling into the classroom and you are… fiddling with the computer? Shuffling papers? Making small talk with the professor? Meanwhile students are left with nothing to do but idly thumb through their phones or chat with classmates. When it's time to officially get class started, you're already behind in terms of student engagement, and thus need to break through phone reveries and interrupt conversations in order to bring the focus to your anticipatory set and the objectives of the lesson. Rather than starting a session struggling to gain attention, use these valuable minutes before class to help generate engagement.

For instruction librarians, particularly those teaching one-shot sessions, face-to-face time with students is at a premium and it is crucial to design lessons that make the most of every minute. However, this planning might not always account for the minutes leading up to the start of a session—a short but crucial period of time in which a librarian can set the tone for the class, build student engagement, and create an effective learning environment. As a former K-12 teacher, planning for the minutes leading up to class time was a crucial component of developing lessons. As I've transitioned to teaching research skills and information literacy in the university classroom, I've found that many of these pre-class engagement strategies have translated well to this setting and this has helped me in efforts to activate prior knowledge, facilitate self-assessment, and build rapport with students—all before library instruction sessions "officially" begin.

PEDAGOGICAL PURPOSE

K-12 teachers have long known the value of pre-class engagement strategies. In 1970, Kounin encouraged teachers to manage the momentum of their classroom carefully, finding that high school students had higher gains with teachers that had little down-time and an absence of "slowdowns" transitioning to the start of class (p. 107). The concept of intentionally engaging students during the time between classes became informally known in the field as "bell work" or "bell ringers." Jones (2000) described the goal of bell work as a simple, yet meaningful learning experience for students that does not require active teaching on the part of the instructor—freeing them to take care of any last minute administrative tasks or make adjustments to classroom technology.

Effective bell work consists of simple, brief warm-up activities. "Make them doable. This is not the midterm exam" (Jones, 2000, pg. 118). These activities can be designed to accomplish a variety of possible outcomes, from reviewing previously covered concepts, to generating interest in new content, or simply getting a head start on arranging classroom furniture for group work. At the K-12 level, bell work also serves the additional purpose of deterring problematic behavior that tends to develop when students haven't been given direction or a task, such as wandering around the halls or failing to retrieve needed books and materials for class (Wong, Wong, Rogers & Brooks, 2012).

While there are no bells or pressing concerns about problematic behavior in the college classroom, the pedagogical principles of pre-class engagement are still just as important. By incorporating short activities leading up to the start of class, an instructor can activate prior knowledge and prepare student minds to receive and integrate new information before beginning the lesson. Pre-class student engagement that assesses student understanding supports constructivist teaching by making student thinking

explicit and allowing the instructor to identify misconceptions (Slater, 2006). Further, for librarians teaching one-shot sessions, getting to know students and building an atmosphere of trust can be tricky when the clock is ticking. Using pre-class time to establish rapport can help to combat library anxiety and foster a learning environment in which the librarian can succeed in teaching their learning objectives.

Similar to the K-12 level, pre-class engagement activities in the college classroom should be simple and short—a great way to boost student engagement with little additional work or preparation on the part of the librarian. The following ideas represent examples of ways to activate prior knowledge, facilitate self-assessment, and build rapport all before the start of class. These strategies can serve as an extension of the anticipatory set component of a lesson plan or shorter warm-ups before a more fully-structured anticipatory set.

STRATEGIES: ACTIVATING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Connecting new information to what students already know is a foundational element of successful teaching. Activating prior knowledge facilitates the retrieval of related information from long-term memory, enabling the brain to better incorporate new material. While this pedagogical concept may seem fairly straightforward, the trickier task is actually determining exactly what knowledge to activate. Hollingsworth and Ybarra (2009) recommended two ways of activating prior knowledge: through universal experience or sub-skill review. Activating knowledge through universal experience involves stimulating a memory from students' life experience that is related to the new learning while sub-skill review focuses on the explicit review of something previously taught that is required for the new lesson (p. 85).

Activating prior knowledge through universal experience can be an effective strategy for pre-class engagement. Look through your lesson and learning objectives to identify a concept to highlight, if possible pinpointing the one that you think will provide the most benefit for helping students learn new content. From there, do some brainstorming. Think about related concepts students might already be familiar with and consider analogies. Effective analogies contain two main parts: the target, which is the concept that one wishes to explain, and the source, which is the familiar piece of information that is used to understand the issue (Pena & de Souza Andrade-Filho, 2010). As a learner's brain checks for similarities between source and target, knowledge can be imported from the familiar situation and applied to the new one. Be sure to clearly explain how their experience connects to new material and why a metaphor or analogy was used to ensure that all students are able to link material. The following examples are pre-class activities designed to activate students' prior knowledge through the use of analogous universal experience.

Example Activities:

- Lesson topic: Research as inquiry
    - Pre-class engagement: Play a clip from a detective show involving the investigation of a crime scene. YouTube is helpful for this and can loop a short clip so that it will play continuously. Display the question, "What steps are involved in solving a crime?" When class begins, discuss with the students how crime scene investigation is similar to the iterative research process in that it requires asking new questions based upon information as it is discovered (Farrell, 2015).
- Lesson topic: Authority is contextual
    - Pre-class engagement: Display the question, "What was the first piece of info you looked for today and where did you go to find it?" Provide an example such as "Today's Weather/Radar Now App". Using a response tool like Padlet, Socrative, or PollEverywhere students add responses. When class starts, review the responses and discuss how important it is to go to the correct type of source for your information need and that it wouldn't make sense to look for weather in a course textbook, just how it won't work to look for a scholarly article on an event that occurred a week ago.
- Lesson topic: The peer-review process
    - Pre-class engagement: Display a "spot the difference" picture game (two seemingly identical photos with small changes in one). When class begins have the students point out the differences they noticed and explain that just like how the two images looked similar at first, once you know what differences to look for it's hard not to see them. This is similar to identifying differences between popular publications and peer-reviewed journal articles. While at first they may seem similar, once you have a criteria and know what to look for, you'll be able to spot the difference.
- Lesson topic: Database searching
    - Pre-class engagement: Play dating service commercials by creating a playlist in YouTube of Match.com, Christian Mingle, Farmersonly.com, etc. Display the question, "Where do you look for love?" When class starts, discuss how just as there are many different dating services, many serving a niche audience, the library provides access to a number of different databases, many serving a specific subject while others are more general and interdisciplinary (this analogy can be extended in some fun ways, see Stahura, 2014).

- Lesson topic: Plagiarism
  - Pre-class engagement: Play the musical scene from the Disney film "The Little Mermaid" in which the sea witch Ursula steals the Little Mermaid's voice. Display the question, "How does this relate to plagiarism?" When class begins, discuss how plagiarism amounts to losing your own unique voice as a writer by using others' words.

STRATEGIES: SELF-ASSESSMENT

Effective instructors need to know what their students have already learned. For librarians often dealing with limited class time, there is no sense covering material that students have already mastered. This is where a pre-class self-assessment can be an informative and informal tool for shaping the content of the session. There are a number of helpful quizzing technologies available to help facilitate knowledge assessment prior to the start of class as well as more traditional paper and pencil options. Despite all these possible options, for most students self-assessment is not something particularly enjoyable. In order to make this pre-class strategy work and establish a dynamic and engaging class environment, consider the following activities that incorporate elements of competition and creativity. Note that these will also work well as a short recap/exit ticket at the end of class.

Example Activities:

- Technological options:
  - Socrative Space Race: Included in a free Socrative account is a "space race" feature in which a spaceship moves across the screen when students answer a question correctly. As a pre-class activity, start a Socrative space race with the login information displayed on a whiteboard and the prompt to "Get your spaceship as far as you can." In the time leading up to class, students answer questions about their understanding of the concept for the day. When class starts, briefly review the answers with students before moving on (optional prize for the winner!).
  - Definition Challenge (http://splasho.com/upgoer5/): This website challenges users to define a concept using the 1,000 most common words in the English language—a task that is just tricky enough to be fun. As a pre-class activity, display the web address and directions for students to define a term such as "plagiarism" or "research." When class begins have students volunteer their responses. They are able to compare theirs to each other's, which provides a basic look at their understanding of a concept while they enjoy seeing what others were able to come up with.
- Paper and pencil options: For these activities you can simply write directions on a white board and students can use their own paper. Alternately you can print the directions on half-sheets of paper and pass them out as students enter the room.
  - Word splash: Display five to seven words related to the concept you'll be teaching on the board (e.g., paper, students, plagiarism, words, copy). Also display the directions to connect the words together in two or three sentences that define plagiarism. When class begins have students volunteer their responses.
  - Gist: Display the directions to define a concept in a specific number of words (e.g., 14-16), no more and no less! When class begins have students volunteer their responses.
  - Acrostic challenge: Display a word vertically on the board (e.g., research, library) with the directions to define and describe the term by working as an acrostic puzzle (see Figure 1). Posting an example using a different term is helpful to cue students. When class begins have students volunteer their responses.

FIGURE 1: STUDENT SAMPLE ACROSTIC CHALLENGE
<PLACEHOLDER; EDITORS WILL PLACE FIGURE HERE IN FINAL DOC>

STRATEGIES: BUILD RAPPORT

Establishing and fostering a sense of rapport with students can be a challenge for librarians, especially when teaching one-shot sessions. Even though this can be difficult, it is well worth the effort—establishing rapport boosts students' engagement, facilitates learning, and generates positive feelings on the part of both students and instructors (McAdoo, 2012). While it is easy to mistake establishing rapport with efforts to be the "cool teacher," developing connections with students really just boils down to being genuine, open, and friendly. Using the minutes leading up to the start of class, a librarian can begin to set this tone for the instruction session. Many of these simple activities can also be incorporated along with the previous ones designed to activate prior knowledge and assess learning.

Example Activities:

- Greet them: One of the simplest ways to make a connection with students is by standing at the door and saying hello as they enter the room. As basic as it may seem, a friendly greeting with a smile and eye contact right at the start sends a message of approachability and collegiality. If there's no time to develop any other pre-class activities, this one is a must.

- Name cards: Being able to call students by name during class is another simple way to establish rapport. Have paper out for students to fold into tents with their names displayed as well as their preferred pronouns.
- Who am I?: Display images of librarians from popular culture in a PowerPoint slideshow set to automatically run. When class begins briefly explain your role and discuss how this may seem very different from what is typically depicted in the media or preconceptions students (particularly first-year students) may have.

CONCLUSION

With a little extra preparation before the start of an instruction session a librarian can begin to engage students starting the minute they walk into the room. The activities listed above are all designed to be easy to implement and can be modified in a number of different ways. Remember pre-class activities are intended to be hands off for the librarian, they are something for the students to do while giving you time to make last minute adjustments or stand by the door and greet students as they enter. Spending some time thinking through ways to reach students before class while planning an instruction session can provide a boost to student engagement and help activate prior knowledge, facilitate self-assessment, and build rapport with students—all before the "bell" rings.

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Figure 1: Student Sample Acrostic Challenge