

PERFORMANCE THEORY AND INFORMATION LITERACY: USING THE METHOD TO ESTABLISH RAPPORT WITH STUDENTS

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EARNING STUDENT ATTENTION

Learning occurs when students engage with a subject, and they engage most readily with subjects that inspire or excite them (Leamson, 1999). Information literacy, sadly, is not exciting to many students (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). Since the subject itself doesn't focus student attention, it is up to librarians to make the experience of learning about information literacy as compelling and entertaining as possible. One way to do this is to incorporate the techniques from theatrical performance into library instruction sessions. Actors draw from their individual personalities to embody fictional characters in a way that feels authentic. Librarians can apply the same methods to create and deliver lessons that are emotionally compelling as well as educational. To clarify, we are not advocating that the one-shot library instruction session be reduced to an empty spectacle. Rather, our vision for library instruction is one in which students learn valuable skills and concepts, but leave the session with lasting, positive impressions of information literacy as a subject, the library as a place, and librarians as likable, friendly people.

It all begins with the battle for our students' attention. In order for instruction of any kind to be successful, students must decide to invest energy in learning what's being taught (Leamson, 1999). In this regard, library instructors face a challenge. Students arrive for one-shot sessions brimming with apathy. Instructors can tell students that the material in

the impending lesson plan is valuable, even crucial for their academic success. Students, however, have heard this all before. Many of their instructors extol the virtues of various subjects and skills, but their messages have the same impediment to sinking in as the message that deep-fried cheese can lead to heart attacks: it gets lost in the forest of similar messages, and the consequences don't strike nearly quickly enough to make obvious sense. Students catch on that instructors can be inclined to overstate the importance of whatever is being taught, so they look for more reliable cues than verbal claims. The cue students rely on most, in our observation, is the effect the item at hand will have on their final grades. The larger the effect, the greater the amount of attention students are willing to pay. Attention, being a limited resource, is not squandered. Like money (which, at least for librarians, is also a limited resource), it is spent on two things: necessities like shelter, food, and alcohol; and luxuries like entertainment, art, or escort services. For student attention, the division might look more like this: necessities—grade-defining projects, easy extra credit assignments, social life, entertainment; and luxuries—minor assignments, learning for its own sake, sleep.

Because it is not possible to force anyone to learn anything, students must make the choice to learn. That choice can be influenced, but not controlled. Consequently, if we want to capture our students' attention, we have to convince students that our subjects are worth learning, to make them believe that it is a good idea to focus their attention and learn (Palmer, 1997; Lanham, 2006). Research on the human brain and memory suggests that the reason for why students choose to direct their attention at the material doesn't have an effect on their learning (Leamson 1999). Thus, threatening students with the possibility of poor grades, while motivational, isn't necessarily any better than other methods for garnering attention. What matters is that students decide to focus and learn. Furthermore,

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fear of failure is temporary, usually evaporating at the end of the semester. Inspiration, however, endures. We contend that library instructors should seek to inspire our students, and that this is done by communicating our passion for our subject matter through our in-class performance. If students see and hear an instructor demonstrating enthusiasm for a subject in an emotionally authentic manner, they can be encouraged to believe that what is being taught is worthwhile and therefore deserving of their attention.

This approach doesn't require significant alteration to existing lesson plans since one-shot library instruction already shares a lot in common with theatrical performance. It seems natural to compare semester-long college courses to one-shot library instruction sessions: What are they, after all, but a single class period from another course that is devoted to learning about the library? The counterintuitive answer is that they are an entirely different beast. They may take place in a classroom and are delivered to college students, but in practice, the similarities are outweighed by the differences (Vossler & Sheidlower, 2011). A more productive comparison can be made to theatrical and comedic presentations. In the coming paragraphs, we shall explain the similarities between one-shot library instruction and theatrical presentations. Note: For the purposes of the following discussion, we use the word "presenter" to refer to both theatrical performers as well as one-shot library instructors.

IMPRESSIONS ENDURE, MEMORIES DECAY

The audience and presenter begin each performance as strangers to one another. Because the presenter lacks the shared familiarity that develops over time, such as between students and their teachers in semester-long courses, attention and respect must be earned anew during each performance. In practical terms, this means that presenters can't rely on future encounters to recover from flawed performances. There will be no future encounters with that particular audience. A poor impression is essentially permanent. Alternatively, a good impression is just as indelible. Each performance stands on its own, separate from all of the rest.

Fortunately, we get to practice our spiels dozens if not hundreds of times. Because presenters usually end up repeating the same few performances over and over again, it is possible to invest more time and energy into perfecting those few performances. Instructors teaching semester-long courses can't afford to expend that kind of energy on any one lesson. In short, while there is a lot of pressure to repeatedly deliver effective performances, there is also sufficient opportunity to prepare and thereby maximize the chances of success. In light of these similarities, it makes sense to ask whether the goals for one-shot library instruction might not benefit from being brought more in line with the goals for a successful performance. That is, instead of focusing primarily on transmitting skills and concepts related to information literacy, which can be problematic to impart in the context of a 50 or 80 minute lesson, one-shot sessions should be more focused at making lasting, positive impressions.

As time passes, impressions and emotions endure;

information and skills decay. We offer the following unscientific, anecdotal experience in support of our claim. One of us attended a professional production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when he was a teenager. Today, he recalls little about the plot and less about iambic pentameter, but the magical experience of watching the play has stayed with him for decades. That one compelling experience motivated him to attend many more plays over the years, and to take an active interest in Shakespeare. It is relevant to note that he walked into the auditorium all those years ago without feeling much in the way of anticipation or excitement. His attendance was mandatory, part of a school assignment. It was the play, the performance of it, that achieved a lasting effect. The play ran for about two hours, and left a lifelong impression. Most library instruction sessions last for about an hour. That is not a lot of time to learn new skills or knowledge, but it is plenty of time to generate a lasting impression. A library instruction session doesn't have Shakespeare's genius backing it up, so life-changing experiences might be a bit much to ask of one. Leaving a group of students positively inclined toward the library and its denizens, however, seems like a remarkably beneficial pursuit. It is also one that can reasonably be accomplished in the space of an hour.

In addition to leaving a positive impression on the library, a sufficiently entertaining and inspiring instruction session can influence student attitudes toward information literacy. And those attitudes almost certainly need influencing. After all, in order to employ information literacy skills, students must make the decision to, in effect, do things the hard way. It takes more effort to employ information literacy skills than not. Students must believe those skills are worth exercising, despite their cost in energy and time. This all starts with their attitudes toward those skills, and those attitudes are influenced by library instruction. A tedious class makes a quick search engine query seem all the more appealing.

WHAT ACTORS CAN TEACH US ABOUT TEACHING

Now that we've made our case for the similarities between performances and library instruction, we will address how theatrical performance and stand-up comedy can supply us with insight into creating positive, lasting impressions in a library instruction setting. It begins with authenticity. To create a sense of authenticity under imaginary circumstances and keep audiences engaged in a performance, actors employ a variety of techniques. These techniques include sense memory, emotional recall, and unit analysis. Originally created by Konstantin Stanislavsky and developed by Lee Strasburg, Herbert Berghoff, Sanford Meisner, and Uta Hagen, these techniques have developed into what is known today as the Method (Griggs, 2001). The Method allows actors to bring a unique sense of self to their characters in order to enhance the emotional authenticity and intensity of a scene. As a result, audience members become more invested in the characters and the story the actors wish to tell. In practice, the focus of the Method is to develop a sense of self-awareness that provides a roadmap to finding one's emotional truth in a character. An actor's ability to follow the Method approach determines the believability of a character (Griggs, 2001). The Method decries the use of caricature

on stage as an unsustainable and uninteresting approach to engaging an audience. Actors who focus only on the outside appearance of a character are susceptible to burnout during the course of a play, and appear dishonest to the audience.

A core component of Stanislavsky's method for character development is the use of units and objectives. Units divide a script into smaller and more manageable pieces. Rather than looking at a character in the context of an entire play, actors are encouraged to break the play and its scenes into several manageable units. A unit denotes any change in the focus of a scene. Examples can range from a character changing the subject of a conversation to a new character being introduced. Actors are often encouraged to mark their scripts where each unit occurs and identify their objective for that unit (Stanislavsky, 1948). An objective is the goal for the character within a unit. Objectives can be complex or simple. For example, an objective for an actor can be as simple as finding a missing car key or it can be as difficult as motivating an apathetic character to accept a marriage proposal. Either way, the objective must be active, honest, and apparent to audience (Stanislavsky, 1948).

Just as actors divide a play into units, presenters divide a single class into manageable parts. This typically manifests itself as a lesson plan. We decide what we would like students to be able to do by the end of class and break the lessons into the necessary elements that serve those goals. Generally, the instructional design process focuses mostly on the skills or information that students should learn and much less on how the educator will affect the students emotionally. If we re-imagine lesson plans as scripts, we can begin to look at the lesson as a scene and our students as scene partners. Here's how this works. To begin, we review the lesson plan and identify any shifts in the focus of the class. Take the first five minutes of the class. The presenter begins with a self-introduction. The focus of the students changes from whatever they were doing before the class to the presenter. Identify this shift in attention as a unit change and generate the emotional objective for this unit. The objective might be to make students feel a sense of anticipation for the coming lesson. In another unit, the presenter may want the students to feel confident about their ability to accomplish today's task. Once the objective is identified, the presenter can do whatever is necessary to reach that objective.

For example, for the self-introduction, the presenter might choose to smile broadly, to speak with enthusiasm, and to move around the room. Added together, these behaviors strongly suggest that the presenter is excited and enthusiastic, and students tend to mirror the presenter's apparent emotional state. Once the presenter has developed the supporting physical characteristics, we can begin to teach in a way that will service our emotional outcomes. If the outcome is to make students excited, we might give an inspiring narrative recounting the success of a student who was once in their position. If the goal is to put students at ease, we might share something personal about ourselves and explain our professional expertise to make them feel as though they are in good hands. Precisely how we go about doing any of this should unfold from our own unique personalities and good old fashioned trial and error (Hagan & Frankel, 1973).

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