Using a Back and Forth Presentation Format to Engage Students in Introductory English Composition Courses

JaNae Kinikin and Shaun Jackson, Weber State University

The style an instructor uses to teach a class can take many different formats. For many years, the librarians at Weber State University taught introduction to library resources sessions to introductory English composition classes using a lecture-style format. These sessions consisted of a thirty minute demonstration introducing the 20-30 students to the library catalog, an article database, and the services provided by the library including reference, reserves, and inter-library loan. After the demonstration, the students were provided with a six-page workbook with short answer and fill-in the blank questions focusing on the resources and concepts that had been presented. Although the students attempted to complete the worksheets, they were asking the instructors questions almost immediately on concepts, such as article citations, that had just been presented a few minutes prior.   The number and types of questions being asked implied that students weren't grasping the information presented. In addition, some students appeared disinterested during the demonstration which suggested our method of teaching was ineffective.

Instruction librarians began to brainstorm ideas on how to improve the sessions with several goals in mind: making the sessions more interactive, covering the material in a way that was more meaningful to students, and presenting the information in a manner that would increase retention and decrease boredom. Although other institutions have tried different methods for library instruction sessions such as online tutorials (Badke, 2009) and multi-session workshops (Houlson, 2007), our library had a tradition of introductory English classes coming to the library for one session and we felt that this practice should continue. Additionally, we knew the information covered in the sessions was new to most of the students, as some librarians had informally polled students at the beginning of their sessions and the majority indicated that this was their first time in the library and that they had never used catalogs or databases. In addition, the post-session evaluation responses collected from the lecture-style sessions indicated that students recognized their need for help in using library resources.

Both the English faculty and library instructors liked the idea of the hands-on workbook containing useful explanatory information about the library's resources. However, much of the material in this workbook was not directly related to the students' immediate needs, and was also covered in either upper-division, course-integrated library instruction sessions or in Weber State's required information literacy course. In short, there was too much information for a 50-minute session. In revising the handouts, the librarians decided to take a minimalist approach, focusing only on students' need for meaningful learning, in this case, their English composition papers. The minimalist approach is also very suitable for instructing novice learners learning to use new tools, as it takes learners' desire for meaningful activity as the chief objective for instructional design (van der Meij & Carroll, 1998). Any material that was not directly relevant to what students were doing in their English classes was eliminated, so we were left with a two-page handout. The first page provided a bullet point summary of concepts covered during the session that students could take with them; the second page was a one-page worksheet (See Appendix A) students would complete during the session and submit to their English instructor. This worksheet required students to locate three resources (one book and two scholarly articles) that they would use later in writing their papers.

First Revision

The new presentation format began with a discussion on the importance of being information literate with a slide stating "But everything I need is on Google, right?" This lead-in was followed by a slide talking about all of the information available through the library that cannot be found on the web. Next we posted slides with "True/False" questions asking the students to stand/sit depending on what they thought the correct answer might be. This interactive exercise helped get the students actively engaged in the presentation. Librarians then demonstrated each resource (library catalog, Academic Search Premier, Google Scholar) and asked the students to participate in some hands-on practice. For example, all students were asked to find a call number for the same book using the library catalog.

After these practice exercises the students used their computers to find books and articles on topics assigned by their instructor, or if no topic had been assigned, on subjects in which they were interested. Although this format was an improvement, as it got students actively engaged in the presentation, the combination of audience participation, instructor-led practice exercises, and hands-on student-focused portion required too much time.

Final Revision

In Fall 2008 a new instruction librarian was hired and she revised the session plan, incorporating custom-designed PowerPoint slides and TurningPoint (a web-based audience response system) to involve students immediately.   Using this technology, three polling questions are asked at the beginning:

1.   Have you ever used a library catalog?

2. Have you ever used an article database?

3. When you begin a research project, where do you start?

The answers to these questions provide immediate feedback to the instructor on the class' prior experience, which allow him or her to tailor the rest of the presentation to the approximate knowledge level of the students.   The polling slides incorporate humor, allowing instructors to engage students and put them at ease. They also offer an avenue for discussion. For example, the answers for question 1 are:

a) Yes

b) No

c) What the heck is a library catalog?

If the majority of students answer "Yes" (I have used a library catalog before), instructors can ask them about their experiences. From this short dialogue, the instructor might decide to skip the basics and cover more advanced search techniques. If the majority of students answer "No" or (especially) "What the heck is a library catalog?" the instructor will take longer introducing the catalog and focus only on very basic searches during the demonstration portion of the presentation.

After the polling questions, the presentation continues with an outline of what will be covered in class that day—research topics, questions, and keywords; the library catalog; the Academic Search Premier database; and Google Scholar. Since most composition faculty schedule their students' visit to the library when they need to complete an assignment or write a paper on a specific topic, we begin by introducing students to topics, research questions, and keywords by providing a few examples on PowerPoint slides. These slides are designed to promote interactivity using basic slide animation. For example, a poor research question might be presented and students will be asked to identify why the question is not a good research question; or a good research question will be presented and students will be asked to identify the main keywords in that question, along with possible synonyms. The answers to these questions do not appear on the slides until after discussion has taken place. Following the presentation and discussion, students write down their research question and the keywords from this question on their worksheets.   The interactive nature of the presentation from the very beginning makes the sessions more informal and results in students being more comfortable in asking questions when given time to complete their worksheets.

The librarian next gives a demonstration of how to search for and find information using three resources--the library catalog, Academic Search Premier, and Google Scholar. To keep the students on task (instead of surfing the web), a software program with a simple keypad called Vision is used to take control of students' workstations during the demonstration portions of the presentation. Once the demonstration for each resource is complete, the librarian

releases control of the workstations to the students and asks them to complete the section of the worksheet related to that resource.

Using the research question and keywords recorded in the first section of the worksheet, students are asked to find and write down the title and call number for a book using the library catalog, and the title, author, journal title, and publication date for two scholarly articles, one from the Academic Search Premier database and one from Google Scholar. The back and forth sequence between demonstration and hands-on learning takes place four times: once for the research question/keywords section, once for the catalog, once for the article database, and once for Google Scholar. This format keeps students engaged in the material during the presentation and on-task once they are given access to the computers to find the information required to complete the worksheet. Because concepts are covered immediately before students complete each section on the worksheet, they are less likely to forget what was discussed. During the hands-on portion, the instruction librarian walks around the room answering questions and offering suggestions for more effective searches to help the students find information they will later use to write their papers. Also, changing the practice exercises from requiring all students to find the same information and instead find only information on their topics makes the session more relevant.

The presentation concludes with a discussion on the importance of information evaluation to get the students thinking about the quality and relevance of the information they find. The final slide provides personal contact information for the librarian conducting the session, with the intent of personalizing the session and the library for students. After the presentation is over, students are allowed to finish their worksheets and the English instructors typically collect these at the end of the session or when the class meets again.

During the initial test of this new format, we finished the presentation with assessment slides using the web-based response system to determine whether students understood what had been presented. After several semesters, we discarded these Likert scale feedback questions (e.g., "*After this session, I can find a book using a library catalog*"), as librarians felt that open-ended responses could tell us more about what we could do to improve the sessions, and a method for collecting this type of assessment is in the works for future revisions.

Feedback from Students and Faculty

This is the format that we have used since Spring 2009. Informal feedback from both students and faculty indicates that they like the new presentation structure. Library instructors also reported an increase in student engagement during the sessions, noting that there were fewer questions asked on task-oriented concepts and more questions on how to

Ch. 5 Is drilling worth it?

Ch. 6 What is the secret to getting students to think like real scientists, mathematicians and historians?

Ch. 8 How can I help slow learners?

Ch. 9 What about my mind?

Willingham is highly readable, scholarly without being pedantic, and entertaining as well. He holds our attention by using popular, up-to-date references throughout with diverse examples such as the Olsen twins (Kate and Ashley) and the hit television series *House*. Also, I found his organization of the lists of references at the end of each chapter, which he categorized as "less technical" or "more technical," particularly useful; I plan to employ this technique myself in the future. Additionally, the table in his "Conclusion" section at the end of the book that lists each cognitive principle, the "required knowledge about students," and "most important classroom implications" serves as an excellent way to refer back to all the information quickly.   The advice is practical and easily applicable to classroom teachers as well as librarians planning instruction sessions.

In LOEX Quarterly's vol 36, issue 2, Nancy Falciani-White reviewed *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving Work, Home, and School* by John Medina. Medina describes how the brain works and the implications for teaching, while Willingham's focus is on why cognitive principles are important to learning and what do about it once you know how it works. The Willingham title complements and extends the information in Medina's book and both are useful additions to education or psychology collections. Prepare to be challenged, inspired and changed.

Post-script:

If you would like to read more of his research Willingham writes a regular column in the journal *American Educator*, "Ask the cognitive scientist." The question addressed in the Summer 2010 issue was particularly relevant for LOEX readers, "Have technology and multitasking rewired how students learn?" (http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2010/Willingham.pdf) Another myth "students have developed the ability to multitask" is exploded.

---

search to find more relevant information. Additionally, data collected in 2009 from students who completed the feedback questions at the end of the presentation showed that 89% were more comfortable using the library, 87% were more comfortable using the library catalog, and 88% were more comfortable using article databases.

Challenges and Future Plans

The most significant challenge librarians experienced with the new presentation format was lack of familiarity with the software. As instructors have become more experienced with the presentation set-up this has become less of an issue. Some instructors have also had difficulty in covering the required information and giving the students enough time to complete their worksheets in the 50 minutes allotted. To alleviate this issue, the librarians have had to adjust the amount of time spent on each skill while still leaving time for any assessment and questions from the students. Finally, some instructors have had problems using the responses from the initial polling slides to modify their presentations on the spot to meet the needs of the students. The library will be providing training to help these presenters feel more comfortable in making these adjustments. Overall, student and faculty response to the new presentation format has

been positive and we will continue to use this structure and refine it based on informal student and faculty feedback. By designing a dynamic, structured interactive presentation format, we've made the sessions more engaging and informative for both instructors and students.

References

Badke, W. (2009). Ramping Up the One-Shot. *Online, 33*(2), 47-49

Houlson, V. (2007). Getting Results from One-Shot Instruction: A Workshop for First-Year Students. *College & Undergraduate Libraries, 14*(1), 89-108. 10.1300/J106v14n01-07

van der Meij, H., & Carroll, J. M. (1998). Principles and heuristics for designing minimalist instruction. In Carroll, J. M. (Ed.), *Minimalism Beyond the Nurnberg Funnel*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Appendix A

The worksheet, annotated with call-outs outlining the sequence in which the session is presented can be found at: http://www.emich.edu/public/loex/373_ApdxA.pdf