

Book Review: Teaching What You Don't Know by Therese Huston (2012)

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It is generally expected that an instructor knows a great deal about the topic they are teaching, but what about when they have to teach on a topic where their expertise is not as strong as they might like? Written specifically for those in academia, *Teaching What You Don't Know* provides practical advice for any instructor who is teaching outside of their comfort zone (which certainly can include instruction librarians!). Using her experience as an instructor and as the Founding Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Seattle University, interviews with academics in a variety of fields, and existing research on teaching, Therese Huston demystifies the experience of venturing beyond an instructor's areas of expertise so they feel as prepared as possible, regardless of what subject or class they need to teach.

Teaching What You Don't Know is comprised of eight chapters. Chapters one and two detail the main challenge and begin to explain why it is not as daunting as it might seem and, in fact, can have certain advantages. Chapter three gives recommendations on preparing for class, while chapters four and five deal with what happens during class. Chapters six and seven focus on interactions with students, learning how to connect with them and how to get feedback from them. Finally, chapter eight gives advice for administrators, including department heads, on how they can support faculty who are teaching what she calls "periphery" classes and topics.

Early on, the book distinguishes between instructors who are content experts (who have expertise in a subject) from those who are content novices (who do not). These are not a strict binary, and in fact, within the same course—or even single class session—the same person can be an expert in most things while a novice in others. While some may see being a novice as a "phase" that just new instructors go through, she points out that as content, class assignments, and technology keep changing, instructors will naturally move in & out of these categories throughout their career, so any teacher at any point may find themselves needing to adjust. Huston further splits content novice instructors into three groups: Poised and Confident, Undecided but Untroubled, and Strained and Anxious. The majority of people fall into either the Poised and Confident group, who are more likely to choose to teach classes outside of their specialty and to use them to their advantage, or the Strained and Anxious group, who are more likely to be teaching the class only because they were assigned by their boss and, at least partly as a result, can feel overwhelmed teaching them. A

key challenge, then, is how to properly recognize and acknowledge the situation you find yourself in and how to make sure you are as poised and confident as possible.

How to Battle the "Impostor" Feeling and How to Prepare

Content novices often encounter "the impostor issue" (p. 37), or the feeling of being inadequate and vulnerable in their position. This issue is one faced by most academics at some point, particularly when you are new to your position or institution, but it becomes intensified when teaching outside of your specialty. Academics are often loath to admit they don't know something (academics are supposed to be, by definition, "educated", right?) and don't want to undermine their authority with their students, nor come off as unqualified to their colleagues or bosses. Huston notes that one striking difference between the Strained and Anxious group and the Poised and Confident group is how they handle the issue. While the first group hides their gaps in knowledge for fear of being exposed or losing students' confidence, the latter group uses these feelings as motivation to improve their teaching and often admit—judiciously—to students that they do not know everything.

The impostor issue requires thoughtful handling, so thankfully Huston provides recommendations for gaining and maintaining credibility with students, which are true regardless of whether you are a content expert or novice, but are particularly important for the latter. First and foremost, credibility depends on showing respect for students. Simple actions like showing up to class on time, making a good first impression, and acknowledging student questions can go a long way towards earning respect. The importance of feedback is also discussed in the book, and one way that feedback is helpful is in its effect on credibility. By taking feedback into consideration and then acknowledging the effective changes, instructors can enhance their credibility.

But beyond these fairly simple actions, how does one deal with the core of the issue—the fact that you, as the teacher, do not feel that you know enough of the content? Huston gives advice on this as well, reflecting that an instructor's perspective and approach can go a long way to remedying the situation. She notes that content novices who are anxious often feel that if they don't know **all** the content, that will greatly hinder their teaching. However, novices who are confident often didn't view themselves as "knowledge dispensers" but instead viewed them-

selves as aiming “to create an effective learning environment, not to tell students everything they need to know” (p. 57). While they worked hard to be prepared, they knew they wouldn’t know everything, and that was fine—the point was to help students build upon their knowledge and to reach the course goals, not to know *every* possible topic or tool capability.

Another way to gain and maintain credibility is through how the course or session is planned and organized. Huston recommends using backward design, a concept which is likely familiar to many instruction librarians, but even if so, she provides a useful, brief overview of the three key steps: “What do you want students to be able to do?”, “How will you know that students have reached competency on your learning outcomes?” and “What strategic advice or background information should you provide, and what kind of practice will they need?” (p. 58). Huston also provides an alternative question for step one that can be useful for content novices: “What are the big questions you want your students to answer by the end of the course?” (p. 60). In addition to backward design, Huston suggests organizing the course to play to your strengths. By starting the class with topics you know and having flexibility in your syllabus or lesson plan, you can increase your confidence and credibility. Overall, strategically designing your course or session is particularly important to a content novice—after all, you may already feel “behind” and thus don’t have any time to waste in your preparation (e.g., you need to figure out if there are certain key concepts that you need to research intensively before class), and by appropriately planning ahead, you can relieve some of the stress of teaching a topic you do not know well.

Applicability to Instruction Librarians

While this book is not written with instruction librarians specifically in mind, it is still full of useful recommendations and things to consider. Whether you are in a classroom with the same students on a regular basis, constantly meet with different students, or primarily instruct through online methods, the advice for fostering a learning environment is universally relevant. Just like the content novices Huston describes, instruction librarians are likely to be asked questions that they do not know the answer to, but that is not something that needs to be overly concerning. When faced with a question you cannot answer Huston recommends that, instead of faking an answer (which can lead to losing credibility and student confidence), try admitting that you do not know, offering to find an answer, or offering your best educated guess.

This book’s strengths lie in its research-based practical advice. Huston supports each claim with existing re-

search, quotes from the academics who were interviewed, or a mix of both. By using real examples from her experience and the experiences of her interviewees, the scenarios described feel realistic and the proposed solutions are supported. Instead of just giving advice on how to teach periphery classes, Huston gives detailed, practical activities to use in class to enhance your teaching. One short activity that can go a long way for student learning is “Comparative Note-Taking” (p. 144). In this activity, students pair up and compare notes, allowing them to see a different perspective and catch and notes they missed. Additionally, Huston lists common mistakes and gives concrete steps to avoid them. For example, you may be tempted to rely heavily on reviewing with your class itemized lists—one at a time—because they provide “pre-packaged, well-organized information” that take little time to prepare (p. 135). However, this doesn’t encourage much deep thinking or understanding, so if there is important information in a list, discuss with the students the relationship these items have to each other, perhaps analyzing why the items are ordered a certain way and whether that order matters.

Also helpful for instruction librarians is chapter six “Teaching Students You Don’t Understand.” One example activity for how to get to know students better is how to properly design and give out a Background Knowledge Probe, a Classroom Assessment Technique from Angelo and Cross (1993). This CAT can help you save time while you also become more aware of what material you need to cover more in-depth & what you can likely skim. While you may not have the opportunity to fully use the example activities to get to know students better due to more limited interactions with students, the information about how to better understand students and their learning methods as well as how their learning may differ from yours, can still be helpful.

Huston notes the importance of having allies while teaching outside of your expertise. Fostering an allyship with a faculty member who is teaching a periphery class for the first time or working with a faculty member who is an expert in the subject you are teaching is a great way to strengthen librarian/faculty relationships.

Conclusion

Any instructor, regardless of their experiences and expertise, can gain innovative ideas and insight from this book. If you frequently teach or plan on teaching one day, you can find a section of this book to ease your fears or to learn helpful strategies. Written in easy-to-read and entertaining language for busy instructors, *Teaching What You Don’t Know* is a great starting point for tips on how best to teach outside of your expertise without being too overworked or overstressed.