

Learning from Students: How Teaching Student-Athletes has Shaped my Thinking About Effective Teaching

Rachel Dineen, University of Northern Colorado

Beginning in the summer of 2018, I have had the privilege of teaching a credit-bearing information literacy course to incoming freshmen student-athletes. Often referred to as “Bridge,” *LIB 150: Introduction to Undergraduate Research* is a six-week course meant to serve as a transition period for first-year student-athletes, helping them build on the skills—needed for academic research—that they bring with them from high school. This class is distinctive in that it is enrolled entirely by incoming student-athletes who live together, study together, and learn how to navigate their new campus environment together. Although student-athletes are often held in a less than positive light in terms of their academic motivation or intellectual capabilities (Comeaux, 2011), I have found this particular population of students to be bright, driven, and incredibly rewarding to teach. Through three summers of working with new groups of first-year student-athletes, I have begun to shift my thinking about effective teaching, particularly when it comes to remaining flexible, feeling empathy, and fostering community in the classroom. In this paper, I’ll share my experiences of teaching student-athletes and how I learned as much, if not more, from them as I was able to teach.

Information Literacy and the Beginning of the Summer Bridge Program

The University of Northern Colorado (UNC) began offering incoming student-athletes the opportunity to enroll in summer Bridge courses in 2014. Students registered for the information literacy course, *LIB 150: Introduction to Undergraduate Research*, as well as a Sociology course. For Bridge students, schedules are purposefully limited to encourage full engagement in course content and to help ease the transition to the demands of college-level classes. Librarians had collaborated with the Department of Athletics to get the Bridge program established that initial summer and have continued to be integral to the development of the program’s academic offerings ever since. While the other course offerings have changed from summer to summer, information literacy has remained foundational to the summer Bridge curriculum. According to internal documents, the mission of the Bridge program is “to help recruit, retain, develop, and graduate students as scholar athletes” (UNC Bridge Program, internal document, Summer 2017). *LIB 150* aims to help achieve that mission through a course that focuses on developing the skills needed to “find, evaluate, manage, use, and create information effectively” (Dineen, *LIB 150* course syllabus, Summer 2020). The current student learning outcomes (SLOs) of this one-credit course are as follows:

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Develop a research process
- Demonstrate effective search strategies
- Evaluate information
- Develop an argument supported by evidence

All 100-level courses offered by University Libraries share these same four SLOs. Recently, our curriculum committee decided to add a fifth learning outcome—students will be able to use information ethically. While we had always taught the ethical use of information in our courses, including proper use of citation styles, the addition of this SLO helps communicate to our students and academic partners the value we place on academic integrity.

Programs similar to the Bridge program offered at UNC are seemingly common among institutions participating in Division I athletics. While the NCAA does not have data on how many schools offer summer educational programming specifically for athletes, they estimate that in the 2017-2018 academic year, nearly 25% of first-year student-athletes took summer classes before their first semester on campus (Wimmer Schwarb, 2019). Bridge at UNC was designed to be an experience for the student-athletes—an opportunity for them to engage with each other, their instructors, individualized course content, and the campus community as a whole. Collaboration between course instructors and staff members of the Student Athlete Academic Success Center (SAASC) is highly encouraged. Information, such as course documents, is openly shared and coordination meetings are scheduled weekly for the duration of the summer session (which is usually six weeks). While the UNC Summer Bridge program has many goals, concepts such as the importance of critical thinking, diversity, community, and campus culture are continually reinforced through course curriculum and interpersonal interactions (UNC Bridge Program, internal document, Summer 2017).

Lessons from the Face-to-Face Classroom

The first two summers I was involved with the Bridge program, I taught *LIB 150* as a traditional face-to-face class. I met with students two to four times a week for 50-75-minute sessions in a library classroom over a six-week period. Both courses were fully enrolled with about 30 students registered each summer. While participation in the summer Bridge program has changed over the

years to include student-athletes from various teams, both of my classes were populated by all-male football players and wrestlers. At first, I found standing in front of such a full classroom, both in number of students and physical space, a bit daunting. However, I quickly learned that these students were polite, driven, and a bit unsure of how to conduct themselves in the college classroom. In both summer sessions, there were students that were confident learners, students that were seemingly uninterested in learning, and students that admitted that school hasn't always been a priority for them. Understanding that they had such differing attitudes toward the classroom meant that I needed to work to keep content engaging and relevant. I endured multiple lackluster instruction sessions before I realized that my approach of lecture followed by a short activity was predictable and pretty boring. I needed to be much more flexible when it came to delivering course content. So, I started to incorporate more varied methods of communicating course content, including using a football team as a metaphor for evaluating sources, inviting guest lecturers from the University Archives to discuss primary sources, facilitating group discussions about reading strategies, using team-teaching to learn about the library discovery tool, and hosting a game about library resources and services. I found that remaining flexible in terms of how the information is presented, or who is presenting it, is key to keeping the information literacy classroom more interesting for these students, who have many potential diversions vying for their attention.

In their *Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete*, the NCAA estimates that Division I student-athletes spend approximately 33 hours a week on their sport, and 35.5 hours on academics (NCAA, 2020). While strenuous exercise combined with class and mandatory study time is par for the course for student-athletes, the result is often physical and mental fatigue. To combat this, a colleague who had experience teaching Bridge shared with me that she encouraged the students to make themselves comfortable during class. Seeing this as an opportunity to show a little empathy with the students, we made a collective deal—as long as they were engaged in class, they could do whatever they needed to do to make themselves more physically comfortable. Some may argue that lying on the floor or stretching in the back of the classroom does not constitute ideal or appropriate learning conditions. However, in his work studying the writing habits of student-athletes, Rifenburg (2018) argues that many athletes learn plays through touch and physical communication with each other, which he refers to as haptic communication (p. 101). Therefore, it is reasonable to think that if students are engaged physically, that would increase the chances that they will be engaged mentally.

Being a member of a sports team means that student-athletes are accustomed to listening to and learning from

each other. Often, the roles that these student-athletes fulfill within their teams are visible in group interactions in the classroom as well. I've seen skills and attitudes valuable in competition transferred—from simple words of motivation to each other, to a quarterback taking on a leadership role for a group activity. To leverage that, one technique I used to help foster community learning in my face-to-face sections of Bridge was to pair the students up and encourage them to work together on class activities and assignments. Partnering students also meant that I could rely on some of the students to reinforce or even reconceptualize course content for other students who may not have grasped the idea from me. This helped to build confidence and trust in the students. I quickly learned to not take offense when students started asking each other questions rather than ask me. This wasn't a reflection of my inaccessibility as an instructor or my lack of expertise in information literacy; it was a demonstration of the classroom community that we had built together. That sense of teamwork extended to my interactions with the staff at the SAASC as well. If a time arose when a student needed more focused or individualized instruction, we would work together to ensure the student was well supported.

Lessons from the Virtual Classroom

The summer of 2020 brought an entirely new set of challenges when it came to teaching in the summer Bridge program. With COVID-19 related space restrictions, we couldn't hold the traditional face-to-face class, so along with members of the SAASC, we decided that I would teach LIB 150 online, synchronously through Zoom. And while the lessons I learned from transitioning face-to-face library instruction content to online could fill an article of its own, I'll focus on one of the biggest challenges I faced when it came to remaining flexible as an instructor—being available to the students. In his work providing library outreach to student-athletes, Caniano (2015) notes how important it is to be flexible, particularly when it comes to connecting with students. One of his solutions was to vary reference hours to accommodate busy student-athlete schedules. Due to the pandemic and its consistently shifting guidelines, student-athletes' schedules were more unsettled than usual, but they were still busy, as athletes were one of the few campus groups still expected to undertake face-to-face activity (e.g., such as group work-outs and team meetings). My solution was to increase methods of communication by providing the student-athletes with my cell phone number, as I had learned that with this group of Bridge students, there was a culture of communicating through text messaging, amongst each other, coaching staff, and academic tutors. Throughout the summer, I received texts from only a few students. However, I saw this sharing of my personal phone number as just one more way that I

could attempt to meet the student-athletes where they were.

I pride myself in working to foster a democratic classroom in all of my instructional practice. I work to make the learning environment welcoming of diverging ideas and less reliant upon traditional classroom hierarchies. This guiding principle was significantly challenged by the summer of 2020. Teaching in an online classroom can sometimes feel like teaching to a void. Lectures are given to muted microphones and black boxes where students' faces should be. This lack of engagement was really hard for me. By the end of our first week together, I became very insistent in my teaching. I began calling on students to answer my questions and requesting that all cameras remain on throughout class. After a week or so of incorporating this pedagogical approach, I decided I was both uncomfortable and unhappy teaching this way, and it was clear the students didn't appreciate it either. So, the next day, at the beginning of class, I acknowledged that I was unsatisfied with the way class was going, and I was pretty sure they were too. I asked them what I could do to make things a bit better for them. Their earnest responses were not surprising. I was not being very flexible, nor was I showing much empathy toward them. At this particular point in the summer, the students were in quarantine, confined in their residence hall rooms because of a positive COVID-19 case. Our synchronous time together in LIB 150 could have been a respite from the monotony of life in quarantine. Instead, because of my own insecurities, it was becoming a chore. I immediately relaxed my demand for functioning cameras or verbal feedback and simply voiced my desire for more interaction from the group. Fortunately, a member from the SAASC was observing class that day. She was able to help me encourage the students to ask questions or share ideas during class moving forward. Just like previous Bridge students needed my understanding with regards to their physical comfort in the classroom, these students needed my understanding with regards to their emotional comfort and abilities in engaging in a college-level course on a digital platform. Small changes in my classroom requirements could reduce barriers to learning for these first-year students (Wong, 2020). Why couldn't I shift my course policies to be more accommodating? After all, the Bridge program is meant to be a time for transition.

In his research on faculty perceptions of student-athletes, Comeaux (2011) notes that one factor in many faculty members' negative view of student-athletes is a lack of interaction with student-athletes on a personal level. Understanding that the classroom community was

critical to the success of past Bridge sections, I worked to get to know every single one of my students during the summer of 2020. It is interesting to consider the kind of comradery you can build with students in the classroom, five minutes before class starts. Without that time, you are relegated to the snippets of personalities students choose to share during class time. Starting at about the halfway point of the course, I scheduled short one-on-one sessions with students during office hours, as an informal method of assessing learning and as a way of communicating directly with each student. In these meetings I would always ask about their health, families, hobbies, whatever. These students were first-year students, living away from home, many for the first time. Despite the isolation they were undoubtedly feeling being in quarantine, I wanted the student-athletes to know that they were part of a larger community, specifically a community that cared about them.

Thoughts for Future Classrooms

My experiences teaching such a unique community with the student-athletes in summer Bridge has provided really valuable insights into my instructional practice. Over the last semester, I have started to adopt these lessons in my teaching, both credit-bearing and one-shots, of the larger student population. I now better understand the value of flexibility—in modes of teaching, methods of communication, or just being available. Remaining flexible as an instructor makes for a better and more welcoming learning environment for students. I have also encouraged myself to be more empathetic and to really understand the needs of my students. Showing students that you care helps to build trust, which is an essential ingredient in effective teaching and learning. Lastly, I have embraced the power of the classroom community. Encouraging teamwork and learning from each other helps foster more confident and engaged learners. These concepts of flexibility, empathy, and community all build upon each other to make a more effective and enjoyable classroom environment, be it face-to-face or online.

References

- Caniano, William T. 2015. "Library Outreach to University Athletic Departments and Student-Athletes." *Journal of Library Innovation*, 6(2): 89-95. <https://sites.google.com/site/journaloflibraryinnovation/vol-6-no-2-2015>
- Comeaux, Eddie. 2011. "Examination of Faculty Attitudes Toward Division I College Student-Athletes." *College Student Affairs Journal*, 30(1): 75-88.

(Student-Athletes...Continued on page 10)

(Student-Athletes...Continued from page 9)

NCAA Eligibility Center. Spring 2020. "2020-21 Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete." *NCAA*. http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/eligibility_center/Student_Resources/CBSA.pdf

Rifenburg, J. Michael. 2018. *The Embodied Playbook: Writing Practices of Student-Athletes*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Wimmer Schwarb, Amy. Summer 2019. "A Bridge to Prosperity." *NCAA Champions Magazine*. <http://www.ncaa.org/static/champion/a-bridge-to-prosperity/>

Wong, Melissa. 2020, September 14. "Extensions for everyone: Syllabus Policies that Center Accessibility." *Critical Librarianship & Pedagogy Symposium*. <https://clps.arizona.edu/registration-schedule>

(Interview...Continued from page 11)

What books or articles have influenced you?

I highly recommend checking out *Recipes for Mindfulness in Your Library: Supporting Resilience and Community Engagement* (2019) by Madeleine Charney, Jenny Colvin, and Richard Moniz as an introduction to how contemplative practices might be woven into teaching, library services, and professional interactions. With fifteen short chapters, this is a practical way to wrap your mind around the different possibilities, from the least intrusive to the most proactive. I became aware of this book when one of the chapter's authors, Katia Karadjova, did a presentation for CPIG earlier this year on the Brain Booth at Humboldt State University, which is a physical space in her library that introduces students to mindfulness through interactive devices and activities. I first skimmed the chapters to get an overview and then went back to the ones that particularly intrigued me, such as "Mindfully Managing Library Teams."

As we've seen, there are both opportunities and challenges for incorporating CP into your teaching. I think the perfect companion to this is *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts* (2018). This book builds on Dr. Brené Brown's grounded theory research on vulnerability in a very approachable and actionable way. I plan to reread the book and complete activities, such as defining your square squad, where you create a shortlist of people whose opinion matters to you. Another activity that appealed to me is choosing two essential core values to guide your decisions, as Dr. Brown provides helpful examples of how her two values guide her actions.