THE ART OF QUESTIONING IN INSTRUCTION

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In June of 2007, the ACRL Board approved the *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators*. One of the points in the Teaching Skills category is to participate in constructive student-teacher exchanges by encouraging students to ask and answer questions. With so much content to cover, librarians may think that there is no time for questions, but questioning can create rich and unique teaching moments.

Unlike credit-bearing situations, librarians are often faced with the one-shot session or the two-session visit. This short-term instructor situation creates unique obstacles for librarians. There is less time to create an environment of trust where students feel safe enough to share their comments with their peers and instructor. The tone of the classroom develops quickly and there is little time to modify it in a one-shot session or two-session visit. The library instruction space is a foreign setting for students, so group dynamics change. During the sixty-minute interactive session, participants were given individual and group exercises to reflect on these obstacles and develop their questioning skills.

TRUST BUILDING

Before you even begin to use questions in instruction, students need to feel that the library instruction setting is a safe, respectful place. Student participation may be hindered by the negative comments of their peers, negative responses from the librarian, or more subtlety, the authoritative response given by the librarian (Blosser, 1997, p. 8-9). The ten minutes preceding a face-to-face library instruction session are very important in trust building. The demeanor of the librarian in those ten minutes can instantly create a safe and welcoming environment. The LOEX Conference interactive session participants were asked to write down what they typically did during the ten minutes prior to class

and why they did those particular activities. Then they worked in small groups to brainstorm active and passive ways to engage with students during the ten minutes proceeding class. These exercises were aimed at identifying trust building behaviors, such as making eye contact and inquiring about students' well-being. Participants then identified what obstacles laid in their way to making the most of the trust building time, such as computer troubles and teachers taking attendance. Finally, as a group, participants were asked to think of some ways to either start engaging with students or to increase their engagement with students during the ten minutes prior to instruction.

BUILDING A MENTAL SET

Another trust building technique related to questioning is emotional objectivity. Emotional objectivity and withitness are the two components of a Mental Set (Marzano, 2003). Emotional objectivity is a skill that reference librarians know very well; it is even built into our code of ethics. However, in instruction settings, objectivity takes on different forms. The manner in which a question is posed can cause it to come off as emotionally biased and halt student comments. Using impartial questions rather than leading questions allows students to think freely about a question and answer honestly without fear of giving the expected answer (Chuska, 2003, p. 63). For example, instead of asking, "What limiter in Academic Search Premier do you really like?" which leads students to only give positive responses, you could ask, "What did you notice about the ability to limit your results in Academic Search Premier?"

Emotional Objectivity plays a role not only in question creation, but in delivery and reception as well. After you ask a question, employ a 3-5 second wait time. Librarians should avoid giving students cues, or answering their own questions, just wait. Another technique available is to use a 3-5 second wait time, take a student comment, and then wait again for another student comment. Let two or three students comment before you

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make a statement or your first response might be deemed as an authoritative answer and signal students to stop commenting.

The second piece of a Mental Set is something that Marzano (2003) calls Withitness in the book *Classroom Management* that Works. It is the quality that is often described as "eyes in the back of her head" or "always knows what's going on." Clear classroom management should be present before questioning can be most effective. Everyone remembers the math class where the teacher goes down the row having each student answer a question; students would count ahead to see which one question they needed to be prepared for and ignore the rest. Don't use questions to manage a classroom, let classroom management create the right atmosphere for questioning. LOEX Workshop participants took a short quiz where they had to identify which specific types of students in any given class. Examples included students who will kill the mojo of group work, students who are feeling sick that day, students who are aggravated with their professor or those who are lost on their assignment. Based on the results of this quiz, participants were then separated into three groups: low, medium and high, based on the number of student types they could identify. Those falling in the low category were given the goals to speak with one to two students before class and to try and identify two groups of students: the brownnosers and the "too cool for the library" students. These groups are often at odds when it comes to responding to questions. The middle category was directed to find the advanced users and question them privately while the other students are working.

ACTIVE ZONES AND BLIND SPOTS

As mentioned, one of the unique challenges for the library is instruction space. The instruction space is often a location different from the regular classroom. The setting may create foreign situations for the student. For example, if a class normally has the desks in rows and the library instruction classroom has the desks in small clusters of four students each, the classroom dynamic becomes entirely new for the students. Therefore, librarians need to be cognizant of their active zones and blind spots to ensure a well managed transition for the students and to create the best learning environment in the smallest amount of time.

One way to discover your active zones and blind spots is to map them out from a bird's eye view. Session participants had to draw their library instruction spaces and put a star at each place where they stood during a library instruction session. Then they had to put dots wherever they made eye contact with a student and wherever a student presented, made a comment, answered a question or asked a question. By plotting active zones, participants could identify their blind spots and learn to address them. (The author has a tendency to favor anyone in her two o'clock view and ignore those in her nine o'clock view.) This graphic exercise can be replicated by any librarian and should be done regularly as part of self-reflection of teaching. It is especially useful if you are getting used to a new instruction space or have been teaching in the same instruction space for a long time.

QUESTION CREATION

After you have established an atmosphere conducive for questioning through trust building and the creation of a mental set, you need to have some questions to ask. Although there are many ways to classify questions, such as Smith's Convergent and Divergent, and Bloom's Lower and Higher Order Thinking Skills, (Blosser, 1997, p. 13), for the LOEX interactive session, participants focused on productive questions. There are six categories of productive questions: attention-focusing, measuring and counting, comparison, action, problem-posing and reasoning. In a 1999 article on productive questions, Mary Lee Martens included cue phrases for each category. In the Action Question category, the cue phrases were, "What happens if…? What would happen if…? What if….?" In the Problem-Posing category the cue phrases were, "Can you find a way to…? Can you figure out how to…?" The last part of the interactive session was devoted to allowing participants to create questions using the cue phrases provided for each category. Each participant was then asked to pass his or her index card of questions around the table for people to read. Listed below is a subset of the questions that the interactive session participants created for the Action Question category:

- What happens if we put these words in quotes?

- What would happen if you click on "advanced search" in Google?

- What happens if you do the same search in Google and an article database?

- What happens if you can't find any results in the library catalog?

- What happens if you find a book that is already checked out?

- What would happen if I added another search term?

Some Problem-Posing category examples include:

- Can you find a way to print the results of your search?

- Can you figure out how to find books on the same subject as this book?

- Can you figure out how to limit a search to videos?

- Can you figure out how to limit your search by format?

- Can you figure out how to find only peer-reviewed articles?

- Can you figure out how to sort your results by relevance instead of date?

- Can you figure out how to get scholarly articles on Google?

CONCLUSION

Questioning is a tool that can be developed by any librarian. Librarians should take an inventory of their pre-class activities, practice emotional objectivity in the classroom, be aware of active zones and blind spots and come to class prepared with possible questions to use during instruction. The reflection exercises mentioned above are just a starting point for developing better questioning techniques. It takes time for questioning to become a natural part of a librarian's instruction repertoire, but through time, energy and reflection, it can work really well.

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