DISCOVERING BURIED TREASURE: TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR THE AGING POPULATION

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INTRODUCTION

Community engagement for academic libraries has traditionally been extended to the academic community. What are the possibilities however, when an academic library reaches out to people not normally defined as university stakeholders? At Indiana State University (ISU) we discovered that extending outreach to an untapped population can reap unexpected gains. For the past three years ISU instruction librarians have traveled to the Westminster Village Retirement Community in Terre Haute, Indiana, to teach computer skills as part of ISU's *Bits n' Bytes* program. The initial goal of the program was to benefit the community-at-large by teaching computer skills to adult learners, but we eventually realized that these students did not behave like our pupils in the university community. We had to learn to teach to a new community of learners and, because of this, our new students were teaching us as much - if not more - than we were teaching them. We began to learn, and in so doing we adopted teaching techniques that addressed their learning styles. We also began to incorporate some of these newly acquired techniques into our library instruction classes at the university. Realizing that this outreach program could offer our university students opportunity for growth, we also worked with ISU faculty to open up the program as a field site for a student enrolled in a freshman social work course.

The rationale for initiating the *Bites n' Bytes* program was two-fold. The first goal was to align the library's initiatives and activities with those of ISU's generally. Part of the university's mission is the development of collaborative partnerships with educational, business, social service, cultural, and government concerns that contribute to the academic mission of the university and directly benefit the community. ISU is so committed to outreach that in 2006 the Carnegie Foundation placed the university in the Curricular Engagement and Outreach category. This recognizes substantial commitments to community collaboration and extensive curriculum-based outreach initiative. Only 62 institutions in the US have this classification.

Our second reason for developing this program was based on our observation of the regularity with which our local seniors access the library to use the internet and our library's rapidly expanding menu of electronic resources. As is the case with other Indiana state-supported libraries, the Reference & Instruction Department at ISU is in the position of providing a significant amount of reference assistance and individualized instructional services to a growing community of university alumni and emeriti. In addition, we also serve a large population of unaffiliated local elders. Elders figure commonly in the Reference & Instruction Department's everyday service activities, and we hoped our creation of the *Bits n' Bytes* program would enhance our ability to serve this diverse population of users.

SETTING UP THE PROGRAM

In the summer of 2004 the ISU Library set up a computer lab at the Westminster Village Retirement Community, a private, non-profit facility offering both assisted and independent living apartments for elders. In addition to the lab, we were able to utilize the facility's large-screen media room and data projector for lectures. Once the lab was assembled we developed the content and method of instruction. Internet connectivity in both the media room and the lab enabled us to consider a two-fold method of instruction. Each one-hour instruction session began with a 15-minute demonstration of the various navigational features of computers in the media room, and then the class

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would move to the computer lab for hands-on practice. Using the semester as the guiding time period, we developed a 13-week syllabus of classes that meet once a week. Every lesson of each week focused on a different topic, with the first four classes devoted to introductory topics such as computer basics, email, and word processing. Many of the classes thereafter focused more narrowly on specific internet sites or methods of finding information on the internet.

Lessons Learned

Where designing the classes was a relatively simple theoretical process, teaching them proved to be quite a challenge. All classes, which ranged in attendance from 4 to 15, were team-taught by either two instruction librarians or an instruction librarian and teaching-assistant. Some of the more advanced students needed little direction. But many classes were filled entirely with individuals who had little or no computer training, and who suffered from various physical limitations, such as impaired hearing or problems with hand motor coordination. For this reason, it became clear that it was essential to have more than one instructor assisting with each lesson.

We also noticed that these students responded best to experiential learning. Rather then sit and listen to a lecture, however brief, they were impatient to roll up their sleeves and "dig in" to the lesson. So in the fall of 2006 we dispensed with the 15-minute demonstration segment of the lesson and instead began each class in the computer lab. For our *Bits n' Bytes* students, however, this was not enough. It became apparent that, even in the computer lab, if we reverted to lecturing for just a few minutes our students would call for action. They simply were not satisfied to sit quietly in front of the computer and listen to us talk. This is just one example of how our students at Westminster challenged us in ways our students at ISU do not. In the *Bits n' Bytes* program, students often interrupted the lesson to request that we establish the relevancy of our content. We regularly heard comments like, "This is very nice, but what does looking for recipes on the internet have to do with me? I don't cook anymore". At Westminster, interruptions also took the form of storytelling. Students repeatedly broke in on the lessons to tell the class stories of their family, friends, and past experiences. We weren't sure how to take these interruptions. If students on campus engaged in behaviors in our library instruction sessions, we would certainly interpret this as a classroom management problem.

At first we were frustrated, wondering if our *Bits n' Bytes* students were hinting that the lessons were dull or unproductive. We asked them if they enjoyed the lessons and if there were any subjects they could suggest we focus on. They told us, with great enthusiasm, how much they enjoyed the program. So we were confused, until we began to realize that our Westminster students were not challenging our role as teachers or being dismissive of course content, rather they wanted to play a more active part in the learning process. They were interrupting us because they did not perceive a classroom. Instead, they perceived a community. To them interrupting the lesson was no more hostile than interjecting a comment to a fellow diner at the dinner table. They were just being social. We noted that as part of this social process the regulars began to mirror each other's jargon and behavior, as if all participants were becoming part of a loosely confederated club. This club was not exclusive. The regulars welcomed new students and enculturated them into the group. We, as their instructors, were also a part of the club.

Because an important goal of the *Bits n' Bytes* program is to teach computer skills to the elderly, we worried that we were falling down on the job, since socializing in class severely chipped away at lesson content. With the view that our students preferred social interaction to learning computer skills, we decided that we were still providing an important therapeutic service to these elders. Perhaps, we thought, it was more important for them to fraternize than to learn computer skills. However, we still didn't understand what was going on in the *Bits n' Bytes* program. No sooner had we decided that for these students, content was not as essential as socializing; then we realized that our students *were* becoming computer literate. In spite of their seemingly irrelevant interruptions in class, they were also asking questions and making comments about course content. Finally we put it all together: our students were building community as they were acquiring knowledge. With all that is written in our professional literature on how to build learning communities, we had unwittingly discovered buried treasure — a learning community had blossomed before our eyes.

In examining the learning behaviors of our *Bits n' Bytes* students we found it helpful to use Martinez's four categories of learning styles which are:
- Performers — characterized as being persistent, systematic learners who enjoy coaching and social interaction
- Transformers motivated — learners who do not accept information on trust and become frustrated when their aggressive learning style is contained
- Conformers — who prefer routine, explicit learning environments
- Resisters — who dislike academic pursuits.

Judging by their behaviors, most of the students in our outreach program were performers and transformers. They were proactive about forging connections with their instructors and fellow students. They wanted to know how the information we provided was going to make a difference in their lives, and they worked at being active participants in the class. And so, realizing that our students were making meaning out of each lesson by telling stories, questioning relevancy, and seeking camaraderie we drastically changed how we taught these lessons.

Instead of entering the classroom with a detailed lesson plan, we began each class by briefly introducing the lesson topic and then allowed every class conversation to follow its own path. Eventually one of the students would bring the conversation back to the lesson for us. But we left it up to our students to decide in what direction each lesson would go; always being ready to offer guided learning instructions when prompted. The effect was that of a group of people informally chatting and helping each other out when needed. It was obvious to us that they were learning, because their facility with the subject matter was progressing each week.

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

Of course, since our Westminster students did not have to write papers and complete assignments for class, addressing a set list of exit competencies was not an issue. But in our classes at the university, we were obligated to teach to prescribed learning outcomes. Even so, we began to question whether we could use what we had learned from our Westminster students and apply that experience to our library instruction sessions at the university. Could we address prescribed learning outcomes yet still relinquish our role in leading a class? Most of our university students seemed much more passive than our Westminster students. If we invited our university students to be part of a learning community, how would they respond?

In the fall of 2006 we decided to apply two teaching techniques to some of our library instruction sessions — storytelling and mirroring. The storytelling technique was particularly successful in an orientation for graduate student assistants. These students were acclimated to the academy and mentored other students, so they were proactive and comfortable in the classroom. Since these students performed research for faculty and assisted undergraduates, the object of the lesson was to teach advanced online search strategies. As a way to situate learning by simulating real-life experience, the instructor invited the class to collaborate in the invention of a fictitious undergraduate. The class named him Claude. The class then fleshed out Claude's personality, appearance, research agenda, and scholastic strengths and weaknesses. Once Claude was formed, participants told stories of his research needs. The class addressed each of Claude's activities and worked together to come up with stories of how to best help him perform his research. The students enjoyed storytelling, finding Claude a safe vehicle for voicing their own research predicaments, or the behaviors of undergraduates they had helped in the past. The instructor enjoyed the lesson, preferring to sit with the students at their computer workstations, rather than stand at a podium. The instructor later reported that she felt a strong camaraderie with these students, who often paid social visits to her office after the experience. If we envision a learning community as encompassing collaborative and cooperative discourse that builds a social network and increases knowledge, then this class worked together as a learning community.

Another important technique for increasing the effectiveness of student/teacher communication came as a direct result of our experiences teaching elders. The concept of "mirroring" referenced often in discussions of language acquisition both for children and non-native speakers, had application to our efforts to teach computer skills. Because language functions not only as a method of communication, but as a means of organizing our thoughts (Butzkamm, 2001, p.52), the method by which an instructor communicates is vitally important for establishing report and transmitting meaning. With seniors, it is essential that terminology and unfamiliar patterns of speech not impede understanding of concepts that are akin to learning a new language. Efforts to maintain consistency with regard to terms like *window*, *right-click*, *button* and *link* segued into an approach to communication that was collaborative. The instructor found that learners acquired and retained concepts much more readily when the language used to describe and name tasks had been fully negotiated within the group. This realization about creating meaning and establishing connection through language was then applied, with much success, in library instruction for university students, where the instructor found that students were more likely to become engaged in the content of the lesson if they were consistently reaffirmed by having their vocabulary, and the style of their questions/observations mirrored back to them by the library instructors.

VOLUNTEERISM

Another change we made to the *Bits n' Bytes* program was to open it up to an ISU undergraduate. We had several reasons for doing this. First, we hoped that our students at Westminster, especially those who were ISU alumni, would enjoy working with undergraduates from the same school. Second, we thought that pulling in students from campus was in line with our university's mission. ISU's deep commitment to community engagement does not rest with the faculty and staff. Students are actively encouraged to be involved in outreach as well. Third, we believed we could only benefit from an extra pair of hands helping us in the lab during lessons. After a few interviews with faculty we arranged for an undergraduate who was enrolled in a SWOK 130, *Introduction to Social Work* class to become a part of the program. Our undergraduate, Andrea Mosley, volunteered as a teaching assistant to satisfy the course's 30-hour volunteer requirement. We had hoped that this experience would benefit us and our Westminster students, but most of all we wanted to make a difference in this young woman's education. Andrea's take on her experience can best be described by reading a portion of her semester-end report:

> I have dedicated many hours of volunteer work in my life, but none compares to the hours completed at Westminster Retirement Village…At first I thought the residents wouldn't be able to do well in this class because they knew nothing about technology, but this experience has proved me wrong… Preparing my own lesson taught me how important pronunciation and speaking clearly are. Most elders that were in the class were hard of hearing, and it was necessary for me to speak loud and clear…I am now considering working with the elderly when I obtain my degree. I have learned a lot from this program, and I would advise any social work 130 student to take full advantage of this opportunity. I would furthermore advise them not to participate only for the grade, but because of the unforgettable experience they would receive. (Mosley, 2006, p.2)

We are enthusiastic about this new component of the program and plan to develop it further. While Andrea worked with us we built a rich, diverse community made up of teacher-librarians, Westminster residents, and an ISU student. For

us, Andrea's presence has reinforced our belief that building community in the classroom greatly enhances learning for everyone, including the instructors. Our Westminster students certainly expressed interest in working again with another undergraduate volunteer.

CONCLUSION

Our experiences with outreach to the elder community have benefited us greatly. In these times of tight budgets and staffing shortfalls, some might call for a reduction or moratorium of outreach programs in academe. But the process of developing and delivering the *Bits n' Bytes* program over these past three years has changed our teaching in ways we could not have imagined. What started out as a straightforward educational outreach program grew into a field site for us to build community in the classroom. The program helped us to develop ideas on introducing situated learning (storytelling and mirroring) and onsite apprenticeships (volunteerism) into our library instruction in the university. Our willingness to reach out to an unfamiliar community of adult learners has demonstrated to us that there is value in testing uncharted waters. As we continue to work with the Westminster Village residents, we hope that we will discover more buried treasure.

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