

# BLENDING, MIXING, AND PROCESSING: STRATEGIES USED TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

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## INTRODUCTION

The authors of this article are employed at two of the colleges of the City University of New York. Founded in 1847, the City University of New York (hereafter CUNY) is an urban public university consisting of 24 institutions located throughout the five boroughs of New York City. Of the 24 institutions, there are 11 senior colleges, seven community colleges, the William E. Macaulay Honors College at CUNY, the Graduate School and University Center, the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, the CUNY School of Law, the CUNY School of Professional Studies, and the CUNY School of Public Health<sup>1</sup>.

The Lloyd Sealy Library at John Jay College of Criminal Justice provides one-shot library instruction classes to selected courses. The courses targeted are compulsory and have a research assignment. These courses include the college-wide mandatory English composition class (ENG 101) and research methods classes required by a major such as the Social Sciences Research Methods course (SSC 325). We also teach graduate classes. The library has 11 teaching librarians. With a student body reaching 15,000 and with one classroom devoted to Library instruction classes, the library cannot realistically meet with all targeted classes.

The College of Staten Island (hereafter CSI), a large commuter campus spread across over 200 acres, is the largest CUNY college (in size). It offers Bachelor's, Master's,

and Ph.D. degrees in various programs of study and there is a strong focus on nursing, education, and business. The CSI Library provides one-shot library instruction classes to selected courses. Courses targeted are compulsory and have a research assignment. These courses include the college-wide mandatory English composition class (ENG 111 and ENG 151). There are 12 full time academic librarians and there are approximately 300 Library instruction classes taught per academic year. The library has ten teaching librarians. With a student population of just under 14,000 and with one classroom devoted to Library instruction classes, the library cannot realistically meet with all targeted classes.

In addition to the City University of New York, one of the authors is employed as an adjunct instructor at ASA College, a small private college with campuses in midtown Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn.

ASA College currently has 3000 students enrolled in 20 college programs<sup>2</sup>. The Information Literacy classes are part of the Core Competencies Division and every freshman is required to take this class. It is offered for 15 weeks and held twice a week for two hours a week. In addition, the Core Competencies Division offers courses such as Freshmen Skills and Career Development. The Information Literacy class is a 2-credit course taught by librarians. Some obstacles when teaching this class is time management and student engagement. Since the classes are held twice a week for one hour each, it may be a challenge to become involved in a lesson in an hour. Often times the lesson must be extended over two classes in order to have a "hands-on" component to ensure that students practise what they have learned.

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1 See <http://www.cuny.edu/about.html>

2 See <http://www.asa.edu/about-us.asp>

## **OBSTACLES FACED BY LIBRARIANS WHO TEACH LIBRARY INSTRUCTION CLASSES**

Librarians in the classroom may face many obstacles with their students. Below are some examples (McGuigan, 2002) (Vander Meer, Ring, & Perez-Stable, 2007):

1. Students may not feel engaged or motivated because classes are non-credit bearing and they are not evaluated on their performance.
2. Academic librarians may have trouble getting “buy in” from academic departments and individual teaching faculty.
3. Students who take a “one shot” library instruction class may forget everything afterwards.
4. There is no “relationship building” between student and librarian.
5. Students may have trouble grasping concepts because they are overwhelmed by too much information.
6. Students need to learn different information systems with different interfaces that may not be user-friendly.
7. Librarians providing instruction for large Undergraduate classes in an auditorium/theater is a challenge.

## **BLENDING: INTEGRATING DIFFERENT STRATEGIES TO INITIATE THE CLASS**

Fulk (2000) suggests having icebreakers like asking students to introduce themselves, as well making the lessons relevant to their daily lives (p.183). Blending real-life stories helps break the tension and hierarchy of learner and instructor. Storytelling is effective because it may humanize an abstract concept or personalize an experience. Teaching with visuals can also help engage students because many students don't like to read. Creating eye-catching handouts on colored paper with screenshots as opposed to long explanations (in text) may be more effective (Fulk, p. 183). Scaffolded learning, a strategy that involves building on what they already know (p. 184) may be valuable in teaching new concepts based on previous knowledge (p. 184).

Nonlinguistic representations, like theatrics, may be an effective teaching strategy for the classroom. For example, when describing the Information Cycle, the instructor may wish to illustrate the information cycle on the screen or in a handout but the instructor may wish to “step inside” and become part of the cycle. They may place him/herself in front of the class and ask the class to visualize him/her as the “news story” in the Information Cycle. The instructor then plays the role and puts him/herself into the Information Cycle and he/she asks students to “follow” him/her as he/she plays the role as the news story inside the Information Cycle. Theatrics can be entertaining and fun and it can be a successful non-traditional way of teaching.

Theatrics may also be used to teach Library Science students email and telephone etiquette. The class went into groups of two and played Library staff person and Library user (patron). They participated in a phone call and prior to the activity the instructor provided a handout of “professional” and “unprofessional” telephone etiquette. Both learners in the group were required to identify examples of appropriate etiquette when communicating on the telephone. For email etiquette, both learners were required to email each other a “professional” email and identify elements that were “professional” and then they wrote an unprofessional email to each other and identify elements that would be considered “unprofessional”.

Experiential learning (Brown, Hansen-Brown, & Conte, 2011) may be effective since it enables learners to practise what they've learned. Theatrics can be a fun way to “act out” for some learners and for others; it may be out of their element.

## **MIXING: INTEGRATING MULTIMEDIA INTO THE CLASSES**

Instructors should mix different media and methods into the classroom in order to stimulate student learning. Whether showing YouTube videos, television commercials, newspaper articles, or video clips, it is critical to illustrate concepts by using different media types. One such example is taking newspaper articles on the same topic from three different news sources; *New York Times*, a traditional Liberal-leaning, credible newspaper, *New York Post*, a local newspaper in New York City that focuses on sports, local news, and celebrity gossip, and *TMZ*, an online news source (and TV show) that is primarily a tabloid. For a recent class, a news story was pulled on the recent hearing of Dr. Conrad Murray, who was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter of Michael Jackson. The same article was reported from three different points of view. The students' task was to discuss the overall tone, content, style of the article and focus on the language used in these articles. This activity was successful because students learned about authorship and how the same news can be reported in different ways and that not all information sources are equal.

To avoid lecturing for long periods of time, showing the class a LibGuide with a short video clip may successfully demonstrate a point or concept. For example, there are many freely available videos on YouTube or LibGuides that explain Boolean operators. Before showing the video, we explain how long the video is and what information students should obtain from the video. After we show the video, we ask follow-up questions.

## **DON'T SIT STILL, MOVE AROUND**

To maintain students' attention, walk around the room and interact with students. When librarians walk around the classroom, students may be more inclined to ask us questions. During our Library instruction classes walking around may help us monitor how each student is doing with their database searches. This keeps students engaged during our sessions. By

constantly moving around, students may follow us and they may be less bored and disconnected. In addition to moving, it is recommend to ask questions and engage students in a dialogue, not a monologue. Some students will be shy or not inclined to participate. It is important not to be afraid of silence. Silence may be uncomfortable for some students, but for others, it elicits critical thinking and self-reflection (Jordi, 2011).

## **TECHNOLOGY AND REALIA**

In the library instruction classroom at John Jay College, there is a document image camera that projects and enlarges images of physical objects. Objects that can be projected include a library card, books and sections of books, journal articles, and a mobile device being used, for example, to navigate the library's website or databases. The possibilities are endless. All too often, students sitting in the back row of the class have a hard time seeing physical objects and other realia (i.e., objects from everyday life) presented at the front of the class. The document image camera also eliminates the need to bring several copies or numbers of an object to show to the class.

Other examples include that we bring magazines and journals to illustrate the differences between popular magazines and academic journal articles. We bring books to show our collections and to demonstrate what a Library of Congress call number is. As Fulk (2000) writes, visuals help our instruction sessions more memorable.

## **PROCESSING: INCORPORATE CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISES AND GROUP WORK**

In addition to critical thinking activities, we incorporate instructional strategies that engage metacognition. Metacognition is "[w]hen students are taught to think about their own thinking" enabling them to "gain knowledge and control of factors that affect learning--the self, the task at hand, and strategies to be employed ("Effective instructional..." para. 3, 2005). We tell students at the beginning of our sessions what the learning objectives and the agenda for the class are. We write these objectives on a white board for the class to see and refer back to it during the class.

Fulk (2000) writes that group work and hands-on activities give students plenty of opportunities to practice a new skill are critical for making an instruction session more memorable. We create group exercises that require students to work together and solve research problems. Our group exercises include keyword brainstorming sessions, creating search strings, and actual assignments to find articles on a given topic using a database.

In addition, mnemonics can be used to help students retain information presented in class. One mnemonic used is the CRAAP test (currency, reliability, authorship, authority and purpose) ("Evaluating web sources", 2010) which is used to evaluate information found on web sites. Students are usually amused to hear this acronym and want to listen to our

explanation of the test.

Muller and Irby (2005) explain that small group discussions are effective because all participants are engaged and they are able to share experiences and learn from each other. Having the instructor facilitate these small groups allows all students to share their experiences, offer feedback, and learn from their peers (p. 10). It is always important to link learners' past experiences with the subject matter. When the instructor makes that connection, the discussion becomes more significant and practical. Teachers should introduce a set of learning outcomes that should be established in these small groups or the learners will not have any focus in their discussion (p. 11). The instructor should ask a set of questions for learners to respond to.

Sufficient time should be given during class time for these small groups to interact with each other. Small group discussion helps foster teamwork (Fulk, 2000, p.183) and improve social cohesion in the class amongst learners (p. 183). Critical self-reflection is an important element in processing the course content. Having appropriate time allotted for "hands-on" learning is very important. Critical self-reflection exercises can prove to be a fruitful part of the instructor's lesson plan (Jordi, 2011). It is important for the instructor to give appropriate time for learners to reflect on the course content (Watson, 2010).

An example can be to compare different health web sites using the CRAAP test. When students are given two health web sites, Diabetes.com (authored by the drug company GlaxoSmithKline) and Diabetes.org (authored by the American Diabetes Association) they are asked to critically evaluate and reflect on which web site is more accurate, and trustworthy. Upon reflection, they are required to jot down notes on the content and design of the web sites. This exercise allows them to think critically on who produces information, bias, the author's agenda, the purpose of both web sites, and how reliable the content is from each site (p. 94).

Critical self-reflection helps promote critical thinking and problem solving skills, the building blocks to becoming an Information literate student (Snyder and Snyder, 2008). Critical thinking can be thought of as "thinking about thinking" and it relates to conceptualizing, applying, synthesizing, evaluating (by observation or experiencing) (p. 90). Critical thinkers, as Snyder and Snyder argue, are problem solvers (p. 90). Although Snyder and Snyder's article focuses on Business students, their critical self reflection exercise can be applied to many disciplines, including Information Literacy instruction.

## **CONCLUSION: ASSESSMENT AND FOLLOW-UP**

Concluding a library instruction class is best wrapped up in an assessment tool such as a quiz or questionnaire. Informally testing students' comprehension of the material is important. For example, after demonstrating Boolean searching, you may wish to ask students questions to clarify the concept.

For example, we ask students how they would use "AND" if they were searching for articles on a topic such as "time

spent on social networking sites and academic performance.” After discussing a new concept, students were split into groups and they were given an assignment. The assignment asks them to test different Boolean operators for a given research topic. We then reconvene as a class to discuss the assignment.

Librarians walk around the class to assess whether students are using the operators correctly. During the class discussion, we address any problems we noticed as students were completing the assignment.

Before the class ends, it is important to emphasize the importance of the tailored handout and our contact information. Emphasizing our availability via phone, in-person, or email is crucial in order to promote ourselves and leave a lasting impression on the student. We want to ensure that even though most library instruction classes are “one-shot”, we encourage them to follow-up with us, to provide feedback, and to contact us if they need assistance.

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