

Chapter 14

Changing Hats: Five Ways to Diversify Your Information Literacy Teaching Toolkit

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Suggested citation:

Tchangalova, N. (2021). Changing hats: Five ways to diversify your information literacy teaching toolkit (Chapter 14). In K. Vaidya (Ed.), *Teach library and information literacy with a sense of humor: Why (and how to) be a funnier and more effective library instructor and laugh all the way to your classroom* (pp.199-216). Curious Academic Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Available online: <http://bit.ly/infolit-humor> (Amazon Kindle)

Introduction

I use humor in the classroom to create an informal and friendly atmosphere. Sharing my personality with the students at the beginning of the class session sets the stage for a more productive learning environment. Providing this icebreaker and additional activities to students during class to engage with the subject matter in a more pleasant way can foster student retention of the material and forge long-lasting connections with students. Many guidelines and framework suggest that teaching information literacy concepts provide students life-long research skills.

However, it is also important to build connections with students and teach them where and how to seek assistance themselves from the libraries no matter where their professional careers lead them. Breaking librarian stereotype as a shushing, old lady with grey hair in a bun and big eyeglasses is not an easy task nowadays. Add personal traits, like the hidden disability of hearing loss and/or ethnic background, and your mission to make the students laugh in the classroom may seem a daunting task, right?

Being a librarian who serves a diverse campus poses additional challenges when it comes to introducing jokes in the classroom. I tested several Bulgarian jokes with English speaking relatives and friends, as well as American jokes with Bulgarians. The truth is that neither group laughed because of the lack of cultural context and the impossibility of translating some words between languages. This trial and error allowed me to explore other ideas for generating positive energy in the classroom. These techniques proved successful in promoting the sense of trust and confidence, as well as establishing a good rapport between the librarian, students, and the instructor. In some of these activities, students are working together, having fun, and forming connections with the librarian.

Although extensive humor is not generated, these tips can be adapted to a variety of audiences with different learning styles and can encourage active learning and engaged atmosphere. Benefits from these techniques are two-fold: students seeking personal assistance from their librarian, and instructors inviting the librarian as a collaborator on instructional design for their subject courses. Librarians often teach the same content over and over again, sometimes multiple times a day.

To avoid burnout and the “did I say this already?” effect, use any combination of these tips in the classes you teach. I have a visionary suitcase filled with tools which help me break out of the same routine in my teaching so that I am not repeating myself in classes where students have already encountered me in another class. Over the span of my career, before the beginning of each semester, I explored one teaching technique or a digital tool to add to my teaching toolkit using various approaches to make learning a fun experience.

I. The “Smiling” Hat

Humorous Self-Introduction

Upon entering the classroom, do you often see students looking at their cellphones, bored, and not interested in their surroundings? Do you have the courage to shake up their world and bring them to yours in the library realm? Bold or not, you need to teach that class, right? Before applying the techniques under this section, grab students' attention by greeting them and announcing your presence. Start a conversation with a student or two at the front lines to break the ice. During your opening, you are trying to do a lot of things to set the stage for instruction. But most importantly, smile, smile, smile ... Smile all the time. Smiles integrated into the body of the instruction session is one convenient and effective technique to provide a pleasant student experience. Shorten the distance between you and the students and make yourself approachable.

For example, in my introduction, I share the highlights of my educational background, share a funny story from the school life of my three children, and stress my role as a librarian during this session and outside of the classroom:

My name is shown on the slide. Stop reading after my first name, Nedelina. You do not need to say the entire alphabet to address me. The T-C-H, in my last name, corresponds to one single letter in the Cyrillic alphabet. But I am not going into more detail here because we are in an information literacy class, not a Bulgarian language class. You can call me Nedelina, send me an email, meet with me in my office, I do not bite! I am flexible and respond by email quickly, BUT I DO sleep on weekends like you, so don't expect an answer then!

Humorous Language in Demo Presentation

Have you found yourself in the role of the talking parrot? Teaching too much, trying to condense as much material as possible in a 45-minute session? Well, you are not alone in this game and learn how you can incorporate some light humor in your talk:

When searching this database, we get 5,456 results. Now, do you have time to go through all of these results? I don't but if you do, then hats off to you! Use these search filters, usually found on the left side of your screen...

Another method to capture students' attention is to bring them into the conversation through the use of the Cephalonian Method introduced by Morgan and Davies (2004). The authors engage the participants by welcoming them with music and distributing colored cards with questions before the class starts. During lecture, they asked for volunteers holding a particular colored card to read the question from the card, thus inducing student participation. Each color corresponds to a particular theme and humor can be infused in the questions. The examples below are inspired from Vossler's approach using the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie (2011, pp. 70–75). Make sure you have enough questions for each student in the class.

Information Resources

- *I love finding stuff in Google. Wikipedia shows up on the top in most cases. Do you hate Wikipedia as much as our professors do?* (Introducing keyword brainstorming and citation chasing)

- *When I want to find apples, I go to the grocery store or the farmer's market. But I want to find peer-review articles for my research. Where do I go?* (Introducing the “scholarly articles” feature in databases)

Searching Techniques

- *I like to eat apples and pears. Should I put them in a single basket or in different baskets? What do these AND, OR, NOT stand for?* (Explaining search strategies and combining main concepts and their related terms)
- *Why are there not as many search boxes as I have fingers? Why is there only one in Google Scholar and three in EBSCO databases?* (Introducing Advanced Google Scholar and adding more search boxes in EBSCO)

Citation Management

- *Being a procrastinator and too lazy to write my paper, how can I make the database cite articles for me?* (Introducing the “Cite” feature in databases and more advanced tools like Zotero)
- *Being a student, I prefer sleep over study, online dating over love. Should I prefer PDFs over HTML documents when saving to Zotero?* (Explaining how Zotero uses the metadata in HTML records to create a reference entry)

Explaining Difficult Concepts with Analogies

Analogies can promote student comprehension by connecting an unfamiliar concept to one that is familiar to the student. For example, when explaining the Digital Object Identifier (DOI) as a more reliable URL for students to save in order to consult it later and why it is important to reference it in their bibliographies, the following analogy could be used:

DOI is like the Social Security Number for the article. It never changes and is a unique identifier for the publication.

Of course, when searching databases, you can always include some humorous elements in your lesson. Humorous analogies are more fun to listen to, making them illustrative and entertaining at the same time:

When searching for information online, especially in library databases, it reminds me of searching online dating websites. Many people spontaneously eliminate a profile based on superficial examination of a person's picture. They don't go deeper into the profile to explore this individual's age, height, education, work experience, or whatever information is posted under this profile. You know, I found my husband on a dating website. I was looking for a balding and mediocre man on the outside but “handsome” on the inside. I dove deeper into his profile and found many common traits with my own life philosophy. Similarly, don't judge a publication only by its title. Look at the abstract, the subject terms, references list and explore additional keywords, synonyms, even other related research on your topic.

Using the same theme of online dating, I explain to students the Boolean logic and some searching techniques applicable to every database:

Suppose I am looking for the same balding and mediocre man, who has blond hair and does not wear glasses. And because I am a tall woman, I need him to be 6 feet tall. Does he need to have all these traits to be the perfect man for me? Probably not, and the more terms or filters you require in the AND string, the less results you will get. Try to broaden the search by connecting various synonyms with OR, and filter the results to exclude unnecessary profiles from your search with NOT.

II. The “Flipped Classroom” Hat

Entertain your students by giving them control of your podium. Take a break from your parrot-talking and let the students teach their peers. Sit back with the instructor and enjoy the show! Using a flipped classroom approach, the teaching roles are reversed and students are introducing information literacy

concepts to their peers (Carroll et al., 2016). Providing extra points to students motivates them to learn. Before class, students are placed into groups and are assigned a module covering a specific stage of the research process (Carroll et al., 2014). During the class, groups work together to develop PowerPoint presentations using images – the funnier the better. After each presentation in a PechaKucha-like style – showing as many images as students want in only 5 minutes – the librarian and the instructor provide clarification on concepts that students may not have explained well.

III. The “Gaming” Hat

Digital Tool: Kahoot

Kahoot, an open source game-based learning platform, is a useful technique to get students’ attention when you are facing a distracted class. This approach helps to refocus their attention to you by changing the knowledge delivery method. It brings some movement detaching students from their “clouds” and bringing them down to Earth.

Announcing the fact that students are welcome to pull out their phones not to check their favorite social media platform but to join a competitive game, where three winners will leave the classroom with a prize, brings some excitement in the classroom. Many vendors and publishers are very generous to send you marketing materials for promoting databases, books, citation management tools, etc. Use these free materials as incentives to motivate students’ participation and engagement.

This technique is useful to break out of a routine in your lecture and pause your talk to reinforce concepts taught in your short lecture. To get you inspired, look at some sample questions provided by Tchangalova et al. (2018). Bring some humorous answers in the game and see students’ excitement when waiting for the next question:

When do you need to provide a citation in your research paper?

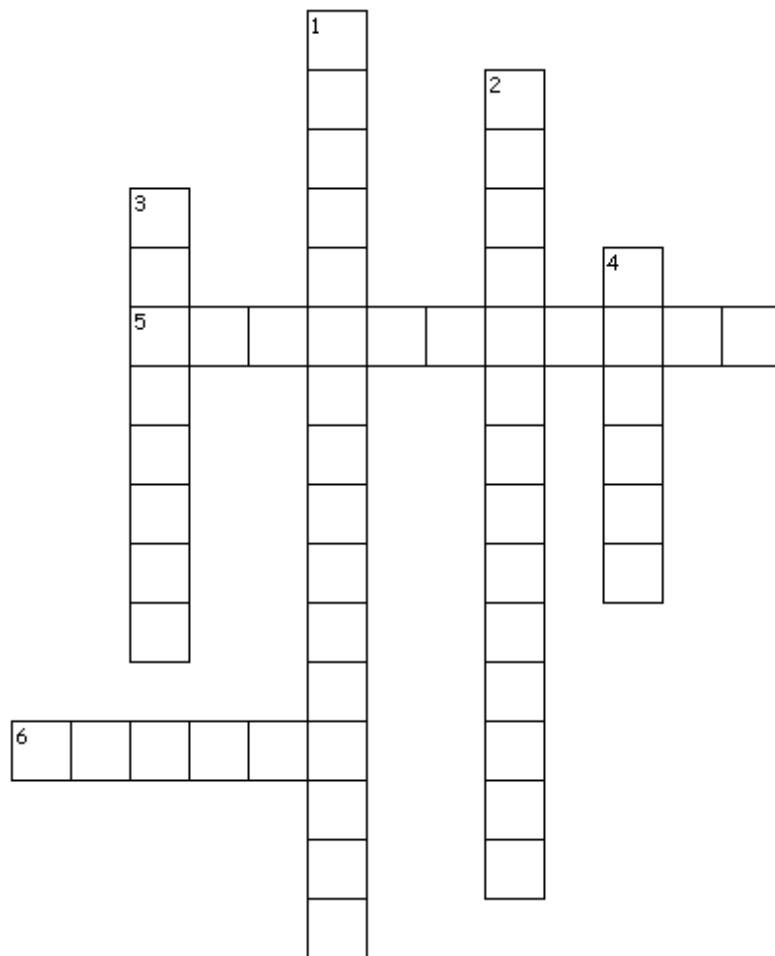
- You disagree with the author*
- You are pulled over while speeding on the highway*
- You use someone else’s idea*

What a librarian can help you with:

- Finding someone to date or be friends with*
- Researching my topic and finding resources*
- Writing my research paper*

Old Fashioned Paper Game: Crossword

When there is so much to cover in the class and little time to deliver the material, I often provide handouts with the necessary links for students to consult later. Sometimes, when requested by teaching faculty to walk students through the use of a citation management software (e.g. Zotero or Mendeley), I often find that some students are already familiar with the citation tool. To keep these students occupied during the remaining time of the class, I provide them with crossword puzzles to supplement their knowledge in conducting research (Tchangalova, 2016). This is another creative way for reinforcing material previously covered in class. Humor can be infused within the hints for across and down lines on a crossword puzzle as shown in Figure 1.



DOWN

1. The aliens named AND, OR and NOT form the group of _____. In the galaxy, called Academic Search Ultimate, they can help you finding your dream article at a lightning speed.
2. Use a “blanket” to surround two or more words to search any planet in the EBSCO galaxy.
3. A search engine that can find the dream article for your research paper.
4. A citation management tool that keeps your citations in a safe space while you sleep.

ACROSS

5. Your librarian has an alien last name.
6. When looking for full-text article in the libraries’ collection, you push the button _____.

Answers: 1. Boolean Operators; 2. Quotation Marks; 3. Database; 4. Zotero; 5. Tchangalova; 6. Find It

Figure 1. A crossword with library terms for students to complete either alone or in groups.

IV. The “Quiz” Hat

As part of the assessment efforts, librarians use multiple choice questions to evaluate student learning. Interjecting some funny elements into quizzes allow students to pay more attention on the concept asked for and select the correct answer with ease.

What does MeSH stand for?

- Me Sleeping Here*
- Medical Subject Headings*
- Medical Emergency Status Hotline*

Why would you include citations in a research paper?

- A - To increase the word count of your paper*
- B - To allow your instructor or colleagues to locate information you have used to support your argument*
- C - To distinguish your original ideas from those of other authors*
- B and C*
- A, B, and C*

V. The “Laser” Hat

Looking for something innovative, not digital or on paper, while at the same time interesting? Look no further! The librarians at the University of Maryland in College Park experimented with lasers as a way to engage students and reinvigorate their learning (Zdravkovska et al., 2010).

Laser pointers can be an effective low-cost tool not only in the hand of the instructor to point on their slides but also for students as an alternative way to participate in the lecture by collectively answering questions presented on a slide. They direct their lasers to the answers on the slide. Be careful, however! Some students may direct the laser to the instructor and/or other students in the classroom trying to “blind” them.

Figure 2 presents some examples on how to incorporate questions in presentation slides to engage students in learning. Depending on how students respond to the questions, the instructor can clarify some obscure concepts that students didn’t understand while at the same time provide humorous answers to bring laughter to the classroom.

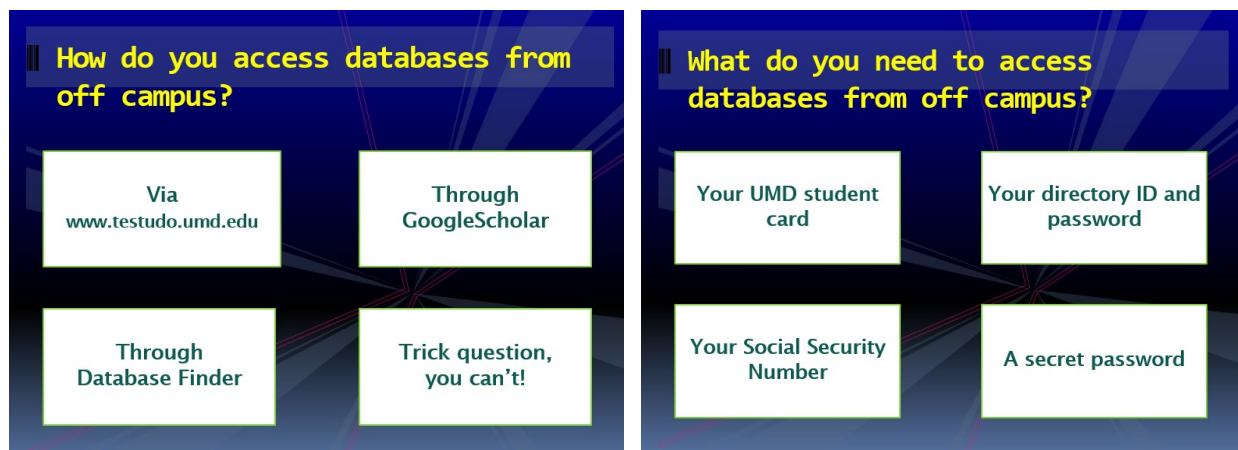


Figure 2. Multiple-choice questions on presentation slides for students to answer using laser pointers as an alternative to clickers.

Main Takeaways

Like a magician who takes out objects that they play with, this teaching toolkit with tips and tricks can be useful in sparking your imagination on how to embed some elements in your teaching practice in order to create a more relaxed classroom atmosphere.

You don’t need to be a comedian or an artist to make your classes interesting and funny. Use what works for you and your persona: (1) smile and make eye contact while telling personal stories as an icebreaker, (2) step down from your podium and let students explain the concepts to their peers using a flipped classroom approach, (3) play games and encourage student participation, (4) embed humorous elements in your lectures, presentation slides, handouts, quizzes, etc., and (5) use nonstandard tools such as pen laser pointers or old-fashioned games such as crossword puzzles.

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Author Bio



Nice to meet you all! My name is Nedelina Tchangalova (T-C-H... oh, my.... How do you pronounce this?). Never mind, call me by my first name. Going back in time, I was crazy enough to leave my chemical engineering degree in Bulgaria, and come to the United States with my husband, a three-year-old son and a 6-month old daughter. I embarked on a library journey transitioning from an Engineering Librarian – well, my first Master in Science degree was a great sprint into the library world – to become a Public Health Librarian at the University of Maryland (UMD) in College Park. As a librarian with hearing challenges and a Bulgarian accent, it seems that teaching students to be information literate is a "Mission: Impossible"! Learn five tips on how to become an engaged librarian!