

HIGH GRAVITY, UNFILTERED ADVICE: TEACHERS-TURNED-LIBRARIANS SHARE TIPS FOR IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

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Effective teaching is a complex pursuit, requiring a depth of theoretical knowledge as well as “street smarts” for responding to practical instructional challenges. For most librarians, their instructional preparation largely centers on the former, with a brief overview of educational theory while in library school. While LIS instruction classes are valuable for providing a theoretical foundation, they unfortunately give little attention to the practical realities and nuances of day-to-day instruction (Julien, 2005; Jacobs, 2008; Saunders, 2015).

As former K-12 teachers who have entered librarianship as a second career, we have both formal educational training as well as years of practical instructional experience. This article is part of an effort to share our advice on classroom issues, focusing on common concerns with instructional design, classroom management, and teaching presence.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

Instructional design has found its way into the academic librarian’s vocabulary and is often defined as “the process by which instruction is improved through the analysis of learning needs and systematic development of learning materials” (Culatta, 2013). While a variety of literature exists on instructional design, few librarians receive formal training. This differs from K-12 teachers who learn about instructional design in their coursework and field experiences. K-12 teachers learn to write lesson plans that require them to define learning objectives, design instructional activities, and identify assessment strategies. They implement, reflect, and revise teaching strategies based on feedback from teaching mentors and students.

The concept of instructional design may seem somewhat intimidating, perhaps because there are so many different instructional design models. However, looking beyond popular models such as ADDIE and Backwards Design, one can see the core of instructional design is really about making instruction iteratively dynamic. That is, ensuring that instructional activities align with learning objectives, teaching and learning performance is assessed, and revisions are made based on that feedback.

Given that many librarians are not trained in the art of instructional design, it comes as no surprise that this is area may be challenging. Librarians may not be sure which instructional activities to implement during an information literacy session, fail to assess students, and overpower instruction with content that is not aligned to objectives. These challenges are further exacerbated by the lack of time available to prepare for lessons and the limiting structure of the one-shot instruction session. The following strategies may help librarians become more effective at designing instruction.

Use Objectives to Maintain Focus

- Maintain focus. A lesson can become disjointed and confusing if it covers too many different topics. Students may experience cognitive overload if they receive too much information at once.
- Develop two to three learning objectives (or less) per session. You have to determine what is essential and what is helpful for students to know.
- Write out your lesson plan. Seeing it written down will help you visualize how your lesson activities align with the objectives.

- Use ADDIE. ADDIE is a basic instructional design model that may help you think about your instruction in a more comprehensive way, by having you Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate your instruction (Branch, 2009).

Implement Assessment

- Develop an assessment plan. Learning objectives and assessment go hand in hand. Assessment helps you understand the effectiveness of your teaching.
- Formative strategies emphasize qualitative responses and require you to monitor student performance while the learning is taking place.
 - Examples: Observation, questioning, quick writing activities including exit tickets, quizzes, think-pair-share
- Summative assessment tends to lean more towards quantitative data and focuses on evaluating student learning. Typically a mixed methods approach works best; however, it may be difficult to summatively assess students if you only see them for a one-shot session.
 - Examples: Evaluating an assignment using a rubric, testing, written exams, giving students a performance task such as a presentation

Make Instruction Relevant

- Use real world examples. Connect concepts you teach to things that happen in the real world. In particular, pop culture references tend to be easy for students to understand.
- Connect teaching topics to the assignment at hand. This helps students understand why they are in the library instruction session.
- Give choices. Allow students to choose how they complete a task or how they organize it (Keller, 2010).
- Mix it up. Infuse videos, guest speakers, humor, group work, music, and other strategies into lessons to capture student attention.
- Refer to ARCS. John Keller’s ARCS model (2010) may help you gain insight into student motivation for designing relevant instruction by thinking about student Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction.

Make Instruction Active

- Integrate engagement strategies. Students learn best when they are engaged, particularly in hands-on and social activities.

- Limit the lecture. Lectures or demonstrations should only be 5-10 minutes long at a time.
- Chunk concepts together. For example, demo a database, then have students practice using it before talking about interlibrary loan.
- Create activities that require students to think. For example, learning “where to click” is not a cognitively challenging learning task for students.
- Learn about active learning theory. Literature on active learning may help you discover new ways to engage students during library instruction.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Classroom management, the task of keeping students engaged and preventing disruptive behavior, can be difficult even for trained teachers. For those in higher education, who often teach without any instructional training, facing uninvolved or unruly students can be traumatic (Boice, 2000).

Fortunately, as we have found in our experience, there are a number of strategies to help prevent disruptive behavior from developing in the first place. These strategies consist of building rapport with students, keeping them engaged and on-task, and removing aspects of the lesson that may lead to distraction and disengagement.

Build Rapport

- Greet your students. Even if you are in a foreign classroom, stand by the door and welcome students, making conversation as they enter.
- Address students by name. Have students create quick, foldable name-cards so you can call them by name rather than just pointing at them.
- What is in it for them? Be sure to explain the objectives of the lesson and how it will benefit the students.
- Develop respect for your directions. Wait for all side conversations to cease before addressing the class. If students start talking again while you are speaking, stop and wait for quiet before continuing.

Engage Students

- Capture student interest right away. Have an activity for them to complete or something eye-catching on the screen as you are waiting for all students to arrive to class.
- Make it (at least seem) mandatory. If providing a handout/activity sheet, instruct students to put their names on the top—they often assume this means they will be handing it in (even if you do not intend to

collect them), and will likely put more effort into completing it.

- Actively lecture. If you need to incorporate direct instruction, give the students something to do during this time to engage them. Try having them fill in the blanks on a handout for the main points, or give them a BINGO card with terms on it that you will be covering.
- Give clear directives. Repeat any directions and try to also write them out or include them in your PowerPoint.
- Ask good questions. Avoid asking “no-brainer” questions as students will be less likely to engage and answer. Make sure to wait for responses when you do ask questions to give students time to think and respond.

Prevent Distractions

- Remove temptations. Ask students to turn off computer monitors and keep laptops closed when they are not needed.
- Plan for the worst. Give some thought in advance as to how you might adapt the lesson if your instructional technology fails.
- Think like an 18-year-old. Before using a free-response technology (e.g., Socrative, Padlet, etc.), acknowledge the temptation for students to add inappropriate responses and simply remind them that they are college students now, not high schoolers.
- Avoid “dead-air.” Plan your transitions between different parts of the session. Open webpages in advance, have materials ready to go, and develop a strategy for passing out handouts.

Unfortunately, despite your best proactive efforts, there will be occasions where students behave inappropriately. In these situations, your response is incredibly important, as your status as a respectable professional is in the balance. Remember to remain cool, confident, and collected. Keep the following suggestions in mind when dealing with indirect and direct disruption.

Indirect Disruption

- Stay on your game. Do not allow late students to throw off your rhythm, let them find a seat and get them caught up later when you have a chance.
- Subtly deal with chatter. If several students engage in side-conversations during whole-class instruction, position yourself near them, make eye contact, or call on a student near the students to draw attention to them without directly “calling them out.”

- Focus on the positive. If several students are off-task, praise those who are on-task rather than focusing on the negative behavior.

- It is not always about you. Remember that students don’t come to class in a vacuum, they bring their personal lives with them. Do not jump to conclusions and assume any disengaged student is trying to personally spite you.

Direct Challenges

- Remain calm and collected. Misbehavior is typically attention-seeking and if you become upset, you have given the student exactly the response they wanted.
- Simply ignore. If a student gives an inappropriate response either directly or through instructional response systems, ignore it. Avoid responding sarcastically or embarrassing students-- you do not want to create a contentious environment.
- Avoid calling out students in front of the class. If a student persists in disrupting the class, do not address them in front of their peers. Find a time during the lesson to speak with them quietly and individually.

TEACHING PRESENCE

Being self-aware of your body language can play a key role in creating a bond with your students. This is especially important when the parameters of traditional library instruction makes establishing trust, building relationships, and fostering student involvement difficult. But, because “up to 90% of what people say and feel is communicated through their actions, not their words” (Hansen 2010, p. 35), librarians may still effectively build relationships with students.

The confidence you portray through your body language will help you engage and persuade students to interact with you and stay on task. Ultimately, it heightens your ability to have more successful interactions with your students. Bower, et al. (2013) cited multiple studies that suggest practice and training are an effective means of improving both verbal and nonverbal communication. To that end, the following advice is meant to assist you in the reflection of your own classroom presence, and as a point of reference when observing colleagues’ instruction sessions.

Movement & Gestures

- Be familiar with the room's layout. Know where the furniture is so you can limit barriers and identify the quickest and easiest routes to each area.
- Free yourself from the podium/computer. Simply moving to the other side of the room breaks up the monotony of your session and eliminates the podium as a barrier.
- Stand still when giving directions. Have you ever noticed that, after you gave a class directions, a majority of students did not follow them? Try this: Stand still while facing the class, make sure all eyes are facing you, and then give directions. Drawing attention to yourself in this manner will help students realize what you are saying is important.
- Gestures add meaning. Appropriate gestures can help express your thoughts and emotions, but also help students understand what you want them to do. This is especially important for students who speak English as a second language. (O'Hair & Ropo, 1994; Tai, 2014)

Spatial Relationships

- Proximity is important. Moving closer to the class as a whole shows you are attempting to engage them while moving toward an individual student asking a question shows you are engaged and genuinely interested in what they have to ask.
- Be aware of boundaries. When working with students one-on-one, be aware of the student's own nonverbal cues to decipher the boundaries of their personal space.
- Work at eye level. If a student is sitting at a computer and you are standing next to them they may be intimidated by the authority you are representing. Crouching down or kneeling next to them shows you are willing to work with them as a peer.

Eye Contact

- Know your content. Familiarity with your material allows you to look at your audience while you are speaking. It is OK to pause, look at your notes or computer for help, and continue your lesson.
- Make eye contact with every student. This is difficult, but not impossible, to do. The goal is to make a connection with each individual which helps make the learning experience personal and can help build relationships.

Enthusiasm & Confidence

- Be positive, upbeat and enthusiastic. Showing these emotions to your students throughout your session will help you overcome anxiety and any potential negative impact your nervousness may have on students' perception of you as a teacher.
- Be animated. Ever notice TV news anchors' over the top facial expressions? They do it to show emotion, interest and the importance of the story as should you with the material you are presenting.
- Be honest. Having a bad day? Sick? Tell your students at the beginning of class. O'Hair and Ropo (1994) state that unpleasant emotions are less accurately perceived than pleasant ones. By being honest, you may be surprised at how understanding students will be which may limit disruptions.

CONCLUSION

Following these teaching tips may help you work toward improving your instruction. Keep in mind that teaching is an imperfect art. It takes time and practice to build your competencies in instructional design and classroom presence and management. To begin improving your instruction, consider having peers observe your instruction, practicing reflective teaching, and looking for opportunities to collaborate or co-teach with others. In many ways, teaching should keep us grounded in reality; instruction is never perfect and even the most experienced teachers need to continuously assess, reflect, and improve upon their practice.

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