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We Can Do it (and So Can You!): Creating an Active Learning Environment in Your Library

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INTRODUCTION

These proceedings detail the methods for fostering an active learning environment at the Mary and Jeff Bell Library (Bell Library) of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. In a diverse instruction environment, it was important to encourage library buy-in, explore the varying degrees of active learning, extend efforts to spread active learning across campus, and develop ideas and plans for increasing active learning in the future.

IN HOUSE EFFORTS

Student Training

The library has a great deal of experience with active outreach approaches like scavenger hunts and escape rooms that aim to bring users together and develop library knowledge through play. These engagement ideas were adapted into a gamified approach for a student assistant orientation.

Student assistants were organized into small cross-departmental teams. Student assistants were organized into small cross-departmental teams; this was done intentionally, as it prevented students from limiting their interactions to their hiring department, enabling them to develop a broader community throughout the library. The scavenger hunt took students throughout the library and exposed them to spaces and resources they may not have seen before and introduced them to friendly faces they could rely on later. Next, the students moved into the escape room. Here they were encouraged to communicate effectively and openly while engaging with tasks that ensured their familiarity with the library's website and online resources, library policies, and the Library of Congress classification system.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with even reticent student assistants expressing their appreciation of the new approach. Supervisors were also happy with the results, as student assistants were now more aware of the different areas and resources the library has to offer. The success of these efforts further established the importance and effectiveness of active learning.

Sizzles and Fizzles

Primary job functions, liaison assignments, and reference duties all compete for a librarian's attention, leaving instruction as neither a priority nor a cohesive program. To remedy the absence of professional instructional development, Bell Library instructors were asked to attend a meeting at the end of the Fall 2018 semester, bringing two instruction experiences to share: one high point in their semester of teaching (a "sizzle") and one experience where things did not go as planned (a "fizzle").

Each librarian shared their fizzles first, allowing for time in between testimonies to ask questions, suggest improvements, and commiserate by sharing similar experiences. As this was the librarians' first real glimpse into each other's instruction practices, some participants may have felt hesitant to reveal what could be viewed as failures or mistakes. However, at Bell Library the fizzles

portion of this conversation became something not just revelatory, but cathartic. In addition to a sense of release, sharing fizzles allowed librarians to solicit feedback on ideas and activities.

To end the meeting on a high note, each librarian shared their sizzles. Though less emotional than the fizzles, librarians gained valuable insight into each other's practices and left the meeting with new ideas to try in their own classes.

Despite only meeting once a semester, the sizzles and fizzles meeting has reframed the way librarians think about their classroom experiences. Librarians even reach out to one another now throughout the semester, saying they had a fizzle or a sizzle of a class. Though a small shift, the common language and the anticipation of sharing experiences has brought an important cohesion to the instruction program.

Instruction Retreats

In addition to semesterly meetings, instructing librarians meet over the summer for an instruction retreat. These retreats provide a catered lunch and take place over four hours in the library conference room. There, the librarians spend time learning about a concept to improve their instruction practice and spend the rest of the retreat practicing the new skill or concept.

During one retreat on active learning, the Instructional Services Librarian gave a presentation about the benefits of active learning and shared some techniques she has incorporated into her instruction. Two other librarians provided additional examples of learning activities, demonstrating the different levels of development and in-class run time. Crowdsourcing active learning examples in this way demonstrated to the librarians that active learning was not a new concept, but rather one that had been practiced inside of the library for years.

Once librarians had an understanding of what active learning could look like, they were asked to create objective-based learning activities. The librarians split into groups of three and spent three 15-minute rounds brainstorming activity ideas for different objectives. The objectives included "Students can discern opinion from fact," "Students understand the differences between a Google search and a search through library resources," and "Students understand what initial steps to take once they have a topic or research question." By the end of 45 minutes, each group had worked on every objective and created an outline of a learning activity. The last hour of the retreat was spent sharing and discussing what activities or ideas had been developed for the three objectives.

The benefits of this type of rapid prototyping included reaffirming a commitment to objective-based design, nonjudgmental fast-paced brainstorming, and a chance to work with fellow librarians to design activities.

Varying Degrees of Active Learning

As made evident during the retreat, active learning can be incorporated into instruction by varying degrees. Escape rooms are an excellent approach to instruction, but can also be extremely demanding. Libraries often face limitations on staff and time, making it difficult to develop such an activity. However, there are several active learning approaches that demand little time, while having a big impact on student learning.

One example is think-pair-share. This activity involves the instructor posing a question, giving participants a moment to think, asking participants to pair up to discuss the question, and finally coming back together to share what they discussed. Activities involving partners or small groups also help alleviate some of the hesitancy to interact in library sessions.

Another degree of active learning involves having students physically engage to demonstrate a concept. For example, to demonstrate the use of Boolean operators, a library instructor may ask students a simple question like, "Stand if you are attending this library session." Next the instructor would introduce the "and" operator and ask, "Stand if you are currently attending this library session and wearing glasses." Through this physical demonstration, the effect of "and" on results is apparent.

When doing a more physical activity it is important to consider incorporating accommodations as necessary. Prior to developing a physically engaging activity, the library instructor should either speak with the professor or develop the activity with alternatives in mind, like students raising hands instead of standing.

There are also many digital tools available for active learning in the classroom, but librarians at Bell Library tend to keep their active learning approaches low-tech. This prevents assumption of technology access and conserves librarian time and energy. A hand raised can be just as effective as an online poll.

OUTSIDE OF THE LIBRARY

Active Learning on the Go

Bell Library's librarians are often asked to be present at tabling events, such as orientations and research symposiums. As librarians are increasingly spread thin across various job duties, they turned a critical eye to these tabling events—was just being present really an effective use of their time?

Still wanting to participate in these events, the librarians took the time to transform tabling events into moments for active learning. Students would still visit the table, meet a librarian, and walk away with swag, but the librarian would have had the opportunity to insert information literacy learning into the interaction.

Two primary activities have been developed for tabling events so far. The first is an adaptation of an activity originally created for a classroom setting, referred to as "The Article Game." The goal of the game, in both the classroom and at a tabling event, is for students to critically examine a variety of article types and determine which article is appropriate for a provided scenario. At the tabling event, this involves using a spinning wheel, such as those on game shows like Wheel of Fortune, with a scenario written on each panel of the wheel. Visitors spin the wheel to determine the scenario prompting a search for information. They then choose an appropriate source from the articles on the table. Whether the visitors choose an appropriate source or not, it is an opportunity for the librarians to engage in a conversation about information relevance, credibility, and critically examining information need.

The second activity developed for tabling events focuses on shifting students away from topic-oriented research to question-oriented research. Visitors select a slip of paper from each of the three containers before them. Each slip of paper has a word or phrase on it like "women" or "comic books," and visitors are asked to create a research question using at least two of the three selected words. This allows the librarian staffing the table to facilitate a conversation about suitable research questions and why starting with a research question rather than a broad topic is helpful when beginning a research project.

Utilizing tabling events in this way does require a few things that a meet-and-greet tabling event does not. Firstly, it requires a librarian who is comfortable engaging with a large number of students and secure enough in their knowledge of the content to have conversations about the information literacy concepts addressed in the activities.

Secondly, these situations involve time. It takes time to develop these activities and it takes much more time to run them than it does to simply say "hello" and pass out swag.

Finally, these games do require some materials, but that should not be a barrier for instruction programs without a budget. Rather than using a physical spinning wheel, a laptop with a digital spinning wheel would work just as well. If an instruction program has no containers, Tupperware would work. These games are intended to be adaptable, and that adaptability includes effectively dealing with budget limitations.

Find Your Champion

Librarians at Bell Library enjoy utilizing learning activities, but not all professors are willing to dedicate time to them in their 50-minute library session. Rather than tackling individual professors each time they want to try out a new activity, librarians at Bell Library have found it more effective to concentrate their efforts on one or two professors who have demonstrated an interest in active learning and objective based design. These professors, or champions, are often found in the First-Year Learning Communities Program where professors are not tenure-track and they teach classes that are intended to help students develop their skills as college students before they enter upper level courses.

One professor in particular has been extremely willing to collaborate with librarians. Initially interested in having her students learn how to identify scholarly articles, she was open to incorporating another objective put forward by a librarian: identifying information need. One half hour brainstorming meeting resulted in "The Article Game" that eventually turned into the tabling event activity mentioned above. Since developing this activity together, she and several librarians have had additional meetings to develop other activities for different learning objectives.

Having one active learning champion has given Bell Library more than just a collaborating partner, it has helped to create an arsenal of successfully implemented activities. Now when professors express an interest in teaching a certain concept, librarians can point to an already-developed activity as well as positive reviews from students and faculty members, making for a much more effective argument. Some faculty members have even asked for activity materials so they can play the game with their students in their own time. While this prevents librarians from leading the conversations, it does mean information literacy concepts are integrated into the classroom.

MOVING FORWARD

Flipped Classroom

Once increased faculty buy-in is achieved, a next step will be working with faculty to conduct a flipped classroom library instruction session. Through this approach, professors would instruct students to complete an information literacy related activity, such as watching a pre-recorded tutorial video on searching basics, prior to attending the one-shot library instruction session.

Doing this can alleviate concerns over the inability to provide students with what they need to become more information literate, let-alone what they need to successfully complete a class assignment. Time constraints may force librarians to cut active learning activities from their lesson plans in order to make sure students can perform tasks that are most effectively taught through demonstrations. With a flipped classroom approach, those basic searching needs will be met outside the instruction session, leaving time for deeper conceptual development via active learning.

Storage

Currently, Bell Library uses a project management software called Basecamp which allows for teams to work together and store content such as lesson outlines and instruction ideas. While Basecamp is a convenient tool, storing materials and sharing ideas is just as doable in a shared folder, a Google Drive, or even an email chain.

Successful lesson plans are also hosted on a LibGuide dedicated to information literacy teaching resources. This guide already includes lessons from Project Cora and the ACRL Sandbox, but including lesson plans created by Bell librarians helps to solidify the idea of librarians as co-developers in lesson planning and information literacy instruction.

Finally, the lesson plans and materials are also being made available in the institutional repository. This will make the lesson plans even more discoverable for use outside of the Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi community.

Digital Information Literacy Quality Enhancement Plan

Active learning and information literacy at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi will see a bit of a shift in the near future. The campus recently adopted a Digital Information Literacy Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that will scaffold information literacy throughout an undergraduate's time as a student. This QEP will help the library identify more champions as well as provide insight on how best to actively engage students in a variety of disciplines.

Online Instruction

After the rise of COVID-19, all Spring 2019 classes at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi were moved online. As a result, Bell librarians attempted a variety of online instruction methods including guide-on-the-side demonstrations, recorded video tutorials, PowerPoint presentations, and shifting classes to an online web conferencing platform.

A survey was created to track the tools created by librarians, while a separate survey was provided for faculty and students to provide assessment feedback. This information will help the librarians develop engaging online tools as education becomes an increasingly digital initiative.

CONCLUSION

Bell Library has made great strides in the last year to introduce, incorporate, and expand active learning in library instruction sessions. This dedication to improving student learning has extended outside of the library teaching spaces and into events, online environments, and even into everyday conversations with stakeholders. As the library field shifts and technology evolves, there will surely be a time when we modify our methods dramatically, but active learning, with all of its documented learning benefits and energizing potential, is here to stay.