

Simple Ways to Add Active Learning to Your Library Instruction
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The design of classes at all levels of education is evolving as educators investigate new ways to reach students, incorporate technology into the classroom, increase student learning, and find new strategies to captivate students during instruction sessions. The lecture format alone is no longer sufficient. Using active learning techniques offers librarians an alternative to the traditional format of library instruction and helps librarians stay relevant during this age of educational change.

At the University of North Texas Libraries we developed software to assess library instruction, called Library Instruction Software for Assessment (LISA). After using LISA to test over 575 students, we found that students taking freshman English were not learning how to effectively search the catalog. After instruction, only 11% were successfully able to perform a subject search. We added a simple active learning component to our library instruction sessions and the students' success rate went up to 38%. Clearly active learning is a powerful tool to engage students and increase their level of learning.

Active learning is not difficult to add to library instruction. For example, the active learning component we added to the freshman English classes we teach is a simple four question worksheet. Simple active learning components can be incorporated into library instruction sessions for most skills librarians teach. It is crucial to approach library instruction classes with the idea that what has been done in the past in education, such as the straight forward lecture format, may not be sufficient for students today. While traditional teaching methods are not to be

discarded altogether, anyone who instructs should be aware of activities that may increase student retention and understanding of information.

Active learning works so well because it takes into account that learning is a process and that students must be engaged for learning to occur. “One way to design for active learning is to create a situation where experience, practice, and application occur (Barnes Whyte & Hensley 2006).” Experience is an activity that brings the student’s experience with the learning into the teaching situation. In the case of our freshman English classes, the experience was the four question worksheet that was designed to increase the students’ engagement with the catalog. They were required to actually experience how the catalog worked rather than just listening to us talk about how it works. Practice is an activity where the student is provided an opportunity to demonstrate that they understand the new information that was provided. The testing we did with LISA allowed the students to practice the skills taught. The final component is application, which is the opportunity to apply the information to a new situation in order to confirm that learning has occurred and can be transferred to new situations in the future. Our freshman English students leave our sessions with a research paper assignment in hand. They enter the application phase at that point and use the skills they have experienced and practiced to do the research necessary for their papers. (Barnes Whyte & Hensley 2006)

Some of the reasons active learning is effective is that it facilitates assessment; learning is demonstrated to the learner BY the learner; it facilitates teacher learning; different learning styles and domains can be accommodated and addressed; and the learner is more likely to find the learning personally meaningful (Ibid 2006).

Active learning is hard because it requires the teacher to take risks; they are opening themselves up more and risk losing some control of the classroom. It can feel chaotic at times as students are taking more control of their own learning experiences (Ibid 2006). Another reason incorporating active learning can be difficult for librarians is that we often have strict time limits for our sessions. There is always a great deal of content that we want to cram into a small window of time. Active learning hinges on the idea that less is more and that students are more likely to learn more if we provide less, but very focused and powerful, content.

Getting Started

Take a moment to think about your class sessions. What percentage of time do you spend on each of the following activities? :

1. You talking _____
2. Students talking to you _____
3. Students talking to each other _____
4. Students writing _____
5. Students thinking _____
6. Students on computers individually _____

“Include all the time spent on instructional activities, but exclude activities such as passing out handouts, taking roll, etc. Do not total above 100%. Even though students are probably thinking and writing while you talk, count only the times when they are thinking or writing with no other activity going on (Ridgeway 2006).”

What are your reactions to seeing this breakdown? If you are spending most of your class sessions with you talking with very little student centered time, then it is time to start adding active learning to your sessions. As this can be daunting at first, start small and work your way to more challenging techniques. Some simple strategies to get you started include:

- Talk informally with students as they arrive in the classroom.
- Expect participation.
- Rearrange the classroom to make it better at facilitating discussion.
- Provide non-threatening opportunities for everyone to participate.
- Give students time to think when asking questions.
- When students answer questions, reward them with praise or small treats.
- Reduce anonymity by asking students about their previous experiences in the library.
- Draw students into the discussion by making eye contact with students that look interested.
- Allow time to answer questions informally at the end of the session.

Set the Tone

We hear students say all the time that many of their classes are boring. On one occasion we asked a student assistant who was talking about a class what made it boring. She explained: “All the teacher does is stand there and lecture. He isn’t open to ideas either.” Like university professors, instruction librarians should be aware of student needs. Students cannot absorb

information if they are tuned out because the instructor is always boring or closed to participation. Students benefit from taking an active, not passive role, in learning.

When implementing an active learning element, tone is important. The aforementioned student assistant described a class in which she had a much more positive experience. “In one large lecture class, the professor ran up and down the aisle with a microphone for comments on each new topic he introduced. Lots of students participated because they had different opinions.” The professor employed the Q & A approach and students were comfortable and engaged by expressing contrasting opinions. The professor set the tone for an open learning environment that encouraged student exploration. Likewise, librarians can use an encouraging, humorous, or open tone to introduce information literacy concepts that many students may be encountering for the first time.

Honor Silence

One of the biggest obstacles librarians face when they begin teaching is allowing time for silence. Silence often makes people feel uncomfortable causing them to rush to fill the silence. When a teacher asks a question and there are no immediate answers, there is a tendency to quickly begin speaking again to fill the void. Give students time to think and let them know that you expect them to participate by becoming comfortable with silence. In silent times, make strong eye contact with students around the room. This can be challenging at first for many new teachers, but if you persevere, you will be rewarded with much more participation and feedback. In addition, the first period of uncomfortable silence is often all it takes to make students aware that you expect them to participate and they will be quicker with answers for the rest of the session.

Active Learning Activities and Techniques

The following active learning activities and techniques can be very good at helping newer librarians and more seasoned librarians who are adjusting their teaching style to include more active learning get started. They will also spur new ideas in those who are already using active learning in the classroom. After using some of these activities as directed, try changing them up to better fit your own teaching style. Not all of these techniques will work for all teachers. Try to find activities that will fit your personality and then make it your own.

Worksheets can be completed individually or in groups. As a group activity, they allow individuals to be active contributors to a larger group and encourage students to bounce ideas off of one another. Worksheets also work well as group work because this generation of students is very familiar with and does a lot of group work so there is no learning curve as they try to negotiate a new method of learning. The worksheet combined with group format allows students to be self-directed in their learning. Worksheets can be short and simple, take up very little class time, and can be customized for a specific subject area and audience.

The **Five-Minute Letter** requires students to write a brief letter directed to the librarian about their reaction to the class session. Provide them with 2-3 guidelines for their letters and give them 10-15 minutes to develop a thoughtful response. The most general guideline may be to ask students to write about 1) what they knew about the topic when they entered the classroom; 2) what they learned in the session that they did not already know; and 3) what do they still need to know to complete their assignment. This task works well as a learning activity because students are given the opportunity to reflect on - and therefore cement in their brains - their learning. It is also an occasion (similar to the example above about our session using LISA)

to have the students' practice component of the session also be an assessment that can help you improve your teaching.

Structuring a Session with Questions allows students to direct the instruction session. Students are given three minutes at the beginning of the session to pair off and write three questions they would like answered during the course of the class. The librarian sorts the questions into broad areas and writes them on the board. The students try to answer the questions with the librarian adding comments or answering questions where appropriate.

An alternative to this is to have the class break into groups of around 4 (depending on the class size) and asking them brainstorm everything they would like the library to do for them and then ask each group to present their "wish list". The librarian then responds to their wishes with answers about what the library does to meet each desire.

With a **Group Search**, the librarian assigns groups of four with a searching task and assigns each group member with a role. The roles include the Navigator, or leader, who steers the group; the Helmsman who does the searching as the group instructs them to; the Recorder who completes a written report or worksheet about the searching; and the Reporter who presents a short summary of the group's work to the rest of the class. Assigning roles is a formal approach to a group search and can help to reduce chaos for librarians who are reluctant to relinquish control but it can also be done more informally.

Designing a Database requires students to read a short magazine article provided by the librarian. They then circle keywords and other terms that they think could be used in a search for the article. They write down their terms and then compare their list with an actual citation in a real database.

In **Writing a Proposal**, students break into groups of four or five and develop a plan for a group research report. They decide on a topic and develop a plan to find appropriate resources for their topic, including which databases they will use and what search terms they will use. If time allows, they test their plan.

Fact Checking allows students to test their researching skills. The librarian provides a compelling news story for the students to read. After reading it, they come up with facts within the story that they want to check for accuracy. Then either individually or in groups, they develop a plan to check the reporters' facts, deciding what source they need to use (this can include print or electronic sources as you see fit) and then actually performing the search to find the answer. Allow time at the end for students to share their findings.

In **Deck of Cards Boolean**, the librarian gives each student a card and then asks students to hold up cards that meet specific criteria to illustrate Boolean concepts. For example: face card AND red card; face card OR red card; black OR red; black AND queen; ((face OR ace) and red). Explain the concepts as the students are holding up the cards that meet the criteria, making sure that they are understanding that OR broadens the search and AND narrows the search and then what happens when you combine AND and OR in more complex searches. If you are working with a graduate class, you could add NOT to the criteria.

There are several **Scholarly vs. Popular** exercises that can be tried, but a good one to start with is passing out short excerpts of examples from each category to the students. Ask them to rank each as either scholarly or popular. Be sure to include a variety of sources. Discuss their decisions.

Conclusion

Getting started with active learning can be daunting but it is highly rewarding for librarians once they start using these techniques. The benefits of including active learning are many. Our research proved that students learned what we were teaching better by including active learning. Students are usually more engaged with the learning process when they are more active. Active learning also increases rapport with students and faculty. Finally, active learning makes teaching a lot more fun for both students and the instructor.

Works Cited and Further Reading*

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NOTE: Some of the resources included in this bibliography have exercises that have been duplicated elsewhere and the original author is unknown.