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Eight Tips from the Trenches: How Experience Teaching High School Informs my Approach to Information Literacy Instruction

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How experience teaching high school informs my approach to information literacy instruction

Instruction has become a fundamental part of the academic library, and most LIS graduate programs have added bibliographic instruction courses, designed to prepare budding librarians for the challenging role of teacher. In 2009, Loyd G. Mbabu's analysis of LIS curricula showed that 86% of ALA-accredited programs offered at least one course dedicated to instruction.[1] While LIS instruction courses hold incredible value, as any seasoned teacher can attest, some skills can only be learned on the job.

As a former high school history teacher, I spent three years "in the trenches" developing methods to design effective and engaging learning experiences. After library school I took my teaching experience to the university level, where I have found much of my instructional background to be quite useful.

While there are certainly many differences between secondary and academic instruction, I wanted to share some insight from my experience that has translated nicely to higher education.

1. Welcome your students. Before every class at my high school, I stood outside my door to greet each student who entered the room. This daily welcome helped to establish rapport and build relationships with even the most challenging students. Whether you see students on a regular basis or are providing one-shot instruction, try arriving to the classroom early and providing a warm greeting to entering students to let them know you value their presence and set a friendly tone for the session.

2. Work the room. Podiums at the front of the room provide a tempting shelter, but remember that students in the back of a large lecture hall or computer lab are physically isolated from you. By moving around the classroom (whether during group activity or direct instruction), I found that I could prevent potential misbehavior, engage students sitting in the back, and provide better physical access to those with questions.

3. Bring it to their level. A standing teacher towers over seated students. This variance in height creates an aura of authority that impedes the teacher's ability to work with a student individually. If a student has a question, instead of leaning over and talking down to them, try squatting to their level and interacting in a more collegial way.

4. Make it mandatory. One of the many mantras promoted at my high school was "make it mandatory," in reference to language used for providing directives. Translating this to the information literacy session, rather than saying "I'd like you to go to the library's Web page," make the process mandatory by saying, "Next, everyone is going to go the library's Web page." This subtle change in phrasing notifies students to follow what is happening because everyone else is doing so. Following the directive with a simple "please and thank you" helps

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maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect and collegiality.

5. See, hear, write. My high school was on the Arizona-Mexico border, and I had many English as a second language students. One strategy that helped to reach all students was to make sure that they heard, saw, and wrote the main points of the content. This strategy also helped to address various learning styles—aural, visual, and body/kinesthetic. For the instruction librarian, ensuring that students see, hear, and write down database searching tips, for example, will help to reach students across the spectrum of learning styles and English proficiencies retain information. Instead of assuming that students will take ownership of their learning, prompt them to write down information. For many students, particularly the college freshman, this can be a refreshing directive.

6. Try something new. Considering the workload of the academic librarian, tried-and-true lessons provide an appealing alternative to constantly rewriting instruction plans. However, teaching at all educational levels is more enjoyable when the instructor takes informed and innovative risks in lesson planning. My fondest memories of teaching are of the games and simulations I used. While it could be stressful trying out an activity for the first time, I found that students appreciate a teacher's thought and effort in creating an engaging learning experience, whether it goes smoothly or not. Try going out on a limb and developing a game or experiment with new educational technology—your students will appreciate it.

7. Communicate enthusiasm. In my experience, revving up teenagers to learn about mercantilism at 7:30 in the morning is a tall order. As I found, however, students will be even less excited if their teacher appears equally disinterested. By conveying my enthusiasm through animated voice and gesture, it was easier to get students fired up and engaged. Even if you have to "fake it until you make it" and earn an Oscar nomination in the process, showing passion engages students and really does make a difference. Above all, make sure to smile.

8. Objectives matter. As a teacher, I was required to generate objectives for every class section I taught. While at first this seemed like more busy work on top of my already packed schedule, I came to appreciate the objective development process and the positive impact this had on my instruction. Make your objectives work for you by using them to help guide planning and ensure that they encourage higher-level thinking.

Print out a list of Bloom's Taxonomy action verbs and incorporate these into your objective drafting, ensuring that you move students beyond lower levels of thinking.[2] Make certain that your objectives include the method by which they will be achieved. Rather than saying "Students will be able to compare psychology databases," include how this will be accomplished, "Students will be able to compare psychology databases *by completing a chart poster in a group.*" If you cannot iterate how an objective will be met, then it might not actually fit what is being taught.

The process of becoming an excellent teacher requires years of hard work, thoughtful innovation, and continual reflection. Effective teachers have a strong foundation in educational theory coupled with an understanding that often the smaller details and interactions can make a good lesson great.

While this level of mastery will take time, remember that you are not alone on this journey. No matter your instructional background or experience, by collaborating with colleagues to share effective strategies and helpful tips, we can all help each other along the way.

Notes

1. Loyd G. Mbabu, "LIS curricula introducing information literacy courses alongside instructional classes," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 50(3): 203.

2. There are many Bloom's Taxonomy charts available online. I like Clemson University's at www.clemson.edu/assessment/assessmentpractices/referencematerials/documents/Blooms%20Taxonomy%20Action%20Verbs.pdf. ᴢ