

Stuffy no more: Passion and humor in the library

By Susan Barnes Whyte

Share your enthusiasm and get involved in the campus community

Passion. Enthusiasm. Humor. Connection. Community. Rather than write a why-I-won-an-award story, I prefer to venture into that land rarely visited by librarians in the professional literature: how those above-mentioned words buttress my teaching at Linfield College.

Background

Last spring at Linfield's annual awards ceremony I found myself the astonished yet delighted recipient of the Edith Green Distinguished Professor Award for effectiveness in teaching, concern for individual students and academic work, distinction in my discipline, and a willingness to introduce new ideas to help make the college a place for academic excellence. Hence I was asked to contribute to this column and have been mulling for some time now on how to do this without sounding pollyannish or too smug. So the following represents, in a most informal way, some ideas that I bring to teaching and learning with students, which of course reflect my teaching style as well.

Passion and enthusiasm

I was recently reading an article analyzing a survey of library patrons: one patron remarked that she had never encountered an enthusiastic reference librarian. Well, why not? Students pick up on the librarian's engagement with the topic at hand and respond accordingly. Enthusiasm for libraries and all the endless discoveries they contain is worthy of great passion. What is tricky is to convey that passion to students for whom library instruction is one more class to sit through and yet, horror of horrors, there is of-

ten no grade attached to this session and no professor to impress. And there is also that whole world of campus life that beckons: those parties, football games, that endless string of relationships. What can librarians possibly say in class? Well, beyond the content, and we all know that students will not remember what the F2 key does in any particular database, students do respond to attitudes and ideas. Libraries contain ideas, millions of them, and our passion for these ideas integrates well into the reason for a college education; after all, why else are they here if not to learn to think like a sociologist, a biologist, a musician, an economist, or, dare I say it, like a librarian?

In all the wonderful articles about teaching more effectively, active learning, and critical thinking, passion and enthusiasm are rarely mentioned. Students are quick to notice faculty and their engagement with the content at hand. I often query students about why they think that so-and-so is a good teacher, and their remarks are very telling: the teacher likes what she does and she likes students. Students respond to and mirror intellectual enthusiasm.

Humor

Humor is a wonderful vehicle for transferring information painlessly. If we can step outside our librarians' heads, libraries can seem to be very absurd. Why can't one computer have all the information in it that a student needs for her research paper? Why are government documents shelved separately and with a whole different classification system? Why do public libraries use numbers to order their collections and academic libraries use letters and numbers? Why can't I sit down at a computer and type: "Please tell me all I need to know about Gustav Mahler"? Why can't librarians be funny (especially since they are so often the butt of jokes)?

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False drop stories are an easy and effective way to gain students' attention and serve to introduce the concept that computers indeed cannot think. My all-time favorite false drop concerns Cherokees. Several years ago when we were still dialing into DIALOG, a student needed contemporary newspaper articles on the Cherokee people. We accessed a well-known national newspaper index and lo and behold all ten articles which surfaced were about the Jeep! Freshmen especially seem to like this story. My current story concerns pufferfish, a.k.a. blowfish, and a search on the Web. All the resources that surfaced seemed to be either about the rock group Hootie and the Blowfish or sexual erotica. (Sex is always a popular topic with college students.) Beyond showing that computers do not think and do not recognize the context of one's thinking, I always tell the story in a way that shows that I did not think the process through; I made a mistake, but it was all right, and here's what I did next. Simple problem solving exemplified by humor can demonstrate the power of language—of words—in a machine environment where the computers respond to character strings and peoples' minds respond to meanings, insinuations, and contexts.

Connection and community

I received my bachelor's degree from Earlham College in 1975. I persuaded library director Evan Farber to hire me in the library even though I did not qualify for work study. It was certainly a step up from peeling potatoes and cracking two eggs simultaneously for the Sunday morning scrambled eggs (a skill my children are in awe of). Farber and the rest of the librarians were an integral part of our life at Earlham. Almost every class had a library instruction session that was directly related to the content of our class. In another class, Farber was a discussion group teacher; another librarian took a group to Scotland for a quarter. We thought this integration of librarians with faculty and campus life was normal. It was only after leaving Earlham and working at a university library and several college libraries that I realized that the norm for academic librarians was vastly different. I try to recreate Earlham everywhere I work, within the parameters of the particular institution.

Earlham, of course, was more than Farber. The model of community, of teachers and learners working together, of involvement with so-

cial concerns and of consensus, where you learned to listen hard to others' ideas even if you disagreed profoundly with them, have stayed with me and many of my fellow alumni. Attending Quaker schools for ten years convinced me that learning is more than what is transmitted in the classroom. After one leaves, what remains is not the specific content, but the process, the concern and affection for people and learning, and the passion for intellectual engagement which is paramount at a Friends' school. Here at Linfield, I have modeled that community involvement, knowing that connection in other areas makes me a better librarian.

At Linfield many events serendipitously unfolded that made me very involved in the fabric of this school. I should preface all this by saying that librarians have faculty status here. While I have mixed feelings about the demands placed upon us for research and professional development, I admit that I did more with this expectation prodding me on. First of all, I left the library often, got beyond the walls of Northup Library, and got to know faculty in

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their buildings. I participated in starting the Women's Caucus, a group for faculty, administrators, and staff. With a marvelous student I helped to resurrect the somnolent Women's Center. I volunteered to serve on the ARFA committee (Admissions, Retention, and Financial Aid), and in my two years on the committee received a very clear picture of who our students are. I chaired this committee for a year as well and was finally forced to speak up in faculty meetings in order to introduce measures. Speaking up at faculty meetings was more nerve-racking than anything I'd done before, but I realize now that faculty knew me in a different role than the one behind the reference desk.

Three years ago I was asked to be a freshman advisor. Linfield has a Freshman Colloquium program each fall, and one year there were not enough faculty to lead the groups. Several students suggested to the coordinator that I could do it. The learning curve was quite steep because all of a sudden I needed to know about classes, credits, general education requirements, and a whole host of other issues such as parents, drugs, and depression. Again, I got to know Linfield on another level, and students knew me on another level. I was reminded over and over of how infinitesimal the library is in the realm of students' consciousness and daily lives. Having these weekly Colloquium sessions on such mundane topics as study habits, time organization, alcohol, diversity, and liberal education made me think about all the issues which confront students. That last session on what constitutes a liberal education has always sparked much conversation, which continues beyond the class session and within the library's walls. Now I meet often with the freshman group during the fall semester along with a peer advisor to orient them to life at Linfield.

Serving on faculty search committees is a time-consuming but ever-enlightening activity that has strengthened my ties to Linfield. I have learned more about who is in the Sociology Department as well as the English, Modern Languages, and Mass Communications Departments. It also allows a natural entree with new faculty to work with them in library instruction. In fact, at one interview session, while we were waiting to start, I asked a student committee member how her research project was going, and we had a discussion; subsequently the candidate professed herself astonished that that conversation had taken place. In her years of being a student and a teacher she had never witnessed a librarian asking such a question.

Last spring I was elected by the faculty assembly as a member-at-large of the committee charged with revising the general education curriculum. This is a most fascinating phenomenon to participate in, watching as disciplinary borders surface, then recede only to surface again. It's also another opportunity to participate actively in shaping what Linfield offers to its students and faculty. All this committee work, although very time-consuming, gives me a fresh perspective on the library and its mission, while giving my colleagues more knowledge about what we do. And people often wonder what it is that librarians really do all day anyway!

Students

I like students. This seems deceptively simple yet fits in with the above comments on community and connecting. I work in this place not because of the library or the collection or the World Wide Web. I work here because I genuinely like connecting students ages 18 to 66 with information. When we are on break, generally go through withdrawal from not having students to interact with! I like their energy and ideas. I respect them. They know more than we realize and often bring a fresh perspective to a class or the reference desk.

When I teach, I often ask them open-ended questions about what we are doing. For instance, instead of telling them what to see on a screen, I ask them what they see and what is important to them as researchers. Then I wait. They always come up with something. I emphasize that in research there is no absolute right way to proceed and that machines are quirky, as are topics. In any class, I prefer to demonstrate one of their topics, rather than show them a clean process that I have spent time working out. I prefer having an improvised class in which a student does the actual keyboarding and we all respond with ideas and suggestions, such as which words might work better or which database might yield better results. This improvisational approach mirrors their actual process once they start their own research. The classes are free flowing and interactive, and all answers are valued.

Behind this improvisation is careful preparation. I always consult with the teacher so that we work together in determining what best suits the goals of that particular class. Faculty are often technology challenged, so I endeavor to introduce them to new electronic resources in ways that do not appear patronizing. I also try to think of the three things that are the most important for that class to learn, while keeping in mind that there might not be enough time for even three! I firmly believe in not lecturing for the entire hour, preferring to involve the class in small group activities or in having different students volunteer to do their searches in front of the class. Behind all the apparent improvisational nature of the actual class, there is much thought. I do not like to be bored and would rather work on an actual topic. This keeps me thinking and involved in the search process.

I think of teaching as performance. As a pianist and a singer, I practiced and practiced be-

forehand, but I gradually realized that performance depended on ease-of-being more than anything else. My hands and my voice would do better if I relaxed and centered on enjoying the music. My hands would find the notes, the chords, the melodic progression. I find teaching to be much the same. After all the reading about theories and exercises and critical thinking, I try to pare down the theory into pragmatic pieces. No one library class will inculcate everything there is to know about how to research a topic successfully. And the teaching does not end in that one class session. Over four years, there is some promise of coherence and development of critical thinking. Teaching continues in subsequent classes and is stronger in the one-on-one reference desk work where we can get down to the nitty gritty of topic development and finding resources. Performance is part of the hook to get the students back into the library or back onto those databases, and also, back to you. Asking the question for some students is the most difficult part of the process.

This fall I had the opportunity to team-teach a new required class for mass communication majors called Information Gathering. My partner in teaching is a former journalist. In this semester-long class, which I will repeat this spring and in subsequent years, I finally have the unique opportunity to participate with students in both the research process and the engagement of ideas which often eludes librarians in a one-shot class. Beyond the tools, I delight in working on thinking with the students. A semester class affords that opportunity and team teaching highlights two different perspectives brought to the process of information gathering.

To sum up the ideas in this article, as a librarian and as a teacher, I engage the students through humor and enthusiasm. I keep the concepts to be learned simple and pertinent to their particular class. I model searches in class and actually enjoy searches that initially fail. I try to provoke students to think about "answers" and "authority" and at the same time light up their imaginations and passion for the discovery that research is. This is a tall order, and certainly it does not happen in all classes nor with all students in any one class. But when a connection is made between a student or group of students and the resources here and beyond, that's when teaching is truly exciting and rewarding. ■

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