

LOEX-of-the-West 2000

Creativity and the art of library instruction

by BethAnn Zambella

It took me almost as long to get from Boston to Bozeman as it will to explain what "LOEX-of-the-West" means.

LOEX, for those uninitiated in arcane library acronyms, is the Library Orientation/ Instruction EXchange Clearinghouse at Eastern Michigan University, which runs an intimate annual conference that's always sold out.¹

Six years ago, our brethren in the Pacific Northwest started a biannual program modeled on LOEX that they dubbed LOEX-of-the-West. Like LOEX-goers, its 200 participants are drawn by the varied conference themes; this year's was "Creativity and the Art of Library Instruction."²

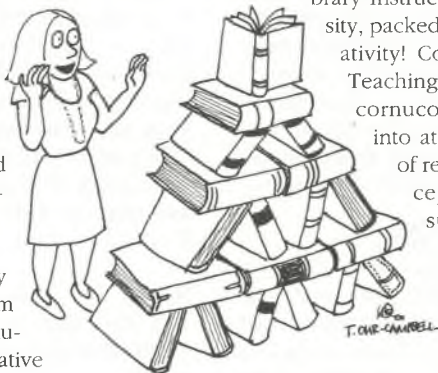
We gathered at Montana State University (MSU) at Bozeman from June 7–10, 2000, to "stimulate and refresh our creative rhythms," remarked Ken Kempcke, MSU reference librarian and conference chair. Kempcke introduced the extended metaphor that had given birth to the conference theme: former-MSU faculty member Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

Since metaphor is one of the most effective right-brained teaching and learning strategies, he crafted an excellent lens from which to view the ensuing proceedings, setting up the tensions between life and technology, reason and creativity, and the quest for wholeness.

Connecting creativity research to teaching and learning

Keynote Mary Jane Petrowski, head of Library Instruction at Colgate University, packed her presentation, "Creativity! Connecting Research to Teaching and Learning," with a cornucopia of ideas, delving into at least two dozen areas of research around the concept of creativity itself, such as psychometric measures, biographical profiles, IQ vs. creativity, and ways to foster creative thinking in the classroom.

Petrowski showed a video clip from television's *Nightline*, which explored how a company called IDEO develops new products, in this case a better shopping cart.³ The lesson I took from the clip: creative responses that don't address actual needs are irrelevant.



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Before and after the teams' in-lab design sessions, they interviewed real shoppers at actual stores to see what problems the consumers saw and to have them evaluate the final product. This person-on-the-street assessment is often the missing piece in libraries' creative attempts to reach users.

As for classroom tips, Petrowski's suggestions ranged from establishing intent to rewarding curiosity and risk-taking, to meta-tasks, such as "promoting supportable beliefs about creativity" by letting students know what creativity requires (time) and what suppresses it (verbalization, too much stress).

My favorite theoretical snippet from her talk looked at "recently activated knowledge." She gave an example from the movie *Topsy Turvy*, where a sword falls on Sullivan's head (of Gilbert and Sullivan), thus inspiring *The Mikado*. Like the protagonist, we are all informed by our most recent exposures to incidents and ideas—reinforcing the notion that conferences like this one really do inspire us.

Petrowski also gave the audience opportunities to participate, administering short versions of creativity tests, such as "generate a list of things that are white and edible" and "brainstorm the consequences of having six fingers [on one hand] instead of five."

Over the course of two days, examples of how-we-done-it-good creativity took many forms: one larger institution chose a counterintuitively low-tech way to reach students (old-fashioned term-paper clinics) while a smaller school took a high-tech route (a portable wireless electronic classroom).⁴

Resources for creativity

Of the dozen poster sessions—all revelatory—my favorite was MSU Reference Librarian Jan Zauha's "Thinking Backward: Selected Resources for Creativity," which included not only books, but games, cards, magnetic poetry, and miniature candy bars studded with creativity fortunes.⁵ A copy of Zauha's full bibliography will appear in the *Reference Services Review* conference proceedings.

Incorporating comedy into library instruction

The best presentation I attended was Sarah Blakeslee and Kristin Trefts' "Did you Hear the One about the Boolean Operators? Incorporating Comedy into Library Instruction."

Because there is a positive relationship between the use of humor and student learning, the California State University at Chico presenters went on a quest to become "funnier" in the classroom.

They regaled us, in tag-team format, with their adventures, including attending stand-up comedy classes. They spiked their PowerPoint slides with cartoons, music, and video clips and gave us all humor journals. The audience also competed to submit the best punchline for the talk's title. The winner? Colleen Bell from the University of Oregon, who said, "And and Or went to Vegas to tie the Not."

The low point of the sessions, for me, was the dearth of creativity exhibited in many presentations. It wasn't so much the ubiquitous PowerPoint slides as it was presenters who insisted on reading them word-for-word. It's one thing to appeal to different learning styles; it's another to give the same information aurally, visually, and as a printed handout.

For example, in a session that promised to explore "teaching with the right half of your brain," the lecturer (and I mean that pejoratively) didn't use a single technique he was promoting, not even a token graphic or metaphor.

I yearned to ask, "Aren't *we* adult learners, too?" I hope future conference presenters will be more reflexive, rely on their own expertise, reveal succinctly what worked, share substantive tips, and invite the audience into the discussion.

The fifth biennial LOEX-of-the-West will take place at the University of Oregon, June 27–29, 2002.

Notes

1. See <http://www.emich.edu/public/loex/CONFEREN/home.htm> for more information.
2. For the full program, check the Web site at <http://www.lib.montana.edu/loex/>.
3. *Nightline*. "The Deep Dive," February 9, 1999.
4. For a full report on the conference, keep an eye on forthcoming issues of *Reference Services Review*, where the proceedings will be published.
5. For quick inspiration, sign up for a weekly brain wake-up at www.thinksmart.com/wakeupbrain.html. ■