

Erin Daniels

Welcome to the classroom

Ten tips for teaching college freshmen

It was bound to happen sooner or later . . . you're not an instruction librarian, but you've been called upon to teach a few (or more) freshmen-level library instruction sessions at your library. While convincing yourself (who you've always viewed as the nonteaching type) that direct instruction is a fantastic opportunity to understand the students at your university, you're perhaps still a bit on edge about your big debut on the classroom stage.

So, to ease your mind as you transition to the world of teaching our youngest students, here are ten tips for teaching college freshmen.

1. Set the agenda (and keep it!). Creating and communicating a structure for your class (via a whiteboard or handout) gives students a sense of goals and makes clear to your students the intention of your class session.

Adding time certainly to each of your agenda items helps students feel a sense of progression and accomplishment, as you move promptly through the material. Staying on track can often be your best friend in the classroom. If you get off track, acknowledge it to the students by adjusting the agenda.

2. Edit yourself. Yes, there may be ten simply amazing databases for your students' papers on global warming, but chances are the students will be happier, and more importantly, more successful with just one or two carefully selected resources.

Just because we, as librarians, often desire to know every option available to us, doesn't mean our students share that same passion.

And sometimes, more is not better, it's just plain overwhelming.

3. Edit yourself again. Explaining databases and library resources can be confusing and lots of extra words don't help the situation. Consider carefully how you explain concepts and streamline your delivery as much as possible: think clean, clear, crisp explanations. Students don't need to actually hear every librarian-type thought that may be cruising around in your head as you demo how to locate full-text articles.

Furthermore, be sure your actions match your words. If you say "I'm going to cover this database quickly," then do it quickly (meaning you're done with it in two minutes, not twenty minutes). This will help build trust between you and the students.

4. Give hands-on time. Yes, give your students real, honest hands-on time—not just time to follow along as you demo. Allowing students even just 15 minutes of time to individually fool around with new resources expands their learning by leaps and bounds. The results are well worth cutting short your demo, no matter how much you really want to show them just one more feature.

There is no replacement for students tackling their own topic on their own terms. Hands-on time is particularly important for freshmen, who will quickly, and most assuredly, drift back to all-Google-all-the-time, if they don't have a positive

Erin Daniels is instruction coordinator at Sonoma State University Library, e-mail: erin.daniels@sonoma.edu

© 2010 Erin Daniels

experience with databases and other library resources during their class session.

5. Make contact. Speaking of positive experiences, try your very best to make contact with each and every student in the room during hands-on time.

Yes, this is asking a lot (and well, just may be impossible for larger classes), but often a 30-second encounter with a student can not only get them off on the right foot, but can transform you (and, by association, all librarians) from an “inapproachable authority figure” into a helpful, friendly resource. Be sure to talk with both the outgoing and quiet students. If it seems a mighty task to get to everyone, make a goal of approaching groups of three students at the same time.

6. Manage technology. Each class you meet will have a wildly different personality. Sometimes you’ll get a very spirited class to whom the lure of the computers (and therefore Facebook) in front of them is simply too much. Who can blame them? After all, how often do we, as professionals, sneak off a little e-mail or two during a demo?

Anyways, have a plan in place for how you will manage a class whose attention seems to be just a bit somewhere else. This can be as simple as asking everyone to turn off their computers for your demo, while reassuring them that they will have plenty of hands-on time in about 15 minutes.

7. Get to know the instructor. The faculty member teaching the course can be your greatest ally during a class session, so cultivate a strong relationship that encourages the instructor to participate in the class session. After all, when you only see a class for one 50-minute period, the students’ loyalty belongs to the faculty member, not you. As such, a few choice reinforcing statements from the faculty member about the content you are showing can be invaluable. In addition, be open to faculty member’s suggestions about the class session.

Demonstrating flexibility with the faculty member creates a positive classroom

environment that students detect immediately.

8. Gotta love ’em. To teach freshmen successfully, you have to love the qualities that define them as freshmen. Remind yourself of your own freshmen days, complete with all the joys and heartaches and dramas. Freshmen are excited about learning, but they are also navigating a vast new system of rules, relationships, and social/academic expectations. Enjoy the wonderfully social nature of this particular stage of student life; remind yourself that, particularly on residential campuses, the “social” does not simply wait outside the classroom door, but rather plays an active role in the classroom.

9. Don’t label. All too often, we are convinced of labels and characteristics that define this particular generation, whether it be “generation me” or the next tag that tries to describe a vastly diverse population with one or two words. Labels separate us from our students.

While it may be useful on some level to understand general trends of a younger population, it is rarely a reflection of how that population actually sees themselves in their moment of experiencing life. The best teaching results come from teaching students as individuals who bring a fascinating array of differences to the classroom, not from teaching them as a labeled group.

10. Be you. It’s perhaps cheesy to say, but your biggest strength in the classroom is you, simply being you. Students are particularly acute at sensing when people are not comfortable or are attempting to be someone they are not. If you are boisterous, be boisterous. If you are awkward, let a little of that awkwardness slip into the classroom. Students appreciate a genuine instructor, because they tend to see parts of themselves (however imperfect) reflected back at them.

There you have it. Now it’s time to face your fate and truly enjoy the opportunity (via direct instruction) to observe how our freshmen students understand and use the information that we’ve helped to diligently to create . . . have fun! *ZZ*