

Trisha Prevett

Razzle and dazzle 'em

Stage directions for engaging instruction sessions

Whenever I hear the phrase “one-shot bibliographic session” I cringe. This archaic term seems to alienate everything information literacy tries to impart. Transitioning vocabulary is not the biggest battle, as many of us face classrooms as an “invited guest” at best or as a “required component,” depending on the receptiveness of the faculty.

To help combat this on my teaching days, my ritual includes snappy dressing, running through my presentation in my head, and a good dose of caffeine. All this prepares me to mentally and physically perform in front of my audience.

One of the best pieces of teaching advice I have ever received was from my high school drama teacher while I was student teaching. He told me that teaching is like being an actor on the stage. You control the pace, emotion, and attention of your audience. I've found through the years that statement could not be more true.

From the first step into the classroom we are judged, measured, and weighed. Students are thinking about how boring the session is going to be, wanting a nap, or thinking about an upcoming assignment. We, on the other hand, are hoping to make a good impression and provide transferable skills that can be used in any information retrieval process.

The first few minutes sets the tone—resulting in students finding you and the content relatable, at least somewhat important or boring, and a waste of their time. Time is limited; don't waste time boring students to

tears. The observations I am about to share are not going to be a “cure all” solution, as you won't be able to motivate every student. However, I make it a personal mission to not receive the hated, empty “death stare” students give when they are bored.

Does that always happen for me? No. Do I second guess myself and my methods when it does? Yes, and that is normal for an instructional perfectionist. You don't have to be one in order to make your sessions engaging, relatable, and even fun.

My first trick is to differentiate instruction in order to meet many learning styles. Do not lecture for the entire session. Talk about a concept, give an example, ask the students questions, and illustrate it (either by a graphic or video) or have them *do* something so they can see it in action. Please remember to lay off the library jargon; better yet, guide them through our library language so that they become confident, informed users.

Next, I always scour YouTube for lively and entertaining videos that illustrate a certain concept within my presentation. In my experience, students acknowledge these efforts and really appreciate the different formats.

While I provide many different avenues for learning, presentation, and content of the session is also important. Making

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yourself blue in the face teaching search strategies and Boolean operators with little more than blank stares from the audience is not effective. Before getting into the crux of using the resources, you must create buy-in. Students need to know why they should be paying attention and how whatever you are going to show them is useful.

My favorite example of buy-in is a precursor to the live demo using the library databases. I show a graphic depicting the “invisible” web, with the main search engines of our day at the top of the ocean and database names on the ocean floor. The search engines have “lights” that do not quite reach the bottom. I ask students to take a moment to look at the picture and tell me what it means.

Then I ask: have you ever searched for research information on Google, found something that looked promising, and were prompted to pay for it? Almost all hands go up in the class. I quickly agree that it’s frustrating and explain that if library resources are used this won’t happen. I also clarify the purpose of the graphic. Search engines cannot see the protected full-text articles.

After a minute, I see “light bulbs” going on all around the classroom. They become much more receptive to the information and skills I try to impart during the following demo.

Do they all sit in amazement? No. Have I at least proven the worth of the library and its resources to students? I think so, and that is enough for me in 50 minutes.

The last piece of my instructional play is to try and make the session fun. Part

of my belief of being an “actor on stage” is that I have no problem smiling, being open, and cracking jokes. This aids in the feel of the room, as I try to appear down to earth. Being of the same generation as my students, this is not outside my normal realm of comfort.

Even if you aren’t comfortable with being *laissez faire*, there are things you can do to make your session fun. If there is an instruction budget, providing sustenance is always an icebreaker. It doesn’t have to be food, branded goodies like notebooks for students to win by participating works, too.

Encouraging participation by different means can help students relax. Another tool I use is the Web-based interactive program Poll Everywhere. This is a chance for students to actually use their texting addiction in a way that provides me honest feedback. Depending on how you structure the questions, students can also actively participate during the session.

Do not wait to implement these suggestions to take students from ignoring your session to actively exploring what the library has to offer. One-shot sessions are not our ideal but they are often the only option we have to make an impact.

Engaging students through creative means, presenting content in a straightforward manner and incorporating technology whenever possible is a winning combination for one-shot sessions. Not only will your students thank you, but the ultimate reward is the knowledge that you did everything in your power to teach vital 21st-century skills. *ZZ*

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