

Michelle Price

# Fun, fear, and frustration

Experiences and opportunities in the classroom

**A**s the outreach and special collections librarian at a small liberal arts college, I also serve as the liaison to the Wegmans School of Nursing, the Wegmans School of Pharmacy, and the Departments of Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. My formal training is in secondary education, with an undergraduate degree in Spanish. So when my liaison work brought me into a cellular biology course, I struggled with the content. Although I could think of great ways to engage the students in active learning, I was lacking enough basic science knowledge to create activities that tied closely to the curriculum. To remedy that situation I was offered the chance to join a student working group in the cellular biology lab. For an entire summer I spent an hour each day learning lab basics, attending lectures, and doing research with *C. elegans*, a small transparent worm. With a pipette in my hand and worms on my plate, I became a true novice again.

I have been an instruction librarian for more than ten years and have conducted hundreds of library instruction sessions, and presented in front of my campus community as well as to my peers at conferences. So for lab, when I was assigned a presentation based on a paper, I barely gave it a thought. My paper was a slam dunk: a description of how a lab created a homegrown image database. I had slides ready, and I had even practiced. However, when it came time for the first student to present, my jolly lab buddies turned into presentation gurus. For the first time in my life, I sat in my seat watching the clock,

hoping time would run out before it was my turn. At the beginning of my presentation, I began to sweat. I was fumbling for words or losing them completely.

I suddenly and intimately knew what it was like to fear being in front of the class. After my disastrous presentation, I looked at my library instruction lesson plans. Did I have situations that could prove fearful to a novice searcher? Was I leaning too far towards the extroverts? Did I leave enough opportunities for silent reflection, quiet roles in group work, or opportunities to respond in writing or asynchronously? Yes, yes, and unfortunately no. I adjusted my lesson plans immediately in order to alleviate those fearful situations.

Most of lab time was independent work, not group-orientated. I was trying to isolate the *par-1h* gene in *C. elegans*. If you mix up all right ingredients, bake them, and set them in a gel, then you should see a beautiful set of glow-in-the-dark-stripes that lets you know you've done it correctly. Under the supervision of the lab director my first gel was a success, and I felt confident to proceed on my own. This was a routine practice in molecular biology. I had tried it once and got it right; I should have been able to do it again, but I couldn't.

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After several solo attempts, my frustration mounted and my Instagram account bears the evidence, “Lanes two, three, four empty. Failure number two on par-1h. Forget you h, I am going to work on g, so there.”<sup>1</sup> I had given up and dumped an entire line of inquiry.

It was at this point that the lab director stepped in and saved me with a pre-made mix and a little TLC for my project. Frustration of this sort was new to me. In my previous academic experiences, I found that if I studied, paid attention, and did the work, I could be successful without remediation. Everything seemed so easy with the professor in the room, guiding the activities, but on my own I just couldn't make it work.

Did the students I work with experience this same type of frustration with library databases? Were they too unable to even formulate questions on what went wrong? I paid much closer attention to the frustration level of my students in the following semesters. My communication took on a new structure: acknowledge the frustration, show the corrections in words and images, give students an example to prove that the new way does work better, and, finally, tell them how to get follow-up help in a timely manner.

It is a common practice to play practical jokes in a science lab, and I wanted to make sure to have a complete lab experience. So I recruited the two most senior students in lab to help me prank the lab director. Our plans were to create the *S.S. C. elegans*, a wormed-themed boat that would fill his office. We spent an afternoon turning a refrigerator box into a boat, hanging fishing rods and creating paper worms to use as bait.

When the lab director found his nautical surprise, he was surprised and delighted at our crafty lab prank.


If the best students took time out for fun and I did too, what did that say about us? Were we poor students because we weren't on task 100% of the time? Of course not, but in library instruction we often place a lot of pressure on ourselves to create a lesson that does just that: engages everyone at 100%. Well, it's not realistic and shouldn't be the ideal scenario. Fun has its place in the classroom, and as librarians we should accept those moments as

joy, not signs of our failure. For example, I coordinate our first-year student orientation. At the end of the library activity, while students were waiting for one another to complete the tasks, a group of 20 students began to do a

hip-hop line dance. I panicked. What if campus administration came in at that moment? Would they think that I couldn't create an instructional and engaging orientation? I took a deep breath, thought of the cardboard boat, and joined in the dance, sharing their joy.

By returning to the role of student after working ten years professionally, I was able to viscerally experience fear, fun, and frustration in the classroom. It has made me more aware and empathetic as an instruction librarian. The road from novice to expert is bumpy, and as our students make that transition, we should be there to ease the fear, alleviate the frustration, and experience the fun.

## Note

1. Michelle Price, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/qM71tklaKJ/?taken-by=mpricesjfc> (accessed March 4, 2016). 



St. John Fisher College Lab Director Daryl Hurd in the *S.S. C. elegans*.