Rachel Hammer

Library anxiety and librarian humor

How to find Nessie

Library anxiety strikes even the most competent of students. While often discussed in the context of library orientation, library anxiety (a term coined by Constance Mellon)[1] also relates to information literacy instruction. Communication between students and librarians forms the crux of instruction and an increase in comfort with the library. Robert Perret, reference and instruction librarian and first-year experience librarian at the University of Idaho, suggests that humor may play a role in this reduction of anxiety. While Perret acknowledges that future research could investigate this idea in more detail, his study did find that most librarians integrate humor into their information literacy instruction sessions through strategies including "puns, self-deprecation, and funny research topics."[2] Even groan-worthy puns, such as the advice to "always believe in your shelf," can engage students. Encouraging students to look up the history of jackalopes or the contested reality of the Loch Ness monster can help students realize that research can—shockingly, I know—be fun.

Keeping sessions upbeat will increase student attention and participation, and this strategy will also encourage more students to attend. Humor can engage students. Encouraging students to look forward to the display on procrastination that is not up yet can get a chuckle, and it also shows students that librarians are just people (often with punny senses of humor) who want to help them succeed. Even though San Bolkan, Darrin J. Griffin, and Alan K. Goodboy's study on classroom humor concludes that integrated humor (humor related to course content) negatively impacts student memory,[3] the humor discussed here seeks to increase student creativity and participation rather than help them remember content.

In a recent library instruction session for the University of Nebraska-Kearney, I told the group that, as a composition professor, I had a student write a paper on the Loch Ness monster. That fact received a few chuckles. Then, I asked the students to pick a topic they had an interest in, ideally relating to their major, and I gave them free reign. One student chose to look up whether mermaids existed due to my example, and she volunteered her topic when we came back as a class. While few academic sources I could find discussed the debated reality of mermaids, that lack led to a fruitful discussion of ways to shift or broaden a research project. Many sources delved into the origin of the mermaid myth, so I demonstrated that the overall topic of mermaids could still work in an academic context.

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I've seen how humor works as a professor in a composition classroom, too. My second semester teaching at Colorado Christian University, I received that paper on the Loch Ness monster. In subsequent semesters, I have given that topic as a positive example, and I have received a wider range of topics with personal connections to students' lives. Something as simple as a slightly ridiculous and humorous paper topic opens the door for students to feel more comfortable writing what they want to write. Interest leads to the best papers—and, for our context, the most engaged research. When students have a desire to research, they are more likely to face their library anxiety. Offering students motivation to care about the library through caring about their projects can lead them through our doors.

For the same instruction session discussed previously, I borrowed an example search from one of my colleagues: online dating. This example, too, seems counter to academic interests. On Google, the top results relay dating websites. However, turning to Google Scholar and library databases reveal a world of research performed on dating websites and those who use them. Another out-there topic became a valid direction for student research, opening the door for students to seek other nontraditional avenues for their work.

While using the online dating example, I used the self-deprecating humor to which Perret refers. I joked that the students must think the librarian lost her mind to show this kind of example. That did not get me many laughs, but I did see students visibly relax as I made myself more human. Additionally, I showed vulnerability, again using self-deprecation as I ended the session by asking if students found the session helpful "at all." Partly, I wanted an answer, but mostly, I wanted to make myself more approachable by displaying the same type of anxiety felt by students.

I injected my personality into the presentation, performing a different session than my colleague did with the same example. However, we both used humor. She chose to use online dating for her entire presentation, while I only used it as one example. I paired it with a more traditional introductory composition topic choice: paying college athletes. The lengths of our sessions differed, and because I had the time for multiple examples, I wanted to hook the less humor-minded students with a less zany topic. I injected humor while remaining relevant for many types of students (and instructors, too).

Showing students that their wildest interests can have relevance in an academic setting boosts students' confidence in their ideas. Mitigating humor with more serious topic choices and a more even tone shows the students that we are serious about our subject matter and ability to serve them. We believe in the power of our shelves, so we must help students believe in them, too—and in *their* shelves.

Notes

1. Constance Mellon, "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development," *C&RL* 76, no. 3 (2015): 276–282.
2. Robert Perrett, "For Your Enrichment: Librarian Attitudes Toward Classroom Humor," *Reference and User Services Quarterly 55,* no. 4 (2016): 261-266.
3. San Bolkan, Darrin J. Griffin, and Alan K. Goodboy, "Humor in the Classroom: The Effects of Integrated Humor on Student Learning," *Communication Education* 67, no. 2 (2018): 144–164.