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MacEwan University Library's pedagogical shift

Using active learning activities during first-year information literacy sessions

Arising from K–12 education, the pedagogical concept of active learning is becoming more and more commonplace in face-to-face library Information Literacy (IL) sessions. MacEwan University Library decided to update IL sessions to incorporate active learning activities, a decision which not only benefitted the engagement of students and faculty, but the librarians as well.

Active learning

Active learning refers to a student-centered instruction method that focuses on having students actively participate in the learning process through activities such as group discussion, investigation, experimentation, or role play. This pedagogical technique helps to increase student interest, engagement, and learning by allowing them to express their questions, ideas, and opinions.¹

With active learning, the librarian acts less like a lecturer dispensing information and more like a facilitator of critical thinking and reflective learning, helping to develop students' IL skills while promoting essential collaboration between the library and faculty. The librarian becomes less of a focal point, and is able to move through the classroom and assist students, who are given greater opportunity to participate and exercise their skills.

Active learning is an approach that recognizes a variety of learning styles and offers instructors multiple ways of reaching learners

that perform better in environments that are less lecture-based.²

Background

A small teaching team of librarians decided to incorporate active learning pedagogy into the largest IL program at MacEwan University Library: the English Library Instruction Program (ELIP). These sessions assist the university's English department in meeting the library orientation outcome embedded within the master course syllabus. ELIP also serves as the baseline for advanced and discipline-specific IL sessions. During the 2011–12 academic year, librarians and library staff taught 118 sessions to English students across three of MacEwan University's campuses, totaling about 141 hours of instruction time and reaching 2,425 students.

Prior to implementing these active learning strategies in ELIP, students often received a similar introductory library session in discipline-specific first-year classes, as well. Some students would have multiple IL sessions in a single term, and this led to some disinterest among students who were participating in their second, third, or even fourth session in a term. A predominantly

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lecture-based style was being employed for the bulk of each session. The novelty of the few active learning activities been using was lost on these students as they would repeat the same activity multiple times. Having received comments from students in this regard, it was clear that a greater variety of activities were necessary. ELIP was also reinvigorated with program-specific active learning strategies in part to better incorporate assessment, another current area of focus at MacEwan University Library.

Implementation

A training manual was created to guide IL session preparation and outline a collection of 15 (and growing) active learning activities. Many activities were included or adapted from pedagogy within the library literature. Three different activities were included for each of the broad ELIP learning outcomes: finding basic library information, identifying alternate synonyms and keywords, applying Boolean logic, identifying popular/trade/academic articles, and searching databases. The outcomes are also incorporated in assessment practices. Each librarian incorporates activities into their session plans according to professor requests, assignment requirements, length of session, and, of course, their own preference or teaching style. As a result, each ELIP session covers similar content, while providing a variety of methods to deliver that content. Each session the librarian teaches may be completely different, depending on the activities chosen. Kits including all necessary resources are stored in the library's teaching labs. This pedagogical shift entailed more preparation up front, but was offset by increased student and librarian engagement during sessions.

Activity samples

Press conference cards

This activity, based on the Cephalonian Method,³ gives students a chance to ask and answer questions to review basic information regarding how to use the library and its services. As students walk into the library

lab, they are randomly handed color-coded questions cards. Timed throughout the session, the librarian calls on a student with a particular card color and has them read the question to the class. The class then must find the answer to the question using the library Web site or their prior knowledge. Question examples include "What's with all the weird numbers on the library shelves?" "How am I supposed to find anything in here?" and "I'm taking an 8:00 a.m. class and the bus gets me here really early. Can I study in the library before class?"

Synonym race

A timed race, adapted from an activity by Ryan Sittler and Douglas Cook,⁴ is used to get students thinking about alternative keywords for their topics. In groups, students are given a keyword that relates to the example topic being discussed. Groups then have two minutes to brainstorm synonyms or use online tools to create the longest list of other appropriate search terms. Terms are then shared with the class and a winner is declared.

Shuffle and deal

Building on previous experience, this activity starts by handing out playing cards to each student in order to demonstrate Boolean logic. Students are asked to stand according to the card they received. For example, the librarian may ask all the students with face cards to stand, and follow-up this request by asking students who have both face cards and red cards to stand, thereby demonstrating the use of the Boolean operator "AND". This process can then be repeated to demonstrate the use of "OR" (e.g., red card or face card, and so on).

Resource referee: Journals

Adapted from another activity by Sittler and Cook,⁵ this activity allows students to examine and distinguish between various types of articles. In groups, students are given a folder that has been pre-populated with articles: two folders contain articles from popular magazines, two contain trade articles, and two

more folders include academic articles. Students are prompted by discussion questions, which ask them to note characteristics that all the articles in the folder have in common. Groups then share their results with the rest of the class. As the facilitator, the librarian would further clarify the differences between each type of article and guide students towards the type(s) required for their assignment.

Scrimmage

An activity adapted from the “Discovery Method,”⁶ students are given time to demonstrate their prior knowledge and subsequent gaps in their methods of database searching. Students are asked to research a topic given to them by the librarian or their own chosen topic for their assignment. No further instruction is given. After a chosen amount of time, the librarian polls students to see who was able to find an article and facilitates a discussion about effective methods of using databases to find articles. Discussion points included: Which databases worked for the topic? How were keywords entered into the search boxes? What tools are available in the database to access articles later? After a demonstration (if necessary) students are given more time to search the databases using the techniques discussed. To close the activity, the librarian again polls students to see who was able to find an article, with the anticipation that the number will be larger than during the first poll. Any other questions or issues may then be raised and discussed.

The results

Through observation and discussions with professors, librarians have collected anecdotal evidence to show that the active learning activities have provided multiple benefits to both the librarians and the students. More formal, ongoing assessment of student learning that takes place during these sessions also indicates that the activities are enabling students to meet the learning outcomes of the sessions.

Generally speaking, it was noted that students appeared to be significantly more

engaged and interested when the active learning activities were used. Most students were quite eager to participate and followed the activities through to their anticipated results. With the expectation of participation, either individually or in groups, student focus on the content improved. With a choice of two or three activities available to illustrate each outcome, it became much less likely that a student would repeat an activity in another session, thereby retaining the novelty of the activities.

Librarians have also reaped the benefits of this pedagogical shift. The tedious nature of repeated sessions on the same topics was not only problematic for students, but also for librarians. There was a tendency to repeat the same session over and over without making any major adjustments. Having a variety of active learning activities to choose from in order to suit each outcome served to relieve tedium; each session had the potential to be different by mixing and matching different activities. As the term progressed, librarians became more comfortable with the process of active learning and began to develop their own activities and adaptations to share with the teaching team and ultimately the students. Importantly, this also provided an opportunity for librarians to reflect on their pedagogical practice and consider the importance of their own teaching style.

By changing the pedagogical style of teaching, librarians at MacEwan University Library continue to strive for improved student engagement, and ultimately learning, during information literacy sessions. The use of active learning activities has helped immensely in achieving this goal.

Notes

1. Joanna M. Burkhardt, Mary C. MacDonald, and Andree J. Rathemacher, *Teaching Information Literacy: 50 Standards-based Exercises for College Students, 2nd ed.* (Chicago: ALA, 2010), 4.

(continues on page 495)

ALA president speaks on NSA leak; organization launches privacy toolkit

In July, ALA launched “ALA Liberty,” a new Web site that contains tools libraries can use to host educational sessions and public forums that help Americans understand their First and Fourth Amendment rights. The launch of ALA Liberty comes as a response to revelations that the U.S. government obtained vast amounts of big data on the activities of millions of innocent Americans. The Web site contains guides and tip sheets for libraries interested in informing members of the public about their civil liberties. The tools provide an overview of the deliberative process and outlines ways that the public can demand government oversight and transparency from legislators.

Later that month, ALA joined an unprecedented coalition of Internet companies and advocates to deliver a letter to the U.S. government demanding greater transparency around national security-related surveillance of Internet and telephone communications. Key civil liberties organizations and major companies, such as Apple, Facebook, and Twitter, joined in the effort with dozens of other companies and organizations, both large and small. WeNeedToKnow, the newly launched petition directed at the White House, invites the public to contribute to the call for greater transparency around government surveillance.

ALA, IMLS detail Affordable Care Act resources for library staff

The Institute of Museum and Library Services and ALA recently announced information resources for libraries to use to assist patrons about the Affordable Care Act. OCLC’s library program WebJunction will provide online educational Webinars, tip sheets, and other resources to help library staff members respond to increased patron information needs related to the new health insurance

marketplace. Library staff can access materials, online resources, Webinar registrations, and archived Webinar recordings at www.webjunction.org/explore-topics/ehealth/get-involved.html.

Google, ALA host Webinar: Revisiting CIPA ten years later

ALA and Google recently hosted a national symposium where library, education, technology, legal, and policy experts considered the impact of the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) on access to electronic information. In July, participants joined a wide range of experts to discuss insights looking at legal, ethical, and political implications of how the CIPA requirements have been implemented in the past ten years. “Revisiting the Children’s Internet Protection Act: 10 Years Later” was part of the Office for Information Technology Policy and Office for Intellectual Freedom’s larger project on CIPA and access to information, made possible through support of Google, Inc. A white paper will be released this fall. *ZZ*

(“MacEwan University...,” *cont. from p. 482*)

2. Anthony C. Holderied, “Instructional Design for the Active: Employing Interactive Technologies and Active Learning Exercises to Enhance Information Literacy,” *Journal of Information Literacy* 5, no. 1 (2011): 24, <http://ojs.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/LLC-V5-I1-2011-2>.

3. Nigel Morgan and Linda Davies, “Innovative Library Induction: Introducing the ‘Cephalonian Method’”, *SCONUL Focus* 32 (Summer/Autumn 2004): 4–8.

4. Ryan Sittler and Douglas Cook, *The Library Instruction Cookbook* (Chicago: ACRL, 2009), 44–45.

5. *Ibid.*, 36–37.

6. Esther S. Grassian and Joan R. Kaplowitz, *Information Literacy Instruction: Theory and Practice* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2009), 34–35. *ZZ*

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