Abstract

Undergraduate students often bring negative attitudes and problematic preconceived notions to library instruction sessions. In the first five minutes of class, it is important that librarian teachers address these obstacles to the learning process. This article examines eight challenging attitudes and mindsets, and offers concrete strategies to overcome them.

Keywords

library instruction, teaching methods, teaching strategies, teaching tips, undergraduate library education
During my five years as a high school teacher, I engaged in two common instructor roles, one as a full-time classroom educator and the other as a substitute teacher. As I recently began my new position as an instruction librarian in a post-secondary academic setting, I wondered how the teaching atmosphere would compare. In particular, I was curious to learn how components of my two high school teaching roles would inform my vocation in library instruction. I quickly concluded that incorporation of substitute teaching tools and skills came into play with great frequency especially given that the vast majority of my instructional sessions were of the typical library one-shot mold. I noticed that many of the same “challenging” attitudes and mindsets I had encountered in the high school setting were also present at the college level. Below is a list of eight prevalent attitudes I see students bring to library instruction sessions matched with concrete ideas to promptly address these problematic impediments to learning.

**Students:** “This librarian has taken us out of the “comfort zone” we have with our “real” instructor.”

**Instructor’s Response:** The first five minutes are critical as this is when students pay the best attention. As Mel Silberman notes, “While students retain 70 percent in the first ten minutes of a lecture, they retain only 20 percent of the last ten minutes” (1996, 2). It is critical to be proactive, capture the students’ attention right away, provide an abundance of eye contact, and set a tone of importance. Most of the time the students are in the classroom session because they are in the midst of tackling a research assignment. As an
introductory activity, I often have the students use the computer in any way they see fit to find the best quality information on their topic. After about two minutes (not enough time to complete the task), I ask the students to stop and tell me what they did. What inevitably happens is all but one or two students go to an Internet search engine. I tell them that today they will learn about other resources for doing research, resources that cannot be reached from the open Web. This activity gets students engaged right away, as they have a concrete, yet thought provoking task to tackle. Grassian and Kaplowitz call these opening lesson components “sponge activities” as they soak up the students’ attention and get them focused on learning (2001, 293).

**Students:** “This librarian has little if anything to teach us.”

**Instructor’s Response:** I like to tell students that I am helping them get their work done. I say that I have put myself in their “shoes”, read their assignment, and using the tools available through the libraries, set out a course for doing research. I tell them that one of the reasons I really enjoy what I do is that instruction librarians teach skills sets. I tell them in many classes I’ve taken, I’ve felt like I’ve learned new facts but I did not know how these facts would be utilized in the future. I stress that searching/research skills are fundamental to this assignment, this course, other college classes, and beyond.

According to Silberman, research indicates that “approximately 60 percent of entering students have a practical rather than a theoretical orientation toward learning, and the percentage grows year by year” (1996, 5). This is in part why the students really want to know about how this library session will help them. I pitch the library session as one where they learn specific ideas on how to get their assignment done and in the process
hone skills that will help them succeed in future projects and endeavors.

**Students:** “This librarian does not grade us, so why should we care?”

**Instructor’s Response:** As the instruction librarian I can rarely say that I directly grade the students, but I almost always mention something about grades. The word “grade” and all its variations command attention and reflect something about which students care deeply. I tell them that effective and efficient research will give them the resources they need and buy them the time to thoroughly analyze and understand these sources. This effort translates into good grades. In any research assignment one does, the initial library research provides the foundation for the success or failure of the rest of the project. I frequently ask students when their current research project is due and challenge them to set out an appropriate timetable for completing their research.

**Students:** “We already know how to do information searching on a computer.”

**Instructor’s Response:** I tell the students that, to a large degree, the purpose behind library instruction is a quality vs. quantity issue. Most people can indeed go to a search engine and receive thousands or millions of items containing their search terms. Finding anything on a topic is very easy. However, because of the information explosion of the last quarter century, the issue is now how to efficiently and effective find quality information, not just any information. I do not try to convince them that there is little quality information on the Web (an arguable assertion). Instead, by using library resources, they first, significantly decrease the amount of information they need to weed through to find the gems, and second, they do not need to take as much time to
investigate the quality of the information. Students are always grateful to learn about ways to save time.

**Students:** “Library sessions are like field trips, meaning this can be only semi-
educational and a good time to “goof-off”.”

**Instructor’s Response:** This problem can be addressed by holding the library session in the students’ regular meeting space. I also face this problem by always providing a road map for the day and a worksheet handout. I tell them that the road map (a numerical list written on the chalkboard) outlines the topics we will cover and the order in which they will be addressed. I tell them to monitor the road map to be sure to ask questions about one topic before we move on to the next. I think this helps students to deal with the problems they have with attention span; it helps chunk the lesson into digestible parts. An added benefit is that it keeps me on track. I also provide a worksheet with the same topic items as the road map and space between each item for the students to write in key information. I make it clear to the students that the worksheet is only a skeleton and that they can choose what information is worthy of written notes. I say that if they hear the information and write it down they are more likely to internalize it and use it in the future. Throughout the remainder of the lesson, I often will preface a comment by saying, “Now, this is a point about X that you probably want to write down.”

**Students:** “This librarian is like a substitute teacher to us.”

**Instructor’s Response:** I always chat with the instructors in the few minutes before the class starts partly so students see that I am an authority figure and an “equal” to the
instructor. To save time, tell the instructors that they do not need to worry about doing a librarian introduction (the librarian does not want to appear like a guest speaker). Give the instructor time to do their normal announcements or closing remarks. I also always give the students an explanation that I consulted with their instructor, their syllabus, and their assignment in order to prepare this lesson. Create a team teaching atmosphere by inviting the instructor to circulate among the students during work time and contribute to the conversation (be sure to tell them this as most will hesitate). LaGuardia and Oka have found team teaching to be the most effective way to lead library instruction sessions (2000, 37). At all points I impress upon the students that this library lesson is a regular and integral part of the curriculum of the course.

**Students:** “Libraries are archaic and simply storehouses of old musty books.”

**Instructor’s Response:** There are many ways to tackle this issue. I tell the story about an article from the school newspaper written about the Libraries several months back. Of course, as I continue to use the story, “several months back” has become inaccurate, but with students relevancy and currency are very important. By the way, I use the school newspaper because I can count on the fact that a significant percentage of the students read the school newspaper. I tell them that the writer of the article polled students on whether they preferred to use the Internet or the Libraries for research. I then use this constructed teachable moment to explain all of the ways that the library has moved into the electronic world (electronic indexes/databases, online OPAC, e-books, digital collections, groupings of human-indexed Web sites, digital reference, etc.). The library is part of the Internet and the Internet is part of the library. Of course, this is also an
opportunity to slip in a few words about the pursuit of quality information and how it is how easier through library resources.

**Students:*** “We’ve already had a library session so we understand how to use the library.”

**Instructor’s Response:** Before I launch into the formal part of the lesson, I often ask students how many of them have had a library instruction session while at (your school)? Usually between 5% and 30% provide an affirmative indication. I then tell these students that in every library instruction session there are numerous new things to learn, even if the topics are similar. I tell them to pay careful attention and speak up if they have something to add. I also mention that the library/information world is changing so fast everyone is constantly learning new skills, librarians included. I also occasionally explain that like any other discipline, you cannot expect to learn it all in one or two sessions. To a large degree, I acknowledge and embrace the idea that many students already have some library research skills.

The first five minutes are of paramount importance. Grassian and Kaplowitz plainly state that “what you do in the first five minutes of a session will determine how effective your session will be” (2001, 292). It is impossible, of course, to incorporate all of the above mentioned teaching ideas in the first five minutes of class, or to even think it is realistic to understand all of the preconceived notions any group of students brings to the classroom. However, utilizing some small combination of these strategies can break negative perceptions and pave the way for more successful instructional sessions.
References

