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# USING FUN TO TEACH RIGOROUS CONTENT

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a point in learning when the content becomes unfamiliar and the learner becomes uncomfortable. This learning edge is a critical place for students. If the content seems too advanced, or if learning the content seems not worth the effort required, students can shut down. They may throw up mental blocks, become frustrated, and be unwilling to progress. Successful instructors find ways to move students across that edge and into new territory where learning occurs. Moving students is accomplished through motivation, which is important because, “When learners are motivated during the learning process, things go more smoothly, communication flows, anxiety decreases, and creativity and learning are more apparent” (Wlodkowski, 1985, p. 4). Motivating students to work through their discomfort can take a variety of forms, one of which is fun.

Given the importance of information literacy instruction, it is critical to find ways to engage students and to help them cross the learning edge and form a connection with the subject matter being presented. Looking at instruction through the lens of fun provides useful opportunities to connect with students. Fun can be approached in multiple ways; examples include humor, games, and group work. The use of fun in the classroom is not only a complement to learning, but according to Dörnyei, the lack of fun may actually be a detriment: “Boring but systemic teaching can be effective in getting short-term results, but rarely does it inspire a life-long commitment to the subject matter” (as cited in Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011, p. 406).

In this paper the author situates fun as a complementary component of rigorous instruction. Fun is often viewed as an

auxiliary component, perhaps as a way to break the ice, but not as a true factor in instruction. The author argues that fun is a successful method to connect students with content. As Mathers (2008) states, “Fun and hard work do not have to be mutually exclusive; rather, fun may actually encourage higher levels of engagement and effort” (p. 81).

## MOTIVATION

Information Literacy (IL) refers to a set of skills that are fundamental to the success of learners; however, it is “wildly optimistic to assume that arguments linking IL with academic success will be sufficiently persuasive to all individuals” (Shenton and Fitzgibbons, 2010, p. 165). Motivation to engage with the content offered within library information literacy instruction must often be provided by the librarian who is teaching. When students reach a point where learning becomes difficult, it is up to the librarian to help motivate them to move into a zone of understanding. Ambrose, et al. state that, “motivation refers to the personal investment made by an individual to reach a desired outcome” (2010, p. 68). Motivation can either be extrinsic, coming from external sources, or intrinsic, coming from the individual.

Pinto notes that a “fundamental question facing university communities is how to raise levels of motivation [...] on the critical issue of information literacy” (2011, p. 146). Designing instruction that incorporates motivation is especially important for librarians since they often only meet with students for one-shot sessions. As Shenton and Fitzgibbons (2010) state, “Information educators often do not have as clearly defined a role as teachers, a situation that leaves them needing to demonstrate their value to

students” (p. 170). Library instruction sessions often occur with little external motivation for the students as the content may not be tested within their larger class. Research skills that are discussed may be needed for a research paper within the course; however, unless the course faculty member stresses the importance of these skills, the students may skip over the research to focus more on the writing of the paper.

For the reasons above, it is even more important for library instructors to tap into the factors of internal motivation. As Crow (2007) asserts, “Intrinsic motivation is at the core of information literacy, the foundation for a desire to learn and find information independently” (p. 52). The work of Small, Zakaria, and El-Figuigui (2004) supports this assertion: “Students with an intrinsic (or internal) orientation find satisfaction from simply participating in a learning experience that stimulates their curiosity and interest, promotes their feelings of competence or control, and/or is inherently pleasurable” (p. 99). Huizenga, et al. (2009) list the seven factors that promote intrinsic motivation; these include challenge, curiosity, control, fantasy, competition, cooperation, and recognition. Many of these factors are delineated as types of fun in the following sections.

There are several theories on motivation; they include overlapping strategies in terms of how they can be implemented in the classroom to improve student learning. Palmer (2007) offers a summary of the various motivation theories, their implications for instruction, and the corresponding teaching strategies. As he notes, “Motivation can be enhanced by facilitating success, novelty, choice, relevance, variety and collaboration, as well as teacher enthusiasm, and providing praise

and encouragement” (p. 39). Bowman’s (2007) work provides several examples of how “...to simulate and motivate students’ internal drive” (p. 85). Notwithstanding Bowman’s contributions, McGlynn (2008) notes more generally that, “...student engagement is the key to academic motivation” (p. 20). The essential point to be made is that motivation is an important component of student success in the classroom.

## HUMOR

Humor in the classroom can take many forms, including jokes, puns, facial expressions, imitations, spontaneous or self-deprecating comments, wry remarks, cartoons, videos, absurd deeds, and sound effects. Among the factors that promote intrinsic motivation, humor addresses fantasy. There are four appropriate types of humor noted by Wanzer et al. (2006): topic-related, topic-unrelated, self-disparaging, and unplanned. For humor to be successful, however, it must be “specific, targeted, and appropriate to the subject matter” (Garner, 2006, p. 178). Furthermore, as the author states, instructors must be conscious that humor may be “...highly personal, subjective, and contextual” (178); it is especially important to be aware of the increasingly diverse range of today’s students. Like all pedagogical approaches, humor should be applied conscientiously, and it should be used for the purpose of achieving an educational goal.

The benefits of humor are both physiological and psychological. As evidence of this, the health sciences literature includes numerous articles showing the positive effects of humor and laughter for treating patients and for teaching medical school students (Meyer Englert, 2010). As noted by Garner (2006),

“...humor and laughter can aid learning through improved respiration and circulation, lower pulse and blood pressure, exercise of the chest muscles, greater oxygenation of blood, and the release of endorphins into the bloodstream” (p. 177); these effects can also be used to improve student motivation. Korobkin (1989) suggests possible classroom applications, including promotion of a humanistic, laughter-filled learning environment; cultivation of group humor and group identification; promotion of self-discovery and risk taking; development of retention cues; and release of anxiety and stress.

There are numerous studies that show the effects of humor in the classroom. Benefits of using humor include the following: students are more likely to retain content (Korobkin, 1989; Hill 1988; and Garner, 2006); students perceive that they learn more (Wanzer and Frymier, 1999); improved classroom rapport (Haigh, 1999); diffused tensions (Mallard, 1999); increased creativity and divergent thinking (Ziv, 1996); student motivation (Ruggieri, 1999); and stress relief (Lazier, 1991). Kher (1999) suggests that humor has an important place in so-called “dread courses,” which students typically avoid due to their lack of confidence, perceived course difficulty, or prior negative experiences. The results of a survey by White (2001) showed that students believed humor helped them to understand complicated material, it motivated them, it relieved stress, it helped them to maintain their attention, it encouraged participation, and it helped them to remember course content. Although there are some published studies in which the authors find no improvement in terms of student learning, Banas, et al. (2011) suggest that those works may have methodological shortcomings.

Humor can also be a useful method for helping to diffuse library anxiety. As noted by Walker (2006), “Library anxiety and stress can be reduced as students become more comfortable with the library’s many resources” (p. 125), and humor is an effective method of facilitating a more comfortable environment. Numerous examples of using humor can be found in Sheidlower and Vossler’s 2011 book, *Humor and Information Literacy: Practical Techniques for Library Instruction*.

Instructors should feel confident bringing humor into their classes because as Gordon notes “humor and laughter not only can coexist with rigorous learning and investigation, but can actually enhance them” (2011, p. 749). This enhancement can come in a variety of forms. Humor is not “one size fits all.” For some teachers, spontaneous witty retorts will connect them to their students; others may have an established set of jokes they can draw from; and for those who do not trust their own humor, they can turn to the internet to find comics related to their course content. No matter what format it takes instructors should work on making humor an established aspect of their teaching as it can have a serious impact on learning.

## GROUP WORK

Humor is a social experience that flows well into the next example of fun: group work. The intrinsic motivation factors addressed by group work include competition, cooperation, and recognition. Sweet and Pelton-Sweet note how a student’s social connection in the classroom affects “... academic performance, self-efficacy, motivation to learn, and perceptions of one’s instructor, peers, and task value” (2008, p. 29). Yaman and Covington show that the benefits of group work

increases collaboration and participation, creates a bond between members, limits the potential embarrassment of answering questions individually, holds group members equally accountable, and allows members to learn from and teach one another (2006, p. 11). The last of these benefits—learning from and teaching one another—goes beyond the matter of course content; group dynamics also facilitate the exchange of diversity in culture, ideas, and beliefs. As Sutton, et al. (2005) state, “Within groups, students teach and learn from one another – they share insights, model skills, and probe each other’s thoughts” (p. 77).

Given the limitations of one-shot instruction, librarians may not have the necessary amount of time to provide students with the necessary guidelines and support for establishing effective working groups. However, the increased use of working groups in higher education means that students will likely have the necessary experience to be able to work effectively with team members for the purpose of completing instructional tasks. One of the most common activities used by library instructors involves the creation of student groups, who are asked relative questions and required to discuss their answers with teammates before responding to the entire class. This type of group activity helps to generate new ideas, and prevents classroom discussion from being dominated by just a few individuals.

## GAMES

A discussion on the use of fun in education would not be complete without attention given to the importance of games. Games are often the first iteration of learning that children are exposed to. As Hwang and Wu (2011) note, “Games are an important part

of the development of children’s cognition and social processes” (p. E6). Games address the intrinsic motivation factors of challenge, fantasy, and competition. The effective use of games for instructional purposes is receiving increased attention. This is evidenced by the 2012 Horizon Report, which lists game-based learning as an emerging instructional technology that will have a significant impact on higher education within two-three years (Johnson, Adams, & Cummins, p. 18).

Games come in a variety of forms, from Jeopardy-like quizzes to virtual word computer simulations. An important element of games is that they provide a safe place in which to learn and work though given content. As noted by Kim (2012), games “...offer an environment intentionally designed to provide people with optimal experience by means of various gaming mechanisms and dynamics” (p. 465). Games are also developed with the flexibility to be played by individuals or by teams. This is discussed by Yaman and Covington (2006), who note that effective games are developed to combine the dynamics of group cooperation with competition in the game itself (p. xviii).

Guillen-Nieto and Aleson-Carbonell (2012) list three changes that have affected the implementation of games in the classroom: 1. a shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered education; 2. a shift from learning by listening to learning by doing; and 3. a shift from memory of a concept to the capacity to find and use information (2012). Drawing from these changes, it can be asserted that games are useful educational tools by virtue of their interactivity. As Aldrich (2009) notes, the interactivity of games requires that the “...learning goals are not just the traditional ‘learning to

know' type, but also 'learning to be' and 'learning to do'" (p. 15).

Research on the use of games in education shows they provide motivating learning experiences (Schwabe and Goth, 2005; Burguillo, 2010; Dickey, 2011; Harris and Reid, 2005), they help students to engage with course work (Coller and Scott, 2009; Ebner & Holzinger, 2007), and they improve desired learning outcomes (Mayo, 2007). Huizenga, et al. (2009) note that the "...learning potential of mobile and location-based technologies [such as games] lies in the possibility to embed learning in an authentic environment, enhance engagement and foster learning outside traditional formal educational settings" (p. 341).

It should be noted that there is the risk when using games in education that the focus is shifted too much toward the game rather than the desired learning outcomes. As Guillen-Nieto and Aleson-Carbonell (2012) assert, "A key challenge for designers then is to get the correct balance between delightful play and fulfilling specified learning outcomes" (p. 438). This point is also emphasized by Yaman and Covington, who argue that, "...the focus should be on what was learned, not who won the game" (p. 12).

Games can be a powerful way for librarians to connect with students in library instruction sessions. As Kim (2012) notes, "Game dynamics can raise library users' level of engagement with library resources, programs, and services," and furthermore, "They can help library users to solve problems more effectively and quickly by making the process fun" (p. 466). As an example, Leach and Sugarman (2005) describe their use of a Jeopardy-like game to reinforce the content learned during their one-shot instruction sessions, and they note

that, "The instruction librarian should select, adapt and direct the game so that it is enjoyable for the students but also has a definite purpose and defined learning outcomes" (p. 200).

## CONCLUSION

Librarians are often faced with instructing students on skills and concepts that may seem abstract. Why should students care about looking at bias when evaluating a resource, when really they are only looking to write a C worthy paper? It is up to librarians to do everything they can to get the concepts of information literacy across to every student. The use of humor, group work, and games demonstrates how it is possible for librarians to incorporate fun into a rigorous course of study. While using fun in the classroom does not guarantee learning will take place, it does offer instructors a useful method of motivating students and helping them cross the learning edge. For librarians, information literacy is often innately interesting and fun. As instructors, they must share that passion and connect their students to the fun that is to be found in learning, growing, and becoming lifelong users of information.

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