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TEACHING MATTERS [EDITORIAL]

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: BEST PRACTICES FOR CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS

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This column focuses on the conceptual and practical aspects of teaching information literacy. Column co-editors Patrick Ragains and Janelle Zauha write about trends and issues that have come to our attention, but also solicit contributions to this space. Readers with ideas for Teaching Matters may contact Patrick Ragains at ragains@unr.edu, or the editors of Communications in Information Literacy at editors@comminfolit.org.

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One of the biggest challenges most of us face in our teaching is a very basic one: How do we engage students in learning to research? Whatever we call the instruction we provide – information literacy, critical thinking, research or library skills – and wherever that instruction occurs – in one-shot classroom sessions, online, in credit courses, at the reference desk, or in the cafeteria – student engagement is a conundrum for us. Librarians often bemoan the contrast between our opportunities for meaningful student contact with that of other teaching faculty who interact with students in what we imagine are consistently rich ways throughout entire semesters or even years. We, on the other hand, struggle to find success and satisfaction in brief interactions typically resembling research speed dating.

As it turns out, student engagement is not an automatic by-product of the semester-long course. Faculties in all departments and at all levels struggle to encourage it and, in fact, it is something that students themselves want. For one thing, student engagement is as complex as it is elusive. C. Gibson (2006), editor of ACRL's publication *Student Engagement and Information Literacy* relies on Stephen Bowen, Senior Fellow of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, for an illumination of the term. To Bowen, student engagement can be classified in relation to four areas: the learning process, the object or field of study, additional contexts, and the human condition. "These four types of engagement offer faculty, librarians, [and others] a way of thinking about students as

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whole persons."

In an effort to understand further the concept of student engagement, we can turn to a myriad of additional resources for help. For example, Harper and Quaye (2009) state that "[s]tudent engagement is simply characterized as participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measureable outcomes." Barkley (2009) defines student engagement as "a process and a product that is experienced on a continuum and results from the synergistic interaction between motivation and active learning." We might also explore the National Survey of Student Engagement's (NSSE) (2009) extensive data gathered from 1300 institutions "estimat[ing]… how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college."

While these resources offer excellent analyses, explanations, and, in some cases, pragmatic ideas for achieving and recognizing student engagement, perhaps the most useful advice for our purposes comes from a source closer at hand – students themselves. The Teaching and Learning Committee at my institution recently sponsored a student/faculty dialog on this topic. We gathered a lunch time panel of 8 students chosen by college deans from around the university and asked them directly how best to engage them meaningfully in the teaching and learning experience. Framed by this over-arching question, the students answered more detailed questions about the topic from about 40 faculty participants over the course

of an hour. What we heard was refreshingly honest and sensible. While the questions and answers primarily assumed a credit-course situation, much of what the students said pertains to the teaching activities of librarians as well.

The students' ideas go beyond theory, abstract data, and complex terminology. Here are some basic best practices for connecting with students and setting the stage for their engagement in the learning process. These are common-sense ideas gleaned from our student panel and tweaked for library settings:

- Be approachable: It is not enough to say you are approachable. Prove it! Talk to students before and after class about everyday topics. Invite them simply to visit with you at the reference desk or in your office. Tell them where to find you. Remind them that you are not interested in grading them and that you will hold their questions in strict confidence. Let them know something personal about you. Share yourself with them. You might tell them why you love your job and what excites you about research. Tell them if there are topics that are of particular interest to you right now and why these topics interest you. Outside of class respond to their emails and their inquiries. Don't appear to be bothered by them when they approach you. Don't treat them like a problem.

- Demonstrate empathy: Direct students to resources that will best help them. Don't do email or other computer work while they talk to you. Pay attention to them! Don't be judgmental. Take their questions seriously even if you think that

procrastination is their problem.

- Use technology appropriately: Avoid PowerPoint! Students have experienced so much misuse of this software in the classroom that they consider it a deadly technology, especially if the teacher simply reads from slides. PowerPoint used in conjunction with clickers, however, is useful because it supports the dynamic question and answer powers of clicker technology.

- Offer opportunities to experience content: Give hands-on time no matter how brief the class period and how much information you are tempted to cram into it. When you demonstrate something that works, ask students why it worked and then ask, "How did this happen?" This gives them a chance for participation and helps you check for understanding.

- Be pertinent: Use examples and information that apply directly to students' lives and needs, not just to their research problems.

- Be candid: Sometimes modeling for students the difficulties of research is the best honesty. Research is not easy. Library resources are not often user friendly. Pretending so does not help.

- Understand how students work and the pressures they face: Students are frequently in an atmosphere of team-based learning. Some of them may not like it because of unequal workloads in group work, but they know that this is the way work is done in the real world. In fact, students are often already working

several jobs. Their need for quick answers and easy access is most often attributable to their busy schedules rather than some inherent laziness.

Remembering and employing simple practices such as these will help you actively engage students even in the briefest of teaching encounters. Making the most of each interaction is essential, especially given the recent findings of Head and Eisenberg (2009) in the University of Washington Information School's *Project Information Literacy* survey "How College Students Seek Information in the Digital Age." Their study suggests that librarians are "tremendously underutilized by students. Eight out of 10 of the respondents reported rarely, if ever, turning to librarians for help with course-related research assignments." Those students we do see deserve to be treated as "whole persons," worthy of engagement with infinite possibilities for success and definite potential for word-of-mouth marketing.

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