

**Title:** Letting the Inmates Run the Asylum: Student Engagement in the Progressive Classroom

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# LETTING THE INMATES RUN THE ASYLUM: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE PROGRESSIVE CLASSROOM

TRACEY MAYFIELD AND KATY FARRELL FRENCH

## INTRODUCTION

We have all faced the challenge. A well-prepared and energized librarian steps in front of a classroom filled with students who stare back at said librarian with looks ranging from agony, to boredom, to outright hostility. No matter how energetic, upbeat, intelligent and entertaining this librarian is, she has an uphill battle on her hands. How will she get through to these students, effectively communicate the information they need, and insure that the students understand and retain what she has shared?

Engaging students in the one-shot library instruction session has become one of the biggest challenges facing instruction librarians today. Students are bored, uncommunicative, and apathetic, and, as a result, motivating them to participate proves to be difficult. These challenges with students invite the question: how do we initiate and maintain student engagement in the one-shot library instruction session? Our approach is a simple one: let the students set the learning agenda. This paper will address how librarians can partner with students during the library instruction session to chart a unique and customized path towards learning.

## RATIONALE FOR OUR APPROACH

The rationale for our approach stems from Deci's (1995) research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Educators, managers and parents alike use external forms of motivation to engage students, workers, and children respectively. The most common and probably effective form of external motivation within academia is grades. Educators use grades as a tool to compel students to act. Librarians teaching a one-shot library instruction session don't have the power of the grade to encourage student participation. To compensate for this, many librarians resort to other external motivation techniques such as prizes and games. Using external motivators to compel action are effective to an extent. Prizes and other rewards may grab students' attention so long as the reward is valuable to the student. Educational games and other forms of competition that do not promote a pressure to win may also stimulate student engagement (Deci, 1995).

In cases where students are motivated by external factors, the ultimate goal becomes winning the reward, not learning. Students may participate only to the extent needed to achieve the external reward, which cuts short the process needed to come to true understanding. External motivators also take control away from the student and place it in the hand of the instructor. Feelings of being controlled and powerless have been found to decrease motivation (Deci, 1995).

Deci (1995) also found that students are more ready to learn if they are intrinsically motivated, which is defined as a desire to learn that comes from within. Factors that increase intrinsic motivation include student autonomy, choice, and control over their learning. Tapping into students' intrinsic motivation during a one-shot library instruction session may be perceived as a challenge: How can librarians promote student autonomy and choice, avoid chaos, and still reach goals and learning outcomes set by the librarian and course instructor? The answer is a balance that allows student choice while setting limits on the choices students can make in an "autonomy supportive way" (Deci, 1995, p. 42).

Our attempt to stimulate students' intrinsic motivation entailed re-imaging our one-shot sessions to allow for student choice while still achieving the student learning outcomes set by the librarian and course instructor. The procedure is simple: we let the

students set the agenda. In every one-shot session that we conduct, we begin by asking the students to tell us what they would like to know, learn, or be able to do by the end of the session. How we go about using this technique is described in the next section.

## **LETTING THE STUDENTS SET THE AGENDA: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

Implementing this teaching strategy does not require special equipment, tools or money. What it does require is an open mind, courage, and the ability to let go a little. This strategy is designed to allow students the opportunity to voice what they would like to learn (i.e., providing student choice) in order to help them complete their research and yet still setting limits on those choices.

Before asking students to set the learning agenda for a library instruction session, it is important to review the purpose of the session with the students. In other words, why were the students brought to the library in the first place? If the students have an upcoming research project due, begin the session by reviewing the details the assignment with the students. For example, remind students that they will have to find scholarly sources to support a position paper. This reminder prompts students to reflect on what they know or don't know about finding scholarly sources. Also, explain to the students that this is their opportunity to ask any burning, deep-seated questions about the library, library research, or what their librarian can do for them.

After reviewing the purpose of the instruction session and related research assignments, have students brainstorm in groups one thing they would like to know, learn, or be able to do by the end of the session. For this activity, we recommend groups no larger than five and no smaller than two. Inform each group that they will be responsible for sharing one learning outcome with the class. As the student groups report their specific learning outcome, record the outcomes in a word processing document displayed via a projector, write the outcomes on a whiteboard, or have students record the list of outcomes on a sheet of paper. After each group has shared their learning outcome, ask the class if there are any more questions that they would like addressed.

At this point, if you are using a word processing document to record and display the outcomes, you may want to organize the list of outcomes to create session outline. As the session progresses, refer back to the list after each outcome has been addressed for quick assessment of student understanding. This also serves as a reminder that you are addressing the students' needs. At the end of the session, review all of the outcomes and poll the students to determine if each outcome was addressed sufficiently.

To ensure both student and librarian/course instructor outcomes are met, we recommend preparing learning activities and instructional materials that compliment a structured yet flexible learning environment. After using this technique for over two years, we know which learning outcomes students most frequently request, and we will share these outcomes in the next section. Prior-knowledge of what students want allowed us to create a bank of learning activities and instructional materials that we could readily draw from during an instruction session. One strategy would be to have a PowerPoint document that contains a slide for each learning outcome. The slide could answer a question and/or describe a learning activity for further student exploration. Another approach is to prepare a handout with several short learning activities that address common student driven outcomes as well as librarian/instructor outcomes for a particular session. The activities may always be modified, elaborated on, or bypassed depending on the outcomes set by the students and the time you have for a session.

In sharing our technique, the most frequently asked question is "Are you ever asked questions you cannot answer?" In our experience we have never come across a student-driven outcome that we could not address during the instruction session or that the course instructor could not address during a subsequent class session. There have been questions that have been put up in jest, (e.g., "What would win in a fight: a taco or a sandwich?") but nothing that stumped us.

In addition, we are always able to address student-driven outcomes alongside librarian/course instructor learning outcomes. In most cases, student-driven outcomes match the outcomes and learning activities already prepared for the instruction session. It is also important to remember that the librarian has ultimate control of the instruction session, and this technique completely lends itself to librarian control. This control includes making the decision to defer a learning outcome in consultation with the students and course instructor.

## **CONTROL ISSUES: THE ULTIMATE BARRIER TO THIS APPROACH**

In discussing this approach with colleagues, there were many comments as to why librarians would not try it. Most comments dealt with the idea that using this approach would have the librarian relinquishing control over the classroom setting. This is simply not true. As mentioned above, there are no questions that have been asked or learning outcomes that were posed that stumped us. In fact, certain student outcomes were so predictable that we created PowerPoint slides and learning activities in advance to address popular student generated outcomes. The idea of relinquishing total control in this environment is a fallacy. While the librarian has ultimate control of the learning environment, student driven learning outcomes help the students feel empowered and help the librarian understand which outcomes need special emphasis and attention.

## WHAT DO STUDENTS REALLY WANT TO LEARN? OUR RESULTS

When we began using this approach, we decided to record the student driven learning outcomes generated from each library instruction session that we taught. Later, we collected and analyzed these outcomes to better prepare our colleagues and ourselves for future library instruction. We collected the data over two academic years, 2014-2015 and 2016-2017. As one author is from a 4-year college and the other a 2-year community college, it is interesting to compare the results (Table 1 and Table 2).

**Table 1: Top 5 Student Driven Outcomes for Community College Courses Surveyed  
(if not top 5 in a particular year, rank is in italics for that year)**

**Table 2: Top 5 Student Driven Outcomes for Four Year College Courses Surveyed  
(if not top 5 in a particular year, rank is in italics for that year)**

Also in these results, the authors noticed that outcomes generated from 4-year college courses were more focused (e.g., how to find journal articles relating to the elderly and social security) than outcomes from community college courses (e.g., how to find periodical articles). Four-year courses, which included upper and lower division courses as well as graduate level courses, developed a greater variety of outcomes as well. Community college students tended to have similar outcomes, which makes sense since their research projects were more general and they didn't have as much experience with academic research. Community college students also placed a greater emphasis on finding materials online, for example, periodicals, electronic books, and scholarly materials.

## IMPLICATIONS

Much like the patterns that emerged from the analysis above, our observations on the behavior of the students using this technique were surprising. They include:

- Students were more responsive and eager to participate in the library instruction session when they set the learning agenda.
- When incorporated with other active learning exercises, the librarian "lectures" less and students walk away with more.
- Students' perceptions of their learning needs are not always congruent with librarian/course instructor perceptions.
- A true collaboration occurs when students feel ownership of what they are learning.
- This strategy works even for students who have multiple library instruction sessions in a single semester. Each class has its own "personality," and therefore each agenda has its own "personality." Some view subsequent sessions as the chance to ask follow up questions from a previous session, or as the opportunity to ask questions they didn't think of in the earlier class.

After we collected and analyzed the data, the question became, "what do we do with it?" At both institutions we shared our teaching strategy as well as the data we gathered on student-driven learning outcomes with other librarians. The data gave some librarians cause to stop and consider how this information might impact future instruction sessions as well as their approach to teaching and learning. Many other librarians adopted this teaching strategy and were thrilled with the results.

The community college took the results even further. First, the data was presented to campus groups to support a campus approach to information competency curricula. Second, the data was used to develop and assess student learning outcomes for the library's instruction program. Third, the data was used to add learning outcomes/modules to the online library instruction request form. Lastly, the data was used as assessment evidence. In both institutions, the librarians are considering how best to share the data with stakeholders (librarians, faculty, administration, students, etc.) to support information literacy curricula.

## CONCLUSION

We have found this strategy for student engagement to be extremely useful and rewarding. It energizes our instruction sessions and causes us to think outside the box. It also fosters new working relationships with faculty and students. However, this is only one method of allowing for student choice to facilitate engagement, and we strongly encourage readers to consider other methods for allowing student choice within the boundaries of a library instruction session, a semester-long course, or another type of learning environment.

## REFERENCES

Deci, E. (1995). *Why we do what we do: The dynamics of personal autonomy*. New York, NY: Putnam's Sons.

**Images for Tables and Figures (Editor will put in body of the text later)**

**Table 1**

Academic Year	2014-2015 (20 courses surveyed)		2016-2017 (16 courses surveyed)	
	Rank	% of total outcomes	Rank	% of total outcomes
Find periodical articles on a topic, how to use periodical databases, and how to access print and full-text periodical articles	1	24.8	1	14.6
What is a scholarly source and how to determine credibility of a source	2	12.0	1	14.6
What resources are available through the library, both online and physical materials	7	4.0	2	10.0
How to find specific types of information, e.g. statistics, images, videos, textbooks, etc.	3	8.0	7	3.6
How to find books	4	6.4	3	8.2
How to search faster, easier, more efficiently	7	4.0	4	6.4
How to select and use keywords, refine/narrow search, use Boolean operators	4	6.4	5	5.5
How to access library resources from home	5	5.6	6	4.6
How to check-out a book, renew books, book borrowing policies	10	0.8	5	5.5

**Table 2**

Academic Year	2014-2015 (24 courses surveyed)		2016-2017 (12 courses surveyed)	
	Rank	% of total outcomes	Rank	% of total outcomes
Find periodical articles on a topic, how to use periodical databases, and how to access print and full-text periodical articles	1	21.4	1	32.0
How to select and use keywords, refine/narrow search, use Boolean operators	2	8.7	2	7.8
How to access library resources from home	2	8.7	10	1.9
How to find books	3	8.1	3	6.8
How to get started in general or with a specific topic	3	8.1	6	4.9
Questions about library services: librarians, help, reserves, computers, photocopiers, media room, etc.	9	2.3	3	6.8
How to search faster, easier, more efficiently	4	7.5	4	6.4
Cite sources using APA/MLA	5	6.9	5	6.3
What is a scholarly source and how to determine credibility of a source	6	5.8	5	6.3