

# **HOW TO ENGAGE YOUR RESISTANT PUNTERS: SUCCESSFULLY TEACHING LIBRARY SKILLS TO POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS WHO HAVE COME ALONG FOR A REST**

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## **ABSTRACT**

We discuss the reluctant learner, learned helplessness and the emotional states that some students bring to library skills classes. These students have previously been unsuccessful in their attempts to search for information and they come to library classes convinced they are not going to learn anything. A prototype for this kind of teaching is proposed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

We have been teaching library skills to classes of postgraduate students in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Massey University Library for the last five years. Our classes focus on teaching the students to access and use the Library's online and print resources, and on finding journal articles using the Library's online journal article databases. As is the case with most training episodes for library users there is only a brief one-off opportunity to teach the students everything they need to know in an hour and a half.

## **THE ADULT LEARNER**

Massey University Library staff have attended a number of training sessions, run under the aegis of Massey University's Training and Development Unit, on how to teach the adult learner. Some of these sessions have yielded very useful advice which we have attempted to incorporate into our teaching. Having been introduced to Kolb's Experiential Learning Model we work at planning classes that incorporate a variety of tasks or elements to accommodate different learning styles - examples or step-by-step demonstrations for the pragmatist, the big picture for the theorist, a chance to observe and discuss for the reflector, and hands-on for the activist (Kolb, 1984).

Dr. Barbara J. Millis, a visiting scholar at Victoria University's University Teaching Development Centre in 2002, presented a seminar at Massey University's College of Education on how students learn. She spoke about diagnostic feedback in the classroom and quick classroom feedback techniques that can be used to facilitate the trainer's understanding of students' knowledge at the beginning of and during the

class. With this information classes can be tweaked on the spot to take account of the students' level of understanding.

Dr. Virginia Goldblatt, a former Massey University Orator, also gave some memorable tips on presenting classes. "Your audience has come along to see a real person, so be yourself. Use your own personality as a strength. If your audience wants perfection they can read it in a book!"

The literature describes some of the assumptions that can be made about the adult learner (Filipczak, 1995; Illeris, 2003; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Adults need to have a good reason for learning and they are often motivated by external factors such as better jobs or higher salaries. They bring to the classroom their own life experience which a good trainer should build on rather than ignore. Adults want their learning to be enjoyable and they want to learn something they value. They want to be self-directing. They do not want to be talked down to. Some are put off by previous negative ideas about their own ability to study. "The minute adults walk into an activity labelled 'education,' 'training'... they hark back to their conditioning in their previous school experience, put on their dunce hats of dependency, fold their arms, sit back, and say 'Teach me'" (Knowles et al., 2005, pp. 64-68).

Quite recently we have taken on teaching the health sciences students in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. These mature students are juggling full-time families and full-time careers in the health system with studying two or three papers per semester; a very high proportion of them are women in their 30s, 40s and 50s; they lead busy lives and want to maximise positive outcomes from their study with the minimum of fuss. Many of them are motivated to study to improve their promotion prospects and come to the university with no prior degree experience. As block mode students they study off campus but attend short residential courses at a Massey campus several times during each semester. They are, according to the description of Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 'classic' adult learners.

These students have not been easy to teach. After one particularly lacklustre class we had a debriefing session with a health sciences lecturer who talked about her students' learned helplessness in the Library and the negative effects this had on their class participation.

This struck a chord with us and we started to think more about our students and their states of mind when they entered our classroom. Did we really have 20 or so alert, enthusiastic, keen-to-learn individuals ready to soak up our every tip and trick? And if the answer to that question was NO (as we suspected) then what state of mind were they in? And why?

## **EMOTIONS IN THE LIBRARY**

A literature search on learned helplessness and library users uncovered some interesting articles on library anxiety and on the emotional states of library users (Collins & Veal, 2004; Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Nahl & James, [1987]). Jokes have often been made about library phobias and our reading confirmed this to be true. Nahl and James ([1987], p. 7) report that students see the library in terms of a punishing experience and then comment on what this leads to: "general anxiety at the

thought of having to go to the library; awe and paralysis upon entering the library and sensing its ‘vastness’; fear of not finding a wanted book on its shelf...; phobic avoidance of online technology; dejection upon discovering the library does not subscribe to the periodical in which the just found citation is published; self ridicule when realizing a particular search strategy was faulty.” And, we could go on: depression when others in the class look as though they are much more familiar with the library and its resources; embarrassment at having to admit little or no knowledge of the library or its services; anger or frustration when the technology doesn’t work.

Nahl and James ([1987], p. 9) also report the following negative comments from students: “the library won’t have anything on this topic”. “If I ask the librarians they’ll think I’m stupid.” “It’s a waste of time to visit the library.” “I’m too scared to try it myself.” They indulge in procrastination, brought on by thinking that using the library is too difficult. “I know I should be going to the library but I just keep not doing it.” They become technophobic: “that database is too complicated – I’ll never learn how to use it.”

None of these unpleasant feelings are actually caused by the librarians directly. But as librarians and trainers we can sometimes forget what these emotions lead to as far as learning goes. Negative emotions can lead to a state of learned helplessness where students anticipate failure and actually block their own learning. These students are not in a state of mind receptive to teaching. Learned helplessness is difficult to change; it has its own inertia. Students don’t experience success; they don’t discover how to access information (Nahl & James, [1987], pp. 7,9).

The challenge is how to turn this around.

## **OUR TEACHING TECHNIQUE**

When we honed a particular teaching style to engage these health sciences students we found the technique worked for our other classes as well. There are always a few students in each class who show a number of the characteristics we have described; we note also that some of the younger students, who come with obviously advanced computer skills, are not information literate. They do not know how information is structured or how to evaluate it and they also benefit from a similar approach. The elements of our technique are as follows:

### **Introduce yourself**

Tell them about your professional experience and qualifications. Your lecture style should be disarmingly simple and casual and a brief resume of your qualifications will provide reassurance. This is also a distraction designed to relax them and give them a focus while they’re still coming to terms with their new environment. Give them a clear outline of the class content and get agreement from them that the outcomes will be useful.

### **Give them an experience! And plan the whole class like a story**

This can be a useful image to keep in your mind while planning a class. Ask yourself where each fact you want to teach them will best fit into the overall story. That way the class will know where they are and may even be eager to hear the ending!

### **Pin the whole story on a topic**

Find a topic that engages their interests (and life experience). Tell them you are not teaching them to be mini librarians, that libraries can come alive with an interesting topic. Finding the right one may be the most difficult part of your preparation; it should be both an interesting reflection of the course content and a good example with which to demonstrate the scope and usefulness of the databases.

Topic example:

Evaluate the interventions used in managing a breastfeeding woman with HIV/Aids

Students who feel helpless or negative or who anticipate failure often seize up right at this point! They have difficulty moving from the topic to their own thoughts about it and their prior experience. As trainers of adult learners you need to build on their existing knowledge and begin the process of really engaging with them.

### **Ask questions**

This is the first key moment. By asking questions in an unthreatening way you are getting them to ‘reflect’ as the Kolb model puts it. By getting them to think and respond you are subtly finding out what they know.

“When you’re faced with an assignment topic like this, where do you start looking?”  
“What sources do you normally go to to find information on your topic?” You may have to wait for the answer. Persist until you get some members of the class engaged. You may have to prompt. We suggest basic things like their lecture notes, the text book, the Listener, television, conversations with their tutor, their family, their fellow students or their flatmates. How many of them go straight to the web? Do they get good stuff? Having talked about how informal knowledge gathering can start, with television or with conversations, present them with a chart that reminds them of different types of information – definitions, overviews, cutting edge information, quality information, and what kinds of format they may find them in – encyclopedias, books or journals or Google searches on the web.

### **Give them an information map**

The purpose is to get them to think about how information is organised and structured, as in Figure 1, before they look at the library’s home page. When we talk about this chart we remind them that this session is focusing on finding journal articles on their topic using the journal article databases and so we start with journals/magazines/newspapers (as the main character in the story line) and work outwards.

### **Take them to the library**

“You are now entering the doors of the library. If you have access to the web you can also, of course, do all this from home.” If possible, do a live demonstration. Show them the pathway from the Library’s home page, to their subject guides and to their journal article databases, pointing out other important features of these pages on the way. Keep the momentum going. You have a story to tell and the next part of the plot is the journal article databases.

## HOW TO FIND INFORMATION

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WHAT DO I WANT?	WHAT'S IT IN?	HOW WILL I FIND IT?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>Definitions</b></li> <li>➤ <b>Brief background</b></li> <li>➤ <b>Comprehensive overview</b></li> </ul>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: auto;"> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>SUBJECT DICTIONARIES  ENCYCLOPEDIAS</b></p> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>Print</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Library Catalogue (KEA)</li> <li>▪ Browse reference shelves</li> </ul> </li> <li>➤ <b>Electronic</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Library Home Page</li> <li>▪ Subject Guides</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>Introduction</b></li> <li>➤ <b>Detailed background</b></li> <li>➤ <b>General overview</b></li> <li>➤ <b>In depth information</b></li> </ul>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: auto;"> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>BOOKS</b></p> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>Print</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Library Catalogue (KEA)</li> <li>▪ Browse book shelves</li> </ul> </li> <li>➤ <b>Electronic</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Library Home Page</li> <li>▪ Subject Guides</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>Up to date</b></li> <li>➤ <b>New research</b></li> <li>➤ <b>Short articles</b></li> <li>➤ <b>Narrow focus</b></li> </ul>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: auto;"> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>JOURNALS  MAGAZINES  NEWSPAPERS</b></p> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>Print</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Library Catalogue (KEA)</li> <li>▪ Browse periodical shelves</li> </ul> </li> <li>➤ <b>Electronic</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Journal article databases</li> <li>▪ Subject Guides</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>Anything</b></li> <li>➤ <b>Everything</b></li> <li>➤ <b>Use with care</b> (Not everything on the Web is credible)</li> </ul>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: auto;"> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>WORLD WIDE WEB</b></p> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>Search Engines</b></li> <li>➤ <b>Subject Directories</b></li> <li>➤ <b>Discussion Lists</b></li> <li>➤ <b>News Groups</b></li> </ul>

Figure 1 Plan for mapping first thoughts about a topic to the appropriate publishing media and how to go about finding these media in the library.

### **Give them five minutes' hands-on practice**

This is another key moment. This exercise requires them to move to the PCs, log on and repeat the steps required to follow the pathway into the databases. Students are told to choose one recommended database and to have a go at searching using the class topic for five minutes. "Just have a bash!" Five minutes is all it takes to achieve a number of results. For the students it is a change of dynamic; they get a chance to move out of their classroom seats and get their hands on the databases. They practise the pathway into the databases. They are quickly able to evaluate their own competence and this is often at odds with what they have told us about their prior experience with the databases at the beginning of the class when it seems they are too

embarrassed to publicly acknowledge their ignorance. In fact, their search results are usually so bad that they become quite curious about how to improve them. They are then in a more receptive state of mind for what is to follow. For the trainer this is a really important diagnostic feedback technique as it provides a chance to really establish their level of competence with database searching in order to pitch the rest of the class at the appropriate level. Note that the trainer helps with logging on but observes the searching techniques without intervention.

So far we have discussed the techniques used to lead the students forward to a point where they are relaxed, keen and ready to learn. A relationship has been established between you and them. A context has been built up in which they can easily absorb the more technical information that follows. They know the pathway in; they know a little about the important features of the Library's home page and the subject guides, where to find their journal article databases and which ones are relevant. They also know something about how scholarly, academic information is structured. In other words, they are now capable of absorbing the real point of the class.

### **Take them to a new level**

You can now throw your expertise at them for the first time – but gently. (It could be that you are going to teach them thesaurus searching on **Medline** or citation searching on **Web of Science** or effective Google searching. The following method is used for straight keyword searching).

Teach them some key principles about database searching that they will also be able to apply to searching any library database.

We use the chart shown in Figure 2 and work through it slowly, step by step, addressing the class topic. We brainstorm terms and create a ready-made search on the whiteboard with Boolean operators. We encourage a lot of participation. We want the students to re-think their approach to searching. We take our time over this.

### **Put the theory into practice**

Demonstrate a database by taking all the brainstormed terms from the whiteboard and transcribing them into a search box. Start with a simple search and progressively improve its focus with synonyms and additional concepts. Teach them to find results. A successful outcome will show them that this database *is* relevant and easy to use.

### **Give them more hands on practice**

By getting the students to repeat the exercise again or to search their own topic, you are making the information personally relevant and helping them to retain the information skills just learned.

### **Consider team teaching**

We team teach these postgraduate students for the following reasons: two trainers give a sense of the importance the library places on helping them to become information literate; our complementary personalities and teaching styles help to establish a relaxed, open classroom in which they can more easily participate; we are both available for the hands-on sections of the class where there are often very needy students wanting assistance. We plan classes together as we get a more creative result in less time; we observe each other's teaching and the techniques that do and don't

work and we learn from each other; we even find that the ideas acquired from planning and teaching our joint classes have improved our solo teaching style. And we enjoy team teaching!

### DATABASE SEARCHING

1. Write out your topic in sentence form.
2. Underline your key words or phrases. These are your concepts.
3. Make a list of synonyms (words with similar meaning) for each of the key words underlined.
4. Combine the synonyms for each concept with OR.
5. Combine your concepts using AND.
6. Do OR combinations first, then AND the resulting sets together.

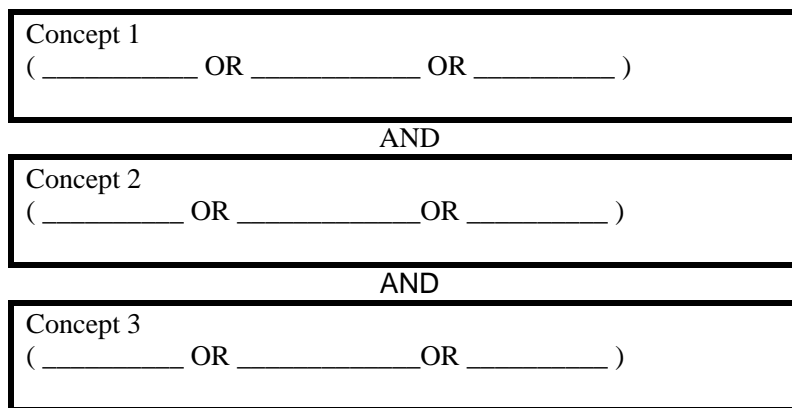


Figure 2 Principles of database searching

### Do a post session debrief

This has become an essential part of our teaching. We write it straight after the class. What worked? What didn't? Not only does it give us invaluable information when preparing for the following year's class but also it helps us to think about our current teaching.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If your primary goal is to capture the unwilling learner you have to reel them in like a trout on a line - with stealth and with cunning! You have only one and a half hours' training time. You are not going to turn your students into experts on any one library tool. Instead you have to leave them with something like these thoughts in their heads.

"Wow! I can do this! I could try again – use another term – maybe I'll see what happens then.... Hey! This is fun!!!"

"I wonder what those other databases have got that this one doesn't have....."

"Lets go and take a look!"

"I'll go and see the librarian again next week and get some more tips...."

We regularly hear these sorts of comments from students; they are surprised at the possibilities that have been opened up to them and they take great delight in

discovering how easy these databases are to use. Not only do we see this for ourselves in the classroom but also we receive formal and informal feedback from their lecturers afterwards. Students comment through formal course assessments on the accessible style of presentation and frequently suggest that these classes should be an integral component of every contact course.

We realise that our classes are only the start of the transformation of these students into confident information literate people. What we aim for in the one and a half hours is to change their attitudes by providing them with some skills to help them experience for themselves the usefulness of the library databases.

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