

New Voices in the Profession [Session]

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Teaching the Hipsters: Incorporating Art and Politics into Creative Library Instruction

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You may be wondering what a hipster is, or how I defined a hipster when creating this presentation. Hipsters are obsessed with finding the next great thing before it becomes too popular. They shun anything that has become mainstream. They hate labels. In fact, no one wants to be called a hipster because it labels them. They love facial hair and thrift store fashion. They gravitate towards all things ironic or controversial. And they fill my library instruction classes.

I teach library instruction to a general writing class which is taken *mostly* by first year students. Since most of my students are coming straight from high school, this is really their first exposure to research and to using the library for more than just a place to do homework. In this class, students have diverse academic majors and interests, but they all have the same assignment to write a research paper about a very general topic. Many struggle with coming up with a good research topic; and most, have not grasped that their research paper should be focused and include their individual opinions and ideas along with scholars' opinions. I get anywhere from 2-3 days to instruct the students about library resources and research practices.

My assigned teaching responsibilities are as follows:

- Help students figure out a topic for their research
- Instruct students how to use the library resources
- Teach how to evaluate sources
- Let the students know they can come to the library for help

As a new library instructor, I wanted to teach everything I was assigned, but I also wanted to teach in a manner in which the students were engaged with their research and were able to find library resources they would actually use. I knew that if I didn't show the students resources they could use immediately, then they would forget about them and even how to use them in the future. And since this may be some of my students' only exposure to the library, I wanted them to remember that they did find helpful and useful sources during their time in my class. In order to get ideas of how to be both engaging and useful, I observed other library instructors teaching their classes and I read current material about library instruction.

What I found is that most library instructors faced the challenge of keeping their students engaged while teaching library resources. Students were either distracted by their computer, or were seemingly not taking any new knowledge of library resources by the end of the class because they still used more sources they found through Google, than scholarly sources found in the library. Indeed, even the latest library instruction material acknowledged the same frustrations.

I didn't want to attack Google or other online resources, but make them an asset in my instruction. We all benefit from online usage. How many of you today are using your portable devices to take notes, while checking your email, social network, or playing a game while I'm talking right now? It's clearly all around us! So, as library instructors, we have to adjust the way we teach. A book I found to be helpful in explaining this pedagogical transition was Marc Prensky's *Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning*.

Marc Prensky said: Students are bored with lectures and they "do not want cookie-cutter lessons from books. Much better are creative approaches within the partnering framework. Some of these can be tied to current events...Others can be tied to student passions ... Still others can be tied to students' immediate reality." (61)

According to Prensky, the partnering framework is nothing new because it is also called, student centered learning; problem-based learning; project-based learning; case-based learning; inquiry-based learning; active learning; constructivism; or learning by doing. (p.15) Isn't that what research is all about anyway? Even our beloved librarian, John Dewey, believed these teaching methods were effective as he indicated in his 1938 book, *Experience and Education*.

I knew if I used the partnering framework, I could demonstrate how the library and online resources could work together to give information needed for a research paper.

I developed additional teaching objectives to aid my teaching responsibilities:

- Get students involved in a *real* problem, project, or case
- Do activities in which everyone will participate
- Teach research tactics and resources students could use immediately.

Prensky said students expect to learn things that "are not just relevant, but real" and "there's an urgency that today's students feel to connect to the real world."

I have seen that to be true with my students too! Students love the real examples for a variety of reasons, and these examples also help them discover their own passion and connection to the real world which they will turn into research topics.

Knowing that many of my students have little to no research experience, I decided to model a real example and *with their interaction* we would go through the preliminary steps of research together. I choose my real examples from political art because, even if the students didn't feel they understood art, everyone tends to have an opinion about art anyway. I wanted to break the ice with my students and get them to start talking and asking questions so it would start the interactive teaching and partnering framework I hoped to establish in my instruction.

To give you an idea of one of the real examples I use, I'll present Ai Weiwei and his Sunflower Seed exhibit in the Tate Modern three years ago. I will either show them a YouTube video published by the Tate, or if I'm running low on time, I show them pictures and tell them about the exhibit to familiarize the students with the artist's purpose for the exhibit.

They find out that these are not real sunflower seeds but 100 million hand painted porcelain seeds crafted in Jingdezhen, a town which made porcelain for the Emperor's court. For generations the people in this town have perfected the porcelain craft, but unfortunately they are without work in the contemporary age. Ai Weiwei's sunflower seed project employed 1600 of the townspeople who were happy to be working with porcelain again. Ai Weiwei explains that he chose sunflower seeds because all paintings of Chairman Mao have sunflowers surrounding him because he represents the sun in China and all the ordinary people loyal to the party are sunflowers. Ai Weiwei said, "Sunflowers supported the whole revolution, spiritually and in material ways."

I ask the students: "Do you think this art has value in the real world?" And their responses tend to be something like this: "How can he afford to pay all those people?" "What does the Chinese government think about his exhibit?" "Who is Chairman Mao?"

They have reactions and questions with the Ai Weiwei exhibit, and this is when we practice brainstorming a topic as a class. We write down all their reactions and questions and break them down into smaller segments. Using their natural inclination to turn to Google and other internet sources, I encourage them to do so to add to our class brainstorm. It's amazing what information the students will find in their searches and it generates a lot of ideas!

Just to give you an example of what their brainstorm will look like, I'll show you a sample brainstorm of why Ai Weiwei earned respect from the students. The students find that Ai Weiwei uses his iPhone to take selfies. He dances Gangnam style. He communicates his ideas through his blog and tweets. He was incarcerated for his activism. There was a Free Ai Weiwei campaign throughout the world. He's trying to encourage independent thinking giving a voice to the Chinese people through his art. He encourages others to speak out for individuality.

And let me tell you, hipsters respect individuality!

The brainstorm is a great foundation for the rest of their research. I tell them to write all the words that appear to be important or which keep coming up in their internet searches and circle them. These words can be used later on when searching library and online databases. I show them reference sources in the library and library guides which will also aid their brainstorm and help them find more information on a general overarching topic. I encourage the students to look here because it's the surest way to find what the professionals and scholars are saying about their topic idea. I also encourage students to try out their circled words from their brainstorms to find more related sources in the library. We use the Ai Weiwei brainstorm to see what results appear in the library resources.

Now it's time for the students to do a brainstorm on their own, using what they just learned toward their personal interests. After their preliminary brainstorm, the students exchange their brainstorms with a partner who will review their ideas and add more questions and ideas to their partner's initial brainstorm. This activity gives everyone the opportunity to participate in the exploration process of research and give each other feedback on their initial research idea. After the students have completed their brainstorm, then they face a new challenge. How do I find scholarly resources for such current events?

I do show them where to search in the library and how to conduct a search in a database, but it's true! Scholarly material is often delayed anywhere from a couple of months to a couple of years. A big factor in the delay is the peer review process. So if a student wants to focus upon a current event that occurred in the last six months to a year, finding scholarly material can be difficult and even impossible.

To combat this challenge, I have found two creative tactics to finding scholarly material:

1. Compare the current event to one from the past.

a. History DOES repeat itself!

b. Using the example of Ai Weiwei, can you think of other artists who were deemed trouble makers because of their political and activist art?

c. Don't you think there has been plenty of research done about these other artists?

d. Yes! So, a student can compare and contrast a past artist with a contemporary one using both scholarly material about the past artist and the most current exhibits and news about the contemporary artist.

2. Use online sources from professional and academic sources such as YouTube videos from professional or academic channels, use blog articles from experts in the field, use online news articles, etc. BUT all these online sources will need to be evaluated, especially if it was not peer reviewed, in order to assess if it should be included in a research paper.

To teach students how to evaluate sources, I use a rubric created by my institution, and I have the students practice using it in small groups.

Here are the source evaluators we focus upon:

Substance, Currency, Authority, Relevance, Accuracy, and Bias.

To help them remember, I tell them to think of a scarab. Each group is assigned a source evaluator to review how they will identify and rate each according to the rubric. Then they teach the rest of the class about their evaluator.

I emphasize authority, accuracy, and bias because when the students use material they found online these three evaluators tend to create more work for them. And, unless it is obviously from a professional or scholarly online source, the student will need to critique whether or not

the online source should be cited in their research paper. We go over, in detail, how authority, accuracy, and bias can be identified with the class discussing their ideas with each other.

I'd like to share with you the ideas students have come up with as I've taught this class. For Authority, the students have indicated they would google the author and see if the author has an online resume or other published works. When the students look over the titles and publishers from the author's other works, they get an idea of whether or not this author is a professional in the field, a professional writer who publishes with a specific publication, or someone who has not written anything else besides the one article. It is a judgment call for the student to decide if this person should be cited in their paper.

When looking at Accuracy, the students indicate that they will skim over the source to see if there are any obvious citations or references. If they don't find them, then they will look for names of people or businesses cited in the source. By looking at these names, they can assess if these are loose citations where they will have to track down the original source or quotes. If there is a lack of citations, then they indicated that it will be difficult to determine accuracy; and therefore, they should probably not include the source in their research.

Bias can be assessed by using the information found about Authority. When looking at online sources, they can also assess by looking at how the website ends. Realizing that everyone is biased, the students know they will want to include opposing viewpoints in order to make their research stronger.

After we have discussed the source evaluation process as a class, we turn back to small groups and practice evaluating the same source with the other groups in the class. I provide the source they will practice with for the exercise; and I tend to choose either an online article or short, informative YouTube video.

You may wonder why I don't have them practice on something scholarly. It's because I know majority, if not all, my students will turn to online sources to *start* their research; therefore, I want them to practice with one as a class. Not to mention, evaluating scholarly sources is somewhat easier since the peer review process has already ensured the source is evaluated. I like to choose examples where the authority is questionable because it creates a discussion with the class. One of my favorite articles has been an article written by Bill Gates article about the benefits of genetically modified foods. Students are rarely aware of Bill Gates' other ventures outside of Microsoft. So this article generates some great discussion.

I assign the students to continue to fill out this evaluation four more times for sources they find themselves. I explain the purpose of this assignment is to train them to think like a researcher who is always critiquing and assessing the validity of a source. In addition, this assignment helps give them a head start to another assignment they have to complete as part of the research paper unit, which is their annotated bibliography. And yes, these completed evaluation worksheets are turned into their writing professor as part of their overall grade for the research assignment.

So, as you can see, by teaching library instruction classes in partnering framework where both library and online sources are used to teach, I have completed all my teaching responsibilities as well as accomplished my teaching objectives. I want the students to learn how to use library sources, but I also want them to feel they can use online sources as well, so long as they evaluate the source.

Ai Weiwei said, "I always think art is a tool to set up really new questions, to create a basic structure which can be open to possibilities."

Asking questions is the first step in the research process, and since art does create questions I have found art and politics to be a great platform for teaching research.

Remember, these students do not want to learn only what is relevant, but what is *real* and can tied to *real* events. They've grown up in the digital age and are comfortable navigating online sources, but they are not always comfortable with the library sources, so we have to teach them. We have to show how both can work together to enhance their research and understanding of their research topic. They need to be shown research sources and tactics they can use immediately otherwise they will forget what you teach them. In the end it's the hipsters' prolific online usage that makes them natural information seekers and excellent budding researchers!