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No One Left-Behind! Teaching Information Literacy in a Different Way to an Urban Population

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Abstract:

The demographics of student-athletes at the University of South Florida closely resemble that of many urban areas in the USA. These students often have little academic success. The School of Information pioneered a credit bearing information literacy course specifically for student-athletes to increase their academic success and to improve their information literacy. The article describes five strategies that make this class successful. These strategies can employed in this class can be employed in other setting such as an urban library or other institution interested in improving clients information literacy.

Keywords: information literacy, student-athletes, urban population, education

Introduction

In many ways the populations of urban libraries and university student-athletes are similar. The challenges faced by these two populations are often converge at the intersection of socio-economic status (SES) and education. Learning 21st century information literacy skills is a potential way to overcome low SES and other stumbling blocks to success. At the University

of South Florida's (USF) School of Information (SI), we have developed a unique way to teach information literacy to student-athletes. The implications of this teaching technique may have exciting possibilities for urban libraries.

Before discussing how USF's student-athletes are comparable to an urban population it is important to understand why this group was identified and selected to have different information literacy instruction. SI teaches the only for credit information literacy course (LIS 2005 Library and Internet Research Skills) available at USF. It is a three credit sophomore level course that is currently offered online and in a blended format though it has been taught in a traditional classroom setting as well. When designing our information literacy course we kept in mind Audrey Cohen and Janith Jordan (1996) belief that, "Students should learn to think and behave in such a way that they can take information and perspectives from vastly different areas of life, synthesize them and use them to achieve positive social accomplishments" (p. 26). We tried to create learning situations which would foster this ideal. We were successful with most of our students with one notable exception, student-athletes. Though many student-athletes took LIS 2005 many also failed the class and some were even disruptive in the classroom. Thanks to researchers such as Carol Kuhlthau (1987) and so many others, we know that in today's information rich society, information literacy is essential to one's social and economic well-being (p. 22). With that in mind we became uncomfortable having an identifiable group consistently under-perform in the course.

To address the issue we were facing with student-athletes we decided to try something different. We separated them from the "regular" students and put them into a course of their own that is taught partially online and partially live. These classes, from our own count, average 65% African-American, 25% White (Non-Hispanic), 9% Hispanic, and 1% Asian/other. Typically 3% of these students are non-native English speakers. The demographics of these students are very different from the general population at USF. USF is located in the Tampa, Florida metropolitan area and has almost 48,000 students. It has a very diverse student population with 55% white (Non-Hispanic), 12% African American, 21% Hispanic, 7% Asian and 5% not reported. (University of South Florida, 2014, p. 14). Though USF is diverse it still has a majority white population. The student-athletes class has an ethnic make-up that is more similar to Baltimore, MD with an African-American population of 65.1%, Memphis, TN with an African-American population of 64.1% or New Orleans, LA with an African-American population of 61.2% (US Census Bureau, 2011, p. 15).

As demonstrated above, the student-athlete population at USF mirrors the clientele of many urban public libraries. Minorities and non-native speakers are over-represented when compared with the rest of USF's student body. Student-athletes recognizes these differences just as any population might. A recent study by Albert Y. Bimper Jr. (2014) showed that student-athletes identify themselves differently than other general population which causes them to behave differently and respond to learning opportunities differently than "general population" students (p. 803). Urban public library users often identify differently from other populations as well. These differences can lead to issues with classroom performance and library usage. We think what we have done can be applied to urban public libraries' information literacy programs as well. When we instituted a different learning environment for the student-athletes we discovered that not only did their course outcome match or exceed our other students' outcomes, but they also began to improve in all of their course work and their risk of not graduating was reduced significantly.

Almost ten years ago we began to research what issues we might be facing and what might be done to solve them. We discovered that there was not much information available about how to teach information literacy to student athletes. We did however discover that The University of Iowa taught a one-shot information literacy session to all incoming student athletes. This session was clearly shown to increase the graduation rate for student athletes who completed the 90 minute course (Forys, Forys, Ford and Dodd, 2000, p. 357).

We also discovered that Donna Louise Gilton (2007) had identified culture shock as a stumbling block to information literacy and instruction. Culture shock is experienced commonly by persons in a foreign environment. It is characterized by disorientation, anxiety, depression and even though rarely paranoid behavior (424). We began to wonder if our student athletes were experiencing culture shock. We know that they are largely minorities, some are non-native English speakers, many are the first person in their family to attend university, they tended to keep themselves somewhat separate from the regular students in class and the other students tended to treat them a bit differently as well. These actions by the student athletes could be an indicator of culture shock. Gilton recommends taking nine different steps to overcome culture shock and be successful in teaching those suffering from it (p 430-431). To us in SI this sounded like we needed to get to know our student-athletes better and discover how they learn as opposed to how we wanted them to learn. Then we could reduce their culture-shock in the classroom and provide them with an experience more conducive to learning.

Again we did more research and discovered that student-athletes underperforming is a wide spread phenomenon that affects all genders, races, ethnicities and sports (Bowen & Shulman, 2002). The research shows that there are many factors which may contribute to this underperformance including, being poorly prepared for college, poor academic advising, lack of time for studies, negative stereotypes, and even peer pressure to underperform (Levine, Etchinson, & Oppenheimer, 2014, p. 525-526). The only way we were going to be successful in creating information literate student athletes was by doing something radically different.

At the time values based leadership and transformational learning were just becoming popular. The generations old if you build it they will come model of education was clearly failing and the idea of meeting them where they are was becoming popular (Mavrinac, 2005, p. 391-404). With these ideas in mind we created a new type of information literacy class that successfully co-opt student athletes into becoming information literate. We also wanted to take a social constructivist approach to teaching our athletes. This approach acknowledges the complexity and individuality of the student, and encourages, utilizes and rewards them as a necessary part of the learning process. In social constructivism the students are actively involved in the learning process (Wertsch 1997). This approach seemed best suited for student-athletes. We had to come up with our own method of implementing this. Our process can be thought of in five steps which can be applied in any setting with under-served, hard-to-reach groups.

Joyfully embrace your hardest to deal with group

No one wants to spend time with their most difficult user. That's no secret but often no one needs you more than that difficult person or group. Looking inside and outside your library to identify the most in need of information literacy who are often the hardest to reach and teaching them. Do this with joy, understanding and patience. This can't be a duty which is distasteful. They get enough of that every day. Truly do the unexpected in an unexpected way.

At USF as was mentioned previously we had a pre-identified group that was struggling not only in LIS 2005 but in all of their classes. They were also singled out by faculty and others as problem students. Instead of approaching them as problems, we approached them as people with needs. We realized that they didn't need to meet our needs, i.e. pass the course. They were used to having bad GPAs. We needed to meet their needs in some way to help them become more information literate and which we know will improve their performance in other classes and in life.

Sometimes this means just being where they are and walking them through what needs to be done. Sometimes it means realizing that there are three men in class with very young or soon to be born children and focusing some of the assignments on child-care for new fathers. Sometimes it means helping a team find a new home for the kitten they have hidden in the dorm. It always means being very excited when one or all of them master a task or integrate a new concept. More than once the instructors have been told they are the people who ever said anything nice about an athlete's academic progress. If you want your "problem" population to become information literate you have to show you care about them first. Then they can care about what you can provide to them.

In the urban library there may not be a group so easily identified and embraced as student-athletes on a college campus. But there are probably groups already identified by social agencies and local governments who are in need of information literacy training. For example, I lived in Makassar, Indonesia for a while. Though in Indonesia women have pretty high status they still are less likely to complete high school or go to college and are less likely to be information literate in the 21st century sense, yet they often make decisions for the family which would benefit from being more information savvy.

Boldly take your instruction to them

Part of joyously embracing our student athletes included realizing that they were not so interested in coming across campus to the School of Information. There are lots of reasons for this but none of that matters. The only thing that mattered is that we took the class to where they already physically were. This was very beneficial for a number of reasons, many of them obvious, such as their coaches and advisers are right down the hall and can be brought in at a moment's notice. But some of them we didn't realize for a couple of semesters. Even though student-athletes in a group reinforce the belief that they can't succeed academically, once we got a core group of athletes who had successfully complete the course and were seeing overall academic improvement they started encouraging their teammates to be equally as successful. Sometimes this was through genuine support and caring and sometimes wasn't quite so easy going. But in a world where the team is extremely important getting support from the team to be successful was very powerful.

Teaching where the student-athletes were located also allowed us to understand better what the life of a student-athlete was really like. There is a lot of travel and there are a lot of practices called at the last minute by coaches who really do tell their athletes to skip their classes. When we understood and accepted this reality it was easy to see a solution to the problem of non-attendance. Quit making them attend! Lectures were moved to an online format which is accessible anytime, anywhere. But from watching students work we realized that even though they are all born digital they are less-likely to be very tech savvy due to socio-economic and other factors. So the class was changed to one required one live lab a week in order to learn to use the research tools and some computer basics in a hands on

setting. However unlike a regular lab this lab is offered twice a week for two hour blocks. Though we try to encourage all students to come at the beginning of the two hours it is acceptable for them to come in late. It is also acceptable for them to make up lab work missed due to team travel or excused absence. Occasionally this means that the instructor meets one on one with students or in small groups outside of lab time. Injuries, play-off games out of town, extra practices etc...are all part of being a student-athlete. There is no reason to be hung up on when they do the work. Just that it gets done.

If we were going to reach our example target populations of women in Makassar we would need to identify a place where they meet. Although often thought of as being stay-at-home moms, these women do several things which would allow librarians to meet them and begin to teach them. One popular activity is to meet as a group in a mosque to learn to recite the Quran. Bringing laptops to help them learn about their religion from reliable sources could be one way.

Exuberantly embrace their learning styles

This is where understanding social constructivism will be very beneficial.

Identifying their special needs and taking the class to them wasn't enough to turn every athlete into an A student. Quickly it became apparent that usual classroom styles weren't cutting it in the lab. We noticed that each athlete loudly demanded attention even when the instructor was clearly engaged with someone else. Of course this was initially annoying but then the idea struck that on the field athletes most often work in small groups with coaches, assistants, trainers and others who are focused not just on the big picture but also on their individual roles. Maybe that's what they needed in the classroom as well. Quickly, library student volunteers were brought in to help the student athletes individually or in small groups. This alleviated some of the demands that the instructor hold each individuals hand through the entire lab.

Other issues also readily became apparent. For instance, in a normal university classroom in the US instructors don't touch the students. But the student-athletes all touched each other especially when they were teammates and they all seemed to want to touch the instructor and the graduate students. Once we let down our guards and touched our students, tensions in the lab relaxed. They grew more comfortable with us and us with them.

We also noticed that there was a lot of movement going on in the lab. Students just could not sit still. The knee jerk reaction stemming from years of public school and undergraduate teacher training was to make them sit down. But that would not be meeting them were they were. So we investigated kinesthetic or tactile learning. This is a learning modality first identified by, Barbe, Swassing, and Milone in their 1979 book *Teaching Through Modality Strengths: Concepts and Practices*. Students who learn kinesthetically need movement. To accommodate this we got the students moving around the lab. For example, we have them moving in and out of small groups, moving into one large group, demonstrating search techniques or other activities that are required to complete tasks to the entire class. Giving them physical tasks seems to pull in wandering attention and refocuses the students on the learning activity (McIntyre, 1982, p. 54).

In our example of Indonesian women learning to recite the Quran, it is not possible to guess what their learning modalities are. However, from Cox's previous experience in Mosques

with several groups of women she noticed that they like to touch and be touched. It is quite possible that they are kinesthetic learners as well. Similar to student-athletes anyone teaching this group would need to be willing to try learning activities that tapped into this modality.

Get inspired by them!

Getting inspired by your students is not a new concept in education. It is very common place for instructors to become excited about learning or about student success when the students are. It is a lovely symbiotic relationship that allows the teaching and learning process to continue. We however chose to use our group's interests as inspiration for what we were teaching. We already knew that student athletes were not in any way inspired by the typical information literacy activities especially those that culminated in paper writing. They weren't even willing to do academic research activities for lots of points. We needed to find out what inspired them and incorporate those things into our lessons. We discovered that they really liked all of those "crazy" websites such as Pop! The First Male Pregnancy (<http://www.malepregnancy.com/>) and Help Save the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus from Extinction (<http://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/>). The trend in information literacy is away from using hoax sites to teach evaluation skills but student- athletes love them and love when their teammates get fooled by one.

We capitalized on this and have designed whole semesters around popular culture and off beat themes. Currently we are using zombies. The students are interested and are willing to talk about zombies, big foot, crypto-zoology etc... They are not willing to talk about or learn using more academic topics. It is even fun for the instructor and graduate students to get to talk about yeti or alien abduction than a more erudite subject.

The example group of Indonesian Women learning to recite already has the topic area they are interested in identified. But if we were teaching them information literacy skills we would use this interest to get them to investigate the Quran further and learn how to use YouTube.com or vimeo.com to watch others recite the Quran. There are lots of possibilities with this topic that could be exciting springboards to becoming information literate.

Celebrate all of their victories

Everyone likes to feel they are winning not just athletes. As you might guess, athletes just naturally expect everyone to celebrate their victories in their sport but they don't expect anyone to celebrate their classroom success. Instead of spending a lot of time cheering their athletic prowess we focus on their success in identifying useful keywords or finding articles in a database. We give them the high-fives, and victory cheers in the classroom. It's amazing what happens the first time the most difficult to reach student gets cheering for making academic progress. We don't restrict the celebrations. Sometimes the smallest strides get the biggest cheer. It just depends upon the needs of the student.

Many other groups will not respond to actual cheering the way that student-athlete groups do but when you are getting to know your special population you will discover what they like to do when they have mastered something or made great progress. You can provide that to them instead of applause and high-fives.

In the case of student athletes, celebrating the victories means actual sports-like celebrations. In other groups it may not mean that. Such loud, physical celebrating would probably not be

helpful with women reciting the Quran. But something like food at the end of your information literacy session to celebrate them being present for the instruction would probably fill that role nicely, or being given a gift for attending or demonstration mastery of whatever information literacy skills you were teaching would be very celebratory for that group.

Conclusion

As Shapiro and Hughes (1996) so eloquently stated being information literate is "essential to the future of democracy, if citizens are to be intelligent shapers of the information society rather than its pawns, and to humanistic culture, if information is to be part of a meaningful existence rather than a routine of production and consumption (p. 1)". To attempt to reach that goal at SI developed five methods to teach our hardest to reach student population. These steps can be applied in any urban setting with minority populations. All you need is to joyously, boldly, exuberantly, be inspired by your urban populations and remember to celebrate with them as together you learn to be information literate.

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