

## Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy rests on three key points, all of which focus on the learner. In my practice, I try to *encourage independence* in using information through fostering critical thinking skills and an experimental, exploratory attitude to the information environment. I base my teaching on one of Ranganathan's five principles of librarianship – “*Don't waste the time of the user*”<sup>1</sup> which is echoed by Chickering and Gamson's<sup>2</sup> emphasis on time on task, to encourage efficient use of information resources. My classroom teaching is *learner-centred* and I develop my sessions to focus on the assignments and needs of students in each class, just as each reference encounter is tailored to the needs of the individual. Below, I will expand on each of these points and illustrate how each informs my classroom teaching and reference work.

### *Fostering independence*

I seek to build independence in students so they not only learn how to use the resources of today, but develop confidence and skills to approach new information tools. These skills include critical reflection on their strategies as they locate materials as well as critical evaluation of the resources they find. In consultations with students and in class, I model an

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<sup>1</sup> Ranganathan, S.R. 2006. The five laws of library science. Ess Ess Publications: New Delhi.

<sup>2</sup> Chickering, A.W. and Gamson, Z.F. 1987. Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. AAHE Bulletin (March 1987): p. 3-7.

exploratory attitude to engage the students with the process of research. I am a firm believer in learning by doing so my classes always include ample time for hands-on practice. My overarching goal is that students leave the session with an attitude of inquiry. Throughout my sessions, I engage the students in a dialogue about what they expect to find, what they do find, and where else they might look. The sessions generally progress from fairly straightforward tools to more complex ones, allowing students to build on successes in searching, developing their self-efficacy which can increase their persistence and their willingness to try new resources. This progression is also evident in my work to integrate information literacy within a program, beginning with classes that focus on the basics for first-year courses and progressing to more advanced and expert level-tools in fourth-year and some graduate-level sessions.

### ***Efficient use of time and information***

Drawing from my work as a librarian, I try to bring people together with the information they need as efficiently as possible. This encompasses maintaining expert knowledge of a continually increasing array of resources so that I can recommend the best tools for information needs and demonstrate the most efficient ways to use those tools. Students are often bewildered by the array of information resources available; by focusing class time on the tools most likely to help them with a given project, I can allow more time for students to explore those tools, to find and evaluate information, and to develop their confidence in the process.

For my classes, the focus on efficiency begins at the initial discussion with the faculty member about the class – together we determine what the students need to know, both for their immediate assignments and for their continuing study in the discipline. Each session is supported by a web-based research guide that serves as an outline for the session with links to carefully chosen resources, and tips that students can refer to for subsequent projects. While I recommend certain strategies and tools for optimum results, I also encourage the students to adapt the strategies to other tools and situations.

### ***Learner-centered teaching***

Encouraging independent learning and saving the time of the user are aspects of my philosophy that focus on the user, reflecting the core of my teaching philosophy: the importance of learner-centered teaching. Students come to the University with different learning preferences, different levels of experience and comfort with the information environment and often, varying degrees of library anxiety. Addressing these factors requires empathy with the students and an understanding of both their needs and the needs of the discipline in terms of information competencies and core tools. I often ask students to evaluate the library sessions, and this feedback helps me link my sessions more closely to student needs.

For each class, and for every reference session, the first task is audience analysis. The questions I start with in preparing each session are: who am I working with? what do they know already? what do they need to know? and what strategies will be most effective? While some content may be similar from workshop to workshop, resources and search examples are carefully tailored to the needs of each class. I use a variety of metaphors for information organization to bridge the gaps between systems student may be familiar with, like songs on

iTunes or foods in a grocery store, and the less familiar library catalogues, databases and search engines.

I also adapt my strategies to the affective needs of each audience. In introductory sessions I focus on presenting the library as a friendly place with lots of help available, to break down some of the barriers students face in using the vast resources we have. For graduate students and faculty, I spend more time on strategies and resources that can save them precious time, often by delivering specialized sessions on tools serving their research interests at their desktops.

Finally, I ensure that my teaching remains learner-centred by encouraging students to assess the library workshops and by asking for feedback from the instructors I work with. Students appreciate the fact that their input is valued, and provide many reflective comments. I consistently use the information from both formal and informal feedback to adjust my teaching practice and the content of sessions. A very valuable prompt for reflection comes when I observe student presentations; seeing how students have incorporated the material from library sessions provides rich insights into what they are gaining, or missing, that further inform my work.

My role as a teacher of information literacy is to help students develop the specific skills they need to succeed with their research projects, to provide them with enough 'time on task' that they build familiarity with the research process, and to foster their confidence so that they may apply today's skills to tomorrow's resources, through experimentation and exploration.

## **Rationale for Contributions**

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The rationale for my contributions to teaching at the University of Calgary is intertwined with my philosophy and the examples of teaching below provide more specific detail of how this looks in practice.

### ***Context***

For librarians, teaching occurs in a number of different contexts, the most obvious of which are course-integrated workshops on aspects of information literacy. These sessions are generally developed in collaboration with discipline faculty, and include objectives related to the needs of a particular course or lab assignment. They also fit within the wider frame of disciplinary competencies scaffolded throughout a student's academic career, from introductory sessions in first year to instruction on advanced tools for graduate students. Typically, sessions include facilitated practice supported by web-based and/or print materials I have developed in collaboration with the instructor. Sessions generally occur during laboratory time, lasting anywhere from 1 to 2 hours depending on the goals for the session. Most are accompanied by assignments worth 2-6% of the total laboratory grade that are usually created collaboratively with a faculty member. Much of the most meaningful teaching takes place at point of need, at the reference desk, or now through more virtual venues, and entails consulting with students to achieve very specific goals.

Other contexts for instruction include sharing work with library and/or discipline colleagues through national or international presentations. I have also seen publications as a chance to share experiences in teaching, most recently of publicly available data sets with wider communities. I have also enjoyed sharing my work through informally mentoring librarians and library staff, including inviting them into my sessions.

### ***Motivation***

To further expand on the ‘why’ of my teaching philosophy, I believe that my three touchstones work to develop learners who will explore new resources, transfer existing skills and knowledge to new contexts and connect classroom learning to their larger personal and professional goals. I work to *foster independence* by providing supported exploration of advanced resources. Students engage not just in doing science but in becoming scientist, that is, becoming familiar with the tools used by researchers in the discipline. Students live in information-rich, rapidly evolving environments – teaching them *how* to learn to use new tools is a critical part of their disciplinary apprenticeship.

Through efficient use of resources, I use my expertise as a librarian to assess the needs of audiences and match them to appropriate resources. One of the clearest examples of this was incorporating patents, which I had used extensively as a business librarian, into science instruction where they are becoming more important as both information sources and communication tools. Not only did faculty and students see the value in this resource once it was incorporated into a class, ideas around patenting sparked a rich discussion of the value of information and aspects of ownership, ethics, and authority, deeper and more enduring concepts of information literacy. The motivation for learner-centered instruction brings the other two concepts together. It is a continuous prompt to continue my own learning to maintain the relevance and currency of my teaching, my subject knowledge, and my use of technology. It also encourages me to establish a rapport with students to better understand their individual needs, so I can introduce the new tools and skills they require and foster the development of the inquiring attitude necessary for their work.

### ***Approach***

I make no secret of my enthusiasm – both about the subject of information resources and about teaching itself, and I believe this enthusiasm helps motivate the students to learn. I see myself as a facilitator of student learning and to that end I encourage student questions throughout my presentation and use open-ended queries to engage students in critical thinking, debate and prediction. By asking “What do you think will happen if...?” questions, I can encourage students to apply what they know to the unknown and prompt their curiosity.

I generally meet classes only once – so in a sense, each class is a ‘first’ class, and I am conscious of the need to develop a rapport with the students very quickly, as I’ve found that setting up a positive learning environment has a direct impact on student engagement, attention and participation. I like to begin my instruction sessions by talking to students as they enter the class to ascertain their background knowledge and to find out from the group as a whole their level of their research skills. I also try and make a few mistakes when doing demonstration searches to illustrate the impact typing errors (e.g. Protein Data Bank numbers, 1QO5 or 1Q05), can have on a search and to reduce anxiety students may have about the exercise or

activity. I emphasize the relevance of the classes by reminding students that the skills they are acquiring are transferable to subsequent lab assignments, other courses, and their working careers. I make sure students know they can contact me for assistance with their research needs. To make myself even more accessible, I am available two days a week in the Gallagher Library in the Earth Sciences Building, to encourage students to meet me in their own space and at *their* convenience.

A final aspect of my teaching practice is my preference for a collegial approach. I learn from my colleagues in the library and from faculty in the discipline, and I enjoy mentoring and sharing my expertise with others. My classes are often enhanced by having colleagues as facilitators and I work as a facilitator in other librarians' classes. This open atmosphere is very conducive to disseminating teaching techniques and content knowledge throughout the library. It is a model of practice I thoroughly support and participate in, as being a lifelong learner gives me further insight into the needs of our students.