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Building Rapport Through Teacher and Learner Inquiry



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Over my eight years as the Interdisciplinary Arts & Humanities Librarian working with Religious Studies, Jewish Studies, and Classics students at the University of Colorado Boulder, I have come to view course integrated library instruction sessions primarily as a relationship building endeavor. Sure, I hope students will also walk away from my classes with notions that “information has value” and that scholarship *is* conversation, grounded in frames from the “Framework for Information Literacy” (The Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016). Yes, I also hope that students will have a better sense of how they can use the Libraries’ website. But, the real success for me is when students feel comfortable asking questions, whether in the moment amongst their peers in class, or afterward by emailing me or booking a consultation for a deep dive into their inquiry.

To help build these relationships, I focus on two things at the very beginning of class: 1) introducing myself in an authentic, relatable, and, sometimes, vulnerable way, and 2) asking students a series of questions, framing this exercise as a way for me to get to know them a bit more deeply, now that they know who I am. Often, I pose three specific questions: 1) What has your experience with research been like?, 2) What are your favorite resources to turn to in order to find information for your coursework?, and 3) What questions about the Libraries are you bringing to class today? Many times, I pose these questions on a padlet (<https://padlet.com/>) where students can post their responses anonymously and “upvote” their peers’ replies.

In a recent library instruction class for an upper level, undergraduate course “Religion & Reproductive Politics in the United States,” time for set up at the beginning of the class ran short and I decided to project the padlet on the screen, but, instead of asking students to navigate to the link where they could contribute directly, I invited them to share out responses to each question, posed one at a time, if they felt comfortable. The third question is my favorite and I find that students often have *many* questions about the Libraries that they either didn’t know who to ask before or never thought these questions were so important to spend time pursuing an answer. With me, a live librarian in front of them, and with a little prodding (“Any guesses on how many library books you can check out at one time? Hint: It’s a lot...!”), the questions began flowing and we spent about 40 minutes of

this 75 minute class addressing the pressing questions on their minds. This was more time than I had expected, but their comfort level seemed to increase with every question I answered and the conversation touched on several of the items I planned to address anyway. Many of the students were not majoring in religious studies, but were pre-med or rostered in other social sciences related disciplines such as political science and psychology. When a student expressed uncertainty about using resources for this class, they cited their familiarity with PubMed and lack of familiarity with resources such as Atla and JSTOR. Noting that this was a time to allay their fears, I assured them that we would go through resources together and we can always follow up after class. I also shared my own uncertainties and told them how I'm actually a student right now as well, pursuing a totally new-to-me field through a certificate in Maternal & Child Health. I have never studied public health before and I'm not familiar with those resources, but I do know that I can apply skills and strategies I apply to resources with which I *am* familiar to public health resources. I also shared that I'm investigating many of the issues they are pursuing in the class and we can "figure it out together." By framing myself as a fellow learner, I gained student trust.

The rapport building during this question and answer period at the beginning of class facilitated an environment where one student courageously asked about the experience they might have if they sought help at our reference desk, a service which I had encouraged students to explore beyond seeking help from me. They began, "Topics in this class could be considered to be controversial. If I go to the research desk, looking for more information on my topic, say, defending abortion, how will the librarians at the research desk react?" I first thanked this student for asking such a question, and then I shared how being at a large, research university means our librarians see all kinds of questions, including controversial ones! Next I shared how, ethically, per the "Code of Ethics of the American Library Association," librarians must separate their personally held religious values from the service they provide to students (ALA Council, 2021). I said how much I love working with my colleagues, who each bring their own expertise, and I have no hesitations about sending students to the research desk to seek help with topics in this course.

Especially with classes that discuss such fraught topics as reproductive rights and politics, it is important to build rapport with students and provide an open space for inquiry. By inviting questions and bringing your own vulnerable, authentic self to the classroom, you can empathize with students and assuage their hesitancy. You may even get some emails and requests for consultations after the class is over! †

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