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## The First Act: Using the Initial Minutes of a One-shot to Engage Students and Jumpstart Learning

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# The First Act: Using the Initial Minutes of a One-shot To Engage Students and Jumpstart Learning



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Of the many constraints on the one-shot session, a primary challenge is quickly building rapport with students. Students who enter the library classroom feeling bored, worrying about coursework, or experiencing library anxiety are less likely to engage. In *The Spark of Learning*, Sarah Rose Cavanagh (2016) argues that “if we want to truly motivate and educate our students, we are much better off targeting their emotions” (p. 1). Creating a welcoming and warm environment is important in helping students learn. Yet, this is a challenge for librarians who have little context for connecting with students who are often ambivalent about library instruction.

The trend toward backward design and active learning – prioritizing learning activities that are organized around authentic outcomes – is beneficial in engaging students; yet, I have found that even with thoughtfully designed sessions, there can still be some struggle in grabbing the attention of the students at the start of the class. An introduction from classroom faculty can help, but sometimes the handover is clumsy, and students look disinterested from the start.

Rather than wait for class to begin, it is more effective to grab the students’ attention immediately upon entering the room. After all, this is when students create their first impression of the library and the librarian. James Lang (2016) writes, “The opening five minutes offer us a rich opportunity to capture the attention of students and prepare them for learning.” As with many texts about teaching in higher education, Lang’s suggestions are within the context of a semester-long class and may not be readily adaptive to a one-shot. Yet the idea of intentionally planning those initial minutes, which includes the pre-class time when students are situating themselves, has gone a long way in helping me establish immediate rapport and focus the students’ attention.

When developing introductory activities, I have a few guiding principles:

- The activity must be low-stakes. Students enter with different abilities and levels of confidence. Any questions posed in the activities should require little advanced knowledge or skill.
- The activity is simple and clear. I am usually floating in and out of the classroom as I look for lost students, so I cannot direct an activity although I do engage when I am with the students. Most activities I choose are passive; the students just look at the content on the screen and talk about what they see.
- The activity should connect with the session content. Time is limited in a one-shot session, and those minutes need to be used intentionally even if the activity is simple.

Here are a few activities to which students have responded positively:

- *Listen to Wikipedia*: This website provides an audio and visual display based on the real-time edits on Wikipedia. The sounds and images are calming, yet attention-grabbing. Students like to discuss the seemingly random nature of the entries that are being edited, and the site provides a great launching point into a conversation about the ever-changing nature of information (and Wikipedia). Students and faculty really enjoy this site.
- Sticky-note activities: Post a question on a whiteboard and provide plenty of colorful sticky notes and markers for students. Some of the prompts I use are:
  - What are some words or phrases that you associate with research?
  - What are some hurdles to research?
  - What sources of information do you use when \_\_\_\_? Choose non-academic scenarios, such as shopping for a device or choosing a college.
- Sticky note activities work especially well when faculty participate. Answers can be a source of encouragement (*I see a lot of you get frustrated when researching!*) or a prompt for discussion (*Google Scholar is a great source; let's explore some useful strategies for using this resource*).
- Trivia slides: Post multiple-choice trivia. For example: How much does the library spend on resources each year? How many interlibrary loan items did the library receive last year? Students are usually surprised by the answers, and those answers can be used to demonstrate the value of information.
- Student quotes or survey data: If you send out a pre-session survey or tutorial, embed a few poll questions and then put the answers on some slides. Slides can also display word clouds or quotes based on student input. This works well with a larger class that can provide a lot of data.

- YouTube fireplace: Truly, there is no learning objective here, but on bleak winter mornings when the students (and the instructor) are slow-to-engage, the warm glow of the YouTube fire is a cheesy but successful way to get a smile from students and create a feeling of warmth and hospitality.

Teaching librarians “want to be excellent teachers, but they encounter significant barriers” (Buchanan & McDonough, 2021, p. 1). One-shot sessions mean that time must be used carefully both to achieve learning outcomes and to help students feel welcome in the library. The opening minutes of a class can go a long way in engaging students and laying the groundwork for meaningful learning. †

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