Library Freaky Friday: Information Literacy and Peer Teaching

Scott Stone

As a music librarian whose primary job is to provide reference and information literacy instruction for undergraduates and faculty at a medium-sized university, I teach approximately fifty information literacy class sessions each school year. The musicologists and some of the applied music faculty I work with are very much in favor of their students receiving library instruction on a regular basis, which means that I see some students in four or five sessions throughout the year. Dealing with this repetition can be a significant challenge as some students bring to class extensive experience with research techniques and concepts learned in previous sessions, whereas others might only be familiar with the basics.

As I've experimented with various exercises and lesson plans to engage this wide variety of student ability, one in-class exercise has continued to prove effective at both teaching and engaging multiple levels of students. This exercise, which I like to call "Library Freaky Friday," is based on the educational theory of peer teaching and involves students teaching students rather than the librarian or professor teaching the class. Velez and his coauthors believe that, "peer teaching encourages students to assume a more active role in knowledge acquisition," which should please any instructor.[1] In addition to peer teaching, this particular exercise requires group work, which, as Yaman and Covington demonstrate, increases participation from students, an attribute that is desirable in any class but especially so in information literacy classes that are often rife with disinterested students.[2]

Library Freaky Friday starts with me informing the students that neither I nor their regular instructor will be lecturing them that day. After the excited whispering has died down, I inform them that *they* will actually be teaching

---

1. Jonathan J. Velez, et al., "Cultivating Change Through Peer Teaching," *Journal of Agricultural Education* 52, no.1 (2011): 40, doi:10.5032/jae.2011.01040.

2. Dan Yaman and Missy Covington, *I'll Take Learning for 500* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2006), 11.

the class. I divide the students into groups (my classes are normally composed of five or six groups of four students each) and assign each group a topic and an information resource that they will present to the rest of the class. I select information resources for each session that are appropriate to the needs of a particular class or research assignment; these might typically cover electronic databases like *RILM*, *Oxford Music Online*, and *JSTOR*, in addition to several print resources such as bibliographies or focused encyclopedias.

Before releasing the students for the next twenty-twentyfive minutes to prepare their presentations, I explain that the students need to become true experts on their resources by using them to search for their topics, but that they shouldn't actually tell the class about their topic. Instead, they will explain how they interacted with the resource while researching their topic. This is an essential part of the exercise and needs to be emphasized throughout the preparation time; otherwise, students will instead come to the front of the classroom and attempt to present their research topics. With that being said, you might ask why the students should even research a particular topic instead of just exploring their information resource. There are several reasons for this. First, searching for a particular topic helps the students to explore the scope of a resource. Second, in my experience with this exercise, I've found that groups will give much more compelling and complete presentations when assigned a topic. Without having a specific information need, many students will just play around with their resource for a bit without fully discovering how it works.

During the preparation time it's important to circulate through the room and engage each of the groups. Ask them standard questions such as: "What type of information can you find in this resource? What type of information can't be found in this resource? Can you find information easily using your resource? Are there search limiters available to help narrow your search? Do you like the resource?" Groups should also be asked specific questions related to their resource. For example, I always ask the group assigned to work with *RILM* if they've discovered how to search multiple databases at once, which would allow them to search both *RILM* and *Music Index* simultaneously.

Once preparation time is complete, I again remind the students that they are to give a complete overview of their information resource, and to refrain from acting like a car salesman who only covers the positive aspects while avoiding negative parts of the resource. Occasionally presentations are subpar, making it important for the librarian to remain engaged throughout the presentation in order to help coax the group to a more successful presentation. Much more often, groups give a solid presentation with various students presenting on different aspects of the resource. In the instances in which everything is perfect with the presentation, it is still important to engage the

group by praising their thoroughness, asking questions of the class, and emphasizing important points made by the group.

Peer teaching in the library classroom has been an effective method of engaging students in learning about information literacy at my school. Post-session surveys and assessments have garnered student quotes including "It was great to feel more acquainted with the programs and actually have a personal preference for using them now," and, "I like how the exercise helped us understand how different resources were better for finding certain information over different kinds of information." In contrast, post-lecture evaluations after a traditional bibliographic information session have never shown an understanding of the advanced information literacy concept that different information will be found in different types of resources. I feel that this point needs to be emphasized, as it is important to all parties involved in the information literacy process. Students who use the proper resources for different types of information (e.g., search in *JSTOR* when looking for primary resources from nineteenth century journal articles, or use *IIMP* rather than *RILM* to find information on a current popular musician) have the most success in completing their assignments and are less likely to experience frustration during the research process. Professors benefit as their students become more likely to stop using freely available Web sites of questionable authority and instead write papers supported with more authoritative information. I credit the students' newly learned skills not to poor teaching abilities on my part, but rather to the fact that the students are so engaged with the fun group assignments and peer teaching that they want to learn and consequently internalize this knowledge.

There are many different ways for music students to learn about information literacy. Library Freaky Friday is one of the more effective methods I've used over the years. The peer teaching is flexible enough that it is still able to engage students who have received multiple music library sessions in one semester as well as introduce concepts to those who are receiving it for the first time. I encourage you to have a conversation with your music librarian and work together to design an effective information literacy session that engages and challenges your students.