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Catching Their Attention! Using Nonformal Information Sources to Captivate and Motivate Undergraduates During Library Sessions

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Abstract

Students at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica are required to complete a course on research and writing for academic purposes. Students are scheduled to visit the library for a hands-on session in the library's computer laboratory. How can we motivate them to acquire the research skills required in academia? We must first capture their immediate attention and then encourage their academic curiosity. How can we stimulate them to become information detectives? What are the nonacademic sources of information that have impacted the lives of Caribbean students prior to arrival at university? It wasn't the journals or scholarly books. It was other less formal sources of information.

Preamble

*"Wake up all the teachers, time to teach a new way.
Maybe then they'll listen to whatcha have to say.
'Cause they're the ones who's coming up
And the world is in their hands.
When you teach the children
Teach 'em the very best you can"*

Source: Extract of lyrics, *Wake Up Everybody*, written by John Whitehead, Gene McFadden, & Victor Carstarphen, 1975.

The Setting

The University of the West Indies, Mona campus is located on the site of two former English sugar plantations that utilized slave labor. During World War II, camps for Jewish refugees, evacuees from Gibraltar, and interred Germans and Italians were established there. No doubt Spanish settlers occupied the land before the British, but Taino Amerindians inhabited the area before them all (Francis Brown, 2004).

There are three campuses and an open campus. The campuses are located in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados. Student enrollment on the Mona campus, Jamaica in the 2014–2015 academic year was 33.1% male to 66.9% female students (Statistical Digest, 2016).

Library Tutorials

First-year students at the University of the West Indies must visit the library for a hands-on information literacy session in the computer laboratory. Some are eager to learn, but others seem distracted. Others arrive late. Once behind a library computer monitor, they quickly focus on e-mail or Facebook.

The tutorial is a component of a course on *Critical Reading and Writing* during which they are expected to prepare an essay on one of several broad topics. In Semester I, 2016, the choices included media and ethics, an iconic historical figure, death/marriage rituals, technical and vocational education, religion then and now, sports, health issues, community-based violence, food and water security, cyberspace control, behavior epigenetics, robotics, disease control and medicine, aging and death, and nanotechnology. Their nonacademic interests include popular music, relationships, sports, and sport celebrities, including Olympians Usain Bolt and Shelley-Ann Fraser-Pryce.

Motivation

When asked why they are pursuing further studies after completing high school, students gave the following responses.

*"More money."
"Make oneself more marketable."
"To get qualifications."
"Parents said so."
"Get a good job."*

Jacqueline Howell Nash

Figure 1. The Aqueduct, Mona Campus, University of the West Indies.

Figure 2. Entrance to the library, Mona Campus, University of the West Indies.

What motivates them to learn, to reach their goals? The *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (2009) describes motivation as "... an energizer of behaviour" In general, their long-term motivation centers around a desire for upward social mobility, including a decent salary and standard of living. Many of them are well-acquainted with *struggle*. They have struggled to achieve, and they hope to reach their goals. The speech given by Olympian Shelley-Ann Fraser-Pryce on receiving an honorary degree from the University of the West Indies in 2016 is worth viewing (UWI MonaMedia, 2016).

How can the librarian as presenter engage these students? How can we motivate them to acquire the research skills required in academia? Sometimes we fail to motivate because we are not adapting our approach to incorporate aspects of their life experiences. We must first capture their immediate attention and then encourage their academic curiosity. We should not teach without first engaging their interest.

Nonacademic Sources of Information

What are the nonacademic sources of information that have impacted the lives of Jamaican students prior to arrival at university? It was not books. It was other, less formal sources of information. These include radio, television, music, newspapers, websites, and social media. Jamaica's heritage entails a strong *oral tradition*, and talk show radio is very popular.

What are they reading? What are they hearing? They are reading billboards, shop signs and advertisements, listening to radio talk shows, watching television news, *dance hall* commentary, church commentary, lots of music, and, yes, social media sources.

This librarian has used different methods to capture the attention of first-year students attending a computer laboratory library tutorial.

Teaching Technique #1

While awaiting the arrival of all students, "motivational" lyrics to popular music were scrolled

on the screen in advance of the standard PowerPoint slides. For example, the words to "The Climb" as sung by Miley Cyrus.

*"... But I, I gotta keep trying
Gotta keep my head held high ... It's the climb ...
The struggles I'm facing ... "*
Source: Alexander & Mabe. (2009). "The Climb."

Another song that was used which also conveys *struggle* is "Gonna Fight"

*"... We're gonna fight it to the top
We're gonna fight without fear
Because we've got to get there ... "*
Source: The Heptones. (1968). "Gonna Fight."

Teaching Technique #2

There were two instances when the accuracy of information was challenged. Not all information is accurate. In the first instance, students were asked to identify the birthplace of singer/songwriter Bob Marley. Most students answered Trench Town, a neighborhood in the capital city. However, his actual birthplace is in rural Jamaica, in Nine Miles, St. Ann.

Second, they were informed of a phenomenon years before they were born when rumor spread in the capital city that a coffin was seen traveling through the streets, controlled by three "crows" who were looking for a "Mr. Brown." This lasted several days and made the news media but was not authenticated.

Teaching Technique #3

In reminding students that plagiarism is theft, reference is made to instances of plagiarism in music, and they are encouraged to Google "plagiarism in music" in their free time to see some interesting results.

Librarians will have to roll with the times and utilize innovative techniques to engage first-year students, or the times will roll over us.

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