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Case studies

Intentional failure and Rhianna's tattoo as pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Academic teaching librarians are often classroom visitors, with limited time to build relationships with students and teach them something useful. To maximize impact, librarians commonly deploy a canned search to demonstrate information seeking strategies. Demonstrating instant perfection is a detriment to student learning that reinforces classroom power inequities and portrays an unrealistic expectation of real-life searching and research. This column invites teaching librarians to instead demonstrate failure in classroom instruction as a way to bolster student confidence, experiential learning and mutual trust.

Educators can spend significant time on lesson planning. The pressure is amplified for teaching librarians, who perhaps have just one session to not only connect with students but also teach them something useful. There are slides to create and activities to mine or invent. And for librarians, there is a database search demonstration: the sample search topic or “canned search.” These pre-rehearsed searches are a common tool in the teaching librarian's arsenal and are crafted ahead of class, designed to demonstrate the many ways in which we can manipulate keywords and limiters to yield quality results. How much time have librarians spent laboring over that fairy tale phrase or string of search terms that will conjure the results page of their classroom dreams? Not too big, not too small, with just enough little *quirks* to show students how to manipulate their findings in a meaningful way. This approach is an enduring method of demonstrating the functionality of databases, but its existence is counter to how searching happens in real-time. Real-world researchers aren't looking for illusive perfection. They are looking for clues and gathering data along the way that informs their unique inquiry and allows them to react and learn from their mistakes. I have come to see demonstrated “canned” database searches as not only ineffective but also detrimental to building trust with students. Research requires flexible thinking and foresight to build-in time for failed queries and dead ends. Canned searches are a way for librarians to feel less vulnerable as teachers but also portray a misleading representation of the research process, undermining student confidence in the process. In this column, I'll define and celebrate failure as an integral step of the research process. I will also suggest classroom strategies for librarians that frame students as worthy of trust and autonomy in their own learning experiences by asking them to react and adapt to the failure of a person with perceived subject authority.

There is a benefit to demonstrating failure in the classroom. My own personal definition of failure is subjectively un-academic and manifested in Rhianna's tattoo (yes, the one and only Rhianna), a simple statement that reads: “Never a failure. Always a lesson.” I first read about this tattoo not from a gossip magazine, but as part of its inclusion in adrienne maree Brown's 2017 book, [brown, 2017](#). Her work with change organizations struck me as applicable in a classroom setting as well. Failure is a natural, human experience that provides the data necessary to adapt to the constant flow of change and uncertainty we face every day. Academic research is intertwined with failure, although we often hide our professional failures to project authority and confidence. Only the authority figure, or in this case the instructor, benefits from this protective measure. This positioning serves an outcome anticipated by reformers like bell hooks who have long challenged educators to disrupt classroom hierarchies in the name of community ([Hooks, 2003](#)). Students too often see the idealized final product from their professors and mentors: a published book, award winning research, a critically acclaimed exhibit. But what they never see are all the big, uncomfortable failures that led them there. Too often, we allow our students to believe the lie that their mentors are infallible. This incomplete narrative of academic success models to students that there are fewer paths around inevitable obstacles. Addressing this falsehood as an inherent issue in academia is overwhelming, but educators are perfectly poised to approach this disconnect on a smaller scale in the classroom. The “canned search” can be reimagined to ignite active, student-led learning, if you're brave enough to attempt it.

I work with undergraduates and graduate students at a mid-sized public university as a teaching librarian supporting arts, communication studies and first-year experience programs. There is a marked

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difference between students in their first and final years, but learners at any stage can benefit from witnessing failure in action. While lesson planning, I design a canned search as usual, but design it to fail miserably, despite all the best practices and library tools at my disposal. I caught myself telling students once in a class, “I can’t anticipate what each of you will need for your unique research topic,” and days later, I kept hearing that on repeat in my head. The only thing I could confidently assume would happen is that most of the learners in that classroom would be frustrated when they tried the strategies I had shown them on their own. Some might reach out for help, some might figure it out on their own, others might internalize that frustration and add it to a list of reasons why they don’t belong. Demonstrating failure is a way to get ahead of that disconnect, to fully model the inherent failure present in research of all kinds. Students already recognize that failure happens in the real-world (Goodwin et al., 2021), so it is not a stretch to integrate failure into information literacy instruction as it relates to academic research experiences.

This classroom strategy begins as most traditionally do, by providing some context as to what seasoned researchers value as effective search strategies with an abbreviated lecture. I present tips for searching that are tried-but-true: looking in a discipline-focused database, using keywords and including synonyms or related terms, and stringing them all together by employing your favorite Boolean operator. I have my sample topic at hand to show them just how effective these strategies are, but what I *do* keep hidden from students at this point is that I know this perfect search will fail. I’ve designed it to do just that. One example is taken from a communication studies research methods course for third- and fourth-year students where the sample topic is exploring the relationship between social media use and feelings of jealousy in marriages. It’s a fine and reasonable research topic by anyone’s definition, and certainly *researchable*. However, when I construct the search in a communications research database, no results are found. The methods are sound, but the hypothesis doesn’t pan out.

This is where your personal bravery must be engaged. An instructor leading this activity is no longer a leader, rather a hopeful facilitator. They hope that students will want to try and will intuitively uncover all those hidden easter eggs that you know, as an instructor, are useful. It is up to the students to outsmart the librarian and manipulate the system using their existing knowledge about information seeking.

At this point, I will ask students what we could do next. This mirrors their personal search experiences which rarely include a librarian on standby. I propose that this, or a version of this failure, will happen as they explore their topics, no matter how sophisticated a researcher they are. This is also a perfect time to remind students that I have heard or read the statement “I can’t find anything on my topic” more times than I can remember, and it’s not only coming from students. It also comes from the university faculty; graduate students, Ph.D. recipients and published authors. Established researchers and subject authorities who also cannot find “anything” related to their topic. I ask them to pair up or work in small teams to make this search work, and they’ll share their ideas after 15–20 min. I give them a little direction, reminding them that the strategies are still sound, but flexible in interpretation, and I ask them to think critically about what information they would truly need to write about that topic. I tell them that they have all the tools they may need at their disposal and then some. These tools include resources found on the library website, each other’s own knowledge, and their librarian or professor. Can they find a source that would be usable? How about three sources or a full page of possibilities? They define success as they work. It’s integral to the success of this method to make your classroom a safe space for students to explore their own ideas. Risk-taking is known to improve student learning when it happens in a supportive space (Haworth and Conrad, 1997). This approach is made more difficult for teaching librarians that are often temporary visitors in a classroom. In my experience, sharing my own professional failures anecdotally in a class session is one easy way to breakdown that hierarchical barrier. Another option is to root this risky instruction in two

general understandings, as articulated by the teaching librarians at the Maryland Institute of College and Art (Ferretti, 2020) as being:

1. Research starts with what you know.
2. You do research every day, you just might not call it that.

As they ideate solutions to this perfect, yet failed search, no strategy is off the table. If students are feeling stuck, ask them to think about what they would do next if this occurred out of the classroom and ensure them that there is no incorrect way to approach “fixing” this failure.

This method engages a variety of learning styles, as supported nicely by David Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle. Learners first encounter a new experience through the lecture of how databases work and their unique language operations (concrete experience) before observing the strategies in actions (reflective observation) and witnessing them fail at producing relevant results. This reflection makes way for student-driven solutions that mirror the experience they will have when searching independently (abstract conceptualism). Finally, these learners play with solutions and offer suggestions to improve the issue at hand (active experimentation) (Kolb, 1984).

While the students work together, I transition into that hopeful facilitator, and a voyeur of student-driven strategies. There is room to eavesdrop and make suggestions or clarify ideas as needed. This gentle nudging bolsters student confidence in their own work, and I have found they are more likely to share them with the group once prompted if they receive some positive feedback as they brainstorm. Groups and class sessions tend to employ diverse strategies depending on what experience they bring with them into the classroom. I have seen some move away from library resources completely and search on Google. Others pull back on the demonstrated strategies and use fewer strategies, and some will replicate the same exact search in another database. How exciting it is that the options for improvement on a failed search may be truly infinite! We come back together as a class and share those lessons with one another. Students are often excited that one of their strategies has an established name (like phrase searching) or that another group tried a similar thing and had different results. They can share their natural curiosity about why databases are structured as they are and discover what skills they are most intuitively inclined to deploy. My role as a facilitator is to push for clarity and record student suggestions. Ideally, this record is something students can refer to or add to later, like a shared document or Padlet. Instructors should take care to maintain student phrasing but provide context that could be useful later. This record is not only a resource for students, but an artifact you can use to assess student learning and inform future instruction.

It can be uncomfortable to release control over the classroom experience. Starting with failure will require a degree of vulnerability and bravery in your teaching. There are often feelings of pressure to teach *all the things* in what little time you have with students, and to turn authority over to them could conjure up a feeling that you aren’t needed at all, or your work is less valuable. I view instruction as an invitation to students. An invitation to return and ask for help when they need it or share their infectious curiosity. Positioning failure as a starting point for library instruction is an extension of this invitation. It welcomes students as capable contributors to their own experiential learning and encourages them to view failure as not simply a barrier or end point, but as a vital part of their work and lives. When you start with a failed search, you have nowhere to go but up. The worst that could happen is that students won’t participate, and anyone who has taught even *one* library-related class can tell you this happens even with the smartest canned search at your disposal. Even so, you’ll leave the classroom having learned something about what your students value and what they are capable of. Whatever happens, just remember it’s never a failure, always a lesson.

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