Highlights and Pitfalls of an Instructional Design Project

Jennifer Locke

LI837XO

Fall 2007
Introduction

Information literacy (IL) is a diverse topic with various points of view concerning how it should best be defined and instructed. Grassian and Kaplowitz have found that the core concepts in all of these definitions are that “an IL individual is able to identify, locate, evaluate, and use information effectively” (2001, p. 8). Additionally, transferability across various situations and information needs are also deemed important. (Grassian and Kaplowitz, 2001, p. 8). In seeking to instruct students in these information literacy skills, many factors must be addressed. This paper will explore the details of creating a 60 minute instructional scenario for 8th grade students, my experiences with formulating the presentation, evaluation of its execution and what could be improved upon in future sessions.

Presentation Design

Today’s young adults have diverse information needs, both personal and school related. They are typically well versed in technology and often enjoy a complex online social web. In *Using Pop Culture to Teach Information Literacy*, the author Linda Behen suggests to “Use [the students’] desire for instant gratification and quick results to demonstrate how they have advantages in locating information today” (Behen, 2006, p. 22). Additionally, she states that “The pop culture names and themes that you work into lessons keep students engaged” (Behen, 2006, p. 24). Keeping these two principles in mind, I tried to design an instructional scenario that would engage the students with familiar examples and relate their comfort with technology, including social networking software, to information literacy skills in database searching. My hope was that by relating these new skills to knowledge they already possess,
the students would be more likely to grasp the concepts being presented and keep involved in the learning activity.

This instructional scenario was designed specifically for 8th grade students. Though this scenario would likely be effective for 7th through 9th graders, students younger than 7th grade may have difficulty grasping Boolean concepts and the instruction would probably prove unsuccessful. Students older than 9th grade may get some benefit from the scenario as designed, but would likely be ready for slightly more advanced searching techniques. Instruction to an older group would be most successful if combined with a specific research project and more detailed instruction.

Design of the scenario attempted to cover each of the three learning styles. I have addressed the auditory learners through brief bits of lecture. Those who are visual learners were taken into account as well through the use of the PowerPoint presentation. I find that PowerPoint is a helpful way to organize the presentation and remind people where we are in the lesson and what we are focusing on at that time. The Grassian and Kaplowitz text talks about the “seductive” nature of presentation software applications and the pitfalls that are often associated with their use. They present excellent things to be aware of when using this type of software with any user group, but I believe the pitfall of too much text would be most damaging to a presentation for young adults. I have tried to take this into account when creating my presentation and feel that for the most part I succeeded. A few slides, the Boolean operators in particular, may be a bit text heavy, but the limited number of slides throughout the presentation would compensate somewhat for this. Though it is mostly useful for visual learners, I believe all three styles will benefit from the organization provided in the PowerPoint.
Finally, kinesthetic learners are most likely to grasp a concept through application. This has been addressed through the Boolean exercise and the in-class practice with the library databases scheduled to occur after the 20 minute presentation.

One of the benefits of living in a digital, global world is that information is readily available. While this can be overwhelming and difficult at times, it can also be helpful. Instructors across the country understand the benefits of resource and knowledge sharing on the web and elsewhere. As such, a variety of lesson plans and innovative ideas are available. Books such as Linda Behen’s *Using Pop Culture to Teach Information Literacy* offer a variety of suggestions. As previously discussed, the focus of this book is to use things that are familiar to young adults in order to get them interested in learning about information literacy. My learning activity developed out of this concept and was adapted from other activities described on the web. Ideas I decided against included peanut butter and jelly, colored blocks, paper cut outs, pop culture stars and television characters.

As suggested by Behen, young adults learn best when they can relate to the examples being used. Although this method can be useful to grab the students’ attention, the instructor runs some risks when using pop culture in their lesson. Firstly, there is always the risk that the pop culture references will overshadow the instruction. Secondly, there is a definite risk of missing the mark on what is “cool” to this age group. Trends change rapidly and something could become outdated very quickly. Using an example that is no longer of interest to this age group could essentially make your instruction invalid. On the other hand, there is also the risk of being perceived as trying too hard. It is important for any instructor of young adults to
remember that no matter how “cool” you were or still believe you are, you are no longer a teen. Respecting young adults for who they are will go far in likewise gaining their respect.

Finally, in order to assess an instruction session, there must be a way to measure the goals and outcomes planned for the class. In this scenario, learning assessment relied upon the instructor’s perception of the class during the database practice time as well as the results from the worksheet to be turned in at the end of class. Answers matching those of the instructor would be an indicator of successful understanding of the basic concepts of Boolean searching.

Presentation Execution

Grassian and Kaplowitz tell us that “Backup plans are essential, especially if you may have just one chance to teach or help someone learn” (Grassian and Kaplowitz, 2001, p. 260). Though things don’t always go as planned, preparation can and did go a long way in execution of my 20 minute micro-teaching session and thankfully there were no major glitches. While I had no exact plan in case of a failure of technology or otherwise, several scenarios would have been possible. Firstly, failure of the PowerPoint presentation would have been regrettable, but not disastrous. Though it served as a useful outline for the class, as well as a pleasant visual for the young adult audience, the handout on Boolean operators could have served as a sufficient reminder of the concepts being discussed. Taking time to make the handouts more interesting to a young adult audience would make them even more effective. In the future, I would likely consider having a more detailed paper outline covering key concepts to pass out to the class in the case of failed technology. Similarly, while the short YouTube video added some much
needed liveliness to the presentation, it was not essential to the discussion of database searching skills and could have been omitted.

The candy example would likely be a hit with students and an effective means of teaching Boolean concepts. With this in mind, it’s also quite possible that the entire lesson could fall apart with the introduction of sugar to eighth grade students. In a real life scenario, I believe the best solution to this dilemma would be to downsize the candy to smaller, “fun size” candy bars. The exercise would remain the same, but minimize the chance of losing control of the class at that point. Additionally, one evaluator suggested getting the class more involved by either having them stand instead of raising their hands or bringing a group of volunteers to the front of the classroom for the exercise. In my opinion, any opportunity to have the class further involved with the exercise would likely make this learning activity more successful. In the volunteer scenario, it could be possible to give candy to the entire classroom after the exercise or even after class. This solution would also keep attention focused forward onto the volunteers and minimize the chance of any students eating their candy before finishing the exercise. Unfortunately, having students at the front of the classroom may make the PowerPoint portion of this exercise difficult or impossible to use. Though the original idea for this exercise suggested adhering candy wrappers to a paper board, instead of actually passing out candy, I feel that this somewhat defeats the purpose. Very few students, of any age, are likely to get excited about an example using candy wrappers in place of actual candy.

Another issue that became apparent during the presentation was that I did not spend enough time focusing on the actual use of limiters and expanders. My original intention was to illustrate the concept by relating database limiters to those used in MySpace social
networking software. Though I scheduled time for it in the 20 minute presentation, it was rushed through in order to ensure time for the candy exercise and a short walkthrough of their application within the library database. Real world sessions would benefit from more attention on this aspect of the lesson, possibly even its own 20 minute session. Additionally, I did not remember to look at the starting time of the presentation, so I had no way to judge my remaining time other than the timeframe from my practice runs. Without actual students however, this time could have varied greatly.

Conclusion

As my first attempt at designing an instruction scenario, I found the process of creation quite chaotic. Outcomes for my lesson were based upon the predetermined knowledge of my students and the allotted time frame, but surprisingly, formulating the details of the pretend scenario proved complicated. While I knew that I wanted to instruct young adults in database searching, deciding upon a specific age group and appropriate instruction within the allotted time frame was difficult. Sample lesson plans and instruction ideas available on the web and elsewhere proved to be a good source of inspiration for instruction content and learning activities. These resources, including lesson plan databases would be helpful for future lesson planning inspiration.

Resources
