



## CHAPTER 3\*

# How Unplanned Events Can Sharpen the Critical Focus in Information Literacy Instruction

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“The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”

—*bell hooks*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction: Unplanning Your Lesson

Critical pedagogy prompts teachers to make connections with students on an affective level in order to achieve the larger goal of liberation and the radical transformation of society.<sup>†</sup> Instructors need to be especially conscious of the specific contexts of the classroom, who their students are, where they come from, and where they want to go. There are no generic students, only particular ones with their own experiences and perspectives. With these basic premises in mind, a library instructor entering the classroom with a lesson

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† These central concepts are elaborated by Paolo Freire and bell hooks.

plan must consider the plan provisional, at least to the extent that they cannot predict who the students are or what ideas and challenges they will present to their classmates and instructors. This is true even from class to class—students may have experiences in between classes, and they may be changed in some way from the last time they came to class. bell hooks, in describing some of the lessons she learned upon becoming a college-level instructor, states that “there could never be an absolute agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction. Students had to be seen in their particularity as individuals.”<sup>2</sup> This flexibility and responsiveness to constant shifts and changes is fundamental to a critical pedagogical praxis.

Information literacy instruction is driven by learning goals and outcomes, even when those are not explicitly stated. Instructors carefully outline them not only for a course as a whole, but also for each unit of a course, and even for each unit of instruction within a particular lesson. But as soon as the teacher begins a course or an instruction session with a meticulously mapped-out lesson plan, once in the classroom, inevitably there are unanticipated ideas, questions, or events. These are the results of the students’ unique contributions, group dynamics, and accidents that happen in the course of a lesson. Most often such surprise or unanticipated events can be folded back into a lesson plan in some way to reinforce the learning goals and outcomes. Or some teachers may choose simply to ignore or dismiss unplanned events as unproductive of learning goals, and some might not immediately see how such events might contribute to the class. Even worse, some teachers may view these events as rude, unwanted disruptions, even insults, and treat students who cause them as miscreants. This chapter will suggest and try to demonstrate how the unexpected moments of surprise or shock can play a special pedagogical role, especially for a critical pedagogy that is responsive to students’ realities, and that places students’ knowledge of and perspectives on their information worlds at the center of learning.<sup>3</sup> The following examples are all taken from my experience teaching information literacy in both one-shot and credit-bearing information literacy classes at a large public urban college.

## “News” on the Net: Using What You Find

The first example comes from a credit-bearing information literacy course that met twice a week for a full semester. In this course students considered a wide

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\* Education scholars have written about unplanned events and their pedagogical usefulness in a variety of contexts. See, for example, Julián Jefferies and Angela-MinhTu Nguyen, “Impromptu Learning: Unplanned Occurrences, Intended Outcomes,” *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 26, no. 2 (2014): 182–92.

variety of information issues in political, social, and cultural contexts and then wrote research papers on a specific information issue that was of interest or relevance to them. When we discussed contexts of information, students shared their own experiences in accessing information. Almost every semester some students would call attention to personal, nonmediated information sources, most often family members or friends, who shared information with them. These sources were ones they trusted, but they were also sources of news, often from the countries in which the students were born or from where their parents had emigrated. The course's focus on mediated information, mainly found on the Web, made the students consider sources they may not have normally relied upon. Their reactions to these types of sources—newspapers, magazines, journals, blogs, and so on—ranged widely. Sometimes they expressed an almost mechanical approval of dailies like the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*. At other times they did not acknowledge any hierarchy of status among news sources and did not believe that any group of sources could be considered exceptionally “authoritative” or “reliable.” In one lesson we discussed and debated the various criteria for evaluating sources of information, particularly for academic research.

The lesson included a competitive game involving groups of students who try to find the best source based on the class's previously agreed-upon criteria. The process of establishing these criteria was in some ways the most interesting part because it involved the students discussing and debating the most important characteristics of reliability or expertise in an article. In small groups the students had to come up with their top three criteria. These standards of judgment included the author (their credentials, experience), the reputation of the publication, the currency of the information, and the relevance of the information to the chosen topic, but sometimes students also cited such things as the domain name or the length of the article. After each group decided on its top three, the results were tallied for the class as a whole and those voted as the top three would be the agreed-upon criteria for the exercise itself.

During one of these sessions a group chose an article from the London tabloid newspaper *Daily Mail's* website. The students were focused on the subject of the article, which dealt with a current foreign policy issue. The topic was serious or academic in that it was about a major current event, and the piece contained straightforward reporting on the issue. The students seemed satisfied and pleased with what they had found, and they also indicated that their choice was the result of time searching online for a good article. The format of the *Daily Mail* article was not obviously that of a tabloid. It could not be immediately pointed out, as I might have supposed, that the article was inappropriate for the purposes of gathering information for an academic research paper. When prompted, the students did not immediately point out any obvious markers of unreliability for the specific article under consideration.

Not sure how to proceed, I yielded to the students to consider the article's merits, dispensing with the usual conversation about differences between tabloid journalism and other kinds. Instead the class had a wide-ranging discussion about the varieties of journalism and journalistic practice, as well as the ways in which Web-based news functions differently from traditional print. With more conversation, students did begin to notice some differences between the *Daily Mail* site and other newspapers, including the fact that it had more stories about celebrities and common crimes (although this was a difference of degree, not kind). None of these distinctions surprised them, exactly, since many of them had not yet built up a set of presuppositions about such categories. Instead, the conversation led students to question the respectable or serious news sources, such as the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*, that they had already expected to be reliable and accurate, simply by reputation. Partly this was because of what they recognized as similarities in format, approach, and even content between the tabloids and the newspapers conventionally viewed as serious or reliable. In the end they were able to recognize the blurring of supposedly clear demarcations between news genres, as well as to question the reputations of respectable newspapers.

## Repurposing the Visiting Professor's Assignment

Librarians frequently complain about one-shot instruction sessions for many valid reasons. One of them is that often the instructor/professor of the class is either disconnected or in some way at odds with the librarian over the purpose and meaning of the library session. Librarians inevitably must deal with varying expectations and are often presented with unreasonable demands from the instructor. Without sufficient communication and preparation beforehand, a librarian and instructor may be surprised by things that either party has prepared for the library session. This is even truer when we consider the potential differences between a librarian committed to critical pedagogy and an instructor with a traditional or conservative approach to their discipline and classroom. Such conflicts can prevent a librarian from teaching a session well, but they can also open up opportunities for critical interventions that the lesson plan couldn't include because the agenda of the professor would not accept them.

An example of this situation occurred in a one-shot for an introductory English composition/literature class required of all students. The professor did not share the syllabus or even the assignment that students were working on before the library instruction session, as was customary (and required). Having been given the assignment only at the start of the session, I discovered that the

professor was asking his students to choose among a small set of white male European and American authors to write about. There was no obvious reason for the exclusionary selection (if there ever could be), other than that the titles were all canonical. The professor asked me to help the students find literary criticism of the novels and stories in the library's databases, but did not ask for anything more specific than that. Although I couldn't do anything about the assignment itself, I could use my power as a guide to the information resources of the library to help direct the students to sources that might implicitly or explicitly critique the professor's choices and assignment. To do this we performed some sample searches in commonly used databases for literary criticism and history. I picked up immediately from the students that most of them were not excited by the assignment and did not seem eager to find sources on the topics that they had chosen. This was indicated by many of the typical physical modes of communication from students during one-shots: slouching in chairs, surfing the Internet, looking away, or exchanging messages with neighbors.

The displayed results of the first database search immediately suggested a solution to what seemed to be an unpromising situation. Without direct prompting, several students instructed me to select titles that dealt with issues of race and gender in the works of the authors under consideration: these were the choices that immediately appealed to them or seemed relevant. I was then able to show them, through a brief look at some article abstracts, how these issues were in fact central to the works of Melville and Hawthorne. Although they were not being given the option to read any works by women or African American authors of the nineteenth century, they could very well explore topics like slavery, women's rights, or oppression of Native Americans by discovering how literary critics and historians have placed the canonical works of white Protestant men in their larger political, social, and literary contexts. The students who selected these topics now displayed an enthusiasm and interest that they hadn't shown before. Other students, too, picked up on their enthusiasm and started making suggestions of their own. While this was a simple thing to do, it was an exciting moment because it taught me that as an information literacy librarian, I could expand students' range of options despite the constrictions set by their instructor.

## The Opportunity of the Conspiracy Theory Website

In another one-shot, also for the introductory English course, the students were given the option to study a major issue of contemporary relevance. One student wanted to research an aspect of post-9/11 anti-terrorism efforts. As I

would often do in a one-shot, we looked at what could be found with a simple Google search. But I could have anticipated that any search related to 9/11 would yield a rich trove of conspiracy websites. Because they are impossible to avoid, a librarian will necessarily look at such sites, at least briefly, and consider the ways in which a reliable information resource can be recognized (by using the CRAAP test or some such similar tool). But I immediately recognized by doing the search that such websites were not easily pushed aside. The eager interest of at least some of the students indicated to me that they may have been sympathetic to some of the arguments of the conspiracy theories. They showed this interest by asking me to click the links for them. Some of them also seemed familiar with some of the claims being made on the sites. I had no interest in trying to ignore or deny these sentiments, because it is always a mistake to ignore students' realities—whatever their views or experiences might be. But although I had not really considered the instructional value of conspiracy theory websites, or conspiracy theories in general, I realized that the students were providing an opening for a critical intervention.

The students considered briefly the questions raised by the conspiracy websites in more depth as a stimulant for further research: What did the government know about terrorism or plots to attack the United States? What did the average citizen know? Who were the people in control of information about what was happening around the world, and particularly with the activities of terrorists? What actions by the U.S. government may have been partly or wholly obscured to the general public? What covert military actions did the United States undertake before the terrorist attacks of 9/11? This seemed to indicate that at the very least conspiracy theorists can ask the right questions, even if their answers may be unsatisfactory from the standpoint of evidence or logic, or worse, if they are framed for the purposes of expressing racism of one kind or another. Indeed, one of the principal reasons I always had avoided discussing conspiracy theories in class was the enduring popularity of anti-Semitic tropes, which students can sometimes be remarkably open about expressing.

The result was a thoughtful, albeit brief, discussion of political information in general. Rather than pushing the conspiracy websites aside as illegitimate or false, they were used as a portal through which to examine vexing questions about how much information about government activity is accessible or even knowable. Because some of the students were already clearly engaged with these questions, they responded immediately to my questions, and several of their classmates became engaged as well. The interest that the class showed also allowed us to consider cases of authoritative or reliable information sources withholding information from the public or passing on government misinformation uncritically (as in the case of the *New York Times* in the lead-up to the Iraq war). Enthusiastic, or at least engaged, exchanges between students showed that prompts by their peers can be at least as useful and pro-

ductive as those that come from the instructor or librarian. By my allowing this space to open up, the students responded to the lesson in ways they might not have if the original plan been followed.

## More Than Just Moments: A Strategy for Apathy

Since any aspect or piece of information can be used to explore some dimension of our current information system, it is always possible to take critical insights away from unexpected, even unwelcome, information such as tabloid journalism and conspiracy websites. Yet even moments that don't appear to contribute any information in the traditional sense can be productive. A very commonly encountered example is apathy or passivity on the part of students. Affective dimensions of student response are the frequent focus of pedagogical theory, both critical and otherwise, and it seems to be the permanent mission of pedagogy in general, at least for the last few decades, to banish passivity and apathy from the classroom. Various methods have been suggested as remedies: active learning, games, group work, flipped classrooms, and so on. These approaches all have been proven effective when implemented intelligently and carefully. But even with such approaches a teacher will still encounter apathy, passivity, and other negative affects, at least on occasion. Again, some instructors choose to ignore these reactions, and others choose to blame the students themselves. Others may even blame themselves and simply conclude that they are not good teachers or that they had a bad class.

Librarians should keep in mind that, especially in information literacy classes, apathy and passivity are never meaningless or simply negative. Students who express such affects may simply be indicating that the mode of presentation or the content of lesson is not effective.\* In these situations the teacher should try to understand why and how that is. To sympathize with the student's apathy can encourage them to think beyond the lesson plan in front of them and possibly stimulate conversations that will connect their interests to the topic or themes under consideration. If a student displays no interest in what is being discussed or taught, they can be prompted to share with the class something that does interest them, and they can be challenged to discuss its

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\* If the behavior is interpreted correctly, which it often isn't. (Mis)reading student mood or affect is another issue that instructors, both librarians and non-librarians, need to consider seriously. The widespread tendency today to denigrate and stereotype millennials, for example, is a great hindrance to effective critical pedagogy. On this topic, see the insightful observations of Kevin Seeber, "Snake People, Dear Reader," Kevin Seeber/MLIS (blog), August 20, 2015, <http://kevinseeber.com/blog/snake-people-dear-reader>.

importance to the larger issues being explored. In practice this means letting go (perhaps only momentarily) of the lesson and lesson plan and freeing up the students to wander where they will to point out, talk about, analyze, and discuss information that they *are* interested in. In a one-shot this can be particularly risky because the librarian may be seen as undermining the visiting instructor's wish to impart certain information and skills to the students.

On several occasions when teaching one-shots, I have taken this risk, usually with the subject instructor's understanding and approval, or at least patience. Students who seem detached or bored are encouraged to describe how they would go about finding information on a topic or what sorts of topic interest them—even if those topics have no clear relevance to the class or the assignment. It gets the student actively engaged with the class, establishes a certain amount of trust, and allows them to make critical connections between their own experience information systems and the types of research or information seeking that are being addressed in the library classroom. Asking students why they like a particular commercial website, blog, or YouTube channel as a source of information, even when such sources seem inappropriate or insufficient to meet the demands of the assignment, can effectively engage them with the questions that they need to be asking. In the initial stages of information seeking or researching, these questions are more important than finding the sources that they will ultimately choose to cite. While it may be true that a student is simply uninterested in asking certain questions, it can be the librarian's task, and reward, just as much as the instructor's, to find a way for the student to discover that they are in fact curious about the question or even have been asking it all along.

## Notes

1. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.
2. *Ibid.*, 7.

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