Sometimes They Just Don’t Have Time: Instruction Methods For Professionals

Showing versus leading, teaching versus delivering, guiding our students to information versus giving them what they want are all debated topics in the academic library sphere. For many librarians there is no topic to debate. We teach our students how to navigate the perilous journey from research question to topic completion as opposed to holding their hands and slipping links and PDFs into their pockets. There are some librarians though, who have different mandates. We may be funded by individual faculties to support the professional needs of a unique group of students, as opposed to being funded by the library itself and it is our priority to deliver first and instruct second.

The MBA/EMBA (Executive Masters Of Business Administration) liaison role at the University of Calgary is one of those roles. Established in 1995 to support the needs of a professional student group, the librarian is tasked with being the link between information and a student group who are coming back to academia after a potentially long break between school and career development. The liaison is expected to perform traditional librarian duties in addition to providing on-the-spot resources for students who may be juggling full-time jobs, young families, and a full-time course load. This is accomplished by being flexible in terms of working hours, offering weekly mini-sessions, and often focusing on the immediate need by providing resources at the point of need and trying not to let instruction fall on the wayside.

The problem with this model comes from a sense of instructional guilt. As academic librarians we are trained to uphold the standards of training our patrons to be information literate as a sort of journey from struggling undergrad to confident graduate. A role that prioritizes the service aspect creates conflicts in many librarians. Although I am called upon to do traditional in-class instruction sessions, I often stress that it is my job to support each of them as individuals and to be cognizant of their hectic workloads.
Fortunately there are solutions out there that can help mitigate this conflict. I use screencast software such as Jing every time I send a student an email response. I keep all of my tutorials under one minute and they target the specific student query. As we know when providing reference services to students, our top picks may not represent all of the top picks out there and I can select the most relevant results based on the inquiry, but these results may not even come close to meeting the hidden needs of the student. This is a way of leading the self-directed learner in a very time effective way. As we all know, it is hard to teach someone who does not want to learn. This helps those who would naturally want to help themselves.

Another method of sliding the instruction into a daily service transaction is to simply send search permalinks when possible. This allows students to see how you constructed your search and potentially apply filters to modify a search that has already been started. This makes students active in the search process, but not lost as to the steps. They are in a safe place and perhaps will be more willing to modify a search once they know they can always return to the beginning step.

It is fairly simple to reach out to students who reach out first, but sometimes attracting the attention of an entire group can be difficult. I find that occasional email blasts work quite well. I send out very short just-in-time messages that contain quick screencasts or interesting articles that meet the needs of specific assignments or that target current news and how they can further their research. Although I do not hear back from everyone, I get quite a few emails either thanking me for the information or asking me for further research. It’s an effective way to remind your students that you are here, and that you are integrated in their program.

There are quite a few types of academic librarians who can benefit from bursts of instruction such as this. Those who work with professional programs that often target busy students may find that this type of sneaky instruction will work best for the group. This cannot replace in-class instruction sessions, but it helps bolster a sense of community. Students remember that I am there and a rapid turnover of their queries leads to trust. In times when many librarians fiercely cling to their relevance, working within the schedules of your student group will ensure that you are remembered and needed.