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Adding Zest to OPAC Instruction: Humor and the Unexpected

Bonnie L. Petry

ABSTRACT. This article evolved from "Getting Students to NOTIS," a presentation that the author gave at the 1995 Chicago NOTIS Users Group Meeting (NUGM) conference. Humor is a desirable element of all types of instruction, particularly bibliographic instruction. A good method for injecting some humor into bibliographic instruction is introducing whimsical catalog entries. The author identifies five types of bibliographic records useful for this approach, provides strategies for locating them, and suggests ways to incorporate them into a class.

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KEYWORDS. Humor, zest, bibliographic instruction, BI, unexpected, search examples

Spithead: an informal history, by Michael Arthur Lewis
Rubbish! The archaeology of garbage, by William L. Rathje

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To some college students, libraries are intimidating, dusty, boring places, and librarians are the most humorless, uninteresting people on earth. The thought of spending an entire hour in a bibliographic instruction session listening to one is absolutely mind-numbing. According to Tara Lynn Fulton, such student preconceptions “... are precisely what make humor a perfect approach. Its surprise power is tremendous” (Fulton 1985, 8).

Public speakers commonly use humor as an effective presentation tool. In recommending strategies for bibliographic instruction, Paula N. Warnken and Victoria L. Young drew upon the literature of professional trainers:

Fun. Enjoyment. Trainers view these two elements as essential in the promotion of learning. This does not necessarily require that librarians have a sense of humor, something too often lacking in bibliographic instruction. Learning to use the library is serious business, but librarians often take themselves too seriously in the classroom . . . Humor needs to become a regular element in bibliographic instruction. (Warnken 1991, 94)

Humor in an instructional setting can rightfully be labeled “multi-tasking.” It not only wakes up the listeners, but also establishes a relaxed, friendly rapport with students—a crucial consideration for optimal teaching and learning. Important concepts and points are more memorable when emphasized with wit. In addition, adding humor to the material helps keep the librarian interested. Bibliographic instruction can become repetitive; if the librarian is bored, why should the students be otherwise? In order to combat the “taxidermy shop syndrome”—rows of glassy-eyed heads staring blankly at the instructor—present students with the unexpected to capture attention and add some sparkle to otherwise dry material.

MORE MEMORABLE OPAC INSTRUCTION

Introducing the use of an on-line public access catalog (OPAC) lends itself remarkably well to humorous instruction. Almost any library collection will yield some absurd and unusual items to use as examples. Robert M. Kaplan and Gregory C. Pascoe concluded that “. . . the benefits of humor in the classroom are most clearly demonstrable for recall of humorous examples” (Kaplan 1977, 64).
Here are five basic types of bibliographic records useful for humorous instruction:

1. Intentionally humorous books:
   
   Welles, James F.
   \textit{The story of stupidity: a history of western idiocy from the days of ancient Greece to the moment you saw this book.}

2. Books on unexpected topics—watch for unusual Library of Congress Subject Headings, such as “Names Carved on Trees,” “Underwear,” and “Snobs”:

   Dingwall, Eric John
   \textit{The girdle of chastity; a fascinating history of chastity belts.}

3. Serious books that are unintentionally funny:

   Richards, Steve
   \textit{Invisibility: mastering the art of vanishing.}

4. Books which lend themselves to appropriate witty or light-hearted remarks:

   Brod, Craig
   \textit{Technostress: the human cost of the computer revolution.}

5. Ordinary books, which become much more interesting when collected together under a theme:

   Multhaup, Robert P.
   \textit{Neptune's gift: a history of common salt.}

   Pepper, Art
   \textit{Straight life: the story of Art Pepper.}

   Heins, Marjorie
   \textit{Cutting the mustard.}

\textbf{PUTTING IT TOGETHER}

Not every example needs to be funny. Try to strike a balance. Humor should enhance the learning experience, not detract from it.
Use a blend of the ordinary and the unexpected in different proportions for different grade levels. For example, include more surprises in exercises intended for an English 101 class than a graduate seminar, since younger students are a tougher audience. For maximum impact, open with an attention-getter and include enough unexpected material to keep students guessing about what is coming next. The goal is to have what appears to be a boring list of exercises yield unforeseen, interesting results. The only way to test the material is to try it out on several classes. What receives a lukewarm reception from one class may captivate another.

At the beginning of class, give each student a handout or worksheet of OPAC exercises consisting of a numbered list of author, title, subject and keyword searches—three of each. This provides plenty of exercises, should the class progress quickly. In slower classes, skip some as needed. Having a printed guide is important. It ensures that everyone knows exactly what to type in and how to spell it. That is preferable to the worksheet scenario, since things can be explained, questions fielded, and comments made along the way as the students view material.

CLASSROOM EXAMPLES

Here are the humorous or unusual excerpts from exercises for three different classes. The author and title of the retrieved items are in the left-hand column; possible comments an instructor might make to help the humor along appear on the right.

Management 495

These students were instructed to research a profession of interest, then find detailed information on the work environment of three appropriate companies.

Rich, George E.  
Artistic horse-shoeing.  
Can’t decide between the blacksmithing and being an artist?

Richards, Steve  
Levitation: what it is, how it works, how to do it.  
An alternative career.
Pfoul, Ina
Underwater basketweaving: a reimbursable vocational trade?

Psychology 311

Psychology 311: Introduction to Experimental Psychology introduces the psychology major to laboratory work and sources such as Psychological Abstracts and Social Science Citation Index.

Phillips, Adam
On kissing, tickling, and being bored: psychoanalytic essays on the unexamined life.

Skinner, Burrhus Frederic
Enjoy old age.

Eysenck, H.J.
Mindwatching: why people behave the way they do.

Fowler, O.S.
Phrenology: a practical guide to your head.

Sacks, Oliver W.
The man who mistook his wife for a hat and other clinical tales.

English 101

Here, a tabloid newspaper theme is used to capture the interest of the entry level, freshman student.

Wurf, Karl
To serve man: a cookbook for people.

Baker, Jerry
Make friends with your fruit trees.

Chase, Pamela
The Newcastle guide to healing with crystals.

Note the author's name—"I'm a fool."
The title says it all.
Now you know why he always went by "B. F." Maybe his parents didn't like him.
Is someone driving you nuts and you're not sure why?
The Victorians believed that the bumps on your head revealed your personality.
Oliver Sacks is a neurosurgeon who actually had a patient mistake his wife for his hat.
As opposed to what?
If you're a fruit, this makes good sense.
Take two crystals and call me in the morning.
The psychic yellow pages. If you’re psychic, why do you need yellow pages?

Friesner, Esther M.
Alien pregnant by Elvis. Love those supermarket tabloids!

English 101

The unlikely theme of this set of exercises is particularly well-suited to an early morning class. It is also ideal for a nutrition or health class.

Feldman, David
Who put the butter in butterfly?

Sholberg, Peter L.
Apricot, cherry, nectarine, peach, plum, prune pest management. (Found with the search, “fruit-California.”) They say California is like granola-fruits, nuts, and flakes.

Baravelli, Giulio Cesare
Stalin’s toast.

Wickizer, Vernon Dale
Coffee, tea, and cocoa; an economic and political analysis.

STRATEGIES FOR COLLECTING YOUR OWN EXAMPLES

1. Keep a sharp eye for appropriate books whether reviewing new books, looking for items in the stacks, or staffing the reference desk. Strange things have a way of appearing even during the most innocent activities.

2. Actively search the OPAC. This is a wonderful “between questions” reference desk project. Scan titles under subjects relating to the particular class, or use free association and make the first word that comes to mind a keyword search.

3. Share what you find. Co-workers may get a chuckle out of your discoveries and be encouraged to bring items they find to your attention.

4. Allow a particular record to suggest a theme, or just select something and try to build on it. Some ideas are: Color, Breakfast,
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Lunch, Dinner, Hamburger Stand, Animals, Supermarket Tabloid, and Holidays.

5. Check the selected list of findings, located in the Appendix, against local holdings.

*Hint:* Remember that some items may be useful for more than one set of exercises.

**SELECTION CRITERIA**

Each record found must be evaluated to determine its usefulness. Inevitably, some will not be suitable.

1. Does the record fit into one of the following categories?
   
   Intentionally humorous
   
   Unexpected topic
   
   Unintentionally funny
   
   Lends itself to remarks
   
   Fits a particular theme

2. What type of search or feature would the record best illustrate? In addition to covering author, title, subject and keyword searches, records that show particular types of displays or other OPAC features may be included.

3. Is anything difficult to spell and pronounce? Remember that records with difficult titles, for example, may be useful for other types of searches.

**SUCCESSES AND FAILURES**

Sometimes humor falls flat. There are always students—and occasionally entire classes—who remain unreachable no matter what, but the reachable ones make the effort worthwhile. One particularly apathetic class refused to even smile at anything. Towards the end of the session, the students did a keyword search for “yellow and pages.” This search retrieved two screens of items. They went to the second screen where *The Psychic Yellow Pages* appeared.
"I knew that one was there!" I exclaimed. One student burst out laughing, but stopped when he realized the others were silent. He looked around, waved his arms, and said, "Come on! That was funny!"

CONCLUSION

One of the most important opportunities presented to students in bibliographic instruction sessions is the chance to make a positive, professional connection with a reference librarian. Humor helps ensure a positive "first contact" and amplifies other desirable aspects of the learning process.

OPAC instruction is an excellent vehicle for introducing humor into a bibliographic instruction session via humorous or unexpected examples. Collecting, selecting, and using such examples is not difficult. Thoughtful selection and implementation will increase the chances of success.

Humor is a form of creativity; to understand a joke usually requires thinking about a concept in a creative way. Claudia E. Cornett says that "Humor in the curriculum stimulates the kinds of thinking processes used frequently by highly creative people" (Cornett 1986, 11). Humor in OPAC instruction may help to "limber up" students' minds and promote a positive computer experience. The potential benefits are well worth investigating.

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