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Amy Springer and Kathryn Yelinek

Teaching with The Situation

Jersey Shore as a popular culture example in information literacy classes

The desire to engage students effectively during one-shot library instruction sessions is a feeling familiar to most librarians. The perennial question is how best to do it. One solution involves adding popular culture examples to in-class assignments. The use of popular culture examples has been discussed in the literature before,[1] and it continues to receive attention because it taps into the emotions of students. Using the right popular culture references will evoke strong reactions in students, and these emotions allow deeper learning to occur.[2] However, picking the right example doesn't always happen the first time. This article demonstrates the process two librarians at separate institutions used to find an example that resonated with their students: MTV's reality show *Jersey Shore.*

Seeking more engaged and attentive students

Amy Springer, government and business information librarian at the College of St. Benedict/St. John's University, decided to compete for the attention of students. She wanted to use a popular culture topic that was mainstream enough to be familiar to most of the students in the classroom.

Previously, Springer used common research topics like the death penalty to demonstrate research and evaluation techniques. In these instruction sessions, however, the students were mostly unresponsive and reluctant to participate in class discussion on information literacy issues. Students often lost interest and preferred to check Facebook or send text messages instead of remaining engaged in the instruction session activities and objectives.

As Springer began to think about ways to enhance library instruction sessions, she turned to popular culture. She used an example of news organizations that had failed to properly fact check information, which resulted in falsely reporting that former Minnesota Vikings player Orlando Thomas had died. This example grabbed the attention of some students, but it failed to grab the interest of everyone in the class. Springer also tried incorporating media and popular films when she used a video clip from *Good Will Hunting* when teaching about plagiarism and information ethics.

In order to elicit more engagement and participation from students, Springer started investigating which popular culture topics could be used most successfully in library instruction. Eventual success occurred by using topics, video clips, and images from MTV's hit reality television show *Jersey Shore,* which follows housemates during summers at Jersey Shore and Miami Beach. Springer was confident that even if students had not viewed an entire episode, they were familiar with the cast members and the show's

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premise through magazine articles, other entertainment media, and word of mouth from their peers.

The first instruction session that incorporated *Jersey Shore* references was for a 70-minute management course called "Work and Values in a Diverse Society." The students were required to write a research paper on gender issues and management for this 300-level class. Prior to the presentation, Springer received permission from the course's instructor to use popular culture within the instruction session.

Springer started with a slide that said "GTL," a commonly used acronym on the show for gym, tan, and laundry, the daily routine for the male housemates on *Jersey Shore*. The students immediately sensed that this was not a normal library instruction session. Springer demonstrated how to search in several library databases for topics related to *Jersey Shore*. For example, one of the cast members is an aspiring DJ; mentioning Pauly D's musical aspirations prompted a demonstration on searching for articles and books about gender discrimination in the music industry.

Given students' positive response to this first instruction session, Springer tried other ways to incorporate *Jersey Shore* in additional information literacy sessions. For an Introduction to Management class, where Springer was requested to show students how to locate articles on management topics as well as company and industry profiles, Springer started by showing a video clip from a *Jersey Shore* episode. In the video clip, one of the cast members, Snooki, was complaining about the tax increase on tanning. The video clip caused many of the students to audibly laugh and comment. This video was Springer's prompt to search for articles about the tax increase as well as information on the tanning industry in library databases and in the U.S. Economic Census.

After Springer demonstrated how to find resources in library databases and within the U.S. Economic Census, the students were required to participate in an in-class activity. Springer created three different hand-outs with questions that would have the students use various databases and the U.S. Economic Census. Next, students got into groups of four and decided if they wanted to be on Team Situation, Team Vinny, or Team Pauly D; each team represented a different industry based on the characteristics and interests of the *Jersey Shore* cast member. For example, students on Team Situation had to make research inquiries about the fitness industry, and students on Team Vinny were given guidelines for searching for resources about the bar and nightclub industry.

The students appeared engaged and interested throughout the demonstration and during the hands-on exercises. Springer won a victory over distractions, such as Facebook and text messaging. Students were ready and willing to comment about the *Jersey Shore* topics. This comfort level appeared to be so infectious so that students had begun openly discussing and showing interest in the library resources.

Wanting to spice up library instruction

Kathryn Yelinek, reference librarian/coordinator of government documents at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, discovered Springer's use of *Jersey Shore* one night during a lull in reference desk activity. She had been searching for an innovative way to combine popular culture references with active student participation in her library instruction classes and came across blog postings in which Springer described her initial success with the show.[3]

Yelinek's standard instruction session included only a few questions that required answers from students—often no one volunteered—and no references to popular culture. With the fall 2010 semester, she was determined to change this. As a result, in September, she experimented with a few classes where students first gathered into small groups and brainstormed how they would tackle their assignment. Each group reported back, and she attempted to use their answers to demonstrate a search strategy.

While this structure resulted in early student participation, the classes often devolved into lecture and glassy stares.

In October, owing to the proximity to Halloween, she switched tactics. Doing away with small groups, she designed two lecture classes that incorporated vampire motifs. Both were endorsed by the classroom faculty. The first, a psychology class, used examples from the HBO hit show *True Blood.* However, only one student showed recognition of the characters and situations in the show. In hindsight, using a premium cable channel show was probably not the best example for cash-strapped students. A Composition I session using examples from the popular *Twilight* movies generated considerable buzz at the beginning of class, but that wore off as the class progressed into lecture.

Wanting to find a happy mixture of participation and popular culture, Yelinek searched the literature for examples of what other librarians were doing. While she found articles on either one separately, she wanted an example that incorporated both. Assuming that anyone who used the phrase "spice up library instruction" was probably thinking outside the box, she searched for that phrase in Google and found Springer's blog entry on teaching with *Jersey Shore.*[4]

After receiving Springer's permission to adapt the instruction, as well as permission from the classroom professor, she incorporated *Jersey Shore*-themed instruction and activities into two sections of a U.S. Government class in early November. The students needed to write a paper on an executive branch regulatory agency of their choice. Past experience indicated that the students would ask few, if any, questions and would have no experience researching government agencies. Using a familiar topic such as *Jersey Shore* and providing an in-class assignment to practice new search skills seemed a good way of keeping the students engaged during the 75-minute sessions.

Starting with the same "GTL" PowerPoint slide that Springer used, Yelinek went on to introduce the fact that Snooki, well-known for her interesting choices in footwear, had recently launched her own line of designer slippers.[5] In order to help Snooki, the class would research the Consumer Product Safety Commission. There was a noticeable uptick in class enthusiasm at the mention of *Jersey Shore,* and several of the students laughed at the slides depicting Snooki's footwear.

Yelinek then demonstrated how to mine the Consumer Product Safety Commission's Web site as well as library databases for such information as the agency's budget and current issues. While the energy level dipped during this section of the class, it rose again when the students were given 20 minutes to complete an in-class assignment on one of three preselected *Jersey Shore*-themed regulatory agencies (the Food and Drug Administration, which regulates tanning beds; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, which regulates alcohol; or the Federal Trade Commission, which regulates advertising). For the final 15 minutes of class, three student volunteers demonstrated how they had found the needed information for one of the agencies.

Conclusion

Springer and Yelinek both witnessed students engaging enthusiastically in the *Jersey Shore*-themed library instruction sessions. The students arrived with an interest or comfort level with the show. Springer and Yelinek were then able to highlight what students already knew and layer on more complicated information.

Chip and Dan Heath explain this approach in their book *Made to Stick* as "advanced organizers."[6] Based on their own observations, Springer and Yelinek gained the attention of the students who were focused on what could possibly come next.

After teaching to two sections of an Introduction to Management class with the *Jersey Shore*-enhanced instruction style, Springer had the students complete a survey. Thirty-eight students completed the survey, and the results supported her in-class observations

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the disaster was worse than they anticipated. This caused some individuals to panic, which can lead to poor decision making. Imagine the worst possible scenario and prepare mentally before you arrive on the scene. This will help to create a calm demeanor, which will facilitate better decision making. During the planning process, no one anticipated a disaster of this magnitude. As a result, there was an inadequate amount of plastic sheeting to cover the bookshelves. A trip to the hardware store remedied the situation, but valuable time and energy were lost and books were damaged unnecessarily.

10. Do not store valuable items on the floor. This is one of the biggest lessons learned from this experience, and it was learned the hard way. Since there was up to four inches of standing water in many areas of the library, everything stored or left on the floor was damaged beyond repair. This included several important and valuable library resources that were left on the floor by library personnel. These materials can be replaced, but at a great cost to the library.

Conclusion

The flood in the S&T Library at UA on January 31, 2010, was a real disaster. The entire facility was flooded and thousands of materials were affected. The library was closed for two days temporarily suspending important services to the campus and the community. While a disaster plan, supplies, and a response team were in place, the plan was untested and training and recovery exercises had not taken place. Despite lack of training and practice we had an up to date plan and most of the supplies we needed to respond to and recover from the incident quickly and efficiently. Hard work and commitment of personnel from the libraries and the university's physical facilities staff were critically important.

We were lucky. Two weeks earlier and there would have been no disaster supplies in place. Three months earlier and our disaster plan would have been woefully incomplete and inadequate. Luckily the library was open and our student employees knew to take immediate action evacuating the building and activating our disaster plan. We learned many valuable lessons from this traumatic real world experience, one of the most important is that you should not rely on luck and can never be too prepared.

("Teaching with The Situtation..." cont. from page 80)

about the effectiveness of incorporating popular culture in instruction sessions:

- 94.7 percent of the students felt more engaged during the instruction session
- 73.7 percent of the students thought that they were now better able to recall and retain the information because of the integration of popular culture

Confidence in the ability to recall and retain information is hard to truly assess without a pre-test and post-test, but the majority of the respondents felt that popular culture helped them in this process.

Due to the survey results and first-hand observations, Springer and Yelinek intend to continue integrating popular culture themes into library instruction sessions. Popular television shows like *Jersey Shore* will lose relevance or popularity and eventually face network cancellation, but new popular culture references will always be available.

Regardless of the popular culture topic, being willing to try different teaching methods is crucial for using popular culture in information literacy instruction. When trying unusual ideas, there is an even greater need for hands-on exercises in which the students can apply information literacy skills. Application of these skills is also important when proving effectiveness to faculty members, who may have reservations about incorporating popular culture references. Springer and Yelinek were both grateful for the support they received from faculty members at their institutions.

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ation, Southeastern Library Association, and the Georgia Library Association, where she served as president in 2008.

Deaths

Edward Swanson, who managed contract cataloging services at Minitex at the University of Minnesota, has died. Swanson's career began at Macalester College, with duties including cataloging and organizing the college archives. In 1968, he moved to the Minnesota Historical Society, where he led the Newspaper, Processing, and Technical Services departments, culminating in the position of coordinator of library cataloging and principal cataloger. During this time, he played a vital role as a Minnesota AACR2 Trainer, helping librarians throughout the state learn and understand the new cataloging rules. He not only provided in-person training, but authored and edited numerous manuals and other documentation to support cataloging including (with Nancy Olson) *The Complete Cataloging Reference Set: Collected Manuals of the Minnesota AACR2 Trainers*. Swanson prepared curriculum and conducting training for the MN Opportunities for Technical Services Excellence (MOTSE), strengthening the cataloging knowledge of librarians and paraprofessionals throughout the state. He has also served as a long-time Name Authority Cooperative Program (NACO) trainer for the region and as the Minnesota NACO funnel. He retired from the Minnesota Historical Society after 32 years, and then, in 2001, he joined the staff of Minitex at the University of Minnesota for nine years. He received the MLA President's Award in 1981 and also received an MLA Centennial Medal. Swanson played a leadership role in the state-wide shared integrated library system (MnSCU/PALS, and MnLINK) Cataloging User Groups and Database Quality Maintenance Task Forces. On a national level, Swanson became a member of ALA in 1962. Swanson served the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS) in a variety of roles including the Library Research and Technical Services (LRTS) Editorial Board (for 15 years), ALCTS Board member and parliamentarian, ALCTS International Relations Committee, ALCTS Publications Committee, and many others.

(*"Teaching with The Situation . . ." cont. from page 85)*

Librarians have multiple options for staying current on popular culture. One valuable resource is library student employees; Springer initially sensed that most students would have some awareness of *Jersey Shore* after conversing with student employees. Many libraries also have subscriptions to popular magazines. *Entertainment Weekly* and *People Magazine* both provide a plethora of information on popular television shows and celebrity gossip. Browsing Twitter trending topics and popular culture blogs could also provide inspiration for enhancing library instruction.

Notes

1. See, for example, Nedra Peterson, "It Came From Hollywood," *C&RL News* 71, no. 2 (2010): 66–74.

2. For more information on this topic, see Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick* (New York: Random House, 2007): 165–203.; Eric Jensen, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: 1998): 71–81.

3. Amy Springer, "Jersey Shore Themed Library Instruction," Ch-Ch-Ch Changing Librarian, ch-ch-chchanginglibrarian.blogspot.com/2010/03/jersey-shore-themed-library-instruction.html.

4. Ibid.

5. Snookislippers.com.

6. Heath and Heath, 91–93.