**"PRE-EVALUATION" GROUP WORK IN LARGE CLASSES: BROCCOLI IS BETTER WITH CHEESE**

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I once heard a wise person say that people only learn when they *want* to learn. As a father of two young kids, I know exactly what that means. As an academic teaching librarian, I also know what it typically means for university students.

Most of my teaching happens as an adjunct to specific courses, in which I am a guest lecturer or workshop presenter for a small portion of a course related to library and information research. Class size varies widely, but is typically around fifty at the undergraduate level, too large to effectively incorporate in-class hands-on research using individual student computers. After over a decade of this type of teaching experience, I have concluded that most students I encounter in class are ultimately motivated to learn for some combination of three very simple reasons: inspiration, grades, and fear.

### Capitalizing on Three Common Motives for Student Engagement

Librarians are uniquely situated to help inspire a love of learning, to help encourage students to develop their critical thinking and research skills, to take time to "think beyond" as the cognitive neuroscientist and child development researcher Maryanne Wolf puts it.[*] But sometimes our own passion for information literacy—those vitally important transferable skills of effectively locating, critically evaluating, and appropriately using information—is not enough.

We need to be careful not to treat information literacy like broccoli, as I once heard one librarian succinctly put it. Students won't learn something just because they are told it is good for them. It doesn't matter how excited we may ourselves get about it. For some, it's still a boring green veggie.

Therefore we need to couple our passion for our subject matter with an appreciation for what our students see as *immediately relevant* to them. We may need to use inspiration's crude older siblings, grades and fear, to help engage students in class. As far as grades go, while I only directly assign marks to a select assignment or two each year, I always directly relate the content of my teaching to the graded assignments students have in their courses. For example, I tell students that learning to write without plagiarizing, or learning to effectively find relevant and reliable peer-reviewed literature, will have a direct impact upon their likelihood of getting a good mark on an upcoming research paper.

Given that the due date for their research assignment may be weeks away from my class presentation or workshop, I also use fear as an even more immediate motivator—the common fear of public speaking. Perhaps "alertness" or "attentiveness" would be a better descriptor. Students are simply more apt to pay close attention to something when they know they may have to speak up on the topic in front of their peers. Therefore in nearly every class I teach, I use some sort of structured exercise to help encourage class discussion.

### [Insert Your Subject Here] Pre-Evaluation Exercise

The exercise I use most often is a simple twenty-minute in-class group exercise which I call "pre-evaluation". This exercise entails requiring students to very briefly evaluate a publication of some sort in order to determine the potential suitability and reliability of its information.

I explicitly make use of all three of the aforementioned student motives simultaneously: I point out that the critical evaluation skills required will help them further develop into successful independent lifelong

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[*] Wolf, M. (2007). *Proust and the Squid*. New York: Harper Perennial.

learners, I suggest that the exercise may help them to get that coveted big red "A" on their upcoming research assignment, and I inform them that *they* will be doing the teaching for the next twenty minutes of the class.

While I normally work with classes of about fifty students, I have conducted this exercise with groups as small as twenty and as large as eighty. Depending upon the class size and room layout, students are divided into groups of about four or five per group, and full copies or summaries (abstracts, tables of contents, etc.) of various publications are handed out.

All members of one group receive copies of the same one document. Prior to class, I have tediously found and copied a variety of publication types—books, peer-reviewed articles, trade journal articles, magazine/newspaper stories, websites, encyclopedia articles, government documents, dissertations—all of which relate to a single topic relevant to the overall course content or to a specific upcoming assignment. I vary the types of publications used and length of time allowed according to the course level, normally first, second or third-year university undergraduates.
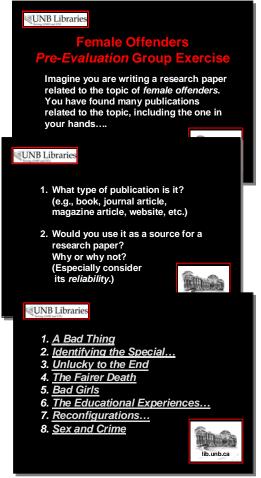
If I am using PowerPoint, I introduce the exercise using the first two of the three example slides on the right. I ask each group to elect a speaker who will later report back to the class, and I point out that I am only giving them five minutes to answer the required two questions—not enough time to read the full publication, but enough to pre-evaluate its "look and feel", its potential as a suitable and reliable information source.

After the allotted five minutes or so of individual reading and small group discussion, we take about fifteen minutes to go through each publication together as a whole class, and I solicit a response from each group speaker.

As we discuss each document, I display an electronic copy of each publication on the class projection screen, or display paper copies using a digital document projector. At the end, I sometimes review by going through the basic tips on this handout: *lib.unb.ca/instruction/InfoSearchEvaluateYourResults.pdf*

I have been using variations of this simple class exercise for several years now. It effectively applies the theory of the critical evaluation of information to relevant real-life examples. Students' minds are always engaged by the exercise, and they remain motivated to pay attention to my subsequent lecture on scholarly communication, database searching, or plagiarism and citation method, as the case may be. Student learning is evidenced via the quality of sources they subsequently search out, select, and incorporate into their later assignments for the course.



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**Female Offenders**
*Pre-Evaluation* **Group Exercise**

Imagine you are writing a research paper related to the topic of *female offenders*. You have found many publications related to the topic, including the one in your hands….

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1. What type of publication is it? (e.g., book, journal article, magazine article, website, etc.)

2. Would you use it as a source for a research paper? Why or why not? (Especially consider its *reliability*.)

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1. *A Bad Thing*
2. *Identifying the Special…*
3. *Unlucky to the End*
4. *The Fairer Death*
5. *Bad Girls*
6. *The Educational Experiences…*
7. *Reconfigurations…*
8. *Sex and Crime*

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As a side benefit, I am often pleasantly surprised at what I can learn myself from student responses. It's amazing what can happen when you engage your audience in a real dialogue, when you realize that learning is ultimately a multi-directional community phenomenon, and when you take the time to add a little cheese to the broccoli.