Team Teaching, Humor, and Informal Polling Techniques in NECDMC - Based Research Data Management Workshops at Brandeis University

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Introduction
Spring semester 2015, Brandeis Library & Technology Services Research and Instruction unit launched research data management workshops based on the NECDMC curriculum. The workshop lesson plan was very structured and closely modeled the NECDMC modules. The one-hour workshop was expected to consist of three sections: Co-presented material in uninterrupted lecture format NECDMC module's hands-on exercises

In no workshop did we get to the hands-on exercise. This was due to the attendee's confusion over lecture material and their questions on topics outside the scope of the workshop. We determined our descriptions of the workshops didn't best convey the topics covered, and our emphasis on theory and best practices left listeners confused as to how the information applied to their own research.

However, we felt these discussions with attendees highlighted areas we could improve for the Fall semester's iteration of the workshops. We conducted research into pedagogical techniques that would complement the material and mix of attendees. We came to the conclusion that three techniques could be incorporated to improve student engagement and material comprehension, and these techniques would complement shift in focus from theory and best practices to best practices and Brandeis-specific solutions.

Team Teaching
One pedagogical technique we pursued was inviting instructors from another discipline to teach the workshops with us. We partnered with colleagues from the Technology Help Desk and Questions Support sections from IT’s The Desktop Systems Specialist, from the Hardware Repair Shop and the Help Desk Interns. Their strengths in the areas of storage, backup, and security solutions were especially relevant.

Collaborating on slide and lecture design alone provided valuable insights into the different approaches to research data management services. We were able to add depth of technical detail, whereas in earlier workshops the best we were able to provide was advice on further reading.

Our colleagues from IT expressed similar interest in the librarian approach and felt themselves better prepared to field data management questions that range beyond traditional IT areas.

Informal Polling
Extremely informal – no stickers or apps, just several deliberately phrased yes or no questions placed throughout the workshop.

We encouraged attendees who indicated they had personal experience with the topic to share their stories. We instructed our hosts to share anecdotes with their peers, to reveal strengths in the areas of storage, backup, and security solutions were especially relevant.

This deliberately interactive style resulted in visibly captivated attendees who had questions relevant to the material, actively shared anecdotes, paid attention to the screen, and demonstrate engaged body language.

Works Consulted

Humor
Humor as a pedagogical tool is a tricky business, as it is quite possible to do more harm than good. Between the subjective nature of humor, the fleeting duration of pop culture references, and the jig-saw puzzle quality of student-level humor, using humor to enhance student learning is difficult.

After consulting the Brandeis literature, we decided to employ a mix of humorous anecdotes about data management disasters (with the user in question thoroughly anonymized), and cartoon-like icons when possible and appropriate. We informed the attendees. Comics from the webcomic XKCD were sparingly employed, after determining that even without prior familiarity, the message conveyed about the data management errors was clear and amusing.

Readers and commentary from attendees were uniformly positive, with the comic and humorous anecdotes in particular encouraging attendees to share similar personal experiences of themselves or friends.

Conclusions
While we did not have a large enough sample size to perform rigorous evaluation of learning outcomes, we can state that student engagement during the workshop was noticeably greater, their questions were more on topic, and showed true understanding of the material and its relevance to their personal research.

We even have evidence of attendees applying this knowledge. One attendee, who from comments and questions made it clear she had never performed a backup of her main laptop, was astonished to learn that Brandeis sells heavy-duty desktop external drives equipped with Rebit, a third-party backup software. She approached the correct service point later that day to acquire one. This attendee found himself in our workshop completely by mistake – he indicated on our workshop sign-in form that he intended to attend a workshop on State, running concurrently in a different classroom.

We court this as all kinds of success.

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