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Active Learning in the Liaison Multiverse

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Goals/Outcomes:
- Explain how active learning contributes to student success, especially among diverse or traditionally underrepresented students.
- Discuss a range of active learning techniques that they can use in their classes and develop ideas for how to incorporate active learning in specific courses that they teach.
- Describe the value of unifying philosophies for liaisons and a technique to encourage joint innovation among librarians.

All of the presenters work in the Academic Outreach department at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Multitude of student groups, departments, classes
(all with a multitude of needs and expectations)

+

Multitude of teaching styles, techniques, and approaches

=

The Liaison Multiverse

Image: SA/Hubble, *Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported license*, adapted for slide
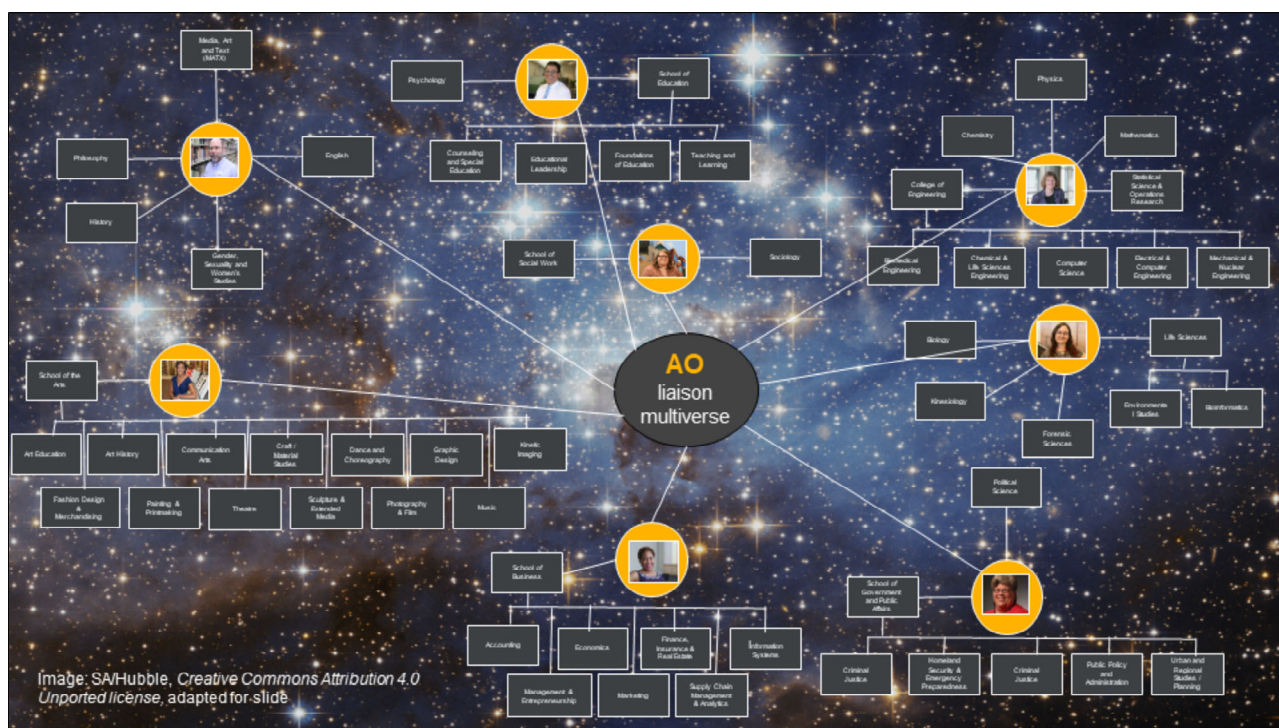
And the multiverse looks a little like this. (This image is missing some complexity since there are areas of overlap that aren't represented and there could be even more detail represented with more boxes. It should still give you an idea of what talking about when we describe things as a multiverse.)

And it's a multiverse that presents some challenges for us when approaching any common goal and in this case an instruction goal around active learning.

- There are a multitude of librarians teaching a multitude of diverse learners across a multitude of disciplines. This makes it challenging for us to jointly develop common lesson plans or shared strategies.
- The nature of the work is also artisanal -- creating a specific teaching strategy for a specific class and assignment.

We need to find a way to draw on the expertise of each liaison and replicate it in a way that allows everyone to benefit working in all disciplines.

The VCU Libraries strategic framework specifically mentions active learning, so we have a directive to incorporate it despite any challenges.
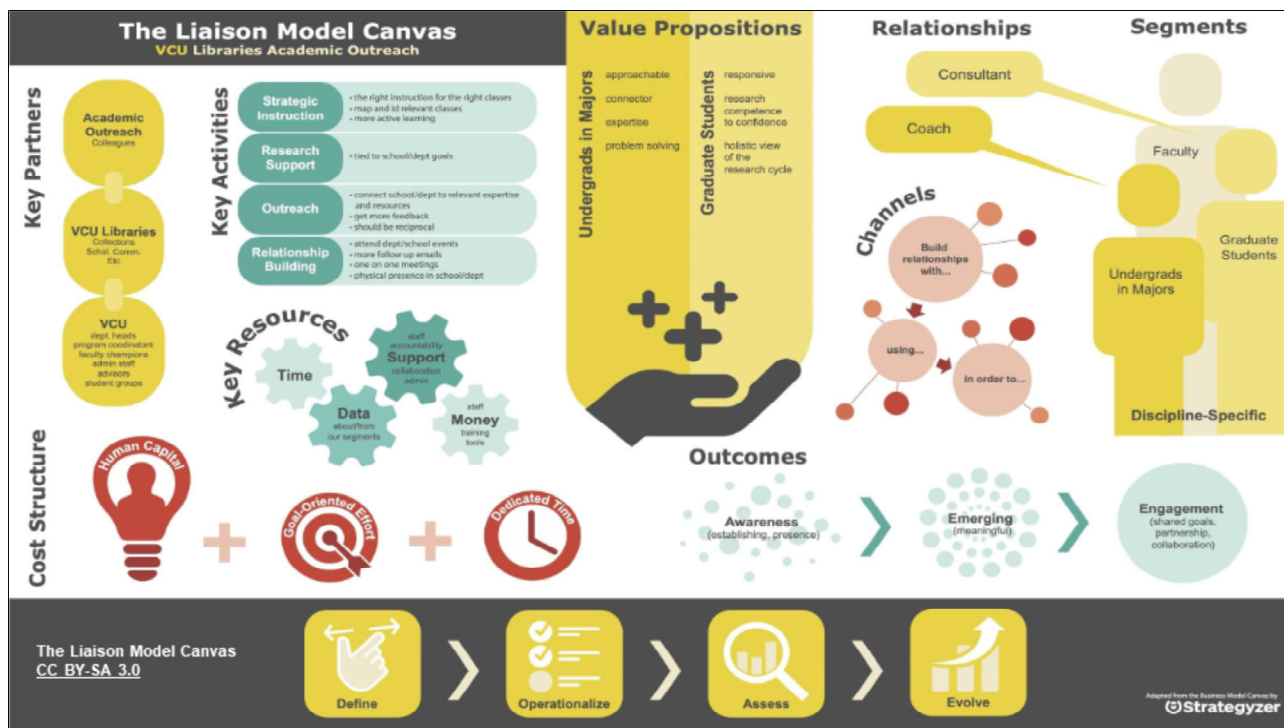
In order to address this type of goal and our multidimensional needs, we developed a flexible framework which is represented here in The Liaison Model Canvas, adapted from the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). We used the process to develop a group identity around our value to our students and to try new things connected to that identity and value proposition. It allowed us to define departmental strengths and goals. Instruction, and specifically active learning, emerged as a key activity.

More importantly, individual liaisons used the process to develop their individual goals--which fit within the larger canvas but was framed in their terms focused on the needs of their areas and on their strengths. Instruction, and specifically active learning, emerged as a key activity.

How would you define active learning?

Put your answer in the chat

Multiple definitions (yet related): main constructs

Verified efficacy: How do we know it works?

Example(s): In the literature

- Active learning is a tool for increasing engagement, you should know that the most critical factor in online learning success is actually *engagement*.
- Suggestion: Don't feel pressured to use the tool -- think about the learning goals and what will move the students closer to the goals.
  a. Why is active Learning relevant to us? Some of the most cited bibliography suggest that it is a very impactful tool.

But, first of all, what is actually active learning? Research in active learning stresses the fact that it generally is "an instructional method that engages students in the learning process"(Prince, 2004, p. 223) and requires students to do "meaningful learning activities" which prompt them to **"think about what they are doing"**, all of this happening "inside the classroom". In general, it is the opposite of passive learning, the traditional lecture method or any other method that does not emphatically contribute to the student becoming engaged in the activity of learning.

Most people think that active learning *always* means action (like providing a handout or surveying students). Like a deliverable or a tangible learning product as a result of

the interaction. This may be misleading since one type of active learning, as suggested by the literature, is problem-based learning. This type of very active learning introduces a problem at the beginning of the session to provide the context and motivation for the learning process (Prince, 2004). Its solution may involve critical thinking for example.

Active learning matters for diverse learners because it contextualizes the learning experience for everybody. It makes it clear what remains sometimes hidden in the learning process: Why are we doing this? Why is this problem important for all of us? Why is your participation relevant? In doing so, it prompts a diversity group of learners to connect with the ultimate goal of the learning process. It offers them a space, it includes everybody in the classroom.

Now, why does active active learning matter to us liaisons:

- It offers a very diverse group of liaisons the possibility to maximize our engagement with the users and the classroom, especially at one-shot sessions.
- It offers our diverse group of liaisons a unifying tool to address information literacy teaching and learning that later could be shared and incorporated into our best practices.
- It is a very versatile and adaptive learning technique that fits our diverse teaching styles and challenges us to display critical thinking in the classroom design. Let me give you an example about students thinking about what they are doing while doing it: When educating on searching databases by using the Thesaurus or index, activate questions that prompt the students to think about what they are doing, why using natural language, why using index terms, why searching this database as opposed to another one. Passive Learning would look like this: "Type X so you can retrieve Y, collect, organize, utilize, period"
- Active learning instead would mean a reflection on the fact that databases are alive entities, flexible, and dependent upon scholarly communication structures. "Type X, retrieve Y, analyze Y and ask yourself who decides that what you are retrieving is relevant and in that order". Databases are representations of scholarly structures and orders. Their indexing reflects those structures. Are there other options? How could your research topic may be reflected in other databases? Does your topic pertain only to this

database? How about Open Access? Every time you use a database you are using a maybe different paradigm for searching also. See tips and Help. There is searching for searching and searching for researching.

- Why is this innovative? Active learning contributes to a more holistic impact of information literacy for lifelong learning. A liaison that chooses active learning may educate the user not only on devising the query but also on thinking more critically about the information system being utilized and the scholarship communicated by that database.

- During the 2019-2020 academic year, as we were preparing for the TILC conference, we asked librarians in Academic Outreach to describe what they were doing to incorporate active learning into their classes
  - Think-pair-share, where the instructor asks a question, but instead of waiting for one student to raise a hand or respond, the instructor asks ALL the students to think about it and then pair up and share their ideas with a neighbor, usually with a large group follow-up discussion, was the most common technique.
  - Hands on time, generally on the computer with a library database, was the next most common.
  - Polling -- either with online tools such as Mentimeter or Poll Everywhere or low-tech polling with shows of hands also were fairly common. For example, librarians used poll questions at the beginning of a session to find out about students' previous exposure to libraries (activate prior knowledge) or library instruction or during the session to check on understanding.
- As you can see, the most common things librarians were doing weren't large-scale shifts in how they held classes nor shifts to completely or largely give up lecture from the presentation, but instead were smaller tweaks to include **more** active learning in their sessions.

From Kelsey Cheshire:
Activity, scaffolding, and assessment in one

https://tinyurl.com/TILCGoogleForm

TILC Active Learning Example Google Form

In a real classroom setting, this form would describe the steps to guide the students through an exercise, perhaps using a library database. When students are asked to provide their email addresses, they also can receive a copy of their responses, so the students can use the information they recorded in the form as a reminder later of what they did and how to do things. The instructor also gets a copy of the responses, for self assessment of how well the students applied what was presented.

* Required

Email address *

Your email

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Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

This form was created inside of Virginia Commonwealth University. Report Abuse

Google Forms

Periodically, during department meetings, we also shared what we were doing in more detail.

One piece of sharing that stood out and that a lot of people in the department said they would try themselves was
The idea that Kelsey Cheshire was using,
She used Google forms to provide guided activities -- such as choosing a topic, developing a search terms, or using a database --
with both instructions and space for students to record what they were doing on the Google form

An advantage of this format over an activity on paper is that both the student and the librarian can get a copy of their work.

The students then can refer to the form later for instructions and for information about the search strategies they had used during class,
And the librarian can use the information after class to see in more detail what the students did.
Kelsey also leaves a space for students to mark if they have questions that they want her to follow-up on privately after class.

Google forms aren't perfect.
It takes some classroom management to keep the students from working ahead on the form,
So, feel free to look at the Google form at the https://tinyurl.com/TILCGoogleForm ,
But please do not go beyond the page with information about keeping students together.
You will get distracted, and you will miss more of the presentation!
If you want to finish it, you can work on it at the end of the presentation
(Pause to let people look)

In a live classroom, it's a bit easier to monitor where the students are on the form than it is in a Zoom room.

Another issue is that the librarian can't see the information a student enter until the student hits "submit,"

However the form is a simple trick to give both the librarian and the student a copy of the work and can aid the librarian in assessing what they're doing.

Finding universal or multiversal activities...
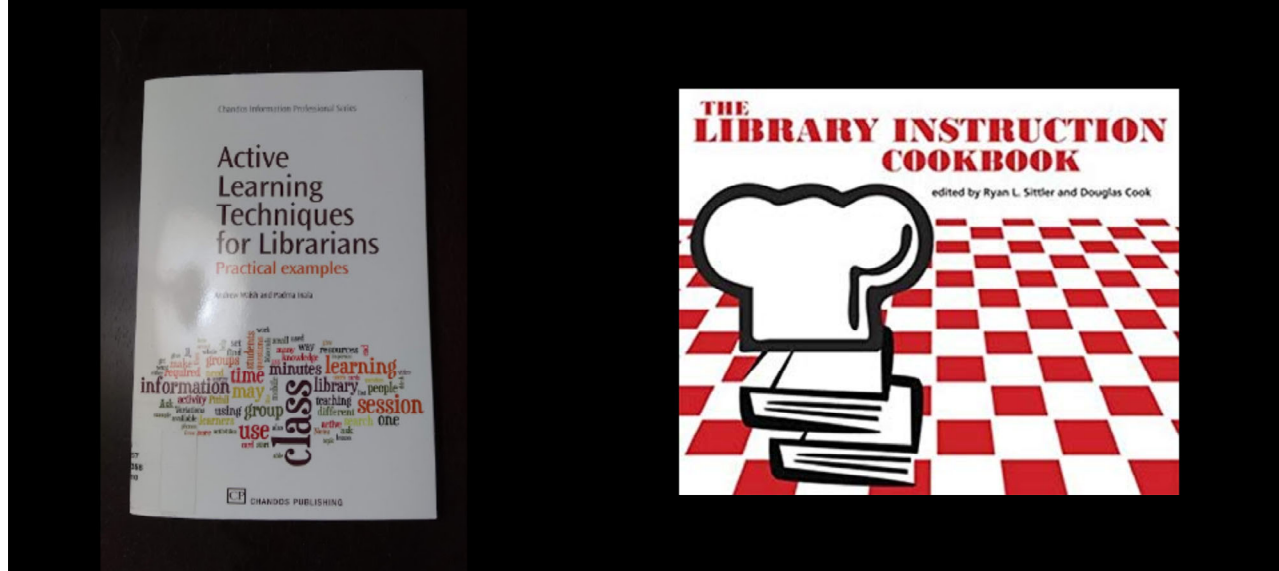
One challenge of incorporating active learning into courses and for us sharing what we did
Is that the activity has to fit with the goals and assignments for a particular class.

In our multiverse, these differences stood out when something interesting one librarian was doing was especially crafted to the class they were working with. Because the specific things we were teaching and specific assignments students were working on varied so much,
we couldn't just wholesale copy each other's activities.

Although it can be enjoyable to bring creativity to apply active learning techniques to a specific subject, sometimes it can be hard to know where to start.

The two books displayed here both have taken active learning ideas and put them into the context of librarians who are teaching and offer a nice starting point.

Walsh, A., & Inala, Padma. (2010). Active learning techniques for librarians : Practical examples*. Oxford, UK: Chandos.*
The first half of this book has one-page summaries of a variety of generic active learning techniques that the reader could apply to different content as they see appropriate. The second half has specific examples of active learning activities for

typical content taught in library instruction sessions, though the activities are not geared toward specific subject areas or disciplines.

Sittler, R., & Cook, Douglas. (2009). The library instruction cookbook. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.
This "cookbook" is filled with 1-2 page descriptions activities for many instruction scenarios that librarians at college and university librarians often face. A section of the book is devoted to discipline-specific activities.

Our Outcomes & What We Learned

Image: Miguel Henriques on Unsplash

What we learned from our active learning multiverse exploration (gathered through interviews and collected anecdotes)

- Overall, AO librarians set very ambitious active learning goals often expressed as including some form of active learning in every session.
- Challenges:
  - Other goals -- e.g. the business librarian, Janet Reid getting into every class with "research" content and that limited time in some of those classes -- only enough to get across "Research Guides & Databases"
  - It's hard...
    - for large classes
    - to get enough information from faculty (like assignment) so you can align the the activity with the learning objectives from class
    - for timing...it can take a long time and it's hard to predict how things go
- Outcomes:
  - Learned that there were areas that students didn't know about. For example, during an Art History class, an Academic Outreach librarian set up a scavenger hunt where students had to find a book in the stacks and report back to the class. *Found out even though it was an*

    advanced class they didn't know how to find a book on the
    shelf...learned that you can't assume anything
- ○ But it's worth the risk for a more engaging experience
  -   ■ Student show and tells are great...When it works well it gives me an opportunity to troubleshoot things in real time (example: this is a book review not a full book/article, click on this link for full text/ILL).
  -   ■ It's also more interesting for the librarians, sessions are never the same.
- Received positive feedback
  - Instructors are enthusiastic and have asked for more
  - Overall, it creates a more engaging, energetic learning atmosphere, that's more motivating to teach in. A lot of that feeling is intangible, but it does appear in the feedback forms.

What's next?

We initially asked this question over a year ago. And the answer was generally: we will keep working on active learning. We were able to encourage and support active learning with positive outcomes while also allowing liaisons to execute the specific techniques and strategies that worked best for them and their areas. And we were confident that we could continue to build on our successes.

The elephant in the zoom room

Image: elephant: Wolfgang Hasselmann on Unsplash, coronavirus: FDA.gov

That was where this presentation would have ended if TILC 2020 hadn't been moved to TILC 2021.

In the year since then, at VCU we've moved into online teaching, including many classes in Zoom.

In the chat box, share your own experiences.

What you wish Zoom would do? What challenges do you face?

Are there any strategies that have helped you? What's been working well in Zoom?

Notes on Zoom wishes and challenges
- There was a learning curve for librarians and faculty.
- Requires a high level of coordination with faculty since you are visiting their online classroom with little control over settings (for polls, breakout rooms, screen sharing). Some Zoom updates have helped with more features for co-hosts.
- It can be difficult to present and monitor chat.
- Accessibility concerns (Zoom added live captioning recently)
- The silence (especially with the absence of student video turned on) is difficult to manage. Teaching to a black square/tiny green light is hard.
- Zoom fatigue is real.
- The pandemic has applied unprecedented pressures to students and the faculty
- Uneven student participation makes active learning harder. It may not be active learning if only a couple of students are participating even if you have adapted an activity or technique to work in an online setting.

Notes on strategies and what works in Zoom
- Break out rooms for small group discussions (adapting think-pair-share)
- There are more options for communication. For example, many students prefer chat to speaking up in class. Also, students can privately chat with instructor (an option that librarians were trying to create for in person classes without much luck).
- There are some other features in Zoom that help with student interaction (example: annotations).
- Use of tools outside of Zoom for engagement (example: Mentimeter)
- Some activities and techniques work just as well (example: Google forms).
- New learning objects (videos, podcasts, pdfs even)
- Developing an increasing comfort level with silence and teaching without benefit of immediate feedback.

A big thank you to Academic Outreach

We're only three people in our own corners of the liaison multiverse, but figuring out how to fit active learning in all of the sectors of the multiverse, and doing so in challenging times, involved everyone in the Academic Outreach Department pictured here. Thank you.

In conclusion, hopefully you've learned more about active learning, picked up a few ideas, and learned that it is possible to learn from other liaisons or colleagues instructing in all areas--even during challenging times.

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