

TELLING THE STORY: USING NARRATIVES TO EXPLAIN WHY INFORMATION LITERACY EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT AND GET STUDENTS INVESTED IN WHAT WE DO

HEATHER BARROW-STAFFORD

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2009, the Knox College Library introduced an online information literacy tutorial to the Knox first-year students during a mass auditorium gathering. Instead of lecturing on information literacy, the library decided to take this opportunity to grab students' attention and show them WHY information literacy skills are important. As a result, the library presented five stories (some humorous, others with serious consequences) to serve as a contextual foundation for the tutorial and future library instruction sessions to build upon.

The goal of this presentation was to impart to students the BIG PICTURE of information literacy education. The library felt that the stories had the ability to expose the purpose (the WHY) of information literacy by giving students examples and allowing them to relate to someone. For our presentation, we selected stories that highlighted bad information choices (thus the presentation was named *The Bad Information Presentation*) in an attempt to show students how easy it is to accept information at face value and the consequences of such choices. While the stories were selected with regard to their tone and appeal, each story exposed underlying information literacy standards, such as authority, selection and evaluation.

BACKGROUND

Knox College is a private liberal arts college in Galesburg, IL with an undergraduate student population around 1400.

Barrow-Stafford (Assistant Librarian for Instructional Services)
Knox College [Edwards, IL]

The vast majority of Knox students are traditional (age 18-23), degree-seeking students that live on campus.

Knox College librarians liaise with academic departments and collaborate with faculty members to design workshops and assignments for students that teach them both general research skills and discipline-specific tools. Information literacy has been identified as one of the college's key competencies, but it is the responsibility of each academic department (with library assistance) to determine how they integrate information literacy education into their curriculum.

In an effort to ensure all students were being introduced to information literacy during their first year at Knox, the library began working with the faculty members in charge of First-year Preceptorial (known as FP), the only course all Knox students are required to take (Knox students design their own academic path with guidance from their faculty advisors).

FP AND INFORMATION LITERACY

First-year Preceptorial introduces students to some of the big questions that underlie a liberal arts education and is taught by faculty from all disciplines at Knox. FP sections meet 2-3 times a week in small-group format (around 12-15 students) and once a week en masse in an auditorium to watch films and/or hear presentations. During FP, students read various texts and watch a number of films that they then analysis, discuss/debate and write about.

Since the focus of FP is discussion and writing, the library had to make the case to the FP faculty directors why there should be a library component in a non-research course. This discussion – on why information literacy education goes beyond basic research skills – is what got the library thinking

about how we approach and present the subject to faculty and students.

In order to accommodate the many FP instructors and sections, different options for the format of the library session were presented such as: in-class workshops, auditorium presentations, online tutorials, library-created assignments. Eventually, it was decided that the library would create an online information literacy tutorial that FP instructors could then assign in their sections, and the library would be given time to introduce the tutorial during one of the mass auditorium class times.

The library and the FP directors collaborated on the tutorial script, and once the script was completed, the library created the tutorial using Camtasia Studio. The tutorial was embedded in the college's learning management system (Moodle) and included a number of short quizzes. The students' scores on these quizzes were recorded, which allowed the library to track who had completed the tutorial and provided us with a means to assess student learning.

PRESENTATION AND STORIES

The library FP presentation was originally envisioned as just a short welcome and introduction to the online information literacy tutorial. However, the library realized this was a rare opportunity to address the entire first-year class, and we wanted to make the most of this encounter.

As mentioned earlier, the conversation between the library and the FP faculty got us thinking about how we present information literacy education to faculty and students. We started asking ourselves questions like "What are we really trying to do with information literacy education?" and "Why should this be important to people?" and "How are these skills important to people in their everyday lives?" We found that our answers to these questions were usually concerned with the consequences of not being information literate. When people don't have the ability to identify a good source or use information to make an informed decision, the library felt the consequences for individuals and society could be disastrous. So, we decided to tell students stories about information illiterate behavior and its consequences.

Finding examples of information illiterate behavior was (sadly) not hard. The mass media offers a plethora of stories where bad information was disseminated to the general population. For *The Bad Information Presentation* at Knox, we used the book *Regret the Error* by Craig Silverman to find stories; this book (and active blog) reports on media corrections, retractions, apologies and trends regarding media accuracy.

We decided to share five stories for the FP presentation and created a PowerPoint with images (and in one case video) corresponding to the appropriate story. The first three stories were chosen for their humor and (relatively) harmless consequences and were told in order from least humorous to most humorous to build the audience reaction up. The last two stories, however, quickly brought students to a serious state due to their consequences. The full stories can be found in the previously

mentioned book, but I will briefly summarize them and include some of the library commentary here. The following is written in the voice of what I would say to the FP students.

Library Introduction (to FP)

The library is here today to introduce an online information literacy tutorial you will soon be assigned in your FP sections. Now, I could spend this time lecturing on what information literacy is and why it is important, but instead, I thought it would be fun and interesting to start by telling you some stories about bad information choices and the impact they can have. I call this: The Bad Information Presentation.

Chicago Daily Tribune reports "Dewey defeats Truman"

In the 1948 presidential election, polls showed New York governor Thomas Dewey had a clear lead over incumbent Harry Truman. Truman, who had been elevated to the presidency after Franklin D. Roosevelt died, had less money and momentum going into the last months of the race. The press, it seems, had largely written him off.

On the day of the election, the Chicago Daily Tribune faced a printing deadline, and unwilling to get scooped, began printing with the headline "Dewey Defeats Truman" before the returns had finished coming in. (Show image of Truman holding the front page of the Chicago Tribune with the words "Dewey defeats Truman") As it turned out, Truman won the election.

Sometimes you can assume you know something to the point where you claim it to be fact. Unfortunately, assuming doesn't make it true; assuming just makes an... (Show image of a donkey.)

An Itsy Bitsy Tiny Weenie Mistake

In September 2006, a man named Paul Van Valkenburgh died. For many years, Paul Van Valkenburgh had told his wife that he had co-written the song "Itsy Bitsy Tiny Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini" when he was a younger man under the name Paul Vance. (Show image of yellow bikini.) Mrs. Van Valkenburgh contacted the Associated Press to report his death and told the AP reporter of her husband's contribution to the music world. The obituary for Paul was written and published in news sources across the country.

Unfortunately (or fortunately), the real Paul Vance was alive and well living in New York when the Associated Press "killed him" off. He was very unhappy when he began fielding calls from his grandchildren asking if he was still alive. As you can see, unfortunately, you cannot just trust a source no matter how legitimate he/she/it may seem. On a side note, Paul Van Valkenburgh's widow was devastated to learn her husband had not written the song.

The Wrong Guy

Sometimes the bad information we encounter is the result of a simple mistake. For example, in May 2006, Guy Kewney was waiting in the BBC studio in London when he saw on a TV monitor a man being interviewed with a caption that identified him as Guy Kewney. Mr. Kewney had been waiting to be interviewed about the lawsuit between Apple Corps Ltd., the Beatles' music company and Apple Computer Inc. (the technology company). Unfortunately, the Guy Kewney being interviewed knew very little about the case.

In this scenario, a studio manager had mistakenly called the reception area instead of the room Mr. Kewney was waiting in and asked for "Guy." As misfortune would have it, a man named Guy Goma had recently arrived for a job interview with the BBC. That Guy soon found himself being fitted with a microphone and plopped into a chair in front of interviewer.

(Play video showing a very shocked and then confused Guy Goma being interviewed by the BBC.)

As you can see, when Guy realized the mistake, a mixture of fear and shock passed over his face. However, he continues the interview for five minutes discussing a lawsuit he knows nothing about. When asked later about the interview, he said he thought it was some kind of initiation prank at the BBC. Again, failure to verify information leads to an array of problems. You can also see that television news takes information errors to a whole new level with mass dissemination.

Terrorist Lives Here (Map of San Diego with a "Here" arrow on it.)

On August 7, 2005 Randy Vorick, his wife and two children were driving back to their home in San Diego after a visit to SeaWorld when a neighbor called to tell them that Fox News had just reported that a terrorist lived at their address. The Fox News pundit reported that the house was occupied by Iyad Hilal a man accused of having links to the terrorists who bombed London a few weeks earlier. Hilal, a grocery store owner, had never been charged with any crime but was the previous owner of the Vorick house.

For a brief period, a satellite image of the Vorick house, along with directions to it, was placed online by Fox News. In the ensuing weeks, drivers began stopping by the house to yell profanities at the family, police received angry calls from concerned citizens about the "terrorist" house, and one night, the house was vandalized. The police began making routine patrols and eventually had to station a car near the house for the protection of the Vorick family.

As you can see, mistaken identity is not so humorous in this case.

While this was the error of a few people who failed to verify their facts, the mass media took it to a whole new level. And unfortunately, thousands, millions of people believe information they hear on TV or online without question. The mass

media -news networks, the internet, newspapers- they all disseminate information –verified and unverified- with incredible speed and sometimes startling results.

New York Times and Weapons of Mass Destruction (Image of Baghdad, Iraq being bombed)

One of the most startling examples in recent history is as follows. Over the course of 2001 and 2002, a New York Times reporter wrote a series of articles making the case that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The reporter's Iraqi contacts supplied information detailing Saddam Hussein's secret weapons facilities located throughout Iraq. These articles continued to be published throughout the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

However, following the invasion, it came to light that the reporter's sources were members of the Iraqi National Congress, an organization committed to toppling Saddam Hussein and had a vested interest in making the case for WMDs and the need for the invasion. As events have played out, no WMDs were ever found in Iraq.

Whether you believe the Iraq invasion was justified with or without proof of WMDs is not the point of this example. The point is that news reports chronicling their existence played a major role in galvanizing public support for the war. People chose to believe the information, and they acted upon it.

Library Conclusion (to FP)

Information – good or bad – has power. Words have power. They have the power to persuade people to a belief or call people to action. In your life, you may be a grandchild concerned about your grandfather, a grocer accused of being a terrorist, a reporter verifying facts, or simply one of the millions of people who watch TV and form opinions each day. In all of these cases, people made choices about information – about what they believed or thought they knew – with serious consequences.

That is why the skills we are trying to teach you in information literacy education are so incredibly important. While we want you to succeed in your courses and write stunning research papers, this is really about helping you develop the critical thinking skills necessary to become informed information seekers and users. Everyday, each of us encounters countless pieces of information that we either take in and internalize, mold to fit into our belief system, or toss aside as rubbish. It is extremely important that we recognize that we have a choice with information. We can choose to educate ourselves on how to find, evaluate and use information. Or, we can just choose bits and pieces of the information we encounter to believe or not believe. Information literacy education is not about telling you what is true or what to believe; it is about helping you develop the skills necessary for you to make informed information choices.

FACULTY/STUDENT FEEDBACK

Immediate feedback during and at the end of the presentation from students was very positive. Students laughed at the humorous stories in the beginning of the presentation (so much so it took a while to quiet them back down) and became solemn and focused during the last two stories and our conclusion.

The library also received emails from a few faculty members who were in attendance stating their approval of the presentation. Additionally, a number of faculty members who previously had not decided to assign the online tutorial did so after the presentation.

CONCLUSION

The library was very satisfied with *The Bad Information Presentation*. We believe it accomplished our goals of: 1) engaging students and 2) providing students with context for the information literacy tutorial and the educational mission of the library in general. We believe our educational mission -to help students develop the intellectual capacities to make informed choices- must be central in the library's larger message. We must provide individuals with context for information literacy not only to make our teaching more effective, but to help build a community invested in the promotion of free speech, healthy debate and accurate, objective information.
