

# MAKING INFORMATION LITERACY STICK: FINDING SUCCESs IN LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

“Making Information Literacy Stick” was an interactive workshop designed to present the key concepts of Chip and Dan Heath’s *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* so that participants could discuss ways in which those concepts could be applied to library instruction. In addition, pedagogical recommendations found in the literature on critical information literacy are reflective of elements of the Heaths’ writing, so those were highlighted as well. The mnemonic device used in the book is SUCCEsS: Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credible, Emotional, and Stories. Following a brief overview of the relevance of each of these elements, participants were challenged to think of activities or teaching strategies reflective of the six ingredients for sticky ideas. What follows is a summary of the presentation, along with the ideas from both the participants in the workshop, as well as relevant suggestions from the critical information literacy literature.

## SIMPLE

Simplicity is not about dumbing ideas down; it is about presenting ideas in a way that resonates with an audience and sticks with them. The first step to presenting ideas in a simple way is getting to the core of the idea. All too often we shroud our ideas in overly wordy explanations filled with the jargon of our field. Finding the core requires us to take a look at our message and see what we are really trying to get across. But once we find our core we must present it in a compact way, so that it

can be more easily recalled and put to use. To do so, we must remember what it was like not to know the information we are presenting, and provide the fundamentals of our ideas in an accessible language.

The Heath brothers take an example from the business world that illustrates their point. When decision-makers at Southwest Airlines consider a potential policy, they look to their company’s mission, to be “THE low-cost airline.” Obviously, the necessities of safe air travel must be considered, but when considering customer complaints such as the lack of full meals on the flight, one must only consider whether or not providing meals would allow Southwest to continue being “THE low-cost airline” (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 28-30). The challenge to librarians is to come up with ways in which we can present our mission or learning objectives in a simple way. Some recommendations were to frame the library as THE question and answer place, or to use analogies for making library concepts stick. For example, in order to differentiate general databases from subject specific databases, you might tell students: “If EBSCO’s Academic Search Complete is like the Wal-Mart of databases, then Education Research Complete is like the specialty school supply store.”

## UNEXPECTED

One way to hook our students early on is by packaging our ideas in a simple way. Another way is to get their attention by breaking the patterns they are used to in unexpected ways. For example, if you have ever traveled by air, you have likely heard the same tired safety instructions informing you how to fasten your safety belt and find the exits. Imagine if you heard the following over the intercom: “If you haven’t been in an automobile since 1965, the proper way to fasten your seat belt is to slide the flat end into the buckle...There may be fifty ways

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to leave your lover, but there are only six ways to leave this aircraft” (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 64). This breaks the patterns we are used to and grabs our attention. Similarly, one LOEX participant told a story about her strategy for getting students’ attention:

A librarian was asked to lead a workshop for a class on giving effective presentations. To grab the students’ attention, she rushed in to the class and gave a five minute Powerpoint presentation overloaded with wordy text, garish images, annoying transitions and distracting animations. She sped through the presentation, allowing her voice to fall to inaudible levels and then rushed out of the room without asking for questions. She returned thirty seconds later to an understandably confused class and used the mock-presentation as a way of illustrating what not to do when presenting.

Another way to use the unexpected to our advantage is to keep our students’ attention and maintain engagement. This can be done by creating a knowledge gap, or providing an idea of what an end-result might look like without detailing every step to get there. Curiosity is maintained not by giving students step-by-step instructions, but by creating an environment where they are challenged to fill in the gaps between what they already know and what they need to accomplish their goals. For example, when explaining scholarly research and strategies for locating credible secondary sources, one might leave some of the work up to the students. After introducing students to a subject-specific encyclopedia that concludes each article with recommended readings, they are assigned a topic covered in the encyclopedia. Their challenge is to identify what kinds of sources are recommended, identify which library resources would be appropriate for locating the sources, and determine whether or not they could obtain the source in the library or through inter-library loan. Rather than giving the students too much detail on the different library resources or keyword searching, they are challenged to try different strategies in locating the sources.

## CONCRETE

To make our ideas concrete is to reduce the abstraction in our presentation and work from our audience’s existing frameworks. The Velcro theory of memory is a metaphor to describe our memory as a system of loops that information hooks on to. Thus, the more hooks our ideas have, the better. The more concrete imagery and metaphors we can integrate into our presentation, the more likely our audience is to remember the message. One might think of all the imagery in a typical urban legend, such as the famous “Kidney Heist” example. Concreteness also applies to our ability to generate ideas, not just remember them. For example, one study has looked at a person’s ability to list all the white things one can think of, compared to a list when the person is asked to list all the white things *in one’s fridge* (Heath & Heath, 1997, p. 120). By providing a concrete context, researchers found people were able to generate a much longer list. To help students visualize the composition of a database, one participant in the workshop takes her students on a tour of the library, ending up in the print periodicals room. Stu-

dents are challenged to find an article in the stacks of journals on a topic, such as windmills and energy. When students start rummaging through the journals and find themselves unable to discover a single article, the librarian introduces the students to the databases, and demonstrates how they search the materials they just held in their hands without flipping through every issue.

## CREDIBLE

Credibility is the stuff of information literacy: above all we want our students to use credible sources. But how do we establish *our own* credibility? This can be done from external sources, or by weaving credibility into the message itself. As far as external authority goes, many advertising campaigns seek authorities in a given field to give credibility to their message. Our resources as librarians are limited in this regard, coupled by the fact that external authorities do not always carry a great deal of weight with their audience. Consider the difference between a doctor telling someone to quit smoking and the memorable Pam Laffin anti-smoking ad campaign. People such as Laffin, who have gone through particular experiences that authorities talk about in the abstract, are what the Heath brothers call “Anti-Authorities” (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 135). As librarians, students often see us as mediators between themselves and the professors, and perhaps we act as anti-authorities in that regard.

To provide internal credibility, try using salient details, and statistics on a human scale. One might think about all the details in a particular urban legend. Urban legends are often spread to other areas by adapting the details of the original to the particularities of the new environment. The goal is to take this phenomenon from the land of fiction and use it to our advantage. Another source of credibility that we can use to our advantage is statistics, so long as we put them in a human context. Consider the activist calling for nuclear disarmament who tried to put the world’s nuclear stockpile in the appropriate context. After dropping one BB into a tin bucket to represent the bomb that fell on Hiroshima, and ten BBs to represent the average nuclear-armed submarine, the activist asked that the audience close their eyes while he dropped 300,000 BBs into the bucket, providing a visceral illustration of the size of the existing nuclear stockpile (Heath & Heath, 2007, p.142). These are not the statistics you see on the bullet points of a PowerPoint slide.

This notion of human-scale statistics can assist students in visualizing information management so they are able to formulate better research questions. In the age of Google, it is difficult to visualize the enormity of the sea of information in which students are treading. Providing a demonstration of the number of hits found in a search in Google compared to the number of hits found in a subject database might act as a good start, but students are still looking at abstract numbers. What would 2,370,000 articles on embryonic stem cells in Google look like? How does that compare to the 11,500 found in Academic Search Complete? One might bring in a stack of journals and explain how many articles are in each one to provide a visual for the massive amount of information out there, and the need for students to focus their research questions so they have

more manageable results.

## EMOTIONAL

Contemporary neuroscience tells us that the modernist view of humans as rational agents in control of their emotional sides is largely mistaken (see, for example, Lehrer, J. (2009). *How we decide*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). The strategy of inciting one's emotions to manipulate one's actions has long been held the stuff of rhetoric, according to many philosophers. But if we know that emotional appeals can stimulate student engagement and participation, would we be wrong to close ourselves off from these strategies? Take, for example, a study that found people to be more likely to donate money to charity when shown a picture of one starving seven year old girl in Mali as opposed to a report documenting numerous facts about the state of hunger and food supplies in Africa (Heath & Heath, 2007, p.166). These kinds of studies indicate that our emotional thinking is more likely to make us care and make us act than analytic thinking. On one level, we can use this to help students recognize the aspects of information literacy that have a clear role in their own lives. Or, like the "Don't Mess With Texas" anti-littering ad campaign, we might appeal to their sense of identity as responsible students, or historians, or future nurses.

Sometimes a little shock value will go a long way. When it comes to website evaluation, students might be surprised by the kind of material that is posted on the Web, and sometimes makes its way to the top of the search results. In one example, students are introduced to a racist biographical website about Martin Luther King, Jr. and asked to evaluate its credibility (see, for example, <http://www.martinlutherking.org>, or [http://www.kkk.bz/king\\_holiday.htm](http://www.kkk.bz/king_holiday.htm)). After reading some of the slanderous material about the Civil Rights Movement's most prominent figure, they will likely be shocked and compelled to establish the authorship and agenda of the website. In a similar vein, Doherty and Ketchner (2005) found that students were more engaged and learned more about the importance of evaluating sources when dealing with topics in which they were emotionally invested, such as 9/11.

## STORIES

Whether they are the urban legends that continue to get passed along, or the tales you hear around the water cooler, stories often stick with us longer than decontextualized facts. As a result, the Heath brothers recommend using stories in two different ways: to provide guidance on how to act in certain situations, and to provide motivation for people to act certain ways. Just as nurses and firefighters benefit from hearing about the experiences of their colleagues, so too do librarians benefit from hearing the stories of success, and sometimes more importantly, the stories of failure, that lead to positive learning outcomes for our students. Contemporary neuroscience has shown that stories act as flight simulators for our brains, wiring them to help us respond better when faced with similar circumstances. In that vein, we might follow the recommendations of Swanson (2004) and put our students in the shoes of others to consider

the different kinds of sources of information and their intended audiences. Swanson asks that students consider the relevance of different sources on genetic counseling for their information needs as nurses, journalists, or potential parents. This gives students a kind of simulation of what they will have to do as they conduct their own research.

Other stories help motivate people to act. To take one example from marketing, we might learn from Subway's successful advertising campaign featuring Jared, the creator of the Subway diet. Having lost over 200 pounds by limiting himself to Subway sandwiches, his story was central to an increase in Subway's sales (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 221). While we might not want to motivate consumption of fast food, as librarians we can also try to use success stories to motivate students in their own research endeavors. People tend to like hearing stories about people overcoming the odds, or coming up with creative solutions to problems, and we could use that to our advantage in the library classroom.

Tales of caution are sometimes appropriate, as well. Educators might introduce students to tales of information literacy gone wrong, such as that of the historian Michael A. Bellesiles, who resigned from his teaching position after allegedly fabricating his research on America's gun culture in *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*. Or, when discussing the concept and consequences of plagiarism, you could refer to the New York Times journalist, Jayson Blair, who resigned after being accused of lacking journalistic integrity.<sup>1</sup>

## CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of the workshop, a participant indicated that she appreciated hearing about theories from other disciplines regarding the work that we do in the classroom. Indeed, if we are to keep our work interesting and our pedagogy effective, we will do well to keep an eye out for works such as *Made to Stick*.<sup>2</sup> The above ideas are just a few that were shared in the workshop relevant to the material. It is the author's hope that this will be the start of a conversation that continues on a wiki made for this workshop, available at the following address: <http://stickyinfolit.pbworks.com/>

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the Bellesiles controversy, see, for example, Wyatt-Brown, B. (2002). Going Off Half-Cocked: A Review Essay of Arming America. *The Journal of Southern History* 68, (2), 423-428. For the Jayson Blair scandal, see the *New York Times* analysis: Barry, D., Barstow, D., Glater, J.D., Liptak, A., & Steinberg, J. (2003, May 11). Correcting the Record: Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception. *New York Times*, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>A few that I have found particularly engaging are as follows: Gladwell, M. (2005). *Blink: The power of thinking without thinking*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company. Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2010). *Switch: How to change things when change is hard*. New York, NY: Broadway Books. Lehrer, J. (2009). *How We Decide*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Thaler, R.H., & Sunstein, C.R. (2009). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.