Dead or Alive: Information Literacy and Dead(?) Celebrities

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Abstract

Information literacy is an essential skill for business communication students. Traditionally taught by librarians, there is a pressing need for all business instructors to incorporate informational literacy training into their courses. Moreover, students need to hone their research skills, moving beyond a dependence on Google and Wikipedia. This article describes an assignment that pushes students to be creative and dogged in their research, to think critically about the information they find, and to provide solutions and tools for fellow students for improving their research and critical thinking skills.

Keywords

information literacy, research skills

How do we teach our students to conduct research? How do we teach them to think critically about the information they find? How do we get them to move beyond Google and Wikipedia? I struggled with this semester after semester, and it was not until I took a break from it and teaching that the answer came to me. The answer is an innovative assignment that I call The Dead(?) Celebrity Report.

Defining Information Literacy

The American Library Association (2005) offers a comprehensive definition of information literacy, one that is sensitive to the rapidly changing nature of how we create, access, and use information. It defines information literacy as the ability to “recognize
when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (para. 7).

It is important to understand that information literacy is not a technical (e.g., the ability to use a computer or search a database) but a cognitive skill. It is the ability to think critically about the information that can be found in books and magazines, online journals, websites, social media, wikis, and more. Information literacy is not about the ability to accumulate information—there is usually too much information, not too little. Information literacy is about the ability to find the best information and use it appropriately and effectively (National Research Council, as cited in Klusek & Bornstein, 2006, p. 5).

Information literacy affects our personal lives, our professional lives, and our ability to engage in lifelong learning. When we are information literate, we know what information we need and where to find it, we can decide if it is good information, and we can then use it properly. Without this ability, we cannot move forward.

Information Literacy and the Business Communication Classroom

Information literacy is typically taught by librarians, not business communication instructors. In fact, in a recent survey of over 500 business communications instructors from a range of American colleges and universities, not one reported teaching information literacy (Russ, 2009). However, there are a few reasons why a business communication instructor should consider including information literacy—including research and documentation skills—in a course curriculum: (a) Information literacy is a vital skill for students, (b) there are not enough librarians to carry the load alone, and (c) information literacy should be incorporated into the curriculum across an entire program of study.

Information literacy is a necessary aspect of training future business professionals. Klusek and Bornstein, in a 2006 study, found that most jobs “demand an information-literate worker” (p. 3), and another study (Cooney, 2005) found that 90% of librarians queried found it important and so did deliver information literacy training to their business students (p. 10). However, my students are part of a tri-campus college that has only one teacher librarian to serve over 6,000 full-time students in three different cities; if I were to ask her to train my five sections of students within the same time frame, I would be asking her to be on my campus at five different times within one week. Having the librarian solely responsible for information literacy training would simply not be practical.

In the case of the business communication courses I teach, information literacy is built into the course learning outcomes, which are based on “Essential Employability Skills,” as defined by the Conference Board of Canada (2000). Moreover, incorporating information literacy training into the course curriculum is supported by research in the field (Cooney, 2005; DaCosta, 2010; O’Sullivan & Scott, 2000; Scott & O’Sullivan, 2005).
The State of Information Literacy in the Business Communication Classroom

As communication teachers, many of us struggle with the pull between the traditional means of researching and accessing information (visiting a library in person, speaking with a research librarian, accessing information in printed form) and the way our students want to do their research (exclusively online). Complaining about the student ken for Internet-only information sources is common, but some voices advocating Internet-based research—and warning that we cannot assume that our younger adult learners are skilled Internet users—are emerging (see Hargittai, 2010; Maehre, 2009).

The Internet is not going away. Students are going to use it. Information literacy teaches students how to think critically about the information they find on the Internet (O’Sullivan & Scott, 2000), which brings us to what is arguably the most popular research tool with students: Wikipedia. While some academics and studies (Eijkman, 2010; Klotter, 2009; Maehre, 2009) support the argument that Wikipedia is, for the most part, accurate, credible, and should be an accepted (if not embraced) research tool, and I do allow students to start their research with Wikipedia, I do not allow them to use Wikipedia in their list of references. My reasons have nothing to do with the credibility of Wikipedia. Jimmy Wales, one of the founders of Wikipedia, said it best: “For God sake, you’re in college; don’t cite the encyclopedia” (Young, 2006, para. 2). I want my students to at least begin thinking about the notion of primary sources, the difference between primary and secondary sources, and what happens to information as we move further along the chain of communication.

Yet the choice of information source is not the only concern when it comes to the research habits of college students. I have had a few opportunities to watch my students do research online and discuss the process with them. Each time, I noticed my students used only two resources: Google and Wikipedia. When Google was used, the first search result offered was the only one chosen by the student. Moreover, if students could not find the information they needed using Google and using their first choice of search terms, they gave up. This style of research was also observed by a study of high school students. As well as relying heavily on keywords searches (and not trying new search terms when the initial search was unsuccessful), the students in the study were lacking in hypertext and hypermedia literacy and were unable to understand the logic and structure of websites, making it almost impossible to find information online (Scott & O’Sullivan, 2005).

Gordon Lightfoot and the Ah-ha! Moment

It seems, sometimes, that my students and their information literacy needs are always on my mind—even when on maternity leave. On February 18, 2010, as I was cleaning up after lunch, I heard the news on CBC radio (our national, publicly funded broadcaster) that Gordon Lightfoot, the Canadian music icon, had died. Ronnie Hawkins, longtime friend of Lightfoot and fellow rock legend, was quoted as confirming the
story. I was sad. I checked online. CanWest Media, another national media outlet, was carrying the story. Two of the most reputable and reliable news sources in the country told me that Gordon Lightfoot was dead. Not reported dead. Not rumoured to be dead. Dead. A piece of my childhood was gone.

Twenty minutes later, both CBC and CanWest Media reported that Gordon Lightfoot had just come home from the dentist and was, in fact, alive and well. My reaction was “This is the assignment I’ve been looking for.”

Assignment Overview
The Dead(?) Celebrity Assignment is adjusted depending on the size of the class, the length of the course, and when it is being delivered (a normal 15-week course or a condensed 4-week course). The important passages from the instructions follow.

Working in teams of two or three you will deliver a 10- to 15-minute presentation about the falsely reported death of a celebrity or person of note (and by “person of note” I mean someone who is historically, politically, culturally, etc., important). The presentation will be supported by a formal report (with typically 3-5 pages of core material, single spaced, Times New Roman, 12-point font, no funny stuff with the margins).

Each team must have a unique topic and must meet the following criteria:

- It was not merely a hoax or joke, such as an April Fool’s Day joke.
- It was reported as true by at least one credible news source.*
- It was believed to be true by the general public or by people in positions of authority or influence.

*Determining just what is a credible news source is part of this assignment—as is finding the material to prove to me that your determination is a good one.

The formal report must follow the format distributed in class, use APA-style citations and references (to be reviewed in class), and cover the following areas:

- History/overview of the falsely reported death (how and why did it start, who or what furthered it, what factors allowed it to “go viral,” how and why it was finally corrected, what repercussions resulted)
- Review of your research (tell the story or path of your research, explain why the resources you chose are credible and useful, explain why the resources you rejected are not credible or useful)
- What this event teaches us about sources, how many to use, which to use, etc.
- How this applies to your research in your courses, what you will be doing differently in your courses as a result of what you’ve learned.
Implementation and Results

Finding the celebrity or person of note to research is the most difficult part of the assignment for many of the students. They tend to either pick a subject too quickly (and then are disappointed when I say “Dig deeper. I think you’ll find this falls under the ‘hoax’ category,” or they agonize over selecting just the right topic, wasting hours if not days. For these reasons, I place a time limit on this portion of the assignment, usually 45 minutes. Students who might rush slow down instead, knowing they have a specific time frame. Students who may have difficulty making a decision are forced to choose. I can rest easy, knowing I have approved the topics and that no one will waste further time with a topic that does not fit the criteria of the assignment.

In-class activities and handouts (links provided above) give the students a foundation in evaluating online information. They use the handouts as tools. When I ask them why they think the New York Times, for example, should be considered credible, they are able to articulate a few reasons—such as reputation, journalistic standards, and so on. At some point, they draw a line in the sand and say, “I guess that’s all we have to go on.” They begin to see that they can be rigorous, but they can never know for sure. There is no guarantee. But that, as eventually they learn, is the point of the assignment. Mistakes are made by people and organizations we trust—not because they are incompetent or unethical, but because they are human. The speed of online communication exacerbates the problem. In the end, we must be able to rely on ourselves and our critical thinking skills.

Another lesson students learn is how important the “story” of the research is. I want to know where they started and why, how did they use that tool, did they change strategies, where did that lead them, were there any dead ends, what sources did they reject and why, what sources did they accept and why. Researching a mistake made by the media is a challenge. Original news stories are removed and follow-up reports or apologies are vague. I am often surprised and impressed at how deep the students will dig and how creative their research techniques are. They want to expose the mistake very, very badly. And sometimes, their research techniques are old-fashioned and still effective, such as speaking with a research librarian.

The rate at which the famous are reported dead before their time is astonishing, and the students have hundreds of subjects to choose from. But what is really interesting for me, as the instructor who has to evaluate all these reports and presentations, is the range of subject matter. Students have researched the falsely reported deaths of Mark Twain, Marcus Garvey, Margaret Thatcher, John Wooden, Pope John Paul II, and Jeff Goldblum, among others, and I have learned quite a bit from them. Even if the same
subjects are covered year after year, no report is ever the same because the report is more about the experience of the research than the material found.

Importantly, for the development of their ability to evaluate information, my students are able to identify why the death was falsely reported, what mistakes were made, how they could have been avoided, and how they were eventually corrected. Also gratifying is hearing and reading about what the students can identify that they learned about research and evaluating information. They report that in the future, they will evaluate material using a formal information evaluation tool, dig to learn more about the credibility of the source, look for more than one source (three is often cited as the ideal), and get as close to a primary source as possible. They report being able to understand that Wikipedia can help get them started but that it does not meet their criteria for the best possible source of information.

Conclusion

When my students have finished their Dead(?) Celebrity Report, they are not experts on research. They are not necessarily adept at using academic databases. They may not be on a first-name basis with their college’s research librarian. But they are thinking more carefully about the information they find, especially online. They are thinking about the process of how information gets online, who is finding it, writing it, vetting it. They are also thinking about what they can do to make sure this information is credible, reliable, and correct. And they know that no system is perfect. If CNN can make a mistake, so can anyone else. Information is changing, evolving, transforming, as is the way we access it. Awareness of this is the best favour the students can do for themselves.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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