Dawn Stahura

Information intimacy
Getting our students to commit

Anyone providing information literacy workshops and instruction can attest that it is a hard sell. There is a plethora of published literature on the phrase *information literacy* and what it implies in regards to our students.[1] I am of the belief that using the word *literacy* has negative connotations. The word itself suggests to students that they are illiterate and deficient in some significant way. What this inevitably does is put our students on the defensive before we even begin instruction. While it may seem like mere semantics, the language we use matters. I want my students to feel comfortable learning new skills, which is why I want to address the concept of information literacy in a way that is meaningful to them and also plays to their strengths.

I would like to share a phrase that I have coined and highlight some of the activities I use in my instruction in the hopes that it will resonate with others teaching information literacy. Recently I have been referring to this set of instruction as *information intimacy.* Intimacy is a concept we all understand to some degree. Since most of my instructional sessions and workshops involve undergraduates, dating and relationships are something they are familiar with. Equating information intimacy to the dating world speaks their language and allows my students to make the necessary connections that lead to better researching.

Learning is emotional. Numerous studies have shown that when students can use their own stories, memories, and feelings they learn the material better.[2] They even retain it. The same is true for relationships.

We learn by getting to know someone better. We learn how to communicate not only our desires but our needs more effectively. We begin to discuss openly our feelings, fears, and concerns which ultimately lead to higher learning. Through communication and investigation we learn what it means to be intimate. But how do we convey information intimacy to our students?

Finding the perfect match

It all starts with a topic. By drawing comparisons in choosing a topic to choosing a significant other, we can discuss what *characteristics* we want our topic to have. We can talk about what *traits* the topic should possess. I draw parallels with topic selection to choosing what to wear on a date, what restaurant to eat at, and what movie to see afterwards. If students put careful thought into their topics, like they do when they plan a date, they have a better chance of writing meaningful, intimate research papers just like they do in having that perfect date night.

Along these same lines, if students enjoy their topics, they are more engaged with the material, thereby establishing stronger relationships with the subject matter. In the dating world, students understand that spending time with someone annoying gets old real fast, and the same is true for poor topic selection. No one wants to spend an entire semester with a topic they find boring and uninspiring.

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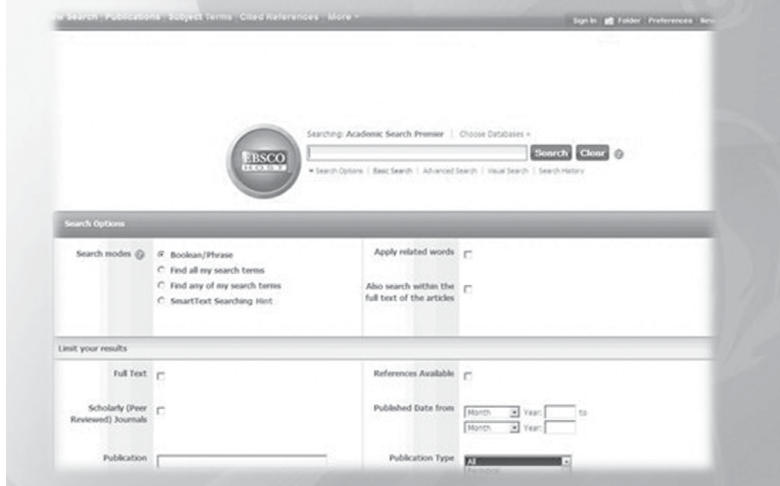
Screenshot of EBSCO Academic Search Premier with added text. View this article online for more detailed images.

One activity I do is called "Reference Speed Dating." In the real world of speed dating, a person sits down with a total stranger and has a quick, 2-to-5 minute conversation that hopefully highlights each other's strengths, interests, and perhaps even weaknesses. The point of the speed round is to "sell" yourself to the other person as a potential match. Basically each potential suitor is saying, "These are the reasons why I am perfect for you and your needs."

By applying this same principle to reference materials, students can quickly pop in and out of different resources (databases, Google Scholar, encyclopedias) to see what they can tease out. I provide each student with a set of questions to apply to each resource they "interview." Armed with their questions, students can begin to make sense of the types of materials out there and learn which resources are most appropriate for their needs.

Depending on the class, I sometimes switch up the "Reference Speed Dating" and have my students use the rose concept from the popular television show *The Bachelorette*. At the end of each episode, the bachelorette awards roses to the suitors she wants to get to know better. If a

suitor does not receive a rose, he must leave the show for good.

In my class, students award roses to the resources they think best suits their needs and wish to interview more thoroughly. The resources that do not make the cut are disregarded. I find that this premise works especially well with freshmen and sophomores simply because they are the target demographic for the show.

Tangentially, databases are a lot like dating websites. It is all about finding your matches. Poor searching techniques bring back poor results, especially if the student is thinking too broad. When we compare databases to dating websites, students grasp this concept. For example, if a student searches a dating site for "23-year-old female" they would receive thousands of results. No one has time to wade through all that, but if we can create strong search parameters, we can hone in on what we really want to see. The same is true for not finding any results at all. If a student is searching an online dating site for "male, 26-year-old, blonde hair, blue eyes, one tattoo, one nose ring" they would instantly discover that they are being too specific. By being

too narrow they are missing out on potential matches who may be a good fit but without a tattoo (but would be interested in getting one). By comparing database searching to online dating sites, students really see how to create effective search strings and begin to retrieve more useful results.

Distinguishing the dazzle from the duds

The next logical step in the research process is evaluating the results. I call this step "distin-

it in other areas of their life. We can then play directly to their strengths and acknowledge that all they really need is to tweak the skill set. By building up their confidence we can get our students out of their comfort zones.

The Project Information Literacy study, conducted by Alison Head and Michael Eisenberg, indicated that students are driven by familiarity and habit.[3] They use the same set of information sources in a similar way every single time they conduct research.
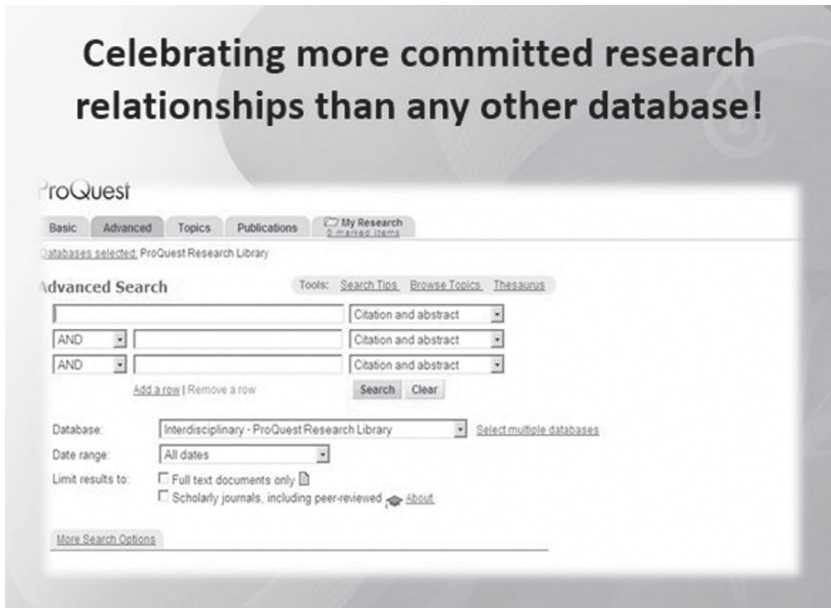
Screenshot of ProQuest Research Library with added text.

guishing the dazzle from the duds." Viewing library search results is very similar to viewing online dating profiles. You have to sift through them to filter out the duds. Not every profile is going to be a match, regardless of what the online dating site might suggest. In order to know whether a match is a true "match," the student must spend time with the results. When students spend quality time with their resources, they discover what the resource is all about. They can then determine which particular resource best suits their needs, if at all.

We, as librarians, know this is the evaluation process but by putting it in a dating context, students realize they sort of already know how to do this because they have been doing

We, as librarians, need to assure them that they do not need to settle. Students deserve more out of the research process, and, in order to reach the very best, they need to leave the land of comfort and take a chance on something new. Once students really delve into their topics, students can commit. We all know relationships start out casual and the same is true for searching. In order to have commitment, our students need to feel comfortable with not only the overall process but with using the resources as well.

Once this happens, they learn to trust themselves and their searching abilities. By having open dialogues about resource selection and evaluation, we can give them the

confidence they need. We essentially become the matchmakers.

Meeting the family

Once students have found a few solid resources, it is time to meet the family. I like to introduce the students to a citation database like Web of Knowledge and/or Google Scholar. In the world of relationships, when we want to take the commitment to the next level, we meet our significant other's family and friends. We all know that you can learn a lot about a person based on the company that they keep. The same is true for locating additional relevant resources. By introducing students to the concept of citations, they can see how this is similar to meeting the family. Each time their resource is cited in another paper, it adds validity. Each time they find a resource that fits their topic in a bibliography, they are getting know the author's "friends."

I tell my students to think of bibliographies and citation databases as reunions. Everyone is in one place and as the "special guest" they, the student, get to go around and participate in a "meet and greet," selecting who they want to talk to and learn more from.

Along these same lines, if a resource is not working out, dump it. There is no point in prolonging an unsuccessful relationship just as there is no point in continuing to use a resource that does not aid in understanding their topic. Besides, if students have been paying attention, they know that the next potential match is literally at their fingertips.

Committing to research

It is one thing for me to say that information intimacy resonates with my students, but it matters most what the students think. In my experience of using these concepts and activities in instructional sessions, students are engaged with the material. Not only are they willing to participate, but they have fun. Part of the appeal is looking at the research process in a new way. Students are surprised that these skills and techniques are not so foreign after all. In fact, many students are relieved to know that they have been doing some of these things already in their real lives. By leading with information intimacy, I automatically diminish the odds that students will become defensive. I start out by playing to their strengths and ask that they consider some new ideas that can only strengthen what they already know. I also make it a point to ask at the end of every instructional session and workshop, "How do you feel?" Because I know learning is emotional, I want to hear what they are feeling about the activities we did and the concepts we tackled. Usually students are surprised to hear me ask, and after a few moments of uncomfortable silence, someone always speaks up and begins the conversation. In the end, we all leave the classroom feeling connected and, honestly, more intimate with each other.

Conclusion

Students still need our expertise. Even though they have searching skills, we can help build upon that knowledge. By playing the role of matchmakers, we can relate the research process to our students in a way that resonates with them. We can provide new ways of looking and interacting with resources spoken in a language they understand. With a little work, information intimacy can be more than just my new catchphrase. It can be the very reason why research commitment issues are a thing of the past.

Notes

1. For example, see Paulette A. Kerr and Ross J. Todd, "Espoused Theories and Theories-in-use of Information Literacy: Reflecting for Effective Practice," IASL Conference Reports, (2009), Or Melissa Koch, "Information Literacy: Where Do We Go From Here?," *Technos* 10, no. 1 (2001): 20-26.

2. For example, see Carolina Mega, Lucia Ronconi, and Rossana De Beni, "What Makes a Good Student? How Emotions, Self-Regulated Learning, and Motivation Contribute to Academic Achievement," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 106, no. 1 (2014): 121-131.

3. Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, "Truth Be Told," Project Information Literacy Progress Report, (2010). ⌇