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Library Tautology: A Reenactment of the One-Shot

Nora Almeida

I have the hammer, I will smash anybody who threatens, however remotely, the company way of life.¹

If there's one thing you learn today, let it be this: keywords. Not specific keywords but the idea of them. If you whisper the correct keywords into the algorithm, you will achieve relevance. If you don't achieve relevance on the first try (which is super common), imagine you're an academic with a specialization in a super-niche disciplinary area who wrote a research article. Then imagine keywords you (they) would use and try those.²

I used to start with "write down every word you can think of related to your research topic" but no one understood why we wouldn't just google.

Why do you think you're here? I say now at the beginning, why even use the library?

One student says "the library is more reliable." But they don't say what it's more reliable than.

I try it a different way: what kinds of sources might you find at the library that you can't find on the internet?

"Books," someone says. And they're right but it's not the answer I was hoping for.

If there's one thing you learn today, let it be this: a cursory understanding of knowledge production and dissemination processes, which is why we need to log in from off campus.³

Show of hands...has anyone ever encountered a paywall in the wild?

A short economics lesson: Academics create intellectual products that are trapped in these databases. The labor of intellectual production is unwaged and subsequently monetized by companies who sell it back to universities. So these products are attached to capitalist value but indirectly. Like I'm standing in front of you getting paid for this. And you're paying to be here but you're not paying me.⁴

Not just anyone can read this stuff...is what I'm saying. Without the login.

Questions?

I'm sorry but I don't know *your* username or password. After our library session you can visit the understaffed help desk downstairs.

Transition: I've internalized a concept and I'd like to transmit it to you but I also want you to engage in constructing it.

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Can you guess what it is?

Good guess but a university can't be the author because a place doesn't have the capacity to write.

A hint: some of the people who write academic articles are in this room.

"Students?" someone offers, hesitantly. Sometimes, I say, but usually professors.

We all look at their professor who seems startled and is probably an adjunct who juggles so many contingent jobs that they don't have time to write.⁵

And, I say, lowering my voice a little as though to let them in on a secret...when I'm not teaching students how to do research, I write academic articles about teaching students how to do research.⁶

This does not accurately describe my scholarly output.

The students look skeptical, like they can't think of a single human being who would want to read an article like that. And I empathize.

Confession: I thrive in an atmosphere that combines boredom with urgency. I rely on meta-analysis as a pedagogical crutch.

Reminder: your own experiences are examples of primary sources if you write them down. We are all knowledge producers here.

Watching you try to use the interface makes me an empirical researcher.

Now, I will conduct labor on behalf of a non-intuitive platform.⁷ "EBSCO abhors a preposition," is a joke I like that no student has ever understood.⁸

See how you can slide the date filter until you are confined within a specific timeframe—like recursive intervals of 50 minutes. Or you can use these radio buttons like you're shopping online, an experience you've likely had before.⁹

Later we can unpack the "find it" button because I like unearthing broken links behind the discovery layer in front of a live audience.

Is anyone feeling confused? This interaction doesn't have a lot of context so that's totally normal.¹⁰

Transition: I'm going to roam around while you engage in active learning or experiential learning or learning by discovery. I'm just a facilitator, I say, winking at the professor who is grading papers and doesn't notice me.¹¹

Is everyone finding stuff?

Advice: if you're not getting what you need, try a different operator.

Reminder: the database is not predictive but responds to certain directives. For example, univers* = universal = university.¹²

Let's evaluate some sources. How about this article about public sector austerity? Let's take a look before the vendor cuts off access because we're behind on payments.¹³

Is this a reliable source?

That's true. Reliability *is* subjective....and contextual but let's gauge how this critical framing is landing with your professor.¹⁴ They're not into it. Let's talk more about the indicators of reality. I'm sorry, I mean: reliability.¹⁵

Where on this virtual artifact would you look for those?

If there's one thing you learn today, let it be this: always be skeptical but also always defer to the assignment guidelines that your professor never shared with me.¹⁶

I'm assuming there is an assignment and will reference it often to lend our interaction gravitas.

Confession: I believe the capacity to spontaneously construct a high-energy performance is an asset as a critical pedagogue. However, I have questions about the conflation of efficacy and eye contact.¹⁷

Which rubric would you use if you were me?¹⁸

Sadly, we're almost out of time but here's the button to email yourself the articles you found. Here's, for some reason, a paper worksheet with URLs on it. Here's where you can chat with a librarian (not a robot) the night before your assignment is due.

Oh, and we didn't get into citations but you can just push this button and poof! Imagine how much you can impress all of your friends with perfect MLA citations if you can ever find this button again.

One sec... before you leave, I need you to manually type this faded bit-link that my colleague wrote on the whiteboard last year into your browser. It's a two-minute assessment that will help us improve these sessions for future students.

I think about the strangeness of the phrase "future students" and wait two long minutes and remember the time a professor directed her students to applaud at the end of a one-shot. It made me feel embarrassed and grateful. I've never otherwise been emphatically congratulated for something I do so routinely.

Don't be a stranger, I say, while the students leave.

I turn off the projector. It is warm and humming.

The room is empty. I feel alive beneath oppressive fluorescent lights, buoyed by the friction of an exchange that I'm also relieved is over.

Notes

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