

Keep Calm and Read Laterally! A Bite-sized Information Literacy Programme at Singapore Management University (SMU) Libraries

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Abstract

Librarians at Singapore Management University (SMU) Libraries developed an information literacy programme, titled *Keep Calm and Read Laterally!* as part of the Libraries' flagship Bite-Sized Workshop Series. The initiative aimed to further the digital competence of students through advocating critical and effective engagement with digital information. The workshop was highly interactive, incorporating problem-based learning and hands-on group activities, and was split into two parts. The first part helped learners to understand what they read and what types of resources they could use to address various information needs, while the second part guided learners to assess digital information leveraging lateral reading techniques and to develop a better understanding towards the credibility of the information being evaluated. This article further discusses several observations from the past two runs of the workshop and presents the gathered participant feedback, which offers valuable insights for continuous improvement. Additionally, the author invites fellow colleagues to exchange ideas and share their best practices in lateral reading instruction.

Keywords: Information and Digital Literacies, Lateral Reading, Problem-based Learning, Critical Assessment of Digital Information, Fact-checking

Why: The Beginning

American author John Green once said: "Instead of asking why read laterally, I think we should consider what we lose when we don't read laterally, when we passively scroll through information feeds and accept what seems true and dismiss what seems wrong."

Given that we both subscribed to this train of thought, it sparked a conversation between my former colleague Rebecca Maniates and I as we wanted to develop an information literacy (IL) programme together. Rebecca, who was then the Research Librarian, Social Sciences at Singapore Management University (SMU) Libraries and I participated in a job shadowing programme where we worked together to develop a learning plan and identify goals in areas to enhance my professional development. One of our goals was to develop a bite-sized workshop as I wanted to sharpen my teaching and pedagogical skills.

We exchanged a lot of ideas focussed on our past teaching experiences. From our experience of coaching first-year students on crafting the American Psychological Association (APA) citations, we observed that they often had difficulty various resources they were referencing but considered them all as "websites". Another thing that we observed was that when students worked on their assignments, they were often puzzled by the rich variety of sources available to them. For instance, students had difficulty differentiating amongst different resource types and often felt unsure about which sources to use and what information to trust. After identifying these common pain points among our students, Rebecca

and I decided to develop an IL workshop as part of SMU Libraries' flagship [Bite-Sized Workshop Series](#), which offers out-of-classroom learning opportunities covering a wide variety of topics, to raise awareness of these problems often overlooked by students and to help address them.

One main concept that we wanted to introduce through this workshop was the lateral reading strategy (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017) for assessing digital information. The lateral reading strategy advocates leaving the site, opening multiple new tabs and checking out what other sources say about the site whereas the vertical reading strategy refers to staying on a single site and reading about what the site says about itself. It is a concept used by many professional fact-checkers and savvy researchers to judge the credibility of unfamiliar sources, and this universal strategy can be applied to evaluate various types of digital information across different disciplines. Through the workshop, which was later named as *Keep Calm and Read Laterally!*, we aimed to impart pertinent information and digital literacies into the student learning experience and further their digital competence in today's very complex information landscape, which is well aligned to our Libraries' strategic goals.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the session, you will be able to:

- Differentiate between the types of resources and their purposes
- Compare lateral and vertical reading techniques as a strategy to evaluate digital information
- Apply lateral reading strategies to evaluate online information

Image 1. Learning outcomes of the workshop, which were set to address the common pain points observed amongst students, are well aligned to SMU's Graduate Learning Outcomes, in particular "Critical Thinking and Problem Solving".

What: Problem-based Learning and Group Activities

In order to make the seemingly boring topic fun and engaging to our audience, Rebecca and I largely incorporated hands-on group activities as a form of collaborative and interactive learning as well as experiential learning that are highlighted in SMU's Pedagogical Framework. I will describe what this entailed in the next section.

Agenda

30 mins	Warm-up: Understand what you read (Activity 1) Group Sharing
45 mins	Flex your fact-checking muscles (Activity 2 – Pt 1) Evaluate information with Lateral Reading strategies Flex your fact-checking muscles (Activity 2 – Pt 2) Group Sharing
10 mins	Wrap-up, Q&A

Image 2. Agenda for the workshop, which included two group activities. By the end of each activity, we invited a group to share their thoughts and findings with the class.

In the warm-up *Activity 1 - Understand What You Read*, participants were firstly given four examples of online materials and students need to identify their resource types and describe the information gleaned from them. The materials included a news aggregator website, a review article from a peer-reviewed journal, an E-book chapter, and an online encyclopaedia. We wanted to guide our participants to progress from merely treating these online materials as “websites” but to be able to recognise their distinct content by reading the information presented on them. For instance, how does a news aggregator differ from a general news website and how does a review article differ from a research paper? Then, participants were situated into three scenarios and asked to match the abovementioned material types to meet the respective information needs in the scenarios. For example, which material types could potentially address the information needs when a topic is new to them and they want to find background information to begin their research? The second part of this activity would help them understand that different types of information can be used for different purposes.

In *Activity 2 – Flex Your Fact-checking Muscles*, we asked participants to firstly assess a piece of online information leveraging their existing knowledge and information evaluation skills. The online information we selected was from a site that is not easily recognisable as a reputable source or a non-reputable one. Next, we introduced the lateral reading strategy and compared it with the vertical reading strategy to demonstrate the strength of the former. Participants were then asked to re-look at the same piece of information and apply their newly acquired lateral reading techniques into practice. This before-after comparison activity aimed to advocate moving away from superficial markers of evaluation, which are often used while reading vertically, and further developing a more nuanced and complete perspective on the credibility of the information that is being evaluated.

We did not just stop here. We also provided some food for thought for our audience to take away from this workshop by prompting them to always consider the context of

information needs and the sliding scale of credibility and to become more critical consumers of information.

How: Instructor Observations and Encouraging Feedback

We have conducted two runs of the *Keep Calm and Read Laterally!* workshop respectively in Term 1 and 2 of AY2022-23. The workshops were open to the entire SMU community for registration, and participation was voluntary. *Table 1* provides a snapshot of the participant profiles across the two runs of workshop. It was noted that the only faculty participant and some staff participants, who were in fact our fellow library colleagues, attended the workshop to observe or refresh their knowledge and wore their student's hat when participating in the group activities.

Table 1: Number of Participants by Profile in the *Keep Calm and Read Laterally!* Workshops

Number of Participants	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Faculty	Staff	Grand Total
Run 1	4	8	0	3	15
Run 2	1	5	1	1	8

We gathered several observations as follows:

In *Activity 1 - Understand What You Read*, it was not surprising that almost all the groups considered both the news aggregator website and the online encyclopaedia as merely "websites". The participants correctly identified the journal article (with only a few of them categorising it broadly as "literature") as well as the E-book chapter, possibly because they had engaged more often with these two types of scholarly content. While most groups did not specifically indicate the journal article as a review paper, it was noted that senior scholars in the class were generally familiar with the differences between research and review papers.

- Another interesting observation was that though the entire class had never heard about the lateral reading strategy before, a few participants were already engaging with digital information with a lateral reading mindset during *Activity 2 – Flex Your Fact-checking Muscles* before the strategy was introduced. For example, they cross-checked the reported claim against credible news sources and examined the site's reputation by consulting [Media Bias Fact Check \(MBFC\)](#).
- Besides, in the latter part of *Activity 2* participants showed great interest in learning about how to use the fact-checking sites, such as [Snopes.com](#), [Factcheck.org](#), and [Google Fact Check Explorer](#) which was newly launched last year. As a bonus, we demonstrated to our audience how to use the Google *site:* search operator to investigate claims more efficiently with the fact-checking sites.

In our post-workshop survey for the pilot run of the *Keep Calm and Read Laterally!* workshop delivered in Term 1 of AY2022-23, 67% of the respondents rated "likely" or "extremely likely" to recommend the workshop to their peers. The participants gave us honest feedback and helpful suggestions which enabled us to improve in the second run. In Term 2, we achieved 100% "likely" or "extremely likely" when the respondents were asked if they would recommend the workshop to their peers. Here are some qualitative comments from the workshop participants:

Qualitative Comments

Lateral reading helps detect the credibility of information, which is a critical skill nowadays. - Postgraduate

(I learnt) Techniques for lateral reading and resources for fact checking. - Postgraduate

(I learnt) Lateral reading - check credibility of stories using snopes.com and mediabiasfactcheck.com. - Postgraduate

(I learnt) To use Google Fact Check Explorer for fact checking. - Undergraduate

Thank you so much for the great session today and the materials. It is very helpful! - Faculty

Wish to see more examples of how to verify a content. - Postgraduate

Image 3. Selected qualitative comments from the workshop participants.

Participant feedback is integral to our continuous improvement of the workshop, and it also demonstrates the level of engagement participants had during the workshop.

Looking Ahead

In conclusion, the *Keep Calm and Read Laterally!* workshop has met its purpose as it has successfully raised the awareness of reading critically and engaging effectively with digital information amongst its participants and offered them a head start in applying the acquired lateral reading techniques in the critical assessment of information.

For most students at SMU, especially the undergraduate students, they are enrolled in a library E-learning module titled *Library Research Skills* which is a highly recommended programme by the SMU Holistic Student Development Framework. Through this self-paced E-learning programme, in particular one of its Learning Activities [Digital Literacy: What You Need to Know](#), students will learn about the [SIFT \(Stop, Investigate, Find, Trace\)](#) and [S.U.R.E \(Source, Understand, Research, Evaluate\)](#) concepts for evaluating digital information. Introducing the lateral reading strategy via this bite-sized workshop would well supplement what the *Library Research Skills* module has to offer and provide students with a new perspective with which they can effectively engage with digital information.

Our observations from the workshops also informed us that librarian's guidance on understanding different types of resources, especially resources available on the open web, plays an important role in helping students to differentiate them and identify the appropriate ones to address their information needs. This could be an area for librarians to focus on and reinforce in their IL instruction.

We will continue offering the *Keep Calm and Read Laterally!* workshop as part of the [Bite-Sized Workshop Series](#) in AY2023-24, and are dedicated to continuous improvement based on the needs of our community. As one student requested for more examples of information evaluation cases in the post-workshop survey, we are currently working on a lateral reading strategies tutorial which will comprise additional, self-directed exercises to our future workshop participants. Due to the intense group activities offered through the

workshop, its class size is often limited. Therefore, the tutorial would come in helpful as asynchronous learning materials to other interested learners too.

SMU Libraries also welcome our fellow colleagues from other libraries to share their experience or ideas on teaching lateral reading with us. A list of key resources that had inspired us to develop this workshop is appended below for colleagues who might be interested to read more about lateral reading instruction.

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Resources for Lateral Reading Instruction

CrashCourse. (2019, January 22). *Check yourself with lateral reading: Crash course navigating digital information #3* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/GoQG6Tin-1E>

Detmering, R., Willenborg, A., & Holtze, T. (2022, July 15). *Lateral reading*. University of Louisville Libraries. <https://library.louisville.edu/citizen-literacy/lateral>

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