The Wind beneath my Wings

Falling in and out of love with an online library research skills tutorial

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Dear Tutorial,

You are truly lovely. You are clear, and give me all the information I needed. You were a great help. You helped me find everything I needed to write my paper. I do wish you could show me how to access the research databases without picking a subject but in the end you were a great help and I truly appreciated.

Thank you, till next time.
Dear Library Research Skills Tutorial,

You're just not that important to me. We're in different places. We would have been good together a few years ago when I was young and didn't know what I was doing. But I'm older now, more mature, and I don't need you.

Best of luck,
The library research skills tutorial is an information literacy tutorial that Concordia library launched last year. We built it to update and replace an earlier tutorial created in 2004.
Before the launch, we did informal user testing where we asked 20 mostly undergraduate students to have a look at a few sections of the tutorial and then fill out a survey. The students overwhelmingly told us that our tutorial was very clear, useful, it had the right amount of detail, and good design and navigation. The responses to the open-ended questions allowed us to tweak certain elements of the tutorial, but overall, the comments were again very positive.
With these results, we felt very confident when we launched the tutorial. But we still wanted to see if the tutorial would be useful in real educational settings. That’s why we decided to do this research. For our research we had two questions that we wanted to explore. The first one was « Is the Library Research Skills Tutorial a useful tool when recommended to undergraduate students with research assignments? » We didn’t want to answer this question by using regular attitudinal research like surveys or focus groups. Nor did we want to do yet another usability study. There are quite a few usability studies of tutorials in the library literature
We decided to investigate our question using a user experience methodology or a UX methodology. Andy Priestner defines user experience as … While the user testing that we did looked at how our tutorial was effective or easy to use, we were hoping that a UX method would add to this by giving us information on students’ psychological expectations or emotional feelings, and that would give us a more complete picture of how a student might interact with our tutorial.
We chose a novel UX method: the love / breakup letter

"A method that reveals how people relate to and are attached to everyday technologies [or services] by asking them to participate in the familiar activity of writing love or break-up letters (...). These letters tend to be playful, but also facilitate emotional expression in a way that can allow users to easily reflect on their attitudes and feelings.

- Walker et al. (2018)

Although there are many different UX methods out there, we decided to try a novel UX method called the love or breakup letter. Walker defined the method in the following way: ...

Walker continues by saying that the use of creativity and exaggeration can allow students to uncover hidden needs or motivations.

This technique has not been used extensively. There are only a handful of articles outside of the library literature that report using this method. And it was used mainly to understand peoples' relationship to technologies through the lens of what they called product attachment theory. In the library world, the technique has been mentioned maybe 2 or 3 newsletters, but very little (if any) details were provided on the outcomes.
Since we decided to use a novel methodology in the world of libraries, we wanted our second research question to be related to this. So...

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<td>1</td>
<td>Is the Library Research Skills Tutorial a useful tool when recommended to undergraduate students with research assignments?</td>
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<td>Will the love / breakup letter method work in a library setting? Will students know how to participate? Will it provide helpful feedback, different from our pre-launch user testing?</td>
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We collaborated with professors in four different social science classes. We worked with them to adapt either their course outline or their assignment descriptions in order to incorporate a paragraph that asked students to use the Library Research Skills Tutorial.
Essentially, the paragraph said ...
We do let the students know that the participation in the evaluation will be optional. The professors also reminded the students at several occasions to use the tutorial to help them with their assignment.
On the day that the assignment was due, we went to each of the classes and asked the students, on a voluntary basis, to evaluate the tutorial using the love / break up method. We purposefully kept the method a secret until we visited their class so that they would not have time to think about it in advance. The goal is to have their response be as authentic and spontaneous as possible.
We also only give them 20 minutes to write the letter, as this was suggested in the literature to encourage spontaneity, but it never took more than 10 minutes in each class.
In total, 52 students participated in our study. We first visited a 200 level sociology class where only 2 out of the 75 students volunteered for our study. The low participation rate had to do with the nature of the written assignment which was optional. Then we visited two separate applied human science classes where we got approximately a 50% participation rate in both classes. Finally, we visited a 400 level sociology class where 8 out of the 9 students participated. Since we only visited this last class about 3 weeks ago, we haven’t had the chance to fully analyze the data yet, so the results we’ll be showing you in the presentation will not include this class.

SOCI 298 – 2 / 75
AHSC 281 – 21 / 50
AHSC 350 – 21 / 41
SOCI 402 – 8 / 9
In total, we received 44 letters (when we exclude the letters from that 400 level sociology class). Of the 44 letters 41 of them were actually usable. By looking at the letters, we saw that they actually fell in four groups.

Excluded letters (from AHSC 350)

- 1 was song lyrics
- 1 was talking about a database or discovery search – not the tutorial
- One was addressed to the library, not the tutorial
We received 41 usable letters, which we divided into 4 groups

The first two groups were the types of letters that we expected to receive. These are breakup letters and love letters. Although we did not have any expectations as to the proportions of each letter...

\[
\frac{23}{41} = \text{breakup} \\
\frac{9}{41} = \text{love}
\]
..we were a tiny bit surprised to see that the majority of letters were breakup letters to the tutorial. This was a little bit surprising especially since our pre-launch user testing seemed to show that students actually appreciated the tutorial. That they saw the value of the tutorial.
We received 41 usable letters, which we divided into 4 groups:

<table>
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<td>56%</td>
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For the love letters, only 22% of students decided to write these types of letters. But we received another 22% of letters that we had not anticipated. We categorized them under two separate letter types.

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<table>
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<th>Breakup</th>
<th>Love</th>
<th>Swipe left</th>
<th>One-night stand</th>
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<td>56%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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That we named swipe left and one-night stand. So for those Tinder users, you’ll understand that swipe left means that the students never even took the time to look at the tutorial. They never used it. They were just not interested and swiped left. A small group of letters were what we’ve called one night stands. In these letters, the students said they used the tutorial, and found it quite helpful, but after using it once, they didn’t feel that they needed to use it again. So they essentially broke up with it.

Another 22% were other types of letters

6 / 41 = never used
3 / 41 = used once, now flying on my own (one-night stand)

Of the 41 letters, 30 letters (3/4 of the letters) had a love letter structure (they either started with Dear... or addressed the tutorial directly)
In terms of the letters written by each of the classes, both students in the 200 level soci classes wrote breakup letters, As for the Applied Human Sciences classes, there wasn’t a big difference in terms of the amount of breakup letters the were written (that’s the black part of the pie), but there were interesting differences in the other type of letters that were written. For example, 300 level class wrote more love letters than the 200 level class (that’s the blue part), and were the only ones to write the one night stand letters. So at the 300 level, outside of those who wrote breakup letters, there seems to have been more of an appreciation of the tutorial as opposed to 200 level classes. On the other hand, the AHSC 200 level class were the only ones to write swipe left letters (that’s the dark grey). Susie will talk a bit about a possible reason why students who would probably benefit the most from a tutorial (200 level students) would not even bother to look at it.

Now we’re going to read you a few of the letters so that you can get a sense of the themes that emerged.
Dear LRST,

As I am already pretty comfortable looking for articles and research papers I was very reluctant to go on a first date at all.

Seeing how a friend set us up, I decided to give it a chance. I wasn't particularly wowed as the information was pretty basic. Too many links also create stress. I personally would have preferred a webinar style tutorial.

Anyway, it was nice to meet you.

Take care.
Dear Library Tutorial,

I'm sorry I never gave you a fair chance. I am sorry to say I've been using another software. Coming from cégep where I am used to using google scholar to write my papers, I have trust issues using someone new.

I suggest to promote yourself competitively to convince me why I should choose you. Don't be so shy next time, brag about your qualities!

I am not used to new relationships and tend to stick to my old ways.

Maybe in the future I will give you a second chance 😊

I mean it when I say, it's not you it's me.

Love, Google Scholar user 😊
Dear Library Research Skills Tutorial,

Our relationship is kind of like when you try and make a meal for the first time. You already have an idea of how it should be prepared, but you feel somewhat unsure of all the intricacies of how to go about it. Looking at the long list of steps to follow is daunting and makes you question if it’s really worth it or if you should just pop a microwavable meal in instead. You muster up all your energy and plow forward. As you continue, you see that it isn’t so hard at all, and when the meal is done, it was well worth [it]. The next time you make the meal however, you don’t follow the guidelines. You might look at it every now and then for a reminder, but generally you don’t need it and want to go forth and try things on your own. You were great at the start (...) However, I’ve grown since then and want to fly on my own now. We can stay in touch.
In addition to categorizing each letter as a whole, we used a general inductive approach to analyze the text of the letters and we came up with 28 codes for specific EXCERPTS or passages that we had identified, and we then grouped those under 5 overarching themes or categories - the 5 bubbles you see here. But it also became apparent to us that the comments in the letters related to two very different things: comments about the tutorial itself such as its content and design -- IT’S YOU -- vs comments about the students’ own context: their intentions, their attitudes, preferences and experience -- IT’S NOT YOU, IT’S ME.

In this case, we actually found the comments about the tutorial itself to be less useful and informative, as with a few exceptions, they were generic and non-specific, so we’re not going to mention anything more about these, other than to note that this is where we found the most positive love-like passages.
It’s not you, it’s me

Back in the world of the students’ own context... here we DID find some interesting specifics, and there was a good variety of them...
But what we found as the most prevalent sub-theme may not shock you if you’ve read the literature about students’ attitudes towards library research, or experienced those attitudes firsthand.
Confidence in “already knowing how to do this stuff” is definitely what was mentioned the most.

Half of all break up letters included confidence as a theme, and though the excerpt here says it all quite succinctly, we should mention that these comments were often tempered by suggestions that those with LESS experience or writing a paper for the first time would likely benefit from the tutorial,
But of course we found more than just blind statements of confidence. Some students took the time to list and describe their learning and searching preferences. (Learning with videos) Videos on YouTube, (Other Tools) Google and Google Scholar -- this excerpt was referring to a library course guide that a student had bookmarked, and (Point of Need) we had some passages telling us, essentially: I don’t want to sit here and read all about how to do these things in general and why they are important, I want help with the specific search I’m trying to conduct right now, or with the citation I’m trying to format.

"I have found other, better, more user friendly resources to have my academic paper writing time with"
Is the Library Research Skills Tutorial a useful tool when recommended to undergraduate students with research assignments?

Back to the Research Questions: **Research question 1**: Is the Library Research Skills Tutorial a useful tool when recommended to undergraduate students with research assignments?
Is the Library Research Skills Tutorial a useful tool when recommended to undergraduate students with research assignments?

Gross & Latham (2009)

“[S]tudents report that they do not use electronic resources such as help files or online tutorials. Their overwhelming preference is just to ask someone else, whether that is a family member, a friend, a classmate, or the person who happens to be sitting next to them.

“[P]eople who have a lot of confidence about their level of ability are unlikely to seek opportunities to build skills they think they already have. (…)

NO!

In our case students were directed to use the Tutorial in their assignment descriptions, and the professors specifically mentioned it at least twice, but still the students did not give it much attention. Gross and Latham, in their research on undergraduates’ perceptions of information literacy, also found similar results. They wrote…” QUOTE “

For others, the tool didn’t necessarily deliver what they wanted and the majority didn’t see the relevance of it for themselves — they considered it TOO BASIC… Gross and Latham again speak to this in their article: QUOTE

So in summary we are saying that in the same way that is not usually useful to recommend a library workshop to students outside of class time, even when they are doing a research assignment, the tutorial is not especially useful when recommended for students to use independently for their research assignment, -- at least not without any other intervention. Speaking of intervention… I’m going to interrupt our questions and answer will a small aside here…
When visiting the classes, we asked the students to answer a couple of survey questions before writing the letter itself. One of the questions was whether they had ever attended a library workshop. Although there was no real difference between breakup letters and love letters in terms library workshop attendance, ALL students who swiped left, admitting they had never even clicked on the tutorial link, also said that they had never attended a library workshop. ---- It’s a super small number and may just be a fluke, though we think it is worthy of further investigation as it supports the notion that a lack of intervention -- even if it’s just to expose and actively putting to use the library and library resources might tend to towards a negative persuasion in terms of even trying out one of our tools.

Sure the professors mentioned the tutorial in their assignment descriptions and brought it up in class, but they did not actually use it in class. We had initially intended on visiting the class twice, once to introduce and contextualize the tutorial and once for the letter-writing, but it actually made more sense not to do so as we were testing its usefulness WITHOUT our intervention.

And these suspicions about intervention are not only ours...
The idea is borne out in similar studies to ours as well. Tim Held and Laura Gil-Trayho, as part of their usability test of a suite of online library tutorials at California State, asked students in focus groups how they thought the tutorials should be employed, deployed, promoted, and they found that QUOTE Participants seemed...(some of the students specifically said: If it isn’t mandatory, many students won’t think it is useful to look at; I’m going to prioritize what I get points for, so make it required for me to get around to it.)

In relation to this point, the authors concluded that QUOTE –[I]f faculty feel such information literacy is valuable to research assignments, -- as offered by the online tutorials --.....
The answer to the second research question is more nuanced

2

Will the love / breakup method work in a library setting? Will students know how to participate? Will it provide helpful feedback, different from our pre-launch user testing?

Research Question 2 related to the methodology -- Or rather set of research questions. Let’s break it up start with the subquestions....
Will students know how to participate?
Mostly, yes. 30 letters had love letter structure (and we only introduced the idea to them when we arrived for testing in the class) and some also told us that they enjoyed the format.
Is it helpful feedback? Depends what you are seeking:

Sometimes the love/breakup letter language actually obscured the message we were trying to decipher, and we had to be careful not to indulge in OVEREAGER interpretation. With lines such as: « I feel you don’t understand me anymore (…) I have to change myself to suit you » -- I leave it to you to figure out how you would code that.

We did NOT get the kind of useful specific feedback which the pre-launch user testing provided, and which allowed the team to make significant changes to the tutorial design, layout and content.

BUT..., YES, we DID get unique feedback in terms of the students’ context, with what we think are revealing clues as to students’ actual behaviour and attitude in their own classroom setting.
And as for the larger question: **Will the love / breakup method work in a library setting?**

We think it can, but, if we were to offer any advice to future researchers we would urge them to consider, in addition to the points we just made, that this method has mainly been used to understand technological ATTACHMENTS. So, ask yourself, are you evaluating a service or a tool to which you want students to become attached? Or for which you want to measure attachment?

We could imagine yes, for instance, with a bibliographic management software, a library space, or a service like ILL.

But when it comes to teaching tools, like the tutorial, breakup letters, and certainly one night stands we discovered, are not only indications of failure, albeit useful ones. They are also reminders that our goal is not simply for students to become attached to our stuff and love it forever -- we also want them to fly on their own. Or, it’s better to have loved and lost.....
Acknowledgements

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Bibliography


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Thank you!