

# Transcript

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**Derek Bruff:** This is "Leading Lines." I'm Derek Bruff. In this episode we take a look at the work of the New Literacies Alliance.

The NLA is a cross-institutional collaboration among librarians to create open educational resources intended to teach information literacy. They have created online lessons for introducing students to search strategies, scholarly conversations, the role of authority and research, citations, reading scientific research and more.

The NLA lessons consist of brief readings for videos, interactive exercises and knowledge checks with lots of feedback for students as they move through the lessons. Each lesson takes between 8 and 15 minutes for students to complete, and lessons can be accessed directly through the NLA website or embedded in your local course management system.

Leading Lines Producer, Melissa Mallon, caught up with two of the leaders of the New Literacies Alliance at a recent conference. Melissa spoke with Joelle Pitts, who is an Instructional Design Librarian at Kansas State University, and Matthew Upson, Director of Undergraduate Instruction and Outreach Services at the Oklahoma State University Libraries.

They talk about the origin of the New Literacies Alliance, the challenges that come with teaching students Information Literacy, what's next for the NLA and the lessons they're developing.

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**Melissa Mallon:** I'm Melissa Mallon. I am the Director of Teaching and Learning and the Director of Education Library at Vanderbilt University. I'm very pleased to be coming to you,

dispatched from the Open Education Southern Symposium in Fayetteville, Arkansas. It's the inaugural open at the conference in this region.

I have the pleasure of talking with two of my favorite people, Matt Upson, who is the Director of the Undergraduate Instruction and Outreach Services at Oklahoma State University Libraries...

**Matt Upson:** Hello.

**Melissa:** ...and Joelle Pitts, who's an Instructional Design Librarian and intern of Academic Services at Kansas State University.

**Joelle Pitts:** Thanks for having us.

**Melissa:** We're here to talk about an amazing project called the New Literacies Alliance, which we'll probably shorten to NLA for brevity. Full disclosure, I am a member of the steering committee with Joelle and Matt. This is a really exciting opportunity to talk more about the project, what NLA is, and how it can benefit faculty and students in higher ed.

Thank you both for being here. I thought we could start out talking a little bit about the history of NLA. How did it get started? What are your roles in the program?

**Joelle:** I can kick things off. I was with the project from the beginning. We started about six years in what was originally a group of Kansas institutions who were hoping to not recreate the information literacy wheel at our respective institutions but pool our time, our resources and our shrinking budget dollars in order to create materials that would work across the partner institutions as a leveling platform.

We've since expanded beyond campus, of course. We've got, I think, 10 partners now from across the United States including in Tennessee, Oklahoma, Wisconsin and others.

We're focused on building a suite of online lessons that not only focus on information literacy concepts and skills but about the critical thinking that's required to engage with the information landscape of today. I am a member of the steering committee. I've been with the project from the beginning. I also do instructional design work for the project.

**Matt:** Then, I have been with NLA, I guess maybe three years now having been in Kansas previously, knew Joelle.

I honestly can't remember how I heard about NLA because I don't think I'd heard about it, maybe in passing when I was still in Kansas, and when I moved to Oklahoma to Oklahoma State and not having any tutorials built already and thinking about what our steps are going to be.

We actually hired an instructional designer, Christina Calhoun, who is also working with us on NLA. She designed our own stuff at OSU, but quickly we've learned, NLA, this is something we can work on, develop content right alongside them.

Then, hiring Holly Leutkenhaus, who's our first-year experience librarian, having that focus on first-year instruction.

We knew that we had a key audience, first-year students primarily at OSU that we wanted to work with and build tutorials for. We had an instructional designer that could do in-house stuff as well help with the instructional design process for NLA. Seeing it as a good opportunity to jump in with both feet and kill as many birds as possible with as few stones.

**Melissa:** [laughs] Efficiency, I like it.

**Matt:** It's been nice. I feel like it's been very productive for us as a team. I think we all enjoy it. Our administration is onboard and very supportive of us being involved. I joined the steering committee, having a greater role in thinking about planning and directions we'd want to take.

**Melissa:** I would like to loop back to something Joelle mentioned, which was this idea of critical thinking. The tag line in LA is critical thinking for complex times. Can you talk a little bit about what within that message speaks to you, and what passions or interests are you bringing to the steering committee in future directions?

**Joelle:** I come from an instructional design background, so I really nerd out when it comes to brain-based learning and some of the neuroscience behind learning.

Part of what makes this project really meaningful for me is the critical thinking piece because

we can essentially combine some of the cognitive and behavioral elements of information literacy, the skills and behaviors we want information literate individuals to know and to do with the affect of the metacognitive elements of learning.

When we combine those two or at least align those two sides of the learning coin, we can more effectively facilitate the long-term transfer of information in the brain.

That's what I really get excited about is when we create lessons that not only teach concepts but require or at least ask students to think about and reflect on how those issues impact them, what it means to them, why they value things the way that they do. Those are the issues I think that make the content meaningful for the student and then facilitates that deeper learning.

**Matt:** When we were bouncing around ideas for the tagline, I can't remember some of the other versions that we had, but what...

**Joelle:** They were pretty terrible.

**Matt:** Were they?

[laughter]

**Melissa:** Do you have an example of one that you can remember.

**Matt:** I can't remember.

**Melissa:** A terrible one?

**Joelle:** I blocked them out, I think.

[laughter]

**Matt:** I think I came up with some fairly crass ones as well. That's usually what I do. What stands out to me about this one is the practical nature of it. It's not critical thinking for success in your specific course title. It is thinking about how to be successful in society as a citizen, as a professional, as a student.

We always talk to students about how it is easier to access more information than ever before, but few people think about the complexity of actually trying to navigate that information, whether to evaluate it, how to use it, how to use it ethically, how to produce and share new information.

That piece, that complexity, the practicality of it is what stands out for me, and it's important. As we think about what our mission and vision are, that really stands out. It's part of what we're doing anyway. It is part of our mission. It maybe hasn't been stated as such. It's not just for academic purposes, not just for classroom success.

It is much broader than that, and that's what we're trying to do.

**Melissa:** Let's talk a little bit about what the lessons look like and some of the content. Something that I find to be one of the biggest benefits of NLA is that the lessons are institutionally agnostic, you could say, in that anyone anywhere can use them. They're not branded with any university branding.

I like what you said, Matt, that it is more than you can use this for your course because this is one thing you need to do in this course. There are bigger concepts, bigger issues that people can take throughout any academic program into "real life," and being a good critical thinker and citizen of the world.

What lessons have you been developing, and how do you decide how to develop a lesson or what content you're going to include?

**Matt:** A lot of discussions with the group, not just with the steering committee but with the group as a whole. For all the things we've said about the practicality of it, life outside academia, a lot of the conversations lead to ideas that stem from what's going on at our individual institutions, what are these commonly seen needs.

Thinking about all the instructional context we have might drive what we want to do with NLA and shifting from that classroom-based or curriculum-based content across the board to bore this. What skills do they need to be successful?

That helps us also apply it to high schools, public library settings, anyone who wants to deliver and receive education in these areas, they're not limited. Those conversations with the

group, we brainstorm a lot of ideas, and then narrow it down in a very efficient manner. It works. Everyone feels like their voice is heard.

I know those brainstorming sessions are really valuable to me in limiting some of these ideas, because there's so many things that we want to do. It's a question of prioritizing this stuff, what's valuable to the most people according to the group.

**Joelle:** I would just echo everything Matt just said. I'd also add that the way that we make decisions around what content and what projects to work on does happen in an egalitarian way which fosters that excitement and the buy-in from our partner institutions.

Whether they have five individuals who participate on the working group or whether they have one, that the nature of the way that we brainstorm lends itself to the open nature of the project.

I would say, too, that even at the lesson level, so when we decide we're going to tackle a particular content area, we gather a small group of what we call a lesson group or a working group, which is usually between three and five individuals.

Even then, we have a similar brainstorming process that happens where we decide on learning outcomes, we decide what we want the students to be able to do and to exhibit, in terms of skills and behaviors at the end of the lesson. These lessons take an incredible amount of work and cognitive brain power to make them happen. It results in a better end product, a better lesson for the students.

**Melissa:** A nice package. Like you said, there's the learning outcomes. There's the assessment piece built in. Faculty or librarians that are using the lessons do not have to recreate anything unless they want to supplement what's already there. That's a nice thing, too.

**Matt:** Having that process, I know for me, is really beneficial, especially intentionally and consciously working toward outcomes. Our instructional designer, Noah C, will tell you. I just get excited, I rush in, and I want to do all these things. On some level and internally I have these outcomes of what I want the students to walk away with.

Until I state those, it's just this formless chunk of information I want to deliver. As a group especially, I can't just rush ahead and not disclose, "Well, here's what I want to do." Having

everyone work on that shapes a lesson.

Especially when it needs to be 8 to 15 minutes long, we can't just go off on all these tangents. It keeps it structured, compact, and efficient. It's beneficial to me to keep my own tendencies in check.

**Melissa:** With all of this brainpower, and I'm going to just say love, that goes into the creation of these lessons, is there one that you feel particularly proud of or that you are maybe a little bit more excited about than some of the others?

**Joelle:** I have had my hand in a number of these, either as a designer or just as a content contributor. As an instructional designer, these things are like my children in a way. I spend so much time and effort building them up from nothing and then they go out into the world. I watch how that happen. In one way, I have an attachment to all of my lessons that I've worked on.

**Melissa:** [laughs] As a good parent does.

**Joelle:** As a good parent does. As one does. The one that probably stands out to me the most, and maybe which has stretched me the most as a designer, is the fake news, or the investigative searching lesson that is currently under development. Matt also works on that one. He can speak to this as well.

That is a topic that librarians in general have not typically broached in their instruction practices until now. We didn't really have a lot to draw from in terms of personal experiences or pedagogy for in-class instruction and so on.

That has really been a challenge to not only narrow that whole topic down into something that can fit into an 8 to 15-minute lesson, but to also navigate some of the politics and some of the issues that go around producing content that will in some ways be polarizing for our students, and maybe even for our faculty and administrators also.

It has not gone out into the world yet, but it's one that is forefront in my brain as the most cognitively and potentially impactful.

**Melissa:** It is a topic that is certainly fraught with a lot of emotion. I know you've

incorporated that somewhat into the lesson.

**Matt:** Building off of -- I feel like I say this guy's name all the time now -- Mike Cofield's work. I do say his name all the time because he does some great things. He's just one of many. What we've really drawn on or drawn from is his web literacy open textbook.

The moves, the strategies, the key details there -- which I know he's drawn from others as well -- has been the basis for this and informed the lesson. Thinking about emotions and our unit discussions that openly state about librarian neutrality and what is our role in discussing this content on campus and realizing that we have very non-neutral intentions in mind.

This came up today in our presentation. How do we deliver this information in a lesson in as objective a manner as possible so as not to turn off students who may disagree?

Getting everyone to see that emotions are often a driving factor in believing information and sharing information that may not be accurate. How do we get students to just think about that in their own information-seeking and consumption process? How do they deal with that effectively?

Then going on to the other steps of actually being able to track something down and fact-check it. Not seeing fact-checking as some type of liberal agenda. Fake news has certain connotations. This fact-checking, how do we get students past that? Thinking about their emotions, talking to each other, investigating information, and learning how to triangulate sources to verify it.

It's going to be complicated. I'm the most hopeful about this lesson.

**Melissa:** That's something that I'm interested in talking with you a little bit more. The idea of the application of the lessons and how they could be incorporated into the classroom. Do you have an example of that? If you were talking to a faculty member trying to describe a way that these lessons could be used, how might you go about that?

**Joelle:** One of the ways that we have started using the lessons in our K state is embedding the lessons through the use of LTI links into our learning management system courses. A librarian will work with a faculty member, typically be added to their course as an instructor or librarian. We will embed those lessons into the course for students to take as required



coursework.

The instructors are able to assign whatever point levels they want. Some of them choose five, some of them choose 100. It's really up to them, in terms of what point value they want to assign to those. Essentially, we sync them with the course gradebook. The students take them as homework.

When our librarians then go in and teach information literacy sessions, they can reasonably assume if the students have done the work, done the homework that all of them are at a certain baseline in terms of information literacy skills and abilities. They can use the class time that they have in a more potentially meaningful and impactful way.

**Matt:** We're trying to do this fact-checking piece and like how to use something like Google something they're familiar with in better more efficient more academic ways. How do you think about information now as a student in different ways?

This is a perfect venue for this kind of lesson. We're never going to get into all these sections. As we progress something else that's going on on campuses we now have some movement on information literacy gen ed requirements and how can NLA really fit in here and help these various courses meet that requirement?

Again fitting that fact-checking lesson into first year seminars I think is just a very natural fit and it's really easy sell for most instructors.

**Melissa:** I'd like to shift gears just a little bit. We are here at this open education conference and we're hearing a lot about open pedagogy, OER, and lots of different ways that librarians and faculty can work together to share information and learning objects.

I just wondered, because NLA is so open, and that's one of the big goals of this project, is to be available for anyone in any country in the world. Could you talk just a little bit about your own philosophy with open education, open pedagogy and how you see NLA fitting into that bigger conversation?

**Matt:** When you describe open education to students, in many instances, they're not like, "Oh, this is amazing. This makes a lot of sense." That may be the case in textbooks. When you start talking about OER, they're just like, "Well, isn't that the Internet? That's pretty used." The

expectation is there. I think, a lot of us had an expectation.

How is the use of digital information limited, if it's not open? I think, with the expectation of students, one of our duties as information providers, or tour guides, direction pointers, or whatever we are...

**Melissa:** [laughs] Whereas the stapler answers. [laughs]

**Matt:** Replacing the printer paper. What is our duty in terms of producing or guiding students to open content? I think that's very important. I'm glad that...I don't know if at the time I had the opportunity to jump on board to NLA, if it wasn't open, if I was at a point in my career where I would've said, "Well, this isn't worth my time." I'd like to believe that I would have said no.

[laughter]

**Matt:** "Let's suggest it. Hey, let's make this open." Really, over the past three years I think I've developed quite a bit as a professional and become more adamant about the creation of open resources. Then as far as open pedagogy goes we can't just create and provide the resources. We have to work to establish a better pedagogical approach to using them.

We can't just replace traditional textbooks with open textbooks and expect anything to change other than the fact that they can now have textbooks. That might benefit them, but how are we going to use this material differently? How can students be a part of this process?

We're experimenting in some of our classes now with ways that students can demonstrate their understanding and build their knowledge and understanding in such a way that it can be shared with other students. It can be continuing to be developed by students on down the line. They can play a greater role in deciding what their education looks like. I think that's the real potential for me.

I don't know if we talked about, we have students who have participated in NLA in a variety of ways. Maybe they're testing lessons. Maybe they're being interviewed for a video. I don't know if Joelle has thought about, "What does open pedagogy really mean for NLA? How do we get students involved in more innovative ways?" It's not something I thought about until 25 seconds ago with you.

[laughter]

**Joelle:** I think it's a great idea. We have a pretty open policy in terms of who's a partner. I don't see why we couldn't have students change this.

**Melissa:** I love that idea and just that whole philosophy of students as producers and content creators. This could be a really exciting way to push that forward.

**Joelle:** Just to build up what Matt said, I think there are a lot of issues just in our current culture and society right now that necessitate the use of open educational resources, open textbooks, and so on. The student-debt crisis and the overall increase in the cost of college is just one of those.

One way that libraries and librarians can carve a niche for ourselves and remain relevant in this era is to focus on access to information in a variety of ways. OER is one of them.

**Melissa:** Great. We talked a little bit about moving forward, possible lessons, maybe having students help with the content creation. What else is next for NLA? We talked about this as the steering committee. We're working on that elusive mission and vision statement. What are your goals for the future?

**Joelle:** There are so many possibilities and one of the things that is exciting about this project is all of the different ways we could go with it. Some of the ideas that we've thrown around are based on the increasing rate of international usage, perhaps translating some of the lesson content into various languages.

**Melissa:** Do you know off the top of your head how many different countries?

**Joelle:** On Friday, I counted 81 countries.

**Melissa:** 81 countries, wow.

**Joelle:** Yeah, which is exciting. It's really fantastic. Apart from us translating the lessons, actually at this conference, we have had a request for broader marketing. Then, marketing the project, getting the word out about the project is something we've talked about even for the last couple of years here. How do we get the word out?

I can focus on the marketing. We always are focused on assessment. We want to make sure that the lessons are useful and continue to be useful in terms of student learning outcomes. We want to make sure that they're effective in that way. Those are some of the bigger issues. Of course, we'd love to pursue so much more funding opportunities to grow that way as well.

**Matt:** Yeah. I was just thinking we waste tremendous growth because part of our timeline and productivity has been limited over the past few months due to circumstances. This just happened, and what is that? It's been interesting to see how limited we are especially when our fearless leader Joelle is, when her time is restricted.

How do we empower other members lead, taking charge, and how many other new members. We've talked about our on-board members in the past. No one's paying a membership fee, but should we be asking, what do you want to get out of this? What can you offer to NLA? What are some ideas and strategies you have?

Figuring out how to grow plausibly, sustainably and without it becoming too unwieldy because I think we're right at a point where if it's everyone who we're involved with NLA was able to and did participate in every single meeting, it potentially would be unwieldy.

What does that mean for us if we want to set a standard of say, we want to produce this many lessons a year or semester? What do we need to do that or expectations? Again, how do we do that in such a way that it doesn't become just a mess for communication since we are all at different institutions?

**Melissa:** To remember that everyone's getting their own time for this. It is an extra piece, but the reason I was so drawn to working with you is that you're just so passionate about it and it is such a great product that is available to so many people in so many different ways and that impact and reach of the lessons is huge.

From what I have experienced, you have that passion and care for this that is necessary to make it sustainable and figure out what it looks like down the road. It seems as though, just for this conference, we've talked a lot about how we are and the huge growth potential there. This fits right in and I think that that will help with the sustainability down the line.

**Matt:** I think we've been more intentional about, "Hey, this is something that is directly meeting the mission of the university in a very broad fashion." Since it is something that's not

written in dollars or job descriptions, it tends to, not be at the bottom of priorities, but it's not something that we're...where does it fit in for everyone?

For those of us with [inaudible 27:06] grant missions or outreach missions that are made clear, and library mission and university mission statements, we could easily talk to administrators about how this plays into that role and see it bumped up on our list of priorities.

Not just individually, but institutionally and especially as we continue to get statistics and endeavor to expand out past English speaking interested populations. That just increases the inevitability of getting more people on board and our institutions in supporting this.

**Melissa:** Yeah. The support is a big piece that needs to be there. If you read out one takeaway for a library, or a faculty member out there, or the administrator, or students, any of our various stakeholders that you would want to give them about NLA. NLA as a group has an elevator pitch.

If you had to take your one piece that you just wanted to make sure people know about this project, what would it be?

**Matt:** If you're struggling and especially and I've been in this position before where you are maybe a solo librarian, you don't have a support staff, maybe your university doesn't have an instructional designer or any type of multimedia production team, and you are alone and your heart is to deliver instruction, just remember you are not alone.

We are there to help. If you have ideas, we want to hear from you. If we have something that is beneficial to you, use it. You have a voice in this. That's the beauty of open. You can do whatever you want with it. You can talk to us about how you want to use it. You can talk to us about how you want to change something or create something new. I don't know if that was one thing but...

**Melissa:** No, that's it.

**Matt:** You are not alone.

**Melissa:** You are not alone. I love it. How about you, Joelle?

**Joelle:** I think I would reemphasize the agnostic nature of blessing. More to mention that there are institutional agnostics. We don't brand them other than in a red logo, but there are also technology and vendor agnostic.

They get at the basics of information literacy. Not just for the particular class that they are used generating for the program, but they might be used in the skills that will last a lifetime. If they facilitate life longer, it would be my one lighter for you.

**Melissa:** I like it very much. That's a good practitioner focus and student focus. As we are wrapping up at the end here we do always have one question that we ask our illustrious guests on the Leading Lines podcast, which is your favorite analogue educational technology.

**Joelle:** I don't know if this count as a tool, but it's one of the pedagogical ways that I have taught for it has resonated with me the most and the students that I work with have consistently remembered.

This is not even in my [inaudible 30:02] . This is pre-librarian for me. I had a board with a nail. In one hand I had a hammer and in one hand I had a banana. I asked the students, "Which one would be more effective at pounding the nail into the board?" Of course, they said the hammer.

I used that as...and in some instances I actually attempted to use those tools to demonstrate or had them used the tools to demonstrate the effectiveness that it was one way to illustrate that tools matter, [laughs] and choosing your tools deliberately based on the contacts that you are aiming for is important. It was a learning-by-doing activity that in an analogue way it was really impactful.

**Melissa:** I love that answer so much. I think that without going back and listening to every podcast episode, I can precisely no one has ever said a banana.

[laughter]

**Melissa:** That was perfect.

**Matt:** I tell you what, I should come first.

[laughter]

**Matt:** However, I know I guess maybe it's a combination of some type of writing utensils on a surface. Really being able to not just jot something down for your own purposes or reflection, although it's very important for you to be able to visualize something or abstract something.

Also teaching others. Being able to demonstrate in a manner other than just spoken word. I would be comics fan and so being able to put a diagram on paper or draw out some type of sequence of events or occurrences I think it's very useful.

That's something we've been...utensils and the surface whether it is stick and dirt, or pencil or paper, or your finger and a touch screen. Being able to translate thought into something visual is incredibly valuable or a banana.

**Melissa:** Or a banana.

**Joelle:** Or a banana.

**Matt:** A mashed banana on a wall. I can smear banana on a wall.

[laughter]

**Melissa:** Is there anything else that you would like to make sure we know about NLA or anything that you want to put out there in the world?

**Matt:** One idea came up in the presentation, increase ways for feedback. Right now let us know what you think and tell us what's working, how you are using lessons, any suggestions for the future that we may be able to implement some mechanism for. The person suggested this morning a wacky option for more collaborative efforts on lesson idea building.

**Joelle:** I really like the idea we're working, too and the formation of a community around this project. We have our 10-partner institutions. We have our librarians and instructional designers who work on the project in day in, day out. I would love to have more feedback from the community. The library community and the ed tech community, too. That would be awesome.

**Melissa:** That's fantastic. Thank you both so much Joelle and Matt for taking the time to talk with me about how the New Literacies Alliance. I'm really excited to see where this goes from here. I know that there's going to be a lot of exciting updates coming soon.

You will share the website so everyone has that. People watch there then we go around creating a hashtag so that might happen. In the meantime, thank you again.

**Matt:** Thank you

**Joelle:** Thank you.

[music]

**Derek:** That was Joelle Pitts instructional design librarian at Kansas State and Mathew Upson director of undergraduate instruction and outreach services at the Oklahoma State Libraries. Thanks to Melissa Mallon, one of my favorite librarians, for talking with Joelle and Matt and for Melissa's work with NLA and at Vanderbilt for screen information literacy.

You may have noticed that this is our 50th episode of Leading Lines. I'm having a hard time believing that we've produced so many episodes. I remember a few years ago having the idea for an interview-based podcast about educational technology.

I thought I might be able to put together maybe an eight-episode season, four featuring Vanderbilt colleagues and four featuring people outside of Vanderbilt I knew to be doing really interesting things with ed tech. That seemed ambitious at the time which is why it didn't happen. [laughs]

I didn't move forward with the project until that day a few years ago that several of us working in ed tech at Vanderbilt were in a meeting together about something else. My colleague John Sloop tossed out an idea for an ed tech podcast.

Once I realized that I might have some partners in campus doing this, we got moving. Once we got the team together, we were often running. Now two and half years later we've produced 50 episodes with more to come.

I'm proud of what we've built with Leading Lines. I look forward to new interviews, new ideas



and new directions for educational technology in the new year. To listen to any of our 50 episodes to this far, visit our website [leadinglinespod.com](https://leadinglinespod.com). To make sure to catch new episodes, you can subscribe to Leading Lines in your favorite podcast app.

If you've got a minute, please leave us a review on iTunes that helps other people find the podcast. Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, The Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, the Office of Scott Lowe Communications at the Vanderbilt Libraries and the Associate Provost for Educational Development and Technologies.

This episode was edited by Melissa Mallon and Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. I'm your host Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.

[music]

Transcription by CastingWords