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The Search for Information Literacy
or
Information Literacy in a Post-Truth World

I am going to start by playing a video that serves as an example of one of the many kinds of information you and your students may interact with each day.

Now, that was apropos of nothing really. I own stock in Exxon and just wanted you to know what great people they are. Actually, I want you to focus on what that made you think and feel, and you can let it percolate, and we will come back to it in a little while.

So we librarians suddenly find ourselves in the news. There are articles floating about that say we could be the cure to the rash of fake news. But there are other articles that say we don't need to be because we can find a technological solution instead. These students at UIUC came up with an app that tells if news comes from bad sources. Problem solved. Except not.

Since fake news is why everyone is talking about me and my people, I will address it first. The first thing I want to say is that fake news is neither news nor new. You can find propaganda and outright lies in the books that rolled off the Gutenberg press and its later cousins, in the transcriptions of oral histories, in the hastily written battle dispatches written by reporters embedded among troops in the American Civil War and telegraphed to mechanical printing presses back home—you know, you had to have sensational headlines and boosting to sell the number of copies of the newspaper that the technology now enabled you to print, and more eyeballs mean more ad dollars—you find it in government documents meant to justify US policies in South America and the Middle East. None of this is new.

And it happens on a sliding scale from objective reporting through various ambiguous gradations across the spectrum to FAKE NEWS. And these things in and of themselves are not the disease, they are symptoms of other problems that have plagued humanity since, well, as

far back as recorded history goes, and it might be naïve to think that your school's librarians can solve these problems. But even if we don't have the ability to fix unequal access to information, deliberate misuse of information, dishonesty, unchecked self-interest, idiosyncrasies of human psychology, cultural and political bias, and all the other countless things that feed the problem we can start on it, and we must start on it.

Let's be clear, even if you flag articles in your facebook feed as false, even if you tell people that so called news is actually propaganda, people who want to believe it are going to believe it. My dad back in east Texas has an email circle of friends who regularly swap forwards and complain bitterly about the world together, and he would often send me emails and asks for verification. So for fourteen years I patiently debunked them and cited all my sources, and in 14 years not one was 100% accurate, and I would say that maybe 90% were made up out of thin air. Finally around the 15th year I hit reply all and absolutely unloaded on them. I believe the last line was something like, "All of you can know that none of the emails you've been sending me all these years were true simply by virtue of not being stupid."

That didn't really help them become information literate...but I stopped getting forwards. And institutionally, my dad's email circle is kind of the same thing as the student who comes up to me at the reference desk and says, I need to find some sources, and I ask what he needs to learn about, and he says no, I already wrote the paper....now I just need sources to put into it. I could ask if he had had one of our library instruction sessions and hope he says no...because if he had hopefully he'd know that to start a research paper honestly is to start from a place of ignorance, or recognizing that he doesn't yet know enough to write the paper...and that is why he is writing the paper. But I am sure some of those who have approached my desk like that actually have had one of my sessions. I'm not saying that bringing your student to the library doesn't help, because it does...but an hour in the classroom with me can teach students how to find a book or use the database, but it can't unlearn all the bad habits they've learned about research and critical thinking about information It's complicated.

Our brains work against learning new information, especially information that disagrees with our preconceived notions about the world. People will work really hard to disbelieve the fact that global warming is happening if their job is the oil industry, their political party is pro-industry, or if all their lives they've been surrounded by hard working oilers who inspire them with their work ethic... You can't make that guy see global warming is happening by showing him an article, and you REALLY can't expect him to take ownership of it.

So it leaves me as a librarian at a bit of an intellectual impasse with myself. Because I can lead a horse to books but I can't make him read them. I can teach someone how to find sources that people like us find credible. But that doesn't mean those sources will seem credible to him. The

best I can hope to do is to teach people how to think about information. And that's hard. It involves time, patience, and rubrics galore.

And it ALSO leaves me at a professional impasse with myself. Because when we talk about closing the loop on information literacy we are talking about more than bringing your class to the library for an hour. We're talking about big changes.

This kind of librarian head-scratching is also nothing new. This was a concern in ancient Greece, though they didn't call it information literacy. The oldest information literacy classes that I've read about were at Harvard in the first half of the 1800s. It is lost to time what was covered in those sessions, though I imagine they were pretty short and focused on the card catalog and citations. But that is just a guess. Over a very long time span, library instruction session evolved into the kind of sessions you very likely had when you were in school:

First you do this, then you do this. Then you get a list of articles and do this. You can do this, or this, or this. Sometimes it looks like this, and when that happens, do this. Now in this database, you do this, and then this, and then this. See how it is like the earlier thing I just showed you? OK, any questions about this? Great. Now in THIS database...

This how-to approach to library instruction--what one of my colleagues derisively calls "the search-and-destroy" instruction session--was, back when I taught English--the bane of my students' existence. It taught them to access multiple databases, plug in their search terms, and find the quotes they needed for their papers. But it provided no guidance as to the complexity of the information landscape or how to navigate it intellectually.

As one of my more obnoxious students once offered as he walked out of the library, "Well, that's an hour of my life I will never get back." His lack of gratitude annoyed me, but I also understood it. The hour had been wasted. Or, if not wasted entirely, it had certainly been uninspiring, even dirge-like in its repetition. Moreover, it had not even addressed in real terms the reason they were there in the first place: you have a paper to write, and you need to figure out what you're writing about, what the experts in that field know, and who you are in relation to that body of knowledge.

My college has a vibrant, passionate, and rigorously intellectual faculty, and students are held to high expectations. To think that my instruction sessions were mere training sessions when they could offer so much more did not sit well with me. But if I was surprised at myself, I probably

shouldn't have been. A lit review on the field I did for a paper I was working on betrayed a tedious commitment to that kind of session. And this may be in part because at every school I have ever worked at information literacy was somewhere listed in the gen ed objectives...usually lumped into communication or computer literacy. At my school it is tied to both in a kind of catch all for all that stuff students should learn that can't be tied to a specific course.

Usually schools try to satisfy that objective by having some classes assign research papers and projects, and some of those classes bring their students to the library for a one-hour training, and that, they hope, is information literate enough. But that never felt like enough, and there was institutional data to back up this hunch: When we did SAILS, what we found was that our students were just about as good as any other students in the cohort of 30 or so colleges and universities who completed the measure. But that was pretty mediocre across the board. Even the best schools had middling performances.

And this is a highly regarded tool. That is to say we are good at assessing something we are not good at teaching.

So my fellow librarians at my school and I started working on ways to change that, thinking of ways to expand the boundaries of our teaching. We started offering workshops, setting up more multi-class instruction sessions, and in 2012 we created LIS 101 and 105, credit-bearing classes.

While I was wrestling with this stuff on campus, there were others who are presumably more important than I am hitting the same walls...and then something interesting happened in 2016: the official adoption by the ACRL in January of 2016 of the Framework for Information Literacy ("Framework") to replace the 2001 Standards of Information Literacy ("Standards").

Whereas the Standards lent themselves fairly seamlessly to assessment, because they summarized information literacy as a series of steps: the ability to know when information was needed, to find it from a variety of sources, to evaluate it for credibility, and to use it ethically the Framework is much more difficult to pin down because it consists of several overlapping "frames" of understanding about information, espousing such ideas as "Authority is Constructed and Contextual," "Information Creation as a Process," "Information Has Value," "Research as Inquiry," "Scholarship as Conversation," and "Searching as Strategic Exploration."

Each of these frames for understanding information consists of threshold concepts, knowledge practices, and dispositions, which are the behaviors and habits of mind students are supposed to develop as they become more attuned to the discipline of information literacy. The idea being that students won't learn a series of steps but will develop a new way of thinking about information.

An administrator may look at the Framework and see it predominantly as a vehicle for obscuring the nice, neat lines of assessment provided by the Standards. But there are reasons that these lines may need to be blurred. When relying on the Standards to guide student learning, it is easy to see that one of the outcomes is much more complex than the others. As important as it is to be able to find information and cite it correctly, the majority of the learning experience will be spent on learning to think critically about information in order to evaluate sources and use them ethically.

The Standards' approach of treating information literacy as a set of discrete and functionary steps--of which evaluation is one, but no greater than the others--makes it difficult to justify formal classroom learning that extends more than an hour. But we knew from our own assessment tools that our students are not excelling in this area. We can do better.

And part of what I hope will give us that freedom is that the Framework is more holistic and its frames are all meant to assist in the evaluation of and critical thinking about information. This approach requires more formal contact time to teach but promises deeper student learning and engagement.

To be sure there is a great deal of overlap from the Standards to the Framework, but the Framework opens the field to much more intensive learning and insists that we as a profession spend more contact hours with students. All of this, interestingly, is what we had already been working on. So this little community college library was ahead of the curve of our national organization, and I attribute that in part to our commitment to closing the assessment loop.

But let's not get too excited.

So back to fake news. Everyone sees it is a problem, only some people see that it is a deeper problem than we can fix with a bandaid. Among librarians, the consensus is that we need more than an app that tells us when an article is fake, and we need more than an hour of instruction... We need something big because information literacy is important. But why is this important?

Why do we have to do it now? And what does it look like in practice? I think right now we are living with a couple of good reasons why it is important.

I was at this assessment conference a few years ago and the keynote speaker asked us how many of us realized that global warming is happening. Almost all the hands went up. He asked how many of us thought that it was one of the most pressing issues humanity has or will ever face. All the hands stayed up. He asked, "How many of you are teaching about it?" All the hands went down. It dawned on me that global warming is an excellent case study of information literacy.

So I created a learning community about global warming and co taught it with a physical science, biology, and an English teacher. And that was pretty terrifying but fulfilling. It dawned on me that, while I had read no small number of journal articles about it, and while I understood the science behind it, I was reluctant to go out on a limb for it because I am ALWAYS reading some news or magazine article that suggests that we don't have all the facts, or that it is a hoax, or that it is all a government takeover, or that Al Gore is a bad person in real life. It is all pretty daunting. And if that happens to me, surely it happens to students. And how does that doubt--intentionally sowed by some parties--inhibit student learning?

What your students hear outside of the classroom impacts what they learn inside of the classroom. And if we are trying to teach them science, if they are not savvy consumers of information, it is a complicated matter to make the truth stick. Even if you give people correct information, they might be resistant to it for any number of reasons that have nothing to do with innate intelligence. For instance, my dad and his friends are smart, educated people. They just had that email forward thing going on, and nothing was going to stop it!

To really unpack it, I would need to bring in readings about the scientific method, sociology, history, political science, epistemology, and even a bit of psychology. Also I make sure to give the caveat that I am here to expose them to new ideas, not teach them everything they need to know about each of these subjects.

Notwithstanding the challenges, I had lofty ideas about what we would accomplish and how great my students would be. But when I read their first written assignment for the class, which was a critical response to an Ann Coulter article, I found that students would abandon the science in lieu of slick rhetoric.... Like Al Gore really is kind of chubby. Likewise, they found her convincing when she stated that reports and evidence showed that the very foundation of the

science was crumbling. Yet none of that evidence was cited and none of those reports was named.

And I say it again: if our science learning is divorced from the social context in which the science is created, disseminated, and analyzed, then we can expect student responses to be at that level. But in the old conceptualization of information literacy as it was typically presented, if the student was able to find that Ann Coulter article and properly cite it, then that was information literate enough.

And that simply won't do.

So I think any movement in the field that gets students to understand their relationship to information, that gets them to recognize that the information they encounter has a context—a creator, a presenter, and a receiver, and that gets them to realize that the answer they find probably isn't THE answer but is just part of a larger conversation, but that also makes them see that facts, information, and knowledge are not the same thing, and that there is a difference between scientific consensus, social consensus, and politicized rhetoric... is a step or three in the right direction.

Over the course of an entire semester you really have time to expose students to new ways of thinking about information. My students were introduced to ...

Epistemology and the Scientific Method: how do we know we are justified in believing what we believe?

Historiography and Sociology: How is culture created and how does it frame the argument?
Information

Technology: How is the internet constructed to help us create our own echo chambers of ever-reinforcing bias?

Psychology: What about our own minds wills us to seek out sources that agree with us, and how do we overcome that?

Students engaged in the social context of the argument, and the more sophisticated students learned pretty quickly how the same set of facts would be presented differently for different audiences and different purposes.

By the way, many of these students were first-semester freshmen. I would be lying if I said I didn't encounter some resistance. One student complained that my class was "squishy." Because the concepts were harder to "click together" than she was used to. That's like real life, isn't it?

Another started out committed to proving that global warming was not going to be "a big deal" and that it might even be beneficial for us. I told him that as long as he found timely, credible research to make his point, that's an argument I would be happy to read.

For the annotated bibliography assignment I asked that students cite their sources; summarize them; evaluate their credibility, timeliness and objectivity; and show how the article would be used in their papers. Though the assignment called for 7 entries, the student in question had only had 6...and when I read the paper I understood why. To support his thesis that global warming was going to be beneficial:

His first two articles were editorials, his third was a critical response to a scientific study, his fourth and fifth were peer-reviewed journal articles that did not ultimately support his claim but that he had cherry-picked some lines from. On the sixth entry he wrote, "I think I am going to have to give up on this topic. I can't really support it."

He had realized through his research that his original beliefs were unfounded. And if you ever want to see what a librarian looks like when he feels utterly fulfilled in his job, that was it.

His final research paper investigated how businesses could gain social capital and good will by going green. That doesn't happen when librarians get one hour with his class.

So we realized information literacy was important, and then we gathered assessment data to show that we were not doing as well as we thought we should, and we used that data to help persuade administrators to let us do more. And we're not done.

We have only managed to teach the course a couple of time. Technical and administrative hurdles have to be overcome to make this more mainstream. But it should be. In every school in Illinois.

And so here are a few things you can do on your campus....

Because the things students are being asked to evaluate are not just articles, not just books...but information and media from all aspects of their lives. It is urgently important that we do more to teach information literacy.

And so now I have another video to share with you, and I want you to think about the first video while you watch this video and see if it changes your perception of the information.