

Sources, Censorship, & Sensibility

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Now, more than ever, school librarians are essential in ensuring that students and faculty are using, analyzing, and diving deep into information that is factual and relevant in a world where manipulation and misrepresentation are a recurring possibility. This article aims to offer questions to ponder and conversations to start. While answers might not be abundant, we must be open to a dialog about quality information, collection development, and professional values in the era of "fake news."

With a shift to the well-rounded education demanded by ESSA and our current political climate, many teachers, in an effort to make their courses current and relevant, are engaging in some tricky conversations on hot topics. Taking on these issues checks so many boxes from an educational perspective: cross-curricular connections to history, civics, economics, current events, and literature; an opportunity for students to develop their own voice and opinion; an opportunity to practice research skills, such as evaluating and curating information; and an opportunity to learn how to debate civilly. This goldmine of potential appeals to most teachers and offers a great opportunity for library collaboration.

Assignment Context

For example, our Grade 8 team creates a capstone project that fulfills many of the objectives above and brings the library team in to help bolster it. The English and civics teachers work together to build groups of students, each focusing on one of the following issues: ability, environment, gender, socioeconomics, labor, First Amendment for students, LGBTQIA+, race, immigration, juvenile justice, or criminal justice.

Students are then tasked, as a group, to do background reading on their issue and zero in on a particular aspect. For example, students in the immigration group may choose to focus on building a border wall or students in the gender group may be interested in exploring the wage gap. In civics class, they research a historic Supreme Court case and a contemporary counterpart. They learn about different kinds of citizen action in historical contexts, then choose one to apply to their issue in a way that they think might make a difference, whether it's writing to a congressperson, starting a nonprofit, or protesting, to name a few. In English class, they read related fiction and nonfiction of their choosing, with a goal of building empathy and understanding of the human element of the issue. Students then use the school's makerspace to create an item to represent the issue and explain their action plan to address it. Students and faculty from the whole school tour the displays and hear the students talk about their issues, the Supreme Court cases, and what they think should be done.

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Role of Librarian and Library

In the library, we're equipped to offer background reading to identify an issue, access to and support for understanding Supreme Court cases, historical examples of citizen action, curated lists of literature and texts in each of the topics, and consultations in class about exploring and picking a specific issue. This sounds like a typical collaborative classroom-library partnership, but we're not just doing geography country research projects any more. When we decide, as we should, to dive into such controversial issues, things get a little more complicated.

I have observed in teaching citizen action and social justice that many students start with ideas and positions on their topics that are held dear and based on false or biased information from home. For example, a student may hear at home the belief that "immigrants will come in and take our jobs" and then look to validate it with research for the project. While parents themselves may or may not be competent in evaluating information and sources, students of this age still view them as an authoritative voice. One must be tactful, when leading students to a conclusion that may shatter the illusion of their parents as all-knowing or that might differ from the values taught at home. The first question to ponder, then, is how do librarians guide and respond to students in circumstances when they realize their parents might be misinformed?

Credible Sources

How do librarians, as guardians of truth and knowledge, react when students use politicians' direct quotes that are not based in fact and when once routine information evaluation measures no longer suffice? Back to the border wall example introduced above. A student could find direct quotes from our administration claiming the need for a wall. There's a plethora of instances where President Trump has said something along the lines of, "You better be smart. They're taking your jobs. You better be careful" (in Blake 2014). These quotes are from someone who is an authority figure and are found in multiple sources. Yet, their factual basis as evidence for a connection between jobs and immigration can't be assumed.

The Brookings Institute reported that,

According to a comprehensive National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine analysis, immigration does not significantly impact the overall employment levels of most native-born workers. The impact of immigrant labor

on the wages of native-born workers is also low. Immigrant labor does have some negative effects on the employment and wages of native-born high school dropouts...however, undocumented workers often work the unpleasant, back-breaking jobs that native-born workers are not willing to do (Felbab-Brown 2017).

How do we teach our next generation of citizens that their president or other elected officials might not always be telling the truth, while still respecting our political system and ensuring its path toward more ethical, fact-based choices as our citizens grow?

If we look toward our professional guidelines about what kinds of information to provide our students, ALA suggests that school library selection criteria, "incorporate accurate and authentic factual content from authoritative sources" (ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom 2018). Much of the information espoused by our government in what would traditionally be considered an authoritative source, such as White House press briefings or presidential speeches, may no longer fit the criteria of "authentic, factual content," as shown in the example above. Yet if we incorporate and lead students only to materials that fit this criteria, our collection will lack the ability to fully inform students on current policies.

So, how do we represent U.S. government statements that are not based in fact and thus do not meet our library selection criteria? How do we help educate informed citizens, when the information from the government that represents them isn't quality information?

Issues of Censorship

Censorship, the arguable number-one enemy of librarians everywhere, sneaks dangerously close when we start talking about what positions students can take on political issues. In a time when people are feeling more empowered to take more radical stances, students are more comfortable expressing potentially problematic opinions. When schools have mission statements and core values that cite things such as diversity, inclusion, or global perspectives, when does it become our responsibility to steer students away from stances that do not align with the school's principles?

Back to the border wall example. A student advocating that such a wall should be built could be perceived as taking a stance counter to a school's mission by not valuing diversity or inclusion, or perhaps even crossing over into racial discrimination. How and when do we guide students if they approach a position that borders on hateful, especially when our goal is to help them develop as individuals? When does this become censorship or pushing an agenda?

Given the criteria we teach our students on the use and evaluation of information, some publications could fulfill the criteria and still offer an argument for a position that is not appropriate in our school environment. For example, if a student argues that a wall should be built along the border, it becomes important to recognize motivation in order

to determine a course of action. Co-teaching and collaboration are an undervalued strength in these kinds of situations. Having more adults and varying perspectives in the room as we talk with students and get to the heart of their argument, can help encourage a path that is logical and based in fact. Formative questioning is essential for constantly checking in about the quality and balance of sources as well as helping students to look inward at what questions they're really asking. Thus far, we've found this to be the best answer, although it's not perfect. If a student is not discriminating against others, then we err on the side of letting the student explore and develop their perspective and argument (see Table 1.)

<i>Table 1. Working through educator responses to student stances that may challenge the school's mission/values.</i>		
Student-Described Motivation	Possible Reaction from Educators	Reason
Job loss to undocumented immigrants	Do nothing	Does not diminish others
Economy/paying for social programs for undocumented immigrants	Do nothing	Does not diminish others
Racial supremacy	Converse Call in a superior Involve parents Steer student away Acknowledge racial bias	Rooted in hatred and not scientifically backed. Unacceptable even if using veiled language

It's worth acknowledging that the separation between the three different motivations in the table is problematic and that racism can be found at the root of all three. I acknowledge that this method is not the answer and has to serve as the start of a conversation to reach a better end. There is too much grey area, too much room for interpretation, too much between the lines. But, at what point does steering students away from a stance, topic, or materials on a subject constitute censorship? Is acknowledging a variety of standpoints, even problematic ones, part of a well-rounded education as prompted by ESSA?

Moving Forward

To avoid getting into a complicated situation, it seems wise to make sure that only quality sources are being referenced from the very beginning with clear expectations. This means that students need librarians and teachers to offer quality lessons on evaluating many different forms of information. We often make charts and rubrics about what makes a good source, but perhaps we should also be making reference guides for students about what is required to *produce* good information. Checklists asking questions such as: "Do you offer a balanced perspective to your sources that are biased?" "Do your sources offer citations and information to back up their claims?" "Have you found the information you present in a variety of credible places?" By asking these questions, it is possible to maintain a variety of perspectives and opinions, but at the very least, the research and ideas will be of a caliber worth entertaining. While this doesn't offer much in terms of an answer, the hope is that this article will spark these conversations in our professional community and classrooms.

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