



## CHAPTER 15

# No Such Thing as Neutral

Rethinking Undergraduate Instruction and Outreach in a Time of “Post-truth”

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## Critical Information Literacy and Librarian “Neutrality”

It is no secret that many librarians have long portrayed themselves and the profession as neutral. Indeed, we (the authors of this paper) left graduate school committed to that ideal, believing it to be the best path to fair and just outcomes for those who walked through the library’s doors, availed themselves of its services and programs, and went into the community, ready to use their newfound knowledge for the betterment of society. By taking no side, the librarian would be sure to provide information for all sides, letting the individuals decide what to take or leave. We have, through an examination of critical information literacy and the notion of library neutrality, committed to shaping instruction and outreach opportunities in a way that pushes students toward critical thinking and critical dialogue while at the same time offering increased opportunities for meaningful engagement of students.

In this chapter, we explore the conversations around critical information literacy and dialogue and then offer examples of how these conversations have in-

formed our practice. We aim to provide both a theoretical context for those who are new to critical pedagogy and practical examples of how these ideas can be incorporated into one-shot and credit course library instruction.

In recent years, as Elmborg and Pagowsky have recounted, librarian educators have, for better or worse, been tasked with the teaching of neutral and discrete information literacy skills.<sup>1</sup> The publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, which were published in 2000 and have since been rescinded, presented a picture of a checklist for student knowledge, meant to ensure that students are equipped with the skills necessary for lifelong learning.<sup>2</sup> However, the *Standards*, although easily assessed, embody Paulo Freire's "banking concept," which, at best, ensures that students passively receive enough skills and facts to make them marketable candidates for a job upon graduation and often ignores the real-life contexts within which students function and learn.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Freire proposed a different way of teaching, one that actively involves students in their learning and creates a "critical consciousness" within them, or an active awareness of social structures and a sense of empowerment to alter or challenge them.<sup>4</sup> Within this pedagogy, students become actively involved in the learning process and are taught to question constantly.

Engaging in critical dialogue is one way to empower and challenge students about structures of inequality within libraries and universities. We define critical dialogue as the exchange of ideas and meanings to promote learning and awareness of thoughts and values. Engaging in critical dialogue requires planning and forethought, and certain steps can be taken to create an atmosphere that is conducive to productive dialogue, such as providing context for an issue in the form of key definitions and historical significance, setting ground rules (especially for how conflict will be handled), and knowing how and when your intervention into a dialogue would be necessary or appropriate. We discuss this in the context of our own experiences later in this chapter.

While librarians have been engaged with this type of pedagogy—critical pedagogy—for years, recently there has been an increased awareness and practice of critical librarianship and critical information literacy, as seen in the #critlib movement.<sup>5</sup> A shift from more traditional to critical pedagogy forces librarians to take into account the systems within which students live and learn, systems that do not provide a neutral playing field of opportunities for students of color and those from marginalized communities.<sup>6</sup>

The academic library has often enforced a "white institutional presence" (WIP), or the prominent influence of white, cisgender, male culture that has come to be viewed as the norm in many areas.<sup>7</sup> These areas include curriculum design and instruction, building and campus architecture, representation in leadership, values, and cultural expectations.<sup>8</sup> Students of color and those from marginalized communities are actively harmed by the WIP since it fails to take into account

their culture, values, resources, and opportunities and fails to offer them the same levels of representation.

When students reach college, they begin to learn a new type of literacy that is most likely not native to them—academic information literacy.<sup>9</sup> These “grammars of information” taught in higher education are necessary for speaking the language of academia, a language that has been largely built and shaped by the WIP.<sup>10</sup> It serves to help individuals be included in scholarly conversations, but also excludes those who do not meet expectations. Additionally, it could work to disempower whole groups of nonwhite and non-cisgender students and reduce their potential access to academic communities and discourse in which they may wish to engage.

Information literacy is, in essence, a tool that offers one power and privilege and regularly excludes or disempowers individuals whose identities do not conform to the white, cisgender, heterosexual male for whom the systems of higher education have been designed. As a way to mitigate issues associated with the exclusive nature of academic information literacy, Elmborg noted the role of critical information literacy in developing a critical consciousness. This is done by asking questions about information structures and the roles that institutions like libraries play in creating and reinforcing those roles. The approach necessarily makes it impossible to maintain the notion of neutrality.<sup>11</sup> Asking these questions and encouraging students to participate in the conversation, and thereby creating the opportunity for critical dialogue, allows students who may feel excluded by the WIP to voice their experiences and values and therefore begin to engage with a system that might otherwise exclude them.

Additionally, being able to claim a position of neutrality is by its very nature an assertion of certain privilege: “*Neutrality* can be seen as a privilege that an individual or institution can use to dodge issues that may not directly affect them and fall in line with the dominant powers.”<sup>12</sup> Historically marginalized people do not have the luxury of choosing to be neutral about certain issues, as they are, by default of their identity, placed on one side or another. Additionally, clinging to the notion of the neutral library and librarian reinforces the “whiteness” of the profession, leading to at best a lack of support for, and at worst the ostracizing of, librarians of color who do not feel represented by this position. Librarians have been tackling this problem for years and continue to discuss it in highly visible venues such as the American Library Association Annual and Midwinter conferences.<sup>13</sup>

While the “neutrality” of librarians can be and often is harmful to individuals and communities, it also restricts the way librarians teach. Keeping ourselves and students in vacuums devoid of value or difficult decisions does nothing for their critical-thinking and argument skills, their ability to engage in civic matters, or their ability to become professional leaders. Neutrality is simply a less risky and easier instructional approach in the short term. Additionally, neutrality can stagnate and atrophy the sense of professional and ethical purpose. Jacobs reflected:

“As a profession, we like to give answers. And we like to ask questions that give us answers. Often, we are not comfortable asking questions that only raise more questions.”<sup>14</sup> A classroom dialogue is difficult, if not impossible, to facilitate if we do not pose difficult and uncomfortable questions.

We see the issue of imposed neutrality or equality between two “sides” in our classrooms time and time again, with scientific topics such as climate change and evolution, where students have been encouraged to seek out and incorporate sources from multiple sides, even when empirical evidence overwhelmingly favors a particular side or approach. Some instructors have even prohibited their students from writing papers on such “controversial” topics in order to avoid dealing with the pain of grading a paper that takes a cavalier approach to source evaluation and the potential blowback of refuting a student’s beliefs—political, religious, or otherwise. The emphasis is too often placed on identifying and collecting viewpoints rather than challenging and refuting through the recognition and evaluation of evidence and logical arguments.

Neutrality is, in many ways, promoted and perpetuated through the constraints inherent to the one-shot sessions so abundant in the academic library instruction world, as well as through both real and self-imposed pedagogical expectations librarians feel they must fulfill during this time frame. *We have only fifty minutes, so we better not squander that time on a tangent related to machine bias when all the instructor asked for is a session on popular versus scholarly sources.* Taking a stance requires a lot of work, intellectually and physically. We have to be prepared for the response, both positive and negative, of our students, faculty, and administrators. The lesson planning has to be thoughtful and nuanced and allow for meaningful conversational diversions that end up in a different spot each time we offer that lesson. Diverging from the prescriptive and proscriptive constraints we work within is a risk, and certainly a risk that some librarians are better positioned and privileged to be able to take, given their own circumstances. However, compared to the daily struggles and impediments many of our students face, we would argue that this is the cost of a moral decision to deeply engage in a meaningful, critical dialogue with and among our students. Carrie Wade addressed the frustration and hope associated with working with students within the limitations set by time and expectations:

I am not allowed the time in the classroom to deconstruct [harmful] worldviews and rebuild a strong community through inquiry and collaborative, student-oriented learning. Instead I focus on what I can do within that time frame.... I always try to add a little bit on ways information has been used against marginalized communities, or ignored them and caused harm in hopes that this will spark more of a critical consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

Continuing in a similar vein, Wade called our profession to task for our culpability as “neutral” parties, noting that we “were the boy crying wolf all those years... when in many ways we were complicit in calling the wolf in to town.”<sup>16</sup>

What Wade illuminates here is that by not pushing ourselves to teach critical thought and encourage critical dialogue, we have been complicit in information inequalities and set ourselves and our students up to fail in the fraught information landscape in which we now find ourselves. By teaching and practicing neutrality, we have both taught and modeled for students not just that there is more than one side to any issue, but that every side should be given *equal weight* even if the sides are not equal in their evidence, support, and creation process. We have modeled that, for example, one climate-change denier’s argument should hold the same weight as one climate-change scientist’s simply because we want to maintain this illusion of neutrality. And when we teach students to seek out “both sides” of an issue like climate change, we are teaching them that both sides are worth the same amount of investigation, the same amount of page time, and should be considered equally, even though scientific evidence overwhelmingly promotes a consensus on the topic. While bringing in multiple ideas around a given topic is important, it is also important to critically examine the information, its creation process, and how it contributes to a larger, ongoing conversation in order to carefully consider all the ideas together. Not promoting this kind of critical thought is a disservice to our students, who rather than learning to evaluate information as part of a complex system, may learn to trust nothing, or only those sources that agree with their preexisting ideas.

Yet asking uncomfortable questions and empowering students through critical dialogue necessitates that librarian teachers yield a certain amount of control in their classrooms. This is not an easy or comfortable task for many of us, as it leaves open the possibility that conversation could be taken over by one vocal individual or that the conversation could take on an exclusionary tone, in which case some students may not feel welcome to engage in the dialogue. However, Jonathan Cope argued that the authority and control librarians possess in the classroom are not removed when taking a dialogic approach to instruction, but rather they “[change] forms and [remain] unspoken.”<sup>17</sup> While we can create an open space for students to engage with concepts of inequality within information systems, we also retain institutional control to condemn exclusionary behavior or language that does not serve the democratic goals of the conversation.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean we should always cut off lines of dialogue, but we should instead set ground rules for what respectful dialogue looks like in the classroom, hold students accountable to those rules, and model through our own behavior and discourse the type of communication we want students to learn and practice once they leave the class.<sup>19</sup>

Understanding that we still retain certain authority over the conversations happening in our classes, we can address problems with the “all sides are valid”

approach that accompanies neutrality and therefore address problems with false equivalency. There was an anecdotal report on an information literacy listserv around 2016 that offered an eye-opening example of how this approach can have serious repercussions on how students think about information. The story (as recalled by us) was relayed by a librarian who said that, after an instruction session on finding sources for an argument paper, a student returned for more guidance. The student was having some difficulty finding peer-reviewed research on “both sides” of the argument; there seemed to be no scholarly “pro-rape” research that could help round out the paper for the student, and this issue was merely viewed by the student as a logistical roadblock to be overcome, not an indicator of a greater moral issue at play.

Instead of teaching an “all sides are valid” approach, we should be promoting a critical consciousness within students, thereby encouraging them to evaluate evidence, explore the implications of “neutrality” for marginalized groups, and question the dominant narrative. A critical consciousness requires students to develop a deeper understanding of the world, to grapple with social and political contradictions, and then to take action based on that deeper understanding. Continuing with the example explained above, rather than a student trying to research the “pros and cons” of an issue like rape, a critical consciousness would encourage them to explore the deep, complex societal issues that surround the discussions of rape in our culture, whose stories are being told (and where, when, and why), and how to synthesize multiple information sources into a larger narrative and deeper understanding.

Critical approaches to information literacy require engagement with and critique of the dominant viewpoints and structures, which may be outside the realm of comfort for many instruction librarians, as such engagement requires them to have a grounding in how information literacy relates to human rights, equity, and the like. If anything, conscious non-neutrality is a prerequisite for critical thinking because it requires the work of defending thought processes, the use of sources, and information-seeking strategies. As Jennifer Ferretti explained, “The idea is not for you to ignore certain resources, people, movements, or things because they were not made by marginalized people. The idea is to critically engage with everything and to meaningfully weave diverse works into the discourse.”<sup>20</sup> Using dialogue as a tool for engaging with diverse views and values reinforces the idea that sources of information are in conversation with each other and encourages students to think of their own writing as a way of engaging with that existing conversation.

Holding a critical dialogue requires you to critique the dominant narrative, evaluate all ideas, and give special attention to voices of the marginalized. For example, in our discussions about how to search Google, students watched a Google-produced video that explained how its algorithm works, read writings by Safiya Noble about her experiences with and research into using Google as a black woman, and reflected on their own experiences of using Google search. Then, as a class, we discussed how these different sources of information diverged and converged,

the limitations and value each brings to the conversation, and what could be done with this new understanding of the complexity of Google and how it is used in US society. Students talked about the problems with Google being viewed (and promoted) as neutral, challenged each other to not equate their own anecdotal experiences with decades of research, and acknowledged that these conversations must be ongoing, as Google exists in a state of constant change. Rather than simply walking away with an idea like “Google is bad because it sometimes gets this wrong or is racially biased,” students were prompted to consider the issues surrounding Google search as a complex system of experiences, decisions, and practices.

When misinformation is so efficiently produced and disseminated using social media and other means, when fact-checking resources are more accessible to the common person than ever before, how can the skills and resources that we share in our classes ultimately contribute to a just society in a meaningful way? This can be done through a stance of non-neutrality that situates these skills, practices, and dispositions in service of a moral good, rather than simply in service of a better grade. Open, critical dialogue and thoughtful argumentation can be a way to encourage students to see each other as complex humans within a complex world. As Cope stated, “The goal of civic education should not be the taming of political passions, but of transforming political antagonists from ‘enemies’—who are illegitimate and must be destroyed—to ‘adversaries’ to be debated”; a variety of views can be expressed while still recognizing that “this pluralism should not be apolitical with respect to intolerance.”<sup>21</sup> Isn’t this approach better suited to a pedagogy that is engaging, meaningful, and dynamic? The authors believe this to be the case and have worked to adjust their curriculum to better incorporate critical practice and dialogue into our instruction.

## Critical Dialogue in Practice: A Departmental Vision Statement, First-Year Seminars, First-Year Composition, and a Credit Course

### *Crafting a Vision Statement*

Informed by the recent body of work on critical information literacy as discussed above (reviewed and expanded upon by Tewell),<sup>22</sup> our small undergraduate instruction and engagement unit (consisting of a first-year experience librarian, an instructional designer, and a director for undergraduate instruction and engage-

ment) convened to articulate our new approach and aspirational goals that would center critical information literacy as the primary focus our work, rather than as a side effect or afterthought as it had previously been. After a series of discussions in the spring of 2017, we settled on the following vision statement to guide our approach to undergraduate instruction that incorporates critical librarianship: “*We will work toward creating information literate citizens that are discerning and ethical consumers and creators of information who value common humanity, demonstrate lifelong learning skills, and positively impact their world.*”<sup>23</sup> Recently, we determined that this statement, while emphasizing the broad goal of benefiting society, did not do enough to prioritize the questioning of power structures and their effect on equity and human rights, and, significantly, addressed information-literate “citizens,” which is, of course, problematic language that could exclude students who were not US citizens. The problems with this language were not immediately apparent to us, even after writing. This is indicative of our own bias and privilege and an example of how easy it is for language that we felt was empowering and inclusive to be oppressive. In the summer of 2018, the unit moved forward with the development of a new statement:

We will work toward fostering information literate persons who:

- are discerning and ethical consumers and creators of information,
- value common humanity through the use of shared inquiry and dialogue,
- demonstrate lifelong learning skills,
- critically question and engage with structures, systems, and sources that inhibit justice and equity,

In order to positively impact their communities.<sup>24</sup>

Once the initial iteration of the vision had been articulated, the very real task of putting our ideals into practice arose. We faced one of the single biggest issues that a large swath of the profession faces when confronted with similar circumstances: given a single fifty-to-seventy-five-minute session with a class, how could we implement the praxis of critical librarianship, such as addressing power imbalances, racism, and systemic bias in information structures, while still meeting the needs of the instructors (such as familiarizing students with the library’s databases)? What if an instructor is resistant to the idea of incorporating issues of race, gender, and power? Building rapport with students is already challenging enough when we are given only one class period with them. How could we possibly in-



roduce issues that can be controversial and require a great deal of sensitivity to navigate effectively? We had the freedom to build our credit course around this content, but we still wanted to incorporate issues of critical librarianship into our everyday work with first-year seminars and composition courses, meaning we had to face these questions head on.

## *First-Year Seminars*

The first-year seminar (FYS) on our campus presents its own set of challenges outside of issues of critical librarianship. Each college offers its own FYS, with no common curriculum or assignments between them. Some courses focus on developing study, communication, time management, and other skills imperative for new college students to persist and succeed. Others focus on career exploration, and some serve as introductory courses to the major areas of study, choosing to cover narrower, discipline-specific information and skills. Each college, and even each section, looked to the library to provide varying types of instruction, such as introductions to databases, library tours, and the like. Without a common set of learning outcomes, assignments, and goals, our instruction for these classes needed to be broadly applicable and able to fit into a variety of course structures while still providing students with information literacy skills that allow them to critically evaluate structures and ideas. Our goal was to make an instructional shift from teaching discrete library skills, such as how to generate keywords or use facets in a database, to teaching information skills that benefit humanity, such as understanding how search engines work and what that means for different populations who use them. Or, as we referred to it, teaching “information for good.”

We started our revision to the FYS instruction program by revisiting our learning outcomes for the one-shot, fifty-minute, in-class sessions to better align them with our new vision statement. The learning outcomes we developed were as follows:

1. Develop, perform, and narrow a Google search keeping in mind Google’s functionality and limitations.
2. Utilize fact-checking strategies in order to determine the authenticity and authority of information.
3. Recognize the social and ethical implications of information use, access, creation, and dissemination and their effect on a variety of communities.
4. Develop habits of inquiry that will serve them as lifelong learners.

These outcomes were designed to start students at a lower threshold (searching a familiar place like Google), but to bring forward issues such as bias in Google’s algorithms and being a responsible information consumer and sharer (building on the “fake news” discussions that were popular at the time). We also took the opportunity to use examples of working through strategies for fact-checking viral

headlines, focusing on those that might unfairly target marginalized communities. Thus far, students have responded positively to the content, and we have been able to engage with all of the outcomes in a meaningful way.

These changes allowed us to continue addressing priorities of the instructors, such as helping students learn how to find and evaluate information online, while also bringing in our own priorities of non-neutrality, confronting unequal access to information, and power structures of information systems. With only fifty minutes, we were not able to take a deep dive into any of these issues, so we looked at the FYS as a way to simply introduce these ideas, hopefully prompting students to think more deeply about the information use in the future and creating a foundation we could build on in later courses, such as first-year composition.

To accomplish this, we adapted a lesson plan, “Googling Google,” from the *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*, volume 2, created by Jacob Berg.<sup>25</sup> Each class included a Google demonstration and discussion, which were focused on a social justice issue currently in the news cycle and included skills such as understanding the power of choosing search terms, understanding how Google’s algorithm determines what is displayed and in what order, understanding the results on the page (ads, types of websites, etc.), and asking students to share how they evaluate content they find through search. Each class then ended with an activity that prompted students to do a search in Google for a current event or controversy, examine the top five results, identify the most and least authoritative site, and explain their reasoning for making that determination. We were then able to analyze their responses as part of an assessment of the new session curriculum. Some examples of topics the students investigated included Confederate monuments in southern states, the opioid crisis, the shooting in Las Vegas, and white nationalist protests.

Assessment of the activity completed in the first-year seminar sessions showed that despite class discussion and practice about using fact-checking techniques that move beyond simply evaluating a website URL or aesthetic design, these were still the most common attributes students examined to determine authority. Students commonly looked for .org or .edu URLs over .com and looked at website design, such as the use of all capital letters in headings, placement of ads, or whether it “looked authoritative.” This assessment showed us that we need to do much more work in pushing students to think more critically and examine the information presented, rather than using quick, simple checks that do not deeply engage with the material.

As part of our scaffolded approach to first-year information literacy instruction, we chose to focus our critical dialogue around examining Google and bringing in examples of information inequality or discrimination through the chosen search examples, such as debates around vaccines and how individuals or communities with a lack of access to health information are uniquely impacted. We felt that this approach would be a slow way to begin to introduce the concepts of information inequity to new students and would provide a foundation we could then build upon

as students moved upward in their college careers. This approach also allowed us to fit into most course structures. Some classes were tasked with completing a formal research assignment, such as an annotated bibliography, but most were focused on developing critical-thinking and life skills. Choosing to focus on Google allowed us to reach both types of classes with information that was relevant, introduce critical pedagogy concepts, and easily fit into the various course structures.

## *First-Year Composition*

Because the majority of our contact with first-year students occurs through first-year composition courses (FYC), bringing critical librarianship into the classroom by addressing issues of access, power and privilege, and identity was incredibly important; it had the potential to reach the largest number of students. The university's FYC program consists of two classes, Composition I and Composition II. Our instruction team has historically had very little interaction with Composition I, which is usually taken in the fall of a student's first year. Our primary instruction in the FYC program happens in the spring, when students are enrolled in Composition II. The second eight weeks of the course are dedicated to traditional composition elements, where students engage in secondary research, synthesize sources, and work toward building an argument in a research paper. During this time, we offer instructors the option of one or two library sessions focused on the specific assignments students are completing. The first assignment is an infographic, where students are asked to synthesize multiple perspectives on a topic. The second is the researched argument paper. Building on the content we address in FYS and due to the more academic nature of the research being completed in FYC, our goals for critical information literacy in FYC focus on identifying the monetary and inherent value in information as a commodity and recognizing when some voices may be absent from a scholarly conversation and why.

Using a similar approach to the one in our FYS curriculum, we chose to build critical dialogue and research into existing session outlines so that we could meet both our goals and those of the instructors, whose primary focus is preparing students for college-level research assignments. In addition to time constraints of the individual sessions, we had the added hurdle of library sessions being optional for composition courses. Due to this fact, we rarely see all of the sections offered in a given semester, and some instructors will choose to do only one library session rather than the recommended two. While we stress to instructors that it is better to schedule both, data from past semesters shows that not all will do so. Therefore, we also try to make each session as self-contained as possible so as to minimize student confusion.

The first library session is designed to introduce students to developing a search strategy, using library databases, and evaluating information. The learning outcomes for this session are as follows:

1. Identify keywords for a topic to use in the search for information.
2. Identify underlying structures and common features of databases.
3. Articulate a search strategy based on the context of the information need.
4. Evaluate infographics for design, purpose, and trustworthiness of the information provided and its sources.

The first goal allows us to approach thinking about search terms in a critical context. A common example we use is the difference between searching for “gun rights” and “gun control,” where we are able to demonstrate through search how the search terms chosen can automatically lead to heavily biased results. We challenge students to consider this in their own brainstorming and to actively seek out alternative terms that could help discover different viewpoints on a topic. Similar to the discussion of Google in FYS classes, this approach reinforces to students that they need to critically consider where and how they search for information and to consider what voices might be missing as a result of their chosen database or search engine and their search terms.

The fourth and final goal of evaluation presents the opportunity for bringing in critical dialogue surrounding the dissemination of information. Using the examples of preselected infographics, students work in small groups to evaluate how the information is visually presented, who the target audience is, where the information is sourced from, and what financial interests may be at play in the creation and sharing of the infographic. We are able to prompt students to translate these skills into evaluating any information source they may come across, allowing us to hold critical dialogues about information sources. One key point we strive to impart is that information, though it may seem otherwise, is not free, and access to it is paid for in some fashion. We are able to share the examples of paid database subscriptions and companies underwriting scientific studies of their own products’ effects and usefulness (or paying to have information about their products packaged in a pretty infographic so that it is more appealing). We are also able to begin a dialogue about the privilege that students enjoy, namely, the access to huge amounts of academic and proprietary information through the library’s paid subscriptions, something that many members of the world population do not have. We engage students by asking them to guess the cost of an average database or academic journal and stress the resources they access through their libraries are not “free,” but rather someone else (the library, the university, an academic department) is paying for access, and students are not individually responsible for the cost. Many students are surprised to learn about the high cost of access to subscription databases and journals. Some have followed up with questions about what happens after students graduate or if someone who isn’t a student is allowed to use our library sources. This can lead to a rich discussion about inequality in information access.

Thanks to one of the FYC instructors, we have been able to experiment with the session a bit within a single section of the course. This adaptation of the les-

son allowed us to ask students to read one of three articles prior to our meeting. The articles were on the topic of “reaction GIFs” and remix culture. While the instructor picked the topic, we lobbied to replace one of the articles with Jackson’s article addressing the use of digital blackface in reaction GIFs.<sup>26</sup> We were able to situate the work within a context that students were likely already familiar with and then able to show the complex nature of this type of dialogue or rhetoric and how different groups (black women, for example) can have their images taken and exploited for entertainment.

Once in class, students formed small groups based on their article of choice and were asked to discuss that work. They were then asked to present a summary of that article to the entire class and then re-form small groups, this time ensuring representation of every article within a group. They then attempted to work on a rudimentary synthesis of the articles and develop plans for an infographic representing this synthesis. This led to discussions on racism in the media, the historical antecedent of minstrelsy, and how the dissemination of these GIFs can perpetuate stereotypes. As Jackson noted, “No digital behavior exists in a deracialized vacuum. We all need to be cognizant of what we share, how we share, and to what extent that sharing dramatizes preexisting racial formulas inherited from ‘real life.’ The Internet isn’t a fantasy—it’s real life.”<sup>27</sup>

This approach to the lesson allowed us to enter into a dialogue with students that was relevant to the assignment and to information literacy while incorporating critical approaches, and we hope to implement something similar in more sections. Students largely responded to this content with surprise and interest. One important piece of the conversation’s framework was that students were focused on developing a synthesis of the topic that required they analyze the articles’ rhetorical styles and purposes, not necessarily on whether or not they agreed or disagreed with the content or one or more of the texts. Of course, their own understanding about the content would be present in the final products they would produce, but for the purpose of the class conversation, our established ground rules kept students focused on the task at hand: how the articles approached the same topic from a variety of perspectives, what rhetorical strategies they employed, and what common ideas or themes were present.

The second library session is designed to help students find additional sources of information to complete a researched argument paper. Most students will be further refining the topics they chose for their infographic assignment and therefore have already located information. We focus, then, in the second session on seeing information in a broader conversation and understanding peer-review and scholarly articles (something they are required to incorporate into their papers). The learning outcomes for our second session are as follows:

1. Recognize the transferability of search strategies between popular and academic databases.

2. Execute a successful database/discovery service search for articles and books using appropriate search strategies.
3. Identify the role that a reference list/bibliography and citations play in the scholarly conversation and employ that knowledge to expand their search for information.
4. Evaluate key criteria related to a scholarly article in order to determine value to their search.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, argument papers have the potential to produce a false equivalency for the student, leading them to believe that there are two linear and equal sides to every argument. Our focus on how scholarly conversations, peer-review, and scholarly articles function has worked to combat that.

In both sessions, we again strive to use sample searches and articles that deal with timely information problems or that focus on controversial or difficult topics. We have chosen to not have prepared “canned” searches so that the students can help direct the flow of the classroom. This not only allows students to be in control of their learning, but also assists them in building critical consciousness around the impact of information choices, searches, and availability. For example, one search topic that a student suggested was mental health among college students. Through concept mapping, database filtering, and citation tracking, we could model how to move from this broad topic to something more focused and targeted at injustices or inequity, such as mental health services on college campuses for LGBT+ students or how access to (or lack thereof) educational funding contributes to increased stress among lower-income students. In this way, we challenge students to think more critically about issues facing them or their peers and move beyond the generic “controversial” topics that crop up in every writing course every semester (like abortion, marijuana legalization, or gun control). Because of limited time with the students (only one or two sessions), and because we rarely (if ever) see the completed assignments that student turn in, it can be difficult to judge students’ responses to some of these activities past the initial dialogue and to know if the exposure to the idea of viewing a topic through an intersectional lens has any short-term or long-term effects on that student’s writing and research. To date, we have not had immediate push-back from students within the class session, nor have we heard negative feedback from instructors regarding this addition to our instruction. In the future, as we hope to continue to build a stronger collaboration with the FYC program and individual instructors, this is a possible avenue to consider for assessing student artifacts.

## *Credit Course*

In the fall of 2017, we were finally able to implement a credit-bearing information literacy course after around two years of development. Having the support of the Honors College and the freedom of extended time with students, we

decided to heavily incorporate critical library pedagogy and dialogue as part of the class. The course is a three-credit, sixteen-week class that runs during a regular semester. Enrollment the first semester covered a wide demographic of students: the majority of the students were sophomore or junior level, with a few freshmen and seniors. Students' majors also varied widely and included journalism, education, agriculture, and engineering. Because it was an honors seminar, and the intent is for the classes to be small to allow for maximum engagement, the enrollment for the course was capped at twenty-four students. That being said, we believe that this course should not be limited to Honors College students and are planning to expand both in terms of student accessibility and number of sections offered.

Choosing to focus the course around social justice issues was both intentional and serendipitous. The final revisions happened to be occurring around the same time that we were developing our new mission and vision, and it seemed like a perfect place to put some of our ideas into action. Our final learning outcomes for the course reflected this commitment to critical librarianship, critical thinking, and critical dialogue:

1. Identify personal information needs and knowledge gaps.
2. Design and implement strategies for searching for, locating, and accessing information.
3. Organize information strategically, professionally, and ethically.
4. Critically evaluate information.
5. Synthesize information to create new knowledge.
6. Differentiate the information creation and dissemination process in a variety of disciplines and media.
7. Articulate how access to and awareness of information has a demonstrable impact on social, economic, and political well-being.
8. Connect research skills to practical, lifelong uses within personal, academic, and professional needs.

We chose to structure the course into three, loosely defined sections: popular information and social media, scholarly information and research, and lifelong learning and career-focused information problems. Throughout each section, we chose readings and other media that would address common information skills (how to search for something online), as well as call into question assumptions, biases, or oversights that are embedded within information systems, and consider how different populations are affected by these problems. By engaging in critical dialogue throughout each section, students are free to examine and question issues of equity from various perspectives while learning with and from each other. They are given the time and space to develop critical consciousness over the course of the semester. As is probably not surprising, these separate sections also bled into each other, and issues reappeared throughout the semester, allowing us to emphasize that complexity of information systems and their uses.

## ISSUES OF RACE

In the first part of the course, we focused on popular information sources, searching the open web, and employing fact-checking strategies to evaluate information for accuracy and authority.<sup>28</sup> For example, when we discussed using Google as a search system, we drew heavily on Safiya Noble's research into algorithmic biases in search.<sup>29</sup> Our students were surprised to learn about the implicit biases that are built into search algorithms. In their reading logs, students expanded on their reactions and analysis of class readings and discussions, and Noble's research appeared in many of the submissions. The readings, logs, and class discussions fostered a fruitful conversation about how the media influence stereotypes about race and whether or not incredibly powerful companies like Google and Facebook have a moral obligation to society.

While the conversations surrounding Google search and racial bias remained relatively calm, and our majority-white class responded favorably to questioning machine bias, not all conversations about racial inequality in tech were free from conflict. Around this same time, students read an article about Pokémon Go and the way the company, Niantic, crowdsourced data to build the augmented reality world that players navigated.<sup>30</sup> In what essentially amounts to digital redlining, the app was built using data from a previous game that was played mostly by white males. This resulted in the majority of the real-life locations players could interact with being in predominantly urban, commercial, white areas. The students' reactions to the assertion that a beloved app like Pokémon Go could be racist were polarized. A vocal section of students defended the app makers, while an equally vocal group argued back. Students had strong, visceral reactions to both the article and their classmates' comments (on multiple sides of the issue). Those that argued in support of the app makers took the stance that the app was not racist because the creators did not *intentionally* exclude people of color. They were, after all, free to download the app and play it. It was also telling that some defended it by noting that rural communities, like many that our students come from in Oklahoma, also dealt with a lack of game locations to interact with. Many students were not able to grasp that these two things were not mutually exclusive: the app could redline communities of color *while also* failing to represent rural communities, and these could both be the fault of lazy design. The reading logs that students submitted after this class discussion reflected that many still failed to grasp the nuance of this issue, despite class discussion.

As the instructors for this course, we expected that some students would likely push back against the article's argument, and this was one of the first opportunities we had to attempt to facilitate what proved to be a very difficult conversation. We wanted our students to feel that their voices were being heard, but we also did not want to let inaccurate statements or assumptions go unchallenged. We let the students naturally guide the conversation itself, but intervened when ideas or questions arose that we felt deserved further thought or probing. For example,



one student argued that Pokémon Go was primarily designed to make money for its parent company, not to be in the business of politics or social justice. When the conversation turned to this angle, we followed up with questions about why equal access was somehow at odds with a company's profit margin.

In addition to intervening when necessary to keep the conversation on track or to follow particularly interesting points that were raised, we also felt it was important to be honest with our students about our own experiences. As white individuals, we have all had to confront our own prejudices and privilege, an ongoing process that we struggle with daily. We hoped that sharing these experiences with students would show them that while these conversations may be upsetting or feel uncomfortable, there is value in being open to that discomfort and being able to recognize *our own* complicity in systemic injustice.

When we began to revise the course content for fall 2018, we chose to approach this article differently for numerous reasons. One, the headline of this particular article, "Is Pokémon Go Racist?" we felt was a little too much like clickbait and distracted from the very real, very important discussion of digital redlining that the article covers; two, because of the incredibly defensive and antagonistic responses some students had, we felt that emotions got in the way of having a truly thoughtful conversation about the topic (and we were, naïvely, not fully prepared to facilitate the difficulty of the conversation); and three, we prefer to use recent, timely topics, and as of this writing, Pokémon Go is no longer a top news story. Instead, the article was presented during an in-class activity in which each student chose to read one article about digital redlining, each of which focuses on a different area of technology, and we had spent considerable class time leading up to other ways that groups are marginalized through technology. In this way, the article was presented within a larger context, and students were better versed in the broader conversation within which this single topic existed.

As part of our learning outcomes, we want to continue to challenge students to think more critically about, and to be able to talk about, issues of race within information systems. Even though the progress of this particular conversation was not ideal, we still feel that it was successful to a degree, as many students had not been exposed to this type of critical dialogue before (confronting racist technology), and as instructors, we feel this experience was invaluable in allowing us to gain experience in helping students navigating these conversations more productively in the future. We anticipated students struggling with themselves and peers when confronted with the realities of non-neutrality, systemic bias, prejudice, and the like and feel this struggle helped them grow as thoughtful consumers and creators of information who take into account the perspectives of other individuals, specifically marginalized populations. Going forward, we feel that we can better prepare ourselves and our students to confront challenging conversations by providing a framework and context for ideas, being honest and open about our own experiences with confronting bias and prejudice in ourselves, and asking more

specific questions (for example, as opposed to starting with the vague questions like “What are your thoughts?” using a more intentional question like, “How does this author’s experience with [technology] compare and contrast with your own?”).

## ISSUES OF GENDER

Later in the semester, when we had shifted the focus to scholarly publishing and research, we again wanted to bring in readings that would complicate the narrative that students usually see about scholarly or peer-reviewed publishing (that it is the “gold standard,” that it is free from bias, etc.). To do this, we brought up the gender disparity in academia and scholarly publishing, and students looked at statistics of women-authored papers compared to men-authored papers.

We also examined information hierarchies in controlled vocabulary, drawing on work done by Emily Drabinski.<sup>31</sup> Rather than simply teach students how to use library databases, we elaborated on the history of how library classification systems work (for both print and electronic materials) and prodded students to challenge the assumption that library systems are somehow neutral or free from bias. By looking at the history of certain topics within library classification systems, such as how information about LGBTQ+-related issues are inconsistently catalogued across disciplines and have a history of perpetuating harmful stereotypes, we challenged traditional notions of authority and highlighted flaws in library and other information systems. This type of thinking and questioning assisted students in building the ability to look past the status quo and dominant narrative and to explore the non-neutrality of concepts once thought to be safely neutral.

These are only a few, quick examples of the ways that we intentionally tried to push students to critically examine their previous notions of information and the ways that it is created, discovered, and shared: that “scholarly” means best; that information discovery systems are unbiased; or that all individuals, regardless of identity, have an equal path to discovering or sharing information. We periodically asked students for feedback on the inclusion of these themes, and as expected, reactions were mixed. Some students pushed for more politically charged topics; others felt that a class on research skills was not a place for anyone to push a “political agenda” (even though the title and description were clear about inclusion of this type of content). It was disheartening to hear that some students clung to that idea that education and libraries should somehow be free from political influence. As we discussed earlier, choosing to stay neutral—and not address the significant problems within information systems—is still choosing a side: a side of privilege, where one has the freedom to believe that these issues do not directly impact large numbers of US society, and that information professionals do not have a responsibility to disrupt these systems to make them more equitable for everyone. Going forward, we have revised the course description to make it clearer that social justice topics will be an integral part of the course. By also continuing our own

learning in key areas of critical pedagogy and librarianship, we can also be better prepared to introduce and facilitate critical conversations in class.

## Conclusion

The authors are fortunate to have initiated and explored critical approaches to information literacy in a safe and supportive environment and recognize the privilege we have that has enabled this exploration. As a campus unit, we have been able to constructively debate the way in which we structure and deliver our instruction and have been able to provide a consistent message in our classrooms and with our students: one that prioritizes justice, equity, and accountability in the information environment. By no means is our instruction a perfect model of critical information literacy, and with it being a relatively new pedagogical approach for us, there remains much to learn through reflective practice and continued engagement with the literature and a diverse array of voices. Still, we feel that our students have benefited from challenging a false sense of neutrality and have been invited to engage in more dynamic opportunities for meaningful and difficult dialogue with their librarians and with each other.

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