

April 2014

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Recommended Citation

Bridges, L. M. (2014). Instruction for International Students Living in Oregon: Censorship in the U.S.. *OLA Quarterly*, 20(1), 31-35. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1014>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Instruction for International Students Living in Oregon: Censorship in the U.S.

by Laurie M. Bridges



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Enrollment numbers for international students have more than doubled in the last 10 years across the Oregon University System (Oregon University System, 2013). According to the 2008 Oregon University System Fact Book, in the fall of 2008 Oregon State University (OSU) had 992 international students. In the fall of 2013 international student enrollment at OSU was an astounding 3,407 (Randhawa, 2014). This dramatic increase in numbers is in large part due to the public-private partnership between Oregon State University and INTO OSU, which was established in 2008. The INTO OSU partnership is described as follows on the INTO OSU website, “OSU leads and maintains full control of all academic and admissions decisions, while INTO contributes to [international] market knowledge, leads [international] student recruitment, and contributes to the overall [international] student experience” (INTO Oregon State University, n.d.). As temporary Oregon residents, often in their early 20s, international students will take what they learn back to their home countries. Intentionally serving international students and their information literacy needs can have wide-reaching effects beyond the state. OSU librarians have been providing information literacy instruction and research assistance directly to a handful of INTO OSU classes, in one form or another, since its inception. However, this past year I’ve been pushing beyond the standard information literacy library sessions by developing, with the cooperation of INTO OSU instructors, librarian-led instruction about censorship and banned books.

The idea of providing instruction about censorship occurred to me in the Spring of 2013 after I had a one-on-one research consultation with an INTO OSU student from Oman. The student was working on a 100-level “for and against” essay about censorship. I had visited his class for information literacy instruction and afterward he scheduled a meeting with me because he was having difficulties finding articles in support of censorship. The student and I sat down together and did an exhaustive search of our library databases and Google. It’s not easy to find research in support of censorship, but we did find newspaper quotes from Omani leaders supporting censorship. As you might expect, the student and I had an engaging conversation about Oman, the United States, and censorship during our hour-long meeting.



After the research consultation with the student, my thoughts kept returning to the conversation and my role as a librarian and possible free-speech advocate. The following questions bounced around in my mind, “In what ways are librarians responsible for educating the public about censorship? Are any librarians talking with international students about censorship? Would INTO OSU be interested in having me work with some of their instructors to develop a librarian-led session about censorship?”

To answer some of these questions, I began by visiting the website of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), which is the leading international organization representing libraries, librarians, and their users around the world. IFLA is an independent, non-governmental, not-for-profit organization. On their website, IFLA outlines four core values; the first one endorses, “. . . the principles of freedom of access to information. Ideas and works of imagination and freedom of expression embodied in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (IFLA, 2013). After reading this, I immediately went to the United Nations website and found Article 19, which states, “Everyone has the right to . . . seek, receive, and impart information . . .” (United Nations, n.d.). These findings made it clear that IFLA is affirming the role of librarians around the world to uphold the principles of “access to information.”

I then sent out an email to a listserv of US and UK librarians who serve international students, asking if anyone had ever taught a session about censorship. I also had several informal conversations with other librarians at OSU. Although I wasn’t able to find anyone who had taught a similar lesson, listserv correspondence and informal conversations did lead me to rule out instruction about worldwide censorship and instead focus on censoring, banning, and challenging books in the US. Why? First, I am by no means an expert on international censorship of books, and becoming one would require extensive research and time. Second, international students come to INTO OSU to learn English and about the US country and culture.

The next step in answering my questions involved talking with the INTO OSU staff. One of the staff members I spoke with was the General English Program Manager. General English is one of four tracks of study in INTO OSU; students on this track are usually taking classes simply to improve their English skills, not necessarily to gain admittance to college or university in the US. All the General English classes are pre-100-level. The General English Program Manager was immediately intrigued by the idea of a librarian-led session about censorship and set up a meeting between me, her, and the Fall term INTO OSU instructor for 5th level Listening, Speaking, and Vocabulary class (5th Level is the top level in the General English program and is a required class).

Censorship and *Captain Underpants*

In our meeting, the three of us discussed how censorship instruction could fit into the course. We also talked about possible readings and settled on *Captain Underpants*, the number one challenged book in the US (American Library Association, 2013). Because the class is *Listening, Speaking, and Vocabulary*, and does not include reading, we limited the assigned reading to a small portion of the third book in the *Captain Underpants* series. While in this meeting, I was told the international students might have little to no knowledge about the US constitution, Bill of Rights, or First Amendment. To discuss censorship in the US, I felt



it was imperative to include at least a short overview of these parts of American history. The lesson was split over two class periods:

Friday (30 Minutes):

1. Distribute three handouts
 - Captain Underpants* book three (introduction and chapter 1)
 - Vocabulary list with definitions of slang words
 - Letter from Dav Pilkey, the author, to teachers (Pilkey, n.d.)
2. Short presentation and introduction
 - Why librarians care about censorship
 - Overview of challenging, banning, and censoring books in the US
 - Information about *Captain Underpants* series

Monday (90 Minutes)

1. Review Friday's discussion
2. Short history lesson: Constitution, Bill of Rights, First Amendment
3. Discussion about *Captain Underpants* and banned books
4. Small group work discussion the reading, censorship, and possible reception of *Captain Underpants* in their home country
5. Listen to a five-minute NPR news clip about *Captain Underpants* (Blair, 2013)
6. Large group discussion

After the class concluded, the INTO OSU instructor sent students a link to an online assessment about the lesson. Overall, the student comments were positive. For example, "It was a really interesting presentation. I wish we can [sic] have more presentations like this one," and "It's a good way to know [sic] about American culture," and "She is good at explaining ideas and concerns about our questions and thoughts." When asked how the lesson could be improved, students said things like, "Go deeper [sic] into the topics, I want to know more about this and her work," and "She can talk more about some interesting culture of [the] United States," and, "It's a little fast, I hope Laurie can talk a little slower." Of the students who filled out the survey, all recommended I teach the lesson again.

In addition to the online survey, I also sent my thoughts and reflections about the lesson to the INTO OSU instructor with whom I had worked. She replied with her own observations and feedback, which indicated after I left the classroom students had more questions about race relations in the US (I discussed race very briefly when I talked about the Constitution and founding fathers) and she also felt the humor of *Captain Underpants* was lost in cultural translation and she recommended trying the lesson with a different book the next term.

Censorship and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

At the end of Fall term, I talked with the General English Program manager about returning to teach the same lesson, with a different reading, during Winter term. She suggested working with two classes at the same time, *Listening, Speaking, and Vocabulary*, and *Reading and Writing*. In *Reading and Writing* students read books chosen by the instructors. As mentioned earlier, *Listening, Speaking, and Vocabulary* is a required class, but the new addition




to my lesson, *Reading and Writing*, is an elective and not all students in that class would be in the other class. The two instructors I was working with for Winter term were enthusiastic and asked that I give a total of three presentations over the course of the term.

As I write this article, it is the middle of Winter term 2014, and the first instructional presentation has already occurred. I taught a session in the *Reading and Writing* class the day after *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was distributed to the students. The class was 90 minutes in length. I began the class with a brief overview of librarians and our role in censorship and academic freedom. I did not go into great depth because I will be going to the *Listening, Speaking, and Vocabulary* class to talk at length about librarians, the Constitution, The Bill of Rights, the First Amendment, and censorship. We talked about the difference between a challenged book, a banned book, and censorship. I concluded with an overview of the book and author, Sherman Alexie. This included information about the establishment of reservations in the US and the setting for the book, the Spokane Indian Reservation, where Sherman Alexie was born and raised. At the conclusion of my presentation, the INTO OSU instructor had a list of questions he wanted the students to discuss. It was a lively discussion and the students had lots of ideas and opinions about censorship. At the conclusion of class, I handed out an article that appeared recently in our local newspaper; *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was being challenged in a middle school and high school just thirty minutes outside of Corvallis, in Sweet Home (Moody, 2014).

I will be returning to the *Reading and Writing* class when the students have finished the book. The students will vote anonymously as to whether or not they would support the banning of the book in schools. We will then discuss the book at length and review locations where the book has been challenged or banned over the past few years. I will also be introducing another newspaper article about the debate in Sweet Home. Along with the *Reading and Writing* class, I will also be making a visit to the *Listening, Speaking, and Vocabulary* class before the end of the term. As mentioned earlier, in this class I will be discussing the Constitution, Bill of Rights, First Amendment, and freedom of speech in the US.

Conclusion

Over the past several years, I have developed a positive relationship with many staff members and instructors in INTO OSU. The people I have worked with to develop the censorship instruction lesson plans and presentations have been enthusiastic about partnering with the library. Most importantly, international students are engaged and interested in the topic.

Providing instruction about censorship in the US is one way to open the door to conversations about censorship internationally. Indeed, it has been fascinating to hear the students' opinions about censorship in their home countries—and in ours—during group discussions. Many of these students studying in Oregon will return to their home countries and one day become leaders in government, engineering, business, and science. It is my hope that the education we provide to them in Oregon will positively impact them and the people they one day lead. I am looking forward to the remaining two sessions I will teach this term and expect to return to OSU INTO classes Spring term, when I will further develop and improve the censorship lessons and instruction delivery based on student and instructor feedback. 



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