

A Discussion About Teaching Information Literacy

Career Development Project Summary

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Overview

As a logical person, I rely on scientific fact and discovery to explore the world around me. The appearance of phrases like “fake news” and “alternate facts” has disturbed me as both a scholar and a future librarian. The need for teaching information literacy, particularly in an academic library, is underscored by the American Library Association's (2015) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, which emphasizes the need for librarians to collaborate with teaching faculty in creating a curriculum for information literacy (Introduction). I wanted to discuss with a teaching librarian how we teach information literacy in a world where phrases like “fake news” or “alternate facts” are used in environments like our federal government, institutions that were previously considered trustworthy and a reliable source of facts.

Ms. Megan Heuer is the Head of Information Literacy at Southern Methodist University, where I have been working as an intern and staffing the reference desk. I wanted to discuss her experience in this area, including how she teaches students to discern bias and authority in a variety of settings. Before our interview, I observed her teaching, along with Ms. Rafia Mirza, two classes of political science students. They discussed a variety of points that relate directly back to the ALA's (2015) *Framework*, particularly the first one, "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual," by asking the students to evaluate the authority of resources, including who wrote the resource and why.

A Learning Experience

After the two classes, I met with Ms. Heuer to interview her about information literacy. Our conversation centered around the following questions:

- Has the new administration and the current political/cultural environment changed how you view and teach information literacy? If so, how?

- With the explosion of social media in the last 10 years, how does the presence of instant publishing, both through and outside of SM platforms like Facebook and Twitter, affect how students view truth and reliable information? How do they affect how librarians need to approach teaching information literacy?
- Current students often come to college with a general knowledge of how to search for information using the internet.
 - How do we take those instincts and show them how to apply these skills to scholarly research?
 - And how do we teach them to apply critical reading and thinking to non-scholarly sources, in order to recognize what is well-researched vs. what is disinformation?

I thought it was interesting that Ms. Heuer used to teach workshops on both fake news and media bias, but that the former became redundant as the students in those workshops would ask questions that guided her back to media bias (Appendix A, page 12, para. 8). The two topics are related, obviously, but it was clear that students weren't nearly as concerned about fake news or misinformation as they were about the news having bias or spin. It was also disheartening to hear that students mistrust the news in general (Appendix A, page 10, para. 2), but given our current political and media climate, it's not completely surprising.

Her comments about bias were also enlightening. When Ms. Heuer mentioned the importance of discussing bias within the context of information literacy, she said, "Yes, there is bias, but it's human to be biased. I think the bias is way more subtle than what people think," (Appendix A, p. 12, para. 2). In my opinion, this is an important point for students (and citizens) to understand: It's nearly impossible to find news or information without any spin or bias. The key to understanding such information is identifying the bias and/or perspective, and considering that when you are reading and digesting that information. This again goes back to the ALA (2015) *Framework*, particularly where it emphasizes that

bias is not just within the information one finds in research, but that students must come to their research "with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview," (Authority is Constructed and Contextual: Dispositions).

Ms. Heuer gave me a variety of teaching tools to use for information literacy and media bias. While the websites she mentions (Appendix A, page 11, para. 7) are more for teaching about media bias, she has given me a couple of tools to help students evaluate sources, which is a central component of helping them discern on their own whether resources are appropriate for a particular assignment. The SIFT method by Mike Caulfield (2019; Appendix A, page 17, para. 1) has only four steps that would be easy for students to remember and apply: Stop, Investigate the sources, Find better coverage, Trace claims back to the original context. This yet again ties back to the *Framework* (2015) idea of the construction and context of authority.

In other conversations with Ms. Heuer, she has also referred me to Joseph Bizup's (2008) BEAM framework for research-based writing. This may be more about how to categorize resources than to evaluate them, but I liked that the article tried to nudge teachers and librarians away from terms like "primary" and "secondary" sources, as those labels might make sense within a history department where you're dealing with original documents vs. analysis of those documents, but they are more loose and confusing within the scope of more general research. Bizup uses an acronym to help students consider the types of resources they might need for their research papers:

Background for materials a writer relies on for general information or for factual evidence;
Exhibit for materials a writer analyzes or interprets; *Argument* for materials whose claims a writer engages; and *Method* for materials from which a writer takes a governing concept or derives a manner of working. (p. 72)

This is another way of getting students to evaluate their selection of resources, encouraging them to look at scholarly conversations within and multiple perspectives on a topic. The challenge here is making

sure that the faculty teaching the course are also using these terms, as it could be confusing if the professor is still using the terms "primary" and "secondary" sources, unless the librarian or professor helps them see the connections between the two frameworks.

Ways to Improve

I think it might have been helpful if I had read Mr. Caufield's (2019) post about the SIFT method before our discussion, in order to ask her how she uses that method within the classroom. In the same way, while I see the connections between the American Library Association's (2015) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* and the points that she discussed with the students about evaluating the quality and context of resources, it would have been helpful to ask her whether she built her lesson plans directly from the framework, or if that was only one of several building blocks that she used when creating the plans.

I'd also like to know more about how she would teach these ideas to younger students. It was clear from the classroom discussion (before our interview) that these were more advanced students when it came to research and connecting ideas. Would she change her lessons or questions if it was a freshman class, and the students were just getting started in thinking about how to research ideas within an academic setting?

Action Plan

As a Research and User Experience Intern at Fondren Library on the SMU campus, I'll be expected to teach information literacy and basic research methods to freshman-level writing courses as soon as next semester, which is one of the reasons I have been observing multiple librarians from our department as they present these ideas to classes on campus. As my time in front of the students draws

close, I will be taking these lessons to heart as I try to create my own way of presenting this information to younger students, encouraging them to find their own voice within academic scholarship.

References

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Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

Bizup, J. (2008). BEAM: A rhetorical vocabulary for teaching research-based writing. *Rhetoric Review*, 27(1), 72-86. doi:10.1080/07350190701738858

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<https://hapgood.us/2019/05/12/sift-and-a-check-please-preview/>.

Appendix A

Transcript of Interview With Ms. Megan Heuer

Note: I had previously observed Ms. Megan Heuer and Ms. Rafia Mirza teaching two sessions at SMU with a political science class, discussing information literacy and the evaluation of a variety of resources. The class will be writing about political movements and protests for change, and some of them will be looking for first-hand sources through social media, foreign newspapers, etc. The beginning of our conversation was a follow-up to that.

JRB. To start off with, how do you think the class went? Do you think the students understood what you were conveying about information literacy and evaluating sources?

MH. Yeah, I think the class went well. They seemed really engaged. It's really difficult to tell how well something's going until they're actually producing work. So as best as I could tell, in working with some of the students one on one, they did seem very aware that when they were going to be looking for things in social media or things online, they were really wanting to check and make sure that it was a legit source and not something made up or not a bot. So we talked about some ways of being able to do that.

One thing we discussed with the students, taking a source and plugging it back into the library search, is seeing if this is a source that's been used by scholars, or is this a source that's been cited by the *New York Times*, or something like that, then that's a good sign that this is a source that can be used. Some of the students were asking about that, and that's the biggest thing that I wanted to make them aware of – that's the big takeaway. You know, when you're talking to the class, you ask, is the Internet or social media a place where people can discuss freely what's going on around protest, and they said, "Yes." Obviously, that's a very different take away than what we got after the class. That was good.

JRB. Good, I could tell while I was sitting in the first two classes that they seem to be getting it, but I know that I wasn't there when you were working with them one-on-one, and that's really the best place to figure out if they're applying that when they are looking at sources.

MH. Yeah, I did hear some about that from students wanting to know is this a legitimate thing. And even if, you know, we talked to one student about [whether] it was a legitimate source, but then thinking about the idea of how it was framed. It was framed, it was the perspective from the United States, it was a Western perspective, and how do you think about the information that's in there then? So it's not just about whether it's good or bad, fake or not fake.

JRB. So [the students] are understanding that the perspective that it's coming from is also important.

MH. Well, it's really difficult to see beyond your own [perspective], the lens of the West, especially for what they are trying to do.

JRB. Because they're looking at Hong Kong and Iran, and some places where clearly a Western journalist is going to have a different perspective than somebody who's grown up there with the regimes that are there.

MH. So in this source that the student was looking at, it was a think tank. It was nonpartisan, quote unquote, but it's a think tank to promote ideas from Western democracy. So it's got a lens to it.

JRB. But understanding that, I think, is the key, and using that when you're writing your paper or making a presentation. I think that's essential, but it sounds they got that takeaway.

Speaking of a Western lens, has the new administration and the current political cultural environment changed how you view and teach information literacy?

MH. You know, I started teaching media literacy workshops right after 2016 election, and the conversation about "What is fake news?" has changed. It was something that was very clear before that,

and now we almost have to define what we mean by "fake news" since there's a blurring of that definition now, namely calling things fake news that are actually great news. So that's been different.

I think that the biggest difference that I personally have gotten to see is that people now think that this topic is way more important. Certainly, with the faculty, there is an urgency now to thinking about these things that I didn't see years ago.

JRB. Does it matter what department the teacher's in; is it from all departments? Or is it more political science and history and literature and journalism?

MH. Well, you know, thinking about it, I have only heard it from the people who are volunteering it, that think it's more important. But it's happening more frequently. But it's been multiple departments, it's people who teach freshman writing. We worked with a class in anthropology where [the teacher] thinks it's important. Certainly journalism, though in the journalism department, they tend to teach these things themselves; they're quite media-savvy themselves. So, yeah, that's a general feeling amongst faculty, that this is something really important that we need to be teaching our students.

I'm always working with a specific kind of population. I'm not working with the general public, and that's different, and so if I were to go out and teach media literacy to the general public, the kind of ideas about truth or not is going to be really different than working with specifically the SMU population, so I haven't seen a big shift for that.

I will say that students in general seem to be quite pessimistic about the news and the ability to get good news. There's certainly varying levels of skill in doing that. One of the big conversations we have is, there's things they know you should do in order to be smart about the news that you're getting. As to whether you actually do that in reality, that's a different thing. And that's not just students.

JRB. That's everybody.

MH. Does that answer your question?

JRB. It does. I mean, do they feel that they can't trust the *New York Times*?

MH. There are a variety, because they're all different kinds people. There are some students... It just depends. I've had some students say most of [the news, they] can't trust. Most of those people tend to be more vocal. So I would say generally, there is a feeling like, "Well, there's some good news sources out there, but I don't know if they lean left or right, and it's hard for me to tell." Sometimes they'll want a shortcut, like is this left or right. One of things we do in the media workshop is talking about that there's not just a bias toward a certain political party, there's lots of kinds of bias and how that shows up.

It's interesting; things that even seem surprising to me, though, in terms of bias toward women, bias toward minority groups, and how that manifests and the level at which that can occur. When I've asked students, "Is that surprising to you?" Invariably, 100% of them say "No, it's not surprising."

JBR. They expect bias now because of the current climate.

MH. They expect there to be bias toward certain groups of people. I think some of it is that they're much more aware of those kinds of issues, I think, like Black Lives Matter and with #MeToo. I think they're more aware of those kinds of issues. That's not surprising to them at all, to see some of those kinds of things.

JRB. Do you ever use the infographic that shows them, and I've seen a couple of different versions of this, that shows where the different publications kind of fall? [left, right, truth, not truth]

MH. You know, I did at first. I tend to show them www.AllSides.com, or www.MediaBiasFactCheck.com, which is a better tool for that kind of thing because it's got way more resources in it, and it's got crowdsourcing. The problem with that chart is that's one author who created that. Say what you will about crowdsourcing, for this kind of thing, for thinking about bias, crowdsourcing may be a better way.

JRB. Well, certainly, if the students are already pessimistic about news, I think the crowdsourcing would be a better way to show them multiple people have looked at these, and thought about this [bias], and this is the consensus.

MH. And I think the other point of teaching the workshop [about information literacy], is that, yes, there is bias, but it's human to be biased. I think the bias is way more subtle than what people think. You know, the difficulty of teaching something like that is not teaching it in such a way that they leave feeling like everything is biased, or these are all bad examples, and, therefore, I've got to throw my hands up in the air.

I think some of it is seeing what that can look like, even in "good" publications. Every publication's going to have things you can critique – there is always an area of grey, and what that grey looks like. There's an area of trying to live in the grey. I mean, that's one reason why I wouldn't just be like, "Here you go, this one's left, this one's right."

JRB. Because it's not as cut and dry as that.

MH. Right, it's not as cut and dry as that. And also there's plenty of stuff out there telling them that our media is partisan. That's not a message you need to reinforce.

JRB. With the explosion of social media in the last 10 years, how does the presence of instant publishing both through and outside social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter affect how students view truth and reliable information, and then how does that affect how you need to approach teaching information literacy?

MH. I would say I'm going to have a hard time answering that, because I want to look at research studies. I can't really answer that question. That said, I think students generally that I've worked with are probably more savvy than we think they are, at least the ones here. It's a wide range. I'll teach a workshop, and there are maybe one or two students who already know what I'm teaching. There's some who have that level of savviness, even if they are not aware of that.

I think, for the most part, they are not aware of how much social media and Google, how much a company is shaping their access of information. They might have some sort of idea about there's relevancy ranking, and there's potentially some factors that go into that, that are related to them as a consumer, but they might not have played that out to its end.

JRB. Like, how does that affect me?

MH. Right, like how *does* that actually affect me? It's like they're sort of aware that this stuff is going on around them, but really thinking about the fact that you're allowing a corporation to determine the kind of information you're getting exposed to, and what that really means. They may not have taken [the idea] to its final conclusion, in terms of their thinking about it.

JRB. Do you think that with all of this stuff that came out of the election, they're a little more aware of that? That Facebook [can affect the information you see]?

MH. Students are super aware of fake information and fake news on social media.

JRB. Do they understand that the algorithms point you to it? That they suggest related stuff?

MH. I don't know. Some of them have heard of filter bubbles, and some of them haven't. There's been some studies that have shown that the people most likely to fall for fake news are actually people older than 55. I think students are fairly aware of that.

That's also why I used to teach a workshop on fake news, and then also one on media bias, and I decided to stop doing the fake news one. Because mostly when I would teach [about fake news], they would want to know about media bias. Because that's harder to recognize and understand. And, of course, a lot of people think that they would never fall for fake news, and yet you can. The sort of, "super, fakey" stuff, most students here are pretty savvy and know that that's fake.

JRB. And I wonder too, how much they are on the platforms where that was the most common. Facebook is now an older person's platform. It's not an 18-year-old's platform, and that's where you heard about that [the distribution of fake news] a lot.

It wasn't necessarily that Facebook was suggesting it as much as somebody [in your circle of friends] would suggest it, someone would reshare it, and it was becoming viral in that way. It wasn't necessarily that the platform was allowing it to happen; it was being proliferated by the people using it vs. Facebook.

Whereas you have the bots on Twitter...¹ again, they're allowing it, but they're not the ones [creating the misinformation].

MH. Did you notice when I told them how much of Twitter is actually bots, and they were like, Whoa.

JRB. Exactly. Do you use that at all when you talk about information literacy?

MH. I haven't really talked about the whole Twitter thing because when I teach the media bias workshop, we're more focused on [other things]. There's a couple of aspects here. You've got the actual publisher and the publishing organization, and whether they are biased or not, and then you have the ecosystem in which it lives. And we talk a little bit about that ecosystem – and that is something to think about, that it's not just about, "Well, I know the *New York Times* is good." But then it's about *how* are you getting your information, how is it coming to you, what's that ecosystem.

Whenever students talk about this, they say, "Well, I get my news from Facebook" or "I get my news from Twitter" or whatever, a lot of times what that is, is they're following somebody that they trust through those news organizations. So it can be people doing that, and that's really different than "Breaking news! Something is happening so I'm going to go on Twitter and see what people are saying." Mostly because that's overwhelming, and most students don't have that kind of time.

So I think a lot of people, and this includes adults too, who are not students, are looking for who are the trusted organizations. "This organization is really good. I know I can get good news from them. I'll just follow that." That's how most of us operate.

Sometimes they are looking for a librarian stamp of approval, like, "This is the good one. My librarian said so." What we do in the media bias workshop, we're even looking at examples from major news organizations, because nothing is perfect. I find that most students aren't trying to assemble an understanding of what's going on just from Twitter or just from Facebook.

JRB. They have a variety of ways that they're doing it; they don't go to just one source, which is probably a smarter way to get your news.

MH. You know, Project Information Literacy just came out with a whole big study about how college students access news². That's a good place to go to understand, broadly speaking, what they're coming into the classroom with.

JRB. Current students are typically pretty Internet savvy. So how do you use that information, how do you use those skills and say, okay, so you already know this [how to use the Internet, Google, etc.]. How do you teach them to use those instincts and apply them to scholarly research?

MH. You just hit upon exactly what we should be doing. Constructivist learning would say that you start with, you find things that are similar, and I'll say – students are savvy with tools that they are used to using. They're not necessarily Internet savvy, they're savvy in the things that they do all the time.

I'll do classes where I'll get them to think about an information search, even for everyday kinds of things, and how you think about that process, because people are good at using information in the way that they're used to doing it. So there's all kinds of similarities there – and differences, and the differences can be helpful too. Say, this is the way you might think about this, how you do your everyday thing, and this is why it doesn't work; we have to think about it in this other way [for a scholarly search].

¹ This was something discussed in the classes taught by Ms. Heuer and Ms. Rafia – that some information on Twitter is being created by bots and not at all by human beings.

² Head, A.J., Wihbey, J., Metaxas, P. T., MacMillian, M., & Cohen, D. (2018). *How Students Engage With the News: Five Takeaways for Educators, Journalists, and Librarians*. Project Information Literacy Research Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.projectinfolit.org/uploads/2/7/5/4/27541717/newsreport.pdf>.

So I'll do things like that. Like what were you searching for, and how did you think about it? One of the things I teach a lot is thinking about strategizing for your search, like thinking about good places to look instead of just finding a search box and dumping words in. For example, are you just coming up with keywords and finding a search box to stick them in and go? Which is how everybody works with Google.

Or do you actually think about a likely source before you start searching? So we talk about,
[sample dialogue between librarian and student]

L. Okay, if you are searching for everyday information, did you think about the kind of source you are looking for, and what would be an authoritative source for your everyday need?

S. Yes, I thought about how I would want to hear from other people who are owners of this technology, and make sure it's not a company's website that I'm looking at that's trying to sell to me. I'm looking for this kind of person to be more authoritative.

L. Would you think about that before or after you do your searching?

Typically, most students will say after. Once you get a list of results...

JRB. That's how they determine where they go.

MH. Right! They do their search and then you look at the list of results. Typically they try to get what they need to pop up in their list of results. That is the behavior: Search box, keyword, look through the results, and keep trying. So [the goal is to ask], "What if you thought about where you might look and put that to your keywords, or add that to your search in some way?" And that completely changes how you think about searching for something.

JRB. Right!

MH. And sometimes they'll do that. What if you went back and added something you found, like blogs by the owners of this technology, and put *that* in and research that site alone? That makes sense because it's something you're used to; it's so much easier to grasp a concept.

JRB. Absolutely – when you're adding on to a previous skill...

MH. Something you're used to doing... It's like, now I know what that would look like in more academic research.

JRB. And showing them that that it's a lot easier, even on our own website, to do a targeted search. If you go to a database versus dumping all of the words into our general search, you may not find what you need. It's better to start looking at these databases and thinking about where might this live, and then going there.

MH. In the subject areas I work with³, we do some academic research, but the subject areas are quite broad. There are some cases in which if you're looking for certain things on the Internet, you literally will not find it if you're only trying to keyword search. For example, I teach a class on public records; you will not find the public record by Googling for it. It's impossible; you'd have to understand how search engines work in order to get that. You can't see inside of the database, even if it's a free database. So we do a little bit of learning about that, for those students, because if you're going to be an expert Internet searcher, you need to know that.

JRB. I think we already talked about this, but my last question was this: How do we teach students to apply critical reading and thinking to non-scholarly sources in order to recognize what is well researched, but versus what is disinformation? I think you talked about that a lot in the class that I saw: [Using] lateral searches, searching [whether something] has been cited by the *New York Times*. I think that takes us back to where we started.

Is there anything else you would want to add to that?

MH. I would say, you know, to really get it at that, you would need a semester course. So everything that you do is so short that the best way to get at that is to keep it simple. I use the Mike

³ Ms. Heuer is not only the Head of Information Literacy at SMU, she is also the Communication Arts Librarian, the subject librarian that works with students and faculty in advertising, Arts Management and Arts Entrepreneurship (AMAE), communication studies, and journalism.

Caulfield SIFT method: Stop, Investigate the sources, Find better coverage, Trace claims back to the original context⁴. That's a simple way of getting them to think about evaluating stuff online.

The other thing that I would say is the most effective thing is to have a sort of shock for the students, like construct an experience for them that is shocking in that something that they thought was really good could actually be bad. It feels a little bit like you're setting up a gotcha moment, and it kind of is. But [it sets the student up to see] oh, actually I thought this was good for all of these reasons, and as it turns out, I was wrong. Having that sort of experience really causes you to re-think how you were thinking about it before.

The other piece of that is that I get students to think about how would you evaluate something, how would you evaluate a piece of information? They'll say lots of things, and some of them are great, some of them are not great. If some of them are not great, it gives you a chance to talk about that. I will hear lots of stuff from how they were taught in the past, from high school and kind of the ways we used to teach evaluation of information, ways that are not actually helpful – things like it's a .org and not a .com.

Well, that is a rule that you were taught, and I want you to forget that. I'll usually tell students that I'm so happy and grateful that you brought that up: Who else was taught that? Let's talk about why that's not helpful...

JRB. Because there's lots of nonprofits that have very a specific reason for existence, and that's going to affect any information they put out.

MH. Anybody can get a .org. I had a student ask once, what sort of process is there for qualifying to have a .org? Well, there is none. Then that means nothing.

JRB. It's one thing to evaluate along with everything else, but it's far more important I think

⁴ Caulfield, M. (2019). Introducing SIFT, a four moves acronym. Retrieved from <https://hapgood.us/2019/05/12/sift-and-a-check-please-preview/>.

[to evaluate the information on the site].

MH. I think it's actually not helpful at all. I think, forget about that. You're aware if it's a company's website; they're not, like, middle schoolers. They know it's a company's website. Sometimes the company's website is the best place you could be looking for understanding what it is.

And that's the other thing – I really hate blanket rules about evaluating information. I know some people (some faculty) will argue with me, blanket rules like "you should never look at Wikipedia" or "this kind of thing is always bad," like, it's hard to come up with hard and fast rules that always apply [to every situation]. I think that shuts down thinking instead of opening them up to thinking, like critical thinking.

JRB. Certainly I've even had a student, as we were talking about another political science class, and he was looking for sources. He's like, yeah, I love to go to Wikipedia – *to look at the sources*. So he was using it in a great way, not using it as a source itself, like he's citing Wikipedia. He's using it as one way to look for information on the top.

MH. A lot of students will know how to do that. That's an example of the kind of thing I'll use in talking about citation tracing, like, Wikipedia, how do you use it? That's generically... Most students know that one. But then you can use that as a way of talking about, like, you can do that with scholarly articles, or you can use Web of Science for that same thing. And I always like to reward that student, tell them "That's a great research strategy. How could you apply that in other ways?"

JRB. It's not your only search, but it's one way to look for information, and then here's other ways to do that same type of research, again, connecting that skill with these other things.

MH. That's a big message for them, that there's lots of different ways of doing things. The ways you're showing them may be more powerful, but it's not the only way.

JRB. It depends on what the topic is, and there's just so many factors that you have to take into account.

MH. Right.

JRB. Well, I feel like I have a lot of good stuff, and a lot of information to digest. Thank you so much for your time!

Appendix B

Recording of Interview With Ms. Megan Heuer

To listen to the full recording of our half-hour interview, please download the audio file at

https://unt.instructure.com/files/4523410/download?download_frd=1.