

Future Ready Librarian: Instructional Leader in an Age of Misinformation

Feature

We often speak about our students' becoming life-long learners. Nowhere is this more important than in the area of information literacy. This recent election cycle, with so much rhetoric in the media about "fake news," brought that into clear focus for many educators. What most librarians have always considered as part of the job has come to the forefront; the need for both digital and information literacy in our political and public discourse now seems urgent and critical to all.

The Future Ready Librarian model identifies the ways librarians serve as instructional leaders—outlining that our roles include building instructional partnerships, empowering students as creators, and curating digital resources and tools. The current frenzy over fake news allows librarians a heightened opportunity to highlight their role as leaders in information literacy. As Michelle Luhtala and Jacquelyn Whiting point out in their opinion piece, "Fake-News Fad: Let it Fade," teaching information literacy and helping students to become careful and rigorous researchers has always been our role. Now, the increased societal attention to media literacy poses a significant opportunity to insert ourselves into curricular planning and conversations.

Building Instructional Partnerships

How do we engage in those conversations? Who are our likely partners? What outside entities can be helpful to us? Current events are an ideal opening for conversations and partnerships with government teachers, journalism teachers, English teachers, professional learning communities, instructional technology departments, and more.

This is also a clear opportunity to distinguish our services from that of our instructional technology partners—our key focus is on information literacy and literacies in general (whether technological or print). We can be strategic about picking partners who share our concerns about literacy to enlarge our sphere of influence.

There are many avenues for building these partnerships, but outreach is key. After reading Joyce Valenza's "Truth, Truthiness, Triangulation: A News Literacy Toolkit for a Post-Truth World," I created a summary of some of her key takeaways on our library blog and then shared both posts with all of our teachers as a way to open up the conversation and provide them with resources. Sharing clear and succinct graphic organizers, like the one Jennifer LaGarde has created, is another avenue for opening a dialogue with teachers for integrating literacy instruction.



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As Luhtala and Whiting noted, teaching information literacy is part of our DNA and many of us use research models with students that include web evaluation, like Carol Kuhlthau's information search process or Leslie Maniotes' guided inquiry models. Having that instructional research model in our toolkit is helpful. In fact, my own district is in the process of refreshing our K-12 research model and building a set of scaffolding materials for teachers including a website that can help teachers lead students through the research process. Having a set of materials for teachers already developed also makes intervention easier. This doesn't absolve us of the responsibility to build instructional partnerships, but at a large campus like mine, having materials I can give teachers as a foundation for our discussions helps standardize what we are trying to accomplish campus-wide. And when a "hot topic" arises, we are already prepared with our toolkit of info lit materials.

We can also create opportunities to address news literacy with students outside the classroom setting. On our campus, we started a "civil discourse" political club which meets monthly. Throughout the year we informally discussed candidates, how moderators performed at the debates, how candidates were portrayed in the media, advertising, etc. Along the way, we talked about credible sources, how to vet the news, and other issues as they came up in the conversation. Though sometimes educators shy away from discussing highly controversial content, finding ways to discuss it with our students models civic discourse. That focus on the literacy "behind" the content allows us an avenue to help students be more critical thinkers (see <http://futura.edublogs.org/2016/11/11/how-libraries-can-provide-a-forum-for-civil-discourse/>).

There are always collaborative ways to integrate news literacy into a teacher's project as well. Our American history teacher initiated an assignment that asks students to view a documentary of their choice and then examine it for factual bias, fact, and opinion. Students watch the documentary, identify how it ties into their curriculum, note some key claims, research those claims in databases and examine if the filmmaker was taking a biased point of view. The project was initiated by the teacher and co-planned with the teacher, librarian, edtech, and instructional partner on campus. Librarians stepped in to teach students key fact-finding sources and how to locate unbiased material to check bias in the documentaries.

Curating Resources

Another significant part of our role as instructional leaders in teaching information literacy is curating resources for teachers. Obviously, there are a plethora of sources on evaluating websites. But we also need to consider how we can curate less obvious resources, like the tutorials buried in subscription databases, or resources from PBSOnline, or outside sources like Newseum, or one I just discovered, Facing History and Ourselves. For example, did you know that Gale in Context databases have a link for curriculum standards in their toolbar with lists of state and national standards for different content areas you can use to show teachers how information literacy fits in their curriculum? *Encyclopedia Britannica's* are on their Educator Page, as are *WorldBook's*.

With “fake news” being the hot topic, many educator-friendly websites have developed instructional materials. *PBS NewsHour* has an excellent lesson called “How to Teach Your Students about Fake News” (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons_plans/lesson-plan-how-to-teach-your-students-about-fake-news/). The News Literacy Project, a nonpartisan nonprofit whose mission is improving news literacy, has a trial tool for classroom lessons called Checkology. You can also invite them to do programming for your school with virtual guest speakers and drop in lessons (<http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org>). The NewseumEd site offers lesson plans related to resources at the Newseum that are especially suited to social studies, government, and journalism teachers (<https://newseumed.org/ed-tools/>). Facing History and Ourselves is geared towards issues of racism as examined through history, and has excellent lessons and video content. For example, at SXSWedu a team from Facing History presented firsthand accounts of events in Ferguson, Missouri, including the illuminating perspective of a local reporter who compared her coverage to that of national reporters (<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/facing-ferguson-news-literacy-digital-age>). The lesson is just one example of how their program allows students to build a much more nuanced understanding of how reporting is crafted around controversial issues and how the interplay of social media enters into the equation, all of which helps students build a much more complex understanding than simple checklists about information.

Lorraine Scaffidi, of The King’s Christian School in Camden, New Jersey, works with 10th graders to dive deep into understanding news literacy. Through this work, she has cultivated a variety of resources. During an email interview, she stated:

The flow of my lessons was an introduction to fake news, types of fakes (art, ads, staged scenes, photoshopped images, fake accounts, fake websites), and strategies to identify fake news (reverse-image searching, fact-checking websites, About Us pages, disclaimers, comments, signs of clickbait, lack of sources, and so forth).

We then moved on to media bias and I introduced them to the Pew Research Center’s Media Polarization tool and AllSides Bias Ratings. I also pushed out two Chrome extensions and showed them how to use them to identify media bias and potentially fake news. Those were the News Media Fact Check and B.S. Detector.

We then looked at opinion pieces, including editorials, op-eds, columns, commentary, and blogs. I showed the students how to identify those types of journalism from the URL of the articles and from the page where the articles appear within a digital news publication. They learned the difference between opinion pieces and news reporting. We finished with opinion journalism, the rules that guide that type of journalism, and the potential abuses. I taught them the IM VAIN acronym for evaluating news stories. I had found so many different systems to evaluate news sources, but I liked IM VAIN for its ease of application.

Some of the other resources I used were Triple Check Before You Share, the NPR report of the Stanford University study, the *Washington Post* article “For the ‘New Yellow Journalists,’ Opportunity Comes in Clicks and Bucks,” Blue Feed, Red Feed, the Journalists’ Code of Ethics, and lots and lots of examples of fake news and images. (Scaffidi email interview, May 7, 2017).

Empowering Students

Unfortunately, we do not all have the time or opportunities to work with students as often as Scaffidi does. This is where curation becomes especially helpful so classroom teachers can also integrate resources into their own curriculum when they see an opportunity. Curating sources can also include curating human ones. Consider local journalists or professors who could partner with teachers, or join a class via Skype, or enter into part of a larger project on news or media literacy.

Curation is not only about sources, it’s also about building partnerships. Often overlooked in this discussion is how we can begin engaging students as curators in their own right. What sources do students naturally use to vet their news? What are the mental criteria? We should be asking questions about their processes, helping them articulate these, and enlisting their help in identifying sources that might appeal to teens more than our sites, which they might perceive as “dry like toast,” to quote *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Despite what teachers or even librarians might think, students are actually frequently discussing the veracity of stories they see online in informal ways. How can we honor their expertise? What can they teach us? How can we deepen the conversations they are having?

Luhtala and Whiting would argue this sort of instruction has always been part of our role as instructional leaders—teaching effective research practices. In their *SLJ* piece they comment: “Our focus on fake news, ‘alternative facts,’ and general media mendacity distracts us from a very real educational challenge: teaching students the skills and dispositions that make them careful and thorough researchers.”

In her piece, Valenza adds, “Nurturing information literate, responsible, active citizens is what librarians do...As the landscape continues to shift, librarians must update our own skill sets and toolkits to guide students in navigating a growingly nuanced universe of news. We must also examine and recognize our own biases so that we are open to

contrary and conflicting ideas.”

The Future Ready framework clearly defines our roles, and historical events are demanding we step up to the plate. While much of this is work we are already doing, we have an opportune moment to highlight our efforts to administrators and teachers.

Works Cited:

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MLA CITATION

Foote, Carolyn. "Future Ready Librarian: Instructional Leader in an Age of Misinformation." *School Library Connection*, August 2017, schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2120923.

<https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2120923?topicCenterId=2247903>

Entry ID: 2120923