

Bridging Contemporary and Social Issues for Information Literacy through Instructional Platforms

Librarianship at a fine art and design college requires flexing information-seeking, interpretation, and analytical muscles that differ from those more commonly used in liberal arts or science-related academic programs. The majority of patrons are teaching or enrolled in studio-based classes, creating works of art, and designing materials rather than writing lengthy research papers. They are also undergoing rigorous review—peer-to-peer, professor-to-student, and sometimes industry professional-to-student. As a result, a key issue for me—as the digital initiatives librarian at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA)—is how to use technology to bridge contemporary and social issues with information literacy within the context of an art and design college curriculum.

Rethinking Instructional Platforms

I spend a lot of time researching digital tools. I've become an advocate for social media platforms like Twitter, chat tools like Slack, and project management trackers like Asana. I'm only just now exploring GitHub, Git, and Jekyll. Recognizing my own digital knowledge gaps has empowered me to learn new things and make mistakes. This vulnerability has landed me in charge of the library's social media presence and has allowed me to teach workshops such as "Omeka in the Classroom: A Teaching Tool for Exhibition Building and Cultural Literacy" and "Digital Humanities for Art Historians." While contemplating what digital initiatives mean at an art and design college, I'm also thinking about when, how, and where I use computer-based technology in my instruction sessions.

According to Pew Research Center, the most popular social media websites are Facebook (68%), Instagram (28%), Pinterest (26%), LinkedIn (25%), and Twitter (21%). Three-quarters of Facebook users and roughly half of Instagram users visit these sites at least once per day.¹ The popularity of these tools can lead us to have a narrow view of what constitutes social media. In very broad terms, social media can be understood as including any online technology tools that enable people to communicate and to share information and resources easily.²

MICA has had a learning management system (LMS) in place for decades, but we are currently moving to an LMS that *looks* and *feels* more like popular social media sites. Our faculty and students have requested an LMS that appeals to their aesthetic taste and focuses on user-centered design. They want their online educational experience to reflect their social online experience and the ease with which they move through

those environments. In light of this, I began to ask: "Why not look at *all* online platforms as instructional platforms? Why wait for a new LMS?"

Technology as a Bridge

After being struck by the numerous topics touched on in Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* (April 2016), I utilized Springshare's web-based research guide platform LibGuides to develop "Beyoncé's 'Lemonade' and Information Resources." *Lemonade* is an hour and five minutes of music, poetry, and references to history, literature, and art. It is essentially a short film with music rather than traditional dialogue. It required several directors and cinematographers to create a beautifully shot, cohesive narrative story of a woman going through stages of grief, presumably as a result of infidelity, while also addressing social justice issues involving police brutality, Black Lives Matter, and black womanhood and feminism. Though many fans of Beyoncé's music are drawn to *Lemonade*, one can see the aesthetic value in the work even without being a fan.

The contemporary and historical issues Beyoncé presents in *Lemonade* offer a perfect opportunity to discuss research and information through a point of reference that everyone is more or less familiar with. This type of opportunity fits with my practice of critical librarianship as the development of critical thinking and information skills as well as an engagement with "diversity, information ethics, access to information, commodification of information, labor, academic freedom, human rights, engaged citizenry, and neoliberalism."³

Some might argue that the topics raised in *Lemonade* are inappropriate for undergraduate students and that addressing them does not abide by the idea of keeping a "neutral" or "safe" classroom setting. In my view, informed by the work of the critical race and feminist theorist bell hooks, treating the classroom as a space in which social justice issues are not discussed may actually lead students from marginalized groups to feel further marginalized and not safe. hooks posits the importance of treating students as whole human beings, with complex lives and experiences, rather than as "seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge."⁴

Others in the library and information science field are approaching critical librarianship in a similar way. Kai Alexis Smith recently authored the "Get Out Resource Guide," on the symbolism and social issues alluded to in Jordan Peele's film *Get Out*, and "Hip Hop and Activism February 2017," an event-based guide that provides resources on the genre and activism.



Craig Arthur uses hip-hop sampling as a means to discuss plagiarism, changing the traditional punitive narrative to an exploratory process of why we cite our sources.³

Since April 2016, when I created “Beyoncé’s ‘Lemonade’ and Information Resources,” it has been viewed over 72,000 times. It’s been tweeted and shared on Facebook, as well as written about in online and print publications. The guide can and has been used as a basis for discussions on teaching with popular culture. One day after publishing the guide, I wrote “Art Is Information, Part I” on *Medium*, explaining why a librarian is interested in this particular work, ways in which research methodologies could be used for art making, how information informs art, and how our own knowledge informs the way we see and interpret art.⁶ Utilizing LibGuides, *Medium*, Facebook, and Twitter, I wanted to send two messages: (1) *Lemonade* is art; and (2) art is information that can be looked at through the lens of critical librarianship.

Technology-Based Active Learning

The MICA library has been embedded in two art history classes with a curatorial focus through Omeka projects that span one academic semester. Both classes were divided into curatorial teams charged with creating online exhibitions and interpretive texts. Omeka is a website publishing platform for digital collections and online exhibitions that can be used collaboratively or individually. The most basic features, such as image cataloging and exhibition building, make Omeka a tool for visual and cultural literacy instruction. Additional digital humanities plug-ins could also be added, including those that explore geographic information systems, mapping, and text analysis.

When I first began teaching Omeka workshops, I quickly realized that undergraduate students did not need help with understanding how to add images, build the exhibitions, or further customize their class websites. The areas where they needed guidance included copyright and metadata. Had I somehow known this in advance and designed this particular instruction session to be a lecture-style presentation on copyright, public domain, Creative Commons, and the Dublin Core metadata schema, for example, it would have been boring not only for the students but also for me. By using a tool like Omeka as a platform for active learning about these issues, I reduced the length of time I talk at students and have a valuable opportunity for students to learn a new tool, which can be added to a resumé or applied when utilizing other digital tools. This sort of work flexes students’ information-seeking, interpreting, and analytical muscles, acting as an extension to the curriculum of their course.

Other technology-enabled issues that could be linked to topics librarians traditionally teach are hashtags and advanced searching concepts. Paige Alfonzo explains the ubiquity of hashtags as an almost universal means in which to streamline instruction of authority control, controlled vocabularies, subject

headings, keyword searching versus subject searching, indexing, and more.⁷ With this instruction, advanced searching concepts naturally emerge in course discussions and student explorations. By working from concepts in social media, librarians can experience what Stephen Brookfield describes as the ways in which social media tools “foster active student engagement, democratize the classroom, and create a participatory learning environment.”⁸ This kind of learning environment lends itself well to the principles of critical librarianship and speaks not only to our students as whole humans but to this whole human librarian as well.

Conclusion

I had a rather narrow view of how to conduct information literacy instruction sessions for art and design students when I began my current position. With a change in leadership and the influence of a new instructional librarian joining our staff, I had the opportunity to look critically at my practice as a librarian, just as our students are taught to critique themselves and their peers as artists and designers.

Social media has the power to be an integrative place where services and collections meet, making those tools an instructional platform similar to the traditional LMS. All instructional platforms require planning and development as well as participation and engagement. Technology does not replace this work; it creates a whole new set of to-do lists and possibilities. Among the possibilities is space to develop dialogue around contemporary and social issues while sharpening information literacy skills. MICA library patrons are generally teaching and learning in a maker environment. As a librarian in this environment, I’m striving to be a maker as well. ■

Notes

1. Pew Research Center, *Social Media Fact Sheet*, Pew Research Center, Internet & Technology, website, January 12, 2017.
2. M. A. Ralph and L. L. Ralph, “Weapons of Mass Instruction: The Creative Use of Social Media in Improving Pedagogy,” *Issues in Informing Science and Information Technology* 10 (2013).
3. Kenny Garcia, “Keeping Up with . . . Critical Librarianship,” Association of College and Research Libraries website [June 2015].
4. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 15.
5. Kai Alexis Smith, “Get Out Resource Guide” (last updated June 2, 2017) and “Hip Hop and Activism, February 2017” (last updated February 21, 2017), Cal Poly Pomona University Library website; Brian Mathews, “Hip Hop Librarian Spins Info Lit: An Interview with Craig Arthur,” *The Ubiquitous Librarian* (blog), *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 2, 2015.
6. Jennifer A. Ferretti, “Art Is Information, Part I,” *Medium*, April 29, 2016.
7. Paige Alfonzo, “Using Twitter Hashtags for Information Literacy Instruction,” *Computers in Libraries* 34, no. 7 (September 2014).
8. Stephen D. Brookfield, “Teaching Students to Think Critically about Social Media,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 144 (Winter 2015), 52.

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