Chapter 4
Tracing Bias in a World of Binary:
Instilling Anti-Racist Information Literacy Skills in Online Environments

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ABSTRACT

The chapter details how the first-year writing program at a small, highly diverse, private university in the Midwest responded to the pandemic and the social unrest of the time by engaging in a wholesale revision of the information literacy curriculum. The authors aimed to build a pedagogical framework that would acknowledge the power, influence, and lure of digitally but simultaneously would trace its complex biases. In sharing the curriculum that aims to recoup central critical questions—a more holistically imagined, digital curriculum designed to bolster anti-racist pedagogy—this chapter will answer the following questions: What does digital, anti-racist, and culturally responsive information literacy curriculum look like in this moment? and What kinds of methodologies for teaching information literacy might we follow to help make space for the continual evolution required when teaching through an anti-racist, culturally responsive lens?

INTRODUCTION

Holistically Considered, Anti-Racist, And Online: New Directions for Devising Information Literacy Curriculum – An Introduction

Librarians and writing studies faculty have long acknowledged the need to devise more robust information literacy curriculum. Teaching "information literacy" has often meant guiding students though using technologies in order to gain access to particular kinds of information and cite sources in ways that align with convention (e.g. H*ow does one find a peer reviewed article? A government report? How does one cite an interview in APA format?*).

But such traditional approaches to teaching information literacy – those that have focused tightly around accessing and citing particular academic genres of information – have historically excluded broader, critical questions about information itself: considering what information is in the first place, how it circulates, how we critically evaluate it, and how we can position different kinds of information in our own research to have various kinds of social, cultural, and political effects. Moreover, our current approaches to information literacy often exclude questions of power, privilege, and access – how particular kinds of information are more likely to be represented and disseminated than others.

A more critical approach to information literacy insists on seeing our students not just as passive consumers of information, but as active agents who already circulate and produce information as members of the culture – most often by using digital platforms and tools within online environments. Notably, it is what has long been relegated to the margins of our higher ed information literacy curricula that our culture most needs. When we lament the poor information literacy skills of Americans, it is typically a critical understanding of information (and the technologies that produce and circulate such information) that we find most lacking. And currently, our American social landscape seems more riddled than ever with misinformation and conspiracy theories – theories often born, nurtured, and set loose to roam free in online environments.

Beyond addressing our missed opportunity to take a more critical, holistic approach to information literacy – one that is so very needed, this chapter details how the convergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic alongside the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement created new priorities in developing better information literacy instruction that both occurred online and fostered space for students to critically analyze digital contexts. In short, we need information literacy curriculum that acknowledges the fundamental truth that technologist Marshall McLuhan declared decades ago: "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964).

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