Balancing Acts in the Critical Library Classroom:

Inviting Constructive Dialogue and Resisting "Post-Truth" Discourse in Politically Contentious Moments

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INFORMATION LITERACY HAS TAKEN on a new resonance since the 2016 US presidential election, as terms like "post-truth," "alternative facts," and "fake news" have become common discussion topics in higher education and in public discourse. Conversations on these topics reflect growing concerns about the role of facts, evidence, and reasoning in public and political discourse at a time in the United States of intense political polarization and heightened distrust in the news media.[1] The increased concerns about the spread of misinformation have clearly illustrated information literacy's relevance, in particular in relation to individuals' personal lives and to their sociopolitical, historical, and cultural contexts. These concerns also point to the challenges of teaching information literacy in politically contentious times when people are especially susceptible to motivated reasoning[2] and to emotional reactivity.[3]

The complexities of engaging with information about contentious issues may be of particular concern to many critical pedagogues since critical teaching explicitly engages with sociopolitical issues and encourages individuals to learn through critical reflection and classroom dialogue. The critical classroom thus is especially likely to open up a number of peda-

gogical questions. For example, when political and emotional tensions are high, how can librarians and other educators foster welcoming classroom environments that center on open dialogue and critical reflection and that minimize the potential for any student to feel socially marginalized? How can we invite students to explore the constructivist nature of knowledge without eliding into an absolute relativism that suggests that all arguments and opinions are equally valid? Stated differently, how can we challenge "post-truth" discourse, which dismisses the importance of seeking accurate information and becoming well informed on an issue before drawing conclusions?[4] And how might we inhabit the roles of both teacher and co-learner as we acknowledge that everyone's experiences, backgrounds, beliefs, and biases (including our own) inevitably influence how they engage with and evaluate information?

These are many of the questions I have been grappling with since 2016 when I began teaching a credit-bearing information literacy course on a racially diverse campus in rural Georgia. Entering this new teaching context toward the end of the 2016 US presidential election, I observed both the political polarization on my campus and the appeal of "post-truth" rhetoric to many audiences. Working on a campus where the political tension often felt palpable, I wanted to foster an inclusive and open environment in which individuals could share differing perspectives and simultaneously to ensure that our work was rooted in mutual respect and critical reflection, analysis, and argumentation. I also believed it critical to acknowledge that I have my own biases and political leanings, while nonetheless encouraging open dialogue and not imposing my own views on my students.

These challenges led me to reexamine a number of aspects of my teaching, including how I frame class discussions about politically charged issues, to what extent I foster an inclusive classroom environment that encourages open dialogue, and how to present the roles that facts, evidence, and reasoning play in evaluating sources, claims, and evidence. These aspects of teaching may be easier to handle when surrounded by individuals whose ideologies largely align with one's own (though it is often difficult to know if this is actually the case). They can be more difficult to address when people's political views and social identities are more diverse. But teaching and learning in such environments also open possibilities for dialogue that are especially needed in polarized times and that are crucial to critical information literacy.

In this chapter, I use my experience teaching my credit-bearing information literacy to explore the pedagogical challenges of responding to political polarization and "post-truth" rhetoric while cultivating dialogue and encouraging critical thought. I also draw from selected scholarship on classroom dialogue and class climate that has helped me to affirm both the constructed nature of knowledge and core principles of critical analysis and reasoning. Toward the end of this chapter, I discuss strategies, materials, and activities I used in my course to encourage reflective, critical thinking, and constructive class discussions.

These instructional approaches reflect my view that engaging productively with concepts like "post-truth" and "contextual authority" involves acknowledging students as co-constructors of knowledge and exploring with them how key principles of academic argumentation and analysis can serve as productive responses to "post-truth" rhetoric. I will also consider how traditional principles of academic argumentation often neglect the more affective dimensions of learning that are especially important when engaging with politically and emotionally charged issues, and I reflect on how critical thinking can be taught more effectively through acknowledgment of the social and affective dimensions of cognition. The strategies and activities I used in my classroom are not presented as models of perfection, but rather as reflections of my own evolving teaching process.

Course Context

LIBR 1101: Information Literacy and Research (renamed as LIBR 2100 in fall 2017) is a semester-long, two-credit course at the University of West Georgia (UWG), a regional comprehensive and doctoral-granting institution located in rural Georgia, approximately one hour west of Atlanta. LIBR 1101/2100 has been taught at Ingram Library since 1998 and is one of the electives that meets a requirement of the university's Core Curriculum. Multiple course sections are offered in the fall and spring semesters, and course instructors are encouraged to design the course as they choose, as long as the central course learning outcomes are met.[5] This design allows librarians a significant amount of freedom in their course design. Having joined UWG in 2016, I first taught LIBR 1101/2100 in the fall 2016 semester.

The UWG student body, reflective of the state, is racially diverse and often politically divided, though the latter is often less obvious in classes in

which politics are not a major point of discussion. In my experiences, students also tend to avoid conversations about politics, perhaps largely in order to avoid conflict. Becoming acclimatized to both a new campus culture and to teaching a credit-bearing information literacy course in this first academic term, I struggled to convey to students the relevance of course content to their everyday lives. It was also during this semester that a polarizing US presidential election was occurring, along with divisive public and political discourse and news reporting that contributed to what I perceived as a tense political climate on campus. Immediately following the November election, when the tension I was already observing on my campus and in my classroom became more apparent, I was prompted to reconsider my course's theme. I therefore chose to center my spring 2017 semester course on news literacy. This decision did indeed make the course's relevance and timeliness much more evident. It also created new challenges.

The importance of teaching news literacy became even more evident to me early in the spring 2017 semester, when US President Donald Trump's counselor, Kellyanne Conway, introduced a new term: alternative facts. In an interview with *Meet the Press*'s Chuck Todd on January 22, 2017, Conway defended the Trump administration's misrepresentation of the attendance numbers for his presidential inauguration by describing false information as "alternative facts." Challenging Todd, she stated, "You're saying it's a falsehood …our Press Secretary Sean Spicer gave alternative facts." But as Todd responded, "[a]lternative facts are not facts. They are falsehoods."[6]

Conway's notion of "alternative facts" has been offered as a prime example of the kind of post-truth political rhetoric that has characterized much of the Trump administration's discourse. Such rhetoric illustrates a clear disregard for the value of facts, evidence, and analytical reasoning. It underscores the need for students to develop analytical reasoning and for educators to challenge an absolute relativism according to which all opinions are equally valid and all individuals are entitled to their own opinions.

But perhaps just as important, it calls attention to a need for both students and teachers to develop their abilities to engage in open dialogue, to consider multiple viewpoints, and to appreciate the role that our social identities and personal beliefs play in how we engage in dialogue and in how we respond to information that may or may not align with our own views. These are not easy things to do.

Possibilities and Challenges of Critical Pedagogies

My teaching context and my decision to focus my course on news literacy required that I grapple with the challenges of teaching about politically charged issues. With an awareness that my own political views differed significantly from those of many of my students, how could I encourage students to think critically about both their and others' ideas and beliefs? How could I teach students about key principles of academic argumentation, including the importance of evidence and reasoning, as I called attention to the problems with "post-truth" reasoning and the notion of "alternative facts" (which have often been descriptive of the Trump administration's claims)? And could I do this without alienating students who may be sympathetic to the Trump administration and without my teaching being perceived of as political indoctrination (a perception that could result in resistance from students whose political views differ from mine)? Moreover, how could I engage in critical reflection about my own perspectives, assumptions, and biases?

While I sought to remain open to diverse perspectives in my classroom, this did not mean that any assertion would be treated as valid. To not challenge "post-truth" claims would be a disservice to students when a crucial goal of education is to help students increase their awareness of the social structures, systems, and inequities that surround us and that are often invisible (particularly if one has been born into certain privileges or has been raised to accept the status quo). Moreover, I wanted to affirm that all individuals have inherent worth, to challenge rhetoric that is antithetical to this principle, and to be inclusive and welcoming to students regardless of their political or ideological views. I also wanted to recognize the impossibility of neutrality.

I sought to convey to students that key principles of source evaluation and argumentation, much like valuing human dignity and worth can transcend partisanship. Such teaching would ideally provide students with vocabulary and tools to evaluate critically claims, evidence, and information sources more generally. Some students would likely still perceive my teaching as unfairly leaning toward a certain political view, despite my best intentions, and some might be uneasy with the political issues that surfaced in some discussions. However, I believed that this potential discomfort, if

approached with thought and care, could work productively (as has been argued by educators like bell hooks and Megan Boler in their discussions of a "pedagogy of discomfort"[7]). I would also need to be highly cognizant of the historical and sociopolitical moment in which the class was taking place and how it intersected with the course materials and activities. Pedagogical literature on classroom dialogue and class climate has greatly helped me to explore such questions.

Challenging Opinion Discourse, Establishing Ground Rules for Dialogue

The growing prevalence of "post-truth" rhetoric suggests that many dialogue-centered classrooms may benefit by establishing ground rules for discussion and engagement. Individuals need to be able to trust that they will be respected and will have opportunities both to listen and to speak. At the same time, a class needs to have a general understanding of its shared purpose and of critical thinking principles that will be encouraged during discussion. Without this, some students may be more likely to engage in an "opinion discourse" that suggests that all perspectives are equally valid, and that can often function to marginalize other students.

"Opinion discourse" is not uncommon to hear expressed within and beyond college classrooms. It has perhaps become more commonplace in the past decade, as Gary Olson suggests in his 2007 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article "That's Your Opinion":

> The student's peremptory dismissal—"Well, that's his opinion"—is not an aberration. That assertion and the attitude it embodies have become endemic, not only in society at large but in academe. Apparently, nowadays an opinion will trump a fact, a reasoned argument, an empirically verified observation—even a treatise by an eminent scholar. An opinion is the great equalizer, and everyone has one. It silences all arguments, squelches all dialogue: That's your opinion. End of discussion.[8]

Such an approach to opinion works against the kind of critical dialogue that class discussions ideally encourage.

Education professors and critical pedagogists Robin DiAngelo and Ozlem Sensoy share concerns similar to Olson's. In their article "'We Don't Want Your Opinion': Knowledge Construction and the Discourse of Opinion in the Equity Classroom" (2009), they reflect, "[s]tudents often reinterpret attempts for dialogue as an affirmation that all knowledge is of equal value." Such opinion discourse, working from the notion that everyone is entitled to their own opinion and that all opinions are equally valid, can close off dialogue. Moreover, it can block critical examination of sociopolitical conditions and structures and function as a means of legitimizing existing power structures.[9]

As DiAngelo and Sensoy argue, the opinion discourse that students sometimes assert in class discussions can "protect their existing viewpoints from the challenge to explore the social, political, or historical context in which they are embedded" while also "invalidat[ing] the rigor of the scholarship."[10] This can be particularly problematic when, as is often the case, some students feel more able to speak than do others. (This can be due to a range of complex reasons, including sociocultural and sociostructural inequities.) In short, the "right to speak" discourse that DiAngelo and Sensoy describe does not always encourage the open and critical dialogue and the mutual respect toward which most critical pedagogues aspire.

Nicholas Burbules explores related challenges in "The Limits of Dialogue as Critical Pedagogy" (2000). He observes that much of the literature on critical pedagogy has presented an idealized and unrealistic view of dialogue as inherently democratic and emancipatory.[11] This representation of dialogue has been problematized, in particular by poststructural feminist theorists (including DiAngelo and Sensoy) who describe ways in which dialogue may not be as inclusive and equalizing as the term implies. Burbules writes,

> The insistence that dialogue is somehow self-corrective, that if there are unresolved power differentials or unexamined silences and omissions within a dialogue, simply persisting with the same forms of dialogical exchange can bring them to light, seems not only counterproductive but itself a form of hegemony.[12]

This is not, however, to say that dialogue is without value. Burbules continues,

> Yet it also remains true that the ideal of "dialogue" expresses hope for the possibility of open, respectful, critical engagements from which we can learn about others, about the world, and about ourselves. Is there a space between the exaggerated claims made on behalf of dialogue entirely as an inherently liberatory pedagogy and the rejection of dialogue as an ideal? Can dialogue continue in good faith while acknowledging the inherent limits to (and dangers arising from) its aspirations toward understanding across differences?[13]

There are no easy answers to the questions that Burbules raises about the role of classroom dialogue and of knowledge construction. But despite these challenges, Burbules ultimately argues that classroom dialogue can indeed "continue in good faith while acknowledging the inherent limits to (and dangers arising from) its aspirations toward understanding across differences."[14] Giving up on dialogue altogether seems more dangerous than attempting it in good faith and with sensitivity to its challenges.

If we agree on the value of dialogue, how do we constructively move forward with constructively promoting it? Research on class climate may be especially helpful for engaging with this question. Ambrose et al., drawing from extensive educational research, recommend classroom practices that promote student development and a positive classroom climate.[15] Many of these practices reflect the value of at once acknowledging the constructed nature of knowledge and the importance of facts, evidence, and reasoning in developing knowledge. These include:
- "Make uncertainty safe."[16]
- "Resist a single right answer."[17]
- "Incorporate evidence into performance and grading criteria."[18]

Other recommendations from Ambrose et al. that focus primarily on class climate and on affective dimensions of learning prove equally if not more important to creating a supportive and productive space for reflective and interactive learning:
- "Model inclusive language, behavior, and attitudes."[19]
- "Establish and reinforce ground rules for interaction."[20]
- "Anticipate and prepare for potentially sensitive issues."[21]
- "Address tensions early."[22]

- "Turn discord and tension into a learning opportunity."[23]
- "Facilitate active listening."[24]

While most educators will likely agree that the above classroom conditions are ideal, fostering such environments, of course, can be challenging when discussing contentious issues. Some critical pedagogists may also raise questions about whether such ground rules suggest that teachers must (or can) position themselves as neutral on most or all issues. I agree with scholars and teachers like Howard Zinn that "neutrality" is neither ideal nor possible.[25] Educators have a responsibility to stand up for social justice. But how does one acknowledge the impossibility of neutrality while also creating a welcoming environment for a genuine exchange of ideas?

Some of the research on class climate may prompt teachers to consider this question, and more specifically whether or how to express one's own political views. In a recent empirical study, students who perceived their learning environments to be welcoming of a range of ideas and perspectives tended to be more open to a diversity of ideas and to debate about them.[26] If a teacher is perceived to be unopen to a range of perspectives, this may close off dialogue. But it is also possible for teachers to express their own views and still to cultivate an environment in which differing views are welcome.

Education researchers Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy address this issue as they reflect on their observations of and interviews with high school teachers across the United States. Some of these teachers disclosed to students their own political views to their students, and others did not. Hess and McAvoy conclude that both the choice to share and that to withhold one's own political views can be pedagogically effective. The decision a teacher makes depends greatly on context, but ultimately should be made with the intention to create an environment of "fairness and mutual respect in the classroom" and "to create a classroom community engaged in inquiry about the focal question of the political classroom."[27]

Maureen Linker's work on "intellectual empathy"—"the cognitive-affective elements of thinking about identity and social difference"—may be especially powerful for cultivating such classroom climates.[28] In her book *Intellectual Empathy*, a guide to critical thinking for students, Linker calls attention to the powerful role of social identity in sharing beliefs about social and political issues.

Of particular relevance to information literacy is her discussion of the "web of belief," a model developed by philosopher W. V. O. Quine.[29]

The "web of belief" is a metaphor for the interconnectedness of beliefs and the fact that when one belief changes it often has an effect on other beliefs. Moreover, core beliefs that are at the core of one's "web" are more resistant to change than those at the periphery. Linker asks readers to "imagine a belief that lies at the core of your web—something that was established in your belief system early in your life, has been extremely well confirmed, and is centrally connected to many of your other beliefs." When such beliefs are challenged, she explains, a person will have a much stricter standard for evidence for changing that belief and will "work hard to discount or deny any counterevidence …because a change in a core belief will have very significant and far-reaching effects on your overall web of belief."[30]

This metaphor illustrates the complexity of human reasoning. It is a particularly useful way of introducing the concepts of cognitive bias and motivated reasoning because Linker invites individuals to understand these tendencies as part of people's common humanity. This approach encourages deep reflection rather than the defensiveness and emotional reactivity that feed polarization. Linker thus provides a fresh lens through which to reflect on the role that personal beliefs, social interactions, and relationships play in dialogue, information evaluation, and analytical reasoning. (Because I learned of Linker's work late in the semester, I regrettably did not include it in the course materials. I have since incorporated her work into my course curriculum and have found it particularly useful for addressing the social and affective dimensions of information literacy.)

In the Classroom: Teaching Practices and Strategies

In my ideal class environment, students show mutual respect and share their varying perspectives and experiences while also working from generally shared understandings of both human worth and analytical reasoning. Such a class also has a generally shared understanding of core concepts like evidence, opinion, claims, and argument and can apply these to evaluating sources. My LIBR 1101 class explored these concepts through a range of class activities, assignments, and discussions. Students were encouraged at various points in the semester to engage in several key processes:

1. establishing classroom ground rules for how all class participants would treat each other in order to foster dialogue, reflection, and inclusion;
2. establishing shared understandings of discursive principles like evidence, reasoning, argument, and opinion;
3. examining professional journalism ethics that illustrate a relationship between values and critical thinking; and
4. examining "post-truth" political discourse (as reflected in Conway's notion of "alternative facts") in relation to the phenomenon of motivated reasoning, as well as in relation to fact-checking strategies and resources.

I intended for these approaches to enable personal reflection and dialogue and to provide key principles and tools for analytical reasoning and reflective dialogue. These course components also built toward the final research project through which students explore an issue related to news literacy and create a statement of research intent and an annotated bibliography.

Classroom Ground Rules

Classroom ground rules are guidelines for how individuals in a class agree to treat one another. These guidelines may be particularly useful when a class may discuss controversial or emotionally charged issues. Such discussion agreements can, in the words of the Public Conversations Project, "discourage old ritualized patterns of communication" and "foster a respectful, safe environment in which participants can have a purposeful, fresh, and personal exchange of ideas, inquiries, and experiences."[31]

Though an instructor can provide students with a set of such ground rules, many educators ask class participants to develop these guidelines collectively in order for individuals to experience more ownership over them. Students are often shown examples of ground rules that can help them understand the purpose of such principles and to brainstorm their own ideas. (Washington University's Teaching Center and Cornell University's Center for Teaching Excellence offer helpful examples.[32]) I took this collaborative approach to creating ground rules on the first day of class. After discussing the purpose of ground rules and looking at several examples, I asked students to think about their experiences of constructive conversations and of the qualities of those interactions. Students were then

invited to propose ground rules to the class, which I recorded in a Word document (shared via a projected screen) and which the class discussed and sometimes modified until we reached agreement on that given point.

Once we had developed our ground rules, all class participants signed a printed version of the document. The document was also posted to the course management system so that people could easily refer to it. The final guidelines included statements such as:

- Be open-minded. Respect that not everyone will share your view.
- Be honest and real with one another while remaining respectful to everyone.
- Reflect before responding.
- Understand that we all sometimes have inaccurate information. Be open to critically examining information and reassessing it if need.
- Don't monopolize the conversation. Give everyone a chance to share.
- Do not interrupt.
- Accept and respect that others may have different views. Remember that our goal is to learn through our interactions with one another, not to convince others of our own perspectives.
- Appreciate that we all have unique experiences and backgrounds that shape our perspectives. Appreciate that we can learn through listening openly to one another and sharing about our viewpoints.

This collective document reflects behaviors and qualities much like those that Ambrose et al., describe as fostering a welcoming and open environment in which people are invited to listen, to reflect, and to express their own perspectives in thoughtful and respectful ways.[33]

I believe that this exercise helped to set a tone for the class, clarified class expectations, and underscored the importance of considering varying perspectives while reflecting on one's own viewpoints and biases and how those might affect one's relationship to various ideas and to information sources. The activity also communicated to students that I would respect personal and political views that differed from my own and that were expressed in respectful ways. As my students and I had agreed through our classroom ground rules, I strove to "[a]ccept and respect that others may have different views" and to "[r]emember that our goal is to learn through our interactions with one another, not to convince others of our own perspectives."

Class discussions and reflective writing assignments throughout the semester remained respectful, and a large portion of students with differing viewpoints and backgrounds engaged in class discussion. While many students remained reticent in the class and while most students did not express their political perspectives, the large majority of students engaged in class discussion at some point in the semester, and a good portion of students with differing viewpoints and backgrounds engaged regularly in discussion. A larger number of students expressed their personal and sometimes political views in the short writing reflections assigned throughout the semester.

While it is difficult to know with certainty that collectively creating ground rules changed the classroom dynamic, these conditions suggested to me that constructing ground rules enriched people's overall class and learning experiences. I am eager to see how ground rules work in future contexts, and especially during discussions in which individuals share more personal experiences or strongly held views.

Establishing Shared Understandings

Creating classroom ground rules helped to position the class for exploring current news stories and issues of news literacy. But I also believed it crucial to have shared understandings of key principles of critical analysis as well as some core strategies for evaluating information. These would serve as a foundation for considering varying perspectives and for evaluating information and arguments. (It is worth noting that this practice of calling attention to key conceptual understandings and exploring the connections among those concepts has been shown to promote learning transfer and metacognition.[34])

The class therefore focused next on key terms and concepts of source credibility and of critical analysis. Each of these points represented a key principle of analytical reasoning that students could use to evaluate sources and claims. These key understandings, established at the beginning of the course, included:

- Facts exist and can often be verified. It is, however, sometimes difficult to verify whether something is true without access to more information.
- Distinguishing between fact, opinion, and claims is important for evaluating sources as well as developing and supporting one's own arguments.

- Arguments are made stronger when we have considered a range of perspectives on an issue, including perspectives that may differ from our own.
- Strong arguments are supported by sound evidence and reasoning.

As part of this work, I presented the importance of terms like facts, evidence, and claims within the context of news literacy. I called attention to recent reports of and concerns about the misleading nature of some news stories, the highly charged political climate since the 2016 US presidential election, and the increased circulation and the popularization of the term "post-truth" (defined by Oxford Dictionaries as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief").[35]

While each of the concepts mentioned above was crucial to the course, the final point (that strong arguments are supported by sound evidence and reasoning) did not adequately address the reality that different communities have different standards for evidence. Though the class touched on the reality that different communities sometimes have varying understandings of what constitutes sound evidence, we did not discuss this in depth. In retrospect, I would also address the ways that communities and individuals sometimes disagree on what kind of evidence is the most credible (e.g., empirical research study data, personal experience). I would also affirm that most communities agree that strong arguments are supported by at least some factual information, by multiple evidence sources that point to consistent findings, and by examination of any evidence that appears inconsistent with the argument at hand. Doing so would have helped to acknowledge the contextual evidence and reasoning. This expansion on the fact that "evidence" and "reasoning" are sometimes disputed terms, though also not arbitrary concepts, would better address the reality that knowledge is largely socially constructed and sometimes contested.

These shared understandings framed source evaluation and argumentation primarily in terms of logic and reason. To balance this emphasis on logic, I also encouraged students to embrace attitudes and dispositions that are crucial to critical inquiry. These included the following understandings:

- Remaining open to differing perspectives is challenging. As human beings we are naturally inclined to believe what already fits into our worldview and to challenge that which does not (motivated reasoning).

- In this classroom, our main goal is to learn, largely through seeking to better understand our own and others' perspectives. We therefore will work to understand rather than to change someone else's mind. We will also appreciate that sometimes we are unable to understand fully others' perspectives and that we can respect their humanity while also disagreeing with their views.

These two points are particularly important for addressing the affective dimensions of learning and cognition. I did not, however, draw strong connections between these dispositions and the key analytical principles mentioned above. Doing so would have helped to address the important connections between the cognitive and affective learning domains. In future iterations of the course, I will introduce all of these concepts early in the course, will draw attention back to these concepts throughout the course, and will invite students to reflect on the connections between them.

The process of establishing a set of shared understandings began with introducing definitions and examples of claims, evidence, and reasoning, as well as of fact, opinion, belief, and prejudice (see, for example, Colorado State University Writing Center's online resource[36]). Such resources provided key vocabulary and concepts that would ground much of our work in evaluating claims, evidence, and sources. These key principles also helped to build toward work in evaluating source credibility. Students brainstormed about their own evaluation criteria and strategies and reviewed evaluation criteria and methods articulated by others in order to further reflect on their own approaches. (Related course materials included the American Press Institute's "Six Questions that Will Tell You What Media to Trust"[37] and use of several fact-checking resources such as Politifact, Factcheck.org, and Snopes). Students also engaged with reading and source evaluation strategies presented in Mike Caulfield's *Web Literacy for Student Fact Checkers*,[38] and completed writing reflections and class activities in they which evaluated various news sources and articulated their own evaluation strategies.

Source evaluation strategies were further explored as students examined journalism ethics (see the Society for Professional Journalists' "Code of Ethics" and School Journalism's "Six Principles of News Literacy"[39]). When examining these ethics statements in class, students considered and discussed questions such as what, if anything, the ethical codes suggest about the field of journalism, whether the public should be able to expect

certain things from journalism and from the media, and whether students perceived that such ethics are generally adhered to in the media. This exercise encouraged students to consider that, while objective facts exist and can often be verified, fact alone is far from the only guiding principle for evaluating source or author credibility.

Though the class discussed some of the complexities of bias (for example, that almost everything has some degree of bias and that things that are presented as objectively true are not always so), in hindsight I could have developed more in-depth activities that illustrated how a reporter's framing of a story can affect an audience's perception (for example, which facts they choose to include or exclude, or what type of evidence they use and how these appeal to their audience). Since then I have begun to incorporate more such activities and to connect them to explanations of fact, evidence, claims, and reasoning.

Challenging "Post-Truth" Discourse

The coursework described above built toward a more direct engagement with material that was more likely to be perceived of as politically charged: Kellyanne Conway's use of the term "alternative facts." Because this term came into circulation at the same time that my class had been discussing the concepts of confirmation bias and "post-truth," discussions about the notion of alternative facts strongly tied in with other course content.

Conway's introduction of the term "alternative facts" serves as a prime example of both the importance and the challenges of questioning "post-truth" discourse. Many of my students might view any critique of the Trump administration as unfair and biased. However, if I approached claims to "alternative facts" as dismissible, this could suggest that it is acceptable to believe whatever one wishes to believe, regardless of facts or evidence.

Fortunately, the term "alternative facts" surfaced after my class had already created class ground rules and discussed essential terms like opinion, fact, and evidence. This groundwork helped to establish a basis for our discussions and I believe provided a valuable foundation for approaching an issue that was more likely to be perceived as partisan (though many individuals across the political spectrum are likely to take issue with the validity of the concept of "alternative facts").

Because I wanted students to have time to reflect on the discourse surrounding "alternative facts," they were given a reflective writing assign-

ment as homework. This activity required (1) reviewing an *NPR* interview with a philosopher who discussed the phenomenon of motivated reasoning and (2) reading a *Washington Post* article on Conway's use of the term "alternative facts." After engaging with these two sources, students were to write about the implications of the term "alternative facts" and to consider the term's relationship to the phenomenon of motivated reasoning.[40]

While I believe this portion of the course was overall valuable, in hindsight I wish I had introduced the phenomenon of motivated reasoning to the class prior to discussing this politically charged news story. Instead, I presented both alongside one another, a move that may have been viewed by some as reflective of my own political leanings (despite my affirmation that cognitive biases cross partisan lines). Given that people are especially inclined toward cognitive biases when engaging with political content, examining research on cognitive biases prior to discussing political discourse would have better enabled students to consider that all human beings, regardless of their political views, engage in motivated reasoning and that it is often difficult to recognize this in one's own thinking. In future iterations of the course, I also hope to draw from Linker's discussion of social identity and the "web of belief" during this exercise. This will hopefully help students to consider how beliefs and reasoning can be influenced by one's social and cultural background and experiences.

Students' writings on "alternative facts" and the subsequent class discussion indicated that the large majority of students recognized the problematic nature of "alternative facts" and how it can reflect motivated reasoning. A few students nonetheless believed that Conway's idea of "alternative facts" was valid. I chose after reading students' assignments to explicitly challenge the notion of alternative facts and to reassert the foundational concepts and principles of evidence and argument and their importance for students' academic work. I also reemphasized that these principles are relevant regardless of one's political perspective or affiliations.

Because I did not see these points as open for debate and did not believe such debate would likely be productive, and because additional course material needed to be covered, the class did not continue our discussion of "alternative facts." The importance of evidence, reasoning, and argument would, however, be further reinforced throughout the semester. Students would also be reminded as they developed their final research projects to consider multiple perspectives and to be cognizant of the human tendency

to seek out information that aligns with one's own views. They should thus make a deliberate effort to use search and evaluation strategies that would help them locate sources that reflected varying perspectives.

At the very start of the semester, I had not recognized the critical role that concepts of facts, opinion, evidence, claims, and cognitive bias would play in this course. Much of the course materials that were developed occurred in response to issues and events that were unfolding as I taught a news literacy course for the first time. Thus, I, unfortunately, did not formally assess students' understandings of concepts like facts, opinion, evidence, and claims at various points in the semester, and I cannot know with certainty how students' perspectives on and approaches to such concepts may or may not have changed. I hope to do a more deliberate assessment of this in the next iteration of this course.

Nonetheless, students' final research projects and their reflection on those projects reflect overall a deepened understanding of developing open-ended research questions, seeking out a range of perspectives on and approaches to those questions, and evaluating sources according to a range of criteria, including evidence and reasoning. Many students also commented in various assignments on their increased awareness of motivated reasoning and, more specifically, confirmation bias. These concepts were new and of interest to many students. Though it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed analysis of students' research papers (a process that could be valuable to do in future courses and with IRB approval), I believe many of the strategies I explored through teaching this course enriched students' learning experiences and are worth further exploration within and beyond many credit-bearing information literacy courses.

Concluding Thoughts and Ongoing Questions

Throughout this semester of teaching, I was engaged in a balancing act: questioning "post-truth" discourse and establishing shared discursive principles and practices while simultaneously affirming the constructed nature of knowledge and the value of students' own perspectives and experiences. Prior to teaching this semester of teaching, many of the questions I have raised in this chapter were largely theoretical to me. Only more recently have I begun to see how students and I respond and interact when openly

acknowledging and exploring the relationships between ideology, politics, and information behaviors.

These questions are not unique to the critical information literacy classroom or to the political moment in which I am writing. The issues that I have explored here have also been deeply considered by many educators interested in critical pedagogies and in classroom dialogue. There are also rich bodies of learning research on epistemological development, confirmation bias, identity development, and class climate that are key to a fuller exploration of these questions but beyond the scope of this chapter.

While I have much more to explore and to learn about the questions I have considered here, I am confident that information literacy instruction is most meaningful when students are able to reflect on and to relate their personal beliefs and experiences to course content and activities, and when class conversations are grounded in some shared understandings of both mutual respect and of critical analysis. This is especially needed in moments of political polarization. In such contexts, heated argument often overpowers the kind of critical reflection and listening that are essential to truly critical thought and inquiry.

Many educators, myself included, are still fumbling through how to cultivate open dialogue and critical thought in politically polarized contexts. These challenges point to the need to better address the affective and social dimensions of information literacy, as Mark Lenker and Geoff Walton have convincingly argued.[41]

As the influence of motivated reasoning and political polarization on information processing and use have become increasingly evident, I believe librarians, alongside other educators, have new and often unexplored opportunities to support information literacy education through our own reflective and critical approaches. I hope the resources, teaching activities, and references to related research that I have shared here provide additional openings for such work.

Endnotes

1.   Numerous studies from the Pew Research Center demonstrate that political polarization in the United States has reached an all-time high, while global events demonstrate that political extremism has also become prevalent worldwide. (Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press* (blog), October 21, 2014,

http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-amer-ican-public/; Pew Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," June 2016, http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/06/06-22-16-Partisanship-and-animosity-release.pdf; Pew Research Center, "A Wider Ideological Gap between More and Less Educated Adults," *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press* (blog), April 26, 2016, http://www.people-press.org/2016/04/26/a-wider-ideological-gap-between-more-and-less-educated-adults/).

2.   Motivated reasoning can be defined as the tendency to believe information that aligns with one's own viewpoint or one's own agenda while dismissing informa-tion that does not support with one's perspectives or personal interests.

3.   Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber, "The Automaticity of Affect for Politi-cal Leaders, Groups, and Issues: An Experimental Test of the Hot Cognition Hypothesis," *Political Psychology* 26, no. 3 (2005); Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, "The Illusion of Choice in Democratic Politics: The Unconscious Impact of Motivated Political Reasoning," *Political Psychology* 37 (February 2, 2016); Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer, "Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age: Confronting the Challenges of Motivated Reasoning and Misinformation," *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (February 1, 2017); Maureen Linker, *Intellectual Empathy: Critical Thinking for Social Justice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

4.   In 2016 Oxford Dictionaries named "post-truth" "Word of the Year" and defined it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less in-fluential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Dictionaries, "Post-Truth.")

5.   The LIBR 1101/2100 course outcomes are: (1) identify, access, evaluate, and use information appropriate to a specific purpose; (2) analyze the political, cultural, and social dimensions of information; and (3) ethically create information by synthesizing sources.

6.   Chuck Todd, *Meet the Press*, NBC News, January 22, 2017, http://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meet-press-01-22-17-n710491.

7.   bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Megan Boler and Maxine Greene, *Feeling Power: Emo-tions and Education*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999).

8.   Gary A. Olson, "That's 'Your' Opinion," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb-ruary 13, 2007), http://www.chronicle.com/article/Thats-Your-Opinion/46676.

9.   Robin DiAngelo and Ozlem Sensoy, "'We Don't Want Your Opinion': Knowledge Construction and the Discourse of Opinion in the Equity Classroom," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 42, no. 4 (January 1, 2009): 443.

10.   DiAngelo and Sensoy, "'We Don't Want Your Opinion,'" 450.

11. Nicholas C. Burbules, "The Limits of Dialogue as a Critical Pedagogy," in *Revolutionary Pedagogies: Cultural Politics, Education, and the Discourse of Theory*, ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 252.

12. Burbules, "The Limits of Dialogue," 252.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Susan A. Ambrose, Michael W. Bridges, Michele DiPietro, Marsha C. Lovett, Marie K. Norman, and Richard E. Mayer, "Why Do Student Development and Course Climate Matter for Student Learning?," in *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 153–87.

16. Ambrose et al., "Why Do Student Development and Course Climate Matter," 180.

17. Ibid., 181.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 183.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 185.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 186.

24. Ibid.

25. Deb Ellis and Denis Mueller, *Howard Zinn: You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, documentary, 2004, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0416825/.

26. Andrew J. Ryder, Robert D. Reason, Joshua J. Mitchell, Kathleen Gillon, and Kevin M. Hemer, "Climate for Learning and Students' Openness to Diversity and Challenge: A Critical Role for Faculty," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 9, no. 4 (2016).

27. Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education (Critical Social Thought)* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 202.

28. Linker, *Intellectual Empathy*.

29. W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *The Philosophical Review* 60, no. 1 (1951): 20–43, https://doi.org/10.2307/2181906.

30. Linker, *Intellectual Empathy*, 25.

31. Maggie Herzig and Laura Chasin, "Fostering Dialogue across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project," Public Conversations Project, 2006, 9, https://www.whatisessential.org/resource/fostering-dialogue-across-divides-nuts-and-bolts-guide-essential-partners.

32. The Teaching Center, Washington University in St. Louis, "Establishing Classroom Ground Rules," The Teaching Center, Washington University in St. Louis, 2009, https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/inclusive-teaching-learning/establishing-ground-rules/; Center for Teaching Excellence, Cornell University,

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33. Ambrose et al., "Why Do Student Development and Course Climate Matter."

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37. Tom Rosenstiel, "Six Questions That Will Tell You What Media to Trust," *American Press Institute*, October 22, 2013, https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/six-critical-questions-can-use-evaluate-media-content/.

38. Michael Arthur Caulfield, *Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers* (Pressbooks, 2017), https://webliteracy.pressbooks.com/.

39. Society of Professional Journalists, "SPJ Code of Ethics," September 6, 2014, http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp.

40. Michel Martin and Jonathan Ellis, "Motivated Reasoning: A Philosopher on Confirmation Bias," *All Things Considered*, January 28, 2017, http://www.npr.org/2017/01/28/512199352/confirmation-bias; Aaron Blake, "Kellyanne Conway Says Donald Trump's Team Has 'Alternative Facts.' Which Pretty Much Says It All," *The Washington Post*, January 22, 2017, sec. The Fix, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/22/kellyanne-conway-says-donald-trumps-team-has-alternate-facts-which-pretty-much-says-it-all/?utm_term=.fa5343127f10.

41. Mark Lenker, "Motivated Reasoning, Political Information, and Information Literacy Education," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 16, no. 3 (2016); Geoff Walton, "Information Literacy Is a Subversive Activity: Developing a Research-Based Theory of Information Discernment," *Journal of Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (2017).

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