

## **Wake Up and Smell the Bias! Spreading Awareness in Library Instruction**

### **Paul Worrell**

As a busy library instructor, you have many goals to accomplish in a single hour long session. You have to teach search strategies, explain how to evaluate sources, and give out general information on library resources and services. This goals alone can take over an hour to cover, but even if you meet this challenge there is an element that goes unaddressed: unpacking hidden biases. While libraries have historically taken pride in being neutral and unbiased institutions this is a falsehood. Noble, Austin, Sweeney, McKeever, and Sullivan (2014) highlighted that the Library and Information Science (LIS) field “privileges White, male, middle-class, heterosexual, U.S.-based values and interests” (p. 212). It is a critical aspect of LIS that often goes unnoticed and unchallenged. As librarians, we need to be active in bringing awareness to the inequities in information resources, our institutions, and in the field as a whole.

Now this does not mean you have to tack on fifteen more minutes to your laundry list of instruction goals. Instead, think of unpacking bias as an overarching theme, spread throughout your teaching. When you challenge students to uncover hidden biases in the information and resources around them, then you start enacting real change. To help you do this, we will explore bias and how it pervades LIS, take a look at what professionals are doing in the field, and combine the most effective instructional strategies to create a plan for helping spark awareness in students.

### **Pulling back the Curtain of Bias**

Underlying biases permeate our day to day life (Ross, 2014). We constantly make decisions based on unconscious reactions, perceptions and assumptions. Even when we think we are consciously aware of bias we may be following patterns and habitual thinking that have developed throughout our lives (Ross, 2014). Biases can take the form of patterns and inclinations and extend beyond our relationships with people and prejudice (Ross, 2014). It is inherent in our preference for specific foods, hobbies, activities and all through this is mostly unconscious. Yet bias is also taught through experience. Your parents may have taught you not to run into the street, effectively creating a bias of danger for that particular situation (Ross, 2014). These “helpful” assumptions occur in other ways, such as in hiring situations when we value someone’s experiences and abilities as good qualifications. Ross explained that qualifications are simply biases that are accepted and “codified” by society (2014). Ultimately, biases are a complex part of how we interpret the world and information around us, and while the process of developing biases is not inherently wrong, we need to be cognizant of their potentially negative impact in our lives.

Feeling overwhelmed? That is okay, but it is important to realize how unconscious and pervasive bias is throughout our lives. So it is not a far stretch to recognize that there are biases in Library and Information Science as well. While it has been a value in libraries to support the community and society over the last century, as they do so they mirror the dominant ways of thinking and behaving. Acknowledging the slant and privilege inherent in libraries is important, and it is crucial that we accepting this reality and act to change it. How do we effectively do this?

Let us look at a specific example of bias in LIS. Bias frequently occurs in cataloging and subject terms. Researchers have long criticized Library of Congress Classification and Subject Headings as disrespectfully organizing groups, sexualities, and identities that lacked mainstream privilege in society (Drabinski, 2013). People who do not represent dominant groups find demeaning labels and undercurrents of prejudice within the organization of the library system. Some common examples include homosexuality being labelled under sexual deviance and most vocational headings being assumed male, with female doctors occurring as a subject term. Therefore groups of activist librarians have worked to change the system and bring attention to the bias. However, Drabinski pointed out that this activism, while based on good intentions, in fact perpetuated the myth that libraries and librarians can seek to be neutral and objective if they ‘fix’ all the problems (2013). In addition, even corrective behaviors can be seen through a lens of bias. A good example was the correction of the subject heading “mammies” to “negro women” in 1972 (Drabinski, 2013). By today’s standard the replacement term remains offensive and inappropriate. So while working to eliminate bias from specific information systems is admirable, it may ultimately miss the mark. We need to move away from simple fixes toward actual open dialogue and education on how knowledge and information is inherently biased, and is always produced within assumptions and unconscious influences (Drabinski, 2013).

This cataloging is an easily observable example of the pervasiveness of dominant bias in LIS, but there are many more examples. We struggle with being a predominantly white and female field lacking in diversity, unknowingly perpetuating our own cultural viewpoints through our services and instruction. So how do we break away from this and move towards starting a dialogue about bias in LIS? One approach is occurring in Library and Information Science programs through targeted coursework that addresses privilege and equity. The goal of these courses is to illuminate the experiences of those outside the norm and uncover the institutional barriers based on race, class, gender, and sexuality (Noble et al., 2014). Through in-depth dialogue, readings, and town hall meetings students and faculty are calling attention to inequities in the LIS field. Through these efforts future LIS professionals are developing a critical view of libraries, and gaining an education that extends beyond simply task-oriented vocational training (Noble et al., 2014). This is not to say that these courses are perfect or do not have difficulties.

Discussing issues of privilege, oppression, and equity is not easy for any student. As you explore the literature on teaching social justice, you may see a pattern of moving away from creating “safe spaces” to spaces where students need to face conflict and be challenged. Too often safety is equated with comfort, and if the dominant groups demand comfort then no real change can come about (Steyn & Davis, 2012). There is often an underlying assumption that people from victimized or underprivileged groups are the primary audience and interested party

of education on bias. The wording of the title of Paulo Freire's preeminent work in social justice education, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a prime example of this viewpoint (Steyn & Davis, 2012). However, it should not solely be members of oppressed and underprivileged groups who champion for change and equity. A more effective dialogue involves the dominant groups, who need education on systematic bias and privilege (Noble et al., 2014). In essence, Freire's title needs to shift to focus on "pedagogy for the oppressor" to enact change. This may be alarming and threatening to those with privilege and make some uncomfortable, but that is the point. Later on we will explore strategies for addressing and embracing such an approach in our instruction.

Bias is all around us and impacts all aspects of our lives. The process of developing biases is not inherently wrong, but we need to be aware of how assumptions are formed and the impact they have. The field of LIS is no exception, but rather has a history of perpetuating the dominant group's interests. Work is being done to illuminate these issues in library schools, and in time the future group of professionals will be better equipped to tackle these issues. But what can we do now? Let's shift our focus and get into today's classrooms. What are current librarians doing in library instruction? How does library instruction look today in regards to unpacking bias?

### **Peeking into Library Instruction of Today**

In looking for concrete ways that librarians are unpacking bias in their instruction you might notice two main areas emerge: new strategies for evaluating information sources for bias, and librarians changing their teaching in ways to be more inclusive. Evaluating information for credibility, suitability, and authority is a core value in the field, and we will explore how the expansion of these practices can help bring awareness to bias. We will also examine the ways librarians are changing their teaching to form a picture of what is working in library instruction today, and what is still lacking.

### **Evaluating for Bias**

In instructional sessions teaching evaluation many librarians use acronyms and other mnemonic devices to help students remember how to evaluate the resources they need. I myself have had professors demand I cover the "CRAAP test" in instructional sessions (Currency, Relevance, Accuracy, Authority, and Purpose). It is an effective checklist method for students starting to evaluate sources, but what do they actually learn from it? The only parts of the method that touch on bias overtly are authority and purpose, and even they often do not get explored beyond surface level motivations. Students may attempt to see the author's credentials, but fail to acknowledge the agenda or slant that the author may have. The CRAAP test alongside many other methods seeks to simplify a complicated and messy process but little research has been done on their effectiveness (Radom & Gammons, 2014). Studies have found that students who received instruction using the CRAAP test among other similar methods often report still having difficulty distinguishing scholarly sources and evaluating overall quality of information (Radom & Gammons, 2014; Ostenson, 2014). Does this mean we have to give up on our quick and dirty checklists?

Let's look more at Radom and Gammons' work as an example. They developed and tested a new method for evaluation based on the "Five Ws" (Radom & Gammons, 2014). They wanted to tap

into previous student experiences using who, what, when, where, why, and how, a common teaching tool in American education. This new method, presented as a solution to the checklists of the past, still fails to account for biases in information and even our instruction. This method does not taking into account students' varying backgrounds, for example those of international students. This simple assumption demonstrates how librarians can unknowingly perpetuate the dominant culture and societal norms. Radom and Gammons described the implementation and assessment of their method, and ultimately concluded that it was effective, due to its basis on scaffolding and tapping into students' previous experiences (2014). This was despite the fact that their assessments showed students struggled to recall the method by name, and identify all the questions used to evaluate a source. Their work is a good example of how librarians can get overly focused on a skills-based approach to instruction, but miss an opportunity to have a dialogue on unpacking the bias that pervades information.

Clearly much research is being done on evaluating sources in field of LIS. Older methods relying on kitschy mnemonic devices are being found to be ineffective and lacking depth. The move to online research is rife with possible bias, but challenging one's own assumptions about students' online abilities, identifying context, and unpacking an author's credentials are strategies we should take away from current trends in research.

### **Unpacking Bias through Teaching Practices**

The other approach of unpacking bias in library instruction that emerges in the research focused on trends in the actual pedagogy. Teaching librarians are finding that older methods where you lecture at students and outline searching strategies and databases do not work (Reale, 2012; Sinkinson & Lingold, 2010). These librarians were experiencing frustration as they observed students who were disengaged and apathetic towards their instruction. Common themes in these "failed" instructional attempts were a focus on demonstration, coverage of large swaths of material in hour long sessions, and a lack of theory-based practices (Reale, 2012; Sinkinson & Lingold, 2010). The corresponding solutions these librarians found for this problem followed a pattern: they researched different learning theories and ultimately used research to inform their practice. Critical pedagogy was a recurring theory of choice for many librarians. Founded on the principles set forth by Freire, this pedagogy focuses on promoting equality and challenging privilege and dominant bias. Were these librarians able to tap into the theory to unpack bias in their transition to new instructional practices?

Reale wrote an informal case study of her experiences transforming her teaching to reflect a focus on student voices (2012). Sinkinson and Lingold shared a similar experience, shifting from a model of demonstration to an inclusive teaching format that relied on student participation and engagement (2010). In their new teaching practices they promoted more engaged and interactive classrooms, where students work in teams, take charge of their learning, and are tasked with critically analyzing information sources (Sinkinson & Lingold, 2010; Reale, 2012; Ostenson 2014). These are all excellent movements toward creating inclusive and dynamic learning environments where overt biases would most likely be muffled, but do they go far enough to spread awareness and instigate change?

Both of these case studies were founded on Freire's ideas and concepts of shifting from a 'teacher-knows-all' banking form of education to instruction based on questioning, dialogue, and revising authority. Interestingly, while Reale described how this theory could effectively help to create inclusive classrooms and tackle inequities, she failed to describe any change beyond the basic structure of her teaching and the learning activities involved (2012). While her methods became more dynamic, she did not challenge the core content or learning outcomes. Sinkinson and Lingold also strongly stated their belief that library instruction in information literacy can reach beyond changing classroom practices (2010). They asserted that true information literacy should serve to empower students to question the information around them, support inclusiveness, and mitigate privilege and inequities (Sinkinson & Lingold, 2010). Yet even with these strong foundations in theory, there was little discussion in their research and practice of how they actually improved awareness of bias in information literacy instruction.

These two cases studies represent a pattern of sharing out effective teaching practices in the literature. While many of these new instructional practices approach the subject of bias and equity in LIS, they fail to dig deeper and provide concrete strategies for engaging students with exploring the issues. We may also still run up against the problem that Drabinski described of librarians attempting to "fix" issues of bias while being blind to their own assumptions (2013). How can we use our instruction to help students truly uncover the ways that bias influences information resources? To find out, we need to combine these effective teaching practices with the lessons learned in research on bias and social justice.

### **Bringing Awareness to Bias by Pushing Students Further**

As Ross pointed out, bias pervades our everyday life (2014). Unconsciously, we assess, compartmentalize, and base our decisions on inherent beliefs that we have formed. Instruction librarians are breaking through their old assumptions of what effective teaching looks like. Through anchoring their instructional practice in research and educational theory, librarians are beginning to change how they address instruction and evaluation (Reale, 2012; Sinkinson & Lingold, 2010; Ostenson, 2014). These are great areas of change and now we are poised to push ourselves even further. What the librarians have created are classrooms where dialogue and student-ownership of learning are being increasingly celebrated. This is a perfect climate to bring awareness to the biases of the information sources that students will encounter, but efforts must expand from the simple use of checklists and mnemonic devices to a deeper conversation about the impact of bias in information, library systems and ourselves.

As we rise up to the challenge of creating instruction where this dialogue can occur Drabinski's illustration of bias in our cataloging systems can help us form a strategy (2013). Librarians who now see the benefit of instruction that is based on dialogue and participation can use this new format to bring students into the conversation of bias in information. Through facilitating a discussion where we "call out" biases we encounter in information resources, library systems, and even among our own thinking we can help students begin to demystify how seemingly neutral systems can actually promote an agenda and status quo. This means we must also go further than simply shifting our practices to and leaving the content unchanged. We need to continue our push for change in teaching to transform not only the methods and theory behind teaching, but the content and learning outcomes we desire (Drabinski, 2013). A good example of

a learning outcome is expecting students to question why they believe certain sources are more credible than others in order to unpack their own assumptions. By challenging them to unpack their own beliefs as well as the biases that underlie information we invite students into an ongoing conversation and questioning of dominant privilege (Drabinski, 2013).

Our primary goal is bring students to this point of awareness. We can support students in dealing with these truths by having an overt discussion of our reactions. It is a helpful strategy to bring perspective and context in at this point. Identifying the underlying bias in information can be abstract and conceptual, so one useful strategy to help students is to discuss concrete ways bias is used in media. Some common examples to share with students are advertising and political campaign material (Ross, 2014). Helping students connect these more clear examples of information that promote specific agendas is a way to contextualize their reactions to seeing bias around them. When students are made aware of the bias in sources and are willing to wrestle with the discomfort and inequities that this illuminates, they are better equipped to analyze the information around them.

These feelings of discomfort are common in conversations about privilege and bias. Especially students who belong to the dominant group may resist when pressed to see how many biases in information privilege them over others (Steyn & Davis, 2012). To help us handle this situation in our instruction we need to call back on those who have sought to unpack bias both in LIS and in social justice education as a discipline. According to the research, identifying oneself as part of the oppressing group is a powerful learning experience (Steyn & Davis, 2012; Noble et al., 2014). For example, the privilege afforded to whiteness permeates society so deeply that even in social justice education white people have expectations that they will be protected from discomfort. When one is called out as part of an oppressor group, it is natural to counter with resistance. Rather than judging this reaction as good or bad, positive or negative, we need to simply acknowledge it as how students engage with the truths in the bias around them (Steyn & Davis, 2012).

Unpacking biases in LIS can often lead to more questions than answers. Do I want students to leave my instruction questioning the world around them? Absolutely. Once aware of pervasive biases and inequities in information, students can more fully understand the creation of information and authority. Ross provided further expertise on bias that we can incorporate into our teaching. He described how after the first step of becoming aware of bias comes practices to transforming your everyday life. People need to become more self-reflective, and realize that their own biases can be part of a system of oppression (Ross, 2014). We can also acknowledge that uncertainty and awkwardness are okay. Remind students that conflict should never be reason to stop a conversation, rather it can inspire them students to engage with information and more critically understand it.

## **Conclusion**

Through opening students' eyes to bias in our instruction, we help them begin to transform. We can do so through embracing and pushing beyond changing our instructional sessions. Not only should you incorporate dynamic, theory-based practices into your instruction, but you should challenge yourself to unpack the content and what learning outcomes drive your

program. Pushing students to engage in a dialogue about how bias pervades all information may be uncomfortable, but you can act as a facilitator to challenge them. Through embracing the conflict and understanding that resistance is a form of engagement we can bring together people in active discussion. We may find that our instruction brings about more questions than answers, but ultimately this shows students are engaged and poised to wake up and see the bias beyond our classrooms.

## References

- Drabinski, E. (2013). Queering the catalog: Queer theory and the politics of correction. *The Library Quarterly*, 83(2), 94-111. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/669547>
- Noble, S. U., Austin, J., Sweeney, M. E., McKeever, L., & Sullivan, E. (2014). Changing course: Collaborative reflections of teaching/taking “race, gender, and sexuality in the information professions”. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 55(3), 212-222. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1539530046>
- Ostenson, J. (2013). Reconsidering the checklist in teaching internet source evaluation. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 14(1), 33-50. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pla.2013.0045>
- Radom, R., & Gammons, R. W. (2014). Teaching information evaluation with the five ws: An elementary method, an instructional scaffold, and the effect on student recall and application. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 53(4), 334-347. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1542401164>
- Reale, M. (2012). Critical pedagogy in the classroom: Library instruction that gives voice to students and builds a community of scholars. *Journal of Library Innovation*, 3(2), 80-88. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lih&AN=90570661>
- Ross, H. J. (2014). *Everyday bias: Identifying and overcoming unconscious prejudice in our daily lives*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sinkinson, C. & Lingold, M. C. (2010). Re-visioning the library seminar through a lens of critical pedagogy. In A. Kumbjer, Drabinski E. & M. T. Accardi (Eds.), *Critical library instruction: Theories and methods*. Duluth, MN: Litwin Books, LLC.
- Steyn, M., & Davis, D. (2012). Teaching social justice: Reframing some common pedagogical assumptions. *Perspectives in Education*, 30(4), 29-38. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1566186207>