

## The Quarterly Interview: Candice Benjes-Small

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-Edited Transcript-

**LOEX:** *“Fake news” is a topic that librarians are increasingly dealing with and you have done some work in this area. In an ACRLog entry, Information Literacy and Fake News, you discuss this issue and try to define it. How would you define “fake news?” Why is it important for librarians to understand and talk about this issue?*

**Benjes-Small:** When I first began writing my blog piece, the phrase “fake news” emerged as everyone tried to figure out what the heck had happened in the presidential election - not the results, per se, but the news stories that swirled around it. People were getting their news not through the traditional newspapers or even cable shows, but from social media and the “dark web.” Stories that fed our worst fears picked up steam and were accepted as truth, with sometimes terrible consequences. The rumor that Democrats were running a child pornography ring out of a pizzeria basement famously led to an armed man trying to rescue these imaginary victims in Washington, DC.

But “fake news” quickly morphed to mean, “news I don’t personally agree with.” Don’t like what CNN/Fox News/MSNBC is saying? “Fake news!” It’s a loaded phrase. But because the idea of fake news has gotten so much press in the last year, I find it to be an extremely effective phrase to use with administrators and teaching faculty. Add in a link to The Stanford Report showing students can’t evaluate websites, and your argument for more information literacy instruction just got a lot more advocates.

In the classroom, I reframe the conversation to discuss perspective versus bias. I was alarmed that my students were lumping mainstream media in with propaganda sites and dismissing them as “biased.” Having a viewpoint does not mean a source is untrustworthy. There’s a big difference between The New York Times, which espouses good journalism and restricts viewpoints to the editorial section, and Bipartisan Report, which plagiarizes from news sources and uses manipulative, fallacious language to enflame its readers.

*You also discuss recognizing “good journalism” as a way of combating “fake news.” You mention several useful tips like avoiding judgments based solely on the source, having students refer to the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics, locating the original source of the story, and checking your passion that can be used to recognize “good journalism” and are highlighted in a class you taught multiple times in 2016. How is that class going and do you have any assessment yet on its impact?*

These workshops have been very popular with students and professors. I select a news story that has been covered by both a mainstream press and a biased site, and have students

compare and contrast the two versions. The students are very engaged in the discussions, and I can see the magical “lightbulb” moments. You can view the exercise on Project CORA at <https://www.projectcora.org/assignment/evaluating-news-sites-credible-or-clickbait>

A simple assessment I’ve done is ask students before the exercise to list on a sheet of paper what they look for when judging a Website’s credibility. They do a quick pair-and-share, and then report out the most commonly mentioned criteria. After the exercise, I ask them to repeat the process. Initially, students mention things like domain name (“.org is better than .com”) and superficial elements such as the presence of advertising being detrimental, or an attractive layout being a sign of credibility. Afterwards, they focus their criteria on the content of the stories and the need to evaluate the source. If I’m not shaking their worlds, at least I’m opening their eyes.

*For many librarians the one-shot is still all they have to communicate with students in a classroom setting. How might a librarian work into these one-shot sessions some of your tips? Which one might be the most pertinent to discuss in the evaluation portion of a one-shot session?*

Having taught approximately eleven-zillion one-shots in my career, I see their benefits. Student learning is most likely to occur at the point of need, and being able to teach a class about database searching, citing sources, or synthesizing information exactly when they are about to do it for their assignments can be extremely effective.

So as with any one-shot, I recommend starting with a conversation with the teaching faculty member. If evaluating of sources is a course objective, then ask whether students will be encouraged to use news stories. Our lesson plan, available through Project CORA, takes about 40 minutes.

You can also integrate elements into other lesson plans. For example, if you are teaching a database, you could discuss how sources are selected for inclusion, and why sites like Breitbart and Daily Kos are generally not.

If you wanted to incorporate one tip into an existing evaluation lesson, I would advocate for distinguishing between perspective and bias. To truly evaluate a source, you need to conduct a close reading of the content, and decide whether the argument stands up to scrutiny. A good argument is persuasive, but you need to beware those that try to manipulate its audience.

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**You also helped found a regional instruction conference, *The Innovative Library Classroom*. What has been most challenging and rewarding in helping start this and keeping it going? What do you think is key to making a classroom innovative?**

I love TILC because it brings together colleagues from around the region (and beyond!) to talk about students, learning, and teaching. We have a very active ACRL chapter in Virginia, but we're a big state; it can be tough to travel to some events. Geographically, Radford is closer to parts of North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia than to Northern Virginia or even Richmond, our capitol. TILC has provided an opportunity for people to cross state lines and network with neighbor librarians, leading to some fabulous conversations and collaborations.

Putting together an annual conference involves a lot of moving parts; luckily, we have an amazing steering committee that make it possible. Another challenge is to keep it affordable. It can be time-consuming to find sponsors, and yet we want to keep our registration fees low.

Some advice to be innovative in the classroom: 1) It's okay to fail. Being innovative requires risk. 2) Try and try again. A one-shot environment means you may teach the same lesson multiple times in a short span; use that opportunity to implement iterative design. 3) Involve others. Talk about your goals and your experiences with colleagues and teaching partners, including professors. My best ideas have been born during "pedaconferences"- informal walking meetings.

***In another ACRLog entry, Tales of the Undead...Learning Theories: Learning Styles, you present a critique of learning style theory. Why is it so important to dispel this myth? What would you say is the foundation of this argument?***

Learning styles are seductive because they simplify 'learning,' which is a very complex topic. Librarians who are restricted to just one shot with students may find comfort in the idea that by matching the right mode of teaching to the appropriate style, a student will have a more positive educational experience. In fact, people have different learning preferences or abilities; someone may enjoy reading while someone else is more oriented to auditory input. But according to educational and psychological research, it's simply untrue that a learner will learn more, regardless of the content, based on a match with her learning style.

Learning styles are dangerous because they promote the idea of a fixed mindset. I've had students tell me they needed to drop a class because Professor A doesn't use PowerPoint and "I'm a visual learner." Such students have been led to believe they cannot learn unless their learning style is addressed. Learning should be about pushing ourselves outside our comfort zones. Learning styles encourages people to stay in their zone, and excuses them from venturing beyond it.

**You have also served on a general education committee at your institution, helping draw up assignments and rubrics for the required information literacy competency for your school's accreditor. How might a librarian maximize their role on such a committee?**

Don't box yourself in to doing just library-related tasks. You may get a seat at the table so that you can represent information literacy or to provide collection development support, but once you're at the table, people are usually happy to let you help in a myriad of ways. I don't shirk my responsibility to represent the library, but I've also volunteered to take minutes, write drafts of proposals, contact administrators, train faculty members, and chair meetings. Along the way, tenured faculty members began treating me more like a peer and colleague. Rather than simply asking me to teach a library class, they will initiate conversations about student research challenges, and ask me to help brainstorm solutions and even critique assignments. Consequently, I am much better informed about the class needs, and the resulting library workshops have been much more effective. The network I've built through these efforts has also been instrumental in the success of many on-going library projects.

**What books or article have influenced you?**

- Robert Barr & John Tagg's 1995 article "From Teaching to Learning- A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Teaching" in *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*.
  - ⇒ This is a seminal article advocating for student-centered rather than teacher-centered education. It revolutionized my thinking about the intent of a university education, and my role as an instructor.
- Yvonne Meulemans and Allison Carr's 2013 article "Not at Your Service: Building Genuine Faculty-Librarian Partnerships" in *Reference Services Review*.
  - ⇒ I love the practical suggestions in the article, as well as the reminder that it's okay to say "no" if an opportunity would not be mutually beneficial.
- My and Rebecca K. Miller's 2016 book, *The New Instruction Librarian: A Workbook for Trainers and Learners*, published by ALA.
  - ⇒ I'm proud of the book, but I was also profoundly influenced during the writing of it. Rebecca was a great co-author to brainstorm with, and we challenged each other to think about teaching and training in new ways. I'm a better instruction librarian and manager for having written this title.