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# Who's left out of the conversation

## The problem of marginalizing students in the scholarly conversation

The description of the frame "Scholarship as Conversation" in the ACRL "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" states "[w]hile novice learners and experts at all levels can take part in the conversation, established power and authority structures may influence their ability to participate and can privilege certain voices and information."[1]

When I think about scholarship as conversation I wonder, who does this discussion exclude? Librarians often consider the role race, gender, and sexuality have in excluding people from the conversation, and these are extremely important issues to explore and work to equalize. However, there is another group whose voice is often marginalized in academia: students.

By emphasizing the importance of one type of discourse over another, librarians can reinforce notions of scholarship that exclude or appear to exclude student participation. In particular, a focus on peer-reviewed journal articles as the gold standard in academic discourse unduly prioritizes certain voices in a format that many students do not understand or feel like they can participate in.

These notions can stifle or undervalue the contributions students make to scholarly conversations, formally or informally, and can reinforce the idea that students are not engaged in meaningful discourse.

### Student deficiency

It seems like every conference or gathering of academic librarians I attend includes at least one presentation that implies that students are incapable of doing proper research and that it is up to us as librarians to fill this void of knowledge. You see this sentiment reflected in the Twitter feeds from some conferences, though thankfully, it is often rebuffed. This way of thinking is not only problematic as a teaching practice, but it makes it difficult to see the contributions students make.

One Friday morning, while taking a break from the research desk after a frustrating student interaction, I began to read the "graffiti" that seems to show up in most bathrooms. Someone had written the question "Why don't we vote online for elections?" Written around it, in self-contained parameters that looked much like a Tumblr blog, was a political discussion on the merits of online voting. I often read articles or hear discussions on how to get students engaged with information and the scholarly conversation, but this seemed to me to be proof that they are already engaged. I wonder if the problem is that we, as teachers and librarians, do not know how to recognize this?

I don't have an exact answer to this, but I would suggest that one of the disconnects

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librarians have with students is that we assume that our way of finding and thinking about information is *the* correct way and that our teaching should be focused on getting students to understand our systems or way of thinking.

As a new librarian, when I hear my colleagues talk about how students do not understand how to use the library, I'm not entirely sure I do either. When teaching, many of my colleagues start with a database, I start with Google or a discovery tool. Where they focus on Boolean searching, I focus on talking about academic vernacular. I often watch librarians click through multiple links and sites, talking at length using library jargon about databases and subject terms, while the students watch in confusion. This same disconnect that shows in our classroom sessions also bleeds into our reference transactions and research guides.

More importantly, I'm not sure this is how students think about information. In my instruction sessions, I ask students where they begin looking for information, and they almost all say Google. As this discussion expands, students will also say they get information from each other. This discourse happens on social media, but I think the bathroom writing would suggest that it happens in a variety of places and contexts. Students have also mentioned that when they need help on a school project, one of the first things they do is ask their classmates and they give each other sources.

We can talk at length about the merits and problems of discussing scholarship in alternative ways, but I would suggest that understanding where students get information helps us to understand where students discuss information. From my discussions with students, it seems clear that they do not start with the library.

The existence of a generational gap in the way people find information and how people talk about information is not a new concept. A report published in 2016 by the Pew Research Center found that 32% of people aged 18 to 29 get their news from social media, and 34% from news websites and apps.[2] Interestingly, the report also mentions that people in this age group are no more likely to engage with news on social media than other age groups. This is not a direct proxy, but it does give us a sense of the systems many of our students use to find information about the world around them.

I'm not suggesting that we sit in the bathroom and wait for a response on the wall. I understand the many constraints of teaching information literacy, but I think there is something to be learned from recognizing the places students interact with each other and with information (and no, it is not just on the Internet). I wonder if library instructors are asking the right questions or framing the discussion in a way that makes sense to our students. Are we are truly taking the time to see where students are engaging in the conversations that shape our world? Assuming that students are deficient because they do not understand the way we organize information pushes the student out of the conversation. This is further reinforced by the insistence that the best source of information is the peer-reviewed scholarly journal article.

## Peer review

When I begin talking to professors about what they want students to gain from a library seminar, invariably they ask me to show their students how to find peer-reviewed journal articles. For many of these classes, this is the only type of source that they can use for their papers. While I acknowledge the place these articles have in scholarship, it is important to not only recognize the flaws of the peer-review system, but also that the contribution these articles make is only a part of the conversation. The Framework states that "[n]ew forms of scholarly and research conversations provide more avenues in which a wide variety of individuals may have a voice in the conversation."[3] I think it is important to acknowledge in the classroom that the scholarly conversation takes place in many forms and formats. In particular, because women[4] and minorities[5] are underrepresented in academic scholarship, it is important to expose students to other sources of information. This helps them to contextualize the articles they

will be using, but also acknowledges that there is more going on in the conversation than what they find through our databases. It is important that students know scholarly articles often do not contain the whole story.

The issue with this overemphasis on peer-reviewed sources often manifests itself when students begin doing research. They start searching broad topics in databases without developing the context for their topic that will make these searches successful. By the time they finally do come across an article that seems helpful, they are often overwhelmed by a conversation and language that they may have little familiarity with. They become frustrated because it seems they can't find anything about their topic. Without context, students may not be able to identify which articles may be helpful. It is important to help students understand that peer-reviewed articles are targeted to a specific audience using a specific language that is not always easy to understand.

Telling students what database is best for their topic and showing them what limiters to use does not resolve this problem. It is okay that students might begin their search on Google or Wikipedia. Rather than fight this impulse, let us acknowledge that the same scholars that are writing journal articles might also be writing elsewhere and help students figure out how to find them.

When we walk into a classroom and focus our instruction on peer-reviewed articles, we are only focusing on one part of the process of information creation. This is a part of the process that students may have little experience using. For example, if they are not familiar with the format of journal articles, it can be difficult to see the greater context of the article just by reading it. Experienced researchers understand that each citation connects one article to another, and they also have a broader understanding of the theories and premises underpinning their discipline. Students may not know the broader context of their research topic, and using peer-reviewed articles to find this information can be very difficult. Helping students find or build this context is as important as helping them find articles for the assignment. Without context, researching effectively in a database is impossible, let alone evaluating and choosing an article that will help you with a paper.

When I ask students to explain to me what they are looking for when they evaluate authors, they often cite the need for an author to be credentialed, regardless of the format or other supporting evidence presented in the information. While I agree with the need to consider the author's purpose and background, I think a singular focus on this misses other important concepts when evaluating information, such as the choice of format, citations, and methodology. It also implies that unless you are credentialed, your voice should be disregarded. This is a curious perspective that I do not think most researchers and librarians share but seems to be the fallback position for many students.

An exercise I like to do in my classes is to have students come up with their own criteria for evaluating sources and then discuss their list and why they choose their criteria. We then come up with a class list, which they use to evaluate a source and explain why they think the source is credible or not. Even after spending time discussing the criteria and specifically mentioning other criteria to use when deciding credibility, students still often link credibility specifically to the author.

I also ask them if they think they could write a peer-reviewed article, and the answer is mostly no. The focus on journal articles prizes a type of discourse students may not feel that they can enter. This is likely too complicated for a library instruction session to address, but, as librarians, we need to challenge the notion that the author is the determining factor in credibility and that students cannot write scholarly articles. It is important that students know that they can participate in the scholarly conversation and that students do publish in peer-reviewed journals. It is also vital to highlight other places where scholarly discourse takes place.

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## Conclusion

Religious activities on campus are as diverse as our students. The library can respect the spiritual needs of students without a great deal of sacrifice. Consult with campus stakeholders and determine if there is a need for a formal or informal space in your library or on your campus. Follow up with professional development to ensure respect, equity, and inclusion are part of your library culture. By providing formal or informal, flexible and inclusive spaces for spiritual practices, we facilitate an environment of inclusion and affirm a sense of belonging. In this way, academic libraries can help contribute to a culture of student support, and therefore, success.

## Notes

1. ALA, "Religion in American Libraries," accessed August 3, 2017, www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/religionfaq.

2. ACRL, "Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries," accessed August 3, 2017, www.ala.org/acrl/standards/diversity.

3. North Carolina State University Office for Institutional Equity and Diversity, "Interfaith Prayer and Meditation Spaces," accessed December 20, 2017, https://oied.ncsu.edu/divweb/interfaith-prayer-and-meditation-spaces/.

4. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, "Reflection Space," accessed December 20, 2017, https://www.library.wisc.edu/college/spaces/reflection-space/.

5. Duke University Libraries, "Prayer and Meditation Space," accessed December 20, 2017, https://library.duke.edu/using/policies/prayer-and-meditation-room.

6. ACRL, "Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries."

7. Interfaith Youth Core, "Creating an Interfaith Room or Space on Campus," accessed August 3, 2017, www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/u4/Interfaith-Space.pdf.

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*("Who's left out . . . " continues from page 320)*

## Conclusion

We wonder why students do not understand the idea that scholarship is a conversation, though we are effectively telling them that they are not a part of it by insisting that it looks a specific way. It is important that we acknowledge that students do participate in the scholarly conversation through their coursework and in their own interactions, despite the fact that it is often not recognized as scholarly because of the form and forum in which it takes place. Many students will, at some point, need to learn to write in a style and format that is more recognizable to academia, but acknowledging that they are already having scholarly conversations gives us a way to connect their experience with the academic one. We can also help students by talking with them about the complex information world we live in and encouraging them to be critical and skeptical of all information, including journal articles. By acknowledging there are places outside of journals in which one can find reliable and relevant information, we can help students not only understand the scholarly conversation, but also help them participate in it.

## Notes

1. ACRL, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," February 9, 2015, www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

2. Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel, and Elisa Shearer, "The Modern News

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**The Council on Library and Information Resources** (CLIR) has been awarded $1.12 million by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to implement a sustainable, extensible digital library platform and set of curatorial processes to federate records relating to the cultural heritage of the Middle East. CLIR and its Digital Library Federation program will work with technical partners at Stanford University and content providers worldwide to build on the Digital Library of the Middle East (DLME) prototype and create processes to extend the DLME. DLME is envisioned as a nonproprietary, multilingual library of digital objects providing greater security for, preservation of, and access to digital surrogates of cultural heritage materials. The platform will be portable and reusable for any future digital library project, encouraging a global coherence of access to and preservation of the cultural record. The project team, led by DLME Project Director Peter Herdrich, Curatorial Lead Elizabeth Waraksa, and a data manager/project coordinator based at Stanford Libraries, will draw on best practices from other digital library projects to support cost-effective and reproducible curatorial workflows for identifying, selecting, and federating digital assets that represent both cultural materials under threat and objects housed in libraries and museums beyond conflict zones.

**Ed. note:** Send your grants and acquisitions to Ann-Christe Galloway, production editor, *C&RL News,* email: agalloway@ala.org.

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Consumer: News Attitudes and Practices in the Digital Era," Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016, www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/young-adults/.

3. Ibid., ACRL, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education."

4. Michael H. K. Bendels, Ruth Müller, Doerthe Brueggmann, and David A. Groneberg, "Gender Disparities in High-Quality Research Revealed by Nature Index Journals," *PLoS One* 13 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0189136.

5. Howard Garrison, "Underrepresentation by Race–Ethnicity Across Stages of U.S. Science and Engineering Education," *CBE—Life Sciences Education* 12, no. 3 (2013): 357–63, https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.12-12-0207.

*("Academic collaboration. . . " continues from page 325)*

students' final projects demonstrated a more developed awareness of the dynamic nature of historical inquiry and the stages of the historical process. Dowling felt that the hands-on learning with the objects fostered better student understanding of how to analyze historical objects and integrate them into their historical analyses as evidence. Based on classroom interactions, the instructor believes the students also found the experience positive, and the assignments challenging yet engaging. Dowling considers the assignment effective and will use the same series of assignments the next time the course is taught with only minor instructional revisions to increase student clarity of the assignment's expectations. Further, she intends to execute a more evidence-based examination of the effectiveness of the project.

From the library perspective, the artifacts themselves were undamaged by student handling using the developed protocol and so the collection may be used again in the same controlled circumstances for this assignment or similar assignments.

## Note

1. ACRL's "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," last modified January 11, 2016, www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.