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Cover Page Footnote

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Teaching Discernment in a World that Eschews Truth



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ABSTRACT

College students today have the harrowing task of sifting through massive amounts of information that no longer fits into nice, neat categories. The role of the librarian has shifted along with the information landscape, from the role of information gatekeeper to information guide. As information has become more prolific and accessible, it is more important than ever to teach students how to evaluate the information they discover to determine whether it is appropriate and relevant for their information need. In a world filled with fake news and constructed realities, the idea that truth has value, let alone exists, can seem outdated or even hostile. However, Christ-followers believe that part of the revelatory process is discovering the truth. Christian librarians should instruct our students to use discernment to seek truth even when the world avoids it. Christian librarians can combine dedication to the librarian profession, passion for teaching, and immersion in Christian values to guide students in truth-seeking behavior.

College students today are bombarded by information. Whether through social media, news, advertisements, or more often a combination of all three, college students have the challenging task of sifting through information that no longer fits into nice, neat categories. The role of the librarian has shifted along with the information landscape, from the role of information gatekeeper to information guide. Students no longer have to rely on librarians to gain access to information; the Internet and open access materials have provided more information than previous generations of students could have imagined. The shift of the librarian to the role of guide may seem to downgrade the profession's importance, but librarians arguably provide an even more valuable service to students today. As information has become more prolific and accessible, it has become infinitely more important to teach students how to evaluate the information they discover to determine whether it is appropriate and relevant for their information need.

One of the basic parts of this process is encouraging students to ask themselves, "Is this piece of information true?" Sometimes the answer is simple, but more and more they encounter information where it is difficult to answer that question definitively "yes" or "no." In a world filled with fake news and constructed realities, the idea that truth has value, let alone exists, can seem outdated or even hostile. However, Christ-followers believe that part of the revelatory process is discovering the truth. The Wesleyan-Holiness tradition posits that knowledge is part of piety, and that faith

and wisdom are intertwined in the pursuit of holiness. Considering the Wesleyan balance of knowledge and piety, we must consider how Christian librarians should instruct our students to use discernment to seek truth even when the world avoids it. Christian librarians can combine dedication to the librarian profession, passion for teaching, and immersion in Christian values to guide students in truth-seeking behavior.

Information Landscape

Several decades ago if a college student needed to gather information on a topic, the student would have to invest a fair amount of time and energy in exploring their available resources. These resources were typically found in a few geographic locations known as libraries. Even relatively basic questions involved seeking out print materials or subject experts, which is why librarians were often known as the gatekeepers of information. The age of instant access to an almost limitless amount of information via the Internet has completely changed both how students seek information and the role of librarians in the process. In exchange for widespread and immediate access to information, our society has given up the element of control over what is published and shared. Before the Internet, false information was unlikely to be purposefully distributed by reputable publishers, making even the appearance of fake or unsubstantiated information less likely to fool the public (Badke, 2017; Levitin, 2017). Today, anyone with design skills can create a remarkably professional copycat website that might deceive some of the savviest information seekers. As Levitin (2017) explains, “misinformation has been a fixture of human life for thousands of years ... The unique problem we face today is that misinformation has proliferated and lies can be weaponized to produce social and political ends we would otherwise be safeguarded against” (p. xx).

Despite this dire implication, the Internet has quickly become society’s most turned to source of information. From basic fact-checking and items of personal interest to the most consequential decisions like healthcare and voting, information gathered online is now central to forming our worldviews, attitudes, and beliefs (Miller & Bartlett, 2012). College students, along with the rest of the population, face unique challenges when seeking information online. The very attributes that make seeking information online so appealing (convenience, privacy, and accessibility) are the same characteristics that make it less reliable for an untrained researcher. Independence in searching also means no one is helping evaluate information; the researcher’s anonymity also means every author or information distributor has the same anonymity; the ability to choose to only see information supporting a particular view also means information aggregators get to determine what information they show based on that perceived worldview (Miller & Bartlett, 2012).

It is easy to believe that college students today have no problem navigating the harrows of searching online; after all, they are the group society has dubbed as our digital natives. The problem is that being tech-savvy is not the same as having critical research skills in an online environment. Recent research that examined young people's Internet searching and online reading skills suggests that despite being raised with technology, students are not necessarily skilled at critically evaluating the information they encounter online (Ostenson, 2014; Stanford History Education Group, 2016). For example, students have no problem navigating social media platforms, but the same students often have trouble discerning what information is factual on those same platforms (Stanford History Education Group, 2016).

In addition to reevaluating our use of terms like “digital native,” we must address new vocabulary that has surfaced related to digital information. “Fake news” is a major buzzword today when it comes to online information. Fake news, fictitious claims designed to mislead readers, has been around since the invention of the printing press and is not a new phenomenon. What makes it so concerning and at the forefront of discussions today is the rapid availability of information, the unchecked publication of that information, and the mistaken assumption that people are adequately equipped to evaluate information found online (Smith, 2017). The idea of fictitious claims is the historical definition of fake news, but in recent years, the term has also been used to mean news or information that goes against a person's personal beliefs or feelings. This new definition of fake news is particularly concerning in the discussion about seeking truth. In response to this new use of fake news, Levitin (2017) comments, “I believe we need to get back to using plain old ‘truth’ again – and fast. And we need to reject the idea that truth doesn't exist anymore” (p. xiii).

Fake news is strongly tied to the other vocabulary term significant to this discussion: post-truth. The Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year for 2016 was post-truth, which they define as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016, n. p.). Rochlin (2017) addresses the relationship between the two terms stating “‘fake news’ no longer means factless or slanderous news, but rather news that is seen to attack a person's pre-existing beliefs. This is the truth of the post-truth era” (p. 386). This is the crux of our challenge as Christian librarians. If we are living in a post-truth era, that means people are more likely to believe information that appeals to emotion or personal beliefs than information regarded as factual and objective (Cooke, 2017). What happens when belief is not rooted in facts? How can we teach our students to seek truth when society does not place value on the idea of enduring truths?

Information Literacy: Evaluation

When librarians talk about teaching students, one of the most common terms used is information literacy. The idea behind calling this set of skills and practices a “literacy” is that information seeking is a field that requires learning and mastery, not an innate knowledge. As librarians have moved from being gatekeepers of information, sometimes providing the only access to valuable information in print materials, to being guides for the vast amount of readily available information online, the focus of library instruction has changed. In this tumultuous world of information, librarians have an important calling to come alongside our students as trustworthy voices to ensure they have the skills to be discerning information consumers and producers. Johnson (2017) explains, “Our communities support libraries because we are reputable and fair, not because we are the hottest and most exciting entertainment source” (p. 15). Libraries retain a respected and trusted brand, a valuable asset that can make us a voice of reason in the pursuit for truth in the discovery process.

The specific piece of information literacy that involves examining information to determine relevancy and validity is evaluation. The Association for College and Research Libraries’ Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2015) contains a frame stating that “Authority is Constructed and Contextual.” Additional discussion on the implications for this frame in a faith-context will be discussed later, but it is important to highlight what this frame suggests students should be able to do. “An understanding of this concept enables novice learners to critically examine all evidence – be it a short blog post or a peer-reviewed conference proceeding – and to ask relevant questions about origins, context, and suitability for the current information need” (Framework, 2015, n.p.). This critical examination is crucial to make sure students consume all the relevant information available, not just the first information they find. The Framework is a useful document, but it is also a living document that librarians continue to wrestle with. Rinne (2016) brings up several excellent points about this particular frame, including the concern that the phrase “authority is constructed and contextual” seems indifferent to the concept of truth. While the frame might ideally need an adjustment in language to clarify the matters of context and truth, it is clear that this piece of the framework is encouraging critical thinking and deep engagement of information, both crucial for our students.

While critical information consumption cannot prevent false or misleading information from being published online, it can prevent it from being propagated so widely. The bulk of disinformation online can be fought with general evaluation skills, but that requires active use of the information literacy skills that we must be teaching (Cooke, 2017). One interesting piece of this evaluation puzzle that Levitin (2017) mentions is the need for humility in our information searching; we must teach students that not knowing everything is okay as the only way we learn is by realizing

we do not know everything. Several of the dispositions and knowledge practices related to frames in the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education hint at this need for humility and openness. The frame “Searching as Strategic Exploration” lists a disposition for learners who “exhibit mental flexibility and creativity” (Framework, 2015, n. p.). Likewise, the frame “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” lists a knowledge practice for learners who “acknowledge they are developing their own authoritative voices in a particular area and recognize the responsibilities this entails” (Framework, 2015, n. p.). Neither of these expressly uses the term “humble” when referring to a searcher, but both statements certainly are positioning the learner to have a mindset that they do not know everything on the given topic. Developing authority suggests the learner does not yet have that authority, and mental flexibility and creativity implies being open to new thoughts and ideas in the search process.

A common solution to this need for information evaluation training is for librarians to offer up checklists for students to use to determine the quality of an information source. There is unlikely to be a single librarian that thinks this is actually the best or most comprehensive evaluation method, but it is an efficient and easy way to convey to students some of the questions they should be asking when encountering new information. The problem is that specific evaluation tools often make the process too simplistic or ignore the broad contexts where a piece of information resides (Ostenson, 2014). It comes back to the seemingly simple question we want students to ask: “is this information true?” Ask that question of a student researching penguin habitats and it will be much easier to answer than it would be for a student researching the effect of the Affordable Care Act on rural communities. Controversial and evolving issues often seem to lack an objective component, which leads to the dismissal of even the existence of truth in that context.

Truth is not always simple or easy to discover, but that does not mean we stop trying. This is the message we must communicate to students when they are frustrated with the complex process of critically examining the information they discover. We may start with checklists, but then we must urge students to move beyond and think deeper. These are not skills that can be taught in a single session or during one college paper. Levitin (2017) expresses this time commitment on the part of the researcher:

Information gathering and research that used to take anywhere from hours to weeks now takes just seconds. We’ve saved incalculable numbers of hours of trips to the libraries and far-flung archives, of hunting through thick books for the one passage that will answer our questions. The implicit bargain that we all need to make explicit is that we will use just some of that time we saved in information acquisition to perform proper information verification. (p. 253)

Our job as librarians is to equip our students with the skills they need to perform this vital information evaluation. Their job is to exercise those skills to uncover the truth.

Christian Calling

As librarians, we are charged to instruct our students in information evaluation and to encourage the pursuit of knowledge. The charge does not change among Christian librarians, but our understanding of knowledge and truth is deeper. The previous discussion on the problematic nature of the frame “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” and the matter of truth likely resonates strongly with Christian librarians because we have a firm belief that there is unshakeable truth to discover in this world. Having a strong faith does not mean despising knowledge; true faith is one that is built on having a seeking, learning, and humble spirit. Christian librarians should be a model of that for our students and encourage their pursuit of knowledge and discovery.

Knowledge is a key component of many Christian traditions, including the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition which will be used as the example here. John and Charles Wesley were convinced that holiness without learning is unfounded and that knowledge without piety is empty (Chilcote, 2004). The Christian faith is built on a balance of knowledge and piety. A Wesley hymn (*A Prayer for Children*) states:

Unite the pair so long disjointed.

Knowledge and vital piety:

Learning and holiness combined,

And truth and love, let all men see (Hymns [1780], 461, cited by Chilcote, 2004, p. 69)

The Wesley brothers were both educated men that wanted a well-informed congregation that would have the wisdom to face the challenges to their faith in their daily lives. Education is as crucial to holiness as worship; worshippers should have both informed heads and enflamed hearts (Chilcote, 2004; Crutcher, 2011). Teaching our students to embrace education (and information seeking) is paramount to their success not only in their chosen vocation but also in their faith journey.

When explaining the role of knowledge in Christian life, the Wesleyan quadrilateral provides a clear illustration for our students. The Wesleyan quadrilateral posits four interconnected ideals: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Crutcher (2011) explains,

Education begins in faith, as we trust what others (scripture, parents, teachers, textbooks) tell us about what the world is like. We then process those traditions

and insights through our own thinking capacities (reason) so that they shape our experiences and allow us to truly own what we know. (p. 23)

This concept of “own what we know” resonates in terms of embracing our faith as mature Christians, but also applies to how we interact with the secular world. We feel comfortable owning our Christian faith because we are immersed in the information about Christianity and have spent immeasurable time investigating the truths upon which it is built. This same reasoning is what we want to prepare our students to apply when they encounter any information that claims to hold truth.

Truth can be a sticky subject, particularly when emotions and personal beliefs are involved. Librarians often talk about the discovery process, highlighting how students find information. For Christian librarians, the discovery process for an information need mirrors the discovery process that takes place with the revelation of truth. Truth is not something we construct, but rather something we discover (Blamires, 1978; Greathouse & Dunning, 1989). Our belief that truth can be revealed means that we seek knowledge to help us reveal truth. Where the world may have trouble defining and accepting truth today, we have the joy of knowing truth exists and is out there for us to discover. What an exciting prospect to share with our students! Education is as much about opening ourselves to experiences as it is about filling our heads with facts (Crutcher, 2011). The discovery, or the journey, is an important part of the experience. How we get there matters, and that is as true of the knowledge put into a class paper as it is of our Christian beliefs.

Teaching Students to Exercise Wisdom

Thomas Aquinas insisted that Christian education must be more than just moral virtues and that it should include intellectual virtues like wisdom and prudence as well (Holmes, 2001). Wisdom is peppered throughout the Bible and mentioned as one of the most sought-after gifts. Sometimes seeking wisdom led to sin, like in the case of Adam and Eve willfully defying God. When Adam and Eve disobeyed the Lord and ate the forbidden fruit, part of the temptation was the wisdom they believed it would impart (Genesis 3:6). Other times the wisdom was sought for noble purposes, like in the case of Solomon. When God tells Solomon to ask for what he wants the Lord to bestow upon him, of all the things he could have chosen Solomon asks for wisdom (2 Chronicles 1:10). In the book of James, everyone is encouraged to ask for wisdom; “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” (James 1:5). There is no doubt when we desire wisdom with honorable intentions, wisdom is something to seek and treasure, as much today as during Biblical times.

Wisdom is often equated with the Bible and other religious texts, but at its core wisdom extends beyond religious boundaries. Sternberg, Reznitskaya, and Jarvin

(2007) craft a very detailed, secular definition of wisdom in their article, further explaining that “when one applies intelligence, creativity and knowledge, one may seek deliberately outcomes that are good for oneself and bad for others. In wisdom, however, one certainly may seek good ends for oneself, but one also seeks good outcomes for others” (p. 146). It is no coincidence that Sternberg, Reznitskaya and Jarvin’s (2007) discussion of wisdom comes in the education discipline. The word wisdom is not mentioned much in the classroom today, but the idea is there, tucked into words like discernment, judgement, and critical thinking. Wisdom means being a thinker that is willing to challenge current prejudices, disturb complacency, and question everything (Blamires, 1978). Our challenge as Christian librarians is to teach our students to be wise in how they engage with information. It could be argued that this is the charge of every librarian, regardless of personal beliefs, and in some ways that is true. However, the motivations behind Christian librarians are different. If we choose to teach, it is our duty as Christian teachers to use our gifts to teach well (Romans 12:7). Christian educators teach because we are following the path we believe God has laid before us; each of us seeking to discern Christ’s truth in our academic discipline (Lyke, 2011). Uncovering truth is seeing a glimpse of God, and we seek truth in our discipline in order to show how God makes himself known in every area of life.

This idea that each one of us is seeking truth as an educator is the first step to teaching our students to exercise wisdom. We lead by example. If we want our students to be wise, we must demonstrate our own curiosity and search for wisdom, not become complacent with our perceived knowledge. As a Christian librarian, that may mean providing information for students is less important than demonstrating wise practices and helping them to incorporate those practices into their own behaviors (Ostenson, 2014). Not every student question or request requires wisdom. Sometimes students need our help in a time-conscious and practical way, such as providing basic citation information or helping with a printer jam. However, the key is to embrace those opportunities that do appear, to help our students think in a deeper way. For example, it might be faster for a librarian to run the search and sift through the results, but the learning experience of the student wrestling with the information may be more valuable to the student in the long run than quick retrieval of the sought-after information. Crutcher (2011) describes the Wesleyan approach to education as a balance between trusting enough to learn new information and putting information into practice in personal experiences. Our students cannot exercise wisdom if they do not seek out new information and learning opportunities.

In addition to encouraging exploration, our other great charge is to teach students not to fear or avoid information that may contradict their original view on a given topic. As William Badke (2017) suggests, “Even if the evidence points in a direction that is against existing beliefs, the information-literate still have confidence that

they will land in the right place as long as they use the tools that support good investigation” (p. 59). After all, we do not blindly accept that Christianity is true. Faith may be belief without seeing, but it is not shallow ignorance. Just as one comes to have a strong Christian faith based on the evidence of truth in the Gospel, so too should we teach our students to seek out verifiable truths when traveling their paths of inquiry. This type of discernment should not be viewed as antithetical to Christianity, rather as a parallel experience to our decision to become (and remain) Christ followers. It is unfortunate that intellectual pursuits and religious fervor are often seen as separate or even adversarial aims. There should be no separation between being an inquisitive student and being an inquisitive Christian. Over forty years ago, Blamires (1978) was already describing a fear that we are heading toward “intellectual anarchy” where truth is abandoned for likeability. Being a Christian and an intellectual means continuing to seek truth even when it is unpopular.

So what does exercising wisdom look like when students are seeking information? Students in one study described wisdom in online searching in the context of critical examination of available resources, in-depth study of chosen resources, and an openness to new ideas (Nyrose, 2009). None of these are unexpected or unattainable in an information search, yet students often fall short of these ideals. In instances where students have an opportunity to exercise wisdom through a more complex information need or research question, the focus of teaching students often must be on attitude and expectations. Students know that a five-minute search will not produce the best results. As librarians, we are realistic and know that not every information seeking opportunity will be met with unlimited time and patience on the part of the researcher. Like with the information they seek, the context and purpose of their information seeking process will determine their commitment and engagement. However, our teaching challenge is to instill in students the desire to seek truth above the convenience of immediate results whenever realistically possible.

Conclusion

The word “challenge” has come up time and time again in this discussion. College students have a formidable task when it comes to information seeking today. They have more resources at their disposal and more freedom to access information than any generation that has come before them. However, librarians know that access comes with a duty for wise and critical use. We must continue to instruct our students in the importance of seeking truth and to provide our students with the skills and mindset they need to become active participants in the revelatory process. The Wesleyan Holiness tradition sets the charge: we must balance knowledge and piety and model for our students the discovery of truth as an exercise in learning and holiness. Being Christian scholars means holding steadfast to faith while exercising wisdom, and pursuing truth in every area of our lives. †

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