Mission Critical: How Educators Can Help Save Democracy

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Posted
Dec. 22, 2016

"At present, we worry that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish. …If the children are the future, the future might be very ill-informed." —Stanford History Education Group, 2016.

How would you feel if you discovered that 70% of middle school students could not distinguish between fake news and authentic news on the web? According to a year-long study by the Stanford School of Education, that is exactly where we are as a country.

Across 12 states and 7,800 student responses, the overwhelming majority of our students — from middle schools to universities were easily manipulated into believing falsehoods to be true or credible. According to reporting by NPR about the study, "In exercise after exercise, the researchers were "shocked" — their word, not ours — by how many students failed to effectively evaluate the credibility of that information."

I am not shocked. As I have traveled the country visiting with schools, I have learned that many of our students have a false sense of confidence about their web literacy skills. In fact, it is not unusual for students to begin to laugh in disdain when asked if they know how to use Google. One fourth grader in a top private school instructed me, "Sir, if you have any question, you have to know how to use Google."

To expose students' false confidence in their own skills, I will present them with a search challenge that I know will lead to bogus information in the top page of results. (Most students only look at the top page of results.) The scary part is watching students' complete ignorance of any framework for questioning the validity of their results.

I want to be wrong about this, but as with the Stanford researchers, I believe we are in serious trouble. Simply put, we are not preparing students to make informed decisions when it comes to Twitter, Facebook, Google searches, or web-based content. Even when students pass our print-based reading tests, they are basically illiterate when it comes to web-based content. To quote the Stanford study, "However, at each level — middle school, high school, and college — these variations paled in comparison to a stunning and dismaying consistency. Overall, young people's ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak."

In the Stanford survey, students failed across various categories of digital media. How can this possibly be true? How could so many of our college students fail such a low bar? Yet, in the application of reading outside of a school setting in a web-based world — where an increasing number of Americans now consume their news — at least 70% of our students failed to pass a test of reading validity. According to the Stanford study, 80% of students could not detect the difference between an advertisement and a news story.

How well would adults do? If we extrapolate the study, which isn't too far-fetched if we assume that children who grew up with social media might know more than their elders, it is possible that the majority of adults cannot fact check, distinguish a reliable source from a biased one, and believe things to be true that are patently false when presented with web-based content. The real problem is that they do not know they do not know.

Historically, we did not have to teach our students how to question the validity of information when we ensured the books in the library and in our classrooms were selected by educators. Providing our students exclusively with vetted information is no longer sufficient. Yes, we need to continue to provide our students with high-quality content, but we also need to prepare our students for a world that does not have a Dewey decimal number on the book jacket and is in their hands or pocket 24 x 7.

What is really scary is the false sense of confidence that our students have about their own skills. If you believe you are literate, then what would motivate you to question your own assumptions about fact vs. opinion or complete falsehoods, especially if the content arrived via Facebook by a trusted personal friend? Wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that if you can pass a reading test based in print on paper, you would be able to transfer those skills to a different media with print such as a Tweet? It turns out this notion of transfer from one media to another may not be as easy as it would seem. (See the seminal work on "The Medium Is the Message" by Marshall MacLuhan.) We may need to recognize that various channels have different grammatical structures that require very specific lessons to be literate.

As a society, we may need to radically review what we mean by reading proficiency and being literate across various channels of print and digital content. Certainly, distinguishing fact from fiction should not be beyond the bar of reading proficiency. Minimally, our students should be in a position to say that they do not know instead of confidently claiming to understand. Unfortunately, there are powerful forces in place — such as our traditional assessment designs — that have put a brake on designing innovative, web-based lessons. In this country, we tend to teach what we test. I do not know of any state or national test that measures web literacy. Without a test that requires this skill, we may be stuck in our paper-based definition of what it means to be literate.

What else could be holding us back from teaching our students to be literate in the most powerful and ubiquitous media ever invented by society? Perhaps we have spent too much time, money, and energy blocking various channels of information on the web, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter in our schools, when we should have been carefully learning to understand the organizational structure of these channels that are omnipresent outside of school? Should educators understand the impact of social media on how their students find information, process, behave, and even make judgments about others?

The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) does require schools to block objectionable material, but it also states that schools "must provide for educating minors about appropriate online behavior." We seem to excel at the blocking provision, while we have basically ignored the education side of the law.

When I asked my own college-age children how their universities prepared them to understand social media, they both stated that they were given a briefing of what not to do. If this is the case, we are not providing our students with a balanced and common-sense approach to being web literate. The urge to control what our students access has prevented us from actually teaching them how to discern the difference between fact and fiction across various digital channels.

Grammar, syntax, and the meaning of words do count. We spend years teaching our students to understand the structure of printed texts, libraries, the Dewey decimal system, and standard reference sources. In the traditional world of handing in a paper for an assignment, we highly value spelling, proper punctuation, proper citation, attribution, the difference between fact and opinion, and the careful step-by-step development of an idea. How much time do we spend teaching the equivalent skills on the Internet?

Just as we ensure that our students do not misinterpret quote signs to be attributable to the main author, perhaps we should also ensure that our students know the simple difference between a modified tweet, a re-tweet, and an original tweet. The Stanford researchers discovered that the majority of students did not click on a link in a Tweet when asked to evaluate the validity of the content. While the comparison might be imperfect, this is similar to completely ignoring the value of footnotes embedded in text. Beyond the mechanics of grammar and syntax, there are also critical thinking strategies that are unique to the web. For example, we should teach our students how to develop a line of inquiry in tracking down a primary source from an opinion on a website. One powerful fact-checking tool that all of our students (and adults) should know how to use is the Wayback Machine (www.archive.org), which has been backing up the web since 1995. (See my article link on the Wayback Machine.) Content that many politicians and non-politicians may not want to have the voting public uncover can be instantly discoverable with this tool.

Google is probably the most popular portal for many of our students who are looking for answers. Very few have been taught the "grammar" of using advanced search tools as limiting results to government sites or universities. Students typically only look at the top page of results. Many students give up when they cannot find the answer. (See my previous article on teaching students advanced search skills.)

We are in a mission-critical state of losing democracy unless we train a laser-beam focus on broadening our definition of what it means to be literate in our society. It is not difficult to create the standards and write the assessments we need to measure our students' web literacy skills. Certainly, being able to validate between fact and fiction must become a basic tenet of teaching reading across all channels of information. The curriculum to support these skills cannot be limited to a special course or an orientation in the library. As with reading print, web literacy needs to be embedded across the curriculum and within the design of assignments across all grades and subjects. Students need practice, practice, practice.

Our national policy of filtering the web in our schools to protect children from objectionable material was an incomplete solution, and one that may backfire to

produce an ill-informed and easily manipulated electorate. No one would argue that we must filter out highly objectionable material. However, the reality of life in a democracy is that the information flowing toward our citizens 24 x 7 across many digital channels is messy — even nasty — with multiple versions of the truth.

The one thing we can count on is that the web will get messier and nastier. We must prepare our students to be literate in the reality of this messy world. Hanging on to the semblance that somehow we can control the information our students can access is counterproductive to one of the original tenets of education as described by the Founding Fathers: "Education being necessary to its [democracy's] success, a successful democracy must provide it."

Simply put, our definition of literacy has not kept pace with the reality of the digital media. We are now seriously late in preparing our students to intelligently function on the web. We need a national and local commitment to prepare our students to become critical thinkers in our omnipresent digital world as well as the world of paper.

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