

Confronting your own beliefs is unsettling, but it is a necessary check against narrow-mindedness, ignorance, and bias.



Four Questions to Ask Yourself

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Our commitment to intellectual freedom is manifested not just in the creation of a strong and clear selection policy or the celebration of Banned Books Week but by our willingness to examine our practices openly with others. In that spirit, I am proposing four questions to explore in your teaching and in professional discourse.

1. Why should I make my selection process transparent?

In this issue about intellectual freedom, authors will give you ample evidence of the need for a selection policy that is reviewed regularly and understood by the community. Further, since the collection itself represents your practical implementation of the selection policy, the resources you own should be evaluated not only by their alignment with lists of best books and the standards of professional associations but also by how well they meet your users' needs and the goals and objectives expressed in the policy (Bishop 2007, 146). *The Collection Program in Schools* (2007) suggests ways to assess implementation using three types of measures: collection-centered measures, user-centered measures and simulated-use studies. While you should oversee any evaluation process, Bishop suggests that you invite faculty and students to help you (146). For example, you might ask teachers to review areas of the collection related to their curricula, recommending items to weed or add. Or you can provide an online form for suggesting new purchases.

You can frame your work with teachers and students by focusing on common selection pitfalls that are likely to surface in any evaluation: personal biases, lack of balance, and favoritism based on popularity or literary merit (Bishop 1007, 170-71).

Personal biases

It is natural for each of us to bring our own interests and experiences to the selection task, and to use them to enrich our teaching. Bishop cautions, however, against the excessive influence of our personal interests on selection decisions:

A media specialist with a strong belief in higher education may be tempted to purchase more college oriented materials than items for vocational courses. A media specialist who advocates online searching as a major teaching tool may be overzealous in budgeting for online services. A media specialist whose hobby is cinema may buy numerous materials about movies and equipment for video production. College-preparatory materials, online databases, books on cinema and video production equipment are all worthy resources; however the media specialist's personal interests should not unduly influence selection decisions. (Bishop 2007, 170)

Bishop suggests various measures to help you evaluate your collection (2007, 141-59). When you invite your users to participate in this assessment, your selection process becomes more transparent and you can be confident that your collection decisions have been based on the policy and not on personal biases. For example, instead of working with baseball statistics during a data analysis unit, the math teacher can help students analyze use-centered measures such as circulation statistics, collection-mapping data or database-use reports from vendors. Or students can brainstorm questions for user-opinion surveys, such as direct interviews or written questionnaires, which they distribute to other students and then analyze. Students can help you decide whether the collection's resources in an area they are studying

match the needs described in the selection policy. What areas of the collection do users identify as weak? Are there well-developed areas of the collection that appear unrelated to both the curriculum and users interests? Do the resources reflect the selection criteria?

Balance

The library's goal is to present a wide variety of viewpoints on controversial issues. Therefore, when students are *studying* a controversial topic in the classroom, suggest to the classroom teacher that you do a lesson analyzing types of sources related to their controversy. Ask students to divide the sources they have used into two piles: sources that advocate a single viewpoint and those that cover various positions objectively. How do these differ? Do the objective sources achieve a neutral point of view? Do the single-viewpoint sources address likely objections? Do both types of resources contribute equally well to a balanced perspective? Ask students to describe the practical effect of one particular source on their understanding of the controversy.

When students are *writing* a research report on a controversial topic, ask them to use their own bibliographies to do a citation study, and find titles that are not in the school library's holdings (Bishop 2007, 154) in order to create a suggested purchase list. Request that they highlight non-holdings in their printed bibliography (or tag them in citation software), then share their lists with you. If these are annotated bibliographies, students could include their recommendations for purchase and even rank first-, second-, and third-choice selections.

Popularity Versus Literary Merit

Selections based on literary merit and popularity are among the most difficult we make. Since literary merit is somewhat subjective, selection criteria may conflict and values may change over time. For example, when my class was examining their local libraries' collections of banned books <www.noodletools.com/debbie/projects/frstam/libfree.html>, San Francisco students discovered that their public library did not own any copies of *The Indian in the Cupboard*, although it was their most widely-requested interlibrary loan title. When asked, the children's librarian cited the collection policy of not purchasing books which contained ethnic stereotyping. Today there are multiple copies in the San Francisco Public Library, which the library now defends because of the novel's popularity.

Hana Field's high school research essay, published in *Concord Review* <www.tcr.org/tcr/index.htm>, recounts the censorship history of *The Wizard of Oz*, a favorably reviewed title that was unavailable in the children's section and all branches of the Detroit Public Library from 1927 to 1972, although it had sold over 5 million copies at the time. The library director, under the guise of selection, claimed that it lacked literary merit: it was not well-written, lacked climax or character development, relied on "fantastic rather than fanciful happenings," and used "too much exaggeration in carrying out each detail, [and is] old-fashioned and out-dated . . . [therefore] it does not meet present day standards of book selection for children" (Field 1999, 83-84).

Distribute copies of this well-reasoned indictment of selection as censorship. Then present students with examples of comic books and graphic novels you are considering adding to the collection, and invite them to help you develop selection criteria for this genre. Bishop proposes that selection of graphic novels consider reviews for individual titles, the author's reputation, and the content in light of the school's curricular needs (2007, 87-88). For this lesson I'd recommend that you propose that students discuss aspects of graphic novels that relate broadly to the goals of your selection policy, including reading motivation and individual interests. Do we apply criteria such as literary or aesthetic merit, racial and sexual stereotypes, or popularity to graphic novels? How might we assess literary or aesthetic merit? How should we implement agreed-upon criteria? For example, which best meets the users' need for popular materials: that two titles in every popular series are acquired or that multiple copies of highly popular titles are added? Which users' needs are not represented in graphic novels? The point is to have students recognize that selection criteria can be considered from many vantages—selection is complex!

2. What can I do to protect both students and the First Amendment?

Frances Jacobson Harris (2007) has analyzed a six-month period of LM_NET messages to determine how school librarians, inhibited by structural impediments such as government regulations, school policies and procedures, talk about how they teach online information evaluation. I am alarmed by her characterization of the tone of these discussions as "passive." She reports that responders did not often question the filtering status quo despite the fact that "specific filter settings can generally be adjusted and refined" under the requirements for

E-rate funding (247). In fact, some library media specialists coped with limitations by ignoring the rules or by creating workarounds to thwart policies. They used “covert acts of subterfuge and subversion aimed at circumventing norms and practices judged unfair, oppressive, or too restrictive . . . [acts that are] actually embedded or institutionalized in cultural practices and, in a sense, constitute practices that are covert and yet accepted” (Turkel 2002, 261–62). These are typical behaviors of people in subordinate positions who may disagree with a policy but feel unable to oppose it. Regrettably, such subversion makes us complicit in normalizing “cheating culture” behaviors in school, even as we instruct students in information ethics and develop policies to discourage plagiarism.

Other school librarians, according to Harris, respond to filtering with resignation, frustration and sarcasm, but rationalize their self-limiting strategies in terms of their personal beliefs about what students should or shouldn't do in a library. Two surveys by Mary Ann Bell confirm this voluntary and excessive filtering. “School districts across the country are engaging in their own form of censorship—they're essentially filtering the filters” (2007, 40). The “elephant in the room” is that many districts are “interpreting their acceptable-use policies too broadly,” disabling browser features to limit searches, banning Internet use completely and allowing students to visit only pre-approved Web sites (Bell, 2007, 41). In some cases school librarians are implementing contradictory goals simultaneously: they limit Internet use to *instructional* purposes but select books for *pleasure* reading, all the while asserting that they are developing *lifelong learners*.

This knotty problem is larger than exercising our professional responsibility for managing information access. The entire school must understand that the First Amendment still protects students' legitimate access to valuable information. Rather than battling the technology department or “the powers that be,” invite your school faculty and administration to come together—not to debate or negotiate—but to answer this question jointly: “What should *we* do to protect both our students and the First Amendment?” This method of community problem-solving is described more fully in “Thinking Together; the Power of Deliberative Dialogue” (London, 2007).

In preparation, provide your colleagues with The Brennan Center for Justice's *Internet Filters* report <[\[file_36644.pdf\]\(#\)> which documents how large quantities of valuable, political and other nonpornographic information continue to be overblocked in “irrational or biased ways” by both commercial and open filters \(Heins, Cho and Feldman 2006, ii\). Since “CIPA only requires schools to have technology on computers used by minors that prevents their access to ‘visual depictions’ that are ‘obscene’ or to ‘child pornography,’ or information ‘harmful to minors’” \(Heins, Cho and Feldman 2006, 2\), your role is to begin a conversation about how to protect legitimate speech and access to information that is not censorable under CIPA. If your school does not filter locally, your faculty should still understand that open-web search-engine filters may block protected speech. Google's SafeSearch, for example, has been found to block access to \[congress.gov\]\(http://congress.gov\) and \[shuttle.nasa.gov\]\(http://shuttle.nasa.gov\) at various times \(Heins, Cho and Feldman 2006, ii\).](http://www.brennancenter.org/dynamic/subpages/download_</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Students can provide local data to the school community by testing sites that clearly fall under protected speech but which have been shown to be blocked (Heins, Cho and Feldman 2006, ii; Dobija 2007, 51), such as:

- “Hillary for President”
- “Traditional Values Coalition” (a nondenominational church lobby)
- National Rifle Association and other pro-gun sites
- *The Owl and the Pussycat*
- The Declaration of Independence
- Shakespeare's complete plays
- *Moby Dick*
- The Shoah Project (a Holocaust remembrance page)
- American Library Association's Banned Books Week

Divide students into teams to test the examples above or other sites identified in the Brennan report. Each group will create a paper chart, a wiki, or a spreadsheet tally of blocked and not blocked results, information which they can pool into a single document for the class to examine. Referring to your selection policy, ask students to identify sites that are candidates for unblocking. Hand out the recommendations at the end of the Brennan report (73) and discuss how these could be implemented at your school. Finally, have each group write up one of the solutions in Google Docs. After these are edited and combined, their final “white paper” will be presented for consideration to the faculty, the school administration and the person or department (even if it is you) responsible for

maintaining the filtering software. For further guidance on using deliberative discussion in a school setting, order the free “Teacher’s Guide to National Issues Forums in the Classroom” <www.nifi.org/discussion_guides/detail.aspx?catID=3238&itemID=3239>.

3. How can I help students understand global censorship without imposing American values?

The middle school/high school librarian at The Anglo-American School of Moscow, Ann Symons <www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/kqweb/kqarchives/volume36/362/362symons.cfm>, helps us appreciate the challenges that school librarians in English-speaking international schools face in the absence of the First Amendment. The Open Net Initiative (ONI) <<http://opennet.net>> provides you with the ability to search a URL to see if it has been blocked, and issues yearly reports on censorship by country and by region. For example China, Iran, Ethiopia, Burma, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates block political and social content as well as information related to certain conflicts or groups, and particular Internet tools. Among this group of countries, Iran and Tunisia are the most aggressive. India and Morocco filter information related to local security or conflict issues, while Yemen and South Korea block social and security-related information. While the United States and Canada do not filter at the national level, they regulate defamation, copyright, national security and computer security by legislation <<http://opennet.net/research/regions/namerica>>.*

If our students will be working in a global milieu, their cross-cultural awareness should include an understanding of these political constraints. When they are assigned library research on individual countries, suggest that this include their use of the ONI database to determine what kinds of access are restricted within their particular country:

- Political content (e.g., views in opposition to the current government, or related to human rights, freedom of expression, minority rights, and religious movements).
- Social content (e.g., sexuality, gambling, alcohol and illegal drugs, as well as topics seen as socially sensitive or offensive).
- Conflict and security content (e.g., armed conflicts, border disputes, separatist movements, and militant groups).

- Internet tools (e.g., Web sites that provide e-mail, Internet hosting, search, translation, Voice over Internet Protocol, telephone service, and circumvention methods).

Rather than asking students to pass judgment from an American perspective, have them consider the ways in which global issues such as climate change, environmental degradation, nuclear proliferation, or child labor might be regarded by citizens of another country, given that relevant information might be unavailable.

4. Why must I confront my deeply held beliefs?

When I was the director of an integrated library/technology department, I worked with our staff to develop an acceptable-use policy linked to our selection policy, ratified by our Board, which strongly supported students’ access to information and right to read. I felt confident that I understood intellectual freedom. Nonetheless, at Carrie Gardner’s AASL presentation in Reno, I was stunned by her argument that labeling is a form of censorship. Her talk, “Sticky Issues: Labels on Resources,” is summarized online at KQWeb <www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/kqweb/kqarchives/volume36/362/362gardener.cfm>. Yes, I had applied stickers in certain areas of the collection, primarily to make it easier for young children to find certain popular types of resources such as picture books about math and fantasy novels. Gardner’s premise is that a label may act to limit access. Of course I could see that labeling books with a reading level might suggest to certain readers that the book was not for them or that their teachers might restrict their students to certain sections under the misapprehension that their students are only able to read books within a particular grade range (Bishop 2007, 183), but I was mystified as to how my math stickers or the unicorn label for fantasy books could possibly affect access. Gardner argues that these prejudgments might deter students from opening a book if they believed that they were not good in math or if they “hated fantasy.” They might never discover fantasies they could enjoy or math topics that might interest them. Even worse, she described how the reading level displayed on the book’s spine prompted peers to tease a less-proficient reader at one school. And she spoke with some passion about finding a picture book about a same-sex family with children that was labeled on the spine with a sticker shaped like a broken heart bearing the words “family

* *If your own school’s access to this site is blocked, order Access Denied (Diebert, Palfrey, Rohozinski and Zittrain 2008, in press) for a discussion of the latest ONI survey of global Internet filtering in forty countries.*

problems.” I can recognize now how prejudicial even the most innocuous label could be.

Confronting your own beliefs is unsettling, but it is a necessary check against narrow-mindedness, ignorance, and bias. When I read Amy E. White’s *Virtually Obscene; the Case for an Uncensored Internet* recently, I felt that my core beliefs about intellectual freedom were being attacked. She warns that censoring Internet pornography is likely to lead to more pernicious censorship of other forms of expression; that even if we wanted to regulate the Internet, we could not agree on an obscenity standard based on community standards—and that it would be technologically futile anyway. She argues that virtual pornography is not harmful and that claims about harm (to women, to children, to community morals) are logically defective. A recent ALSC summary of the research on the harm of exposure to sexually explicit material in media (not books) (Kotrila 2007, 50) lends credence to White’s thesis:

Although the assumption the children are harmed by exposure to sexually explicit material is well entrenched in the United States, there is very little research to support or refute it. Of particular concern is the accidental exposure to sexual content, especially on the Internet. According to Mitchell, in 2005, 19 percent more ten- to twelve-year-olds and 35 percent more thirteen-year-olds reported encountering unwanted exposure to pornography on the Internet than in 2000. So we do know that incidents increased, but the authors made no assessment of whether these encounters caused any harm, and fewer than 10 percent of the youth reported these incidents as ‘distressing.’ (Kotrila 2007, 51)

Despite both these publications and my knowledge of more-permissive attitudes toward explicit material in Denmark and other European countries, I find it hard to accept harm to even a small percentage of our youth. Even more disturbing are recent reports of the negative effects of video-game violence (Pierce 2008, 60–67), given the promotion of gaming in libraries:

In children and adolescents, greater exposure to violence in media has been correlated repeatedly to increased aggressive attitudes and behaviors. These correlations occur both for passive television and film viewing and for interactive engagement with video and computer games. Almost all studies are

of short-term effects only. In the only longitudinal study on childhood exposure to violent content, Huesmann et al. found a correlation between six to nine-year-olds’ viewing of violence on television and aggressive behaviors, including criminal ones, of these same subjects in their early twenties. The perceived realism of the content is a significant factor in promoting aggressive behavior. (Kotrila 2007, 50)

There are few clear answers to these hard questions other than to engage our communities not in debate but in open discussion. Together we can hope to guarantee the rights of the individual. However, when we passively accept the status quo or even covertly subvert it, or when we dodge any scrutiny of our personal beliefs and values, we insidiously undercut intellectual freedom. Coming face-to-face with our own raw discomfort is humbling, but it increases the likelihood that we will have greater compassion for the distress of others with whom we disagree, even as we support their rights.

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