



Equity Dispatch

Students as Critical Users and Producers of Knowledge: Reframing the Equity Conversation in Library and Information Sciences



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The newsletter at Great Lakes Equity Center is written and edited by [Kitty Chen](#), [Erin Macey](#), [Juhanna Rogers](#), [Marsha Simon](#), [Seena Skelton](#), and [Kathleen King Thorius](#).

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IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

To teach is not to transfer knowledge, but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge.

--Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*

Educate

Equity Spotlight

Enabling access to information and creating opportunities to produce new knowledge* are two obligations of a democratic society (Lievrouw & Farb, 2003). In the past, these imperatives have compelled individuals in the field of library and information sciences to question and study the adequacy and comparability of resources within knowledge-providing institutions, including schools and libraries (Pribesh, Gavigan, & Dickinson, 2011). More recently, unprecedented growth in technology has led to new equity considerations. Reconsidering who has access to information, as well as who is responsible for or empowered in the process of producing and validating knowledge, has implications for the roles of staff and educators in our K-12 institutions (Yu, 2006; Zins, 2007). Specifically, while educators should remain concerned with comparability of information access, they should also recognize that what counts as valid and valuable knowledge is culturally determined (Lievrouw & Farb, 2003). Furthermore, students should be viewed and empowered by educators as producers of knowledge rather than as recipients. In sum, educational stakeholders seeking to provide all students with equitable learning environments in the information age must tackle issues concerning the creation, selection, accessibility, and distribution of information with the ultimate goal of empowering students to read and respond to both “the word” and “the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Equity Considerations

We have long recognized that disparities exist in access to particular sources of information, including physical access to comparably-funded libraries (Pribesh, Gavigan, & Dickinson, 2011) and the internet (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008) as well as to skills necessary to interpret print or use technology (Meneses & Momino, 2010; Pribesh, Gavigan, & Dickinson, 2011). History is replete with examples of times that resources and literacies were intentionally denied to particular groups (Collins, 1995; Jimenez, 1990; Luke, 2012) or when information was tightly controlled or manipulated, with those controlling the flow of information referred to as “gatekeepers” (Pettigrew, 1972). Within the context of information flow to students, decision-makers at all levels, from state political leaders who determine how to distribute funding to schools, to school board members who approve curricula, to media specialists and teachers who introduce information and resources to students, serve gatekeeping roles.

One of the outcomes of unbalanced decision-making processes is that schools with the highest concentrations of students from low-income families have the fewest school library resources to draw on, and schools serving more affluent families are also more likely to have more than one full-time librarian (Pribesh, Gavigan, & Dickinson, 2011). Perhaps more relevant to this generation is the extent to which youth have access to new technologies that connect them to digital information and each another (Asselin & Doiron, 2008); access here is also unequal, with African-Americans from working-class communities the least likely group to be able to use the internet regularly (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008). Research studies have also noted differences in environmental factors that implicitly value or devalue print literacy, including whether or not neighborhood stores sell reading material for children, the amount of signage in the neighborhood, whether physical spaces to read are available, and the quality of daycare and preschool materials (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Such concerns have spurred movements in library and information sciences to improve political enfranchisement and participation of individuals in digital and print literacy activities (Lievrouw & Farb, 2003; Meneses & Momino, 2010). Ensuring access



Sheryl L. Mase is the assistant director at the Library of Michigan, where she has worked for 13 years. Sheryl devotes her career to the establishment of more equitable access to information and literary resources for all communities. As the assistant director, she directs statewide library services, which includes the oversight of federal grant administration, certification and professional development for librarians, broadband development, public access computing, collaborative projects, and consulting. Sheryl is also responsible for the coordination and management of the Library of Michigan's flagship program, the [Michigan eLibrary](#).

Sheryl's experience with social justice work began in college, leading her to explore issues related to intellectual freedom. As an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan, Sheryl became acutely aware of socio-economic inequities, particularly with relation to community protection initiatives. From her perspective, information must not only be for the privileged elite, especially if Americans are serious about being a democratic nation with guaranteed First Amendment Rights. “Thomas Jefferson said that an informed citizenry is at the heart of a dynamic democracy, which is often quoted as ‘intellectual freedom is the cornerstone of democracy’ and this has always made sense to me. Information is power - power to the people.”

To Sheryl, the process of uncovering equity issues for K-12 education may differ somewhat from uncovering those in the library world. However, at the root, the process has the same tenets. Sheryl believes that the economic

to information in various forms is an enduring concern, and one that remains important in equity conversations.

At the same time, we must also acknowledge that what constitutes meaningful access and valued information is locally and culturally determined (Meneses & Momino, 2010). All individuals live in an “information world that is defined by their shared culture: the way in which people acquire and use information and the way in which people make sense of the information are all ultimately shaped by this culture” (Yu, 2006, p. 232). Moving beyond equality of access to information requires acknowledgement that “fair or reasonable distribution of information among individuals, groups, regions, categories, or other social units” is one that allows “the opportunity to achieve whatever is important or meaningful to them in their lives” (Lievrouw & Farb, 2003, p. 515; see also Becvar & Srinivasan, 2009). Accordingly, schools and libraries should center the knowledge needs of their local communities as defined by and in dialogue with those communities.

Those in marginalized communities possess important information resources (Becvar & Srinivasan, 2009) as well as an ability to unravel myths and distortions in dominant sources of information (Luke, 2012). As information-centered institutions, schools and libraries can shift from a primary focus on distributing information to one that facilitates the important work of producing knowledge and preserving and promoting cultural and ethnic heritage. In other words, rather than falling into the common trap of considering students and families as merely receivers or seekers of knowledge, we should recognize their power as knowledge sources and creators of information (Meneses & Momino, 2010). When combined with action-based methods and frameworks for capturing their unique knowledge, digital technologies can prove a powerful tool for developing these kinds of two-way knowledge-sharing relationships (Becvar & Srinivasan, 2009).

Recommendations

An equity focus on information access and production first entails recognition that the go-to sources for teachers and media service personnel in schools are often drawn from their own cultural backgrounds and/or from sources that are privileged among particular groups (Doherty, 2006). Because of this, students’ requests for information tend to be met with responses drawn from a white Anglo-Saxon male paradigm (Doherty, 2006). Furthermore, if information sources (e.g., texts) describe racial or ethnic groups inaccurately, students may become skeptical about the trustworthiness of both texts and of teachers (Overall, 2009). Rather than treating information as a neutral commodity, it must be seen as context- and interest-dependent. To assess information equity, we must ask whether what we are providing allows individuals “to accomplish their particular ends and purposes” (Lievrouw & Farb, 2003, p. 515); such a question widens the view of information to that which is “constantly changing, contested, interdisciplinary, and collaboratively constructed and re-constructed” (Asselin & Doiron, 2008, p. 3).

Educators, including school librarians, must take on new roles, facilitating students’ growth as critical information-seekers and knowledge-sharers. Encouraging students to ask questions that engender critical literacy – an ability to unpack myths and distortions and build new ways of knowing (Luke, 2012) - is essential. These might include:

- What is “truth?” How is it presented and represented, by whom, and in whose interests? (Luke, 2012, p. 2)
- How does the author get me to believe him/her? What does this person have invested in this information? How does this information influence my thinking on the subject? (Asselin & Doiron, 2008)
- What explicit and hidden messages about (race/gender/nationality/ability)

stratification of American families contributes to the growing literacy gaps between middle class and low-income households. Everyone needs to be committed to solving the problems surrounding access and opportunities. Sheryl asserts that the career of a librarian centers on providing resources and creating pathways that expose the community to information; she also challenges all citizens to use their political power to support libraries.

Upcoming Events

Illinois

May 14-15, 2014

[Education Recognition Program Illinois Showcase](#)
Chicago, IL

May 21, 2014

[Advancing Evaluation Implementation for Special Education Personnel Workshop](#)
O'Fallon, IL

May 22-23, 2014

[2014 Chicago International Conference on Education](#)
Chicago, IL

Indiana

May 27-31, 2014

[National Conference on Race and Ethnicity](#)
Indianapolis, IN

Michigan

July 29-31, 2014

[2014 Summer Leadership Conference](#)
Marie, MI

October 30, 2014

[Legislative, Education & Advocacy Day \(LEAD\)](#)
Lansing, MI

do the authors send to readers? (Teaching Tolerance, 2014)

While digital access opens the door to many new resources for students, teachers and school librarians do still have significant influence over the types of information students will work with in schools. Because of this, it is important that they provide access to materials in a wide variety of formats and from a wide variety of perspectives (Smith & Brown, 2013). When students and families are involved in the selection of materials and when materials represent the full range of languages spoken in the school community, students benefit (Overall, 2009).

Finally, if we accept that learning is not simply information transmission from teacher, text, or web to learner, but accept that each person has relevant experiences that can be used to “enable people to overcome their false perceptions of reality” (Freire, 1993, p. 86), we must also attend to students and communities as creators of valid and valuable information (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Students should be encouraged to produce and share information, asking:

- What do I already know about this particular topic?
- How did I develop this knowledge?
- Is what I know consistent with other sources of information?
- What other information would help me to understand this topic better?
- How could I represent and share what I know with others?

By encouraging students to approach new information with respect for what they already know or to share what they know with others, we take a step toward recognizing “young people as active members of society: not only becoming, but being as well” (Meneses & Momino, 2010, p. 206).

Conclusion

Opportunities to access relevant information, critically assess “the word” and “the world”, and produce knowledge, are all vital to students’ growth as participants in democratic society. As we continue to assess the adequacy and equality of access, retaining an understanding that relevance, validity, and literacy are culturally bound notions will serve us well as we seek to expand opportunities and participation. In schools, moving beyond information retention to seeking, assessing, and producing will serve our students best as they strive to be and become active participants in society.

**While the meaning of terms like “information” and “knowledge” are contested, drawing from Zins’ Critical Delphi, this article adopts the perspective that information is a set of organized data that is universally available (e.g., through a film, article, or podcast), while knowledge is information that has been interpreted by a particular individual (Zins, 2007).*

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

Engage

Minnesota

May 13, 2014

[The Other Side of Poverty in Schools](#)

Minneapolis, MN

October 16-17, 2014

[2014 Education Minnesota Professional Conference](#)

St. Paul, MN

Ohio

June 16-18, 2014

[OERC Conference: Connecting Research, Practice, and Policy](#)

Columbus, OH

June 18, 2014

[Half-Day Learning Session hosted by Ohio Education Research Center](#)

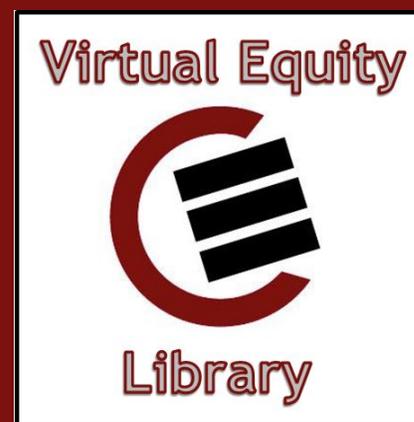
Columbus, OH

Wisconsin

May 17, 2014

[Next Door's 25th Annual Walk for Children](#)

Milwaukee, WI



INDIANA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



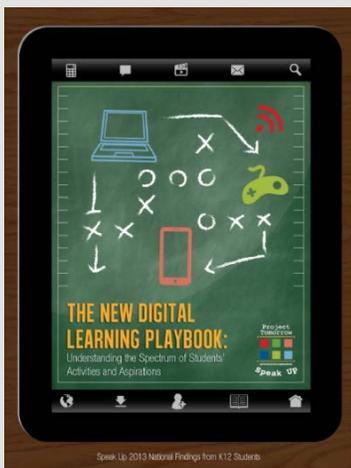
The American Library Association (ALA) was founded in 1869 in Philadelphia, PA and its national headquarters is currently located in Chicago, Illinois. Today, the organization serves over 9,000 members through its 11 membership divisions and 20 sub-committees that focus on specific issues related to library services, school support, and community development. By establishing a network, ALA now has affiliates, chapters, and many other relationships with grassroots organizations.

ALA's mission is to produce research, provide professional development opportunities, and host conferences that bring librarians together to improve education. In alignment with this mission, the ALA has identified eight key action areas for the 21st century, including advocacy for librarians and the profession, intellectual freedom, literacy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, transforming libraries, organizational excellence, and equitable access to information and library services. To support these key action areas, ALA publishes reports, offers resources, and hosts events across the country pertaining to literacy and library equity.

The organization has also established divisions and subgroups that focus on these matters across the nation. The Office for Library Advocacy, for example, works directly with schools in crisis, providing resources, letters of support, and national data sets to help local school districts and grassroots organizations that are seeking to renew closed or deprived libraries, librarians, and literacy resources in school. In addition, the Office is charged to bring media attention to the issues facing school libraries. This is just one of many offices within the ALA that are fighting to better support the development of school libraries. Please view [their site](#) and use their resources to advocate in the Great Lakes region.

Empower

Something to Read!



[Speak Up](#) is an initiative committed to understanding how students' use of digital technology has evolved over the last ten years. In 2013, Project Tomorrow surveyed over 325,000 students from 9,000 schools in 2,700 national school districts and published [this national report](#) on student learning and its relationships to technology and digital device usage in classrooms. The report offers insights into how students use digital tools and resources inside and outside of school activities to enhance learning. For instance, by using digital technology and mediums such as Skype, Facebook, and Google Images, students are able to share their narratives and

investigate content and ideas. Using a metaphor of native storytelling, the authors compare students' adoption of digital technology as a method to explore the evolution of the education process. [Read this report](#) to better understand students' digital learning experiences.

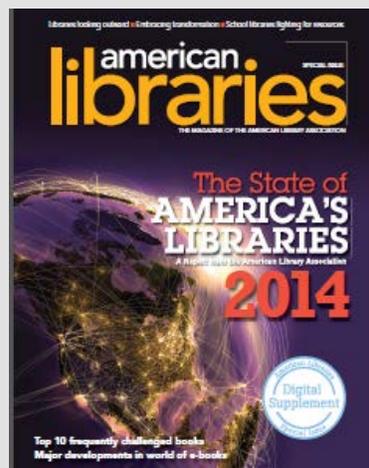
Something to Watch!



The [Iowa Association of School Librarians](#) produced [this short video](#) to describe how librarians - whom they assert are teachers first and foremost – can transform schools. The video highlights the values and skills librarians bring to school settings, proposing a student-centered, community-inclusive framework for libraries in schools. Ultimately, librarians are considered strategic assets in schools' mission to support critical literacy and life-long learning. Watch to learn more!

Something to Use!

In honor of this year's National Library Week, the American Library Association (ALA) released [The State of America's Libraries: 2014](#). The report discusses various aspects of information literacy and the role of libraries in five critical goal areas: literacy, inquiry, social and emotional growth, creativity, and imagination. Additionally, the report shares findings from a national survey that confirms the public's interest in retaining a robust library system for schools and communities. However, while considered vital in the U.S., school budget cuts have resulted in underfunding and neglect of school libraries, adding to an information literacy gap. As the information literacy gap continues to increase, the current state of library services in schools and communities must be discussed in a larger context. [This report](#) provides students, teachers, and parents with valuable knowledge to help initiate the conversation in their communities.



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