

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

### *The Perfect Storm for Transformative Learning?*

[A]t the very moment when we have more varied ideas, thoughts and opinions on our campuses, we also have students who are less equipped and perhaps less eager to have challenging discussions. — José Antonio Bowen, President, Goucher College (2016, Dec. 7)

And, one might ask, what ideas or opinions are worth discussing? What is their source?

Most important: How do we help students separate fact from fiction in order to have an informed discussion in the first place?

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The Editorial Board of the *New York Times*, in a December 10, 2016, editorial, proposed the idea that reliably factual shared stories used to unite Americans, but with the fracturing of the monolith that was represented by Walter Cronkite and John Chancellor and Frank Reynolds, America drifted away from a commonality that was a key source of dependable, vetted information about our lives, politics, and society (Editorial Board, *NYT*, 2016).

One only has to observe the divisive rhetoric and the bizarre, sometimes dangerous, consequences of fake news taken for reality to realize that Americans are now, more than ever, divided in what we believe is real regarding our society and politics.

We no longer share to the same degree a dependable story. At the same time, we have come to realize that even the “good ol’ days” of network news often didn’t reflect reality for major segments of our society because those views and voices were sometimes discounted.

The “good ol’ days” had their share of challenges, to be sure, but Americans — in general — could trust a common source of information that — in general — tried its hardest to stick to verifiable facts and label everything else opinion or editorial.

Now, we have to help our students find and depend on the sources of information that fit this category.

Due to the “filter bubble” effect (Pariser, 2012), it’s incredibly easy for our students to find and stick to sources of information that confirm their existing views and opinions. On their own, students may never venture from the safety of that cocoon to encounter other ideas that might be more rooted in reality than their existing views.

Living in your own bubble that constantly confirms your own biases stunts your growth.

If our students' bubbles are populated by fake news sites and politicized rhetoric, they may be the next Americans to arm themselves and drive somewhere to counter what they have accepted as a factual threat.

The trouble is, such sites have proliferated, and it's easy to find the sites that confirm your bias. Google and Facebook and other media serve up such recommendations as part of their algorithms to interest our students (and us), thereby driving more click-through traffic to generate revenue.

Walter Quattrociocchi, the head of the Laboratory of Computational Social Science at IMT Lucca in Italy, has spent several years studying how conspiracy theories and misinformation spread online, and he confirmed some of my fears: Essentially, he explained, institutional distrust is so high right now, and cognitive bias so strong *always*, that the people who fall for hoax news stories are frequently only interested in consuming information that conforms with their views — even when it's demonstrably fake. (Dewey, 2015)

So we Transformative Learning educators are now positioned within the perfect storm. We have a focused opportunity to prompt a key transformation in our students' lives: We can help them develop a willingness to consider others' opinions and views as supported by the ability — and motivation — to discern dependable information from unsupported conjecture.

The kinds of duties that used to be the responsibility of editors, of librarians now fall on the shoulders of anyone who uses a screen to become informed about the world. And so the response is not to take away these rights from ordinary citizens but to teach them how to thoughtfully engage in information seeking and evaluating in a cacophonous democracy. (Wineburg, as quoted by McEvers, 2016).

Communications professor Melissa Zimdars at Merrimack College started compiling a list of sites disseminating unreliable and satirical information for her students, but she also provided them the following tips to help them discern fake from real news:

- Watch out if known/reputable news sites are not also reporting on the story. Sometimes lack of coverage is the result of corporate media bias and other factors, but there should typically be more than one source reporting on a topic or event.
- If the story makes you REALLY ANGRY it's probably a good idea to keep reading about the topic via other sources to make sure the story you read wasn't purposefully trying to make you angry (with potentially misleading or false information) in order to generate shares and ad revenue. (Zimdars, as quoted by Itkowitz, 2016)

The TL opportunity available to us, however, is not simply helping students determine which websites convey accurate, truthful information. We have the chance to stoke students' *desire* to be factually informed.

Here's one suggestion: Identify an issue for which you know reputable and disreputable sources of online information exist. Sit at the classroom computer and let students watch you surf to several sites with information on the topic, first going only to reputable sites, then only to disreputable sites. (Climate change is a great one — see the Itkowitz article for an example of a whopper of a lie about climate change that many Facebook viewers shared as fact.)

You get the idea. What's most important, though, is the discussion about *why* you know the reputable source information is good and the disreputable source information is bad.

As the UMass-Amherst, Purdue, and University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign students make clear (Itkowitz, 2016), students want our help in having good information upon which to base decisions.

Intensifying that desire is a big opportunity to have a transformative impact on students' critical and reflective thinking skills.

## References

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