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ASSESSING CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CLASSROOM: EXPLORING SOURCE TYPE AND EXPERTISE IN STUDENT- GENERATED HASHTAG SYLLABI

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Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the 2014 murder of 18-year Michael Brown in Missouri, hashtags like #ferguson, #justiceformikebrown, and #handsupdontshoot begin trending on Twitter. At the same time, Marcia Chatelain, Georgetown University Professor of History and American Studies, began crowdsourcing materials for educators trying to address what happened in their classrooms using the hashtag #fergusonsyllabus. What resulted was a list of highly interdisciplinary and multimedia sources including scholarly texts, news stories, songs, poems, films, public addresses, and children's books. Chatelain's call spoke both to the present crisis, the murder of a Black teenager by police, and to the historical and cultural context in which this shooting happened. The efforts of Chatelain and the community that came together around this hashtag expanded our understanding of information production and curation and the function of a syllabus beyond the college classroom. In introducing our classes to the idea of the hashtag syllabus, we attempt to engage our students in practices of information literacy with the hope of providing them tools to look critically at the inequities that permeate academic and non-academic spaces.

Critical Information Literacy

While the hashtag syllabus as class assignment is distinct in many ways from the syllabi that inspired it, the goal is to draw student attention to contemporary issues outside of the classroom while simultaneously advancing important learning goals. As instructors, we see these learning goals as inextricable from questions of power and equity and work to meaningfully address those questions through various stages of the assignment. The central goal of these assignments is to develop our students' critical information literacy skills. Critical information literacy, a growing area of scholarship most frequently addressed by librarians and literacy scholars, "involves developing a

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critical consciousness about information" and challenging both the library and the academy's "role in structuring and presenting a single, knowable reality" (Elmborg 2006, 198). Building further on this, we engage with ideas from critical library instruction praxis that "promotes critical engagement with information sources, considers student collaborators in knowledge production practices (and creators in their own right), recognizes the affective dimensions of research, and (in some cases) has liberatory aims" (Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier 2009, xi-xii).

Methods and Findings

As instructors and scholars working in distinct, but highly interdisciplinary fields, we have used hashtag syllabus assignments across our curriculum to support unique learning objectives in both introductory and upper-level courses. In the early stages of developing critical information literacy, our students focus on vetting different source types. At the end of their time as undergraduates, the focus turns more explicitly to critiques of academic knowledge production and distribution. Students in upper-level courses are assigned historical and contemporary critiques on race and gender bias in communication and media studies scholarship, in academic publishing and peer-review, and in libraries and archives in preparation for this assignment. This framework requires students to consider the "racialized and gendered politics of knowledge production itself" (Goldthree and Bahng 2016, 23). In both instances, our students are required to do collaborative work while quickly expanding their familiarity with materials on contemporary issues. To assess the effectiveness of these assignments in responding to these critiques, we use qualitative content analysis to explore patterns in source type, media type, source accessibility, authorship and engage in group discussions about the distribution and organization of materials. While we continue to review the outcomes of these assessments with new groups of students, we have found these assignments support deep learning and engage students in work that establishes critical connections between their work in the classroom and their position in the world.

Connection to Conference Themes

Chatelain's #fergusonsyllabus was a revolutionary document, in its creation, its range of content, and its aims. That first hashtag syllabus served as a prototype that has since been recreated, reworked, and reimagined many times and in many different contexts. The power of these documents is that they bring together, in a cohesive way, a series of openly available documents for public consideration. While some operated through a crowdsourced model, like the #charlestonsyllabus, others, like the #charlottesvillesyllabus, were instead developed and circulated by a small group of people, in that case, a group of graduate students at the University of Virginia (Clark 2020, 226). Both crowdsourced and curated hashtag syllabi efforts are often led by people working within traditional academic and educational institutions (teachers, professors, graduate students, librarians, and instruction coordinators), but not exclusively. The widely circulated #lemonadesyllabus, based on Beyoncé's 2016 album, was created by the theologian and writer Candice Marie Benbow. Through the process of co-creation, crowdsourcing, collaboration, and distribution outside of traditional academic spaces, the hashtag syllabus offers a kind of public pedagogy document that addresses, both implicitly and explicitly, the limitations of expertise as constructed within the academy.

Hashtag syllabi, as represented in the examples above, serve as opportunities not only for resource gathering, but intervention. It is important to recognize that the early examples of these efforts were "primarily initiated by African American scholar-activists," and very often by Black women.[1] These efforts are part of a long history of self-education practices and are "necessitated by the systemic deficiency of racially inclusive content in America's public school and university curricula" (Monroe 2016).[2] By integrating the hashtag syllabus into our classes, we ask our students not only to look more closely at the content offered to address contemporary issues of social justice, but to more critically consider how knowledge is produced and by whom. The open and online quality of the hashtag syllabus further deepens that discussion to consider the audience for and accessibility of the sources included and to engage students in processes of knowledge production. While the syllabus is rarely revolutionary in the context of the college or university classroom, our hope is to help students reimagine that document as one with revolutionary potential and to see their role and their responsibility in creating resources that actively push against biases in academia, to look beyond common search results, and to create a web-based resource that is responsive to issues and audiences in the world outside the academy.

References

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[1] Notably, two of the most famous movements of the past twenty years that centered hashtag campaigns were also developed or led by Black women. The #metoo movement, while initially attributed by many news outlets to a 2017 viral tweet by actress Alyssa Milano, was started by activist Tarana Burke in 2006, and the Black Lives Matter Network was started in 2013 by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi.

[2] For additional information on the history of collective knowledge production in African-American communities, please see Heather Andrea Williams' Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom (2005) and "The History of Non-Digital, Crowdsourced Knowledge" in Alyssa P. Lyons' article, "Hashtag Syllabus," published by the American Sociological Association (2019).