

Guest Editorial

Dungeons and Dragons in the Information Literacy Classroom: How We Taught Bias in a For-Credit IL Class

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In a for-credit information literacy class required by all freshmen students, regardless of major, it is difficult to find consensus when it comes to teaching emotionally fraught concepts such as bias. This editorial addresses those challenges and presents a novel solution to teach bias in class: by having students examine the private lives of fictional characters.

I began my position as the Head of Teaching and Learning at Duquesne University's Gumberg Library in July of 2019. I was eager to begin designing curriculum for Duquesne's required one-credit information literacy class: UCOR 100. Nearly five years later, the course has changed names to BRDG (Bridges, the name of our core curriculum) 100 and my department has designed (and taught) five versions of it. We started with a very traditional in-person class, included an online version for students who could not fit the face-to-face class into their schedules, created a course meant to be taught in a Hyflex environment during the pandemic, and tweaked the classes that followed to address the changing needs of post-pandemic students.

Information literacy skills might have once been a curriculum that could be designed and then retaught over and over, but that's no longer true. A recent, highly cited online survey (Intelligent, 2024)—indicating that at least half of our students were getting their research from TikTok—led to curriculum alterations. Last year, AI widely entered the coursework of many university students (Cotton et al., 2024), and our assignments were adapted to address this (for now). My two-person department must regularly address these kinds of changes to appropriately meet our learning objectives and to ensure the class remains relevant.

Throughout these past five years, as well as during my previous seven years spent at Penn State, I have encountered a variety of instructional challenges. I'm sure I'm not the only librarian who feels like the Boolean Operator "OR" can evade even the most attentive student's understanding. I suspect citations will consistently be something students avoid creating on their own, despite in-class activities demonstrating that citation generators (and ChatGPT) almost always include mistakes (again, I say, "for now"). Certain semesters have been harder

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than others for both student and instructor-related reasons that are tough to predict. But the concept we have struggled with the most has been that of *bias*.

There are a lot of different elements to bias as a concept. There's the unrealized bias we and others carry with us, there's confirmation bias, and many other cognitive biases too.

Within the broad scope of bias, students struggle with a variety of issues on every level when it is taught. For those just beginning to assess their own thinking, the idea that their perspective on wealth, for example, could push them in a certain philosophical or political direction can be extremely offensive. This hits a nerve so sensitive that, when we attempted to teach this concept, more than a few student surveys included threats to instructors' jobs and/or called our character into question, sometimes using crude language.

Another surface-level difficulty is the erroneous idea—which students bring with them from early lessons on the difference between subjective and objective information—that *anything that carries a bias is automatically wrong*.

Comparing opinion pieces on the same topic—for example one from the centrist *Wall Street Journal* and the other from the liberal *Slate*—tends to confuse students. They often come to the table believing that, if both of these perspectives aren't automatically "incorrect" because of their bias, then one of them *has* to be "correct." Different media sources or online personalities can exacerbate the issue by claiming to share "only the facts." The concept of reading different perspectives and using those perspectives to inform their own thinking is often challenging for students to approach.

We could blame social media, helicopter parents, or the widely decried declining rigor in high school, but I think the truth falls closer to the developmental reality of "black and white thinking," in our students' lives. Black and white thinking, also described as "lower formal operational thought" by Piaget scholars, is a stage of thinking where concepts are not approached with nuance. They are either right or wrong, yes or no, etc. Research indicating that large portions of first-year college students are not reaching "full formal operational thinking" (a more nuanced form of logic labeled by Piaget) has been recorded since the nineteen seventies (Adi, 1980; Shcwebel, 1975). For many students black and white thinking doesn't start to fade until the end of their college career. You can't expect a freshman to develop the nuance of four years of college instruction during a one credit class, or worse, a one-shot of course-related instruction.

In my experience, teaching about confirmation bias causes discomfort in students no matter how many peer-reviewed studies or clever videos—explaining that having confirmation bias is universal and doesn't make them "wrong" or a bad person—I share with them. The idea that the human brain has the tendency to confirm that whatever it already believes is right is not an easy concept to accept, especially when this challenges the information they've consumed on social media, from their parents, and other trusted sources to create the worldview they rely on.

For both practical and ethical reasons, an information literacy course with a learning objective that addresses "evaluating information sources" can't easily ignore the issue of bias. My department worked for years to address the concept of bias and, though student learning was present, the results were never particularly satisfying. We were always left with no real indication of how we could improve our curriculum to make the concept of bias easier for us to teach and for the students to comprehend.

After attending a teaching retreat in the summer of 2023, it struck me: what if we took the student's characteristics and beliefs out of the equation altogether? Not because they don't

matter, but because current students—due to a variety of forces that impact post-pandemic Gen Zs—prefer an element of trust in both their instructor and classmates before they are willing to participate in class discussions or group work that requires any sort of vulnerability. Building trust takes time, often far more than can be established in a traditional three-credit course, let alone the single credit our class is allotted.

It was in this instructional situation that we created the Bias Character Sheet.

Inspiration for this assignment comes from several influences far-removed from the retreat where the assignment was conceived. Probably the biggest inspiration was the role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*, as well as the myriad similar games which require players to create a character and then solve problems as that character along with a team of other created characters. One of the most enjoyable elements when playing a RPGs (role playing games), is that you can create—and then play as—any kind of character you like. Your player can be exactly like you, or you can play someone who acts in a way you'd never behave in a million years. Although I cannot say that character creation goes without any judgement in every D&D game, I'd definitely describe it as a safer sphere than revealing your own political party to an entire college classroom.

Another source of inspiration for the Bias Character Sheet was the creative culture found in social media fandoms where folks, young and old, create OCs (original characters). For many, these characters will never end up anywhere other than the creators' imagination, but that doesn't matter; they're still respected as a viable outlet of creativity within the communities where they exist. OCs run the gamut of being avatars very similar to their creators, to personalities in the fictional universes their creators are currently interested in, to unique characters who are generated completely independently. Once OCs are conceived, creators describe how their OCs would react in certain situations, collaborate with others' OCs, and so on—an exercise in both character building and, frequently, socializing.

The Bias Character Sheet allows students to select a character, any character, and fill out a series of questions about that character's personality, values, and other elements that could affect personal bias. The character can be a fictional character that already exists (Sponge Bob is popular), a character the student has just made up, or a real person, (with the requirement that this person is someone who the student has little chance of ever meeting). Once a character is selected, the student begins to fill out the elements of their life. The instructor informs the class that while it's expected they try their best, there is no "right" or "wrong" in this assignment. Students select everything from education level to sexuality (a number of folks think Sponge Bob is gay), to immigration status (Shrek is an excellent example of a character who is not a citizen in the land where he lives) for their characters. Student engagement during a required one-credit information literacy course is hard-won, but with this assignment, students were generally excited, sharing what they'd done with the groups they sat in, as well as with their instructors. They had frank open conversations about what it would mean for Sponge Bob if he weren't straight, wondering if it would be accurate to describe Taylor Swift as a billionaire, and many other things. Students had fun, and started to reflect on how personal beliefs and involvement can affect their assessment of the things they read, as well as their perspectives in things they produce. Most of all, they were talking to each other without fear, building a classroom community much less judgement.

Nearing the end of class, students were shown several TikToks, some humorous, some more serious. They were tasked to discuss how they thought that their characters would

react to each short video with the members of their table. These questions were often lively. Throughout the rest of the fourteen-lesson course, instructors were given the opportunity to go back to the character sheet, asking students questions related to the characters that they had created. This allowed students to address the complexities of personal bias without feeling threatened.

The structure of this assignment allows students to keep their personal identities and political/religious/etc. beliefs private. Many students in previous classes were quick to react to divergent ideas as “political,” something that used to be a vital part of the college experience. The ultimate goal—one which goes far beyond this class—is to bring together groups with differing beliefs or identities that would otherwise immediately shut each other down. This assignment also allow students who espouse conflicting beliefs to understand and respect both their own biases, as well as the biases of others, allowing them to confront each other in a measured and respectful way both in the information they encounter, and in conversation. The dearth of this type of discourse at all levels of education is the focus of many complaints, from parents to teachers to employers to students themselves.

There is a persistent idea in that college freshmen should “toughen up or fail,” when it comes to learning difficult concepts or exiting their comfort zone. We believe that—since it is completely normal and healthy for many eighteen-year-olds to not have established the ability to distance themselves from black and white thinking—forcing “mental toughness” on them is a pointless exercise. Our activity instead is a primer, allowing them to safely explore different perspectives and how these perspectives play out in the information ecosystem. It is not meant to exist in a vacuum, but instead to support students as they approach more complicated ideas in their major-specific classes, giving them the capacity to research, write, and debate in a respectful and productive way.

And in the end, it’s fun for us too.

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