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CHAPTER 4

The Impact of Oppression

Transforming Historical Database Instruction into Contemporary Discussion

*Kelleen Maluski**

...the most mainstream (e.g., white, heterosexual, Christian, middle-class) controlling regimes in society will privilege themselves and diminish or subdue all others in the organization of what constitutes legitimate knowledge. When we inherit privilege, it is based on a massive knowledge regime that foregrounds the structural inequalities of the past, buttressed by vast stores of texts, images, and sounds saved in archives, museums, and libraries.

— Safiya Umoja Noble¹

* Kelleen Maluski is the student success and engagement librarian at the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Library and believes that her experience and knowledge are never more important than the learners she works with. Kelleen strives to learn and grow through every interaction and to center the voices and cultural wealth of all. She engages students with critical evaluation of the information landscape to more completely participate in the world around them through integration of social justice tenets. Kelleen's work as a student success librarian is always impacted by her current and changing position within society as a bisexual/pansexual cis white woman who was a first-generation student, speaks English as her primary language, and is a US-born US citizen, with the chronic health condition endometriosis (which leads to chronic pain and struggles with mental health). Her experiences within health care and adaptation to academic environments, and the privileges and roadblocks she has encountered through these journeys, are in large part why she is a health sciences librarian and grounds her work in holistic student success and the use of a feminist ethics of care framework.



Introduction

I, like all white female-identifying librarians, have to confront my own part in white supremacy culture, especially in spaces where my particular power and privilege can harm learners. It is vital work to decenter my voice, minimize the harm I cause, and make space for the lived experience and expertise of the learners I work with.² There have been movements within librarianship, such as critical librarianship, that call for facing up to power imbalances, but there have been valid criticisms of how these have been exclusionary in practice and explicitly ignored the need to engage with conversations around racism. Therefore, confronting my part in these structures is especially necessary in a system where “many librarians of color have already felt unwelcome because the movement regularly highlights the work of white librarians without recognizing that librarians of color have been doing this work without calling it ‘theory.’”³ While many times white persons in the profession are lauded for their work on what are often referred to as DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) initiatives, there is a valid tension because the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color) librarians who shoulder much of this work are less frequently cited and acknowledged. While “discussion of race, sexuality, and gender within a theoretical framework and practice cannot solely be the responsibility of the few POC faculty and students,” we must not use that as an open call to continue the pillaging and exploiting of our colleagues’ work and our students’ voices while asserting ourselves as “allies.”⁴

This chapter will break down how I engaged with these needs and concerns for one specific class when tasked with teaching historical and academic database searching techniques to high school students conducting research for an historical essay on “slavery in the Americas.” This lesson plan serves as an example of one way that I, as a white academic librarian, utilized the knowledge and expertise of BIPOC library scholars to adjust my teaching and create a comparison activity where we reviewed results for Susan B. Anthony versus Ida B. Wells to engage with the inequities and discrimination of information systems. I will review the critical pedagogy theory I employed when creating the lesson plan, break apart the lesson, and discuss the outcomes of this approach in terms of student engagement and participation.

Contextualizing within the Profession

Librarianship has built an image of itself as a noble profession, created to educate and bring knowledge to the public, but in reality our demographics and practices do not reflect the society we serve.⁵ One indication of this disconnect is how we centralize

traditional mechanisms of academic publishing that have been used to discriminate and exploit minoritized groups.⁶ This builds a cycle of disenfranchising the voices of our students by further pushing an assimilation narrative to the future practitioners of various professions, including those who will produce scholarship. As “university and college students all over the nation commit to being tens of thousands of dollars in debt, it becomes a social justice issue that not only do they finish, but that they receive the best education possible.”⁷ We have a responsibility to our learners to challenge the false narrative of neutrality that upholds white supremacy.⁸ For instance, teaching that a scholarly or peer-reviewed article (or the databases that they are housed in) is automatically more reputable than other sources is an oversimplified stance that discredits our learners’ ability to engage with critical thinking and does a disservice to their education.

A refrain from white librarians is that having conversations that confront discriminatory practices, especially in the classroom, makes them uncomfortable. However, this stance itself shows how inequitable our teaching practices are because it assumes

- one, that we are owed comfort;
- two, that whiteness is central to our work and what we deem “accepted” knowledge;
- three, we have a right to opt out of doing the work that our colleagues who have been historically and systematically excluded don’t have the option to opt out of.⁹

Choosing to not engage in conversations around the impact of systemic racism and discrimination within the information landscape inflicts harm on all learners and makes them less informed on the topics that we are supposed to be teaching. Not addressing the existence of these problems or pretending they don’t exist reinforces the gaslighting of those learners who see the problems in our information systems.

Background

While I worked at a small liberal arts (SLA) college from 2015 to 2019, one responsibility of mine was to help organize one day each semester for a local International Baccalaureate high school to engage in college research practices while working on historical investigation papers.¹⁰ We put this day together in collaboration with the high school’s teachers and librarian, local public library librarians, and a few members of the SLA library team. The fall day took place in the public library with five sessions covering how to create a search strategy, search the library catalogs at the public library and the academic institution, search open access historical databases, search academic databases through the college subscriptions, edit their topics, and utilize print sources. While the students would be researching and writing two papers throughout the year with us, this was the first time they had all completed an

essay for this program. It was therefore vital to convey the importance of each step of the research process and how to meet the needs of their assignment. For their essays, the students were required to use both print and online sources and at least one scholarly and one primary resource. The sessions were tight, with only thirty minutes each. Every session was taught by a different member of our collaborative group to make sure all of the roughly eighty students had appropriate attention. The days included time for the students to begin doing their own work while having access to the librarians and their teachers to ask questions. A research guide was also created to help build metacognitive skills and be a point of assistance when the students were working solo. The guide also included information on how to book a consultation with a librarian from the college.

In the fall of 2018 at our team meeting, the high school history professor indicated she was concerned that the students weren't really understanding the point of the historical investigation essay with the topic "slavery in the Americas." She wanted the assignment to be a way for them to confront current social injustices and how our history was not only impacting our present day but had led to it. Since the school had a predominately Black and Latinx population, the professor was even more concerned that the students should be able to engage with this conversation in an honest and meaningful way. We discussed the possibility of altering the assignment to build more on contemporary issues, but instead we decided to change how we were teaching the topic.

We decided to find a search example that would be used in every session to help build a cohesive thread to the day, and in the session on historical and scholarly database searching, we would discuss the discriminatory practices associated with our topic. Our objective was to engage students in a conversation about how what had occurred in the past was still a part of our present and that we need to work to shine light on this as opposed to creating a superlative mythos about present-day society.¹¹

Planning

While we would need to convey very basic search strategy information in a short period of time, the subject matter warranted designing the lesson with extreme care. It was crucial to allow time to discuss the approach and lesson with colleagues so as to help break down any biases I might have been building into the lesson and to make sure the objectives were being appropriately met. If I had been creating this lesson today, another key element would have been to utilize trauma-informed care. While much of what we built into the lesson plan utilized concepts inherent to trauma-informed care, such as improving the "psychological and emotional well-being of patrons and staff accessing library services and using these spaces," this was not a theory I was as familiar with at the time.¹²

When crafting the lesson plan, we chose the search example of Wells and Anthony because it allowed us to integrate concepts that are perfectly outlined by Leung and López-McKnight:

Center racialized examples and topics in your teaching and extend those further to disrupt ideas of what's appropriate or what counts, and what's valued, as legitimized knowledge. Challenge dominant information and knowledge-production processes that intentionally exclude BIPOC, showing its connectivity to White Supremacy's structural, historical, and contemporary realities. Recognize that even moments that may seem small and trivial are vitally important to the big picture, to the process that gets you to that larger impact. Trust the students to be worthwhile. Trust them to open our minds. Trust them to teach us.¹³

The lesson needed to not only make the correlation between past and present, but also break down traditional power dynamics in the classroom and build trust with students. The focus would be breaking the normalized hierarchy of white supremacy and utilizing the students' knowledge to frame our conversations, encouraging their agency through the sharing of their thoughts and voices.¹⁴ With only thirty minutes and the students coming into a space they might not be familiar with to work with a new instructor who was from a discriminative profession, expectations needed to be tempered. This was about starting small to trust the students and have them trust themselves.

The groundwork for this lesson centered on a basic structure of questions and reflections to confront various damaging dominant academic practices (based in sexism, classism, and racism). We would work toward learning the searching techniques while critiquing the tools, societal beliefs, and practices that have led to a lack of representation. This meant building the lesson to be flexible enough to offer space for the students to share their thoughts, feelings, impressions, questions, and so on. We did not want to make assumptions about how the students saw their identities intersecting during the session, so we approached the subject from a place of cultural humility and with an ethic of care.

Central to the implementation of these pedagogies was how

in a practice of cultural humility, we are open to the intersectionality of identities, but follow the lead of the patron in determining the importance of various aspects of their identities ...recognizing that what may be most salient from the librarian's perspective may or may not be significant to the interaction.¹⁵

Additionally, organizing our lesson with an ethic of care and critical race lens focused our praxis on relationship building and providing space for students to feel

comfortable teaching each other rather than the typical praxis where the instructor wields the power in the classroom.¹⁶ This pedagogical approach aligns with the ethos espoused in Safiya Umoja Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* and critical race theory to examine how the library profession had actively contributed to the knowledge hierarchies and centering of white supremacy that created these structures.¹⁷

Selecting the Search Comparison Example

This lesson hinged completely on selecting a search example that could convey the fact that historical narratives are often skewed by the dominant culture and spoke to the myriad injustices at play when researching a topic like “slavery in the Americas.” The hope was that the example would show how our information landscape continues to employ the discriminatory practices, such as lack of representation, that existed in the historical time periods the students would be researching and that issues of oppression permeate every facet of our society.¹⁸ The example needed to be able to cover various areas of inequity within our society so that students could lead a conversation on what spoke to them most or review issues pertaining to intersectionality.¹⁹ The example of Wells and Anthony spoke to each of these needs.

While the basis of why Wells and Anthony have been misrepresented in our historical discussions has much to do with racism, there are also many other issues at play, including classism and sexism.²⁰ With this example, students could explore intersectional injustices while also seeing how the discrimination and erasure that Wells experienced still happen in our current society. Women of color and especially Black women are consistently left out of the dialogues in which they have expertise.²¹ This practice is founded in white supremacy and continues the cycle of pushing Black women out of academia. We wanted the students to be able to evaluate what stories get told and why, how our historical narrative is skewed by the elitism and deeply embedded white supremacy of academia. Furthermore, an end goal for their assignment was to have them realize that their voices mattered and they could help change the narrative. As Tressie McMillan Cottom says,

When black writers are not read or black thinkers are not cited or black activists are not interviewed, we can say that it is just too hard for those who do not live, work, or learn near black people to find any.²²

Considering this and understanding our time restraints, we decided to structure open-ended questions that could be answered in a verbal discussion (as opposed to a worksheet) to help learners connect the library materials and research with

the historical injustices they were reviewing. To help show the primary resources and facilitate this discussion, we designed an activity where we compared results for Anthony and Wells in *Chronicling America* and JSTOR (through the college's subscription). These databases were chosen to fulfill the needs of the assignment and to show how the scholarship of today can be just as discriminatory as the publications of the time. Both elements could be addressed through the primary sources in *Chronicling America* and the representation of scholarly articles throughout the years in JSTOR. Facts about both Anthony and Wells were prepared in case the students weren't aware of who they were. This activity served as a way for the students to compare these two contemporaries and their statuses and how the historical record has impacted modern-day women writers, activists, and educators.

There also needed to be time for students to begin researching their own topics and to ask questions specific to them. At the end of the day, the students would have a larger amount of designated time for individual research, but we wanted each learner to begin working within the resource they discussed in each session. This is another reason it was useful to have a simple comparison with open-ended questions that were reflective in nature but didn't require written reflection. Open reflection further centered the students since they could focus more on their own work and navigating it than on a set activity that further centered the instructor's power in the classroom. With all of this in mind, I went about creating an outline (see appendix).

Teaching and Outcomes

Once in the classroom, after introductions and outlining objectives for the session, the class began by asking each group if they knew who Anthony was and then by asking if they knew of Wells. Most of the students raised their hands when asked about Anthony. From the entire day, of roughly eighty students, only one student indicated they knew of Wells. For the students who knew about Anthony, when asked who she was, they usually indicated things along the lines of her getting women the right to vote. The one student familiar with Wells knew she was a writer and activist but wasn't clear on all the details. With both examples, it was incredible to have the students start the class by sharing their knowledge and begin to break down the perception of college teachers as lecturers.

For both examples, since students were fuzzy on the details of who the women were, the previously prepared facts were shared with the students along with the question "Why do we think we know more about Susan B. Anthony than Ida B. Wells?" With every single group, there would be a semi-hesitant response of "Because Ida B. Wells is Black?" This statement was affirmed and encouraged as students were tasked with discussing more. With each group, after the students gave their responses, the dialogue around the ways in which these women's stories have

been told and the perceived truth about our collective histories began. The body language of the students changed and the room became filled with side discussions. The students asked questions and other students participated in answering them.

From here, we could launch into looking at the databases and covering how more results for a person doesn't mean they are more important or more deserving. When we arrived at the portion of the lesson where we searched *Chronicling America* for both women, finding 869 results for Wells and 20,072 results for Anthony, there were actual gasps and boos. Here again, the students expressed their learning, their knowing, and their engagement with the materials. We made sure to cover trying alternative spellings, Boolean, and so on, but the biggest takeaway from the day was for them to trust themselves and to see how those who have the most privilege and power dictate our historical record. The impact of slavery in the Americas was not some distant concept that no longer had implications for our society or them. These historical essays were a chance for these students to change the dialogue.

From here, the students were then able to conduct their own work with time for questions that could be posted to all the educators. They were also encouraged to book appointments with librarians at the college and utilize the resources at the public library. While the evidence was anecdotal, all instructors felt that the individual research time led to more questions and edits to topics to make them more contemporary. Later, the history professor indicated that the papers did seem to improve in terms of topics connecting to student interest. The college librarians also saw a slight increase in the number of consultations booked. This was a step in the important direction of inviting the high school students to see that their research was worthwhile and that they were respected for their knowledge. The time that was taken to carefully plan the lesson and build in reflective, open-ended questions therefore met the objectives.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, the impact of acknowledging the truths that our students know about our society, accepting our role in that, and trusting the tools learners already have to change this narrative are critical. *Algorithms of Oppression* was a massively important text in updating this lesson, and the reasons for needing to unveil these truths cannot be stated better than the way Noble concluded:

Arguably, if education is based in evidence-based research, and knowledge is a means of liberation in society, then the types of knowledge that widely circulate provide a crucial site of investigation. How oppressed people are represented, or misrepresented, is an important element of engaging in efforts to bring about social, political, and economic justice.²³

Appendix: IB Research Lesson Plan, Fall 2018

Conducting Research in Databases Portion (half hour total)

Objective: Professor wants to make sure that this year we not only tackle how to do research but also convey to the students that the work they are doing on the historical investigation into the assignment “slavery in the Americas” is not just about history. Rather, the assignment represents contemporary issues as well. How have these practices impacted the development of these nations, and how are they still being implemented and the effects still felt?

Databases to Review

- Chronicling America (primary sources)
- JSTOR

Driving Frames to Map to from ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy*

- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual.
- Information Has Value.

Resource for Development of Lesson Plan

- *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* by Safiya Umoja Noble, <https://nyupress.org/books/9781479837243/>
- Susan B. Anthony quote: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/hundreds-voted-stickers-left-susan-b-anthonys-grave>

1. Introduce self
2. **Let students know we are going to discuss how to search databases, but we also want to start thinking about what stories get told and why. Who writes the history and scholarship? How can we layer our research to help expand our results to find credible evidence to back up our thesis? How can we add our voices to the conversation to help change the narrative?**
3. Explain that we will be discussing how to use databases for research, using
 - a. **Chronicling America (as a way to find primary sources)**
Display the guide again and show where they can learn more about primary sources and find this database.
 - b. **JSTOR (a way to find scholarly articles)**
Display the guide again and show where they can find the database.
 - c. On the guide also show how they can get help with evaluating their resources.
 - d. A little time for individual research and questions.
4. Before we start, who knows who Ida B. Wells is and who Susan B. Anthony is?

- a. Facts on Ida: Journalist, educator, civil rights crusader, feminist. One of the founders of the NAACP. Born into slavery, fought against lynching, active in women's suffrage movement despite outspoken disapproval from other women in the movement who were white.
 - b. Facts on Susan: Reformer involved in the women's suffrage movement. Part of the antislavery movement, but once issues started arising with wanting to pass 15th Amendment (right of black MEN to vote), Anthony moved toward focusing only on the rights of women, literally wrote a history of the movement that credits her and Stanton with starting the movement and eliminates Black suffragists from the narrative. "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman."
 - c. Why do we think we know more about Susan B. Anthony than Ida B. Wells?
 - d. Both women were important to equality in different ways, but issues arise when we start to look for information on their contributions and understanding how the narrative has been formed. **More results on a person does not mean they are more important.**
5. Review the databases
- a. Go into Chronicling America and do a search for "Ida B Wells"
 - i. Ask if anyone knows why I used the quotation marks and discuss how this keeps a phrase together.
 - ii. Show the guide and point out the **Boolean operators box**. Boolean operators *command* a database to refine my search to better find what I need.

These are for more advanced searching, and so you will want to refer to the guide and ask questions when you have a chance to try a database yourself.

 - iii. Show how Chronicling America found newspaper articles from past time periods that discuss Ida B. Wells.

How many results do you think we will get for Ida B. Wells?

 - iv. Now do the same search for "Susan B. Anthony."

How many results do you think we will get for Susan B. Anthony?

 - v. **The differences in results—869 to 20,072—does this tell anyone anything?**
 - vi. **Mention spelling names differently and also listing in other ways, like "Wells, Ida" or taking out the initials, though this could lead to false results.**
 - b. Go into JSTOR and do the same searches.

- i. Discuss how JSTOR is different from Chronicling America, looking for scholarly articles about a topic, not usually primary sources.
 - ii. Do a search for “Ida B Wells” AND “Susan B Anthony” to find things that might discuss the issues between their representation and within the movement.
 - iii. Explain that the AND is also a Boolean operator, and point this out on the guide. Explain that this allows me to find *both* concepts in the record.
 - iv. Point out subjects to filter with.
 - v. Remind students that research is iterative, though, so I might need to tweak and edit my search (using other synonyms or phrases) as I find more relevant results.
6. **As you move forward with your research, think about how slavery is still impacting the Americas, how the history has been written, and how you might think about changing the dialogue. Do we still see issues with the representation of Ida B. Wells vs. Susan B. Anthony? How can we change that narrative?**
7. Have 10 minutes for questions and individual research.

Notes

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3. Jennifer Brown et al., “We Here: Speaking Our Truth,” *Library Trends* 67, no. 1 (2018): 173, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0031>.
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