Crucial Conversations in the Classroom Podcast

Episode 2 Information Literacy as a Tool for Engagement with Diverse Viewpoints

Intro

Jane Barnette

And in our second episode, we want to talk about the workshop topic that we covered called Information Literacy as a tool for engagement with diverse viewpoints. And in this session, we explore how information literacy can be leveraged to create a more inclusive and informed classroom environment. So we examined the framework for information Literacy for Higher Education, which was developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries.

And we hope that our participants gain some insight into the key concepts and skills that are required to critically evaluate sources and identified biases and navigate these diverse perspectives. We did some discussion, but most of this was fairly interactive, because we had some activities as well. And in this session, faculty learned how to apply information literacy principles in their teaching practice.

Of course, fostering a culture of critical thinking, skepticism, and open mindedness. That's the tricky thing.

This episode will dive deeper into the strategies and resources shared during the workshop, including Michael Caulfield book How to Think Straight, Get Duped Less, and Make Better Decisions About What to believe online with Sam Weinberg. Join us as we explore how information literacy can be a powerful tool for promoting engagement with diverse viewpoints in the classroom.

Sheyda Jahanbani

This was, an idea that we came up with for this series because I, you know, at what point have you been, sitting around with a bunch of faculty and, you know, found yourself talking about especially online sources and how our students can be so deeply confused about, you know, what is real. I will say I had an encounter with somebody just, earlier this week in which I said something and they looked at me and said, are you real?

And I thought it was like the most relatable. I don't think they were asking challenging my statement because it was a fairly mild one. I think it was more like, what can we believe anymore? And I thought it was so funny that I got asked that question by a stranger, are you real? So, we're all living, especially with the rise of AI in this moment in which it's really easy to be, confused about how we know what we know.

And yet, I think one of the things that almost every academic discipline in the modern university is, you know, premised on is some sort of empirical method that requires us to be able to trust our facts. Of course, as a historian, that's kind of a crucial part of what we both, practice and what we teach.

And so, I know, you know, Jane, you and I both thought that this is, a technique, like making sure we actually are speaking from the same hymnal when it comes to factual information in our classrooms is a technique for, advancing spaces for for good conversation about difficult things. And, you know, so many times, I think, when we hear an opinion expressed, if we have been especially trained in our disciplines, you know, to think about sort of every statement as a claim, we're always looking for evidence.

And so, this is one thing that we can do to help our students learn that they both are always making claims and that when they make those claims, they need to understand that you have to support those claims with evidence, but also that everybody else is too. And so when you hear things, there's an obligation, it's not rude to be skeptical, right?

There's an obligation to think about, okay, what was the basis upon which this person made this assertion or claim? So, we talked in the workshop a lot. Just about being really transparent with the students and helping them recognize the difference between facts as we each define them in our disciplines. And claims and in history. This is a kind of a key thinking concept.

But it's also a key concept. As we discussed, we had a wonderfully, diverse range of, of disciplines represented in our workshop in lots of different fields, in every field. Right. You have to know what is a piece of factual information and what is a claim. And so we've been trying to think about how to incorporate just that language.

Again, you know, if you listen to our first episode on active listening, one of the things about the straight A's that Jane talked about is, you know, that that acknowledgment piece and one of the most powerful things I try to do in my classes is when I hear somebody make a claim, I when I acknowledge I use that language.

Okay, you've made a claim about the pandemic. You've made a claim about, you know, misinformation about public health. So where did you get the information that helped you derive that perspective or opinion? And just using that language really intentionally and predictably, right? I mean, when you're teaching a class that's one fifth of a student's educational experience in any given semester.

But for us, it feels like it's really everything that happens is really important. So I've learned to repeat myself a lot and be predictable so that, you know, the the 5 or 6 terms or concepts. I want them to leave the class with not just a class session, but the whole semester, I repeat in every class session. And so, we get into a place where they know what that word, fact or claim means to me.

And so, I think that's something that we kind of can overlook the importance of is just being predictable and repetitive with the terms and concepts that we use in our classes, because it's new to them, and it's important to make sure you know that. I mean, think about, I parenting has been such a, useful experience for me when I think about what teaching is, because I live with my student, and she also teaches me a lot.

And just think about the number of times with a kid that you repeat the exact same thing, and you don't want to confuse them and mystify them. You want to repeat something so that they understand what you're really you know, you're giving them many "at-bats" is how I would put it. So, we we gave a variety of different strategies, including, you know, being intentional about what a fact is for you and

talking to students about the fact that different disciplines define facts differently, and engaging in a process to derive what a good definition is for your class.

Jane Barnette
Sheyda that this has come up recently for me as well.

Sheyda Jahanbani
Oh, good.

Jane Barnette
In my graduate class, we had a moment to reflect on, you know, both the advantages and frankly, the potential pitfalls of poststructuralism gone so far. And, you know, don't get me wrong, I don't want anybody come in for me here. You know, I'm all about the post structural move. I love the notion of deconstruction. It is essential to most of the work that I do, both as an artist and a scholar.

And yet I find myself. And maybe it's because of my age, but I also think it's because of the state that we're in where the the sort of lack of, belief in facts has led us down a path that has made it possible to have not just misinformation, but disinformation that is proliferating, on the internet. And part of it has to do with the internet in terms of its reach and the social media sort of possibilities, but also I think it is enabled in some ways based on the sort of philosophical turn that happened, you know, what, 1968 or so on, forward in terms of, continuing to be so skeptical about one sort of notion of truth, to the point where the notion that there could be any facts at all feels like it's been undermined. And I just wanted to kind of put that out there, because I think that I don't think I'm alone in having those conversations with colleagues, grad students, and in some cases, even undergrad students.

Sheyda Jahanbani
How I want to hear how you, critique in some, classroom environments. And I think especially both of us, teach graduate students, we know this is the move that they walk in with. So I feel like one of the things we both have in common as our pedagogy is try to be somewhat, light and playful a little bit, and that that can be a way to, to, you know, just take the temperature down in every setting.

So are there ways that you what you're basically saying, it sounds like to me is, you know, before you critique the text, you have to understand the text. So are there ways that you do that, that you feel like are really, effective and also, you know, might even kind of be intellectually fun?

Jane Barnette
Yeah. I mean, it's funny you mention that because just this week we were dealing with Foucault as the order of things, graduate students. Yeah. But it's an intro to grad studies class. And so it strikes me at least that higher education is a lot about the order of things. And so but of course, this, you know, it's always this way with Hugo, there's going to be at least a couple of students who come in and they're like, I don't think I understood this, even though they're doing great, even though they actually are probably much more capable than they think.

But they they trip themselves up and whatnot. So I brought in a, it's interesting you mentioned playful because I brought in a card game called We See that I actually purchased for, my dad, who is sort of dealing with memory loss, but it's such a beautiful little game because there are all these photographs on the cards and no words.

And I separated them into groups, and I was like, okay, here's how you play the game. You just need to put a card down and put another card down that matches it until you get a three by seven kind of arrangement. And there were several groups in class after they were done with theirs, they then went around to look at the other groups.

What? They made their three by seven. The conversation that we had was so robust about people being like, I understood what our we were doing, but I couldn't understand what in the heck the other people were doing. And I was like, so what you're saying is that your interpretation of the order of things, was enabled by the conversation that you were having with your person at your table.

But when you were without that, when you had no context, when you had no dramaturgy, when you had no research, it was difficult to figure out whether or not it was right.

Which to me is very connected to the notion of, that of of holding at the same time, the truth of poststructuralism, with the understanding that, yes, there are certain facts that exist. Right. Yeah. That we have all the.

Sheyda Jahanbani
Like nuanced intellectual processes that you have learned how to do to recognize the, the like, the equality of both of those statements. Right. And so when we're thinking about how to engage with students in the classroom, you know, I think a lot of people think of information literacy as like a checklist. And I really like to think of it more as a broader kind of pedagogical, problem set, you know, or question about how we get students to be able to say what you just said and understand that, like both of those conflicting things can feel right and are used in different ways and are valuable tools, intellectual tools for solving different kinds of problems, right?

Jane Barnette
Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. And I also question.

Sheyda Jahanbani
If it's oh, go ahead.

Jane Barnette
I was going to say it's connected to something. We talked about in the first episode, which was, shifting your goals as a teacher from specific information that they could memorize or, you know, repeat to, a way of thinking that can be endlessly applied.

Sheyda Jahanbani
So one of the things I, I think, I want to make sure that we, we talk about a little bit because I know we've both had this experience and it came up in our first conversation, but I'm sure we both have loads of examples is, you know, how really central our emotions are to the way we think.

Right? And we often, especially in the Western tradition, if you want to call it that, you know, a kind of enlightenment world view, think that there's this rational person and then this emotional person, and somehow we can keep those two separate. And, you know, one of the things I, when I was doing some research for this workshop learned, is, you know, how our emotional responses, especially when we encounter, quote unquote, information on the internet, how our emotional responses kind of feed, very particular kinds of thought patterns and intellectual responses.

So, you know, the extent to which, for instance, like the most compelling emotion when people are on the internet is anger. So, if something makes you angry, you'll, you'll continue participating and like, consuming that information that we we clickbait is a real thing, and we like to click on things that are outrageous. And I think we all know if we have a moment of reflection, that that's.

Jane Barnette
True, I feel seen. Okay, let's just say let's not ask my partner because I think we're going to get some validation there.

Sheyda Jahanbani
Exactly. What I love to know is that the second emotion that is most, you know, sought after when we're on the internet is, awe and I had never had anybody really explain to me why cat videos are so compelling. And, you know, essentially when we see something super adorable, what we're experiencing is a sense of awe at this, at this transcendent, acute thing.

So I think one of the things we tried to talk about in our, in our workshop that I thought was really productive is just to have, like to normalize the fact that we have emotional responses to receiving information and that the intelligence, you know, our, our intellect and our emotion are not these, you know, perfectly siloed, separate things, but are deeply intertwined.

And, of course, we've read book reviews that reveal reviewers inability to keep those two things separate. So I think that this is something that can be really powerful. So as a dramaturg and as a theater professor, how does that kind of fit into your thinking about how you might take this concept of information literacy and kind of, work with your students to think through it?

Jane Barnette
Yeah. I mean, in some ways, that for us is a little bit of a low hanging fruit, right? Because we're always dealing with drama and dramas based in conflict, and conflict is often where we kind of ignite anger. But but I do think that it is perhaps in a weird way, so commonplace that we don't actually recognize the power that it has in our day to day lives.

So we might recognize it in terms of over in theater. Oh, when I get on the stage, it's really important for me to engage in this moment, because then I can create this anger that really fuels my my character for the rest of the. But when we're in a classroom that is, you know, I like to call them the book classrooms versus the sort of studio classrooms.

Right? So if I'm teaching theater history and, you know, there's a lot of reading of books, there might be, a kind of desire to pretend, as you were saying, that. Oh, in this classroom, I can't use my entire body. I have to use just my brain. And, you know, I'm a theater major, so why am I having to do this, right?

One of the big things that I have done since I really started teaching, theater history, was to ask myself whether or not the traditional idea of a full on research paper written on paper was the right way to evaluate or assess a theater major. The ability to understand history. And for me, it's not. For me, what really works is to get them in a situation just like we are right now, where they're podcasting, or if they are giving a live presentation, but basically to speak a piece, sort of like the American Chautauqua tradition, the notion of getting up there and either creating a creative purpose, performance that's based on archival material, primary resources, or, presenting about secondary scholarship in a way that

is passion. And that sort of hooks into something that actually, truly, truly, truly matters to you so that your body is in the game. So that, I mean, I think in a weird way, unless the professor is sort of in a theater history type classroom, unless the professor is thinking about it, it can actually get lost, even though in those studio classrooms it is front and center.

Sheyda Jahanbani
Yeah. And I loved I mean, you said something when we were kind of talking about the the information literacy workshop, that I thought was so, illuminating to me, which is that, you know, we don't have to be afraid of of the emotion that we feel in. In fact, sometimes we can lean into it and ask students to to share and to narrate and to to sort of engage with how feeling works when information comes at you.

And, and that that can be really intellectually productive. And we shouldn't see these two things as so separate. So I really found that to be useful. And, you know, in fact, it's something that I just talked about in class on Tuesday, is that we don't need to be afraid of our feelings in a classroom. What we do need to do is be mindful about how we talk to each other, knowing that we are feeling beings.

And so, you know, one of the things we haven't talked about yet, but I know it's something both you and I believe deeply in are encouraging our students to be participate or to to participate in creating class, constitutions and charters for how we're going to behave with each other over the semester. And, you know, all of the the material we've been talking about over the last two podcasts, you know, if you can build into the infrastructure of your class, sort of, guidelines for how we're going to talk to each other and how we're going to make repairs.

I think that I know it's a real middle aged lady thing to say, but I think that normalizing the fact that we're all going to screw up and we're all going to sometimes not, you know, interrupt each other and not listen as well as we should. And we won't always be asking neutral questions, because sometimes the cake is dry and we're annoyed because we had a bad day.

That's an Easter egg to our first episode. The, the the extent to which building that kind of of infrastructure into a class from day one, you know, can really help you create a space in which you can have these kinds of conversations. I feel comfortable saying to my students, we can lean into emotion as you, helped me see the other day, because I know we have a set of guidelines for what we'll do when our emotions maybe make it hard for us to be kind to each other.

Jane Barnette
Well, I think this is so key. And it came up in both of the sessions that we had, both in a positive and a sort of potentially, you know, tricky way and tricky only because, as Sheyda mentioned, you can't start this mid-semester. You can't just sort of start a class, get it started, and then all of a sudden say, I guess we kind of need to.

I mean, I guess you could try, but I think it works so much better if from the jump, from the beginning of your class, there's an acknowledgment that the classroom is itself a community and that all communities have either unspoken or spoken rules. And so, if we can just go ahead and make them spoken and then make them even written, if we can all vote on them and have conversation about why it's important, what is important.

And yeah, if those if those guidelines come not from just the instructor, but rather from the community itself, there's much more strength in peers, watching out for each other than there is in us as professors

being the only folks who have guardrails. Right? Like, yeah, we want not police each other because I don't think either one of us want police work in our classroom.

Instead, I think what we want is the looking out for each other.

Sheyda Jahanbani
Yeah, I love this. You know, I know there's a lot of language about safe spaces and some people, you know, feel like that can shut down honest debate. And that debate is a good thing for producing knowledge. I really like and have really made an effort to increasingly use this term brave spaces. And that's how I want my classroom to be, a place where people can be brave.

And, you know, one of the things I just I think we don't put enough emphasis on is that being confused in a world of certainty, you know, where people know what they believe and know what they think. And this, not me. I think being confused is a very vulnerable act. And so, with something like information literacy, you know, on the most basic level, one of the things I am trying to teach my students is that we're figuring it out, and we have this new technology, the I mean, it's not that new anymore.

The internet, AI as new technology, and that I find myself overwhelmed and a term I like to use is flooded. I am flooded sometimes with all that's coming at me. And I've spent now the better part of 25 years learning how to do quote unquote, information literacy as a like career. That's sort of what history on one level is.

And even I am overwhelmed and fall for things all the time. And I think, you know, one point, I'd just like us to both, you know, maybe talk about for a minute and emphasize this is just how important it is for a faculty member to admit their own vulnerabilities in a classroom.

Jane Barnette
You know, I'm so glad. First of all, almost everything you just said right now is, is pure gold. So I'm hoping that it it really resonates with some folks out there because, but what it reminds me of that I also want to bring into this conversation is the notion of slowing down. And it's connected again, to not not being so focused on content that you forget about the dynamic of of learning that may or may not be happening in your classroom, but slowing down to say something like, I am thinking about what you just said, right?

And allowing yourself as a professor not to know everything, yes, but also to model for them that it does take time. It actually can't be rushed and, if we're rushing, we might be actually missing some of that information literacy. Right?

Sheyda Jahanbani
Yeah, I, I try to do that. It's hard. I like I'm a, I like fast things. And, you know, to my peril. I think I have a, particular habit of kind of thinking fast. But it's been a powerful move for me in the classroom to remember that we don't actually like haste does make waste does is the old phrase, and and that when we are rushing, we are missing things.

And we're also one of the things we're missing is opportunities to show them what it looks like to puzzle through problems. So to me like that, that I say to them, like I am thinking it's also, by the way, for those who are listening, who are annoyed by digital devices in their classrooms, you can make a rule that says, no digital devices and everybody will violate it.

But if you spend half of a class session or in my case, a whole class session, having a conversation about attention and what we owe each other in the room and how it takes our brains focus to make sense of intellectual problems. And that multitasking is not just a phrase, it's it represents cognitive processes that ultimately humans are not terribly good at, despite our confidence to the contrary.

If you can spend the time and then talk to your students and ask them what they think and what their experiences are, you know what you'll find. They don't need a lot of reminders. So when I say to them, I am thinking in this room with you and I need to be like, present, and I need you to be present.

And you all know that when you're on your phone, you're not really present. And I know when you're on your phone, I'm annoyed. So I'm not present. Just that little spiel I have found builds so much more compliance, quote unquote, with my policy on digital devices then, you know, saying like, I'm going to take your phones away, right?

So again, slowing down and talking about why we are doing the things we are doing and why we are building time for listening and thinking and confusion and vulnerability into these spaces. These are like the people coming into your classroom are, you know, intelligent beings who want to be learning something and they want human connection. Anybody who walks into a room with each other want some kind of connection.

They want to be seen. They want to be heard, they want to connect with another person. And so to me, I always try to bring what we're doing down to that truth, because that is a fact I know to be true, from my own lived experience and also from what they tell me.

Jane Barnette
Right, right. And I mean, I think, the part about the digital devices and maybe you were the one who mentioned it, but I've been thinking about it all week, so maybe I heard it somewhere else. But they were talking about how that word multitasking was developed for computers, and somehow it got used for humans, and it was never meant to be.

And that kind of makes sense to me because, yeah, I'm just thinking about, like, driving experiences I've had, especially in the last week or so, where I've just noticed I'm like, y'all are multi multitasking and you don't need to be. It is dangerous. Yeah.

Sheyda Jahanbani
Yeah. And you know, I, I love telling them like I mean it can be very powerful to be like oh you know what I spaced for a minute. Can you repeat what you said. Like these are just little ways to cue to I, I know the youngins like this phrase normalize and I like it too. I think it's a powerful word to think about what we're doing in the classroom.

Like we have to normalize confusion. We have to normalize vulnerability. And, you know, these are just things that if we can show that even with our experience and our intelligence and our training and blah, blah blah, that we can be duped by a piece of misinformation or disinformation on the internet. That is, they will remember that you thought some crazy thing happened.

You know, I my my recent example is, someone in my household who shall not be named, but who has also a PhD in history, you know, saw something on the internet about Caitlin Clark going to Europe and

told me about it. And and then mid-sentence, they went, wait a minute. We're like, I need to actually research that.

And it was like, oh, you're doing it. You're doing information literacy. And of course, it turned out not to be true. And it was just a moment where we both, like, laughed uproariously at how easy it is to just grasp stuff out of this. You know, ether. And so if if this happens to us, it's okay to tell our students it happens to us.

Jane Barnette
Yeah.

Sheyda Jahanbani
Absolutely not. Like they're not going to think less of us. I think, well.

Jane Barnette
And even if they do, I mean, I'm not I don't care as much about what they think about me. As much as I want them to start to, to, deal with the barrage, the flood, as you mentioned, of information in a way that is, I hope, slower, but at least more, intentional.

Sheyda Jahanbani
Absolutely. So we have some resources that are going to be on the site alongside this podcast, but, you know, you can practically, implement in your classrooms. I think, you know, we mentioned at the beginning the work of Michael Caulfield, his wonderful book coauthored with the history pedagogy expert Sam Weinberg, has been so useful for me.

It came out last year. I, I love the book. It's called Verified How to Think straight, get duped less, and make better decisions about what to believe online. I could see it in, in different, classes that being a productive book, actually, to have your students read excerpts from and have a good conversation about how we're going to decide what a fact is in our classroom.

And also, of course, there is, you know, the, the, oft mentioned framework for information literacy for higher ed, published by the Association of College and Research Libraries. And I think something that that Jane and I both knew, but were reminded of in our workshop is actually that librarians really have to think about this. And so while, I don't want to add to their to do list, if you as a faculty member are struck, or a GTA or an instructor are struggling with how to think about information literacy in the context of your class, I bet you're not very far away from, librarian who can help you.

You know, tailor an assignment or work with materials that they have access to because this is, you know, absolute bread and butter kind of stuff for library science. So just a note that I was so grateful that we had people from the libraries in our workshop who could kind of talk a little bit about how central this is to the work they do.

Jane Barnette
Well, and I was glad that they were there. I mean, I'm always glad when any librarian is nearby because I just, I love them. But I was also glad because it made me feel less, dumb because they they admitted that even though they get training on this all the time, that it is changing so quickly that they too sometimes feel like they can't keep up.

And I think that's so crucial for us to hear is that it doesn't matter how recently your whatever terminal degree, PhD, MFA, whatever it might be, was, was issued, chances are good that things have changed pretty drastically since you were, last really thinking about it in that way. And so for your students, it is it is absolutely imperative each time you're teaching that, you just take a moment to kind of familiarize yourself with some of the more interesting tricks that are starting to come into information on the internet.

Sheyda Jahanbani
Yeah, I will say, just in the spirit of full disclosure, I've had to really wrestle with this myself. You know, AI, I think is the first the new thing where I've been like it, I don't want to know about it. And I consider myself a fairly curious person. And it's like the first thing I've decided I'm not going to be curious about.

And I know when when I that when I bring judgment instead of curiosity to something that's like, oh, that's gone, that means I'm uncomfortable and scared. So I think that, the fast changing nature of, of the information ecosystem that we live in, you know, demands self-reflection as well. And there are tons of resources that CTE has, you know, to help you navigate that, not just this conversation.