



FUTURE READY FRAMEWORK:
Information Literacy



FOSTERING RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION OF ONLINE INFORMATION

SOMERVILLE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Somerville, New Jersey

A librarian deals in information, but in today's world, not all information is created equal. From irresponsible Google findings to fake news sites to the spread of (mis)information via social media, there is a lot of content out there, and much of it is flawed. Bringing up citizens of the digital realm who are responsible consumers of information is one of the most important things we can do.

Elissa Malespina, Teacher Librarian at New Jersey's Somerville Middle School, takes this responsibility to heart. "Information literacy is about finding, evaluating and applying information, ideas and products in tandem with the students and teachers in our schools," said Malespina. "In my case, that can often take the shape of training students in effective online research. But it can also have to do with how we fill our spaces with products that spark those ideas, or what our students perceive the role of the library to be today."

On any given day, Malespina works with hundreds of students, helping them develop the skills they need to be critical consumers of information. One of the most basic things on her go-to list for information literacy is access for every student. "Our library's doors are functionally always open," Malespina said. "Each time I teach students something, I put the link to the website and information about the project on our Google Classroom page. If students have a question or need help, I am always just an email away. Students also have 24/7 access to our databases, eBooks and card catalog via our website." This first step may sound simple, but, according to Malespina, this level of access is vital in a 24-hour news cycle to help students find the most up-to-date and reliable information.

Malespina regularly partners with other teachers in her district to help students – even the youngest of them – learn how to cite sources and vet information responsibly. This essential skill is critical to her mission to help students develop a savvy approach to information consumption. Together, Malespina and the teachers in her school are committed to helping kids understand how to discern fact from fiction amid the noise of the digital information landscape.



MAKING THE CASE

One could argue that the Internet has led to the disconnect between factual and fictional information, just as one could argue that the schism is due to the emphasis on persuasion and the goal of using information to make one's point. This intersection is beautifully illustrated via student debate (see virtualdebate.weebly.com), one of Malespina's favorite ways to present a teachable moment on information literacy.

"We do a virtual debate with other schools around the country," she explained, "and have judges from around the world judge the students in real time via Google Hangout. Before the debate, I work very closely with students, helping them do careful research for the debate, to ensure they understand good information from bad." As Malespina explained, the preparation for the debate itself helps students experience the importance of backing up your argument with facts and statistics – and having confidence in your sources. "And at the same time, it teaches them how to speak in public," she added. If students can learn to make a compelling case using only the most

carefully researched facts, they are more likely to grow into citizens who evaluate information carefully.

Some aspects of our tech-infused world mean the potential for downfalls is greater than before. But in other ways, today's tools make previously complicated processes noticeably simpler, and improve the way educators promote information literacy. "Teaching citations has become so much easier," Malespina said. "Every time I teach a student how to build a bibliography using

EasyBib, I can't help wishing something like this had existed when I was a kid. I never could remember what I needed to indent and underline!" Because of the way the tool makes it easy to build a citation, Malespina always tells her students, "when in doubt, cite it." A mindset like that, in which citation is considered a tool for strength and clarity rather than a requirement to be met, encourages a deeper awareness of fact-based dialogue, which is the very basis for being a responsible consumer of data.





MAKERSPACE LEADS TO INNOVATION WHICH LEADS TO LITERACY

"In order to address information literacy we need children to be *in the library* in the first place. If they're excited about coming to the library, they're more excited to use it and to explore all it can help them do. Makerspaces are an integral part of that framework because they empower students as creators, and empowered students are more likely to think critically and be engaged in their own literacy," Elissa said. "At its heart, the Project Connect framework is a way to show the interworking of all of these elements."

Malespina has chosen to set up her library with books on one side and tables and computers on the other, with all Makerspace supplies at the top of the bookshelves in the fiction area. Children gravitate there naturally – highly visual access entices them to use the materials. "Budgeting for so many consumable materials is a challenge," she noted. "Sometimes I would end up just purchasing supplies

on my own." But when she makes purchases, she always tries to select tools that support her information literacy goals, whether directly or indirectly. "Learning more about what my students really like in the space helped me begin to tailor my purchases to meet their needs," said Elissa, "because the more students are drawn to the space, the more time they spend in the library, and the more I can help them expand their horizons."

"Our Makerspace has been an awesome way for students to create uniquely. For example, we had an ESL class use materials to create a diagram of a plant – some used Perler beads, some used pipe cleaners, some used Popsicle sticks. But in the end, they were all able to correctly display the parts of a plant and label them." This is the crux of Malespina's awareness of the interwoven aspects of the framework. The students in question were more engaged in their project,

which led to more time spent researching the facts they needed to learn about the parts of a plant.

"No one disputes which parts of plants are which," Elissa laughed. "But the Internet is overwhelming and, as a new Stanford History Education Group study shows, students are very much struggling with identifying real and fake information. We know that they don't intrinsically understand bias. Helping students learn not just how to find information but how to evaluate it is the cornerstone of what I do." At the middle school level, that can sometimes involve a degree of retraining. "I often need to stop students from simply Googling things and grabbing the first item that pops up," she points out. "I spend a lot of time teaching them how to use our databases, for example. I also make text sets for them using the library's Google Classroom as well as LiveBinders."

"I think the inadvertently best-kept secret is that there's actually nothing special or different or extra that you need to do in order to be a future-ready librarian. Chances are you've been inventing some of these solutions based on needs that you see at your specific school. If we all share our ideas and support one another, we can grow even more future-ready, together. And then we all benefit."

ELISSA MALESPINA

Teacher Librarian at Somerville Middle School, New Jersey



SHARING THE RESPONSIBILITY

Helping students locate valid sources of information is something all librarians help students with on a regular basis. Because Somerville Middle School is a Google school, Malespina centers many of these lessons around Google Classroom. For a collaborative research project, for example, she might help students find relevant articles, and then put all of them into a Google Classroom to share with all students and teachers.

“Just the other day I curated a LiveBinder filled with resources for a Hope Diamond Project that the sixth graders were doing in science. The goal was to help them build a reliable portfolio in which all the information would be in one place,” Elissa said. Doing so allowed the students to avoid simply Googling their way to unreliable resources

and also helped them develop the information skills they’ll need in college and their careers.

At the same time, Malespina introduced both teachers and students to a new technology, emaze, which they had the option of using for their project. The teacher was learning about it at the same time students were, and Malespina considers that accomplishment to be a key feature of what it means to be a future-ready teacher librarian. “We should be teaching both the students and teachers how to use technology when relevant. We should also collaborate with our teachers to make sure they are teaching proper citation and research in tandem with our approach.”

Malespina is optimistic and excited about teachers and administrators recognizing teacher librarians more. “The teachers are starting to come to me with many more questions,” she said, “and asking for my help in finding resources. They’re also starting to use my knowledge and expertise to help with lesson planning. Last year I don’t think they had a feeling for what a future-ready librarian could do for them. Now they use me as a resource for help with information literacy and beyond.”

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