Censorship 2.0: What does classroom censorship look like in the digital age?

The author discusses censorship in the Digital Age and the importance of Critical Literacy.

Many of our past conversations regarding censorship in the English classroom have focused on questions of novels for class use. Issues of language, character portrayals, and themes all have fallen victim to the axe (or eraser) of what is school censorship. Frequent objections to classic works have spanned decades, suggesting the basis of concerns are not trivial, but indicative of a deeper moral belief in the values that should be communicated through public schooling. *Catcher in the Rye* and *Of Mice and Men* are two such works often targeted for similar concerns over vulgarity, depiction of marginalized groups (including women and racial minorities), and the defamation of God and religious views (Doyle, 2010). However rife the debates remain around *Catcher in the Rye* or *Of Mice of Men*, one can only assume that the recent tide of neoliberal reforms, which have increased widespread public interest and input on educational issues, will not assuage these controversies anytime soon. The National Coalition Against Censorship’s recent reports from the Kids Right to Read Project (KRRP) point to such a resurgence in the contestation of literature in the classroom (possibly as the result of a collaborative initiative) (Barnett, 2013), as some parents and educators have very real concerns about the language and themes their students are exposed to through English curriculum. It is within this context that broader fears and more widespread censorship have emerged, during our societal transformation from emphasizing largely print-based linear literacies to more multi-modal and digital-based literacies.

Even before the emergence of the Internet, the censorship debate grew to include other technological innovations, especially regarding the use of multimedia and the transmission of ideas through a variety of formats beyond the printed word. Calls before the “internet boom” to support “young people to interpret and understand the media messages that bombard them,” (Considine, 1985, p. 39) have only exponentially escalated within the context of modern day media exposure and digital literacies. The same concerns around exposing students to vulgar and obscene language, negative portrayals of marginalized groups, and “risky” adolescent behavior are in play when considering what students might now access with the click of a button. And yet, these fears have been further transformed through the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, which allow
students to move from consumer to producer on web-based platforms. The question of what sites students might be visiting and what they might be reading are now coupled with the dangers of what they might be posting in response. With limited understanding of the impact and permanence of web publishing, students may lack the judgment and foresight to critically analyze what they choose to share and how this may follow them in unintended ways. There now exists a real possibility that students may not only access some of the very ideas and messages that have been regarded as highly controversial but may be constructing and sharing their own questionable material as well (from inappropriate posts to defamatory websites).

Some educators and administrators have responded by attempting to block the free use of these resources in school settings—in terms of limiting sites based on content and the interactivity of the tools (ie-social networking sites). Some of the topics often falling under this umbrella include “Wicca and Native American spirituality; blacklisting websites that affirm the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities while whitelisting sites that advocate against gay rights and promote “ex-gay” ministries; and refusing to unblock webpages that deal with youth tobacco use, art galleries, blogs, and firearms” (Caldwell-Stone, 2013). In addition, access to social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are also included as potentially distracting or dangerous to the educational process. The logic behind these actions is drawn from efforts to comply with the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), which often is misunderstood as “a belief that an institution will lose all federal funding if it does not block all potentially inappropriate sites to the fullest extent practicable” (Caldwell-Stone, 2013). This justification and proclivity to err on the side of caution often results in unnecessary and wide-spread internet censorship, even as the Federal Communications Commission has clarified that there is no inherent requirement for schools to block the use of sites like Facebook in order to comply with CIPA (Caldwell-Stone, 2013).

Nonetheless, many schools have faced the scrutiny of district technology coordinators who refuse to unblock sites related to social networking, with the likely and substantiated fear that students will be engaged in non-academic and unmonitored technology usage through these sites (though others may argue this is really an issue of classroom management). A national longitudinal survey conducted in 2012 by the American Association of School Librarians highlights this heavy handed blocking, especially related to Web 2.0 tools, as respondents reported the frequency of districts blocking the following content: social networking sites (88%), IM/online chat (74%), and YouTube (66%) (Adams, 2013). However, while respondents indicate a high occurrence of blocked sites, they also indicate the negative impact of filtering on student learning, suggesting that filters “inhibit student research,” “ignore the social aspects of learning,” and “discourage collaboration” (Adams, 2013). Additional reasons supporting censorship are related to the increased prominence of cyberbullying which may be only intensified within these open online environments. Fear-based responses of censorship, however, only perpetuate the problem as they simultaneously devalue “the skills and
knowledge young people are gaining through their involvement with new media” while potentially “mislead[ing] us about the roles teachers and parents should play in helping children learn and grow” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 9). Sidestepping the opportunity to engage students in critical discussion and use of technology tools does not provide the mentorship or modeling students need in order to develop into competent digital citizens. Furthermore, despite our best efforts, many teachers can attest to student ability to easily navigate around filters on district computers or bypass school wifi altogether to tweet, chat, and post from their cell phones without any school approval needed.

Which comes back to the question at hand. If students are accessing and posting materials mostly uncensored from the scrutiny of parent, teacher, and community members, and if they are engaging with blocked sites and tools on their own devices on-going throughout a typical school day, then what is the point of censorship in the first place? What are we really protecting our students from? Is there a better course of action we might take in order to prepare our students as opposed to protecting them from the unknown wiles and wilderness of the Internet?

This is where the role of digital literacy and citizenship is vital. It is not a new argument to call for increased awareness and attention to issues of digital citizenship, though it is increasingly more important as the features and capabilities of online tools become more wide ranging with greater potential for audiences. A better response to blocking our students out might be to “engage them in critical dialogues that help them to articulate more fully their intuitive understandings of these experiences” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 12). Here are some ideas of what we might do as educators--and English educators in particular--to teach for responsible and critical engagement with digital literacies.

**Teaching Critical Literacy Skills**

Just as we teach students to critically engage with literature, we should also teach these skills in the context of analyzing sources, materials, and tools online. The common usage of “digital natives” to refer to current generations of well-connected and tech-savvy students, may be both overstated and oversimplified (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2007). While the view of “digital natives” often creates an image of expert producers and consumers, research has suggested that these same students “often are limited in their ability to examine the media themselves” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 14). How do we get students to think critically about the sources they locate and messages they produce? The goal is to develop a more complex and critical view of authority and authorship in digital spaces--teaching students to ask questions of validity, intent, bias, and perspective that are important to not only understanding what we read but in determining what we do with it next (what we question, write, research, and produce in response). Livingstone (2003) explains how these skills may not necessarily be that different from their counterparts applied to print contexts, many of which English educators have long been teaching as part of informational literacy. But, what is to say that students will transfer their use of these skills from one context to the next? This requires practice and support to not only determine how to use the skills but also why
it might be even more important to do so in an online context. Attempting to answer the “why” may be the very starting point for pushing students to more critically engage with the socially constructed representations of literacy that they often unknowingly take for absolute truth.

This focus is further represented in state and national standards around digital literacy skills for 21st century students. Produced by the International Society for Technology, the ISTE Standards, formerly The National Educational Technology Standards, emphasize the distinction between technical use and critical awareness by stating that, “Simply being able to use technology is no longer enough. Today’s students need to be able to use technology to analyze, learn and explore” (ISTE). The ISTE Standards also explicitly highlight the role of communication as students are expected to “use digital media and environments to communicate and work collaboratively, including at a distance, to support individual learning and contribute to the learning of others” (ISTE). This position is also reinforced in the Common Core State Standards as research and media skills are integrated within content areas standards. Across both elementary and secondary levels, direct reference to these digital skills are made in Reading-Anchor Standard 7, Writing Anchor Standards 6 and 8, and Speaking and Listening Standards 2 and 5 (Common Core State Standards Initiative). Throughout these standards, students are asked to gather, integrate, use, evaluate, assess, produce, publish, interact, collaborate, and present information and ideas--all of which require a deepening critical understanding of not only how to use the tools, but why and for what purposes.

It is clear with these objectives in mind that limiting access to sources and social networking sites may impede upon and restrict the ability for students to engage with and practice in these meaningful contexts. So how do we begin these conversations around digital literacies and citizenship? Can we engage students in the importance of these issues by drawing on their own experiences, which might be used to jumpstart and transition into academic inquiry into building and practicing these skills?

**Engaging Out-of-School Literacies in the Classroom**

One way to frame this inquiry is to begin by exploring student use of and exposure to digital literacies beyond the classroom context as a way of posing a meaningful “why” to provide purpose and application for developing these critical skills. A quick way to dispel myths about the authority of the internet is to perform a simple Google search--something our students likely do multiple times a day. Many students and adults alike view Google as a neutral entity, a search engine that merely sifts through a digital warehouse of information to provide a listing of the most relevant material. Some of us are more aware of the role that website structures and paid-for ads play in ordering the placement and frequency of the sources appearing in search lists. However, many students have probably not considered that the search results might be different depending on the user--that even search results may be biased to present a specific perspective and reinforce the types of materials and interests you have previously provided Google through your web searches and browsing history (Magid, 2012). So
rather than an objective presentation of related material, the research process can be entrenched in bias from its very inception.

An easy entry into this discussion might also begin by directing students to their own engagement on social networking sites. In these online environments, it is also becoming a regular practice to track behavior and interests, personalizing our experiences, exposure to new ideas and perspectives, and shaping a more narrow view of our worlds and our identities (often now cast in the role of consumer). As someone who was a Facebook user back when it was still called “The Facebook,” I remember a time when advertisements did not co-exist within the realm of my social networking experience--let alone specifically targeted appeals. However, it is not just Facebook utilizing this marketing technique. Another site that tracks user behavior in order to direct users to sites and services is the social bookmarking site, Pinterest. What once served as an online bulletin board to collect pictures and bookmarks of inspiration (often used to save links related to fashion, cooking, and home decor) now provides interactive suggestions of additional items, boards, and users you might be interested in following or purchasing (Gannes, 2013).

While this practice may be more predictable than surprising in our digital world, it may remain disconcerting to reflect upon how these social networking sites respond and interact with each other to further consolidate and focus our internet experience. A recent experience highlights my own concern over this issue. That pretty pink stiletto I bookmarked in Pinterest is now appearing on my Facebook ad tabs as a product I might be interested in purchasing from Nordstrom’s. In addition, the advertisements urge me to visit links for diamond rings (in the last year I became engaged to be married), get an advanced degree in education, and find out Snooki’s secret to losing weight. This last ad is a new one, most likely a result of a recent Google search. While some users may find these features helpful in better aligning their internet browsing preferences, it is important for younger users to understand how these tools operate in actively shaping what may be misunderstood as a neutral encounter with content. All it took was one Google search or adding one new “pin” to Pinterest to instantly update my personalized advertising across digital sites, in a seemingly, though not accurately, applicable way. Even this general inquiry can lead into developing a critical perspective for moving from searches to sources and hopefully prepare our students with the eye and mindset to become their own informed digital users--something increasingly important as more and more of our lives take place in digital spaces.

Supporting Critical Consumers: Analysis of Source Material

Once students have begun to establish their own basis for why critical awareness is important, the next step is to consider the “how.” How do we support students as digital consumers to critically analyze digital content in terms of authority and authorship? Many teachers address this question throughout the middle school years when students first begin to engage in more substantial research projects. Activities focusing on evaluating websites, critiquing search terms, and explicitly teaching format and layout of websites all help students to
distinguish useful and trustworthy source material. Often, these activities include suggestions emphasizing the analysis of URL’s for “.org” or “.gov” endings as opposed to “.com.” And yet, as Web 2.0 technology has allowed for more and more digital readers to take on the role of digital writers, these spaces are now populated with greater amounts of digital content produced by all ages and for all purposes. An increased prevalence of blogs, wikis, and YouTube videos appearing in web search results provides more and more content for our students to sift through. Is there a place for this content in our classroom projects? Is there a way we can teach students to critically approach these sources in order to determine what may be useful, or how it may be useful? Can narrative anecdotes be drawn from blog entries? Can scanning a blog post provide links and interpretations of more “credible” sources? Can watching a YouTube video help a student to understand an abstract idea or encourage brainstorming for a classroom project? Are there ways we can utilize these often more accessible versions of web content to scaffold and supplement learning or research, as opposed to ignoring their ever-increasing presence? After all, how many adults follow blogs and use wikis (or even contribute to their own)? What processes do we use to determine which sources are credible and worth reading, how do we further distinguish between fact and fiction within the context of this material, and how helpful can this process be in allowing us to construct understandings and engage in dialogue and discussion through comments?

We might then consider the ways our own actions devalue and censor certain forms of literacy online. For example, many teachers have strictly forbidden the use of Wikipedia (an online encyclopedia with collaborative and open authorship) for research projects. Some research has even shown that a degree of accuracy comparison of Wikipedia to Encyclopedia Britannica results in a similar percentage of errors on average (Giles, 2005). This may lead us to question our own beliefs about authority and authorship attributed to seemingly unquestionable sources, as well as addressing long-held bias we might hold against less traditional methods and mediums. Instead, one might consider the supplementary role these sources might play alongside more traditional research sources, encouraging our students to draw from their critical toolbox to navigate the potential that exists within these collaborative and informal digital texts. The more critical our students become as consumers of digital text (and the processes involved in finding these texts), the less we need to rely on censorship to protect them from unsavory viewpoints and characters.

**Supporting Critical Producers: Informed Engagement with Digital Tools**

Beyond the discussion of censoring sources, we might also investigate the outcomes and missed opportunities of censoring technology tools. Teaching students to socially engage online is a vital skill set to success in the 21st century. Practice engaging in the types of discourses and situations prevalent in online communities will better prepare our students to analyze their role as not only consumers but also as producers of digital text. We can also work to support critical perspectives about the use of social networking sites, the role they play
in identity construction, and how communication fundamentally changes in online environments (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2012).

While many of our students are actively engaged in their own social networking activities, this is a tool that can also be repurposed for the English classroom. One way to do so is to approach the use of a classroom social networking site as a form of LMS (learning management system). From this hub, students can create individual profiles (to create authentic identities central to academic discourse), engage in blog posts, collaborate in groups, post videos and resources, and much more. An example from one of my previous classrooms was a site I created using Ning.com, through which my students blogged and debated about issues from Beowulf, Canterbury Tales, and Dante’s Inferno. The best surprise of this entire unit was to actually find students reading and commenting on posts—when they were not asked or required to do so. Through supporting and developing their own voices in the form of literary blogs, students took ownership of the writing process and became engaged in creative expressions of their ideas. The biggest struggle we faced was not academic—it was administrative. The intermittent district censorship of our site (which was categorized as a form of social networking) disrupted our daily activities until it eventually became blocked in its entirety, even after an appeal for its academic purposes. The final blow and block came, ironically enough, the afternoon I was preparing to lead a teacher development session on using sites—such as Ning—in the classroom. Needless to say, the session no longer allowed for teachers to sign up for their own accounts.

As we seek to open up channels of access and opportunities for learning in and beyond our classrooms, it remains important to share our work and learn from others involved in similar curricular initiatives. The need to tie these tools to authentic and meaningful educational experiences (as well as those that are clearly aligned with state educational standards) is important work that validates the risk-taking needed to re-conceptualize how we see our teaching, our content, and our students. Similar adaptations of projects can be created using almost any social networking tool (from Twitter, to Instagram, to Diigo). A good starting point for inspiration is Kathy Schrock’s (2014) blog Guide to Everything, with well organized resources to teach the use of tools and provide ideas for what implementation may look like. The most important key to this process is using your own critical mindset to determine what will be meaningful to your students, in your class, based on your content, and the potential limitations (time, access, or tools) in your setting. Projects might range from creating Twitter accounts where students post tweets and interact as characters from a text, or using Instagram accounts for students to post pictures and captions exploring a research topic in their community. With endless potential for making authentic connections between student lives and digital literacy learning, these experiences must be welcomed—allowing for creative risk-taking in redesigning curriculum and experiences.

However, we must also be wary of jumping on bandwagon technology projects without engaging our own critical eye (Hicks
Many activities may lead to only shallow or superficial learning, or simply replace the tool or process with a faster, more efficient model. For example, using a Learning Management System only for students to submit their work electronically (as opposed to in the physical tray in the classroom) may improve organization though it doesn’t fundamentally impact or re-imagine the learning process, the content, or the role of the learner. Using the same tool to facilitate writing workshops where students can track draft changes, read and respond to peer comments, and construct multi-modal representations of their work in final digital portfolios would change the nature of the learning and writing process, the authenticity of publishing for authentic audiences, and the opportunity for the teacher to provide just-in-time feedback. It would also rely on a strong foundation of what it means to interact and engage in digital spaces, applying exactly the type of critical lens our students need in order to become more informed producers. So as educators, we must use the same critical disposition to evaluate our own decision-making around using technology tools in the classroom. Indiscriminate censorship derived out of fear—as opposed to insightful analysis and explicit teaching of appropriate use of technology tools— is more likely to alienate and devalue real-world student experiences with literacy, which in many ways may be more akin to the ways they will be asked to engage with literacy in their future personal and professional lives.

These ideas just scratch the surface of what it means to prepare students with the skills needed as digital consumers, to think like critical consumers, and to contribute as thoughtful producers. Such situated learning experiences do not require expensive software or explicitly educational adaptations for classroom consumption, rather, they are already widely available and accessible—waiting to be repurposed. And still, this pursuit remains stymied for so many innovative educators, as it requires taking risks and teaching critical engagement within the murky and unpredictable realms of the Internet—not within the sanitized networks of censorship.

References


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Resources
You might conduct your own Google search for articles related to digital censorship or review some of these, many of which generate their own set of questions regarding validity and authorial bias. Get students thinking and talking:


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