Introducing Intellectual Freedom Courses into the Canadian LIS Curriculum

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For the first time in the history of Canadian library education, intellectual freedom courses are part of the curriculum. In September 2000, Dr. Ann Curry introduced a course entitled "Current Trends in Library and Information Service: Issues in Intellectual Freedom" at the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia.[1] And in January 2001, I introduced a course called "Contemporary Issues in Library and Information Studies: Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in Canadian Libraries" at the School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta.

Of course, intellectual freedom is hardly a new idea in library schools and in the profession. The Canadian Library Association Statement on Intellectual Freedom dates back to 1974, and intellectual freedom has served as a central tenet of the profession even longer. Typically, intellectual freedom has been introduced to students as a recurring theme in core courses, such as cataloguing and classification, reference, children's and young adult services, and collections. These courses have included intellectual freedom in terms of censorship, subject access, and selection issues.

Recent courses in information retrieval, digital libraries, Internet, publishing, information policy, globalization of information, theories and practices of reading, and feminism and library studies highlight intellectual freedom in other ways. These include restrictive licensing policies, ideological use of Internet filtering systems, the digital divide, intellectual property, pressure groups, fees, services to marginalized groups, information monopoly, multiculturalism, and minority recruitment.

These courses help students appreciate the breadth of intellectual freedom, but not necessarily the depth. As long as intellectual freedom is held as one of the profession's central tenets, Canadian library students should have the option to study it closely.

Self-censorship has broad-reaching implications ...

Intellectual freedom

In the context of contemporary Canadian library and information studies, intellectual freedom is widely understood to mean equal access to free expression on all points of view on social issues for all library users. Democratic societies such as Canada's endorse this concept of intellectual freedom because it stands for people making their own choices and self-governing.

Wallace Koehler's new survey of library and information literature, association codes of ethics, and librarian values identifies intellectual freedom as a widely held professional principle.[2] His survey shows that intellectual freedom is an umbrella term that covers many other concepts, including service, equality of access, information literacy, preservation of the record, literacy, professional neutrality, diversity of opinion, confidentiality, and cultural diversity.

Several key terms related to intellectual freedom are markedly absent from Koehler's findings, however. Censorship, self-censorship, and social responsibility are commonly considered professional anti-values, and it is important to include them in any discussion of intellectual freedom.

Censorship

Censorship involves more than deleting or excising parts of published materials. The act of censorship also includes efforts to ban, prohibit, suppress, proscribe, remove, label, or restrict materials.

Censorship violates the notion of intellectual freedom because it hinders people's ability to make informed decisions.[3] To promote intellectual freedom effectively (as the CLA Statement on Intellectual Freedom directs us to do), librarians must also combat censorship. Teaching a commitment to intellectual freedom, then, involves teaching a commitment to activism.

Self-censorship

Traditionally, the act of self-censorship occurs when librarians consciously choose not to include an item in the library collection for fear that it will provoke a challenge from the community. In the information age, this form of censorship extends to limiting access to online information, including the Internet. Self-censorship shows the discrepancy between library rhetoric and the realities of daily practice.

Self-censorship also plays out on a more unconscious level. Because of the profession's heavy reliance on mainstream review media, publishers and vendors, materials produced by the alternative press and those that reflect alienated social sectors are often under-represented in library collections.

Self-censorship has broad-reaching implications: the reliance on mainstream sources favours not only establishment cultural interests but also economic, social and political interests.

Social responsibility

Michael Gorman observed that the concept of the library as an advocate of intellectual freedom is not without controversy.[4] There is a conflict between those in the profession who take a purist stance on library neutrality (information on all sides without taking sides and no social agenda) and those who advocate that the profession should take a stand on social issues. These issues include racism, sexism, the environment, hunger, poverty, and international relations. Supporters of the

latter often use the phrase 'social responsibility' to illustrate their position.

In general, advocates of social responsibility see librarians as agents of social change, and they find fault with the idea of library neutrality in the traditional functions of collections and services. They charge that libraries are vehicles of dominant ideology to the exclusion of marginalized groups such as the homeless, youth, gays and lesbians, women, ethnic

minorities, and political radicals. When it comes to specifics, however, librarians for social responsibility are characteristically not homogeneous. They reflect a diversity of opinion, often divided.

On the other hand, librarians who take an absolutist stance on intellectual freedom appear to stand united. Harmony might seem preferable to discord, but some view it as problematic.

Questioning the absolute

In his award-winning work *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing, Too,* Stanley Fish wrote about "the unavailability of a perspective that is not culturally determined."[5] Library historian Wayne A. Wiegand was the first in our field to point out the importance of reading the work of Fish and other influential post-modern scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, Sandra Harding, Edward Said, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith.

Wiegand's reading prompted him to note that the codification of intellectual freedom as an absolute in the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights goes largely unchallenged by librarians. In 1996, Wiegand urged American students and instructors of intellectual freedom courses to consider library discourse on intellectual freedom in the context of "the powerful ideas being debated in a broader intellectual world." Scholarship on "race, gender, class, Third World, and sexual orientation," he argued, indicates that library discourse mistakenly treats terms

like "democracy," "family values," and "tolerance" as one-dimensional.[6]

As Fish pointed out, such terms "are always presented as if their meanings were perspicuous to anyone no matter what his or her political affiliation, educational experience, ethnic tradition, gender, class, institutional history, etc."[7]

In reality, individuals will interpret these terms differently depending on their own circumstances and context. Librarians need to be mindful of this. Critics of open Internet access, for example, often talk about "harmful," "unsafe," and "questionable" sites. The question is: harmful according to whom?

IF in LIS education

Along these lines, it is my hope that intellectual freedom courses will help Canadian students:
- Expand awareness of the complexity of intellectual freedom.
- Develop a critical awareness of intellectual freedom as a multi-dimensional and contested concept.
- Examine the ethos of intellectual freedom in the professional discourse in terms of when it emerged, how it evolved, and where it is heading.
- Critically evaluate professional issues from various standpoints (e.g., public, school, academic, government, corporate; personal, professional; child, youth, adult; class, race, gender; cultural and literary canons).

- Analyze how library discourse on intellectual freedom interplays with cultural studies, philosophy, political science, women's studies, law, technology, publishing, business, reading research, etc.
- Consider theoretical frameworks for examining the library as part of a larger network of cultural production and ideology (e.g., deconstruction, Marxism, feminism) and the role that intellectual freedom plays therein.

Exposure to a growing number of intellectual freedom issues in library and information courses helps students learn about the breadth of intellectual freedom but does not necessarily help them understand the heart of the matter. In fact, despite the adoption of a number of position statements related to intellectual freedom, the Canadian Library Association and its American counterpart have yet to define intellectual freedom. Perhaps a Canadian intellectual freedom course student will!

Notes
[1] In 1997, Dr. Ann Curry wrote of the difficulties of teaching intellectual freedom topics to library and information students. See Ann Curry, "Intellectual Freedom Lectures and the Dilemmas of Offense-Free Teaching," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 34, no. 1: 44-53.
[2] Wallace Koehler, "Core Values as Defined by the LIS Discipline," http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/K/Wallace.C.Koehler-1.Jr.
[3] *Intellectual Freedom Manual,* 5th ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1996), xx.

[4]Michael Gorman, *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), 89.

[5]Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing, Too* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 238.

[6]Wayne A. Wiegand, Introduction in "The Library Bill of Rights," ed. Wayne A. Wiegand, *Library Trends* 45, no. 1 (Summer 1996): 1-6.

[7]Fish, 4.

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C E N S U S

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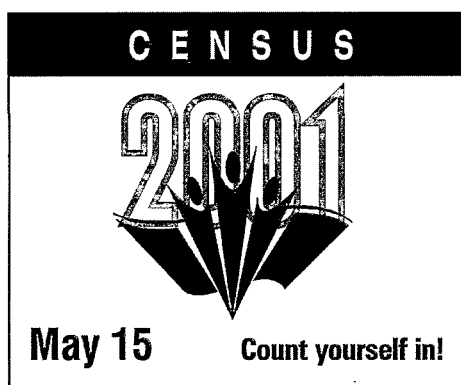
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The freedom to read can never be taken for granted. Even in Canada, a free country by world standards, books and magazines are banned at the border. Books are removed from the shelves in Canadian libraries, schools and bookstores every day. Free speech on the Internet is under attack. Few of these stories make headlines, but they affect the right of Canadians to decide for themselves what they choose to read.

Freedom to Read Week (Feb. 25 to March 3, 2001) encourages Canadians to think about and reaffirm their commitment to intellectual freedom, which is guaranteed under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

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It's about choice. Yours and mine.

Read the Freedom of Expression Report Card (published March 2000), a survey of Canadian organizations and individuals who aid or impede freedom of expression in this country (see www.freedomtoread.ca/committee/report.htm). Lorraine McQueen (then CLA president) received an A+ for her article, "The Provision of Public Internet Services" in the December 1999 issue of *Feliciter*.

Participate in one of the many Freedom to Read Week events taking place across Canada. Find out how you can get involved in the celebration at www.freedomtoread.ca/how/index.htm. Download a copy of the Freedom to Read Kit from www.freedomtoread.ca/kits/index.htm.

Freedom to Read Week is sponsored by the Freedom of Expression Committee of the Book and Periodical Council; it receives support from writers, publishers, librarians, educators, booksellers and readers.