

“ WE WANT OUR STUDENTS ... TO ASK QUESTIONS, DEBATE AND DISCUSS ISSUES, AND WE WANT THEM TO HAVE THE ABILITY TO SORT FACT FROM FICTION. — JESSICA NORDAHL, TFS



TFS provides resource tools to its students to help them avoid dependence on questionable sources of information. TFS PHOTOGRAPH

How to navigate the misinformation minefield

KATHRYN BOOTHBY

When teachers set assignments at TFS in Toronto, they are cognizant of the plethora of misinformation that abounds online and on social media. That is where Jessica Nordahl, junior school teacher-librarian, steps in. Nordahl curates resource tools that help students gain an early advantage in separating real from fake in the information sphere.

“We want our students to be critical thinkers. We want them to ask questions, debate and discuss issues, and we want them to have the ability to understand and sort fact from fiction. It is something we are constantly working on,” she says.

For junior students, Nordahl curates websites, databases, videos and books relating to each classroom unit of inquiry and creates a page of age-appropriate resources that provide relevant and valid information.

For Nordahl, reliable sources include licensed and subscribed online tools such as Encyclopedia Britannica School, Discovery Education Kids, and BrainPop. Safe search engines like Kiddle and Safe Search Kids, and trusted general resources like Common Sense Media, are also part of the information repertoire.

Helping students navigate the information maze goes beyond curating resources, however. Older students are taught research strategies to help them to discern the real value of information.

Nordahl is a member of the TFS Learning Forum along with other teachers, strategists, guidance counsellors and information technology specialists at the school.

“We work as a team to ensure our students are being responsible when gathering online information in the classroom and beyond,” she says.

“We are living in strange times. Information, both real and manipulated, is disseminated at lightning speed. Creative approaches

are necessary to help students determine the difference and understand the consequences of misinformation.”

One approach is to question and assess the merit of what they see and read through the 5Ws of evaluation, says Nordahl. The 5Ws include:

1. Who: wrote the page; are they an expert; is there a biography or more information about the creator?
2. What: is the site about; how does the author describe the site; what is their purpose; how much advertising is there; is the domain .com, .org, or .gov, and why does that matter?
3. When: was the site created; is it regularly reviewed and updated to keep it current?
4. Where: does the information come from; is the

site sponsored and, if so, how does that influence the content; are advertisers promoting a particular point of view?

5. Why: is this resource useful for my purpose; is it better than another?

Another component is a fun learning opportunity that engages students in an online scavenger hunt, where they use critical thinking and the 5Ws to determine which websites are real and which are fake.

“It makes for a very interesting class discussion,” notes Nordahl. These strategies also help students better evaluate something they may have heard or seen on social media.

“Following the critical thinking routines helps them dig deeper to find the truth.”

For senior students — and just in time for the current federal election campaign — CIVIX, a charity for building digital literacy among youth, offers free classroom resources that help students evaluate information being disseminated.

StudentVote.ca is directed to those below the voting age and runs parallel to general elections. It provides information about government and democracy and covers the issues, party platforms and candidates. At the end of activities students cast their ballot for official local candidates.

“It is very tempting for older students to be cynical about everything they read, which can be detrimental to democracy. They need reliable information to form opinions, to be engaged and to have power as citizens,” says Jessica Johnston, director of news literacy programming with CIVIX.

“We work with teachers to create curriculum materials that empower students to be more critical consumers of information and have the ability to investigate and be curious. We give them the tools they need to sort through the pollution to find what’s real, including a tool to search origins of a photo or video to determine if it has been manipulated — as has been the case in some instances.”

CIVIX also helps students examine motives behind false information, its potential impact and whether those redistributing it are doing so knowingly or not, she says.

“Above all, check emotions before proliferating a piece of information. If it invokes a strong response, check the validity before passing on.”

After the federal election, CIVIX tools and resources will live on a sister website, NewsLiteracy.ca, for use by students, teachers, parents and the general public throughout the year.

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BRIDGE BUILDER

BOLD EXPLORER

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