

Teaching Ethics to Teens Via School Library Reference Services

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Abstract:

School library reference services daily deal with legal and ethical issues: copyright and other intellectual property issues, security and confidentiality, equity issues, all of which have expanded with technology advances. Not only can school librarians model ethical behavior when providing reference services, but they can also take advantage of this learning moment to incorporate instruction on ethical use of information. In particular, the various processes in conducting research offer opportunities for reference services to instruct students on ethical behaviors: posing ethical research questions, collecting data ethically, minimizing risks to subjects and subject matter, maintaining an ethical relationship with people who are impacted by the research, identifying ethical (and unethical) aspects of sources, analyzing data ethically, and reporting data ethically. Stages of ethical behavior, and its application to digital citizenship, also impact of school librarian instruction effectiveness.

Keywords: ethics, school libraries, reference services, research

Introduction

Every day school library reference services encounter legal and ethical issues: copyright and other intellectual property issues, security and confidentiality, and equity issues, all of which have expanded with technology advances. Social media ramps up legal and ethical issues even more. As information professionals, school librarians need to be aware of ethical issues and know how to address them. The American Library Association's code of ethics (1995) provides a framework to guide ethical decision-making about service, resources, intellectual property and intellectual freedom.

Not only can school librarians model ethical behavior when providing reference services, but they can also take advantage of this learning moment to incorporate instruction on ethical use of information. Especially since young people might not have developed their moral

compasses, librarians can help in that development. Furthermore, since school libraries are situated in formal educational settings, school librarians serve in a *loco parentis* role. As such, they are explicitly responsible for guiding students' ethical behavior and teaching students how to use information ethically.

Ethics in Standards

As noted above, the American Library Association (ALA) has a code of ethics to guide librarian behavior. ALA's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) developed its own guidelines for information services (2000). That document cites the American Library Association's code of ethics as its governing statement for information service. Other sections of the RUSA guidelines weave in aspects of ethics in a more nuanced way. For example:

- Strive to provide information services to all members of the community.
- Provide access to information services that reflect the entire service area population.
- Communicate effectively with all library clientele, regardless of ethnicity, disability, lifestyle preference, etc.
- Provide complete, accurate answers.
- Add value to information.
- Seek continuing education opportunities for professional growth.
- Evaluate resources and services based on professional standards and community needs.

Focusing on library educators, the Information Ethics Special Education Interest Group of the Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) crafted a position statement about ethics guidelines (2010). ALISE stipulated the need to discuss ethical issues in information as it relates to teaching, service, research and other scholarship.

In their 2007 set of learning standards, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) explicitly state that "ethical behavior in the use of information must be taught" (p. 2). Dealing with minors adds another layer of legal issues, and implies an additional need to model ethical behavior so children will experience and integrate such values. Each standard includes dispositions that address attitudes and beliefs that drive behavior as well as responsible actions.

- In thinking critically, students are expected to respect intellectual property.
- In applying and generating knowledge, students need to make ethical decisions.
- In sharing knowledge, students should use information to support democratic values and intellectual freedom.
- In pursuing personal growth, students should practice safe behaviors in personal communication.

Digital citizenship constitutes a subset of these learning standard ethics. It may be defined as the ability and habit of using technology safely, responsibly, critically, productively, and proactively to contribute to society. Digital citizenship crosses curricular borders, just as information and technology literacies do.

Ethics in Reference Services

As teens seek information, either for school or their own personal needs, they use the school library's reference services. While reference help may consist of locating facts for students (declarative knowledge), reference service also help students with procedural knowledge such as research skills. Reference services have the added advantage of offering just-in-time instruction, at which point students are motivated to learn. In the process of providing reference service, not only do school librarians teach information skills but they also teach responsible use of information.

The most common ethical issues focus on intellectual property, and within that topic copyright is the main concern. The rights and compensation for creators of recorded information counterbalance people's need to access and use information. While unethical information behaviors have always existed to some extent, today's technology makes it much easier to access, copy and share information unethically. Students may well be acting unethically when they download and duplicate copyrighted materials without permission (such as sharing movies 'ripped' from Bit Torrent). Students sometimes buy copyrighted essays and attach their own names to those documents. More often, students may copy-and-paste text from a document and not quote them or cite it. In these situations, students probably do not ask for reference service. Instead, teachers may ask the librarian to try to hunt down the original text of a student's questionable writing, and then the teacher will confront the student about possible plagiarism practice. Digital content is trickier to handle because the Digital Millennium Act of 1998 has some complex restrictions about image alteration and publicly shared digital resources, so some students and teachers might not realize possible legal repercussions of, say, posting websites online with unauthorized content.

Reference services offer a pro-active, preventative instructional approach. For instance, when students ask for help in finding an article in a subscription database aggregator, school librarians can point out the citation feature, and make suggestion about ways to paraphrase the text. School librarians can also mention that the access to the database costs money, and some of the money is given as a royalty to the author. The cost of the subscription may also enable the user to download and keep the article legally. In effect, the library is facilitating the students' ethical access and use of information.

As they provide reference service, school librarians can also point out that some information on the Internet may well be illegal or unethical. The classical example is <http://martinlutherking.org>, a white nationalist website that portrays King as a sexual deviant communist and fraud. While the First Amendment protects the rights of the website creators, students should be aware of hurtful biases as well as credibility issues. Furthermore, school librarians can alert students that they may find that websites might include information plagiarized from another website or printed document. In some ways, these examples may cause a student to think that such practices are permissible, but school librarians need to point out that slander and plagiarism can lead to arrests, fines, and imprisonment. By complying with intellectual property laws, students develop ethical values, and they can be proud of their own intellectual creations.

Ethics and Research Practices

When students and other school community members conduct research, they should act ethically. Besides copyright compliance and the larger issue of intellectual property, the following ethical issues need researchers' consideration (American Psychological Association, 2010). While these guidelines are directed to scholarly research and publication, the underlying principles apply to school community research efforts as well, and school librarians should show their constituents, both students and adults, how to act ethically throughout their research efforts.

- Pose ethical research questions. Questions should benefit society, not make conditions worse. For example, research should not be conducted in order to seek revenge on a colleague. Do not misrepresent the purpose of the research.
- Collect data ethically. Do not misrepresent the purpose of collecting data, unless concealment or deception is justified for the research's value (e.g, the stated purpose is to determine which websites a student uses when in reality the study intends to determine the degree that students share information about websites). Do not fabricate data. Do not use unethical means to arrive at an ethical result. Keep records safe and confidential.
- Make every effort to protect human and animal subjects, and minimize any risk. Normally, k-12 students do not collect data about school community members. However, teachers may have students create and administer surveys for class study. Parents or guardians need to give consent for their children to be active research participants. In educational settings, explicit permission is not needed if the research involves normal educational practice, standard tests, uninvasive surveys, observation of public behavior, collection of pre-existing data, and protection of individual identity. Nevertheless, research subjects should be voluntary, and give informed consent about their responsibilities and obligations. Get explicit permission for recording people's distinguishable voices and images.
- Maintain an ethical relationship with people who will be impacted by the research. Be sensitive to other people's concerns, such as student evaluations. Try to remain objective, and not favor one person over another. Do not play "spy" for the teacher or anyone else. If a person asks for some information to be "off the record," either keep that commitment, or do not have the person share the information. Keep confidentiality unless there is imminent danger, such as violence or suicide.
- Analyze data ethically. Any personal biases and gains (such as getting money from a video game company for beta-testing) that impact interpretation should be openly acknowledged. Data should not be twisted to support some pre-existing agenda or assumption. Clarify values that enter into the analysis or interpretation.
- Report the data ethically and in timely manner. Do not misconstrue the data, findings, discussion, or recommendations. Do not misrepresent data in statistical graphs. Acknowledge other sources of information.

Teaching Ethical Information Behavior

Because much of reference service is conducted on an individual basis, school librarians can gauge students' information behavior and attitudes as they address possible ethical issues. "Just say no" does not suffice. Nor can one-size-fits-all instruction meet students at their ethical developmental level.

Krathwohl, Bloom, and Bertram's 1973 affective domain taxonomy serves as a useful framework to apply appropriate instructional approaches to foster ethical information behavior. Each stage calls for specific strategies.

1. **Receiving.** School librarians should get students' attention about ethical issues, such as plagiarism, digital piracy, flaming, and cyberbullying.
2. **Responding.** School librarians help students actively learn about ethical issues, and ways to act ethically. At this point, students might "go through the motions," such as learning how to cite documents, doing it purely as an exercise.
3. **Valuing.** At this point, school librarians address the reason for ethical practice. Students start to value ethical practice, understanding how it benefits themselves and others.
4. **Organization.** School librarians introduce possible conflicting values relative to ethical issues, such as pointing out that another student plagiarized (issue of privacy of information) or lending a password to a friend. The goal is to help students resolve conflicting ethical values.
5. **Value complex.** At this point, students self-regulate and practice ethical information behavior continuously and consistently (a high expectation even for college students).

Typically, each stage is addressed before the next one can occur. When school librarians teach a whole class about ethical information behaviors, they should plan with the classroom teacher to ascertain the students' overall level of ethical information behavior and attitude.

Class Instruction in Digital Citizenship

As noted above, digital citizenship may be considered a subset of information literacy that highlights issues of ethical behavior. The following four-step process can guide students in thinking about ethical behaviors and practicing especially in terms of digital citizenship, and ways to act. In addition, several digital citizenship learning activities and informational sources can be found at <http://k12digitalcitizenship.wikispaces.com>.

1. Awareness. School librarians draw attention to students' personal digital informational needs and behaviors. How often do they use the Internet? What information do they search for? How do they ascertain the accuracy and value of information found? School librarians survey students' experiences with social networking and consequences, such as embarrassment, loss of reputation, or cyberbullying. School librarians can then ask them how they deal with their digital life in terms of privacy, identity, and social support.

2. Engagement. At this point, students can learn about intellectual property and intellectual freedom laws as well as other legislation that impacts information creation, dissemination, and use. Students need to know both their rights as well as their responsibilities. Because technology keeps expanding and changing continuously, laws lag behind practice, and social norms of behavior are dynamic. Students can examine hoax information such as <http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoaxsites.html>, <http://www.hoaxbusters.org/> and <http://www.snopes.com/>; they can discuss how to evaluate information critically, and posit possible consequences if someone acted on the false information. What responsibility should the hoaxer bear for real-life negative outcomes?

When engaging with digital information from a legal or ethical standpoint, one of the most effective strategies is case studies: librarians can share legal cases and current news (e.g., homeland security, wikileaks, National Security Agency surveillance) dealing with technology issues that arise in accessing confidential information, broadcasting inappropriate information, social networking, file transfer, pirating or plagiarizing information, and other intellectual property issues. What are the underlying ethical issues? What are the consequences? What are alternative actions that could have been taken?

3. Manipulating Information. Students can develop their own scenarios to research. As learners self-identify unethical digital behaviors and impacts, they become more aware of the problem. When they are involved in developing ways to solve the problem, they gain more ownership and control, feeling empowered to cope themselves as well as to help their peers. Students can also “produce” information by representing a given set of data: graphically, numerically, as a diagram, as a lab report. Similarly, they can manipulate images through cropping/selection and filtering techniques. In doing these physical and psychological manipulations, students learn how different representations can be used to influence opinion in one way or the other, and may be used unethically.

4. Application. How does one act on the information? That is often the ultimate real-life goal, particularly as an ethical citizen. Perhaps by analyzing available information, one decides how to vote in an election. School librarians can facilitate this pro-active application by having students create position presentations for the local government, or help a local group implement those recommendations, so that their ethical learning can impact others. Other student-empowering activities that enable learner to apply digital citizenship skills include: reviewing digital sources, creating products for the community, capturing local oral and visual history, and training others in responsible technology use.

Conclusion

Reference service offers several ways to help students learn and practice ethical information behaviors. Furthermore, because reference services involve information in a variety of formats, students learn how format impacts ethical behavior. Both just-in-time and scheduled class visits provide opportunities to model and teach students about ethical issues related to information, and ways to respond ethically and responsibly. The flexibility of school library reference service reflects the diversity of student learning preference and ethical information situations.

Because reference services constitute one aspect of the school library’s program, school decision makers should allocate resources to insure its effectiveness in promoting ethical information behavior. Having a school-wide ethics scope and sequence across curricular areas provides a venue for learning ethical behavior that links to the overall intellectual framework. Furthermore, the school community needs to model ethics in its infrastructure and actions: providing equitable access to information, making provisions to ensure that the school community is digitally safe, having a plan to secure and protect educational data in case of crime or disaster, maintaining privacy and confidentiality of individual records, creating and enforcing policies that protect the legal rights of everyone, and training staff to keep them current in ethical education themselves.

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