Filling in the Gaps: Using Zines to Amplify the Voices of People Who Are Silenced in Academic Research

Dawn Stahura, Salem State University
Bibliography


Filling in the Gaps: Using Zines to Amplify the Voices of People Who Are Silenced in Academic Research

Dawn Stahura

The Beginning is the End

My time at the reference desk involves engaging with students in research consultations on a myriad of topics. Because I am a feminist, my approach to research and reference questions is filtered through a feminist lens. I define feminist pedagogy at the reference desk as the flattening of the hierarchical and oppressive power structures by challenging the white-cis-male-dominant narratives that make up our informational and knowledge systems that inherently silence all other voices and perspectives. While this might seem like an insurmountable task to accomplish at the reference desk, it can not only be done but also done well. In this chapter, I would like to share with you a few ways in which I teach students to not only critically evaluate the information they find but to actively seek out the missing pieces in order to fill in the gaps of their research. Because zines live by the DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos and attempt to dismantle oppressive forms

of knowledge systems, I implore you to read this chapter in whatever way you feel best suits your needs. The dominant way of reading would be to follow along in chronological order but because zines are not part of the dominant landscape, this way of reading holds no real advantage to your learning process. If you are interested in validation of personal experiences start there. If you would rather follow in the traditional method of reading, feel free to do so. If we want our students to critically evaluate the research process and the information they find then we must allow them to decide how and where to begin. Sometimes the ending is the middle and the beginning is the end.

Somewhere in the Middle

Many of us lead instructional sessions that teach our students how to find scholarly content by searching the library catalog and utilizing subscription databases. These skills, along with evaluating sources, are imperative if our students are to become the critical thinkers we want them to be, but the problem is the information our students find oftentimes omits any narrative not deemed “valid” by the white-male-dominated view. In current reference settings, the scholarly articles that we hold so near and dear to the research process silence all but the dominant voices. What is worse is that our students are unaware that so many narratives and perspectives are missing. Sure, they might be frustrated with the lack of relevant results when they do a search, but for the most part no one really questions controlled vocabularies or the statistics found in the methodologies section of scholarly work because no one suggested there were inherent issues residing there. Students are unaware of inherent biases in their search results or filter bubbles that prevent them from seeing the full landscape of resources, which does skew their opinion and perspectives on various topics. Our students cannot include what they do not know is missing, and more often than not, they leave the reference desk with only a partial, distorted view of the way things were or really are.

Voices that Zine

I work closely with several undergraduate and graduate courses in Sociology, Women and Gender Studies and Visual Communications whose teaching faculty find immense value in incorporating zines in their classroom. Not only do I talk about zines, but also, in many cases, the students are assigned to create zines as their final projects. I also teach a graduate level course in Information Sources and Services where I talk at length about the power of zines as primary sources. In both cases I show students the ways in which zines represent the oppressed narratives that dominant informational sources sometimes willfully ignore. From zine subject headings, to keyword searching in our zine spreadsheet, I give students the space and opportunity to question the way information is gathered, organized, and disseminated; an opportunity to question who deems what resources are “valid”; who decides who is an “expert” within the traditional publishing circles.

Zine making and zine reading are inherently feminist acts because they apply three very distinct principles of feminist pedagogy: participatory learning, validation of personal experience, and the development of critical thinking skills. By applying these three principles to the research process, zines become more than just supplemental resources. They become the alternative way of critically evaluating and understanding the systems that disseminate our information. Zines shift the lens from periphery to direct focus.

Principle One: Participatory Learning

The research process starts with the basic search for information. A student approaches the reference desk with a topic in mind and after talking in-depth about the student’s pre-search results and what resources are still needed, the conversation turns to generating keywords to help in the search process. As I brainstorm keywords with students I take the time to explain the inner workings of controlled vocabulary and subject headings. While there are certainly benefits to zeroing in on these subject headings for more precise results within the library’s resources, the Library of Congress Classification is not all-inclusive. In fact, marginalized groups are still cataloged by outdated vocabulary within our databases and catalogs. These institutionalized oppressions usually go unnoticed in typical library searches unless the student is encouraged to question the legitimacy of the construction of

subject headings. This consciousness-raising approach allows students the opportunity to be active participants in their learning by not only becoming aware of silenced voices, but also by questioning the overall production and dissemination of information. Furthering this, I really believe consciousness-raising opportunities allow students to critically evaluate their own voices and what roles they play in the production of knowledge and really zero in on internalized biases.

For example, if a student wanted to find information on African American women and sex, we would need to put African American women and sex as our search terms. Instead of stopping there, I challenge the student to think about what it means if they just put Women in the search box. Who are these women? Who are included? Excluded? Who determines this inclusion? What does it imply if the category of Women does not include all women? What about sex? What does it mean if the results assume you mean heterosexual sex? Or let’s say a student is interested in resources that discuss LGBTQ oppressions (not discrimination) or health issues and sexual politics of the queer community, our library databases and catalogs will not provide the full range of resources that accurately address and describe these topics because LCC does not recognize them as “valid” subject headings. I ask students how it makes them feel if they do not see these identities as “normal” or the “dominant” view within controlled vocabularies.

Once light is shed on these issues, students begin to see the problems with controlled vocabulary and will hopefully dig deeper into the search process. Once they grasp the concept of institutionalized oppression within classification systems, they can understand that the results presented to them are partially inaccurate due to these inherent biases. Several of my students have commented that digging deeper in this way validates their experiences in researching in that it becomes clear that they are not searching incorrectly or using the wrong tools, but that the tools are not representative or inclusive of what their informational needs are. These biases will never give the full narrative and this is where zines supplement the research process. The To the Front Zine Collection at Simmons College is cataloged based on the Anchor Archive Zine Library’s subject classification\(^3\) and the

\(^4\) Alternative Press Index. I personally read each zine that is cataloged in our collection and take detailed notes of the subjects addressed in each zine. While our zines are catalogued with records that are searchable within our library’s catalog, they are classified with the Library of Congress subject headings. This is obviously so students can find zines within their search results and since our zines circulate, this helps with visibility but there are problems with the overall classification scheme. To circumvent this issue, I keep a separate zine catalog in spreadsheet form, which is updated every time a new zine is read and evaluated by me. This alternative catalog is a true reflection of what each zine represents, using vocabulary and subject headings that are not only more inclusive but reflect the true nature and language of the non-dominant narrative. This detailed spreadsheet allows our students to find zines on subjects that are not classified or recognized within the Library of Congress Classification system. Zines can be searched by subject headings or keywords within the spreadsheet by using the standard command + F or CTRL + F. In essence, students are able to search by all the keywords, names, and subject headings that truly describe and reflect their topics.

Students can also physically browse the zine collection, taking certain subject boxes off the shelf to peruse the zines. There is a cheat sheet available that explains what each subject code stands for and lists the topics found under each subject heading. This form of classification is not only more personal but allows for real identification of subjects that reflect the true nature of their existence. Once students are aware that not every voice is heard within the databases they undergo a new search within the zine spreadsheet to begin filling in the holes in their research process.

**Principle Two: Development of Critical Thinking Skills**

It is a fact that scholarly articles can be daunting for our students because of their confusing jargon, endless pages of references, and


the dreaded methodology section that contains graphs, numbers, and intimidating data. For most students, they would rather skip the methodologies section all together. Who could blame them? In fact, how often do we tell students to just skip the methodology section completely? As librarians, our reasoning (and it is certainly valid) is that unless they are recreating the study or instructed by their professors to read this section, methodologies can be ignored. The focus then shifts to the introduction and the conclusion/discussion as being the "must-reads", the areas that contain the research's truth.

To be honest, I have given this very advice to more than one panicked student who was drowning in the idea of wading through a 30-page research article riddled with words and numbers that did not make sense. In those moments of research crisis, I was mindful of where students were at emotionally and in exercising ethics of care, I choose to have them focus on the "must-reads" which on a basic level satisfied the students' need. I hoped that by focusing on the emotional aspect of research that the students would feel comfortable and safe enough to approach me again should the need arise. In actuality, I do my students a great disservice by ignoring the methodology section entirely because it is here where the truth is revealed as to who is missing in the research. By delving into the methodologies section, I teach my students how the results are always filtered through the researcher's lens. That because we cannot avoid this filter, the results are slanted truth, hinging on the notion that all study participants told the absolute truth. In reality, the very nature of being under a watchful eye skews the results thereby compromising the conclusion to some degree. In simple terms, there is bias present in all forms of research whether it is intentional or not.

Who are these participants? By using the methodologies section, students can dig deeper to find out who was included and who was excluded. This allows them to challenge the legitimacy of the overall results, and once students know who is missing they can begin their search for those oppressed narratives by way of zines. They can decide for themselves in having those oppressed voices present, whether or not it affects their viewpoints on the scholarly research findings and what the implications are. In essence, I ask students if zines affect scholarly results.

A big issue I have with methodology sections and scholarly articles in general is that they are already seen as authoritative. The expertise of the authors have to be proven and vetted before their words ever make the published page. Within academia there is sometimes an intense push to publish, not to share information or to make connections with others but rather to gain tenure. The "publish or perish" landscape of academia can lead to publishing articles that are motivated by financial or reputational gain, not a desire to share information. Scandals arise every year where unethical or even faulty research makes its way into databases and scholarly journals. Many librarians spend a lot of energy diverting students' interest from Wikipedia, but at times, scholarly articles are no better. We just do not say that aloud. We teach students to use Google Scholar over regular Google to help them reach more suitable content but we fail to explain the filter bubble that surrounds everything they ever search using the Internet. We never tell them to question what resources reach them and consider what might be missing altogether.

Zines are different in every conceivable way. For one, zines are not written for a profit or recognition but rather for intimate connection, a way to tell one's truth. Because zines are not filtered through a researcher's gaze, they are inherently honest. There are no gatekeepers to keep a zinester's story hidden, no permission to be granted in order to publish. A zinester writes and publishes a zine by their own rules without interference, which means zines can be as radical as they need to be, sharing stories and ideas that are not popular or even considered. I realize that we do not live in a perfect world and yes, sometimes zines are created with hatred, bigotry, misogyny and racist views. With that said, I believe that zines can and do challenge the status quo. Their very existence is a feminist radical act.

Zines show us that we are more than just statistics, that if certain groups are not included in the research design or the results then the conclusion has no impact on oppressed truths. These scholarly results do not represent the oppressed and never will if they are continuously kept out of dominant narratives. Zines share a different version of the

---


7 Jennifer Sienk, "Another Form of Crying: Girl Zines as Life Writing," Prose Studies, August 4, 2003, 249.
story that does not always match the scholarly researcher’s conclusion, and this is imperative if we want our students to see the full landscape of their topics.

Secondly, zines give our students unique opportunities to hear their research. Instead of reading a scholarly article on the impact of an experimental drug to cure AIDS, students can supplement that knowledge with a zine written by someone who is actually taking the drug. This humanizes their research, which I think is something that we, as a culture, fail miserably at. We often forget that the participants in scholarly articles are real people with real emotions and feelings. The humanization of research was revolutionary for one student I met with who said, “research articles do not include how the participants feel, what they struggle with on a daily basis, or how they developed an eating disorder.” Zines helped this student hear the point of view of the patients, which led to a greater understanding of eating disorders. When we humanize our research, we care, and it is in this caring that students take risks to break the silence of oppressive systems, to institute change that matters outside the walls of academia. This breaking of the silence took a zine form at Simmons College in the Spring of 2016 when the Students of Color Inclusion Council asked me to lead a zine workshop for them. They wanted to incorporate the Ten Demands that were presented to the Simmons President as well as their own biographies, essays, reflections, and art. The end result was #Simsscene, a powerful testament to the very real grassroots activism on campus that is seeing real, positive change and by sharing their zines with the community (Simmons and the outside) they are making connections and building relationships on a much deeper level. Deeper level understanding is crucial for any type of social change, big or small.

Lastly, zines allow for the examination of power structures in knowledge production. By reading zines students can examine how knowledge is constructed, and the social positions and intent of those who produce and disseminate information. The very impact of dissemination of information by the dominant groups can be critically evaluated. Once students begin questioning the production of knowledge, they realize that zines allow anyone to be an expert of their own lives, feelings, knowledge, and experiences. This powerful realization extends to our own students as they come to understand that their own voices and knowledge matter, that by including oppressed narratives in their research is a radical act, that by breaking the silence, they are changing the power structure.8 In my opinion, this should be the true reason we conduct research, to institute real change. Research conducted through the lens of feminist pedagogy recognizes the centrality of the intersections of race, class, and gender, which allows for critical and radical critiques of classic, dominant assumptions.

Principle Three: Validation of Personal Experiences

In helping students find relevant articles for their topics, we often tell them to mine the references of the articles they like to see whom those authors consulted to write their papers. Students are encouraged to use databases such as Web of Knowledge and Scopus to uncover citations of worth. While this is certainly valid advice and I still recommend students do this, it ultimately reinforces the legitimacy of scholarly “experts” as being the only voices of worth. This total reliance on vetted experts omits those not included in the dominant knowledge production. Citation backtracking is a useful skill to have, as long as we are teaching our students that it is not the only way that research can happen.

When students incorporate zines into their research, they begin to see citation management as more organic and personal. This process creates a closeness and connection to the zinester. Zinesters recommend other zines and write about which zines inspired them and encouraged them to come forward with their own stories. By using zines, students create a bibliography that is a mixture of scholarly and organic, an empowered bibliography that includes all voices. Because zines discuss the lives and experiences of the non-dominant worldview, students critically evaluate their own lives and experiences and compare it to the discussions and conclusions they read within the dominant scholarly narratives. This is important if we want our students to not only be critical thinkers but critical producers of knowledge. Zines allow for the active cultural production

of information as opposed to passive cultural consumption of that knowledge. This very concept is one that is gaining importance with its inclusion in the ACRL’s new information literacy frameworks.

If we teach our students critical information literacy skills by way of zines, they learn to critically evaluate the establishment itself.9 Our students can then question the publishing process, the exclusion of ‘non-experts’, institutionalized oppression, and the way in which some have access to information while others do not. In academia, everyone who lends a hand in the publishing process creates legitimacy of the text, from the writer to the editor to the publisher.10 Zines do not need legitimacy in order to be authoritative.

Students often take for granted the access they have to scholarly resources but it is worth pointing out that non-academics and non-community members do not have access to the same resources. Academia is a world governed by restricted use clauses, language barriers, and Internet connectivity. Access to scholarly resources requires money and privilege, which is a critical social justice issue. Information and access to it is a basic human right and any time a barrier is placed between knowledge and the people, librarians need to implement the tools to break down those barriers. One easy way to dismantle these barriers is through zines. Zines emphasize the dissemination of knowledge instead of access limitations and paychecks, which is why a lot of zines are traded instead of purchased.

The point is not monetary gain as found in some scholarly publishing but rather informational gain. Getting the information out there with the least amount of barriers and obstacles is the true intent of zines. If zines are a radical act simply by way of existence then the reference desk is certainly a radical space that provides the opportunity for our students to engage with resources that are not supported by the white-cis-male-dominated power structure. Zines are therefore the ultimate feminist pedagogical tool as evidenced by student responses to using zines in their research. Students embraced the idea of not only hearing their research but also positioning themselves within the narrative. This positioning allows for self-reflection and critique, which oftentimes never makes it into the research process. Zines provide a unique way for my students to evaluate their own feelings and sometimes misconceptions about a particular topic. Minds that are changed for the better allow for a greater opportunity for social justice initiatives to succeed.

The Ending is the Beginning After All

By incorporating zines in the research process, our students achieve a deeper and more thorough understanding of their topics. By using zines our students recognize which points of view are omitted from the scholarly resources found within library databases and catalogs. Through zines, students fill in the gaps of their research with voices that represent the uncensored, subjective, creative, social, and political truths that are written by “non-experts whose only true intent is to shed light on various forms of oppression.”11 By doing so, students flatten the dominant hierarchy of knowledge production and begin to shape a truly inclusive feminist narrative that is desperately lacking in scholarly research and agendas.

Zines are a revolutionary concept that encourages students to speak for themselves as opposed to letting dominant voices speak for them. Students can and should be knowledge and cultural producers overwriting the traditional, white-cis-male-dominated knowledge systems and by doing so they challenge the status quo. This feminist act can lead to institutional change. When our students break the silence with their research, real change happens on a micro-level but just like Scopus or Web of Knowledge, that change creates a web. The further out the web, the more macro the changes become.

This change is not just happening in the student realm. Simmons faculty have changed as well by incorporating zines into their syllabi by way of required readings and the creation of zines for class projects. One of the faculty I work with closely stated that it allowed her students to connect with the course material in a real, authentic way which led to really deep, critical learning. This in-depth analysis ultimately resulted in more meaningful class discussions and more


thoughtful papers. On a personal level, I have changed too in ways I never imagined. Zines exist in my personal life as I create my own zines and collect them but having the opportunity to work with zines on a daily basis with students is really empowering. I feel closer to my students when we are able to discuss really difficult subjects by way of zines in a safe space. Working closely with zines also allows me to be my empathetic self, to be seen as human. Oftentimes the role of the librarian is painted heavy with stereotypes and I love any chance I can get to strip away that color.

On an institutional level, the Bentley Library is becoming more of a safe space for our students. With the zine collection and makerspace, students know that they can come to the library to not only read zines but also make their own zines. This kind of self-publication is not only radical but also extremely liberating. In this context, I act as mentor, assisting students in layout and publishing. There is nothing more rewarding than seeing a completed zine born out of thoughts once only found in the ether.

There are of course challenges to overcome. Faculty are sometimes resistant to using zines as primary sources, prescribing only the scholarly works found within our databases and academic journals. Overcoming this is not impossible but it does take actively seeking out an adventurous faculty member to take a chance on zines. Once they realize how valuable the payoff is, faculty can be your zine cheerleaders, advocating on your behalf. All it takes is for someone in a position of power to stand with you in solidarity.

With all that I have said here, I am in no way advocating that we throw out our scholarly articles and only read zines, nor am I saying that one resource is better or more useful than another. What I am proposing is guiding our students through a richer, more well-rounded research process by incorporating zines. By using both resources our students not only fill in the research gaps, they gain a deeper understanding of not only their topics but also knowledge creation and dissemination. What better place to learn this than at the reference desk. If this is not feminist pedagogy, then I do not know what is.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


