Empowering Information Professionals to Confront Legal and Policy Issues

Rebecca Katz, BCL/LLB; LLM; PhD Candidate, McGill School of Information Studies

ABSTRACT

Are there limits to copyright and trademarks, and how can information professionals effectively advocate fair laws? Who protects our private information online? And can we unite librarians, patrons, and policy-makers against the armies of online misinformation?

These questions are all relevant to the library and information field. Likewise, they all have legal and policy dimensions which information professionals can and should engage. Indeed, many contemporary challenges are information policy challenges that ask who should own, access, or profit from information. Libraries, with their public interest mandate, are poised to play an advocacy role in these debates. They are also well-positioned to help other stakeholders understand their rights in information. However, to do so, librarians and other information professionals must be empowered to tackle 'legal-ese' and address policy questions.

With that in mind, the McGill School of Information Studies recently piloted a new Information Policy course. The presenter taught this course in Fall 2018. This proposal reports on the experience of teaching legal and policy issues to information studies students. It considers strengths, challenges, and lessons learned, and argues the importance of empowering LIS students to address legal and policy issues. After all, we are all information users and creators, just as we are citizens and, ideally, law-makers through our role in the democratic process. Addressing information policy challenges in ways that serve the public interest is vital to information management and public service. It may even represent a way to take the library's role of encouraging a more informed citizenry into the 21st century.

COURSE CONTEXT

- Presenter/lecturer holds degrees in law; working on PhD in Information Studies.
- Course GLIS 690 Information Policy offered at McGill University School of Information Studies for the first time since 2005.
- Course therefore required a significant revamp.
- Given lecturer's background in law and government, focus on legislation, legal, ethical, and policy issues relevant to information professionals.
- Nineteen Master of Information Studies students self-selected into course; students had varied career goals as well as varied exposure to content.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

- Scaffolding: start small; build up.
- Active learning: "the one who does the work, does the learning" (Doyle, 2008).
- Collaboration: necessary for interdisciplinary work .

CHALLENGES

- Learning content myself, given breadth of topic.
- Talking and teaching across disciplinary backgrounds.
- Course alignment: ensuring all components of course 'fit' and 'worked' together.
- Assessments: finding the right level for students; preparing students to succeed.

SCAFFOLDING

- Students' legal literacy, like legal literacy generally, varied within class and between topics.
- Challenge to enhance understanding when baseline varied.
- Other challenge: communicating given different disciplinary background between instructor and students.
  - "Remember in whose presence I babbled."
  - Began with simple, accessible definitions and examples—even exaggerated ones.
  - Gradually worked up to more complex material.
  - May even be able to improve and make a collaborative worksheet of legal definitions.
- Let newsworthiness guide, but not overwhelm, choice of topics; enhance students' understanding beyond headlines.
  - Many subjects, e.g., copyright versus piracy, net neutrality, privacy in the news frequently.
  - Double-edged sword: legal issues, as presented in media, may be somewhat shallow or misleading.
- Through clarifying legal and regulatory concepts, using different sources, and exposing students to law and policy, I successfully enhanced student understanding.

ACTIVE LEARNING

- Dilemma: lectures necessary to explain content, expose ethical issues, and clarify legal terms, readings—yet lectures also boring and passive.
- Also, information professionals will need to apply legal and policy concepts in practice—how to build active learning and application into course?
- Initially (generally early in class period) used tools, such as a modified think-pair-share, to probe students' baseline understanding of topic, encourage discussion.
- Then devoted part of class period to lecture, other materials (e.g., relevant news clips) to refine student understanding.
- Most courses broke about 30 minutes before the end of the period to let students work in groups on hypothetical problems, either theoretical or applied.
  - For example, students, in groups, might discuss the ethical dilemmas and conflicting values or obligations in a difficult situation.
  - Some more applied problems involved careful consideration of a piece of legislation and which provisions may apply to a given situation.
- Mixed results based on student feedback (as addressed below).

CHALLENGES, CON'T

- Survey course: introduction to a broad range of topics within information policy, apart from my narrow dissertation focus.
  - 'Cramming in' adequate knowledge of topics myself was challenging.
- I spent a great deal of time on preparing lectures and content and researching readings, which left less preparation time for assignments.
- Assignments as follows:
  - 3-4 short focused notes exercises assessing student comprehension.
  - First term paper: an argumentative essay type assignment.
  - Final term paper and oral presentation: developing an information policy for a hypothetical organization (written) and then presenting, defending it in front of the class (oral).
- Mixed feedback for focused notes assignments; some students indicated argumentative essay was too 'undergrad' for this level. I also realized the final was weighted too heavily and that more attention to policy development would better prepare students to complete it.
- Broader struggle: aligning course objectives, content, assessments, in-class activities to best prepare students.
- Mixed feedback on amount of active learning as well, which is related to alignment: I will pay more attention to this aspect of course development in future iterations.
  - Want in-class activities to be most useful to students in practicing and applying material ahead of assignments.
  - May swap the first term paper to be more practical, e.g., articulating a course of action and reasoning about how an information law or policy studied applies.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Carefully consider learner needs, level of understanding – and seek feedback iteratively.
  - I succeeded where I matched assignments, readings, etc, to learner needs, but received poorer feedback on aspects of course that were misaligned.
- Collaborate: In an interdisciplinary area (e.g., information studies and management, law, policy/government, technology), no one person can have 'all the answers.'
  - This is another area that I hope to expand in future iterations of the course.
- 'Remember in whose presence you babble' and introduce technical terms in small ways, building (scaffolding) upon them.
- Incorporate and build on newsworthy topics, not as a buzzword, but as a way of recognizing that courses like this (even workshops on discrete legal topics, information and news literacy, etc) are important for understanding the world around us.
- Highlight that we are all information users, managers, stakeholders – and should be active stakeholders in decision-making about these issues.