

FEATURE

[REDACTED]
**LABELING AND
RATING [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] SYSTEMS:
GREATER ACCESS
OR [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] CENSORSHIP?**
[REDACTED]

THE MARTIN

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How well versed are school librarians on issues related to labeling and rating systems? Librarians must recognize the difference between using labels to create interest in books and implementing labeling and rating systems that restrict or discourage wide-ranging reading. When labeling and rating systems are put under a microscope, First Amendment issues that threaten students' intellectual freedom are exposed.

Motivations for labeling come in many forms. Sometimes labeling is an attempt to help students more easily find materials. Other times it is a reaction to material perceived as offensive or to mandates from administrators. Some labeling and ratings systems evolve from an earnest attempt to assist students attain higher academic achievement and reading fluency. Misunderstanding the impact of prejudicial labeling or ranking systems creates sticky situations in which the library—or librarian—is seen to be advocating the ideas found in the collection, when the

fact is “the presence of books and other resources in a library does not indicate endorsement of their content by the library” (ALA 2015a). Labeling and rating systems may give the impression that the library endorses and favors specific material over other ideas and concepts.

Viewpoint-Neutral Directional Labeling

Melvil Dewey invented the Dewey Decimal Classification system in the early 1870s. His system of cataloging materials created a structure for librarians to organize and access materials. Ever since then, the concept of categorizing items for ease of access is a hallmark of librarianship (OCLC 2015). School librarians continue to design and implement resource location schemes to assist patrons. This type of *viewpoint-neutral directional labeling* is acceptable because it is a convenience designed to save time and not an attempt to prejudice or influence readers, or discourage access to materials.

Examples of viewpoint-neutral labeling include placing stickers on science fiction, mystery, fantasy, historical fiction, and other genre books. Although there may be some disagreement as to whether a book falls entirely into one genre, these labels do not suggest moral or doctrinal endorsement. The challenge with viewpoint-neutral labeling? “When directional aids are used to forbid access or to suggest moral or doctrinal

When labeling and rating systems are put under a microscope, it exposes First Amendment issues that threaten students' intellectual freedom.

Placing AR or
Lexile [REDACTED] labels
on books [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] sidetracks
student [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] reading by
leading students
to materials [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] that
encourage reading
of words [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] rather than
finding [REDACTED]
books of literary
quality [REDACTED] and
student [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] interest.

endorsement, the effect is the same as prejudicial labeling” (ALA 2015a). A symbol on a book indicating Christian fiction falls into the murky area of endorsing Christian religions over other faiths. Being inclusive is essential when placing genre labels on materials. Therefore, discard the Christian designation and create a genre such as “inspirational” to encompass all faiths (ALA 2010).

Be cautious about including in your online public access catalog information generated from outside rating and labeling entities. The challenge occurs when either Machine Readable Cataloging (MARC) or Resource Description and Access (RDA) records are provided. School librarians often accept these records because they provide the maximum descriptive information available. Note that cataloging guidelines do not require librarians to provide rating or labeling information. If libraries choose to use this information, “they should cite the source of the rating to their catalog or discovery tool display indicating that the library does not endorse any external rating system” (ALA 2015b).

Viewpoint or Prejudicial Labeling

Labeling that is not directional is called *viewpoint labeling* and may be prejudicial. Viewpoint labeling is in conflict with the Library Bill of Rights and students’ right to information because it is designed to restrict access based on a value judgment that the content, language, themes, or views of the author of the resource are appropriate or inappropriate. Prejudicial labeling is used to warn, discourage, or prohibit users from accessing material or to place materials in restricted

locations where students must depend on staff to access it (ALA 2015a).

Private and Commercial Rating Systems

Ratings systems often bias or prejudice attitudes and decisions about materials. Whether it is the Film Ratings System (CARA), Common Sense Media, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, bookalachi, or Focus on the Family, all seek to provide content ratings that influence a reader's viewpoint for or against the material.

According to its website, Common Sense Media publishes "independent ratings and reviews for nearly everything kids want to watch, read, play, and learn." Although Common Sense Media states that the reviews are unbiased and developed by expert reviewers, it is difficult to find out who rates their books, what the reviewers' credentials are, and how Common Sense Media can claim that the reviews are unbiased. Pat Scales, in her article "Weighing In: Three Bombs, Two Lips, and a Martini Glass," explains how Common Sense Media's rating system is doing a disservice to students, provides tools for censorship, and encourages looking at topics in materials out of context (2010).

Rating systems provide misplaced confidence if used in collection development. Rating systems assume that individuals or groups have the ability and authority to determine what is appropriate or inappropriate for others. The rater's opinion is based on standards about whether language or scenes of violence are suitable or not. But to whom is something unsuitable? And what or whose standards are being used? Ratings systems accept that individuals

must be directed in making up their minds about ideas they examine. The creation and publication of material ratings is a perfect example of the First Amendment's right of free speech. "The adoption, enforcement, or endorsement, either explicitly or implicitly, of any of these rating systems by a library violates the Library Bill of Rights and may be unconstitutional" (ALA 2015b).

Readability Rating Labels

As librarians we are charged with making professional decisions to purchase materials covering a wide variety of views about a particular topic (ALA 2015a). Selection policies that mandate "providing materials on opposing sides of controversial issues in order that young citizens may develop, under guidance, the practice of critical analysis of all media" and require selection of high-quality materials that "place principle above personal opinion and reason above prejudice" assure an inclusive collection suitable for library users (HCPS 2012).

If a book is purchased as a result of a readability rating system, such as the one provided by Renaissance Learning's Accelerated Reading (AR) program or by MetaMetrics, the company that provides Lexile measures, the librarian must also consider the interest and comprehension level of the material. As explained on the MetaMetrics website, "*The Grapes of Wrath* is a fairly simple book to read but may have a theme that is inappropriate for a certain age group" (2015). Lexile measures and AR scores may indicate a student can read the words in the material, but they do not necessarily mean that students will understand the context of the story or information. Although

readability is one selection indicator used by librarians, collection choices must reflect age-appropriateness, interest, and book quality. Placing AR or Lexile labels on books sidetracks student reading by leading students to materials that encourage reading of words rather than finding books of literary quality and student interest.

Readability labels pose a bullying risk when students carry books that identify their reading levels. Often low-performing readers come to mind when we think about bullying, but all students, including those identified as gifted, are at risk for being bullied when the book and consequently the student are marked with a reading-level label. "Bullying can threaten students' physical and emotional safety at school and negatively impact their ability to learn" (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services n.d.).

Conclusion

Labeling and ratings systems create challenges that determine how well the librarian succeeds in dodging censorship issues and providing access. School librarians should know that viewpoint labeling and rating systems that restrict access or interfere with developing a diverse and quality collection are powerful tools undermining students' right to read. Labeling materials based on a biased rating or readability score is censorship.

Librarians believe in the premise that balanced, open access to information is a student's right. Recognize the difference between assisting access with directional labeling and denying rightful access to resources through viewpoint labeling. Most of all, avoid collection-development

To Learn More about Access, and Labeling and Rating Systems

American Association of School Librarians. 2011. "Position Statement on Labeling Books with Reading Levels." <www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/resources/statements/labeling>.

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selections based on judgments about content, language, themes, or views about the creator of the material. Refrain from labeling materials with a readability score. Stay on the side of ALA's Library Bill of Rights and the First Amendment.



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Schools. She is a member of AASL and the AASL Publications and Advisory Group. She serves as the liaison to the Freedom to Read Foundation and is also a member of ALA BARC (Budget Analysis and Review Committee). She was awarded the 2015 AASL Distinguished Service Award. She coauthored (with Suzanna L. Panter) the March/April 2015 KQ article "The Paradox of Our Profession" and coauthored (with Kathleen R. Roberts) the January/February 2015 Principal article "Digital Native Does Not Equal Digital Literacy." She also wrote the book *Empowering Leadership: Developing Behaviors for Success (AASL 2013)*. She is a past president of AASL.

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