

**“Well, we start, not surprisingly, with research”:
Depictions of Guided Inquiry and Critical
Information Literacy Instruction in
*Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

Lisa Cheby

Introduction

At the ALA conference in July 2024 in San Diego, California, Lisa Kropp, President of the New York Library Association, declared “We are on a Hellmouth.” This comparison of working in libraries in today’s environment of censorship and backlash against equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice to the demon-ridden world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) (1997–2003) did not need to be spelled out for the librarians in the room who, like Buffy, do the daily hard work of keeping an apocalypse at bay (metaphorical for us, real for Buffy). Both Buffy and librarians must contend with misinformation that the general population is often willing to accept rather than face the

Lisa Cheby, educator, school library advocate, former high school teacher librarian and poet, is the Endowed Education Librarian at California State University. Lisa’s research and teaching focus on school library instruction, critical information literacy, AI literacy, poetic inquiry, and young adult literature as a medium for social change. She has an MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles and an MLIS from San Jose State University. Lisa is the author of two *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* inspired poetry chapbooks. Her third chapbook, *Contact Tracing*, is a meditation on the first weeks of lockdown in 2020. Her fourth chapbook, *Planets Within*, is forthcoming in 2026.

threat before them. Kropp called for librarians to lead the fight like Giles, and to activate all the potential library defenders as Buffy activated potential Slayers at the end of the series (“Chosen” 7.22).

From Covid to the current elections, information literacy is often the thin line between our well-being and our endangerment. In 2022, NATO declared the lack of media literacy education a global threat and partnered with the Center for Media Literacy (CML) to host a series of webinars addressing the global crisis of media literacy (Media and Learning Association). Tessa Jolls, president of the Center for Media Literacy, chronicles the history of media literacy and the new urgency for common frameworks and pedagogy to better prepare people in an increasingly decentralized, globalized media landscape. Rather than seeking to rely on social media companies’ accountability, Jolls recommends building media literacy frameworks to guide interventions through education both formal and informal of the public in the process—skills needed to understand the content and context of media messages.

Librarians, like Giles, have always been doing this work. Two decades of school library studies lead by Keith Curry Lance, Leslie K. Maniotes, David V. Loertscher, and Debra E. Kachel show that the presence of a school librarian on campus improves students’ performance. Librarians share the growing concerns about information illiteracy and work to rethink how we teach information literacy, a subset of literacy. In 2016, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) adopted a new *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, to better reflect the complexities of the information landscape, including changes in higher education through models such as Critical Race Theory and the growth of concepts of “multiple

literacies, for example, transliteracy, media literacy, digital literacy, etc.” (16). The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) also initiated a review of their standards leading to the publication of the *National School Library Standards* in 2017 along with crosswalks for how these standards are to be integrated with other national and content area standards, such as the *Next Generation Science Standards*, through collaboration with the teacher librarians. A second version of these standards was released in October 2025 at the national conference to update language to strengthen requirements for critical information literacy, to include the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and to account for changes in technology.

Yet the nationwide decline of the presence of school librarians often goes unnoticed. Parents, students, and even other teachers who do not work closely with school librarians frequently assume that any adult who unlocks and monitors the library is a librarian. When school libraries are kept open by volunteers and classified staff, versus credentialed school librarians, the community is typically unaware of the skilled expertise they are missing. Our endangered status is why librarians turn to our pop-culture depictions for hope. “The appearance of school librarian Rupert Giles has done more for the image of the profession than anything in the past fifty years” writes GraceAnne A. DeCandido (44). California, home to Sunnydale High School, is 50 out of 51 states (including D.C.) in school librarian to student ratios (Lance “State Profile”). Recent bills passed by the California assembly that require the Model School Libraries Standards be embedded in content area frameworks through collaborations with teacher librarians, which do not exist in most schools, shows a disconnect between policies and policymakers’ awareness of the state and roles of

teacher librarians (California Legislature). This literacy crisis in the United State and the decline in teacher librarians in K-12 school evidences how a better understanding of the role of school librarians in information literacy development is essential to strengthening school libraries, and thus information literacy, including media literacy (Jolls; Media and Learning Association; Kropp; Lance and Kachel; Lance and Maniotes).

Using the lens of library science to view Buffy can help deepen the understanding of the role of school librarians in information literacy education and civic participation. Perceptions of school librarians, either in our real world in the fictional world of *BtVS*, influence how we choose to invest, or not invest, in school libraries and librarians, which impacts students' access to information literacy instruction. Adriana Estill describes the Sunnydale library as a sanctuary for quiet study and research, but also a site of conflict and danger. Libraries are sanctuaries for open access to information, fact-checking, and independent, critical thinking. This access to information is dangerous for repressive and authoritarian systems that thrive on controlling information. Thus, the library is a natural setting for the Slayer and her Watcher/Librarian to radicalize and expose the mythology of the Slayer.

In addition, unlike other classrooms, the library is a public space that anyone can enter at any time, whether curious students, demons and vampires, or adult administrators “who represent institutional authority and forces of repression and censorship” (Estill 246). Christine Jarvis, in an essay about depictions of life-long learning in *BtVS* writes, “In the Buffyverse, the desire to control knowledge and to restrict the learner autonomy is repeatedly portrayed as life threatening.” Over the last decade, concern over media literacy and citizens'

ability to recognize misinformation has dominated the news. In 2017, Congressional hearings sought accountability from social media and internet companies for misinformation in the 2016 election (Martin). Examining the interactions of the students with the library and librarian in *BtVS* can provide insight into why the role of the school librarian is so important and, as the series progresses, how the lessons learned via the library create critical-thinking, active citizens essential to the well-being of communities.

Giles, Watchers, and School Librarians: More Than Shelving and Watching

The work of school librarians is difficult to measure by standard metrics like class enrollment, grades, and standardized test scores as librarians' work cannot be tied to an assigned roster of students since they work in collaboration with teachers to reach all students on campus. School librarians do not directly assign grades to students. When visiting classes come in for instruction, the focus is often on critical thinking skills that cannot be teased out from content knowledge measured by standardized tests. Nonetheless, school librarians, often called teacher librarians, are uniquely credentialed teachers authorized to teach library content standards, which includes skills related to using school libraries, information science, and all types of literacies, including information and media literacy. Like all faculty, they are credentialed educators with specialized training in pedagogy and instructional design in addition to their content area expertise. According to the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) website, teacher librarians are the only teachers on campus authorized to:

- Instruct students in accessing, evaluating, using and integrating information and resources in the library program
- Plan and coordinate school library instruction ... through collaboration with teachers
- Select materials for school and district libraries
- Develop programs for and deliver staff development for school library services
- Coordinate or supervise library programs at the school, district or county level
- Plan and conduct a course of instruction for those pupils who assist in the operation of school libraries
- Supervise classified personnel assigned school library duties
- Develop procedures for and management of the school and district libraries. (n. pag.)

Estill argues that Giles's expertise--his ability to research and his understanding classification systems--are his librarian superpower. His teacher superpower, I would add, is his ability to engage students in inquiry and his modeling of the research process as a life-long learning practice. In the first episode, when Giles gets news about the Harvest, he declares, "I need to go to the library" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1.1, 00:33:50-52). From the beginning of the series, when faced with uncertainty which is the first affective experience at the initiation of research, as we will see in Carol C. Kuhlthau's *Information Search Process* Giles establishes the power of library resources and research as a means of coping. DeCandido writes that, like all good librarians, Giles "bridges the chasm between information as it lives in the text and the transfer of that information into a form the Slayerettes [(the Scoobies)] and Buffy can actually use" (46). This statement

echoes Kuhlthau's theory of research as constructivist, where information is "a bridge to the gap that enables sense-making," which is the underlying philosophy for the Information Search Process (ISP) and Guided Inquiry framework that I will use to analyze information literacy instruction in *BtVS* (Kuhlthau, *Seeking Meaning*, 4).

The structure of narrative serial television cuts out many of life's mundane tasks—personal hygiene, laundry, grocery shopping—that do not drive the narrative forward. Thus, we do not see Giles providing whole class instruction or leading library orientation sessions for freshmen. As seen above in the CTC description of a teacher librarian's authorizations, a school librarian's duties are broader than those of other faculty. Giles's instruction does not look like what we consider instruction since he does not have classes assigned to him and we do not see him lecturing in front of the chalkboard, or, more modernly, the white board or projection screen. In "Passion" (2.17) the writers humorously point out the subtlety of the librarian's work by the Scoobies' shock and irritated reaction to two students coming to the library to actually use the library. Not even the students closest to Giles are aware of the work he does with other students. Giles reminds them it is a library after all and goes to attend to the students. In fact, throughout the series, we see Giles engaging in essential school librarian tasks the same way most school librarians do: through individual interactions with students who need information and through conversations and collaboration with other teachers, particularly Ms. Calendar, the computer science teacher who also happens to be a technopagan. During conversations about Slayer business, for example, a student, Owen, comes to check out an Emily Dickinson book ("Never Kill a Boy on the First Date," 1.5). Throughout Season One we see Giles conversing

with students in the hall, students in the background using the library when Buffy and other main characters are meeting with Giles, and other seemingly mundane tasks that mark the invisible yet significant work of a school librarian. It is the special training of the school librarian and the space separate from the confines of established classroom curriculum that is essential to the development of information literacy and critical thinking. In writing about the library as place, Estill describes the importance of the library space to enable “negotiations around the acquisition of knowledge, the relationship between research and power, and the drive to create community, and the desire for sanctuary” (236). In *BtVS*, the school librarian and the library are essential for having the guidance and the space for learning, questioning, problem-solving, and planning for successful aversion of an apocalypse.

Librarians are also trained to create spaces—physically and energetically—that are accessible, equitable, and diverse, and to be non-discriminatory curators and conduits for information for all within their community (American Library Association). The Sunnydale High School library, in Season One, is the only safe space for the Scoobies to discuss Buffy’s Slayer powers and the reality of demons, and to collaborate (Estill 24445). Giles’s special demon collection ensures that these students have the resources they need to fill their information needs, but also the tools to fight evil. Estill highlights two key elements of this unique collection: “books...and weapons...like the pen and the sword...they engage a dialectic that redefines the library” (240). Of course, these books also include the Slayer journals and ancient texts about “Vampyr’s” and other demons. In short, Giles has created a collection and space to facilitate the ability to fill information gaps through collaborative and meticulous research,

information evaluation and discernment, and the identification of bias and mis/disinformation in order to make critical decisions as an individual and a community member.

While Estill emphasizes the Scooby's exclusivity and dominance in the library, it is not just the Scoobies who appreciate Giles and the library. Giles's familiarity with the students who are working on the fringes of rules and what is 'normal,' is evidenced in the episode "Gingerbread" (3.11). Michael, a minor character in Willow's witchcraft circle, is bullied for wearing makeup and being a warlock. When Michael is targeted by the town's book-banning parents' witch-hunt, under the influence of demons of course, he runs to the library to seek sanctuary under the protection of Mr. Giles and the Scoobies. His direct address to Giles implies a relationship with the school librarian that goes beyond this one incident and one episode. In "Consequences" (3.15) Cordelia goes to Giles for help in finding books for her psychology class, asking him for books by or about Freud and Jung, indicating she understands his value to education and knows he is someone to go to for help with school projects. In these small, incidental interactions that often serve as humorous interruptions to the main plot, we see the importance of Giles, the school librarian, to students beyond the Scoobies, and the implication that Giles's influence is much wider than his work with Buffy and the Scoobies. Jarvis, writing about the Doublemeat Palace's training video for Buffy's first job flipping burgers, contrasts the library as the bridge to information with the world outside the library: "[t]his [outside] is a world where knowledge is given, not made." Though the never-ending violence on campus may, as Jarvis asserts, illustrate "the damage to both student and teachers that results from educational practices that exploit and sustain unequal power relationships," it is Giles, the school

librarian, who maintains the library as a safe space and offers instruction that is not being offered elsewhere in the school or home. It is in the library, as a discreet physical space of the school, that students find the opportunity for self-directed inquiry that extends beyond the institution, an education that resists rather than complies with social norms (Jarvis). It is the librarian that students can trust to guide and support them in these self-directed quests that are the basis for what I will argue is effective library instruction through critical information literacy and Guided Inquiry.

Critical Information Literacy

According to the Final Report of the Presidential Committee on Information Literacy for the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL),

[i]nstead of drowning in the abundance of information that floods their lives, information literate people know how to find, evaluate, and use information effectively to solve a particular problem or make a decision—whether the information they select comes from a computer, a book, a government agency, a film, or any number of other possible resources.

This definition holds extra import as we witness the fracturing of our democracy, which also complicates the idea of information literacy. The place of libraries as both advocates of intellectual freedom and upholders of information organizational systems shaped and defined by societal values rooted in oppression creates a tension in the role of librarians as information literacy educators. This tension defines and fuels critical information literacy. In a 2006 article, James Elmborg questions the role of the library in relation to socio-political context in which libraries exist: “Is the library a passive

information bank...or is it a place where students actively engage in existing knowledge and shape it to their own current and future uses?” (193). Elmborg goes on to advocate for critical information literacy, an approach that problematizes the definitions of literacy as merely “skill-based,” removed from context, community, and culture (193). In the introduction to Annie Downey’s *critical information literacy*, Jessica Critten continues this argument, stating that “situated critical information literacy does not just consider the subject discipline, but also the way information is situated within a system of power relationships” (5-6). Downey pushes this even further, stating, “students need to go beyond critical reflection and actively disrupt dominant modes of information production in order to challenge oppressive power structures” (18). Looking to find balance in the quest to order information so it is accessible and to resist the oppressive outcomes that such ordering often creates or perpetuates, practices such as reparative description or metadata remediation work to repair “offensive, discriminatory, and unbalanced descriptions and terminology in our metadata” (California State University Library Special Collections and Archives). In 2015 the Association of College and Research Libraries published an updated framework for information literacy to move away from the skill-based focus to place information literacy within the “dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem in which all of us work and live,” and to “require new attention to be focused on foundational ideas about that ecosystem” (2). In her feminist reading of *Buffy*, Zoe-Jane Playdon describes how *BtVS* presents “particular ideas of learning, of spirituality, and of citizenship, which challenge the dominant discourses of western patriarchy” (156). In my analysis, these “particular ideas” are encompassed within critical information literacy.

Through the lens of critical information literacy, this paper employs a close reading of Giles's instruction of the Scoobies in *BtVS*, to invite investigation of how to negotiate tensions between tradition and resistance in library science and how to better understand the role of school libraries and information literacy instruction in K-12 education. To help structure the reading, I use the Guided Inquiry Model to provide a framework by which we can see how Giles, as a school librarian, mentors Buffy and the Scoobies in developing critical information literacy.

The Guided Inquiry model

As a school librarian, my collaboration with faculty focused on reimagining library instruction to shift from focusing on producing a five-page essay to how to engage in the process of inquiry in order to prepare for a life of varied information needs (Cheby). Though often called a research paper, these assignments are better described as reports since they are a compilation of information gathered to answer an assigned question rather than a practice of inquiry for a deeper understanding. Inspired by Kuhlthau, Maniotes, and Caspari's *Guided Inquiry: Learning in the 21st Century*, my information literacy instruction engaged students in low-stakes, high-engagement practice of question formulation and investigation of topics students' chose that were relevant to their lives and communities. I will use Guided Inquiry in this analysis as a framework for reading depictions of school librarianship in *BtVS* as a model for information literacy instruction. Kuhlthau et al. identify key features of Guided Inquiry that distinguish it from traditional instruction built around essay assignments. Guided Inquiry is

- life-long learning of information literacy skills;

- transferable across disciplines and research tasks, as opposed to skills that are learned in subject area silos to prepare for a test;
- mentoring students through all stages, and emotions, of research versus focusing only on the final product;
- pursuing student-generated, relevant topics versus pre-determined questions from the teacher;
- using a variety of sources versus only engaging with preselected sources and only accepting one criterion for authority;
- collaboration in all stages from brainstorming to troubleshooting search queries to evaluating sources (*Guided Inquiry: Learning 6*, Figure 1.2).

Developed through decades of research, Guided Inquiry is rooted in constructivist theory and builds on John Dewey’s “concept of information as ‘working capital’ for constructing understanding and knowledge” (Kuhlthau et al., *Guided Inquiry: Learning 14*). Constructivist approaches contrast with teaching methods that focus on learning discipline area content as transmitted by the teacher to the student. Rather, constructivist methods position the teacher as a facilitator for students to engage with material to construct meaning. In Guided Inquiry the teacher and teacher librarian are guides for students to choose unique paths of inquiry to pursue.

Kuhlthau et al., drawing from theorists George Kelly and Jerome Bruner, developed their own model, the Information Search Process (ISP), which associates stages of the research process with affective, cognitive, and physical responses (*Guided Inquiry: Learning 14*). The affective responses include feelings of uncertainty, confusion, frustration, and doubt, as well as clarity, focus, and excitement. By acknowledging and

destigmatizing emotion as a component of research, instruction can be designed to include interventions to guide student through expected and natural mental and emotional obstacles to completion, where the joy and satisfaction of inquiry may be experienced and fostered. Kuhlthau et al. track the path of inquiry with feelings, thoughts, and actions as seen in this table from Kuhlthau’s website:

Model of the Information Search Process							
	Initiation	Selection	Exploration	Formulation	Collection	Presentation	Assessment
Feelings (Affective)	Uncertainty	Optimism	Confusion Frustration Doubt	Clarity	Sense of direction / Confidence	Satisfaction or Disappointment	Sense of accomplish- ment
Thoughts (Cognitive)	vague	—————→			focused	—————→	Increased self- awareness
Actions (Physical)	seeking	relevant Exploring	information	seeking	pertinent Documenting	information	

(Kuhlthau et al. *Guided Inquiry: Learning*; Kuhlthau, “Information Search Process”)

Though in the table the ISP appears linear, inquiry is a recursive process, with the seeker repeating phases, reassessing information as they work through finding and evaluating information, and defining and redefining queries. Critical information literacy as practiced in library instruction “promotes critical engagement with information sources, considers students collaborators in knowledge production,...recognizes the affective dimensions of research, and (in some cases) has liberatory aims” (Downey 41 42). All of these elements are seen in the ISP and Guided Inquiry the affective and cognitive considerations, the emphasis on research as collaborative, and the attention to both exploration

and reflection on the process. In discussing the role of teacher librarians in K-12 schools, I have already discussed Giles as a mentor and model of life-long learning. Using Guided Inquiry's ISP model and critical information literacy theory as lenses for analysis, I will examine how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* offers depictions of information literacy instruction to "prepare students for work, citizenship, and life in a free society" (Kuhlthau et al., *Guided Inquiry: Learning* 14).

Student-Generated Inquiry

One of the key tenets of Guided Inquiry is the importance of questions that are generated by the students themselves. This requires adequate time for students to explore and contemplate their own curiosity, something that is often not allocated for in traditional research assignments (Kuhlthau et al., *Guided Inquiry Design* 93). Through what may look like informal conversations, school librarians strategically elicit the interests of students and help students to articulate their information needs more clearly. Questions are not imposed on students. Through exploratory research, students have time to develop questions that are meaningful for them and for which they are excited to gather information. In "The Harvest" (1.2), Willow "wants and needs to help," so Giles asks her to be his research assistant, stoking her natural curiosity and utilizing her knowledge of online navigation to supplement his book knowledge. Using Guided Inquiry Giles channels and focuses natural curiosity and desire to help into research and learning. By sharing the research duties, Giles also establishes from the beginning the idea of inquiry and research as collaboration—we don't have to do it all alone for it to be useful or valid research. In fact, Giles teaches students that sharing responsibility can lead to deeper understanding and more effective action.

The exploring phase before the identification of the question is often where students are feeling confusion, frustration, and doubt, so guidance in identifying what they really want or need to know is key for students to be able to move forward in the inquiry process (Kuhlthau, “Information Search Process”). In “Faith, Hope, and Trick” (3.3) Giles pretends to be working on a spell as a tool to get Buffy to recount how she killed Angelus hoping she will open up about the experience, not yet knowing that Angel had returned just before she killed him. Only later in the episode is she able to reveal the deeper truth of Angel’s regaining his soul just before she killed him. . Giles’s skills in Guided Inquiry helps Buffy to work through her emotions of confusion, frustration, and doubt to be able to clearly identify the truth of what happened. Once Giles knows what Buffy experienced, he is better able to help her move forward. This type of reference interview, albeit not always so deeply personal, is essential for both the information-seeker and the librarian to co-develop a strategy to address the information need..

Guided Inquiry’s focus on process invites a deeper, more critical engagement with information-seeking than traditional assignments that only require students to master pre-determined content matter to be demonstrated through tests or formulaic writing assignments. Playdon notes that the “negotiated learning relationship between Buffy and Giles” is “education rather than training” (161). These distinctions between learning as negotiated and relational, and education as being about thinking over training, are reflected in the values of collaboration, student-driven inquiry, and critical thinking of Guided Inquiry. In an analysis of life-long learning in *BtVS*, Jarvis’s observation of how “Buffy adopts a ‘deep’ approach to want to understand the demon phenomena in her own terms

and connect it to her own experience” mirrors Guided Inquiry’s aim to leverage an inquiry’s relevance to the student in order to allow them to practice and develop life-long learning skills. Moreover, as Playdon puts it, “training is an act of subjugation, education an act of empowerment” (164). This deep inquiry through critical information literacy as modeled by Giles and practiced by the Scoobies is contrasted with the rote learning model promoted by many institutions, including schools¹ and governments. Alia R. Tyner-Mullings pushes such analysis even further, stating that “the way education is portrayed in these shows is not only steeped in racial and racist ideas about education, but also very violent ones” (58).

The conflict between rote learning and critical information literacy through inquiry is best exemplified by the differences between the Initiative, a military department sent to Sunnydale to study demons by capturing and experimenting on them, and the Scoobies. The Scoobies engage in inclusive Slaying practices that work to understand the history and context of demons’ actions and motivations (Jarvis). Dr. Walsh, the director of the Initiative, and Dr. Angelman, the lead scientist working on their secret experiment of building a super soldier assembled from demon parts, do not want anyone asking questions (“The I in Team” 4.13). Buffy’s inquisitiveness, learned from Giles’s information literacy mentorship, is considered dangerous by Walsh and Angelman, who value the obedience of soldiers, like Riley, who follows orders without questioning or requiring explanations (“The I in Team”). After Buffy’s first tour of the Initiative’s facility, Walsh calls her “unpredictable” and Angelman an “unnecessary risk” (00:14:47-50). This echoes education leaders and others in power who prefer that students (and citizens) not question or challenge their power. Similarly, in Season 2, Snyder, Sunnydale High

School's newest school principal, colludes with the police to cover up demon activity as gang activity and mark Buffy and her friends as troublemakers because of their inquisitiveness ("School Hard" 2.3). Snyder warns them, "A lot of educators tell students: 'Think of your principal as your pal.' I say: 'Think of me as your judge, jury, and executioner'" ("School Hard" 2.3, 00:00:14-24). Buffy brings a critical inquiry approach that seeks to understand the motives and patterns of each unique demon to more efficiently defeat or quell them., When Angelmen ends a mission-prep meeting at the Initiative by saying "that's all you really need to know." Buffy, undeterred, raises her hand to ask "Why exactly can't we damage this polka thing's arms" and "What do they want" ("The I in Team" 4.13, 00:19:50-52; 00:19:57-59; 00:20:20-21). Buffy's extensive experience slaying demons gives her confidence and authority. Her questions are indicative of her underlying value of liberation and emancipation versus blind destruction of the other. Seeing demons as conscious beings, maybe even allies, makes Slaying, for Buffy and the Scoobies who are trained in battle and critical thinking, more than following orders, but a constant balance of justice and ethics. Slaying is an informed, evidence-based action to protect innocents and the world from harm or death. The evidence drives decisions like sparing the lives of the soul-bearing vampires like Angel, redeemed demons like Anya, or merely harmless demons like Clem. Each demon is dealt with as an individual. Riley has been trained to "follow orders, not ask questions," ("The I in Team" 4.13, 00:29:45-47). Buffy challenges Riley to think more critically: "Aren't you curious about the science and research stuff they're doing?" ("The I in Team" 4.13, 00:29:50-54). When, without questioning why, he is beckoned from bed by Dr. Walsh, who surveilled Riley and Buffy's night of passion, Buffy notes "you're really not one for

asking questions, are you?” to which he says he’ll leave that to her (“The I in Team” 4.13, 00:30:30-32). As Jarvis writes, “the passivity and unquestioning obedience” of the Initiative team “exemplify a static and hierarchical world in which knowledge is uncontested,” in contrast to the healthy skepticism, and “self-directed,” collaborative learning of the Scoobies under Giles’s guidance. Realizing Buffy’s critical approach will not be squelched, Walsh tells Angelman that Buffy “is becoming a liability” (“The I in Team” 4.13, 00:31:32-34). Buffy’s education by Giles has left her untrainable, according to the needs of the Initiative.

The critical information literacy and Guided Inquiry model do not, however, pretend to remove personal investment or bias in the inquiry process. In “Gingerbread” (3.11) Giles questions if Buffy’s outrage to find those responsible for the two children her mother, Joyce, found dead is because of Joyce’s involvement, to which Buffy confirms, “Oh, it’s completely personal” (00:06:02-05). This hearkens back to Jarvis’s note of Buffy’s “‘deep’ approach” to slaying that is dismissed by Dr. Walsh and Dr. Angleman of the Initiative (“The I in Team”). Estill similarly writes about the idea of book knowledge as useful but incomplete if removed from the context of experiential knowledge. Unlike the soldiers, Buffy seeks agency and to “be in control of what she does, not controlled by it” (Jarvis). This kind of empowerment is a goal of Guided Inquiry and critical information literacy. Kuhlthau notes shifts in librarianship that recognize that “physical access does not equate informing,” but requires consideration of how people use and seek information to better guide them to be critical users and creators of information (*Seeking Meaning* 2).

By engaging in inquiry that is driven by personally urgent questions and information needs generated by the students, the students in *BtVS* gain confidence, autonomy, and agency. After escaping the Master's minions, Buffy returns to the library to get more information. Once Giles explains the origins of the Hellmouth, she is able to continue her Slaying duties with renewed confidence and focus ("The Harvest" 1.2), a pattern repeated throughout the series, especially in the high school years. In Kuhlthau's development of the Information Search Process, she found that many students struggled to reach a focused thesis because of a "lack of personal perspective" grown from "the notion that the purpose of a search is to reproduce an author's view rather than to make sense within one's own frame of reference" (*Seeking Meaning* 68). The importance of personal investment in research to integrate understanding into their reality compels both the villain and the Scoobies in "Some Assembly Required" (2.2). Chris, a classmate of the Scoobies at Sunnydale High, achieves great success in science experiments to revive his dead brother, a Sunnydale sports hero, as he grieves for him. The Scoobies are motivated to collect evidence to solve the mystery of stolen female bodies from graves and how they might protect other female students in Sunnydale. It is not just about finding an answer, but making sense of why the bodies are missing, which leads to Chris's research into magic that led to reviving his brother. In "Beauty and the Beasts" (3.4), after Buffy finds a resurrected Angel in an animalistic state, she goes to the library under the guise of relieving Faith from guarding Oz, a werewolf, on the full moon. Once alone, Buffy searches the card catalog to try to make sense of this new Angel. Giles finds her the next morning with the catalog drawer on a stool and Buffy sleeping with an open book. When Buffy claims it was a bad dream that compelled this late-

night research, Giles, skeptically responds, “I didn’t think you knew what a card index was for” (“Beauty and the Beasts” 3.4, 00:18:50-53), Buffy has embraced Giles’s habit to turn to the library when information is needed, hearkening back to a classic Giles quote from “Angel” (1.7), “you weren't here from midnight until six researching it” (00:12:25-27). Buffy’s need to understand what happened to Angel to clarify her own guilt for killing him prompts her to seek information that she can integrate into her understanding of events with the hope that the Angel she once knew might be restored. This need for deeper understanding to create a path for clear action drives Buffy to her late-night search through the card catalog and stacks of the Sunnydale High School Library. As school librarian, Giles curates and creates space where students may pursue knowledge they need without question or judgment, but also with gentle guidance through turmoil to clarity. Implementing Guided Inquiry that prioritizes personal relevance and purpose helps the students of Sunnydale to find focus in order to face and articulate urgent questions they could not confront alone.

Apocalypse and Misinformation: Choosing and Evaluating Sources

Another key objective of guided inquiry is for students to learn to use a variety of sources that are not pre-selected by the teacher and to develop criteria for each inquiry regarding what would constitute an authoritative source (Kuhlthau et al., *Guided Inquiry*). Kuhlthau’s studies of information literacy instruction revealed that using multiple sources is a skill to be learned; students “showed a need for guidance” in search strategies to “open up the creative process of learning from a variety of sources” (*Teaching* vii). Though a bibliophile, Giles

concedes “that format is the least of our [librarians’] problems when there are vampires and demons about” (DeCandido 45). Giles incorporates this into his instruction by assigning each Scooby to seek information from various types of sources. For example, in “Some Assembly Required,” Giles consults books, Willow searches the internet, and Buffy conducts field research. This pattern is seen over and over in the series, through explicit agreement or the informal choices of the researchers. Other Scoobies are often assigned or volunteer to assist one of these three in their searches. Later in each episode, they convene, usually in the library, to consolidate and evaluate their findings from all the various sources, reassess their inquiry approach, and designate new searches until they have sufficient information to formulate an effective plan to save Sunnydale and the world. In later seasons, after the students have graduated high school and Giles is no longer the school librarian, this work takes place in Giles’s apartment (Seasons 4 and 5), the Magic Shop (Seasons 5 and 6), or in Buffy’s home (“Bring on the Night” 7.10).

In “The Freshman” (4.1) Buffy and Willow take one trip to the college library, where Buffy is overwhelmed and Willow is entranced by its vastness. Buffy seeks out the comfort of Giles’s support when a student on campus is missing, insisting “We need research and, and chests and stuff” (00:35-39). Buffy recognizes the need for research and information to continue her job as Slayer and eventually is able to convince Giles and the others to reunite the Scooby team to divide and conquer the research tasks that allow for effective Slaying and survival. In “Never Leave Me,” (7.9), the basis of Slayer knowledge is attacked as the Watchers Council is blown up, but not before Giles is able to steal some key primary source materials that he hopes will help them fight the First Evil. In “Bring on the

Night,” (7.10) the Summers’ home becomes research central with the dining table transformed into an ad hoc library with the materials Giles saved, a computer, and other books they have gathered. As Willow does internet research about the Seal of Danzthar, Buffy instructs Dawn to “Keep reading. ...we need to figure out how to fight this thing [the First Evil]” and asks someone to hand her “the *Watchers’ Codex* again” (00:02:19-25 ; 00:02:34-38) Willow’s task, now that Dawn has taken over internet research, is to find or create a spell that will allow them to locate the First Evil, leaving her to research a variety of non-traditional sources about magic and witchcraft, including the community knowledge of her witch network. Thus, from Season 4 to Season 7, we see Buffy and the Scoobies actively making decisions about what kind of sources to use for each information need, evaluating and cross-checking the evidence they find, and then making critical decisions about when and how to take action. In short, they practice Guided Inquiry and the ISP over and over.

Guided Inquiry prioritizes understanding over closed answers and final products. As a result, when we suspect or fear we are lacking information, we must continue the search until we can find confidence in the information (Kuhlthau, “Information Search Process”). In *BtVS* we see the inquiry process is not linear but cyclical, moving through moments of confidence and perceived clarity back to uncertainty and doubt. In “Prophecy Girl” (1.12) Giles, conducting his research to explain the even stranger than normal phenomena occurring in Sunnydale, stumbles across a prophecy predicting that Buffy will face the Master – the evil behind the demons and vampires who seek to open the Hellmouth and start the apocalypse – and die. Giles cross-checks sources. Ms. Calendar confirms Giles’s sources, bringing him evidence from her own online research,

declaring “this is apocalypse stuff” (00:11:02-04). Still, he fears he is missing something, so he asks Ms. Calendar to investigate emails she has received from a monk from Cortona talking about an Anointed One and a prophecy. Giles even calls in Angel. As Giles explains to Angel that the prophecy comes from a highly accurate and trusted source, the *Codex*, Buffy overhears. The disappearance of the monk does not allow Ms. Calendar to confirm the prophecy but adds to evidence that an apocalypse is near. Through all this, we see these researchers move in and out of doubt and certainty, as we see in the ISP model. However, needing to choose a course forward until more information reveals other options, Buffy allows the Anointed One to lead her to the Master against the protests of Giles and Ms. Calendar. Giles and the Scoobies continue undeterred as Giles assigns everyone reading for how they can locate the Hellmouth and prepare for the Apocalypse. In his lair, the Master mocks Buffy, “prophecies are tricky creatures, they don’t tell you everything” and whispers in her ear “you’re the one that sets me free” (00:33:49-00:34:01). With a taste of the Slayer’s blood, he is able to open the Hellmouth. What neither the prophecy nor the Scoobies account for is that Buffy refuses to be bound by rules. Even the Master is surprised when Buffy confronts him again, and he insists, “You were destined to die. It was written” (“Prophecy Girl” 1.12, 00:40:51-53). Buffy, with Giles’s instruction, has created a team of information-seeking warriors who persist through doubt and confusion. Xander employs Angel’s vampiric sensing skills to find Buffy, and it is Xander’s breath that revives her. Having died and come back to life, Buffy is the new evidence that the prophecy is not the final word, as she tracks and kills the Master. Sometimes information is inaccessible until we enter the underground and welcome in new doubt to lead to the next level of certainty.

Researchers, as the ISP shows, often must overcome frustration as sometimes needed information is lost, hidden, or rendered undiscoverable. An incorrect subject heading, an online journal that closes, poorly configured metadata, and government websites that are altered due to censoring administrations are just a few ways information may be rendered inaccessible or undiscoverable. Some information is created outside of classified and categorized systems and requires creative and non-traditional searches to find. In “Passion” (2.17), Jenny Calendar’s translation of the spell to restore Angel’s soul is saved on a floppy disk that slips between file cabinets. This valuable information, which would have prevented much destruction by the soulless Angelus, remains hidden until accidentally discovered by Buffy in the next season (“Becoming, Part 1” 2.21). When faced with prophecies, the wisdom of ancient texts, or any information vetted by gatekeeping institutions, critical information literacy urges us to question not just the credibility of the source, but what remains unknown or hidden. In “Gingerbread” (3.11), when Buffy sees in Willow’s notebook the symbols found on the hands of the dead children her mother discovered on the playground, she fears Willow’s witchcraft has veered into ritual sacrifice. Based on that evidence, Willow seems suspect. Only when Buffy questions the veracity of the victims’ identities Giles admits he assumed the sources were verified by the media do they discover the photo in the news article is actually an archival photo. Thrust into doubt, they are forced to continue research until this new evidence clarifies and confirms that the children are demons, not real victims. With this knowledge, Buffy can properly identify the symbols on the hands as disinformation placed by the demons. Now clear on whom they are fighting, Giles is able to find and cast a spell to

reveal the demon's true identity, exposing the disinformation that incited the witch hunt in Sunnydale and stopping the burning of Willow, Buffy, and Amy, another witch who is part of the Sunnydale High School wiccan community

Guided Inquiry and critical information literacy include accounting and adjusting for bias in sources and ourselves. In "Becoming, Part 1," the Scoobies' biases toward Angel—Buffy's love, Xander's jealousy, and Giles's anger—cause division as they determine how to use the knowledge at hand: Jenny's newly discovered curse to return Angel's soul. Do they use Jenny's curse to save the world by restoring Angel's soul before he awakes the demon Acathla who will suck the world into hell, or do they use the sword Kendra brought that is blessed by the knight who originally imprisoned Acathla in his current stone tomb to reseal the tomb and kill Angel? Each character advocates for the knowledge that supports their own biases and serves the outcome they most desire, leading to each following their own path and the tragic slaying of Angel just as his soul is restored ("Becoming, Part 2" 2.22).

The Scoobies rely on each other to point out each other's biases that get in the way of good decisions. In "The I in Team," when Buffy shows up an hour late to the Scooby meeting at the Bronze with the Initiative soldiers in tow and gushes to Willow about how she has been accepted as part of the team, Willow asks Buffy, "Do you really think this is a good idea? ... Don't you think you are rushing things a little?" (00:18:13-18), pointing out how little they really know about the Initiative. This is a reversal from "I Robot, You Jane" (1.8), in which Buffy cautions Willow about her online boyfriend, Malcolm, who turns out to be a demon trapped in the computer. In that episode, Willow, working with Ms. Calendar on a digitizing project, unknowingly releases a demon into the internet by scanning a book in which

the demon was trapped. The demon, posing as Malcolm, befriends Willow as a tool to gain power. Her inability to distinguish from the truth what she wants to believe — there is a boy who likes her — keeps her from taking precautions she would usually take, such as requiring evidence that Malcolm is who he claims to be. Acting on limited information, Willow reveals personal details that leave her vulnerable to the demon’s manipulations. Buffy’s concern that this boy is not who he says he is, which was correct, pushes Willow closer to Malcolm. Only as more evidence accumulates — Malcolm’s stalking behavior and knowledge of personal information about Buffy, a dead body, the blank book, and ultimately kidnapping and attacking the Scoobies — is Willow able to see the truth. Similarly, in “The I in Team,” Buffy’s blind spot for Riley and the Initiative is exposed when Dr. Walsh sets her up to be ambushed by demons. Critical information literacy and Guided Inquiry encourage information seekers to learn to adjust and readjust their understanding and strategy as new information confirms or contradicts what they think they know.

In *BTVS* and real life, information-seeking is not a linear means to a single right answer. In learning to be life-long information seekers, Buffy and the Scoobies often act prematurely or incorrectly, armed with incomplete information. Each search is “an impetus for learning and changing constructs,” an adventure that requires flexibility, resilience, and sometimes luck (Kuhlthau, *Seeking Meaning* 3), like finding Jenny Calendar’s work on a floppy disk between cabinets. Even as we work towards complete and transparent information sources as critical information literacy practitioners, like Giles, Buffy, and the Scoobies, we do the best we can to verify information we have access to and stay open to correction in the ongoing process of moving towards clarity. In

reporting of their work, authors of academic research papers include their shortcomings and possibilities for further studies. Research, like fighting demons on the Hellmouth, is an ever evolving, life-long learning experience.

Challenging Authority and Tradition: Defining Authority in Sources

Critical information literacy goes beyond the demand for a variety of sources, to problematizing what is defined as a source and expanding the idea of what is deemed credible or authoritative. Estill discusses the tension between library stereotypes, especially the dusty old British librarian who only values book knowledge, and the reality of the library as a space to practice radical information-seeking and action. Though Giles is definitely a bibliophile, from the stance of critical information literacy, we can interpret his teaching as one that expands definitions of credibility in inquiry tasks. Estill writes that Giles's love of books and Britishness reinforce "the idea of the library as a culturally 'high' site" as opposed to "pop Americana... 'low' culture" (238). Yet Buffy and the Scoobies (and the viewers) find that the materials found in the library and promoted by Giles are "neither conventional nor curricular" (Estill 239). Critical informational literacy practices of challenging traditional forms of knowledge and accounting for the culture in which an inquiry exists for Buffy, it is a world filled with magic, demons, and the constant threat of the Hellmouth is integral to the information-seeking strategies Giles teaches (Elmborg; Downey). From the beginning, Giles debunks the idea that only certain types of sources of information, such as library books, are valid. In "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1.1), Giles asks Buffy about her dreams as a point of initiation for research, recognizing information and

knowledge integral to Slaying comes from non-traditional sources. Later in the season, this critical information literacy approach to source seeking and selection is reinforced when Giles asks Willow to use the internet to find information, knowing that there are some things—like city plans—for which his ancient books are not the authoritative source (“The Harvest” 1.2). In “I Robot, You Jane,” Ms. Calendar’s expertise in digital information complements Giles’s book expertise (and creates sparks for some library-centered romantic banter, because even in the apocalypse our need for love prevails). Giles resists succumbing to his own preference for books and acknowledges that ancient texts passed down through the Watchers Council are not the only useful or authoritative sources of information when battling the Hellmouth. In seeking help from Ms. Calendar and online sources within the technopagan community (the term by which Ms. Calendar identifies herself and her community), he recognizes the credibility and expertise of individuals and communities which may historically have been relegated to the fringes of discourse and purposefully discounted to maintain a certain narrative to support those with power (“Prophecy Girl”; “Passion” 2.17). This is another key lesson of critical information literacy that Giles passes down to his students.

In “Checkpoint,” (5.12) the striving towards more inclusive definitions of authority and more accessible forms of information are seen in the clash with the Watchers Council and with Buffy’s professor. In a college history lecture, Buffy dares to question the validity of Rasputin’s death, based on her Slayer knowledge of vampirism, only to be shamed by her professor who mocks her for entertaining sources he deems not credible, namely sources outside the mainstream of the Western narrative of history that threaten his world view.

Buffy's confidence to question her professor is a testament to the lessons from Giles, who encouraged her to have confidence in her own experience and in non-traditional sources of information, and prepares her to meet an even greater challenge of authority: the Watchers Council.

Buffy returns to the Magic Box, a shop owned by Giles and managed by Anya, that has become the new Scooby headquarters, to find the Watchers Council waiting for her and declaring the shop closed ("Checkpoint"). The Council, uneasy with Buffy's growing independence and involvement of the Scoobies in Slaying duties, comes to Sunnydale to assess her credibility and effectiveness as the Slayer. They attempt to coerce Buffy into their series of tests by using the currency of information, in this case privileged information about this season's adversary, a god named Glory. The concept of knowledge as transactional, something to be controlled by and reserved for those deemed to have proper authority and power is an example of the kind of oppressive and biased systems within information production that critical information literacy encourages students be aware of and challenge. As Giles's apt pupil, Buffy refuses their offer to get information in return for surrendering their philosophy of evidence-based, collaborative decision making. Buffy knows that she and the Scoobies are more than capable of investigating on their own and do not need gatekeepers to grant them access to the information they need.² This refusal is a first step toward Buffy's eventual sharing of power with all the potential Slayers in Season 7, a final act of rebellion against the gatekeepers to give full autonomy to the Slayers.

The Watchers Council is forced to resort to wielding their extensive, brute power and threaten to deport Giles to get Buffy to concede to their tests ("Checkpoint"). Fighting blindfolded

under the command of instructions in Japanese, a language Buffy does not understand, Buffy flouts their commands and finishes the test using her own experience and knowledge. She declares she will continue to effectively execute her charge as Slayer on her own terms and using her own methods, which have served her well in averting numerous apocalypses over the seasons. This echoes the first episode where Buffy challenged such authority and classification of knowledge upon her early encounters with Giles (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”). Both new to Sunnydale, Buffy and Giles gaze down on the crowd at the Bronze from the second-floor balcony, as Giles attempts to instruct Buffy in using her Slayer power to sense who is a vampire by encouraging her to hone her extra-sensory gifts. Without a pause, Buffy points out a vampire. Giles, impressed, asks her to reflect on how she was able to use her super senses, but she points out the vampire’s fashion and demeanor are “carbon dated” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” 1.1, 00:32:00-01). The Watchers’ desire to control and define what is credible knowledge is akin to information classification systems that attempt to distort authority and teach users of information to distrust their own experiences, their own authority, and the experiences and knowledge of communities, experts, and systems outside of academia or other systems of power.³ Standing on the balcony at the Bronze, Giles disappointedly responds, “But you didn’t... hone” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” 1.1, 00:32:07-08). Humbled and flustered, Giles learns to accept and value Buffy’s unconventional methods.

. Buffy and Giles disrupt and challenge established systems of authority throughout the series. Giles confronts Principal Snyder in “Gingerbread” when the authorities raid the library during a flurry of calls for censorship led by a demon-controlled Joyce, working to defend why they have

books on witchcraft and demons in their library, clearly relevant topics for a school on the Hellmouth. In “Graduation Day, Part 2” (3.22) when Buffy is kicked out of school, she questions the logic of systems that fail to consider the broader context of Sunnydale’s place on the Hellmouth, the humanity of the students, and the equity in freedom of expression. In “Revelations” (3.7), Mrs. Post, a wayward Watcher, belittles Giles’s library collection and his research strategy, though we later learn it is her credibility and the credibility of the Watchers’ system that is flawed. At the end of the episode Giles reports Mrs. Post “was kicked out by the Council a couple of years ago...they swear there was a memo”. The failure of the Council to keep track of their own disqualified Watcher is indicative of the failure of bureaucratic gatekeepers of information to adapt and to incorporate new information and knowledge into their world view, an ongoing struggle within librarianship and academia.

Likewise, Giles’s ignorance of the inner workings of the Council is indicative of such institutions’ ostracization of those who challenge the status quo. Giles has become an outcast for his unconventional approaches and support of Buffy’s self-directed inquiry methods and innovations in Slaying. This ostracization culminates in “Helpless” (3.12), when Giles must make a choice to follow the directives or refuse to complete the test of the Slayer on her 18th birthday. This test requires the Watcher, in this case Giles, to inject the Slayer, Buffy, with a drug that drains her powers to and then to trap her in a room with a Vampire to see if she is able to survive without the Slayer abilities. Buffy reprimands the Council when she learns about this irresponsible, inhumane test when the caged vampire attacks her mother while she was incapacitated: “You understand nothing. You let that monster loose and he went

after my *mother*” (“Helpless” 3.12, 00:40:34-40). Firing Giles, the consequence of defiance, does not bring Buffy or Giles into compliance. In “Bad Girls” (3.14), Buffy and Giles make it clear upon meeting the new Watcher, Wesley, that they have no intention of toeing the line of a system that has proven itself archaic and inhumane. As the season closes, Buffy fires Wesley for still believing in the rightness of the Council’s mandate, exemplified by his willingness to sacrifice one—in this case Willow—for the greater good, a mindset that justifies war and death, but has been determined to lack credibility and be unnecessary with Buffy and the Scoobies (“Choices” 3.19; “Graduation Day: Part 1” 3.21; “Graduation Day: Part 2” 3.22). Buffy rebukes such thinking with faith and confidence of her ability to work through any information challenge using the Guided Inquiry process and critical information literacy skills Giles has taught her. She knows that through creative and persistent work, together they will find a way to save both Willow and avert an apocalypse—which of course they do.

One of the most direct critiques of institutions and systems of authority as gatekeeper of knowledge in *BtVS* is seen in the depiction of the Initiative in Season Four. Jarvis writes, “The authority and the hierarchy on which the Initiative is based are threatened by Buffy.” As Patricia Pender puts it, *BtVS* “delights in deliberately and self-consciously baffling the binary” (35). The feminist principles of the personal as political and the legitimacy of emotions and experience as information used to guide inquiry directly challenge the Initiative’s requirement for conformity in action and thinking. Rather, Buffy’s critical information literacy approach to problem-solving blends knowledge, emotion, and experience to find effective solutions to apocalyptic threats that create space for liberation rather than blind obedience (Jarvis). Dr. Walsh’s

ability to engage and complete the Adam project is an example of the danger of unquestioning authority (“The I in Team”). Thus, through the seasons, *BtVS* establishes new standards for authority and credibility through the practice of ethical use of information to construct deeper understandings of the demons of Sunnydale.

Interestingly, tucked within the story of the Initiative is the episode “Pangs” (4.8), which directly tackles the idea of revisionist histories and the need for tools like critical information literacy, Guided Inquiry, and diversification of scholarship to build more accurate narratives. In this episode, the Scoobies face a Chumash vengeance demon released from beneath a construction site at the location of an old mission. Buffy, annoyed that her mother is out of town for the holiday, insists on a traditional Thanksgiving. Anya quips it is really a sacrificial ritual, and, as mainstream American culture does, she is ignored for the sake of nostalgic tradition. Willow, turning to books and the internet to research the latest demon in town, is troubled by the history she uncovers. She finds that Hus, the Chumash Spirit, seeks vengeance for the enslavement and forced labor of the Chumash. Rather than the usual vanquishing, Willow suggests they should help Hus right the wrongs done to the Chumash. Giles disagrees, claiming a demon is a demon, regardless of the context. As viewers, particularly in 2025, we are challenged to reconcile this flawed attempt to shed light on the crimes against Indigenous Americans. Embedding the history of the Chumash in California in a TV episode was likely a radical choice at the time, especially in framing it as a challenge to Buffy’s longing for the familiar comforts of an idyllic childhood Thanksgiving. Critical information literacy asks us to examine how society and individuals justify lies we were taught when presented with new

information and confronted with ethical questions of how to repair and course-correct moving forward. Mona Tucker, Chair of the yak tityu tilhini (YTT) Northern Chumash tribe, speaking about this episode at the 2024 Slayage Conference, drew attention to the stereotypical depiction of indigenous people as vengeful, evil spirits, and the sloppy decline at the end of the episode equating indigenous people to pets. Furthermore, Hus turns into a bear, making it more palatable when he is stabbed with his own knife. Tucker critiques the show's failure to acknowledge their continued existence, as if the vanquishing of the spirit puts the questions and issues to rest.⁴ Tereza Szeghi and Wesley Dempster, in their in-depth analysis of the problematic depictions of Indigenous Americans in this episode, write that the series perpetuates "the notion that this history and the indigenous peoples affected by it have vanished" (§ 2). Despite her willingness to stand up to the authorities in the Initiative and the Watchers Council, in this instance Giles and most of the Scoobies fail to rise to the demands of critical information literacy. Collective habits, like Thanksgiving, are difficult to change on a societal scale. It is Willow's curiosity and sense of justice that motivates her research. Guided Inquiry and critical information literacy practices are essential as they put the student in charge. By not being limited by the interest or priorities of curriculum, Willow had the freedom to uncover multiple perspectives and to use her training to draw her own conclusions, even if others do not agree and the world insists on going on as usual. Szeghi and Dempster also note the failure of "Pangs" to seek justice for Hus by focusing "on how members of today's dominant culture can come to terms with their own colonial history" (§ 9). Yet, it is through the work of the Willows of the world that, by persistence in research and speaking up to bring awareness,

change occurs, such as the recent return of property to the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council in August 2025 (Gaydos).

The strong information literacy foundation established by Giles in the Scoobies' high school years prepares them, and Giles, to enact the values and principles of critical information literacy in increasingly complex and disruptive ways, ultimately leading to Buffy's rejection of the entire Council-approved Chosen One legacy ("Chosen" 7.22).

Research as Community and Collaboration

In Guided Inquiry, Kuhlthau et al. (*Guided Inquiry: Learning*) propose that doing research is not a solitary activity. Knowledge in *BtVS* doesn't just come just from books, but "issues from every moment of group interaction" (Wandless ¶8). Estill describes research as depicted in *BtVS* as a democratic collaboration where everyone has their chance to provide opinions and input (242). In "Passion," we see the deep collaboration of Giles, Ms. Calendar, Xander, Willow, Buffy, and even Cordelia as they work to find a spell to protect them from Angelus. With everyone's input and talents, Willow is able to successfully cast a spell to shield Buffy's home from Angelus. In "Enemies" (3.17), Wesley's collaboration with Giles, though forbidden by the Council, reinforces for all the importance of working together toward a common goal in research and saving the world. Research is collaboration in *BtVS*.

The space of the library "compels the formation of a community effort" that is essential to Buffy's success" (Estill 245). In Season Four, the loss of that space disrupts the collaboration. With Giles retired, Xander in the workforce, and the vastness of the college library overwhelming, Buffy is lost and dislocated ("The Freshman" 4.1). In "The Freshman," when a student goes missing, Buffy seeks out Giles's help, but finds

she is interrupting a romantic rendezvous with his friend from his life before being a Watcher, Olivia. The Scoobies finally rally when Buffy seems to be the next student to go missing.

Throughout the season, outside forces continue to challenge the cohesiveness of the Scoobies. In “Fear, Itself” (4.4), a demon released through a frat house Halloween decoration gone awry divides the Scoobies by amplifying their fears. “I’m not your sidekick” (00:28:47-49) Willow says, pushing into the shifting of power relations that the move to college started. Meanwhile, Xander is left unseen and unheard by the others. Only when they are reunited are they able to see and vanquish the demon. In “The Yoko Factor” (4.20), Spike plays on the Scoobies’ individual insecurities by spreading gossip through the Scoobies to weaken their trust in each other and ability to work together. Once these lies come to the surface and the source of all the misinformation is traced back to Spike, they reunite to pull together their resources to more effectively move forward in defeating evil (“Primeval” 4.21). Research and the information it provides is not as powerful when isolated from collective collaboration.

Studies of students in college who had high school library instruction show that, like the Scooby gang, with “a clearer sense of the research process” and the confidence that the information they find will lead them to well-considered approaches, they are able to effectively fight personal and in *BtVS*, supernatural demons (Kuhlthau vii). At the end of “Primeval,” Xander’s proposed solution to fighting the Initiative’s Frankenstein-esque experiment, Adam, evidences this earned confidence in a well-researched solution and the power of collaboration: “All we need is combo Buffy her with Slayer strength, Giles’ multilingual know-how, and Willow’s witchy power” (“Primeval” 4.21, 00:19:21-27). Through an

enjoining spell, Willow unites her power, Giles' knowledge, Xander's heart, and Buffy's strength to defeat Adam and reinstate the power of collaboration among the Scoobies in their collective fight against evil.

From the beginning, Giles models the humility and curiosity necessary for expert researchers who build their own understanding from the expertise and collaboration of others. In "The Harvest" (1.2) and "I Robot, You Jane" (1.8), Giles seeks the expertise of Willow and Ms. Calendar to learn how new technologies can be used for research and to fill information gaps for Buffy to effectively protect Sunnydale and the world. Estill notes how Giles's position as librarian and his Britishness create an expectation that the library "represents a dead past...instead of contemporary concerns" (238-239). Estill's analysis focuses on the shared space of the library in bringing together low and high culture, joining the historical quest for slaying long-battled evils into the contemporary world of Sunnydale and prime-time TV. Giles, like all librarians, brings the wisdom of the past (or exposes its ignorance) to address the needs of the present in teaching critical information literacy using Guided Inquiry. Giles is a guide rather than just an expert, turning to Willow to navigate online resources to find the plans for the city's tunnels system ("The Harvest," 1.2). In "I Robot, You Jane" (1.8), Giles brings in Ms. Calendar to be a trusted member of the Slayer's circle because of her unique knowledge of technopaganism and access to the resources associated with that community. The willingness to collaborate with a variety of authorities of knowledge, including community knowledge and open access information, exemplifies the importance of community in research in *BtVS*.

Defending Intellectual Freedom

Adherents of critical information literacy, like the Scoobies in *BtVS*, value open access to sources and welcomes knowledge from outside the gatekept systems of academia. Keeping knowledge from others is the goal of censors and those who want to curb intellectual freedom. “Gingerbread” (3.11) addresses the issue of intellectual freedom and book-banning head on as Joyce and the rest of Sunnydale fall under the thrall of a demon disguised as two children, Hans and Greta (supposedly inspirations for the fairytale Hansel and Gretel). The demon, Giles explains, “thrive[s] by fostering hatred” among humans to watch them “destroy each other” (“Gingerbread” 3.11, 00:32:29-43; 00:32:48-49). In our current news cycles filled with rhetoric of disinformation and censorship campaigns, this is a demon all too real to librarians as “they feed us our darkest fear and turn peaceful communities into vigilantes” (“Gingerbread” 3.11, 00:32:50-56). In Sunnydale, it is Mothers Opposing the Occult (MOO) — much like the real-world Moms for Liberty — led by Joyce, who outs Buffy as a Slayer and Willow and Amy as witches. A young student warlock, Michael, runs to the library to find sanctuary (as noted earlier) and warn others. Joyce speaks for the fears of those who do not want free access to information: “Any student can waltz in there and get all sort of ideas. Do understand how that terrifies me?” (“Gingerbread” 3.11, 00:24:22-31). The school library and lockers are raided and the book that would prove that the symbol Willow has on her notebook is for protection is confiscated. In the face of such illogical behavior, it is questionable that textual evidence would be able to exonerate Willow. Buffy defends the significance of her role as Slayer and the right to access information, especially books on the occult: “And maybe next time that the world is getting sucked into hell

I won't be able to stop it because the anti-hell-sucking book isn't on the approved-reading list" ("Gingerbread" 3.11, 00:25:09-17). Willow, Buffy, and Amy, all taken hostage with the help of their families, are set to be burned at the stake. In the end, through meticulous and thorough research methods discussed earlier in this paper, the Scoobies are able to reveal the true identity of the demon to lift the veil of delusions that have taken over Sunnydale's parents and compelled the unrestrained censorship of the school library and students of Sunnydale. Thus we see Guided Inquiry's and critical information literacy's real and significant impact in society. Unfortunately, there is no magic spell to lift the veil and not enough teacher librarians to instill strong information literacy skills in our students to adequately combat disinformation, deep fakes, and censorship efforts today. Still, like the Scoobies, librarians and their students continue to defend intellectual freedom despite the challenges.

This is not the only episode or the only means through which access to knowledge is challenged or threatened. Jarvis notes that over and over, "Buffy resists attempts to control her access to knowledge...." In Season Seven we see both the Council and the First attempt to wield power over Buffy and her collaborators by limiting access to information. In "Never Leave Me" (7.9), Buffy calls the council asking for help in finding Giles. Quentin Travers, the director of the Watchers Council, claims that they do not keep track of "lapsed Watchers," but then orders the Council to find Giles, satisfied that Buffy does not have information they do not, while refusing to share the Council's resources. Giles eventually reappears with the information that the First's aim is to eliminate all potential Slayers and Watchers and, thus, the Slayer lineage by limiting, destroying, or denying access to the mystic texts about the

Slayers' and Watchers' origins as well as the locations of all the potential Slayers ("Bring on the Night" 7.10). Fortunately, Giles manages to save some of these texts before the Council is destroyed, and he has already started bringing the Potentials to be under Buffy's protection in Sunnydale. In these interactions, the power of information, thus the power of critical information literacy, is emphasized by the desire to control who has access to information and what information is given to the public. By reclaiming their right to information and their right to use information to take action, Giles and the Scoobies not only defend Sunnydale against demons, but also against threats to intellectual freedom.

Conclusion: Graduating into Information-Literate Citizens

I have already noted that in "The Freshman," at the first sign of demon activity in her first year at college, Buffy seeks out her trusted high school librarian to guide her in filling her information need: how to fight this new demon. Giles, in the middle of a romantic evening, responds, "you haven't described anything that you can't do yourself" (00:22:41-43). According to Kuhlthau, as students mature as researchers "their sense of ownership" increases as they "actively seek to build an area of expertise" (*Seeking Meaning* 84). At the end of Season Two ("Becoming, Part 1"), we see the culmination of their lessons in the library, when the Scoobies gather together their research and knowledge to cast the spell to restore Angel's soul. Their expertise threatens the vampires' domination in Sunnydale, resulting in an attack by demons before they can finish the spell. At the end of Season Three, Buffy applies the lessons learned and practiced throughout the season. In "Bad Girls" (3.14), Buffy urges Faith to stop, think, and consider making a plan—skills that are essential to critical information literacy and

steps in Guided Inquiry when Faith wants to follow some demons into a manhole without knowing who or what they are. Faith, lacking library training, jumps down the hole without adequate information. Buffy, compelled by her duty to protect, follows Faith in a situation where they are outnumbered and barely escape alive. At the end of Season Three, rather than sitting and waiting for the Mayor's ascension, Buffy confidently applies the evidence they gathered and the knowledge they acquired from past experience to create a plan. Giles' validation of the strategy as viable bolsters Buffy's confidence.

This reliance on the library as a place to go when there is the gap of information for sense-making is something Buffy and her team practice throughout high school, developing the habits and skills of information literacy that carry over into the post-high-school seasons. By Season Seven, with Giles gone, we see the long-lasting impact of high school information literacy instruction through independent inquiry in the research center that Buffy's home becomes as they face the First Evil. Throughout this season, we see the Scoobies paging through ancient books, strategically searching online, embarking on trips to seek out supernatural sources of information, and instructing the next generation of Slayers in both combat and information literacy. As Buffy tells them, "The question is never what do you think? It's always...what do you know?" ("Potential" 7.12; 00:33:25-30).

Thus, in *BtVS*, it is repeatedly asserted that we cannot separate our experience and emotions from our research, and that research is often a form of activism. To maintain power and uphold systems of oppression, real-life campaigns to limit access to information and the demonization of those who seek to open up discussions to more diverse, inclusive, and complex understandings of history is all too real. Critical information

literacy seeks to dismantle such systems through practices like removing veils around bias and systematic oppression embedded into library and information systems that were created within such systems. Guided Inquiry seeks to disrupt these systems through critical analysis during inquiry and encouraging students to generate their own questions. Citation justice, for example, expands the definitions of authority in scholarship and challenges the traditional gatekeeping system of knowledge by encouraging inclusion of more diverse perspectives, experiences, and subjects in research. Faced with systematic inequities and biases, Buffy consistently challenges traditional forms of authority and exposes the flaws of a gatekeeper system of knowledge. From school principals, to government powers, from Dracula to Glory, and from the Master to the Watchers Council, Buffy refuses “to be intimidated by more powerful figures” which gives her “deeply feminist potential” (Pender 31). From the first episode, we see Buffy challenge the “fiction of authority” (Pender 40-41), when she refuses to comply with Giles’s demands for her as the Slayer. Thus, from the start viewers know *BtVS* does not intend to unquestioningly uphold and carry on old traditions and that Giles, the Watcher/librarian, aims to liberate, not oppress.

All this work in building critical information literacy, in examining and challenging systems of authority and knowledge, is what empowers Buffy, in the end, to see the legend of the Chosen One for what it is – a legend. It is Buffy’s final renouncement of the Slayer as the Chosen One that marks her work as truly liberatory. The conclusion of the series is foreshadowed in Season Three when Buffy activates and arms all her classmates to fight the demon at graduation (“Graduation Day, Part 1”; “Graduation Day, Part 2”). To do so, she must disrupt the narrative of misinformation that normally

keeps Sunnydale in denial about the vampire and demon problem that comes with the Hellmouth. When, in the preceding episode, her classmates award Buffy the Class Protector Trophy as an acknowledgement of the not-normal of Sunnydale and their indebtedness to Buffy's Slaying skills, the door for her to rally them at graduation opens. In Season Seven, Buffy returns to the men who created the first Slayer and refuses their offer for more power by uniting her with a demon, as they did with the first Slayer ("Get It Done" 7.15). She tells them they are the ones who do not understand how they "violated" the first Slayer "made her kill" for them ("Get It Done" 7.15: 00:37:30-32). Buffy decides to create her own path to free herself and future Slayers from patriarchal, binary thinking. In "End of Days" (7.21), Buffy finds the last Guardian, an old woman who reminds her of her power. Buffy chooses to share this power by empowering all the potential Slayers through a spell cast by Willow. Thus Buffy ends the one-Slayer-dies-another-is-born cycle. Through this sharing of authority, Buffy saves the world.

It is through the library, though within the physical space of the school, that students in *BtVS*, and in real life, find the opportunity for self-directed inquiry that extends beyond the institution. In the library they find education that resists rather than complies with social norms (Jarvis). Giles, in practicing Guided Inquiry methods to teach critical information literacy, prepares students to engage not just with scholarship, but their community and the real-world challenges that face each generation. Through practice and collaboration, the Scoobies model active critical information literacy as a means to resist authoritative systems designed to oppress rather than uplift and liberate. Our educational leaders today could learn from *BtVS* the essential role of school libraries and school librarians in

helping to create critical thinkers, collaborators, and innovators who will imagine a world better than the one we have left for them and do the research and collaborative work to make it real.

Notes

¹ Cf. Alia Tyner-Mullings' "'School Hard' and Traditional Education in the *Buffyverse*" in this journal.

² However, as Tyner-Mulling reveals in her analysis of Black characters in *BtVS*, Buffy's ability to have this choice is a result of her privileges, which includes access to critical information literacy instruction from Giles.

³ Cf. Molly Turnbull's "Prehistory and Archaeology in *Buffy: the Vampire Slayer*," p. 19, in this journal.

⁴ Cf. the *Slayage* article by Tereza Szeghi and Wesley Dempster, "'Why don't you just go back where you came from?' or 'Slight yams': 'Pangs' of Regret and Unresolved Ambivalence in Joss Whedon's California."

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