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Authority and Source Evaluation in the Critical Library Classroom

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CHAPTER 7*

Authority and Source Evaluation in the Critical Library Classroom

Eamon Tewell and Katelyn Angell

Introduction

These lesson plans began with a desire to explore notions of authority in the library classroom at our mid-sized urban university, including how authority is used by teachers to the benefit or detriment of learners and how learners can begin to reclaim their own authority. In creating these lesson plans, we sought to begin with students' experiences, promote their sense of personal empowerment, and encourage them to consider the complexities of source evaluation.

We have used these lesson plans in library instruction sessions for first years and sophomores enrolled in required critical-thinking courses that have a focus on composition, rhetoric, and interdisciplinarity. Each of these courses meets with a librarian twice during the semester, though the lesson plans created for the two-class sequence could also stand alone. Though we have not team-taught these sessions, we recommend this approach if staffing allows. Our goals were twofold: (1) for both ourselves and our students, to consider how authority operates in the classroom, and (2) for our students, to reflect upon the role that the construct of authority plays in common information sources.

These lesson plans rely on student input to determine group topics, devise search strategies, and select sources, as well as ask that the students share

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their process and thoughts with their classmates. We made these choices to facilitate an anti-hierarchical environment that places importance on student contributions and experiences, an approach in line with critical and feminist pedagogy.¹

The use of student-only groups for a major portion of an instruction session helps learners to create and refine their own ideas without the intrusion of the teacher's "correct" answers or domination of the discussion. Presenting students' answers to the rest of the class disrupts the dynamics of the traditionally instructor-centric classroom and encourages students to embrace their own positions as information producers and consumers. The use of small groups is intended as a collaborative and democratizing structure that ideally encourages students to develop a dynamic removed from the direct influence of the teacher.

The primary aim of the second lesson plan is to foster individual reflection among learners and provide time to consider ideas of authorship and barriers to accessing marginalized voices. Additionally, beginning the session with questions allows concerns to be addressed prior to activities, creating a classroom environment more welcoming for student interests, concerns, and voices.

Because both lesson plans attempt to put students' and the teacher's conceptions of authority into question, we want to note that the goal is not to eliminate the teacher's authority. Instead, the intent is to increase students' sense of authority in discussing and evaluating sources and to make their existing knowledge a central part of the classroom. It is important that "authoritarianism" is not conflated with "authority" when translating Freirian critical pedagogy to our own settings, as it is disingenuous to claim one's authority does not exist when in fact the teacher is always backed by institutional power.²

Learning Outcomes

Library Activity 1

- Locate an article on your selected topic in a library database
- Locate a book on your selected topic in the library catalog
- Evaluate and compare library (catalog; database) and non-library (Google; *Wikipedia*) sources for currency, accuracy, and relevance to your project
- Identify the creator of a resource and use this information to determine its appropriateness as a source for your project

Library Activity 2

- Locate one article in a library database
- Think critically about the author of the information you access. Remember a time when you needed information on an important topic. How did you decide upon the best source to use? How did the author's identity or background play into your choice?
- Explain why some voices are privileged over others within academic research

Materials

- Instructor computer with Internet access
- Projector for computer
- Computers for students
- Pens and papers for student worksheets (worksheets provided in appendices 7A and 7B)

Preparation

Preparation is limited to photocopying activity sheets for however many students you anticipate being in your class. Additionally, because this is an unusual teaching approach, we have found it useful to contact teaching faculty in advance to gauge their receptiveness to this pedagogy.

Session Instructions

Lesson Plan 1

1. Introduce the library catalog and one database of your or a student's choice. Limit this demonstration as much as is possible; if students already know how to access the catalog and databases, proceed with the following step.
2. Ask students to create groups of four or five people, and as a class, ask each group to select a different source type. Alternatively, you can assign students groups and an information source. Hand out one copy of Library Activity 1 (appendix 7A) to each group at this time.
 - Source types:
 - Database
 - Google
 - Wikipedia
 - Catalog

3. Each group decides on a topic of interest that they will search for using their selected source type. The topic does not have to relate to the class and can simply be something of interest to one of the group members. During this time you should confer with any groups having difficulty choosing a topic.
4. Each group searches for their topic and answers the questions in Library Activity 1 regarding one source (article, book, website, or *Wikipedia* page).
5. Each group presents their findings to the class, using the questions answered as a guide. During this time you should participate as they see appropriate, acting as an occasional commentator on the sources being presented. Additionally, they should encourage other students to dialogue with the group presenting.
6. The final portion consists of a brief wrap-up and question-and-answer session. You can take this time to answer any questions the students have as well as recap the overarching themes of authority and source evaluation.

Post-Instruction Minute Paper

The following steps can be completed after the first class, whether taught as a one-shot or part of a two-class sequence. This requires creating a short survey that can be done easily using Google Forms or other similar programs.

1. E-mail the survey to the class's professor soon after the library session and ask them to forward it to their students. Questions:
 - What is one thing you remember from the first library session?
 - What questions about library research do you have that you would like answered in the next library session?
 - Is there anything from the first session that you found confusing?
2. The survey will determine what additional questions students might have and allow them to suggest content they would like to address at a later date, prompting student reflection on the session and allowing for instruction more responsive to their interests.

Lesson Plan 2

1. Address student questions sent via survey or answer questions students have on the spot. We find it helpful to begin by asking the second and third survey questions listed above, as these often lead to additional questions that came up for students between the first and second library sessions (such as concerns about topic development or locating specific services within the library).

2. Introduce the citation/resource evaluation activity and hand out Library Activity 2 (appendix 7B) at this time.
3. Students work on the activity individually or in pairs. You as the instructor walk around the classroom and asks students to raise any questions or comments regarding the assignment as they arise.
4. Ask for volunteers to share answers to the questions on the activity with the rest of the class. Students are encouraged to reflect and build upon the comments of their classmates.

Assessment

The minute paper is a common type of formative assessment, allowing students to offer their feedback in a brief yet open-ended format. This type of assessment can be used to plan future instruction sessions as well as to provide a glimpse into what students remember from the session. We selected minute papers because they allow students an opportunity to briefly reflect on their experience and contribute their opinions in writing, something not possible with more rigid forms of classroom assessment like multiple-choice tests. We found the minute paper to be a suitable assessment option that balances time constraints with respect for student thoughts and input.

A more in-depth assessment can be undertaken through an analysis of students' written responses to the activity questions, as we plan to do. An analysis of responses using inductive coding, where major themes are inferred from a close reading of the texts, could be very informative for understanding students' thoughts and attitudes towards authority in information sources. This type of assessment requires a great deal of time but provides far richer insight into student responses to the questions and instruction they received.

Reflections

In a world more conducive to critical pedagogy, we might simply ask students what they wish to learn about at the beginning of a session and allow that to guide the direction of the class. This is too sharp of a break from our students' educational expectations and the type of instruction they are comfortable with. In other settings, however, it may be the case that students are more accustomed to a critical or nontraditional pedagogical approach. If this is the case, we encourage you to ask more demanding questions of your students and to take a more direct approach to questioning the authority of sources. Questions confronting the racial and gendered dynamics of authorship, for example, may be a more effective means of getting students to consider these dimensions.

Regarding the classroom activities, question 3 in Library Activity 2 (“Who can publish on this specific topic? Whose voice might be included or excluded?”) provoked the most questions and the most interesting written responses from students. Some students were unsure of how to answer, which was an opportune moment for us to talk directly about the cultural and social dimensions of academic authorship, particularly its exclusionary nature and the unlikelihood of marginalized voices being represented.

The minute paper was not particularly successful in allowing us to develop a more student-centered environment in the second session based upon their questions. The comments received generally appeared to represent what we assume students think their professor or librarian would want to hear (that they learned about databases or how to find an article). As a result, this method of assessment may require further work in order to receive authentic responses, likely one not requiring the intervention of their professor for its distribution. A potential alternative could be to present students with the minute paper at the end of the second session. Class content would be fresh in their minds, and this immediacy could be a boon to active and accurate reflection, but they would have less time to think about what they had taken away from the class or still had questions about.

One other limitation to consider is that assigning different information source types to different groups means that there is less equity in terms of “learning something new”—students assigned to exploring an online database are potentially receiving a learning advantage over students exploring *Wikipedia* or another website already familiar to them. However, since all students see each other’s search processes during the presentation portion of the session, this disadvantage is not a major one and students using a familiar website will still be critiquing it in ways they are unlikely to have before.

Final Questions

How can we encourage students to question authority while being in a position of authority ourselves? How can we use our positions as instruction librarians to help students identify as information creators as well as consumers?

Appendix 7A: Library Activity 1

Names: _____

Learning Outcomes

Once you have completed this activity you will be able to

- **Locate an article on your selected topic in a library database**
- **Locate a book on your selected topic in the library catalog**
- **Evaluate and compare library and non-library sources for currency, accuracy, and relevance to your project**
- **Identify the creator of a resource and use this information to determine its appropriateness as a source for your project**

1. With your group, decide on a topic of interest and search for a source on your topic using the resource your group selected.

2. Please circle where you found this source:
 GOOGLE LIBRARY CATALOG LIBRARY DATABASE WIKIPEDIA

3. Please write down the author(s) and title of your source.

4. Who wrote or contributed to this source? How can you tell?

5. How might this particular source be useful to you? What are its disadvantages?

6. Would you include this in your works cited/references page? Why or why not?

Appendix 7B: Library Activity 2

Name: _____

Learning Outcomes

Once you have completed this activity you will be able to:

- **Locate one article in a library database**
- **Think critically about the author of the information you access. Remember a time when you needed information on an important topic. How did you decide upon the best source to use? How did the author's identity or background play into your choice?**
- **Explain why some voices are privileged over others within academic research**

1. Find one article relevant to your paper topic in a library database of your choice. Please e-mail the article to yourself and to me [e-mail address here].

2. Do you think this is a trustworthy source? Why or why not?

3. Who can publish on this specific topic? Whose voice might be included or excluded?

Notes

1. Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013).
2. Joshua Beatty, “Reading Freire for First World Librarians” (presentation, Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians conference, Ottawa, ON, June 2, 2015), <http://digitalcommons.plattsburgh.edu/lis/7>.

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- Accardi, Maria T. *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013.
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