

ETHOS AND CREDIBILITY: COLLABORATING TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY

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INTRODUCTION

While the sheer amount of information available on the web means that students are creating longer reference pages, there is much doubt as to the actual quality of those sources (Davis, 2000). Indeed, the question of what constitutes quality itself, in a postmodern age, is quite problematic and a matter of heated philosophical debate. After all, much of the work being done in information retrieval, for example, shows that quality can only be judged by the user (Saracevic, 2008). As such, if college students can convert the information they easily obtain on the web into course credit, the matter of quality is decided. A further problem of determining quality is that undergrad students, who lack expertise in the subjects they are studying, understand they are in no position to evaluate web sources effectively (Liu, 2004).

Still, the advantage of online resources is evident: the web empowers individual users to be at the center of access. And yet, we see a new problem emerging, especially as internet information is being used for college research papers. Where the physical space of the library, along with its strict classifications and taxonomies, once ensured a modicum of quality, web searching is often less controlled. In "Credibility on the Internet: Shifting from authority to reliability" Lankes (2007) further argues that while users have become more independently responsible for information, they have paradoxically become "more dependent on the providers of that information and the

tools used to manipulate that information" (p. 681).

Responding to users' need to evaluate web resources, many librarians propose that students use a "checklist." While this type of heuristic has its critics (Hashimoto, 1985), it can still be found as a key component in many information literacy interventions (e.g., Grimes & Boening, 2001; Mulligan, Baumin, Currie, McKittrick, & Fellows, 2008; Norman, 2006; Shanahan, 2008). For the most part, this method sounds reasonable, listing common sense elements like authority, accuracy, objectivity, currency, and coverage. However, we see at least three problems with this method: (1) If followed it eliminates information that may fulfill a particular research need; (2) It substitutes the important skill of "critical information literacy" for a simpler model that never asks students to engage in the question of what underlies authority; and (3) It is not in alignment with academic values by suggesting that there are objectively written texts. Collectively, these problems show that critical evaluation can be interrupted by a focus on surface credibility.

We believe that being left out of the checklist is a discussion of a text's discourse community (Bizzell, 1992), or what we would call the text's "ethos." We want to show students how texts are embodied, reflecting the values and practices of their authors and discourse communities. Baumlin interprets Aristotle's view on ethos to mean that "the rhetorical situation renders the speaker an element of the discourse itself, no longer simply its origin (and thus a consciousness standing outside the text) but rather a signifier standing *inside* an expanded text" (1994, p. xvi). The online medium gives an impression that all texts are similarly disembodied. So, part of the new challenge for librarians is to engage in a discussion about how texts are made, since to students these texts may appear to emerge spontaneously from the same unexplainable ether (Harley, Dreger, & Knobloch, 2001). We believe that the ethos method

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of evaluation is a step in the direction of that discussion.

LIMITATIONS

We start from the premise that there is no such thing as an objectively written text, a project thoroughly addressed by modern rhetoric. According to Bizzell and Herzberg (1990), “whereas philosophy has always sought knowledge about absolute truth...rhetoric has sought knowledge of contingent truth” (p. 902). The quest towards objectivity itself has been shown to be suspect, as in the work of Aronowitz (1988), who asserts the need to ground all academic disciplines, including science itself, in discursive practices rather than axioms (p. x). Finally, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in the *New Rhetoric* show us that the significance of rhetorical theory and the dialectic is that it allows us to find a position somewhere between using “objectively and universally valid truth” and the use of violence to change peoples’ minds” (p. 514). This is the crucial issue of information literacy that we need to take more seriously—if there is no absolute answer, what constitutes a source that is good enough to change one’s mind?

The pedagogical implications of the rhetoric of assent or weighing “good reasons” (Booth, 1974; Toulmin, 1950) have gone uninvestigated by librarians who promote skepticism as the primary stance students should take toward information. But cultivating systematic assent rather than systematic doubt is necessary to help college students understand how to learn from and, therefore, be changed by information. A more holistic approach to evaluation like the one we propose would lead students to an analysis of the methods behind the creation of a source (McKerrow, 1990). This would replace the focus on the surface or even the content of the information source and would, instead, attend to the “manner in which decisions are reached,” turning our students’ “attention to the criteria and procedures for accepting broad classes of propositions” and broad classes of information (McKerrow, 1990, p. 24).

Finally, we understand the dangers of trying to arrive at any kind of conclusion as to what constitutes a true academic ethos for evaluation, given the multitude of disciplines and practices within the academy (Cronin, 2005). The attempt here is not reductionist. Because the basis of our philosophy is the belief that multiple subjectivities are what constitute the closest thing to a truth, we know that a distillation of these values into a single framework is necessarily limited. Our goal is to take what we know from our research to arrive at a set of general practices that define an academic ethos (Nelson, Megill, & McCloskey, 1987). What we are more certain of is that failing to reflect on this does not stop us from enacting a set of values in the classroom.

ETHOS AND EVALUATION

The definitions of information literacy are contested, so we will outline our intention. First, the student skills and concepts at issue in this paper (i.e., evaluation of discourse community values, consideration of methodology, appreciation for subjectivity, development of schema for understanding the

information universe, etc.) are more accurately referred to as elements of critical information literacy because they have at their core a concern for the structural power relationships inscribed in information sources. It has become a truism that information literacy is more than Boolean Operators and Subject Headings, but the real shift in the way librarians teach information literacy is not yet fully realized. Recent compelling scholarship has exhorted librarians to develop a more robust theoretical foundation for our pedagogy and a more engaged reflective practice for our teaching (Andersen, 2006; Elmborg, 2006; Harris, 2008; Jacobs, 2008; Norgaard, 2003; Norgaard, 2004). When information literacy is understood as sociopolitical, embodied, and simultaneously emancipatory and hegemonic, then teaching information literacy becomes as loaded as teaching history, cultural studies, writing or ethics. Common information literacy concepts like authority, originality and access are not neutral and cannot be taught without regard to the context of students’ prior knowledge and the community values of the academy. It is in the gap between students’ experience and the tacit requirements of college work where librarians must insinuate our expertise so that information literacy (and its associated respect for academic discourse, ethical methodology, and generous reading) will be developed in tandem with students’ discipline specific learning.

Rather than critical information literacy, the checklist method emphasizes surface evaluation of source characteristics that approximate credibility. It is worth noting that Stanford University has a site that shows how to create sites that look credible (Fogg, et al., 2003). Because convincing surface-level credibility can easily be mimicked (Burbules, 2001), students are still left to answer the question of academic authority without any guidance from those who have the training. The problem with over-emphasizing credibility is that research has shown that familiar sources are perceived to be more credible, and that when seekers are not engaged with the information they are using, source characteristics influence seekers’ judgment of credibility more than source content does (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). In short, the more familiar the message, the more credible it appears. Rather than asking students to challenge the unconscious responses that influence the ways they evaluate information, measuring credibility reinforces a belief in the standard of judgment that serves students as members of other communities, but not as members of the academic community.

Nowhere is the question of credibility more controversial than in current discussions of Wikipedia. In “An Empirical Examination of Wikipedia’s Credibility,” Chesney (2006) found that the 258 academics in his study judged Wikipedia pages about their areas of expertise to be quite credible. But, these results should not surprise us, given the fact that Wikipedia has many people checking it on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, Wikipedia claims a high-level of objectivity, to the point that they provide warnings on material that has not yet been vetted for the neutral style that the editors require. If credibility in the forms of accuracy and objectivity—major features of the checklist method—is what we want our students to value, then why are so many students still being taught to avoid Wikipedia? It is within this seeming contradiction that we began to see the

need for deeper analyses using rhetorical theory. The question of Wikipedia’s benefit to our students—and why we as academics use Wikipedia to fulfill particular information needs—becomes clearer if we see Wikipedia as the embodiment of a community’s values and practices, which we might also call the “method,” rather than retaining it as a kind of straw man. We assert that the method is what illustrates the ethos of a particular community and that investigating each community’s practices will enhance students’ understanding of the academic research process. It has been the academy alone, and more specifically modern rhetoric, that as a community has dealt with these questions.

So, when we look at the checklist, especially as it is used to help students evaluate information, we ask if it is supporting an academic ethos—and if not, which community’s values are being perpetuated. As a reminder, let us look at a checklist from New Mexico State University, which is titled, *The Good, The Bad & The Ugly: or, Why It’s a Good Idea to Evaluate Web Sources*. We use this particular example because after looking through many, this seems fairly typical. Here are the criteria: (1) Authority, (2) Accuracy, (3) Objectivity, (4) Currency, and (5) Coverage. Examined for these five criteria, we find that Wikipedia looks like an excellent source. Widely publicized studies have shown that Wikipedia has a good level of accuracy. Most would agree that a major benefit is that it is current, and it certainly covers quite a large amount of information. Some might argue as to the level of authority, but authority can be assigned given a certain level of reliability and accuracy. One of Wikipedia’s strongest claims, however, is in the area of objectivity. In fact, the attitude toward neutrality is so deeply embedded in its method that it allows the site to claim that if anything “is omitted from Wikipedia, it is because reliable sources have omitted it” (Wikipedia, 2009). Modern rhetorical and critical theory shows the error in these claims of objectivity and neutrality.

By way of contrast with the checklist method, we would like to examine a method based in academic ethos (see Table 1). We suggest that this approach may be a way to discuss more explicitly with students the qualities of academic values,

thus giving them a clearer sense of why we might opt for certain texts over others at particular phases in the research process.

While authority is an attempt at higher claims to truth, authorship connects a source to an ideology/philosophy—in short, authorship embodies the text, placing it within a particular discourse community. A further problem with authority is that students, lacking knowledge of the field, are in no position to judge it correctly. Evaluating accuracy presents the same problem: different communities have different criteria as to what constitutes accuracy—embedded in a methodology. And if we emphasize accuracy to the typical student who sees her role as a reporter rather than as a researcher, we should not be surprised when she finds something she deems accurate and unwittingly plagiarizes in her effort to maintain accuracy.

Returning to the notion of objectivity, we understand that the rhetorical voice of many academic texts sounds disinterested. But, while the voice may be objective, the claims should be hedged, and an appropriate methodology should be established: the authors must indicate the limitations of their research, acknowledging their work as only a piece of a larger project. As such, the text must be open-ended, inviting critique and further research—in the spirit of the dialectic. These are the elements of the academic method of creating and evaluating information that need to be made clearer to students.

We feel that we can better answer the question of Wikipedia’s value by using the ethos method of evaluation. (1) Favoring accuracy, Wikipedia does not allow original research; (2) Its goal is to ensure a repository of established truths, and as such is not open-ended or dialectic; (3) Because its voice relies on the “wisdom of crowds,” the ideology is one of eliding authorship; (4) This lack of authorship and belief in its own objectivity denies that the text represents contestable and embodied values. Using the ethos method, we find Wikipedia to be an unsuitable source of research but a tool that may have a role in fulfilling a different information need. This nuance can be lost on students when they are advised to evaluate sources by applying common checklist criteria.

Table 1
Comparing Criteria

<u>Checklist Method</u>	<u>Academic Ethos</u>
• Authority	• Authorship
• Accuracy	• Originality
• Objectivity	• Transparency/limitations
• Currency	• Canon
• Coverage	• Open-ended question and the dialectic

CONCLUSION

Librarians have not historically concerned ourselves with the ways that the information we provided was put to use. But with the disintermediation of information seeking, we must deepen our understanding of how information is perceived and therefore how it will be used by students. In this way, we can find methods to address some of their persistent writing problems (i.e., avoiding plagiarism, finding a focus, reading critically, and developing academic literacy). At the nexus of information seeking and use, librarians will find our most important work as teachers. Rhetorical theory offers librarians insight into how information is created and used. At LOEX 2009, we showed how applying rhetorical theories is changing the way we teach information literacy.

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