

2022

Teaching Ways of Knowing: The Challenges of Marginalized Knowledge to Understandings of Authority and Authorship

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INTRODUCTION

This presentation grew out of an interdisciplinary course on Marginalized Knowledge taught by the authors. Dr. Vaughan conceived and then invited Ms. Larson to co-teach the master's level course. As we developed and taught the course, the topic presented us with an intriguing question: if libraries are full of knowledge, and full of information that helps people develop new knowledge, what is the relationship of libraries to knowledge that is marginalized?

One of the interesting challenges posed by marginalized knowledge to librarianship and information studies is in how we teach students to be skilled, intentional researchers. We want students to follow certain academic practices, but what if the best research has been built on a hierarchy of knowledge that has excluded, colonized, or suppressed certain kinds of knowledge? We have since written a chapter together about the impact of marginalized knowledge on information literacy (Larson & Vaughan, 2019). Here, we focus on how marginalized knowledge presents challenges to the ways we teach students to consider the credibility and authority of information sources. This significant part of information literacy instruction often emphasizes student efforts to understand the qualifications of authors and the sources of their authority. Considering marginalized knowledge changes this.

In this presentation, we define marginalized knowledge and provide several examples of what it is, the diversity of ways of knowing involved, and how this relates to evaluating authority and authorship of sources. Most of our case examples come from readings we used in our course. We will also address what we, as instructors and librarians, might do differently to ensure that our information literacy instruction develops students who understand and value many kinds of authority in knowledge.

WHAT IS MARGINALIZED KNOWLEDGE?

“Marginalized knowledge” refers to bodies of knowledge that have been devalued, ignored, fragmented, suppressed, appropriated, commodified, or disrespected, directly or indirectly by a dominant culture or institution.

Many of these bodies of knowledge grow out of cultures and identities that have been oppressed or colonized. It includes the knowledge of indigenous peoples, women, the working class, the enslaved, the “othered,” and others living on the margins of dominant systems. Many of these knowledges have developed out of holistic world views; established relationships with natural ecosystems; intimacy with the body, food, and land; nurturing relationships; the interactions of mind, body, and environment; and perceptive diversity beyond that deemed rational. They are often developed out of ways of knowing that are not central to dominant Western knowledge systems, and are thus viewed as having less authority.

Some of these marginalized knowledges reside in working class occupations. The work of Mike Rose (2014) helped our class explore the complex ways of knowing of several occupations, including waitressing and carpentry. The knowing of such occupations is often seen as simple skills. To counter this, Rose notes the waitress's “mix of strategies and processes: imagistic, spatial, verbal, and the role of emotion” (p. 12). He beautifully points out the carpentry knowledge requiring the use of all the senses including a keen sense of hearing for equipment trouble (pp. 74-75). He highlights connections between mind and hand that are

required for many kinds of knowledge: “[b]rain, hand, tool, wood become a complex cybernetic system, information flowing back and forth in action” (p. 79).

Rose (2014) demonstrates that the sophisticated knowledge of these forms of work reflects the integration of wide-ranging abilities including attention, problem-solving, abstract thinking, aesthetics, hand and body skills, and social and emotional understanding. The ways of knowing that develop these knowledges include all the senses, kinesthetic knowing, and learning through experience and observation. This is counter to the Western notion of separation of hand from brain when describing sophisticated knowing.

Indigenous knowledge was a significant part of our exploration of marginalized knowledges. Indigenous knowledge emerges from specific communities and encompasses diverse areas such as agriculture, ecologies, histories, and spiritualities. Indigenous knowledge resides in stories, everyday objects, ceremonies, and other forms such as poetry and novels. An example is the poem by Peter Blue Cloud (1988), “Within the Seasons,” which is divided into four seasonal sections. In the *spring equinox* section are the lines:

Dawn of a glorious season, flowers
in merging, undulating waves of color
The taste of strawberries, anticipate
in their blossoms, the rich and fertile
smells of soil we bend to,
breaking the ground for summer’s corn (p. 94).

Ripening wild strawberries, which can grow when soil and air temperatures are cooler, are signals that the soil has warmed enough to plant corn seed. Western science calls this phenology—when changes based on seasonal rhythms can be used to indicate other changes in the landscape or ecosystem—although this validation from Western science is not needed in order to respect Indigenous knowledge.

We see this in a situation in 1993 when a mysterious illness struck down people in the Southwest, including people at Navajo Nation or Dinéyah. Navajo spiritual leaders and Western biomedical professionals met to identify the cause of the illness. Navajo spiritual leaders drew on the many layers of interpretation of their own history in their creation story to identify the cause of the illness before the biomedical professionals traced the etiology (Schwarz, 1995).

Certainly, non-Indigenous biomedical professionals did not associate sophisticated knowing with spiritual leaders as they tried to determine the source of the illness in 1993. The Navajo creation story as a guiding history for the Navajo people continues to be a source of knowing through its twelve levels of meaning (Schwarz, 1995, p. 385). Schwarz explains, “The stories are the philosophic wellspring contemporary Navajo individuals use to cope with current concerns. The stories that comprise Navajo oral history are compressed metaphoric accounts, with many different levels of abstraction, that allow for great flexibility and adaptability in interpretation” (p. 377). Teachings about the stories often are done through ongoing interaction with a spiritual elder; publications on the origin story could easily miss the existence of many levels of meaning.

Our course studied the complex basketry knowledge depicted by Sarah Hill (1997) in *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and their Basketry*. Her work provides a window into how knowledge is influenced by political, economic, and ecological landscapes over three centuries. Particular basketry styles and materials (rivercane, white oak, honeysuckle, and red maple) are associated with particular generations and their struggles. The basketry manifests knowledge of the plants and seasons that produce the materials, the physical and artistic skills needed to prepare, weave, and use them, resistance and persistence in the face of colonization, and the spiritual and social importance of women and baskets within Cherokee culture.

The course also entered into conversation with women’s ways of knowing, spaces of knowledge, and theories of patriarchy, life, and cooking, through analysis by Meredith Abarca (2006) in *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican American Women*. Abarca explains the concept of *sazón* as a “sensory way of knowing” (p. 50), using body senses such as touch to gather information to prepare food, especially “‘la mano de la experiencia’ (the hand of experience)” and “‘el sazón de la mano’ (a hand’s knowledge)” (p. 51). The authority of knowledge comes through sensory powers less appreciated in Western epistemology’s hierarchy that values sight over the other senses. Authority also comes from their own voices: “working class women have been speaking all along, but perhaps not in political or economic conventional discourses” (p. 10).

One of our goals has been to help students learn to identify ways of knowing beyond those usually valued by Western and academic reasoning such as the objective, in which the knower is separate from what is known; the authoritative, in which a higher figure holds the knowledge; and the empirical, in which knowledge is gathered by the senses, particularly sight, and a logic based on order, time, and Western reasoning. We pointed students to marginalized ways of knowing that include the embodied expertise described by Abarca and Rose, and Indigenous ways of knowing that include revealed knowledge, evoked by intuition, dreams or

visions; experiential knowing, based in first-hand knowledge; relational knowing, based on personal interactions; and metaphoric, engaging greater symbolic meaning (Cajete, 2000; Castellano, 2000; Schwarz, 1995).

HOW DOES THIS CONNECT WITH INFORMATION LITERACY?

Academic libraries are grounded in Western higher education systems; libraries preserve, organize, and disseminate knowledge that is developed out of the institutional systems of scientific method, rationalism, peer review, and publication. As part of this context, libraries are part of the dominant culture—the one that has also promoted marginalizing and oppressive values and practices. As academic librarians, we tend to see the positive and the inclusive in higher education and libraries. We must recognize that our beloved institutions have not always been friendly and respectful for some identities, bodies of knowledge, or ways of knowing. Shanbhag (2006) notes that “[i]nformation literacy pedagogy as well as practice is still wedded to a template of what constitutes knowledge and knowing in [a] formal academic setting” (p. 1). Integrating an understanding of marginalized knowledge is a step towards changing this.

One common area of information literacy instruction is teaching students how to evaluate sources of information, so that they make appropriate use of high-quality sources that are relevant to their needs. This evaluation often includes considering the qualifications of authors of the sources, recognizing their academic disciplines or professional contexts, and understanding their research methodologies. We want students to understand who created the information, how, and what ways of knowing were engaged. If we are teaching them only to use sources and types of information that come from Western academic ways of knowing, however, marginalized knowledges and other ways of knowing remain outside of their perception. Such information literacy instruction may therefore function to keep these bodies of knowledge marginalized.

We incorporated information literacy instruction into our course on a number of levels. We provided a handout on source evaluation that encouraged questions about authors’ positionality, methods, ways of knowing, and approaches to their own sources of information. We had a class activity in which students examined the use of source material in one of our main texts. In case study assignments, we asked them to incorporate the voices of the knowledge practitioners. And finally, we built into most assignments some kind of written reflection on ways of knowing and authority of the source. These reflections were to consider:

- how they found the written and in-person sources;
- evaluation of the sources for authority, relevance, and contribution to the project;
- reflections on whose knowledge and what ways of knowing are valued within these sources;
- mysterious aspects of the information that they found.

Our intention was to plant the seeds of a practice to ponder ways of knowing and to ask who or what is behind the presentation of those ways of knowing.

Our work relates to and expands upon the approaches described in the ACRL Information Literacy Framework (2015). The frame of “Authorship is constructed and contextual” asks us to consider “an openness to new perspectives” and “additional voices,” and “to acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others” (p. 12). We might see this as encouraging us to open to different kinds of authority and authorship created by marginalized communities and ways of knowing, but overall the frame appears to focus on academic information. This frame also names the context of the information need as important to weighing authorship, but doesn’t ask us to consider the context for authorship and authority itself. Marginalized knowledge teaches us that not only are the needs of searchers contextual, but the formation and dissemination of knowledge and information is contextual. If we teach only the use and evaluation of certain types of knowledge, and define authorship and ways of knowing in limited ways, we help to maintain the marginalization of other kinds of knowledge.

WHAT COMES NEXT? INTEGRATING AND FURTHER EXPLORING AS INSTRUCTORS

This is the part of the presentation where we should offer a nifty approach, a catchy acronym, or a flexible module that can be incorporated into all of your instruction efforts. We don’t have that for you, for a variety of reasons. One is that the issues are complex and contextual. They require students to have skills in close reading, higher-order analysis, and some understanding of the many ways power and injustice affect us and our institutions. Many of us may face difficulty just getting our students to pay attention to reasonably reliable information over unverified or superficial sources. Another challenge is that librarians are often delivering information literacy instruction to address another instructor’s assignment, discipline, and timeframe, without the freedom to teach subtleties of epistemologies and marginalization. Finally, for many students, the idea of diverse ways of knowing and unfamiliar epistemologies is new territory. How can we bring these insights and questions into more basic information literacy efforts?

One important step is to continue decentering our perspective as privileged academics. It isn't that we don't value our disciplinary expertise and our academic institutions, but we need to learn to see and value beyond them, as well as to critique their marginalization of other epistemologies. We can keep seeing these marginalized ways of knowing, and come to respect a wider range of bases for authoritative information.

We have begun to see, based on our experiences, some ways to teach students to nuance their own understandings of ways of knowing, forms of expertise, and bases for authority. One is to teach the context for knowledge and information, in whatever form it is presenting itself. The ACRL Information Literacy Framework begins to approach matters of context for information, and some other information literacy research on evaluation encourages consideration of context, for example, Meola's (2004) contextual approach using comparison and corroboration. These do not, however, apply context to authorship, method, and epistemologies. Even Western disciplines that pride themselves on objectivity, logic, and evidence-based work, such as natural sciences, philosophy, and medicine, arise from and function within particular cultural contexts. We need to help students see there is always a cultural context for knowledge.

Another way is to teach students to evaluate sources in terms other than "authoritative" or "not authoritative." If authority is contextual, then it isn't a binary characteristic, something that is either possessed or not. We can teach students to ask "how is this source authoritative?" and "what kind of authority is this information based in? What ways of knowing does it rely on?" Indeed, a more open question invites more critical thinking of all kinds.

We end with Mike Rose's (2014) questions for the skills he considers in his book *The Mind at Work*: "What is going on here? How is it learned? What enables it to happen? What in this moment does it mean to be smart?" (p. li). We used these questions repeatedly in our course, and found them valuable for helping us understand ways of knowing. The answers to these questions can uncover epistemological worlds not yet recognized in our current understandings of information literacy.

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