

Questioning Authority: An Exploration of Diverse Sources

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At the University of Michigan Library, the Learning Programs and Initiatives (LPI) unit leads activities related to course-integrated instruction for lower level undergraduate students. LPI librarians most often teach one-shot workshops for English 125, the university's main writing requirement class. Usually we are asked to teach when students are assigned an argumentative paper and a crucial part of these sessions is source discovery and evaluation.

At a departmental retreat in December of 2015, we discussed the instruction requests we were receiving from faculty members. Instructors were asking us to address the use and evaluation of credible, non-scholarly & non-traditional sources and how students could incorporate these types of sources into their research papers. The group felt unsatisfied with the source evaluation methods we were using at the time such as using a checklist or explaining the differences between scholarly and non-scholarly sources. We began to feel that this approach was not nuanced enough to be able to respond effectively to some of the courses and assignments we found ourselves teaching to.

Additionally, it became more common for instructors to design assignments where students investigate or work closely with a specific community and thus require students to use a wide variety of sources, including non-traditional ones such as blogs, interviews, local newspapers and community organizations.

Here are some examples of how instructors describe the types of sources that they wanted us to address:

“By secondary source, I have in mind sources that are ‘popular scholarly’--not so academic so as to be over my students’ heads, but having some credibility, particularly if they are being used as support. Perhaps editorials from the NY Times, book reviews from the NY Review of Books, articles from the New Yorker, etc. might be appropriate.”

“For this assignment, I ask my students to incorporate 2 different types of sources: what I refer to as ‘academic’ sources and what I refer to as ‘cultural’ sources. In the past, I find that my students have a difficult time thinking about and differentiating between appropriate uses of these sources. For example, many of my students attempted to allow too much authority to interview statements when making arguments about a general community or would use an article from a popular culture source as if it was credible evidence. Any advice or guidance you could give my students (or me for that matter) on how to help them think through this issue would be wonderful!”

“The theme of my course is community. For my student's research assignment, I will be asking them to either 1) interview someone outside their community or 2) research a topic of their choice by looking at ‘popular culture’ media (things like chats rooms, reddit, buzzfeed comments, etc). Any advice you could give them about how to look for and utilize the later types of sources would be very useful. Also, any databases that can provide them with examples of interviews being used as the basis of an academic argument would be great.”

What was missing from the earlier approach was prompting students to think more broadly about the relative nature of authority, the use of non-traditional sources, and also the contexts and processes of knowledge creation.

ACRL Framework

These source conversations within LPI coincided with the adoption by ACRL of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (January 2016), and the group saw an opportunity to re-think our approach to source evaluation by looking more closely at the Framework. After more reading and discussion we began to realize that the Framework mirrored the realities of our instruction sessions: a more critical approach, and a focus on students as creators of knowledge through experiential projects in social justice and service learning contexts.

More specifically, the language in the Frame “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” closely reflected the information needs expressed by our faculty around source evaluation. This Frame explicitly recognizes that “...authority is a type of influence recognized or exerted within a community. An understanding of this concept enables novice learners to critically examine all evidence—be it a short blog post or a peer-reviewed conference proceeding—and to ask relevant questions about origins, context, and suitability for the current information need.”; “Experts know how to seek authoritative voices but also recognize that unlikely voices can be authoritative, depending on need” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 4).

Developing the Plan

Over the course of three months in 2016, a team from LPI met every other week to create a lesson plan addressing the issues raised in our retreat. The goal was to design a lesson plan around the Frame “Authority is Constructed and Contextual.” The team re-defined this Frame to create a more student-friendly version of it. Our definition emphasized that authors could have credibility based on three fac-

tors: subject expertise, societal position, or special experience. Following a Backwards Design format, the group determined that the lesson would have two outcomes:

- Students will be able to define different types of authority, such as subject expertise (e.g., scholarship), societal position (e.g., public office or title), or special experience (e.g., participating in a historic event) in order to more easily recognize a variety of credible sources for their English 125 writing assignments
- Students will be able to recognize that authoritative content may be packaged formally or informally and may include sources of all media types in order to more easily incorporate a variety of credible sources into their English 125 writing assignments.

The team agreed that structuring the lesson around an intriguing topic would generate student interest. Possible topics included prison reform, drug laws, anti-bullying legislation, free range parenting/kids having enough playtime/recess, literacy, food access, clean water, and the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis. Due to the immediacy of the issues surrounding the Flint Water Crisis and the potential variety of types of sources that could be explored (blog posts, documentary clips, popular news media articles, online-only news sources such as Slate & Salon articles, long form journalistic articles, and scholarly articles), the team chose this Michigan-centric topic.

The team decided to create an argumentative statement that would drive a scenario in which students could use a variety of sources for an English 125 paper. The argumentative statement or topic would be “Government mismanagement contributed to the Flint Water Crisis.” We decided to find several articles that could possibly address this statement. We hoped to find a blog post, an activist group or personal web site, a newspaper article, a Slate/Salon/Huffington Post article, a scholarly article, and/or an NPR article that would address this question. We faced a number of challenges as we looked for articles including the fact that we didn’t want to find articles that too obviously looked like they were inappropriate for a college paper. We also acknowledged that our goal in looking for a scholarly article would be to look for an article that just addressed lead poisoning. The Flint Water Crisis was being newly addressed by scholars. We also wanted to find articles that could be easily read and understood in a short activity.

Our idea was to present 3-5 of these sources to students. Students would work individually or in small groups to read the articles and then address questions that the LPI team created for each article. The team wrote questions that addressed the relevancy of the article to our topic, the authority of the publication for this topic, and the author’s potential bias. It was difficult to create these questions; too many questions would overwhelm students and be too time consuming.

Implementing the Lesson Plan

After our collaboration, the lesson plan consisted of four diverse sources and a series of questions for each. The questions would allow students to evaluate the sources, explore how context plays a role in authority, and analyze how each source could be incorporated in a research project. However, the way the articles and questions were delivered, and the way students engaged with each other and the instructor could vary based on the method of instruction. Faced with the task of teaching a brand-new lesson plan that approached evaluation in a non-traditional way, each librarian chose an instruction method that they were comfortable with and had previously employed with success. Some librarians put students in small groups and had students read different articles while others had all students read adapted versions of all of the articles. Each librarian chose to customize the implementation of the lesson to fit their own teaching style.

A librarian who engages with technology often in the classroom used a slide deck to provide instructions to the students and employed a Google form to deliver the articles and questions, though it did add time to the activity. Specifically, students had to navigate to the link and the librarian would have to cover how to use the form and submit their answers. The student responses could be viewed by the librarian as they were submitted. This allowed for real-time formative assessment during the session and allowed the librarian to guide the discussion based on the submitted answers and address any problem areas. The recorded answers of all sessions were later used for a wide scale assessment of the impact of the lesson plan at the end of the semester. A version of the form was also modified in order to enable it to be completed in a shorter time frame. Specifically, the questions were shortened and an article was removed. The shortened activity modified the original plan, but the learning outcomes remained the same.

One librarian developed a print handout that provided more specific instructions to guide students as they worked through shortened versions of the questions. The students were provided with printed versions of the articles. A second librarian facilitated the activity in the same way in their 7-week one credit course, Digital Research: Critical Concepts & Strategies. This method allowed the librarians to implement the lesson plan without having to learn a new technology and deal with an additional stress factor.

The final librarian developed an evaluation game (<http://bit.ly/2pCM4Om>) utilizing the software Articulate Storyline 2. The active-learning game had the same articles, but removed the short answer questions. The questions were adapted to be multiple choice and automatic feedback was provided to students. The activity’s gamefulness resided in the students separating into teams and being awarded a final score based on their evaluation answers. The game increased student engagement, but their answers were not rec-

orded for assessment.

Each librarian implemented the lesson plan uniquely and the next section on the plan in action will further discuss these implementation experiences.

The Plan in Action

Once we started to test out the lesson plan in classrooms during the winter of 2016, some interesting issues came to light. Although one librarian had a very relevant moment where her students actually had to navigate through a protest about the water crisis in order to get to her classroom, many in the team quickly discovered that some students did not know about the Flint Water Crisis. Although a good percentage of incoming students are from Michigan, it became clear that we needed to come up with a quick synopsis for those students from out of state where the news story had not been as prevalent.

Another issue was time; ideally, we had wanted to talk about at least three articles to show nuance beyond scholarly vs. non-scholarly articles, but taking class time to discuss three articles was difficult. Some team members ended up going back to a model of using a scholarly article and non-scholarly article for comparison. They found that by following through with discussion questions developed with use of the Framework in order to bring out more conversation about authority, two articles were sufficient to have a conversation. One librarian discovered that having half the class look at one article, the other half look at another article, then have them report out did not give the class as a whole the understanding of authority that she wanted. She cut down on questions asked, and had the students look at all three articles to get the full breadth of comparison.

The librarian who created the Articulate Storyline game discovered that some students responded very well to the competitive edge this added, and the competition encouraged more critical thinking since the students were quick to challenge each other in the spirit of the game.

One team member discovered that the conversation about authority could go too far in one direction. By talking with her class about different types of experts, at a certain point in the session, students were demonstrating their search, and explained that they did not want scholarly articles because hearing from everyday people was more important. Subsequently, the librarian made a few changes to the discussion questions. Additionally, when talking about bias, there was also a need to balance the conversation between skepticism and cynicism; this is a difficult concept for students. Another librarian had students who did not feel the scholarly article was relevant because it did not specifically reference Flint, and needed to do some work with the lesson around the concept of relevance.

The team created a new reflective question for assessment of the lesson, and students took time at the end of class to answer:

“Imagine that you are heading back to your room and you run into a friend who has a research paper and is stressing out. In 3-5 sentences, what advice would you give your friend on getting started, getting help, and finding quality sources for their paper?”

Students responded enthusiastically to the scenario, writing about determining bias of a source, and making sure to find multiple perspectives. One librarian talked in her class about wanting different sources to add different voices to the narrative, and had a student write:

“First, scour academic journals and books to arrive at a general background and starting point on their topic. Then, narrow down academic sources to arrive at specific sources that add to their argument. Finally, broaden their source search to find sources that add a narrative feature to their paper.”

Future Steps

We have discussed the need to look at all the Frames and look at other aspects of our lessons that we could improve by looking through the Framework lens. However, time to collaborate together on these lesson plans is difficult to find. We have also discussed that we came together on the Authority Frame because the language of that particular Frame really spoke to our team. The other Frames have not captured our interest in the same way.

Whether we continue this same type of process to develop lessons around the Framework, going through this process once was very worthwhile. We all agree that taking the time to do a deep dive into one Frame made us mindful of the other Frames and has had a positive impact overall on our teaching.

References

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For more about the project, see our website at <https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/loex2017>

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APPENDIX

Developed Questions:

The questions below are the original questions developed by the group. Each Librarian adapted and edited the questions to fit their own teaching style.

Using this source: What is it about?

1. The answers to the following questions will help you determine whether this source could be used for your research paper/project.
 - a. What is this source about?
 - b. Is this source relevant for your research paper/project? Why or why not?
 - c. What aspects of this source apply to your topic (You can be broad here)?
2. Where is this source “published?”
 - a. Is it published in a magazine, an online magazine, a blog, a journal or somewhere else?
 - b. Investigate this “publication.” What is its mission or purpose? What are the titles of other articles/posts in this “publication?” What is this “publication” about?
3. Who has written this source?
 - a. Google the author(s). What did you learn about them?
 - b. From what you found, can you say that this person has a professional background on this topic? Why or why not?
 - c. From what you found, does this person have an official responsibility that is relevant to this topic? How do you know that they have this responsibility?
 - d. From what you found, did this person learn about this topic in some other way? How did they learn about it?