

Perceived Authority, Real Consequences: Research-Informed Practices to Teaching Students about Authority & Misinformation

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Introduction

The Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education made waves when it was introduced to librarians in 2015 (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015). Among these “frames,” which were deliberately left open to interpretation and flexibility, was the idea that authority was both contextual and constructed. As I taught information literacy concepts as an instructional librarian in the library classroom, I was struck by this particular frame and the questions it left unanswered for both me and my students. I thus created a research study to not only understand this frame of information literacy, but also to understand how students conceptualize authority prior to any information literacy instruction. In measuring students’ likeliness to disseminate misinformation if it comes from a perceived authority, I was able to better understand my students and draw conclusions about the work that needed to be done to make sure they were information literate. These proceedings will include an overview of the study conducted and the research-informed practices that were adopted in order to teach students about authority and misinformation online.

Background

In order to better understand how students construct and contextualize authority, I conducted a survey of full-time first-year freshman at my institution, Park University, where I obtained full IRB approval. This survey contained six evaluation activities of social media posts from a range of authority figures that contained either accurate information or misinformation. Participants were asked to rank their likeliness to share the post with others and their confidence in the posts’ accuracy on a five-point Likert scale. Then, participants were asked to share their reasoning for sharing the post in an open-ended response. An example of this study’s survey instrument can be found in Appendix A. Overall, the results led to several key insights that informed my teaching practices moving forward.

Findings from the study showed that most students did not demonstrate critical analysis—about authority or otherwise—when evaluating the social media posts: only 15% of all qualitative responses showed a critical analysis of the post in their justification for sharing or not sharing. In contrast, many students did make emotion-based decisions out of fear, uncertainty, or desire to support or help others; in fact, 64% of the qualitative responses

were emotional responses. However, many students did reference or appeal to the source’s authority in their qualitative response. This included noting that the account was “verified” on social media as well as connecting this verified status to the post’s validity. I also found that students trusted traditional authority sources, including police departments and a user who listed their medical doctor credentials in the account profile. When comparing two social media posts about an internet hoax (see Figure 1), The MoMo Challenge, 50% of students indicated that they would very likely or somewhat likely share a post authored by the Spring Hope Police Department, with 47% noting that they were very or somewhat confident that the post was accurate. Whereas, when presented with a post with similar content written by a personal Facebook user, 46% of participants responded that they would share the post but only 35% indicated that they were very or somewhat confident that the post was accurate. When observing the difference between their likeliness to share and their confidence, I was able to understand how students construct authority as well as where their current perceptions could be strengthened.

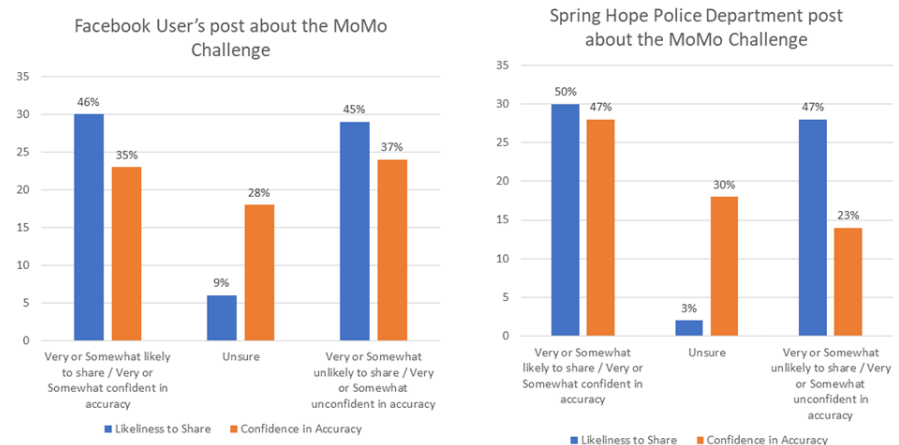
Further data and findings from this study have yet to be published, but for the purpose of these conference proceedings, I found it important to note that while students have experience with source evaluation in a traditional academic setting, it was clear that they struggled translating these skills to social media posts and instead relied on their first impulse. In reviewing the data, I noticed several themes or trends within the data, including: an inherent trust in traditional authority figures, such as police departments and medical doctors; an adherence to markers of credibility; and a lack of perceived social responsibility for information shared online. As an instructional librarian, I began to wonder how I could address these tendencies or beliefs that came out of the data. Thus, I found three inter-connected areas that I could shift my mindset or practices to better serve my students.

Implications for Instruction Librarians

Social Responsibility

An interesting observation I made from the data collection period was the way that students responded to the content presented. Several students remarked that they would share posts “Because its [sic] funny. For the meme” or “I think it’s interesting and would send to my friends but would know it may not be true.” Others were conflicted by the content and noted, “While it isn’t

Figure 1:
Likeliness to Share and Confidence Levels from MoMo Challenge Evaluation Activities



from a reliable source, I doubt there would be intent to lie about something like this.” Based on the data I collected, including both the qualitative data and quantitative data, I noticed that there seems to be a disconnect for many students between the posts that they share and the ramifications those posts have on the greater social media landscape. While one share or like or repost feels like no big deal, it is difficult to predict how many other people will see or share the post after them. On the other hand, some students took their social responsibility very seriously, but still their instinct to overshare could lead them astray. For example, students stated they would share a post about the MoMo Challenge (a debunked internet hoax) because, “I have heard of this before and want to spread awareness just in case [sic] it is true.” I found that some students were adamant about sharing posts that elicited a strong emotional response, in this case fear, as a safeguard. Related to this, I wonder: is the perceived risk of not sharing the potentially important information worse than the chance of sharing false information? How can we teach students about their own social responsibility to share correct information? How do we illustrate the way information is misconstrued, warped, and click-baited on social media? For me, it involves “fake news” and a classic game of “telephone.”

To begin, have students sit in a circle and number or designate each student so you have a clear start and end point. Give the first student the first page of an article and have them read it and give them a moment to summarize it in their own words. I created my own fake news article that is relatively harmless and easy to read, which can be found in Appendix B. Then, have them share the summary with the next person in line. Just like the game “telephone,” have each student summarize what they heard from the person before them and report it to the next person in line. For an extra challenge, play some music in the background to add to the distraction. When the last person has heard the summary, have them share with the class. Finally, read the headline of the original article and compare. How similar were the stories? What did the telephone game represent in the world of social media? What about the background music? Why did you ask them to summarize the first page of the article, rather than the entire thing? What can we do to disrupt this cycle? What is our obligation to disrupt this?

This game has gone over well with my students and is a powerful tool. One question I still wrestle with is: How do we convince them that this something worth caring about? How do we empower students with their social responsibility, rather than making it another checklist they have to remember? These are still ideas I am ruminating on in my professional practice.

Information Literacy Outside the Classroom

From the data I collected, it became obvious that many of my students lacked a real awareness of rampant misinformation online. While a few displayed some critical thinking skills, 68% of the qualitative responses cited a purely emotional impulse, rather than a concrete reason for sharing or not sharing the social media post. I do not, however, think this means that students do not have critical thinking skills; rather, even though Generation Z are “digital natives” (Mohr, 2017, p. 86), they struggle to contextualize their critical thinking skills in the changing, dynamic, and relatively unmonitored landscape of social media. Similarly, several students remarked in their qualitative responses that they utilize social media for fun or to connect with family and friends rather than to seek out news and information. This particular remark was applied to the video sharing platform, TikTok. If students approach social media platforms as a place to share ideas, be creative, and find funny things to send to their friends, it is no wonder they often do not critically examine the posts they share to the same extent that they might examine an internet article using methods they have been taught in class.

For instruction librarians, it is critical that we help bridge the gap between analyzing web pages and scholarly articles to analyzing social media posts and every other piece of information students come across. Teaching students to be information literate for life includes empowering them to use their critical thinking skills across every part of their life, even on TikTok. Shockingly, when I asked students while conducting my research which social media platforms they encountered news, TikTok was among the top three, with 38% of students reporting they came across news or current events on the platform. Whether we like it or not, and whether students realize it or not, they are rapidly consuming information on social media platforms. So how do we prepare students to engage with that information critically? How do we ask them to view information neutrally, rather than as all good or all bad?

To the relief of every instruction librarian, I reject the notion that this means more classroom-based library instruction sessions. I do not think it means begging for another class period or convincing another instructor to give up class time. I think it means meeting students where they are at and getting outside the classroom. After all, students need frequent and repeated exposure to these ideas which is not always possible within the constraints of one-shot presentations. Consider...

- Creating opportunities for exposure to these ideas by partnering with other student organizations or services to put on engaging programming about information literacy on social media outside of the classroom
- Posting tips about being a critical consumer of information on your library’s website and social media platforms
- Creating opportunities for students to ask questions, such as “Ask a Librarian” sessions Live on Instagram or TikTok

Will this Meet My Information Need?

Let’s face it: It is time to engage students in critical conversations about authority. Through the teaching of well-intentioned librarians and educators alike, many college students have begun to moralize information, labeling sources as “good” or “bad.” In reality, information quality is quite complex and nuanced. Instead of labeling information as good or bad, what if we challenged our students to ask themselves this question: Will this meet my information need? Instead of asking our students whether using TikTok or Instagram to get their news is good or bad, engage them in a discussion of whether a TikTok on COVID-19 vaccines that was created by a medical doctor and cites publications from the Center for Disease Control & Prevention will meet the information need they have. When we dismiss sources in a simplistic binary way, we neglect to meet students where they are at—on social media and immersed in the digital world. Instead of labeling sources as all good or all bad, let us teach students practical skills to evaluate whether a piece of information will meet their information need in the real world.

I have found success in teaching lateral reading, as well as using the infamous “check list” methods, such as CRAAP. However, these checklists often fall by the wayside when it comes to students using social media sites on their own time. After all, due to the rapid pace of incoming information on social media platforms, including TikTok and Instagram Reels which specialize in 15 to 30 second videos, students could encounter 20 different videos in the span of 5 minutes. Due to the complexity of these platforms, I find it is more effectively to simplify my message students: Pause.

The best internet hoaxes and misinformation out there stir up emotions and makes us feel something. But if we can empower students to pause after reading something that triggers them, we may be able to disrupt the cycle of misinformation. Pause. Breathe. Let your emotions regulate, let all the chemicals that just flooded your nervous system dissipate. Then, evaluate the information before you. This is similar to the increasingly popular SIFT method by Mike Caulfield (2019) where the first step is “Stop.” In my research study, I found that for several of the posts, students would mark that they were likely to share the information while being very unconfident that the information was accurate. In fact, on a viral post about the MoMo challenge, authored by a personal Facebook account, 46% of participants marked that they were very or somewhat likely to share the post, but 37% marked that they were somewhat or very unconfident that the post was accurate. If students could remember to simply pause before deciding to share or not share, paired with their repeated exposure to evaluating authority and their increased social responsibility, they could radically change their social media experience.

Conclusion

Through my research in students evaluating authority within social media posts, I came away with three predominant implications for teaching information literacy and the ACRL frame, Authority is Contextual and Constructed: these included having stu-

dents assess their information needs, expanding information literacy instruction across the curriculum and outside the classroom, and empowering students to claim their social responsibility on the social internet. These findings are research-informed and will hopefully spark further ideas to both reinforce the importance of understanding authority as well as mitigate some of the challenges regarding teaching this frame. I enthusiastically share these findings but also posture myself as a learner; I strongly encourage readers to experiment with these techniques as well as other methods of discussing authority with students.

References

Association of College & Research Libraries. (2015). *Framework for information literacy for higher education*. <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>

Caulfield, M. (2019) *SIFT (The four moves)*. Hapgood. <https://hapgood.us/2019/06/19/sift-the-four-moves/>

Mohr, K. A. J. (2017). Understanding Generation Z Students to Promote a Contemporary Learning Environment. *Journal on Empowering Teaching Excellence*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.15142/T3M05T>

For **Appendix A** and **B**, see: https://bit.ly/484-491_Appendices_Abdeljawad

(LOEX 2022 Report...continued from page 3)

present. Additionally, a good case tells a story while also provoking conflict, at the very least providing something that needs to be solved. Finally, a good case is relevant to students and ties into the work they are doing in class such as their readings, assignments, or needed skills. Advantages of using case-based learning in the information literacy classroom include that cases put information literacy and research concepts into realistic context for students; additionally, using cases is a form of active learning since students are actively engaged in solving the problems presented to them. As with any classroom instruction it is also important to consider assessment and think about how instructors will know that students have accomplished learning. Vaaler and Eslami recommended three types of assessment for case-based learning: performance-based assessment (e.g., how successful they were in finding an answer?), peer assessment (e.g., can students guide their peers to the answer?), and classroom observation (e.g., what are instructors seeing from watching students work?).

This was an interactive workshop, so small groups were each given examples of an IL-focused case study to analyze, such as topics like needing to locate a last-minute citation, conducting market research after graduation, and conducting research before signing a government petition. The groups reviewed their case and answered a scaffolded set of questions where they were asked to think critically in order to identify how they thought students might approach “solving” each case study, the resources they would need to be successful, as well as the challenges that the students would face when approaching the case.

Jennifer Ditkoff (Community College of Baltimore County) and Virginia Seymour (Savannah College of Art and Design) introduced attendees to the concept of signature pedagogies in their interactive workshop, **Trading Spaces: Re-imagining Library Instruction Using Disciplinary Signature Pedagogies**. The presenters cited Shulman’s 2005 work on signature pedagogies which defines them as “the types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new

professions.” The presenters put forth that librarians often teach information literacy in ways that are very similar to the way in which librarians were first taught—a mix of lecture, demonstration, and guided exploration. However, other disciplines do not conduct instruction in these same ways leading to a mismatch of expectations and learning objectives.

Ditkoff and Seymour point to potential benefits of leaning on signature pedagogies when librarians are conducting subject specific instruction. One benefit is that utilizing a discipline’s specific pedagogy will allow students to lower their cognitive load thereby increasing their learning potential. Cognitive Load Theory holds that learning potential is impacted by the working memory available while completing a task so if students have to first adapt to a new method of classroom instruction during a library session, they are using more working memory before a librarian’s lesson even starts. Additionally, utilizing signature pedagogies allows students room to enact information literacy principles with the familiar context of their discipline. Finally, applying signature pedagogies also raises the potential of students connecting the relevance of important information literacy concepts to their work both inside and outside of a classroom.

This workshop allowed participants time to think critically about typical pedagogies for a variety of disciplines (e.g., creative arts students typically learn in a studio setting; nursing students are coached to find a “best answer” in a clinical setting) compared to what a typical library lesson might look like for students in those disciplines. Group discussion was also incorporated to allow participants time to discuss how various IL skills and the Framework for Information Literacy might be best applied to help impact students’ abilities to reach relevant target skills for specific disciplines.

 For more information about the conference, and the PowerPoints and handouts for many of the sessions, including from the plenary session mentioned in this article, visit the website at <https://loexconference.org/2022/breakout-session-materials/>