CHAPTER 4*

Question Authority and Be an Authority

The Future Belongs to Us†

Romel Espinel

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, understanding authorship and authority can be challenging. The advancement of online technology with social media like Twitter, Facebook, and easy-to-use blogging software like WordPress has given the masses a voice on any given subject. News articles are skimmed, URLs are copied and transmitted within seconds over the Internet. And while it can be said that these “new” developments have led to more voices to being heard, abundance has not necessarily translated into a more informed democratic society.

Librarians have answered the call by making it a priority to instruct students on how to evaluate information sources. In the past, librarians would simply “path find” for students by showing where information was located or by curating collections for students to use for their research projects. With the explosion of online resources, instruction needs to be tailored to how students are using the Internet because of its easily accessible information.

* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (CC-BY 4.0).
† A riff on the Circle Jerks song “Question Authority” from their 1982 record Wild in the Streets.
Susanna Calkins and Matthew Kelley in *College Teaching* suggest that to help students understand how to critically evaluate sources, they need to be given “guidelines or experience” with regularity, prior to assignments and learning exercises. Thus, in many information literacy classes librarians teach about evaluating sources by scaffolding their instruction with guidelines and acronym strategies like CARS or CRAP. These acronyms provide criteria for students to remember and act as guiding principles: currency, reliability, purpose or point of view, and of course, authority.

While providing students with guidelines or criteria for evaluating sources seems like the easiest instructional method, this approach impedes the development of the knowledge or practice to create and use criteria for specific informational purposes. First, this method reinforces the power structure of a traditional classroom: the librarian with knowledge vis-à-vis the student with no knowledge. The criteria that are taught might not necessarily fit the context of the research students are doing, especially when “authorities” are defined only by elite standards. Second, students were not involved in the development of the criteria of authorities on a subject that they may be researching. By not empowering students to learn how to develop criteria for a specific research context, students never truly take ownership of their learning. As Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* speaks of education as having “narration sickness,” librarians tend to teach the evaluation of authority like the diagnosis of a disease by its list of symptoms. Students need to continually challenge authorship and authority to understand the totality of a subject and the context of the source and the information from which it was created.

One of the aims of critical pedagogy is to get our students to understand the class contradictions and exploitative practices that operate under capitalism. On the one hand, the Internet has been presented as a tool for expanded knowledge development because information can be grasped quickly. On the other hand, the Internet is also a commercial space for capitalism in an endless drive to make profits. Information is treated as a “free” commodity that is available to students to digest. However, the interests of working class students are not the aim of most websites or search engines.

The following lesson is my attempt to instruct students in becoming conscious of their role in knowledge production as authors and how to come to a collective agreement on what kinds of authority are needed for a particular information purpose.

In this active learning experience, the class works together to determine what the appropriate criteria are for their research projects. Here the librarian does not give prescribed guidelines for determining credibility. Instead, students become critical agents who reflect on the definitions of author and authority, unpack what these terms mean under capitalism, and work collaboratively to build their own criteria. By engaging in this critical practice, students can replicate the experience when researching other projects as well as understanding the world.
Learning Outcomes

- Investigate how authority is created
- Develop criteria for authority according to a specific information context
- Analyze authorship and authority
- Recognize that they are also authors and must develop their own sets of criteria for being a responsible author

Materials

- Socrative.com account (or any audience response system). For an analog version, printed survey questions can be used.
- Dry-erase board and markers
- Computers, tablets, or cell phones can be used to enter information into Socrative.

Preparation

In Socrative (or other audience response systems), enter these questions to be answered on students' mobile devices or computers:

1. Are you an author?
2. If you were to research autism, what criteria or credentials would you look for in order to consider an author an authority on the subject?
3. Where would these authors share their ideas?
4. If you could guess (or if you know) the name of an information source that would contain articles about your topic, what would it be? (e.g., journal, magazine, newspaper, blog, website, etc. Be specific.)
5. Come up with a list of social justice topics where perspectives are questioned about their authority (e.g., police brutality, Ferguson, drones, global warming, etc.).

Session Instructions

1. At the beginning of class, have students log into the Socrative and answer the five questions listed above.
2. Once students have completed the questions, display their responses without revealing names. Have the whole class discuss results of question 1 (Are you an author?). Discuss if anyone considers themselves authors and what qualifies them as an author. If most of the class does not consider
themselves authors, ask if they produce art, social media posts, scientific findings, or other objects that might be considered authored.

3. Discuss results of question 2. Have the students point out similarities and differences between the answers. Why are these credentials so important to the notion of authority? How have these credentials been developed over time and accepted? While someone may be discussing autism, does that make them an authority?

4. Discuss results of question 3. Where would these authors share their ideas? Can these official areas of publication silence or marginalize other voices? Where can we find these voices, and how can these voices be credible?

5. Discuss question 4, which should reveal students’ experience with scholarly, popular, Internet, or trade sources. Discuss where they have accessed these sources in the past.

6. Have students break up into groups of two. Ask them to consider one of the social justice topics suggested in question 5. Alternately, you can provide your own list of topics for students.

7. Ask groups to discuss who would be an authority for their topics. Give the students some guiding questions like: What is the author’s relationship to the subject? Is the author a journalist, scholar, independent writer, etc.? Students should list the credentials for their authority. Students should also challenge the authority of their imagined authorities by pointing out potential contrary opinions.

8. Give the class time to discuss the criteria that groups have come up with. Have the groups use their created criteria to have them look up two authoritative articles on their topic using Google and two using library databases.

9. Have each group present one of their sources and how it meets the criteria they developed.

10. Wrap up by noting that authority is not a given criterion dependent on degree or education but is specific to the context of the information or the research being conducted. End with a reflective question to the class: As an author of a future research paper, what will your authority on the subject be based on?

Assessment

Formative assessment can be done throughout the session. While discussing students’ answers to the questions, the instructor can assess their knowledge, reinforce concepts, and make suggestions of what types of criteria can be applied if the knowledge is limited. By taking notes while students are working in groups, librarians can assess how students are developing ideas about au-
thority and what criteria should be implemented for their needs. Summative assessment can be used when students demonstrate and discuss how they created criteria and then used them to guide their research. The types of criteria that the students develop should aim at exposing expertise, education, use of other research in their sources, and a point of view or an ideology. Librarians should also be sure that students recognize opposing viewpoints.

Reflections

I have done this lesson with first-year and second-year students. First-year students need more direction in how to discover information sources available to them, where to find them, and what types of authority are reliable. This would require additional learning outcomes to address those needs. Second-year students who have already been exposed to evaluative criteria display knowledge of what types of authorities they need for their research and where to find them. With the more advanced classes, I was able to bring up political questions about marginal sources and how their authority can be reliable according to context.

When I have used this lesson, in answering question 2, students placed a strong emphasis on authors who have a PhD or simply a degree in the subject area but also mentioned extensive study in the field or work. Only one student out of nineteen gave mentioned that the author should use reliable and numerous sources within their research about the subject. This observation led me to ask whether students check works cited or bibliography pages to validate research. After some inquiry, most of the class responded that they had not checked the author's sources.

Final Question

How can we help students unpack the criteria they use to evaluate authority in order to expose the class, race, or gender politics underneath?

Notes

Bibliography
