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It's all relative?

Post-truth rhetoric, relativism, and teaching on "Authority as Constructed and Contextual"

Within the current climate of political polarization and discussions about "post-truth" rhetoric, many academic librarians are debating how the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education[1] does or does not address "post-truth" thinking and rhetoric. Most of these discussions have centered on the Authority Is Constructed frame, which describes source authority as determined largely in communities and within specific contexts, rather than as anything absolute or universal. The concept of constructed authority can potentially be understood as an affirmation that authority is purely a matter of opinion or subjective evaluation, or that there are no consistent or objective indicators of credibility. On the other hand, the notion of authority as entirely objective misrepresents the social nature of knowledge creation and renders invisible the sociocultural structures and systems that powerfully share what is considered knowledge.

In this essay, I will consider both challenges and possibilities of teaching about the Authority Is Constructed and Contextual frame (hereafter the "Authority" frame). These are particularly significant at a sociopolitical moment in which 1) facts, evidence, and reasoning have been made inconsequential in much of public and political discourse and 2) public discourse has become increasingly divisive and often marginalizing to various social groups. Ultimately, I will argue that the Authority frame, while easily misunderstood, is a rich conceptual understanding that can help students both to appreciate the contextual nature of information creation and to challenge "post-truth" rhetoric. Conceptions of relativism that challenge the extremes of both absolute truth and of absolute relativism suggest constructive ways of engaging with the Authority frame.

Unpacking "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual"

The Authority frame is probably the most debated of the Framework's six conceptual understandings. This is not surprising, given the complexity of the concept and the concision of the frame's opening statement. The Authority frame begins with the following summary of the concept:

> Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility, and

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> are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required.

This opening text rightly invites students and teachers to challenge the false dichotomy of good/bad and credible/noncredible sources. It also draws needed attention to the significance of context when evaluating and using sources. At the same time, however, the Authority frame cannot be adequately summarized in just one or two sentences. These introductory sentences may easily be misinterpreted to mean that authority and expertise are merely matters of opinion and that all arguments are equally valid. Such a reading of the Authority frame fits well with the notion of post-truth. If authority is determined by communities, is any given community's understanding of authority just as valid as another's? Is authority merely subjective? Are all information sources equally credible, and facts, evidence, and critical analysis of limited importance?

A more nuanced understanding of the Authority frame, in contrast, requires moving beyond all-or-none thinking. For example, students might consider principles of source authority that are generally agreed upon across many communities. How do these shared principles illustrate how source authority and expertise are more than a matter of subjectivity? At the same time, might certain shared principles reflect cultural norms and values that may unfairly marginalize certain individuals or groups?

These questions reflect the impossibility of adequately summarizing the Authority frame within a few sentences. The more detailed description that follows the frame's introductory text is therefore essential. Readers will hopefully look beyond the frame's first three sentences to consider the more particular ways that the Authority frame represents concepts like source authority and expertise.

The more detailed explanation of the Authority frame encourages a more complex understanding of authority. Evaluation of authority involves "informed skepticism," "an openness to new perspectives," assessment of the "validity of information created by different authorities," and enables "learners to critically examine all evidence." This evaluation ideally occurs along with recognition of "biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others' worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations."

Thus, "novice learners come to respect the expertise that authority represents while remaining skeptical of the systems that have elevated that authority and the information created by it." Relatedly, "[e]xperts know how to seek authoritative voices but also recognize that unlikely voices can be authoritative, depending on need." The Authority frame hereby affirms the importance of evidence, reasoning, and context when evaluating information. Not all sources are equal. At the same time perceptions of authority and credibility cannot be neatly separated from issues of power and social structure.

While a closer examination of the Authority frame illustrates its complexity, the phrase "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual," viewed in isolation, may still be interpreted to suggest that expertise or source authority is a mere matter of opinion. How might we, as librarians and as educators, address this potential misunderstanding of the Authority frame? And how might a more in-depth engagement with the Authority frame open exploration of more complex questions, like who decides what is true or authoritative and how? Examining various conceptions of relativism may help librarians and other educators consider approaches to teaching about authority as

contextual, yet not as arbitrary or purely subjective.

Conceptions of relativism

Varying conceptions of relativism illustrate both the value and the limitations of "contextual authority" when evaluating information sources, claims, and evidence. They can also generate ideas for teaching about the Authority frame. The term *relativism*, as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is 1) "a theory that knowledge is relative to the limited nature of the mind and the conditions of knowing" and 2) "a view that ethical truths depend on the individuals and groups holding them."[2] Similarly, the Authority frame describes authority as dependent upon the context of an information need. The frame also states that "[a]uthority is constructed by various communities" that "recognize different types of authority." Both the Authority frame and certain understandings of relativism can serve as acknowledgements that individuals' and social groups' perspectives, experiences, and values depend largely on context and culture. Both can thus reflect cultural sensitivity and an appreciation of difference.

While relativism can encourage an appreciation of difference, absolute relativism, according to which all viewpoints are equally valid or all "facts" are merely constructions, is problematic. It undercuts the possibility to agree on certain ethical principles (e.g., all human beings have inherent worth) or on established scientific knowledge (e.g., climate change is real). More complex conceptions of relativism enable fuller appreciation of the contextual nature of authority, while also challenging the notion that all information sources and all arguments are equally valid. "Weak" relativism and feminist standpoint theory are constructive examples of at once appreciating difference and affirming generally shared principles for understanding our material and social worlds.

Political Scientist Jack Donnelly, discussing relativism within the context of human rights, advocates for a "weak cultural relativism," according to which culture is one among various sources that determines morality and rules.[3] Cultural relativism reflects respect for "communal autonomy and self-determination"[4] and contrasts the ethnocentric notion that rules and ethics should be exactly the same across all cultures. At the same time, advocates for universal human rights like Donnelly also recognize that some values and rights transcend culture and should not be considered open for negotiation. Weak relativism, Donnelly argues, acknowledges cultural differences alongside generally shared values and ethics.

Feminist standpoint theory

The idea that certain ethical principles and human rights should transcend cultural contexts is also central to feminist standpoint theory (FST). FST recognizes that feminism looks different in different cultural contexts and that Western values and norms of "feminism" should not necessarily be imposed on other cultures. At the same time, FST cautions against dismissing material conditions that contribute to social oppression and injustice. In so doing, FST draws attention to how people's perceptions of reality are largely socially constructed and, more specifically, how the traditions of empiricism and positivism (often characterized as part of a patriarchal system) often mask the interpretive and constructed nature of our perceived "realities."

FST may be particularly useful for considering the concept of authority as constructed and contextual. As Sociology and Women Studies Professor Kum-Kum Bhavnani asserts, the notion of "objectivity" has the potential to reinforce dominant power structures and ideologies, while limiting the power and the voices of other groups.[5] Feminist standpoint theorists also caution against viewing all experience as merely a construction, since doing so can function as a dismissal of very real social inequities and injustices. Thus, FST posits that communities are essential to determining knowledge and that the "most

objective truths are those validated by different standpoints."[6]

Both FST and weak relativism encourage an appreciation of cultural and individual differences, without collapsing into an absolute relativism that dismisses social and materials conditions and that implies that nothing is knowable or verifiable. Moreover, they suggest a need for shared understandings of what is knowledge or what is true, while leaving room for differences in individuals' experiences and differences across cultures.

Such conceptions of knowledge and relativism are also implied in the Authority frame. While authority varies by context and is judged differently in various communities, this does not mean that facts and evidence are irrelevant or that what is true becomes merely a matter of opinion. Rather, the Authority frame encourages both healthy skepticism and an appreciation of expertise: "novice learners come to respect the expertise that authority represents while remaining skeptical of the systems that have elevated that authority and the information created by it."

Such a practice of informed skepticism occurs through critical examination of all available evidence and through posing "relevant questions about origins, context, and suitability for the current information need." Informed skepticism furthermore requires "acknowledge[ing] biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others' worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations" and "question[ing] traditional notions of granting authority and recogniz[ing] the value of diverse ideas and worldviews."

Implications for teaching

It is important to recognize that more nuanced conceptions of relativism may be challenging for some students to grasp. Research on students' cognitive and epistemological development (that is, their understandings of what is knowledge and how it comes to exist) indicates that individuals' understandings of relativism develop over a significant period of time. Moving from absolutist understandings of knowledge to more complex relativist views is a gradual process, and many students may struggle with concepts like contextual authority and weak relativism. As educators develop approaches to teaching about contextual authority and relativism, they will likely benefit from considering educational research on epistemological development (for example, the work of William Perry, Deanna Kuhn, and Barbara K. Hofer and Paul Pintrich).[7]

Teaching about relativism and authority also requires acknowledging the powerful role that motivated reasoning plays in beliefs and argumentation.

This moment of political polarization has illustrated that evaluations of authority are greatly influenced by pre-existing beliefs, attitudes, and biases. Thus, it is often difficult to recognize how sociostructural factors influence one's evaluation of source authority. This points to a need for information literacy education to better address the role that cognitive biases, prior beliefs, and social identities play in how people evaluate and use information. Though this complex issue is beyond the scope of this essay, there is a growing body of research on information literacy and motivated reasoning that will also enrich librarians' approaches to the Authority frame (for example, Mark Lenker and Geoff Walton).[8]

While our pedagogical approaches are—and will continue to be—wide-ranging and multifaceted, they can remain grounded in an understanding of source authority as contextual, not arbitrary, and in shared understandings of concepts like fact, evidence, argument, and reasoning. It is also essential that we develop deeper understandings of how social identity and beliefs influence reasoning and source evaluation, given the powerful role they play in learning and in social relationships and structures.[9]

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personnel records. These requests are processed by NARA's Office of General Counsel. Archival records subject to FOIA are the records created by executive branch agencies and the White House and are the legal custody of the National Archives, including records subject to the Presidential Records Act that have been transferred to NARA since the Reagan Administration. Archival records are located at NARA's archival facilities and at Presidential Libraries. *Access:* https://www.archives.gov/foia/electronic-reading-room.

- **National Security Archive (GWU).** Founded in 1985 by journalists and scholars, the National Security Archive's holdings now total 8 to 10 million pages of declassified documents. The Archive's holdings start in 1945, with the beginning of the Cold War, to the present. Electronic Briefing Books, covering topics in U.S. foreign policy ranging from Cuba, North Korea, and NATO Expansion, are excellent research resources. Sourcebooks are also available by subject with relevant declassified documents. The Digital National Security Archive is a paid ProQuest subscription within the site. *Access:* http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/.

Note

1. For more information, see library.shu.edu/presresearch.

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Such knowledge will further enable us to develop pedagogies that invite students to critically evaluate and reflect on not only individual information sources, but also on their social worlds, relations, and experiences. In so doing, we can develop information literacy education that responds to students as social and emotional beings. We can develop pedagogies that acknowledge that students' experiences are, like our own, in many ways constructed and contextual, but also shaped in powerful ways by the material and social worlds that we inhabit.

Notes

1. ACRL, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," January 2016, www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

2. "Relativism," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary,* November 16, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/relativism.

3. Jack Donnelly, "Cultural Relativism and Universal Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1984): 401.

4. Ibid., 400.

5. Kum-Kum Bhavnani, "Tracing the Contours: Feminist Research and Feminist Objectivity," *Women's Studies International Forum* 16, no. 2 (January 1993): 96. https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(93)90001-P.

6. Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 773.

7. William G. Perry, F*orms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999); Deanna Kuhn, *The Skills of Argument* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Barbara K. Hofer and Paul Pintrich, "The Development of Epistemological Theories: Beliefs About Knowledge and Knowing and Their Relation to Learning," *Review of Educational Research* 67, no. 1 (1997): 88–140.

8. Mark Lenker, "Motivated Reasoning, Political Information, and Information Literacy Education," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 16, no. 3 (2016): 511-528; Geoff Walton, "Information Literacy is a Subversive Activity: Developing Research-Based Theory of Information Discernment," *Journal of Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (2017): 137–55.

9. Maureen Linker, *Intellectual Empathy: Critical Thinking for Social Justice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Susan A. Ambrose et al., "Why Do Student Development and Course Climate Matter for Student Learning?" in *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 153–87.