Liz Chenevey

Teaching the politics of citation

Challenging students' perceptions

In many of my regular one-shot instruction sessions, I often ask students why we cite in our work. The responses are typically the same: to avoid an Honor Code violation, because plagiarism is wrong, to give credit. Sometimes I'll hear "to find other articles." All these responses are correct and valid reasons to cite. But I often feel like the idea of "credit" feels vague to students and that the consequences of not giving credit affect the person who should be citing, rather than the person not being cited.

So often students, especially undergraduates, are taught citations with the message: if you do not cite, *you* will be penalized. Students are threatened with punitive measures from their professors or the honor council should they mis-cite or plagiarize. I often have students schedule reference consultations with me seeking help to fix their citations to make up points lost—and for some, those technical errors were the only major concerns with the paper. We have been teaching from a place of compliance and fear[1]—fear of plagiarizing, fear of losing points on technicalities. It's no wonder they don't engage when we teach how to correctly craft an article citation in their discipline's style.

After attending two talks on citation practices at ACRL 2021, titled "Under Pressure: Rethinking How We Teach Plagiarism"[2] and "Citation as Empowerment,"[3] I began thinking how to better talk about citation practices with students. A shared message from both sessions was the idea of empowering students in their engagement with citations, particularly through a critical lens.

Inspired by these talks and other conversations I had had with librarians about teaching citations (or not), I developed a workshop on the *politics of citation*—a term originally coined by Richard Delgado to confront racially biased citation practices that often exclude scholars of color.[4] The workshop allowed me more autonomy and time to dive deeper into this complex topic and engage students with citations in a way they likely had not experienced in a one-shot. I also wanted to further explore this topic for myself and create something that I could adapt to multiple settings—including with faculty or in one-shots as appropriate. Because of this secondary goal of adaptation, I used the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education to inform my learning outcomes so that I could easily weave it into other instruction venues in which I already connect to the frames.

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Creation of the workshop

James Madison University (JMU) is an R2 doctoral university, but at the time this workshop was created, it was still classified as a master's-level institution. JMU has a strong general education program curriculum, within which students must take one of two courses under the domain of wellness. Those who take the personal wellness class are required to attend a set number of programs or events throughout the semester that connect to different dimensions of wellness. I coordinated with our general education librarian to include this workshop in the program to reach a broader audience of students than those in my liaison areas. Because of the nature of the general education program, students can take this wellness course at any time in their academic career, meaning their exposure to some information literacy concepts would be quite varied. Their educational disciplines are equally varied, so I strove to create a workshop that was engaging and approachable, regardless of students' majors and their experience with searching for literature.

While I see connections between the politics of citations and every frame in the Framework for Information Literacy, I chose to explicitly focus on three frames for this workshop: Information has Value, Authority is Constructed and Contextual, and Scholarship as Conversation. I then developed learning outcomes informed by these frames, with each outcome guided by a primary and a secondary frame. These outcomes also then served as an outline for the class structure.

The learning outcomes for the session were as follows:

1. Students will be able to explain the importance of citations
    a. Information has Value
    b. Authority is Constructed and Contextual
2. Students will reflect on systemic inequalities in the scholarly landscape
    a. Authority is Constructed and Contextual
    b. Information has Value
3. Students will identify strategies for more inclusive citation practices
    a. Scholarship as Conversation
    b. Authority is Constructed and Contextual

In the following sections I will outline how each outcome mapped to the two corresponding frames.

1. Students will be able to explain the importance of citations

In developing this outcome, I drew mainly from Information Has Value, specifically to develop the knowledge practices around giving credit and intellectual property. This is typical for citation instruction, but I wanted to take it further by also examining the role citations play in determining disciplinary standards of authority, as outlined in the knowledge practices of Authority is Constructed and Contextual.

As discussed previously, we often primarily base our teaching around the idea of plagiarism and that plagiarists will be punished. But I want students to think not only of what may happen to them, but how the act of plagiarizing or not citing someone affects the original creator. My main goal with this outcome was to situate their prior understandings of plagiarism in a broader context and to tease apart the idea of "giving credit" and its implications.

I started off asking the same question as in my one-shots: Why do we cite? Following

a brief discussion, I provided examples from pop culture where original creators were not given credit. This included Chuck Berry's plagiarism case against the Beach Boys, ultimately providing him writing credit on a number of their songs and providing ownership rights to his production company,[5] and TikTok star Addison Rae's dance compilation on The Tonight Show with no credit to the original creators of color, causing many creators of color to speak out against their work being coopted by other white influencers.[6] By starting with examples from pop culture, some of which they may have been familiar with, students were able to see real-world implications of the idea of giving and receiving credit—that information has societal value.

To then transition into academia and scholarly publishing, I shared an example from Dr. J. Richelle Joe, a Black counseling scholar who found the results of her research repurposed in the publication of her professional association with no reference to her original work.[7] This led us into a conversation of how citations are valued within the scholarly landscape.

Here I broke down how citations can impact both individual scholars and scholarship as a whole. This included how citations honor intellectual property, demonstrate the iterative and relational nature of scholarship, demonstrate value as academic currency (e.g., as seen in tenure and promotion processes), and lend credibility and authority on topics to those cited. All these pieces work together to inform what works are cited, shared, read, taught—in essence creating disciplinary canons. This helped to set a foundation that citations have more value than perhaps they previously realized and how they play a role in constructing our ideas of authority and expertise.

2. Students will reflect on systemic inequalities in the scholarly landscape

Because I saw this outcome as building explicitly on the foundation set by the first, I drew from the same frames as before. Here, Authority is Constructed and Contextual was the priority, particularly developing the knowledge practice of understanding the social nature of scholarship and the learner dispositions of reflecting on one's own biases and valuing diverse ideas. Information Has Value also informed this content, particularly in the knowledge practice of understanding the systematic underrepresentation and marginalization of groups in the information landscape.

With this foundation set for how citations have broader implications in the scholarly landscape, I wanted to again further tease apart possible preconceived notions students were coming with. Often when I discuss issues of authority with undergraduate students, we ask questions about the author: Who are they, what credentials do they have to speak on a topic, how notable are they in the field? And of course, these are all important questions to consider when evaluating authority. However, as the politics of citation demonstrates, there has been a systematic exclusion of certain scholars (typically women and people of color) and a "closed circle of citation" among top white scholars,[8] and therefore these metrics of authority should be considered critically. My goal with this outcome was to discuss citations as an issue of equity and justice and to encourage students to engage more critically with these notions of authority.

This is where I introduced the concept of citational politics. I shared statistics on citation gaps based around gender and race. We discussed appropriative citation practices—especially regarding indigenous communities—that erase knowledge and how these systematic exclusions can bias future inquiry.

I then outlined four efforts to encourage more critical and generative citation practices: feminist citation practices,[9] the Cite Black Women Collective,[10] indigenous citation practices and style templates,[11] and best practices to consider when citing trans scholars without deadnaming.[12] Following a brief introduction to each concept, students participated in a jigsaw-inspired activity, selecting one critical citation practice they wanted to explore further and reading a short article to learn directly from those doing this work.

Following the reading, they shared what they learned both in small groups and on a padlet for the entire group to see. Their responses indicated surprise and frustration at the inequities in scholarship and many noted that their perspectives on expertise and the value of different sources of information was broadened.

3. Students will identify strategies for more inclusive citation practices

Because students are regularly expected to cite appropriately, I drew from the Scholarship as Conversation frame to ground this outcome in a knowledge practice they were already familiar with—citing others in their own information products. But I wanted to empower them in their own scholarly voice, so I encouraged them to see themselves as not only information consumers but as contributors as well. I also drew from Authority is Constructed and Contextual to encourage students to develop their own authority, acknowledge the responsibility that entering the scholarly conversation entails, and recognize the varied nature of authority to include in one's own work.

Now that we had discussed the importance and value of citations and challenged our notions of authority, my goal for this outcome was to empower students to take action. As scholars who are developing their voice and finding their place in their field, they can take steps to make the scholarly conversation more equitable through ethical and justice-oriented citations.

This can start with a mentality shift in how they approach citations. In her ACRL 2021 talk, Christina Fena highlighted the idea of celebrating the source list.[13] Students work hard to find their sources, and the bibliography should be a celebratory space that demonstrates that effort and uplifts other voices. When citing, scholars are intentionally selecting who they are conversing with,[14] and that is a responsibility that should enrich the conversation.

I encouraged students to critically review their citations for equity and consider various types of expertise. Counting citations can be one way to do this review, identifying what is the percentage of representation across the list. They should ask themselves if there are voices and perspectives missing that need to be considered. If marginalized voices have been included, have they been actively engaged with or simply added to meet a diversity metric? I shared too that these strategies could also be used with their course reading lists, empowering them to have conversations with their professors if they had questions or concerns about what perspectives are represented in their class.

Conclusion

Developing this workshop has changed how I think about and teach citations. While the workshop was developed to scaffold knowledge, the structure of the workshop—in which each section is tied to a specific outcome and corresponding frames—does allow for some flexibility in how it can be delivered. For example, I could teach just one section of the workshop in an information literacy session in which other parts of the Framework are

addressed. I now more intentionally bring pieces of this workshop into one-shots to provide students with more context as to why they should care about citations, and students are interested. After these sessions, students come up to me expressing excitement about the topic and want to learn more. I can't remember a time when students were eager to learn more about the mechanics of a citation.

I have also taught variations of the workshop with faculty. There is a lot of opportunity in talking with faculty about the politics of citation, not only for them as scholars who regularly engage in citation practices, but for them as teachers working with students. Our students deserve more than citation policing. As budding scholars, they should begin to understand the nuances of the scholarly landscape they engage with and work to make it more inclusive.

Notes

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