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Privileging Peer Review: Implications for Undergraduates

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PRIVILEGING PEER REVIEW

Implications for undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Librarians and teaching faculty privilege peer review articles out of ideals rooted in academic culture more than for pedagogical reasons. Undergraduates would find greater benefit in the opportunity to search and critique sources related to their personal and creative interests as well as relevant to academic research projects. Faculty are culturally indoctrinated to value the traditional peer reviewed text, while students value more contextually relevant knowledge types. Information literacy librarians can play a role in helping these two groups come together for greater student success. Librarians can adopt the role of change-agents by engaging teaching faculty in discussions about the goal of research assignments relative to peer review literature. Framing this discussion is Paulo Freire's theory of banking information discussed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000).

INTRODUCTION

How does the ability to locate, read and incorporate peer review journal articles improve undergraduates' critical thinking skills? Teaching faculty have noted that peer reviewed articles are a shortcut to ensure that students are "not just using Google" but accessing reliable articles (Foster, 2007; Walker, 2006; Wang and Artero, 2005). It is also a method that librarians use to measure the efficacy of library instruction sessions through citation reviews (Diller & Phelps, 2008; Hearn, 2005; Hovde, 2000; Mohler, 2005; Yu, Sullivan, & Woodall, 2006). Does the ability to locate, read and incorporate peer reviewed articles necessarily aid students in their ability to determine the reliability of sources and improve their critical thinking skills? I suggest that we are privileging peer review literature out of ideals rooted in academic culture more than for pedagogical reasons. Undergraduates would find greater benefit in the opportunity to search and critique the sources related to their personal and creative interests as well as relevant to academic research projects. This is something that many peer review articles are too narrow in scope to accommodate.

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE AS ARRANGED IN THE ACADEMY

Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire constructed the concept of "banking information" out of the inherent power of teachers in the classroom. In Freire's (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* he defines banking information as the "act of depositing [information/knowledge], in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (Freire, 2000, p. 73). The opposite of banking information is collaboration and trust between teachers and students, where students are acknowledged as bringing useful information/knowledge to the classroom. Because of how knowledge and expertise are arranged in the academy, there is little trust in the student voice. The culture, politics, and economics of peer review systems position faculty as experts, creating a gulf between students as creators of thought and faculty as the arbitrators, or depositors, of what is useful knowledge. Students are not regarded as experts or as creators of ideas limiting their ability to have a voice in the research process. This power dynamic is endemic to academic culture and may not be a conscious thought on the part of academics.

Singh (2008) wrote that the "condition for finding a representational voice in order to understand and name one's world is dialogue" (p. 700). Freire defines the process of naming as part of dialogue and as a means to control dialogue. "Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur…between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them" (Freire, 2000, p. 88). In the culture of the academy, faculty are the experts and the process of naming is the purview of faculty. Faculty have a stake culturally, politically, and economically in expertise and hence a stake in naming and controlling dialogue.

Knowledge and expertise are arranged in the academy with specialization at the top of the pyramid. The higher number a class is assigned, the greater the level of specialization, for example, a 100-level course versus a 400-level course. The adjunct and junior faculty teach generalist survey courses; tenured faculty teach higher -level undergraduates and graduates. The word "professor" denotes one who professes knowledge about a subject. Faculty

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members — professors — publish peer-reviewed books and articles on narrow, highly specialized topics and receive promotion, tenure, and the status of an expert. University administration values faculty who receive a federal grant to work, for example, on an experimental science project; the faculty member is rewarded with a reduced teaching load and increased status. Faculty can publish a new ideological theories and gain economic power to earn additional income as a guest lecturer or consultant. By identifying and publishing in a niche, faculty become the de facto experts in their area, raising their status in their department, in the wider academic community, and conferring status on their institution for employing experts.

Beneath faculty are the junior faculty, the adjuncts, and the graduate students striving to the golden prize of being recognized as an expert in a subsection of their fields. Following in the footsteps of faculty, the members of this group labor to find their own scholarly niche in order to enter the fold of tenure track faculty.

At the bottom of the pyramid of academic culture are undergraduate students. In the academy, undergraduates are not experts. Any expertise with which a freshman arrives must be transformed from a general interest into a narrow focus, from popular culture to the narrative of academic language. The purpose of papers and research assignments often is to train students out of the colloquial voice, to have students adopt the language and conventions of academia.

The focus faculty place on student use of peer reviewed works is based on the value that faculty place on these sources. Because peer review directly influences tenure (cultural and political power) and promotion

(economic gain), they are valued by faculty. While not intentionally venal or intended to dominate students, faculty place value on the type of information that confers status upon them. This type of information becomes valued not just for faculty career goals but is transferred to the assessment of student performance. Teaching in higher education thus places value on students' ability to acquire and use peer reviewed literature.

Freire's early efforts at literacy were focused on the peasantry, the group with the least voice (Singh, 2008). As knowledge and expertise are arranged in the academy, undergraduate students are the "peasants." They are the underprivileged and oppressed group, the group with the least voice. In order to confer on students the prestige that faculty assume is part-and-parcel of success in the outside world, students' natural voices are suppressed. Student grades are influenced by their ability to write in an academic voice, to use jargon, and to write on specialized topics. Unless each student intends to become a professor, the ability to adopt faculty values may or may not help undergraduates in life beyond the academy.

PRIVILEGING INFORMATION

Academic librarians view peer reviewed information as authoritative while information not vetted by peer review is not considered verifiable or reliable for academic work without stringent critique. However, the word "authority" only appears in the information literacy standards once and does not mention any specific type of resource. Elmborg (2006) claimed that librarians have decontextualized the standards from the natural contexts that searching for information frequently involves, as opposed to democratic values information literacy is acknowledged to

possess. For example, students often are looking for information in social and political contexts versus purely academic exercises. Students successfully research information on their health, parenting and topics like the weather naturally using reliable — though not academic — sources (Mark, 2011).

Librarians must stop teaching purely within the academic frame and instead assist students in their intellectual growth and understanding though critical practice that more resembles a journey with the student (Elmborg, 2006). From a critical pedagogical approach, information literacy librarians should recognize that students have their own experiences with information, even if it is not valued in the scholarly world (Swanson, 2004). In order to assist students in achieving information literacy skills, librarians should understand student perceptions of information.

Librarians have the power in academia to act as information experts. We should use this dynamic within the academic culture to bring awareness to the usefulness of sources outside the narrow, specialized focus of peer reviewed literature. One means to accomplish this is through generating awareness of the common practice of privileging peer review articles unconsciously out of ideals rooted in academic culture. This is not an easy task. Many librarians themselves are involved in the tenure process and recognize how deeply we are rooted in the mindset of publish or perish.

Combining consciousness-raising with a more targeted approach is recommended. Librarians can become change-agents through discussions with faculty and instructors. One audience could be those involved in freshman courses which are writing-intensive. Discussing the focus of what each assignment intends to accomplish with small groups works well. At my institution, I recently had a discussion with ten faculty members about the purpose of their first year student research assignments. Was the purpose necessarily bound to the need of using peer reviewed articles? Many faculty members noted that their assignment focus was to help students learn to distinguish reliable sources from non-reliable sources and then to incorporate what they had read into their own writing. Faculty recognized the fact that peer-reviewed literature in itself was not an important part of achieving the goal of learning to think critically about sources. Another audience to approach are faculty members who teach upper-division undergraduate courses with research components. Librarians can work with faculty to develop assignments designed to address peer review specifically. Unfortunately, many research assignments have specific purposes and goals and then tack on the requirement of using one or more peer reviewed sources whether or not these sources are relevant or integral to the research project. Working with faculty on assignment design is one method of separating the need for students to learn about peer review and the need for students to locate reliable sources (peer reviewed or not) relevant to their research topics.

If librarians and other teaching faculty change their approach of privileging peer review to a student-centered approach and include student views, information literacy will become more relevant to students, leading them more willingly to critical thinking skills and life-long learning.

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