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WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE? AUTHORITY, AUTHORITATIVENESS, AND THE UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCHER

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As a relative newcomer to librarianship, I am often puzzled by the tendency of librarians to blame themselves when students often do not take better advantage of librarian expertise. The propensity of undergraduates to turn to peers, parents, or even the stranger—student sitting next to them, rather than that helpful librarian, is often attested to in the literature of the profession. For example, Nancy Becker (2003) notes that “peer reference groups exert undue influence on student information seeking behavior” (p. 92). Nancy H. Seamans (2002) concurs. Based on her interviews of first-year students at Virginia Tech, she concludes that undergraduates “often do not see libraries and library personnel as part of their information-support network” (p. 121). Kate Manuel (2002), in her study of GenYers, makes the case that this generation of students “usually find[s] peers more credible than teachers, when it comes to determining what is worth paying attention to . . .” (p. 208). Even so, librarians continue to exhort one another to be friendlier, more approachable, more nurturing, the underlying assumption being that librarian behavior is the most plausible explanation for utilization—or under-utilization—of librarians as expert searchers and evaluators of knowledge claims. (This is not to say that for some students, library anxiety isn't a real phenomenon. It is simply to say that there may very well be other factors in play.)

Even more perplexing to me, as one who spent the first half of her career as instructional faculty, is the assumption that faculty command more authority than do librarians. For example, Rebecca Jackson (2008) suggests that faculty can and should “invest that same type of authority upon librarians by discussing how helpful and useful librarians can be to their students” (p. 60). In a lively email exchange between us,

she raised the crucial question as to who constitutes an authority figure for undergraduates, particularly underclassmen: “What you say about the lack of respect for instructors sort of surprises me. It sure seems like they listen when a professor sends them into the library with instructions to find articles in particular journals [as if] those are the only journals they can use. So who are their authorities?” (R. Jackson, personal communication, August 17, 2007). Her sensible question can be answered by teasing out the difference between two types of authority.

The type of authority that undergraduates typically ascribe to faculty is, for the most part, what Patrick Wilson (1991) calls “administrative authority” — an authority “one has by virtue of occupying a position” (p. 259), an authority that faculty possess as the wielder of the grade. When students “listen,” they do so largely because they believe they must in order to receive a satisfactory grade.¹ Their adherence to faculty instructions is not necessarily based on a recognition of their professor's “cognitive authority,” defined by Wilson (1991, p. 259), as an authority based on expertise. In fact, faculty no longer enjoy much in the way of “cognitive authority.” To be sure, faculty may be recognized by their peers as cognitive authorities, but that recognition does not necessarily entail recognition by novices. In fact, it rarely does. This point is made plaintively by Susan Ostrov-Weisser, who sees an extraordinary sea change in the culture of the American college classroom:

It's as if my student and I live in parallel academic universes. In mine, I'm the expert who shares my expertise and evaluates student performance from the position of that expertise. In hers, I am not more

likely to be right than any eighteen-year-old student; on the contrary, I don't know anything worth knowing better than she does. It's all about personal opinion anyway, so why am I troubling her with my "opinions" when she has her own perfectly good ones already? My intellectual authority as her professor is equivalent to a useful fiction, a semi-ironic game she agrees to for a short time for pragmatic reasons, with the understanding that we both know it is faintly ridiculous. (2005)

Tim Clydesdale calls this crisis of authority "The New Epistemology": "After interviewing some 400 students on 34 campuses nationwide, I found few in awe of their institutions or faculty. . . and most ambivalent about anyone's knowledge claims other than their own" (2009, *Popular Epistemologies*). In another *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Gary A. Olson makes much the same point: ". . . nowadays an opinion will trump a fact, a reasoned argument, an empirically verified observation—even a treatise by an eminent scholar" (2007). This crisis of authority has become a fixture of postmodern American culture. Clydesdale sees today's students as "not all that different from the population as a whole" (2007), but its impact is particularly devastating in academe.

William Badke (2005) has wryly designated academic librarians as the "Rodney Dangerfields of the academic world—they can't get no respect" (p. 64). However, if one listens to the faculty voices in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, or *Inside Higher Education*, or *Academe*, one would think that "Rodney" has lately been acquiring a lot more company.

There are a number of cogent reasons, many

grounded in cognitive development theory, which go a long way toward explaining why the issue of authoritativeness, the credibility conferred by expertise, is such a vexed one in the context of today's college classroom. Personal epistemology theory, based on the pioneering work of William Perry and subsequent cognitive development researchers, tells us that young adults operate mainly as "dualists" or "multiplists" when they negotiate knowledge claims.

Dualists see themselves as empty vessels to be filled and perceive learning as the regurgitation of memorized factual material. They do believe in "authority," but they believe as children believe. They do not base authority claims on intellectual expertise, nor do they have any mechanism for or inclination toward the weighing of knowledge claims based on evidence. They do not regard themselves as active constructors of knowledge, and so for them, the responsibility for their learning rests solely with their instructors. They are often more comfortable within the hard disciplines, little conceiving that here too, knowledge must be constructed. Multiplists, on the other hand, conform very closely to the description offered by Ostrov-Weisser. For them, everyone has a right to an opinion and all opinions are equally valid. Evidence is not necessary; a fervently held opinion is not only enough, it is positively sacred.

Current cognitive development theory sees undergraduates as oscillating between these two poles, often with a tendency to become dualists in the presence of the hard sciences, only to shift into multiplism in the softer disciplines, the humanities in particular. These belief systems act as "filters," as Troy Swanson (2006, p. 98) puts it, filters that dramatically impact how students process and synthesize information. Students enter

college with numerous presuppositions, attitudes and beliefs, some helpful to learning, others retrograde and inhibitory. For example, if one sees all opinions as equally valid, why would one waste time in attempting to determine the credibility of a web site or, for that matter, information in any form? Students often don't "get" the fuss about a web author's credentials. We — both librarians and faculty — might urge students to use peer-reviewed literature, for example, but a frank and open discussion as to why that might sometimes be essential all too seldom fails to materialize because it is self-evident to experts (both librarians and disciplinary faculty) that credentials and expertise matter, whereas that necessity is at best problematic from the standpoint of an eighteen-year-old.

Another explanation that offers itself, a commonsensical one, is that undergraduates, because they are novices, are often unable to determine credibility. As Swanson (2006) points out, novice searchers are more likely to be taken in by "surface credibility" — visual glitz (p. 101). Given some prompts — for example, a checklist furnished by a librarian, they should be, in theory, better equipped to assess the cognitive authority of a web site. We earnestly enjoin them to be skeptical—in fact, to question authority and to weigh knowledge claims. The kinds of questions that John M. Budd (2008) proffers are exactly the kinds of questions often presented to undergraduates when they are asked to weigh evidence: "If information is going to be trusted, you may want to know on what basis someone speaks. Has the author done work in this area before? Does the author know how to investigate the topic? . . . Is a blog as authoritative as a peer-reviewed journal?" (p. 327).

The reality is that for undergraduates, the test of reliability has more to do with a

certain sense of fit. Does the author's view resonate? Does it sound right? Is it easy to read? Barbara Hofer (2004), a cognitive psychology specialist, has studied how undergraduates typically assess information sources:

Students . . . appear to be evaluating the level and intelligibility of the writing, vocalizing comments that indicate they want the appearance of profundity coupled with accessibility For most of them, this is not a particularly deliberate and thoughtful process, and the rapidity with which students viewed information and discarded it was startling (p. 53).

The *A* word that matters most to the undergraduate researcher is accessibility, not authoritativeness. Thus, a mechanical method applied to information evaluation—the checklist approach—often does little to address and challenge undergraduate epistemological beliefs because it is based on premises that undergraduates frequently discredit.

None of these explanations, however, fully account for the crisis of cognitive authority that Clydesdale, Ostrov-Weisser, Olson, and many other observers delineate. The emergence of the hive mind—the wisdom of the collective—has done much to further blur notions of what used to be a commonly received notion of authoritativeness: It does often seem as if expertise will become, in the words of Michael Jensen (2007), "merely a function of swarm intelligences" (p. B6). Swanson (2006) contends that "the recent debate about the value of the open-access, public encyclopedia Wikipedia has at its heart a recognition of the need for authority and credibility" (p. 99). One need have no

cognitive authority to write for Wikipedia. As Burton and Chadwick (2000) argue, “Fold into this context of uncertainty postmodern attempts to erase the author, unseat authority and destabilize text, along with the questionable status of intellectual property, and it is little wonder there is a gap in knowledge about evaluating sources” (p. 313). I would go further and argue that it is not simply a matter of the undergraduate researcher not knowing how, but it is more profoundly a matter of not knowing why, or, put another way, a rejection outright of concern for authoritativeness. Somewhere along the way, authoritativeness has come to be regarded as “suspect. . . a form of repressive or exploitative influence” (Ostrov-Weisser, 2005). In short, authoritativeness has become conflated with authoritarianism.

The word crisis may at first seem hyperbolic, but when one considers what is at stake—the ability of a citizenry to render reflective judgments, to weigh knowledge claims, to generate evaluations based on something more substantive than mere taste and feeling, the designation is apt. The assumption that just because there are sham experts, there are no experts strikes at the heart of the scholarly enterprise. A rejection of the reality and significance of cognitive authority makes critical thinking impossible because one of the ways that novices learn to evaluate knowledge claims is by studying how cognitive authorities carry out that process. Finally, a denial of the cognitive authority of professors (and librarians) as experts in their respective domains makes evaluation of student progress the matter of whim that students often imagine it to be.

In such a context, the question as to who “don’t get no respect” (or who gets less) becomes (or ought to become) comparatively trivial. Rather, the crucial

question is how all of us can validate the notion of disciplinary cognitive authority so as to help students move beyond the unsophisticated epistemological positions of dualism or multiplicity. Librarians can best join forces with faculty by focusing less on issues of access and retrieval and more on student attitudes and beliefs about knowledge, especially beliefs about expertise and cognitive authority. They can (and should) especially support those faculty members who resist societal and sometimes institutional pressure to deliver education-lite, but rather provide a compassionate but rigorous model of pedagogy. Michelle Holschuh Simmons (2005) has argued that academic librarians are superbly suited to helping undergraduates become acclimated to the culture of a specific discipline’s discourse community. They are natural mediators between student and professor; as such, they are uniquely positioned to articulate to students the reasons why, for example, professors might sometimes require the negotiation of complex peer-reviewed literature. Librarians can (and should) model for students a deep respect and passion for cognitive authority and erudition.

As Lisa M. Given and Heidi Julien point out, “. . . forging and maintaining strong working relationships between faculty and librarians is no easy task” (2005, p.26). However, in an era that valorizes opinion and devalues intellectual authority, finding common ground may actually be easier than ever before. By staying apprised of academic megatrends that impact the practice of college teaching, by articulating an empathetic understanding of the daily realities of a beleaguered professoriate, by fully “embrac[ing] faculty as clients” who are as deserving of attention and respect as students (Given & Julien, 2005, p.36), academic librarians may discover, as this

librarian has, that it is deeply satisfying to serve instructional faculty. As one who has worked on both sides of the Great Divide, I can say with absolute certainty that faculty need all the help from “Rodney” they can get.

NOTE

1. Barbara Valentine amusingly refers to this strategy as “WPW” — doing “what the professor wants.” Many students believe that their grade is simply a matter of a professor’s whim. See Valentine, B. (2001). The legitimate effort in research papers: Student commitment versus faculty expectations. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 27, 2, 107-115.

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