Authority Is Constructed and Contextual

Information resources reflect their creators’ expertise and credibility, and 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.

Experts understand that authority is a type of influence recognized or exerted within a community. Experts view authority with an attitude of informed skepticism and an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought. Experts understand the need to determine the validity of the information created by different authorities and to acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others’ worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations. An understanding of this concept enables novice learners to critically examine all evidence—be it a short blog post or a peer-reviewed conference proceeding—and to ask relevant questions about origins, context, and suitability for the current information need. 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. Experts know how to seek authoritative voices but also recognize that unlikely voices can be authoritative, depending on need. Novice learners may need to rely on basic indicators of authority, such as type of publication or author credentials, where experts recognize schools of thought or discipline-specific paradigms.

Knowledge Practices

Learners who are developing their information literate abilities do the following:

- Define different types of authority, such as subject expertise (e.g., scholarship), societal position (e.g., public office or title), or special experience (e.g., participating in a historic event).
- Use research tools and indicators of authority to determine the credibility of sources, understanding the elements that might temper this credibility.
- Understand that many disciplines have acknowledged authorities in the sense of well-known scholars and publications that are widely considered “standard”. Even in those situations, some scholars would challenge the authority of those sources.
- Recognize that authoritative content may be packaged formally or informally and may include sources of all media types.
- Acknowledge they are developing their own authoritative voices in a particular area and recognize the responsibilities this entails, including seeking accuracy and reliability, respecting intellectual property, and participating in communities of practice.
- Understand the increasingly social nature of the information ecosystem where authorities actively connect with one another and sources develop over time.

Dispositions

Learners who are developing their information literate abilities do the following:
• Develop and maintain an open mind when encountering varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives
• Motivate themselves to find authoritative sources, recognizing that authority may be conferred or manifested in unexpected ways
• Develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview
• Question traditional notions of granting authority and recognize the value of diverse ideas and worldviews
• Are conscious that maintaining these attitudes and actions requires frequent self-evaluation

From the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education:
http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework#authority