

Authority is Contextual and Constructed: Class Discussion of Authorship

The following activity is meant to demonstrate the concepts of authorship and authority to your students. It introduces the idea that context can influence the tone and writing style of a faculty member or scholar and also introduces the concept of the scholarly conversation. At the end of this activity, students should...

- Be able to compare and contrast two different sources in order to comprehend the different types of context for scholarly ideas.
- Recognize scholarly blogs and other informal scholarly communication sources in order to describe scholarly communication as an ongoing and evolving dialogue.

Activity

Present your class with excerpts from two different information types on the same topic and written by the same author. For example, you can use a blog post and a peer reviewed article or a YouTube video and a scholarly book. You can even use your own work, by using a conference poster and an article or a book and an email—the point is to find two dissimilar sources. You will present the two sources to the students without revealing the author and engage the students in a discussion regarding authority.

Example:

The following example uses excerpts from a blog post and an essay published in a peer-reviewed journal, on food insecurity and fast food companies, written by Dr. Marion Nestle. Dr. Nestle is the Paulette Goddard Professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health at New York University and is also the author of the popular blog “Food Politics”.

Article 1 is a blog post from Food Politics: M Nestle. (2013, Oct 16). Today is World Food Day: Perspectives. Retrieved from <http://www.foodpolitics.com/2013/10/today-is-world-food-day-perspectives/>

Article 2 is an journal essay by Nestle: Stucker, D., & Nestle, M. (2012). Big Food, Food Systems and Global Health. *PLOS Medicine*, 9:6, 1-4. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1001242.

After giving your students a chance to read the two articles, engage them in a discussion regarding the authority of each piece.

Potential Discussion Questions:

1. Which article do you trust more? Why?
 - a. Answers can include the following:
 - i. Language: Article 1 uses natural language, article 2 uses scholarly terms
 - ii. Tone: Article 1 is conversational, 2 is formal
 - iii. Citations: Article 2 clearly shows evidence of citation
2. How would you use each article?
 - a. Example: Use article 1 to stay up to date on the subject, use 2 for a research paper in college
3. Which one did an scholar/faculty member write?

After a few minutes discussing, reveal the authorship of both articles. Then ask the class for their observations/revelations.

1. What is the purpose of academic blogs?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of both mediums?

Students will also find it useful if you discuss how you use blogs or other forms of social media in your research (that is, if you do). Discuss how you stay aware of changes in your field and how you approach research. The point is to get students to comprehend scholarly communication as a dialogue between peers and that the work of an “authority” can take many different forms.