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“Matters of Authority”

**Learning Outcomes:**

Students will be able to articulate multiple ways in which authority can be ascribed [*Authority is Constructed and Contextual*]

Students will be able to identify primary and secondary sources / scholarly and popular sources and how they are linked to each other [*Scholarship is Conversation*]

Students will seek a variety of source formats and perspectives in their own work [*Information has value]*

**Part 1:**

Select a social justice or current issue relevant to course topics such as immigration, foster care, or people living in homelessness. Very briefly discuss this issue, having students bring up any knowledge or connections they may have. The goal is to stir up a little conversation and see what bubbles up.

Then ask, “Who knows the most about what it is to be…… (homeless, a foster child, immigrant, etc.)” As students answer, organize their responses into categories, asking students to vote on which category “knows the most”. Tally the votes for each column.

*For a flipped classroom lesson, ask students to complete the question as a writing prompt before class.*

**Part 2:**

Option 1: Go through each category asking students who voted for that category to share their reasoning. Ask: Why did you identify this category as having the most or best knowledge on the topic? Then go back through and identify downsides in each category. As points are made you may wish to apply them across all categories. For example, when someone raises the issue of “bias”, take time to explore how bias factors into each category. Also, consider how something might be both a strength and a weakness, asking for example: is detachment a good or bad thing, how so?

Option 2: Pre-identify a resource that can serve as an example for each category: a primary source, professional site, a news article, and a scholarly article. Divide the class into 4 groups giving each group one of the sources. Using the source for context, ask: what does this source have to offer on the topic? What are the strengths of this source, potential downsides? Ask each group to report on what they found. Compare and contrast the source types as described above.

**Part 3:**

Name and identify types of sources and appropriate uses. Introduce the concepts of **Primary sources, secondary sources, popular sources and scholarly sources**. Ask students to apply a label to each category, clarifying or redefining terms as necessary and highlighting how primary sources are the raw materials of secondary sources. Discuss how more than one label might be appropriate. Finally, ask questions which help students to see links and relationships across categories of sources.

Sample Questions:

How does a secondary source use primary information? (A researcher collects data from people who have first-hand experience; reporters use sources to tell a story)

How might a journalist use a scholarly source? (Repackage research findings for popular consumption).

How do they influence each other? (Professionals change their practices based on research findings).

Which sources are the most immediate? (first-hand events – reporting – scholarly investigation – policy and procedure changes)

*Optional: Source evaluation. If you have time, or in another class meeting, consider the foundation of authority for each category. What do we look for when selecting each type of source*?

**Part 4:**

Wrap-up and debrief. Return to the idea of choosing a “best” type of source, how has their thinking changed?

Ask students to complete a one-minute written reflection. How will each category of sources be reflected (or not reflected) in their upcoming research paper?

Final Note: In my experience doing this lesson with first year students, a majority of students will value personal experience as being the “best” at the outset. It is common for them to say something along the lines of: *No one understands what it’s like to be homeless more than someone who has been through it*. Starting from that firm conviction, this lesson is designed to help students think about different ways of “knowing” and what secondary sources (particularly scholarly) are able to accomplish in providing analysis, context, and scope.

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| Part 1:  “*Who understands the most what it means to be in the foster care system*”? | Person with “lived” experience   * Child in the system * Parent in the system | | Person with professional experience   * Social/ Case Worker * Doctors & Mental Health Professionals * Educators | | Person who has written or reported on the issue   * Journalist * Activist * Policy Maker | | Person who does research on this topic or studies it in some way   * College Professor * Researcher * Sociologist * Psychologist | |
| Part 2:  *Strengths and Weaknesses of each source type* | -Deep, personal experience (Drill Down)  -Eye witness  - “Walked the walk”  - Insider perspective | - One person’s experience is not everyone’s experience  -Potentially unreliable  - Hard to be impartial | -Exposure to a wider variety of experiences  - greater detachment  - education on the subject  - “expert” | -Might see more of the problems and less of what’s working.  -Potential for bias  - May have an agenda  -Narrow focus | -Detached from situation  - potentially unbiased  - able to “tell the story”  - able to bring together different pieces of the puzzle | - Not experts on the issue  - Reliant on their sources  - May have an agenda  - potential for bias | - Education  - Unbiased  - Broad view (Big Picture)  - “Experts”  - Ability to offer analysis | - Potential to miss the human side of the story  - Potential for error, poor analysis  - may have an agenda  - narrow focus |
| Part 3:  *“How can we understand this type of source?”* | * Primary * Popular (Usually) | | * Primary or Secondary * Popular or Scholarly | | * Secondary * Popular | | * Secondary * Scholarly | |
| Optional:  *“Where does authority come from?” What is an appropriate way to critique or assess this manner of authority?* | Personal Authority:  Assess:  Accuracy  Evidence  How, where and why is the story being told? | | Expert Authority  Assess:  Credentials  Employer  Education  Body of Work  Affiliations | | Journalistic Authority  Assess:  *Author:* Credentials, Body of Work, Quality of Reporting, Evidence-based.  *Source:* Reputation, Purpose, Accuracy | | Academic Authority  Assess:  *Author:* Credentials, Education/Background, Body of work, References  *Publisher:* Reputation, Purpose, Accuracy | |