The Gossip Activity

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Audience

College students in intro-level classes. This activity has been successfully run in ENG 101 (English composition) and Introduction to Business classes, but could easily be adapted for high school students as well.

Learning Outcomes

- Students will list characteristics and clues that point towards reliable information in order to evaluate the sources they will use for their assignment.

Frame

Authority is constructed and contextual.

Overview

The goal of the activity is to demystify information evaluation and get students to generate their own criteria by which to evaluate the reliability of information and information sources. Students will also discuss the ways in which these criteria are contextual and may vary by situation. The Gossip Activity is one segment of a larger one or two-shot class, which also includes an introduction to the types of sources that will be used in an assignment and some instruction around how to find them (e.g. how to use a research database and/or library catalog).

Materials

- Large sheets of paper from a poster-sized pad, divided by lines to form four quadrants per page
- Markers
- "Swag bag" of library/college swag (e.g. pens, highlighters, headphones, buttons, etc.)

Duration

Approximately 40 minutes.

Lesson outline

Intro [5 min]: In the course of your research, you'll use a mix of information sources. Library resources have all been vetted to some degree—either a librarian or a database vendor has deemed them authoritative. Even so, they still might contain questionable information or overt biases. You are also, inevitably, going to use sources that you find on the open web, for which you'll have to do more of your own evaluation.

We're now going to spend some time coming up with criteria for evaluating sources. My fellow librarians and I have been trying to get away from talking about good information and bad information. Personally, I prefer to think about information on a continuum of reliability, with different situations requiring me to be more or less certain of the reliability of the information that I'm using.

We are all encountering new information and deciding what to believe and what not to believe all of the time. [Give a brief, true, narrative example from my own life of trying to figure out the extent to which I trusted second-hand information].

[Part 1, 15 minutes]

In small groups, I want you to imagine that you've heard something surprising about an acquaintance. This is second- or third-hand information. How do you decide what to trust and what not to trust?

➢ Get into groups of 3-4. Each group has a large piece of paper divided into quadrants.
➢ Make lists in the top two quadrants. Things that indicate trustworthiness go in the top left quadrant, things that indicate the information or source is untrustworthy go in the top right quadrant.
➢ Think about: the nature of the information, the person telling, and the person being talked about.
➢ Take 5 minutes and compete to come up with the longest/best list. Winners get to choose a piece of swag from the swag bag.
➢ After 5 minutes are up, regroup, discuss the lists and criteria, and choose the winning group [10 minutes]

[Part 2, 15 minutes]

You're now evaluating a website or piece of news you've found on the internet.

➢ Get back into your same small groups. You're now working in the lower two quadrants.
➢ In 5 minutes, make a second list. Again, things that indicate trustworthiness go on the left, things that indicate untrustworthiness go on the right.
➢ Keep in mind that the lists will be similar to those you generate in Part 1, but not identical.
➢ Regroup and discuss. How are the two sets of lists similar? How are they different? Make sure to include some discussion of the importance of a source's reputation—both the reputation of the author and (if it's a published piece) the reputation of the publication. Also make sure to discuss motivation—why did someone create this/write this? Winners get another prize from the swag bag. [10 min].

[Post-mortem, 5 minutes]

OK, we've come up with some really great, specific lists of criteria for evaluating information. Can we lump any of these things into broad categories that you can apply to many different types of information sources? [Write down a list].

Assessment

Before leaving or moving to the next activity, student put their names on their large sheets of paper and turn them in. The librarian evaluates, before giving the papers to the faculty member: How comprehensive were the criteria that students generated? Were major indicators of credibility lacking to an extent that warrants a follow-up in class? Were there gaps in participation across the class? Could they give examples of how they have applied (or could apply) these criteria to evaluating specific information sources?