OF MAPS AND COURTROOMS: EVALUATING INFORMATION SOURCES

Seminary Scholarship Symposium, February 8-9, 2018
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University

By Terry Dwain Robertson, Associate Dean of Libraries, Seminary Librarian

ABSTRACT:

How are novice researchers to evaluate library resources in a topic for which they have limited prior knowledge? Kuhlthau has described two phases in a typical student research process: exploring and documenting. These two phases correspond to the cognitive and affective characteristics of novice researchers as they approach a new academic topic. Formulation, the actions are categorized as “exploring.” After the focus formulation, the author’s mindset shifts. Now what counts is not the “instrumental” values of a document, but rather the “performativity” of the information. Both share core similarities:

- Type of document: primary / secondary / tertiary
- Currency: newer publications are generally better
- Purpose: for academic purpose vs entertainment
- Scope: length and depth, focus
- Authority: reputable publisher, credible author vs self-published or worse, anonymous website

Summary: Choosing a book or article to achieve a desired learning outcome is like choosing a map. An incomplete or outdated map makes finding your destination much more difficult. An incomplete or outdated resource may mislead you and end up spending too much time unlearning and finding the truth.

EXPLORING: MAP METAPHOR

A map is a two-dimensional symbolic representation of geographic space.

A document we read for information is a two-dimensional symbolic representation of cognitive space. Both share core similarities:

- Type of map: i.e. street map vs topographic map
- Currency: up-to-date vs historical map
- Purpose: Travel directions vs. electoral grid
- Scope: Andrews University campus vs State of Michigan vs United States
- Authority: Reputable publisher for commercial sale vs hand-drawn directions

All these descriptors apply to documentary sources (books, journal articles, websites)

For documentary sources, just like maps, a quick pre-reading can evaluate these “instrumental” characteristics:

- Authority: Reputable publisher, credible author vs self-published or worse, anonymous website
- Currency: Newer publications are generally better
- Purpose: For academic purpose vs entertainment
- Scope: Length and depth, focus
- Accessibility: Online vs paper source

DOCUMENTING: LEGAL METAPHOR

After the focus formulation, the author’s mindset shifts. Now what counts is not the “instrumental” values of a document, but rather the “performativity” of the information.

Think courtroom. Think legal argument. Think Judge (professor). Think Jury (other readers).

In evaluating maps, what values are important?

- Type of map: primary / secondary / tertiary
- Currency: newer publications are generally better
- Purpose: for academic purpose vs entertainment
- Scope: length and depth, focus
- Authority: reputable publisher, credible author vs self-published or worse, anonymous website

Summary: Choosing a book or article to achieve a desired learning outcome is like choosing a map. An incomplete or outdated map makes finding your destination much more difficult. An incomplete or outdated resource may mislead you and end up spending too much time unlearning and finding the truth.

HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpreting texts. It includes a set of assumptions about the nature of documentary communication, authorship, readership, publishing technologies, language, literary genre, and much more. To engage in scholarly conversation anticipates a careful, thorough, and intentional hermeneutic both in engaging the words of others, and then the choice of words when expressing a new argument. Just as there are rules of evidence in the courtroom, there are conventions and methods for judging ideas.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


