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. This paper suggests two familiar metaphors that provide clues to evaluating library mediated sources.

During the exploration phase, the metaphor of the map is discussed. What makes for a good map? Many of these same characteristics should be present in the sources that are accessed. Typical characteristics of maps demonstrating the values of soundness and reliability that can be applied to library mediated resources include: (a) currency, (b) credentialed authors writing in their field of expertise, and (c) reputable publishers.

During the documentation phase, the metaphor of the legal argument in a courtroom is discussed. Is the "testimony" this source provides useful evidence? Many of the characteristics of using good evidence from reliable testimony in an argument should inform what makes for sound and reliable sources that can withstand robust cross examination. In addition to the pre-reading characteristics discussed for the exploration phase, hermeneutical values come into play.

EXPLORING: MAP METAPHOR

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

In evaluating maps, what values are important?
- Type of map: e.g., street map vs topographic map
- Currency: up-to-date vs historical map
- Purpose: Travel directions vs. electoral grid
- Scope: Academic 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:
- 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, credentialed 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 An incomplete or outdated map makes finding your destination much more difficult. An incomplete or outdated resource may misdirect you and you end up spending too much time unlearning and finding the truth.

DOCUMENTING: LEGAL ARGUMENT 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).

Think about the premises, the "testimony" for a moment. How does the evidence fit the argument? Is the evidence factual? Is the evidence credible? Think about these questions.

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 genres, and much more. To engage in scholarly conversation requires 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.

DISTINCTIONS: NOVICE VS EXPERT RESEARCHERS

Novice researcher: Exploring a new field of study in which the researcher has limited prior knowledge and is expected to use new or undeveloped skills.

Expert researcher: Exploring a field of study in which the researcher’s fund of prior knowledge is rich and the required skill sets are well developed and practiced.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


