

Michael Dudley

# Exploring worldviews and authorities

## Library instruction in Indigenous Studies

### using Authority is Constructed and Contextual

**T**he student sitting next to me in the University of Winnipeg's Aboriginal Student Services Centre listens respectfully as I demonstrate the library catalog and databases, then turns to me. "It's interesting," he says. "The way the university teaches us, by explaining. It's not like when me and my father would go into the bush."

He then recounts how his father didn't instruct or describe things for him, he simply modelled the actions and behaviors needed to survive in the wilderness: what to pack, where to stow each item, and how to dress, expecting his son would learn from example. Still retaining the body memory, the student mimes the actions he learned years ago. Then he pauses, reflecting, and turns to me. "Except when he was in your world, he would get angry, distant. But when he was back in our world, he was my father again."

This conversation took place probably six years ago, but it's stayed with me not only because of its personal emotional power but because of how it made me think about my "world"—that it forced me to recognize my positionality as a non-Indigenous Canadian within a society built on settler colonialism, cultural erasure, and racism. This world—which had proved so harmful to his father that the health of their relationship required they be nowhere near it—was the very one that has furnished me with a rewarding career and material comforts. More than that, I realized, the student was also implicating the

institutions to which I belong in the workings of that world.

Since 2012, I have been the librarian responsible for Indigenous Studies' collections and instruction. Yet, because I am a white, non-Indigenous man, I am acutely aware of the need to continually remind myself of my situatedness, and that of the academic library, stressing the ways Knowledge Organization Systems (KOS) can play a significant role in reinforcing and reproducing the knowledges and values reified by both these institutions and the broader society.

For these reasons, I have enthusiastically adopted the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education in my practice. I believe it to be an excellent critical, yet intuitive, pedagogical gateway for engaging with students regarding the nature of library research related to their disciplines and/or cultures. Specifically, I have found the first frame, Authority is Constructed and Contextual (ACC) to be an essential tool in my instruction in terms of locating and describing the biases inher-

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ent in classificatory and indexing schemes premised on the positivist, Eurocentric values and worldview of the Western Enlightenment.

As I regularly demonstrate to students, applying the Library of Congress (LC) classification and subject headings to works representing the alternative worldviews, perspectives, and issues of Indigenous researchers becomes quite problematic—indeed, epistemologically violent. ACC helps to highlight the potential for KOS to marginalize such counterknowledges.

Of course, as I tell my students, the information literacy frames do not operate in isolation, but are closely interrelated. Yet, the epistemological bases of Research as Inquiry, the methodological approaches in Searching as Strategic Exploration, the materialism of Information Creation as a Process, the dialogical processes of Scholarship as Conversation, and the axiological dimensions of Information Has Value—all derive from and depend upon the foundational ontological nature of ACC, which is to say, our understandings of what exists, the terms we use to describe what exists, and those on whom we rely for these descriptions. As such, I often initially frame my information literacy lectures and workshops with a discussion of ACC.

### **Approaching authority**

This first frame encourages students to understand the bases of existing authority, in terms of what constitutes a credible source, advising that they be aware of structural biases. Students understand that authoritative sources can reproduce conventional wisdom that may be repeated with unwarranted confidence, thereby rejecting new evidence and potentially generative alternative points of view.

Because of this, the ACC frame encourages students and scholars to view authorities with healthy skepticism, and to be open to new interpretations and perspectives. *Knowledge Practices* include challenging sources of authority, while *Dispositions*

include maintaining an open mind when considering conflicting perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

To situate the discussion rhetorically and personally I point out that, when I was in school in the '70s, it would have been perfectly acceptable for me to write in a history essay that “Columbus discovered America,” which was considered at the time to be common knowledge. Now, of course, this idea is recognized as incorrect and indeed offensive, given the fact that Indigenous peoples were on this continent for tens of thousands of years, that Norse explorers briefly colonized Newfoundland in the 11th Century, and that Columbus perpetrated a genocide.<sup>2</sup> The ACC frame reminds us that some things considered “facts” may not be such at all.

I find that a good way to develop this idea further, especially if I'm in a classroom with a world map or a globe, is to give a brief overview of the history of the theory of continental drift. First introduced in 1912 by meteorologist Alfred Wegener, the theory that the continents moved spent most of the first half of the 20th Century in the academic wilderness, ridiculed and dismissed by most geologists and geographers, who maintained that—despite the obvious correspondence between the coastlines of South America and Africa—the appearance and arrangement of the continents had gone unchanged since the Earth formed billions of years ago.

This denial persisted well until the 1960s (after I was born, in fact), not only because Wegener and his followers did not yet know about tectonic plates (first proposed in 1967) so could offer no reasonable mechanism for how or why the continents would move, but because the theory upended established science across a number of disciplines, most of which vigorously resisted the idea.<sup>3</sup>

The peer review process, as essential as it is, can thus have a negative “gatekeeping” effect made visible through this frame. This particular example highlights quite clearly and powerfully that, what may be considered authoritative and established

“common knowledge” in one time period may be later overturned. More importantly, it demonstrates how knowledge, and even entire worldviews, can be subjugated by powerful or influential actors.

### **Authority in Indigenous Studies and Gender Studies**

This epistemological phenomenon is particularly salient in the field of Indigenous Studies, which concerns a worldview quite oppositional to that traditionally governing most other disciplines in the academy. Holistic, spiritual, relational, ecocentric, and cyclical rather than reductionist, materialist, compartmentalized, anthropocentric and linear, Indigenous worldviews afford the academic researcher perspectives on reality, relationships, and responsibilities not otherwise expressible in the Western paradigm, thus constituting a “gift” to the academy.<sup>4</sup> It should not surprise us that conventional KOS do a remarkably poor job of representing these concepts. As Sandy Littletree and Cheryl Metoyer observe,

Existing subject headings have not been designed with the perspectives of Indigenous people in mind . . . the cataloging language silences Native American history. It disregards the sovereignty of Native nations, as well as historicizes and stereotypes Native people and cultures. Additionally, researchers have found that LCSH and other mainstream knowledge organization systems severely limit the retrieval of Native language materials and Native American topics.<sup>5</sup>

Following an overview of ACC, I generally begin library instruction sessions in Indigenous Studies by explaining how LC Classification concentrates almost all topics related to Native Americans—even contemporary ones—into the E 51-99 range, or “Pre-Columbian history.” Native tribes

and cultures are classed alphabetically at E 78 by “state, province, or region” with the effect that cultures in Alabama are shelved near those in Alberta, Canada, with no consideration for regional or linguistic relationships or commonalities. This phenomenon repeats in the E 99 range (by tribe) which, again, sorts people alphabetically without regard for cultural relationships. LC Classification is especially problematic for materials relating to Indigenous peoples in Canada, which are also classed here, rather than in the F 1000 range with other books related to Canada. At a basic level, by placing all Native American topics in history—even those about current events or issues—LC rhetorically positions Indigenous peoples in the past, with no contemporary existence or agency.

An excellent tool for illustrating these points in a classroom setting is EBSCO’s Alternative Press Index (API), which has since the late 1960s been developing its own indexing terms emphasizing progressive social justice priorities and underrepresented populations.<sup>6</sup> Many of its indexing terms are openly radical, naming both forces of oppression and liberation. Rather than the standard LC Subject Heading (LCSH) *Indians of North America*, API uses *Native Americans*. Furthermore, API acknowledges the reality of *Native American Oppression* as well as *dispossession* and *Native American land and land disputes*. To recognize the agency of Indigenous people in the face of these oppressive forces, API names *Native American activists* as well as international expressions of an *Indigenous people’s movement* plus *rebellions and revolt*.

As well, for essay topics related to gender and sexuality, I similarly point out how the LC Classification and Subject Headings marginalize topics and people relevant to their interests, especially those related to LGBTQ issues.<sup>7</sup> There are, not infrequently, gasps around the room when I point out the pathologizing sequence HQ 73-77 that places sexual minorities—gays, lesbians,

bisexuals, and transsexuals—between the sexual abuse of children (HQ 71-72) and the sexual exploitation of children (HQ 103).

Again, comparisons using API are instructive here, as the database accords LGBTQ people and issues thoughtful and emancipatory indexing terms when compared to those of the LCSH. Where LCSH only recognizes *gay marriage* as a concept, API names the reality of *gay marriages*. Where LCSH establishes a universalizing *gay rights*, API prefers a more inclusive *gbtq rights*. Where LCSH only discusses *queer theory*, API sees the lived reality of *queerness*. As is the case with Eurocentrism, heteronormativity similarly constrains the sayable in LCSH, thereby potentially marginalizing identities and populations.

Yet, I don't just describe these terms, lecture from a PowerPoint, or offer a canned presentation. Instead, I try to point out instances of biased KO as they are encountered in the course of conducting live searches, using topics suggested by the students, which better demonstrates, I believe, the extent to which they may find that discourses in these fields can be shaped by external, imposed terminology. As such, using ACC as a framing device is a powerful way to encourage students to view critically not just their sources but the tools we provide in the academic library to discover them. By then connecting this frame to the others, I show how one's ontological assumptions can then have a direct impact on the kinds of questions one pursues, the values one holds, and the sources one consults.

## Conclusion

For purposes of information literacy instruction in Indigenous Studies, which is fundamentally concerned with the interface between starkly contrasting worldviews, as well as for topics related to gender and sexuality that explore different

expressions of human identity, the frame Authority is Constructed and Contextual assists students in recognizing the power inherent in naming both "worlds" and the structural power and ideologies underlying social categories.

Furthermore, by critiquing the very institutions for which I work in front of a classroom during the course of conducting a live search, I strive (much like the father of that student) to model good practice: in this case, the knowledge practices and dispositions associated with this frame—namely, viewing authorities with informed skepticism, and in maintaining an openness towards new perspectives.

## Notes

1. ACRL Board of Directors, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries 2015), 12–13.

2. David Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

3. Hal Hellman, *Great Feuds in Science: Ten of the Liveliest Disputes Ever* (New York: Wiley, 1998).

4. Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

5. Sandy Littletree and Cheryl Metoyer, "Knowledge Organization from an Indigenous Perspective: The Mashantucket Pequot Thesaurus of American Indian Terminology Project," *Cataloguing & Classification Quarterly* 53 5/6 (2015), 642.

6. Alternative Press Center, "The Alternative Press Center," <http://altpress.org/>, accessed October 11, 2019.

7. See Emily Drabinski, "Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction," *Library Quarterly* 83 (2013), 94–111. ¶¶