
Bibliographic Instruction and Cognitive Authority

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ABSTRACT

A KIND OF ADVANCED bibliographic instruction (BI) is proposed that involves the study of bodies of literature and their structures. The kind of study proposed would give students a basis for independent evaluation both of a body of literature and of the claims to cognitive authority of its producers.

Incoming college freshmen are asked about their goals: do they aspire to make a lot of money? to be an authority in their fields? Most (77 percent in 1987) say that they aim to "become an authority in his or her field," in addition to "being very well-off financially" (75.6 percent) ("Fact File," 1988). It is an understandable ambition; in a society in which expert knowledge plays such a central role, to be an authority in one's field is to have one of the most valuable assets available, a fund of intellectual capital. One can understand much of scientific and scholarly life as being a competitive struggle for authority; to be the acknowledged chief authority in one's field is to occupy a commanding position. Authority is desirable; how does one get it? and, in particular, is there any way in which bibliographic instruction can play a role in getting it?

First, to avoid misunderstanding, there are two quite distinct sorts of authority (Wilson, 1983, pp. 13-35. Compare De George, 1976). One is cognitive or epistemic authority, the authority based on claims to special knowledge. The other is administrative or "performatory" authority, the authority one has by virtue of occupying a position

that empowers one to command or sanction or forbid others to do things. Cognitive authorities are authorities *on* something—e.g., insects or Buddhist logic. Administrative or performatory authorities are not authorities on anything; rather, they are authorized to do or command or forbid something, as the judge, “by virtue of the authority vested in me,” is able to perform a legal marriage ceremony. We are only concerned with cognitive authority here.

Second, cognitive authority is a matter of social perception and recognition. It is not what you “really” know but what others think you know that gives you authority; you get cognitive authority by getting others to think you know things. You might be the world’s greatest expert on a topic, but if no one recognizes you as having special knowledge on that topic, you are no authority. You can be an authority for just one or two people without being a generally recognized authority. You can be an authority for some people while others think you are a fraud or a crank. Or you might be a generally recognized authority, recognized by all (or almost all) those who have an opinion on the matter as really knowing what you’re talking about.

Third, the scope of your authority may be narrow or wide: the field or area in which you are thought to be especially knowledgeable may be as wide as all physics or as narrow as the history of Corvallis, Oregon. And the degree of your authority can vary from slight to great. You have *some* authority if people are inclined to give your word more weight than they would give to “ordinary” people’s on the same subject; you have *great* authority if people are inclined to take your word as final, as settling the question. Authority is a matter of more or less weight being given to what you say in a small or large field; but “the” authorities on a subject include only those of great or near-great authority.

Finally, the crucial question: what leads us to recognize a person as having authority? What leads us to suppose that a person really knows a lot about a topic? If we personally think we are knowledgeable about that topic, we can test the person, formally or informally—i.e., listen to what is said, and judge whether it reflects real knowledge or just pretense or bluster. In the academic world, we judge each other all the time, deciding that this person is “sound” on topic X, that person is a “light weight,” that other a crank, and that other one simply ignorant of the subject. But what about all those areas of knowledge that are outside our competence? I know nothing about Sogdian history; how can I tell who does? Unless I am completely gullible, I will not take the fact that a person *claims* to know all about Sogdian history as settling the matter; there has to be some better reason than that.

If we can't ourselves independently judge whether or not a person is knowledgeable about a topic, we have to rely generally on reputation; if the person is thought to know a lot, we may go along with the general opinion. One other person's opinion may be enough; if I trust my friend *A*, I may simply ask *A* who can be trusted on topic *X*. But my friend *A* may be going on reputation. Ultimately, reputation will be traced back to some people who claim to be able to evaluate knowledge claims directly—i.e., peers or people active in the same line of inquiry. If a person's peers all think the person is knowledgeable, that provides a basis for reputation that others are likely to accept. This is not always the case, of course; a person may get a reputation which peers think is undeserved, and people may remain quite unknown even when they are well thought of by their peers. But by and large the social rule seems to be that specialists are the primary judges of specialists, and reputation outside the specialist group depends on reputation inside the group. That is not the whole story, though, as will soon be demonstrated.

There is another basis for recognition of authority—performance. One may not be able to judge people's knowledge in the area of their claimed competence, but they may be able to do things that convince one that they have special knowledge. If the doctor cures an illness, if the scientist makes predictions that can be seen as being fulfilled, that will provide a good reason for thinking that they have whatever knowledge it takes to do what they do. The performance test is not always available and not always conclusive; successful predictions might have been sheer luck, remission of illness might have been spontaneous. But performance often persuades more than anything else could, other than being able to tell by personal "examination" that a person knows something. We will come back to this point.

Those college freshmen who are seeking personal cognitive authority in their fields are going to have to persuade "established" specialists that they have acquired specialized knowledge themselves; they are going to have to study hard, take advanced degrees, and do research of their own that can be evaluated by other specialists. Authority is a social phenomenon through and through. The hard work is necessary but not sufficient; everything depends on whether others come to think that "X is a good person [or even, *the* person] to ask if you have questions about that topic."

One can acquire cognitive authority in ways other than the academic route, but we can ignore these and concentrate on the academic world. There is clearly a role, albeit a very modest one, for bibliographic instruction to play in helping students work toward their goal of becoming "an authority in their field." The more heavily

research in their field depends on library resources—rather than on experiment or observation or abstract thought—the more valuable will be knowledge of the bibliographic system. In some kinds of research, knowledge of the bibliographic system is practically indispensable, while in others one can get along with little or none. Naturally we want to help those who are interested in becoming “authorities in their field” by first persuading them that BI will in fact do them some good, but we must not exaggerate its utility.

There is, however, another kind of connection between bibliographic instruction and cognitive authority. To make it, one has to distinguish between two kinds of knowledge associated with a field of inquiry. A person can be known as one who “has a wide knowledge of the literature” of a field without being recognized, or wanting to be recognized, as an expert (or even competent) practitioner in the field. And conversely, in many fields a person can be an expert in the field without having an especially impressive knowledge of the literature of the field. One might be a good economist or theologian without especially impressive knowledge of the literature of economics or theology; one might know those literatures without being an especially good economist or theologian, or being one at all. The practitioners claim to be good at developing and using the techniques of a field to discover new things and to be uniquely good at telling what is right and what is wrong with others’ work in the field. Practitioners’ knowledge is know-how: how to conduct research in a particular field, how to evaluate others’ work in the same field. One may lack, or disclaim having, a practitioner’s know-how and yet have a lot of “know-that,” knowledge of what the practitioners have produced in the way of writings. Experts in a field may generally be expected to have considerable amounts of both kinds of knowledge, but they are two distinguishable kinds.

If practitioners’ knowledge is distinguishable from knowledge of “the literature,” what kind of knowledge is knowledge of “the literature,” and what good is it? Knowledge of “the literature” of a subject is, in the first place, knowledge of the separate pieces of literature—i.e., the *works* that make up the literature. It will probably not be knowledge of *all* the works in the field unless the field is a quite small one, but wide knowledge of a literature means at least wide acquaintance with the works in the field. What there is to know *about* the works making up a body of literature includes standard bibliographical information about publication, but this is of less importance than knowledge of works’ content, intertextual relationships, and position in the intellectual field. One cannot come to know a literature without having read it and understood it, hence to have come to know its content to some degree. Deeper knowledge

of content includes not just “what the work says” but how it says it, and what it exemplifies or exhibits—that it is, say, an early application of a new technique or a prominent example of a certain intellectual style. Knowledge of intertextual relationships is knowledge of the other works in relation to which the particular work is to be understood and its significance identified. Knowledge of a work’s position in the intellectual field is two-fold, depending on “stand” and on “standing”—i.e., on the “stand” taken with respect to a space of possible alternative stands or positions, and on its “social standing” in its field—crudely put, a matter of its reputation and influence.

This is knowledge of “the literature” representing scholarly or scientific production. It might be the literature of a discipline, or a subdiscipline, or a specialty within a subdiscipline, or of the study (perhaps cross-disciplinary) of a particular problem or phenomenon; there are countless ways of isolating bodies of literature for study. And of course there are other literatures of which one can have knowledge, for example, “real” literature, that is novels, poems, plays, and the like, or primary source materials for study in some area—i.e., archives, public records, private correspondence, survey data, census records, etc. For any area in which a body of literature is produced, we can expect to find (at least) two different kinds of cognitive authority—authority *in* the area, the kind of authority claimed by practitioners and producers of the literature, and authority *on* the literature produced, a kind that can be acquired without being a practitioner in the area at all.

Whatever the value of knowledge of the literature of a field may be for its possessor, its value to others is potentially enormous. I can ask a person who knows a body of literature well “Is there anything there that I should know about?” and hope that, once I have made it clear what my own interests and problems are, the other will be able to make connections between my situation and the literature of their field and steer me toward works that I might otherwise never have heard of. The crucial ability involved is the ability to see, or imagine, indirect or nonobvious relevances—i.e., the possible utility of works that have no *obvious* connection at all to my interests, which I would never have found by direct search because it would not have occurred to me to search for them. This ability, though marvelous, is not all that rare. Good librarians have it; graduate students may have it, helping faculty members by identifying potentially interesting material in regions unfamiliar to the faculty member. This is the kind of performance on which we are likely to base estimates of

the performer's knowledge: if they can produce such useful things, they must know something worth knowing. This is a typical road to recognition as a cognitive authority.

For our purposes, it is worth stressing that librarians, among others, can acquire a good knowledge of the literature of a field without taking an advanced degree in the field or otherwise acquiring a practitioner's know-how. Such knowledge will be used on behalf of clients, but might it not also be used in instruction as well? There is the familiar straightforward job of showing undergraduates how to use the bibliographic system for whatever use that may be in their studies, and the more specialized job of showing advanced students how to use the specialized bibliographical resources of a field. But might there not be a further kind of instruction to give, aimed not at helping people become practitioners in a field but rather at studying bodies of literature? If there is, what in fact might it be, and why should anyone want it?

If one knows a body of literature well, what one knows will include a very large amount of detailed particular knowledge, for example, about individual works and their characteristics. But that is not the kind of information that could be useful to attempt to pass on to others. One would not do it in bibliographic instruction of the usual kind, where the objective is to show students how to use the bibliographical apparatus for course-related purposes or in aid of research in a field. Those who want to use the literature simply as a tool in their own research will not want to know more than is necessary for what may be very narrow purposes, so that the successful teacher would be the one who was careful *not* to burden them with more than they wanted to know. The same would be true if one were trying to help students come to know a body of literature; most of one's detailed knowledge would not be worth trying to pass on to any except the few who were interested in that very *same* body of literature. But what could be the alternative?

The teacher must have something general to give; one's knowledge must support some interesting or useful generalizations, but what sort of generalizations? Might it take the form of a general theory of the structure, function, and growth of "bodies of literature" that could be taught to students seriously interested in mastery of some field of literature? Perhaps, but such a theory would first have to be invented. There is nothing of this sort yet available in the literature of bibliography or librarianship or information science. The nearest approach to such a theory seems to be Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), a famous but abstract and difficult work that is hard to imagine serving as a textbook in an advanced BI course (compare, Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). In the

absence of a general theory, the appropriate level of generalization might be an account of structural and functional differences among various specific fields of inquiry—for instance, as has been suggested, “differences in the structures of the literatures in these areas [the humanities and the sciences], distinctive features of scholarship that characterize and shape these literatures, and distinctions between reference and access tools serving these disciplines” (Smalley & Plum, 1982, p. 136). The notion of paying close attention to the structure of a body of literature, and structural differences among different corpora, has immediate attractions (quite independent of the now outmoded approach of the Structuralist Movement). Structural description seems appropriately general and potentially useful and/or interesting.

What kinds of structure? A body of literature does not have just one structure, but exhibits multiple structures, depending on which of many different kinds of relationships one uses to define a structure. The subject matter divisions of a field give one kind of structure; the different genres or kinds of literature produced give another kind of structure. The division of the literature into “live” and “dead” gives another kind of structure. And yet other structures appear when one considers opposing methodological, theoretical, and ideological orientations. The division of a field into competing schools of thought or methodological camps is often the major division for insiders and outsiders alike. The social structure of the group of people who produce a body of literature may be reflected in the internal structure of that body of literature. Conflicts among groups consist of both social and bibliographical facts; so are “distances” among groups—communication and noncommunication, borrowing and lending. These are revealing facts of social and bibliographical structure. Such structures correspond to the “intellectual topography” of the field (Keresztesi, 1982), and identifying them is one of the most crucial elements in coming to grasp the character of a body of literature. If we are drawn to a structural approach to bodies of literature, it should be with the understanding that there are many structures to be discovered in any single body of literature.

The more potentially elaborate the study of structure becomes, the more preposterous it begins to seem to think of making it the focus of a course of bibliographic instruction. For while one might, without difficulty, find a few relatively superficial things to say about the structures of the literatures of various disciplines, serious knowledge of structure requires a depth of knowledge of the literature that no one can be expected to have except, at most, in a few limited fields. But think of using one’s special knowledge of a limited field as an *example* from which lessons may be learned that will transfer,

by analogy at least, to other subject fields. Supposing that one is talking to a group of students seriously interested in exploring different bodies of literature, small or large. One can try to help them by exhibiting the variety of types of structure that can be found. One would not assume that all literatures exhibit the same kinds of divisions; one would want students to look for ways in which their own field of interest differed from the instructor's exemplar field and from those of their fellow students. But concrete illustrations are always better than unadorned abstract description, and the simple fact of having a particular "model" field subjected to structural analysis would be a promising way of helping students execute their own analyses.

How does one explore such structures? As it happens, bibliography is a natural tool for this purpose, and one used not merely to identify the separate works making up a body of literature but to investigate the intellectual "topography" of that literature. Since bibliographical works are systematically organized, their organization can indicate something about the structure of the literature. Subject classifications made by those managing the bibliography of a discipline, for instance, can be expected to reflect the discipline's current understanding of its own subject matter structure, and changes in the classification will reflect structural changes in the field. The simple size of classification sections shows something about the relative importance of different specialties within a field. When a bibliographical work does not directly *show* structural features of a literature, it may still provide information from which structure can be extracted, as a citation index allows one to uncover the life span of different parts of a literature, explore the relative standing of authors and individual works, and trace patterns of "exports and imports" from field to field.

There are many specialized guides to the literature of different subjects which could serve as "textbooks" for the serious student in an advanced BI course. The instructor need not try to substitute lectures for these texts, but rather illustrate the use of bibliographical works in structural analysis, using the literature the instructor knows best as an example. In addition, there are the many already published writings describing structures of different literatures—the many citation studies and bibliometric studies of bodies of literature, for instance, as well as the many explicit discussions of the state of affairs within disciplines, evaluations of progress and prospects, critical analyses of whole schools, and histories of the development of disciplines. Some of these explicitly analyze bodies of literature, some are directed rather at doctrines and theories, procedures, results, and methodological disputes instead of at bodies of literature exhibiting

those features. All could be usable by one trying to construct a map of the topography of a literature. And steering students toward such material would be an important job for the instructor, involving more conventional instruction in the use of still other bibliographical works as tools to locate literature about bodies of literature.

While bibliography seems naturally suited for use in the exploration of structures of literatures, it has its limits, which would have to be made explicit. For instance, one element that is generally lacking in standard abstracting and indexing services and current bibliographies (including library subject catalogs) is description of a work's orientation or point of view or methodological position. From an indexing point of view it is noteworthy that the MLA international bibliography (sometimes) indicates the "scholarly approach" of a work—e.g., "Marxist approach, archetypal approach." It is noteworthy because it is not standard practice in all the fields in which such discriminations could be made; in other fields, bibliography may offer no direct picture of the methodological or ideological spectrum of the field. And there are numerous interesting bodies of literature that can hardly be approached through existing bibliographical apparatus at all. The bibliographical approach to the study of structures of literatures is not always effective, but it is, we must suppose, always worth trying.

So it appears that there is an alternative approach in bibliographic instruction, aimed at the exploration of small or large bodies of literature, guided by a central concern for structural analysis. But what could be the good of such instruction? Who would want it? How could it substitute for a course taught by an expert practitioner of the field? And what's it got to do with cognitive authority? A BI course would not be enough to make one an authority on any substantial body of literature—that takes time. And, in any case, that kind of authority is not the kind that students say they want; they want to be authorities *in* some field, not *on* its literature or the literature of some other field. So the advantages of this alternative approach are not apparent—but aren't they?

First, not even the largest university offers courses on all subjects that have a distinguishable body of literature; "taking a course" is simply not an option in most cases. More importantly, the idea that the only, or the best, way to study a subject is to "take a course taught by an expert practitioner of the field" is one that we have been trying to subvert. Practitioners of a field claim two kinds of special competence, as we have seen: (1) at using their field's techniques, and (2) at evaluating work in their field. Let us concentrate on the second point—evaluation. Practitioners will claim that only practitioners can evaluate, or "properly" evaluate, work in their field;

but why accept this? Others may evaluate their work in different ways than they do, but where is the justification for claiming that the others will be wrong when they differ from the practitioners' evaluations? Practitioners may be uninterested in outsiders' evaluations of their work, but the "social rule" mentioned earlier, that specialists are the primary judges of specialists, is not a social law that outsiders are not permitted to form their own evaluations of the specialists' work. Are we to exclude in advance the possibility that the practitioners' evaluations of their own work are mistaken, that they grossly exaggerate their success in acquiring new knowledge, that they are more like alchemists than like chemists? Practitioners may have their own ways of evaluating their own work, but there have to be other ways, and there are.

We must insist that the kind of study of bodies of literature sketched earlier is just the kind of study that puts one in a position to make a personal assessment of the literature and of the status of the producers of the literature as well. Evaluation is to be distrusted when it is *uninformed*; "serious" criticism and evaluation is informed criticism and evaluation. Evaluation based on close study of a body of literature is certainly *informed* evaluation. Knowledge of the content of the works constituting the literature, of their intertextual relations, and of their position in the intellectual field is as clearly relevant to evaluation as any kind of knowledge could be. Evaluation of a piece of the literature is clearly better when the particular work is seen in relation to the other works in the field; attempts at evaluation of a work in isolation are generally pointless. Seeing a work as part of a structured field is seeing it in an appropriate context for informed evaluation. Seeing a structured body of literature as a whole is also a prerequisite for informed evaluation of the whole literature. The result of such an evaluation may, in fact, be the conclusion that those practitioners have nothing of value to offer, and that their insider's evaluations are entirely untrustworthy (for a good example of this, consider the literary critic Frederick Crews's [1986] critique of psychoanalysis). Practitioners' knowledge and knowledge of a body of literature are not only distinct, they can also be competing bases for evaluation of a field of inquiry and its products.

So bibliographic instruction of the kind proposed would give students a basis for independent evaluation both of a body of literature and of the status of "authorities in the field," not by teaching students "how to evaluate" but by helping to put them in a position to make their own informed judgments of others' claims to knowledge. Those judgments might be extremely tentative, but that would be appropriate; one never knows all there is to know that is relevant to evaluation, and evaluations must always be subject to revision.

But they must start somewhere, and independent examination of a body of literature is a suitable starting place. The idea that bibliographic instruction should make the student to some degree an independent agent is familiar; here the idea is extended, from independent ability to *find* information, to independent ability to *evaluate* what one finds. Others may come to recognize the value of one's knowledge and one's evaluations, and one might thus get some recognition as (to some degree, for some people) an authority on a body of literature. But this kind of cognitive authority is unlikely to be one's direct goal; if it comes, it comes as an unsought byproduct of knowledge acquired for other reasons. Still, it is of interest to realize that bibliographic instruction, perhaps only a small aid in the quest for status as an "authority in one's field," can have quite another use—i.e., helping to put one in a position to be an independent assessor of others' claims to cognitive authority.

Now this looks remarkably like a central component of a general education aimed at increasing "students' awareness of the products and processes of culture" and at developing "critical and independent thinking in preparation for lifelong self-directed learning," as Frances Hopkins (1983, p. 20) described the aims of a second kind of bibliographic instruction—BI as a liberal art. In fact, what more generally applicable kind of study could one imagine? The kind of BI proposed here looks like a proper component of a liberal arts curriculum. If specialized professional education is the route to "authority in one's field," a liberal education should prepare one to question for oneself the status of the socially recognized authorities, rather than accept the status quo as given and unchallengeable. And the independent study of bodies of literature looks like a fine way of doing just that.

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