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Information Literacy Applied in a Seminary

Course on World Religions

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Abstract

In Library Science, a core pedagogical outcome in higher education is “information literacy.” One component of this competency is the ability to evaluate information. In applying this ability to Seminary education, specifically to student academic writing, I suggest that “information” in theological inquiry is primarily an expression of “testimony,” defined as information gained from statements and actions of others rather than from perception, memory or inductive inference. Thus recent discussions of the epistemology of testimony in regards to belief formation are pertinent where they contribute to understanding the dynamics of information exchange during the pedagogical event. In the typical process of researching a term paper, it is assumed that the student author has examined the testimony of reliable sources, and then after analysis and synthesis, shares her own interpretive testimony afresh.

A typical course on World Religions provides the context for the discussion because most Seminary students, though well informed on matters of Christian and denominational inquiry, are novice information seekers in topics drawn from outside their prior experience. Tacit prior knowledge is not as readily available, and requires a more explicit application of source evaluation competencies.
Evaluating Information in Religious Communication:

Information Literacy Applied in a Seminary Course on World Religions

Finding sources for writing term papers has ceased to be the challenge it once was before the age of the internet. Now, with a reasonably constructed search strategy, the information seeker can navigate through a broad spectrum of sources from around the world and across the centuries in a matter of minutes. This facile accessibility to ‘information,’ while attractive to time stressed students, can prove challenging in ways not experienced in prior generations. No longer can the novice information seeker assume competent gatekeepers have vetted each and every source, naively accepting it all as accurate and valid.

For the most part, professionally edited books by reputable publishers and peer reviewed articles in respected journals may still be assumed to have a reasonable level of credibility that can provide baseline information for novice seekers. But with all the emerging technologies and new publishing formats, delimiting research to traditionally “safe” sources like these is no longer adequate. Too much quality material is now available in these new emerging formats. The problem is that now the information seeker must evaluate the sources for herself, since the quality of the resources can vary from the exceptionally useful to malicious disinformation.

This new information environment is illustrated in a recent article in Inside Higher Ed (Berrett, 2011). The account of “Climategate” headlined the piece, in which an informal email between researchers used words like “trick” and “hide” in connection with a discussion of some data pertaining to global warming. The email became public and the unfortunate use of vocabulary triggered a widely engaged debate on the validity of the science behind the claims made for global warming. This called for an investigation, in fact there were three, and while the
methods and published results of the researchers were exonerated from the charge of misinformation or disinformation, the volatile reaction to the original incident is now part of cyber lore. In the report of one of the committees, chaired by Muir Russell (Russell, Boulton, Clarke, Eyton, & Norton, 2010), the following observation was made:

“One of the most obvious features of the climate change debate is the influence of the blogosphere. This provides an opportunity for unmoderated comment to stand alongside peer reviewed publications; for presentations or lectures at learned conferences to be challenged without inhibition; and for highly personalized critiques of individuals and their work to be promulgated without hindrance. This is a fact of life, and it would be foolish to challenge its existence.” p. 15.

Religious communication engages the blogosphere as ambitiously as any academic discipline. As illustrated by Robert Glenn Howard (2011) in Digital Jesus, the internet becomes a venue where entire religious communities can develop, particularly if they do not have a voice in existing communities. This is becoming a global phenomenon. (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007; Kim, 2007; Weimann, 2010). Virtually any Internet search naming a major religion generates hits in the five to seven figure range. That student researchers who are novice information seekers on a topic for which they have limited prior knowledge will now begin with the internet is a “fact of life.” Information literacy instruction must follow up with appropriate perspectives on how to recognize the good and avoid the undesirable. (Budd, 2009).

While investigating the science involved in “Climategate” proved to be objective, and the panels were able to make defensible conclusions, religious information is qualitatively different from environmental statistics. I suggest two ways it is different. First, religious beliefs are an inherent facet of an individual’s identity, and the fine lines used to distinguish value and meaning are deeply personal. (Zerubavel, 1993). Second, the transmission of religious knowledge from one person to another takes the form of testimony as defined in standard epistemology. (Baergen, 2006).
In these two aspects reside the pedagogical motivation for the information literate evaluation of religious beliefs that differ from those the student currently holds. Comparing and contrasting one’s belief system with another brings into focus and enables the articulation of the fine lines that define personal and community identities. The object is to make that which was tacit now explicit. For the boundaries to be validated, the information used to articulate those distinctions needs to be accurate.

In a research assignment, accessing information is a means to an end, the writing of the paper. Thus, for the Christian Seminarian writing a research paper on a different world religion, the value of the assignment for the student will be proportionate to the validity and accuracy of the information accessed. Even more significant, the validity and accuracy of the information shared in this way reflects on the professional character of the author. While this claim may seem obvious, many students struggle to successfully evaluate the information they find, or use it appropriately. The fine lines between “unmoderated comment” and “peer reviewed” discussion; between “presentations or lectures at learned conferences” and “highly personalized critiques of individuals and their work” (Russell, et al., 2010) may not be tacitly evident to novice information seekers. They are vulnerable to the problems of “information cascading,” (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch, 2007), “truthiness,” (Berrett, 2011), and “circular reasoning.” (Baergen, 2006).

**Literature Review**

This essay attempts to triangulate discussions in the literature on information literacy with information theory, with the epistemology of testimony, and with Christian theology to inform pedagogical objectives for a typical World Religions course writing assignment in a Christian Seminary. This conversation between library science, philosophy, and religion is a
novel application, though the literature is rich in each of the three disciplines, and cross
correlations on fundamental hermeneutics is widely available.

The standard document defining information literacy is published by the Association of
College and Research Libraries (Iannuzzi et al., 2000). Representative works expanding the
pedagogy of information literacy in higher education include Grafstein (2002), Eisenberg, Lowe
and Spitzer (2004), and Budd (2009). Much of library instruction is limited to technology
fluency in using information seeking tools. Because of limited access to students, librarians
generally begin with these more objective task-based facets. In Information Literacy, Eisenberg,
Lowe and Spitzer have documented what a number of innovative Universities are doing.
Grafstein, in “A discipline-based approach to information literacy”, and Budd in Framing library
instruction develop arguments for a more integrated and holistic approach in which information
literacy competencies are embedded in disciplinary discourse instruction.

The epistemology of testimony as a facet of social epistemology is now finding its voice.
While testimony as a path to knowledge has always been tacitly recognized, it has certain
inherent difficulties (Adler, 2010), so only recently have full treatments discussing it been
published. Most notable are C. A. J. Coady’s (1992) ground breaking treatment, Testimony; the
collection of essays in Epistemology of testimony, edited by Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa
(2006); and Lackey’s (2008) Learning from words.

The basic manual on academic writing for Seminary education is Nancy Vyhmeister’s
Your guide to writing quality research papers, 2nd ed. (2008). She includes a chapter on
“Taming the Internet” and provides a standard list of criteria to consider when evaluating
websites. Lucretia B. Yaghjians’s manual, Writing theology well (2006) approaches the task
from the perspective of a composition instructor and delves much more thoroughly into hermeneutics, however she does not discuss the evaluation of sources *per se*.

For a theological perspective, I wish to highlight the works of Lesslie Newbigin, including *The Gospel in a pluralist society* (1989), *Truth to tell* (1991), and *Proper confidence* (1995), in that he addresses the problems of pluralism and relativism. His work provides a foundation for a hermeneutic of confidence and clarity.

**From Information Theory to Information Literacy**

The term “information” is ambiguous and polyvalent. (Floridi, 2011) Albert Borgmann (1999) defines information as “INTELLIGENCE provided, a PERSON is informed by a SIGN about some THING within a certain CONTEXT.” Brown and Daguid (2002) observe, “People treat information as a self-contained substance. It is something that people pick up, possess, pass around, put in a database, lose, find, write down, accumulate, count, compare, and so forth.” (p. 120). They contrast knowledge from information by noting that knowledge “entails a knower” and “requires assimilation.”

Therefore, to facilitate conversation, I frame the semantic range of the term “information” to fit the context under discussion. Namely, “information” is the commodified and reified medium by which the knowledge of an author is given expression in a form that accessible by a reader for the purpose of new knowledge formation. This frame works because when a student seeks information for a paper about a topic, she begins with published works that are commodified and reified. The most prevalent media technologies that prove useful involve print and its digital counterparts. The ability to access these media involves the competency to use the communication technologies effectively. And finally, upon receipt of the information, the user
must derive meaning from the commodified symbolic representations and choose whether or not to incorporate the information into her knowledge store.

Thus the information life cycle can be described as follows. The author knows some “thing,” and wishes to share that knowledge with some “one” else, a reader. Using the symbolic representation of language, the author articulates the knowledge and records it using an appropriate technology into a commodified and reified medium that is now accessible to multiple readers independently. In this form the some “thing” that was conceived in the mind of a communicator has taken on an existence of its own and is now physically detached from the author in the form of “information.” By using the same technology, a reader in a different location and at a different time can access that “information.” Should the reader choose to assimilate the information, it becomes knowledge for them as well. The knowledge exchange is completed.

The theory assumes that the knowledge in the author’s mind is true and that the reader will access it accurately and completely. However, human experience frequently demonstrates that the exchange does not always occur as intended. Using the “Climategate” incident as an example, we can begin with the assumption that the knowledge in the mind of the scientist who wrote the original email was accurate. Noise (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) was introduced into the knowledge exchange process through the use by the author of questionable rhetoric in a commodified communication technology medium, the email. Thus additional noise was amplified by the medium because that medium did not provide access to the full context of the author’s knowledge. When untold numbers of unintended readers accessed the rhetorical faux pas, that information was taken out of context and interpreted to support ideas never intended by the author. So finally, even more noise entered the exchange through the intentional
hermeneutical misinterpretation and misapplication of the intent of the original communication. In the end, the noise overwhelmed the initial expression to the point that misinformation and disinformation became rampant undermining the fundamental accuracy and reputation of the original work of the author.

To summarize, the knowledge exchange process is fallible. Information is fallible at the point of creation, in its transmission and in its reception. It is the function of the information literacy competencies to filter out as much of the ‘noise’ as possible to achieve as clear a reception of the intended message as possible. Thus the information literate seeker is cognizant of the author’s intentions and context as well as the meaning of the words. In addition, the information literate seeker understands the impact of technology on the transmission of the information. And the information literate seeker intentionally seeks to use sound hermeneutical strategies to evaluate, interpret and assimilate the information, thus accurately improving their knowledge acquisition.

From the Epistemology of Testimony to Information Literacy

Most of what we know has been told to us by others, and this path of knowledge acquisition is labeled as “testimony.” Human reality dictates that a person can only be in one place at one time, and this greatly restricts what could potentially be learned through perception and memory, the traditionally emphasized modes of knowledge acquisition. For example, it is impossible for me to know without relying on the testimony of someone else what is happening in the next room. I cannot be physically present in two different locations. In this communication exchange, two classes of information could be provided to me. The first is descriptive. The events are merely described, and this description could be verified by talking with someone else who was in the room at the same time. These would be the facts, and
represent public knowledge. In addition to the facts, the person describing the events in the other room could also provide interpretations of what was going on, explaining why they thought things happened as they did. These interpretations provide added value, but open to discussion, and could be refuted. But regardless, they grant the hearer with a deeper level of understanding. The values of both classes of information are discussed in the epistemology of testimony.

The study of religions such as a student might undertake in a World Religions course could attempt to limit itself to just the facts. The problem is then delimiting what constitutes a fact. Perhaps the best that could be offered would include the text of the historical scriptures, the architecture of buildings of worship, and perhaps descriptions of specific religiously based behaviors. At this level, however, all the researcher has accumulated is a collection of interesting trivia. For these facts to have meaning, interpretation is essential. While it is relatively easy to verify the facts and believe them with certainty, interpretations may be more challenging to validate, and we accept them with degrees of more or less confidence. In the study of religions, though the accurate presentation of facts is the baseline for reliability, interpretation plays a more significant role than facts in large part because we use interpretations to draw the lines that create a religious identity.

The standard views on the epistemology of testimony refer to Hume and Reid. Hume argued that beliefs could be formed from testimony only if independent corroboration could be found, and this is labeled the reductionist program. Reid, on the other hand, argued that beliefs could be formed from testimony except if there was evidence to the contrary, labeled as non-reductionist. To rigorously apply Hume’s argument would result in a blind skepticism, while an uncritical application of Reid’s approach would lead to naïve gullibility. So neither approach in and of itself is satisfactory.
Jennifer Lackey in *Learning from words* (2008) suggests that both approaches are needed but apply to different roles. She suggests the reductionist approach has focused on what the hearer must do, while the non-reductionist approach applies to what the speaker needs to do.

“To put this point somewhat crudely, the speaker –condition ensures reliability while the hearer-condition ensures rationality for testimonial knowledge (justification/warrant). … Accordingly, an adequate view of testimonial justification or warrant of a hearer’s belief has dual sources, being grounded in both the reliability of the speaker and the rationality of the hearer’s reasons for belief.” (p. 177).

I find this explanation intriguing because in the information literacy cycle, a student completing a writing assignment first assumes the role of the hearer while seeking information, but then becomes the speaker when authoring the paper. Thus the first task of the information seeker is to confirm reliability of the source using the standard strategies as presented in information literacy instruction; and then affirm the rationality of the information through appropriate critical thinking dispositions; then when using that information to purpose, fulfill the expectations anticipated of a reliable testifier. So even though it is unlikely that a student paper would be classed as authoritative, through the proper citation practices of authoritative sources, and through a thoughtful and careful presentation of a rational argument, it is hoped the work would be considered reliable.

Fallis (2004) draws on these discussions on the epistemology of testimony and applies these principles to the evaluation of web sites. He explains in detail four standard criteria: authority, independent corroboration, plausibility and support, and presentation. These criteria are good indicators of the reliability of the source. He uses public health information sites for his examples, but I suggest that these criteria apply equally to defining reliability in religious sites.

If writing a paper in a World Religions course were nothing more than an intellectual game of some sorts, then this concern for reliability and rationality would not be that significant. But these students are preparing for a spiritually based profession in which they must deal with
religious pluralism on many levels. Thus it is imperative that in their dealings with the different
religions and/or spiritualties, they do so with a reliable, clear understanding of the people with
whom they are communicating and with accurate and fair interpretations. Attempting
meaningful dialogue cannot happen when distorted by the holding of false beliefs based on
misinformation and disinformation. This principle even affects how the spiritual self-identity of
both the individual and the community is perceived because of where the lines are drawn to
define who is inside and who is outside. If those lines do not correspond with practical reality,
then there is an identity crisis and the when the boundaries end up blurred they no longer serve a
positive purpose.

From the Christian Scriptures to Information Literacy

During the first couple of centuries of the Christian church, it existed as a persecuted
minority in a religiously pluralistic society. Its earliest writings reflect internal tensions as it
expanded into new cultures and struggled to contextualize its message to appeal to new
audiences. In the four Gospels we have examples of how the story of Jesus was shaped to appeal
to different cultural audiences. Paul’s epistles to the churches of the Rome, Greece, and Asia
Minor reframe the Christian message for new contexts outside Jewish culture. One of the latest
writings to be included in the New Testament Canon is 2nd Peter. Though short, it provides an
early Christian response that correlates in significant ways with this discussion on information
literacy.

The epistle is a warning against believing false teachers in the church, thus it proclaims
the need for the reader to exercise appropriate critical thinking dispositions. The first claim is
that there are adequate sources to come to a true knowledge of God. “His divine power has
given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his
own glory and goodness.” (1:3, NIV 2011). Then follows a descriptive analysis of what constitutes testimonial reliability. A reliable testifier is one who exhibits a specific set of qualities, which include goodness, knowledge, self-control, and culminate in love. (1:5-9). Reliable testimony does not consist of “cleverly devised stories” but on verifiable eyewitness accounts (the Christian Scriptures) and on historically validated faith, “the prophetic message of Scripture” (the Hebrew Scriptures). (1:16-21). In contrast, the false teachers fail in terms of both a reliable character and in having a reliable message. (2:1-3:16). The epistemic duty of the believer/community of faith is to “be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (3:17-18). This final instruction encapsulates the dualism that reflects both the reductionist appeal to reliability and anti-reductionist appeal to rationality.

Paul also dealt with situations that illustrate the need for balance between reductionism and ant-reductionism. The Thessalonian church appears to have been overly reductionistic in their thinking, closed to new knowledge. So Paul admonishes them: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.” (1 Thess 5:19-22). At the opposite extreme of anti-reductionism, to the point of naïve gullibility, the Ephesian church needed encouragement:

“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” (Eph 4:14-15).

These brief examples from the canonical Christian Scriptures suggest that the epistemic foundations for what we have recently articulated as information literacy are timeless and common to human experience across cultures.
Summary and Conclusions

This essay has attempted to triangulate discussions of information theory, the epistemology of testimony, and Christian theology to provide information literacy objectives for a typical World Religions course writing assignment in a Christian Seminary.

From information theory, a delimited definition of information was suggested, namely that information is a commodified and reified medium by which knowledge is exchanged between persons. It was noted that “noise” could interfere with the effective transmission of that knowledge at any point in the exchange, including but not limited to the rhetorical choices of the author, the constraints of the technology, and the hermeneutical stance of the reader. One of the aspirations of information literacy is to reduce the noise and enhance the clarity of the knowledge exchange process.

From the epistemology of testimony, it was noted that the evaluation of an exchange of information appeals to two standards, reliability and rationality. The assessment of reliability preoccupies the role of reader, or information seeker, while the assessment of rationality more directly engages the role of author. Information literacy standards emphasize both reliability and rationality in the evaluation of sources and in the use of sources for an academic writing assignment.

From the theology of the Christian Scriptures, it was noted that there is a true and a false, and that the objective is to discern the true. To do this, the information seeker can observe the reliability and character of the testifier, and can appeal to the reliable prophetic authority of the Scriptures. Only now, the ‘seeker’ assumes anew the role of a religious communicator providing information for future information seekers, and must be cognizant of the need to now be a reliable provider of rational information.
As noted in the introduction, for the most part, professionally edited books by reputable publishers and peer reviewed articles in respected journals may still be assumed to have a reasonable level of reliability and credibility that can provide baseline information for novice seekers. However, in terms of evaluating sources, competence and maturity are needed when dealing with the non-gatekeepered media such as the blogosphere. For that class of sources, information literate seekers verify and validate the authority of a source; seek independent corroboration of pertinent details; reflect carefully on the plausibility of the information, noting especially how the arguments are supported; and finally take into account the presentation, including rhetorical choices, grammatical accuracy, voice, tone and style. (Fallis, 2004)

In conclusion, the desired outcome for a research paper in a World Religions course in a Christian Seminary is to articulate an accurate and fair analysis of the topic based on reliable representative sources. It is hoped that from this experience the Seminarian will become better equipped to dialogue with those of a different religious faith more sympathetically, respectfully, and intelligently. It is also hoped that the Seminarian will be better prepared to share their personal and community’s testimony of faith more reliably and rationally, “speaking the truth in love.”
Reference List


