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## The Context of Authority and Sociological Knowledge: An Experiential Learning Project

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# The Context of Authority and Sociological Knowledge: An Experiential Learning Project

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## Abstract

In this innovative project, a social sciences librarian partnered with a sociology professor to embed the “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” frame into an upper-division sociology of poverty course. Students in this course participated in an experiential learning project, collaborating with local children on a participatory photo mapping project to document the children’s neighborhood. By working directly with community members in this field experience, the students gained an understanding of the differences between scholarly authority and community authority and what can be learned about poverty from each type of source. Engagement with a local community provides students with a direct understanding of the contextual nature of cognitive authority and can be replicated in a variety of settings.

*Keywords:* experiential learning, authority, cognitive authority, ACRL Framework, Authority is Constructed and Contextual, sociology, partnership, collaboration

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## Introduction and Background

Since the publication of the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015), academic librarians have been grappling with how to apply the “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” (AiCC) frame. In traditional information literacy instruction, tools like the CRAAP test encourage binary thinking about the authoritative value of a source through a series of questions (e.g., What are the author’s credentials? Is the author qualified to write on the topic?) (Meriam Library, 2010). This type of dualistic thinking is appropriate for students early in their college careers (Hall, 2013). AiCC, however, suggests that educators should be helping students to go beyond that type of yes/no source evaluation, making clear that one central goal is for students to understand that the authority of sources is *contextual*: that is, the appropriate authority is dependent on the information needed. In other words, authority is relative, but not purely subjective (Baer, 2018).

We theorized that an upper-division class, when the students might be better prepared cognitively for relativistic thinking, was an ideal test case for introducing students to the contextual nature of cognitive authority. Developed by Patrick Wilson in his classic 1983 text *Second-Hand Knowledge*, cognitive authority, a concept that played a central role in our project, describes the ways in which people decide to trust the accuracy of what others have told them. When someone believes what another individual has told them about something, that second person becomes a cognitive authority for the first person on that topic.

In the innovative teaching practice described in this article, we used an experiential learning activity in an upper-division sociology of poverty class to teach students about different sources of cognitive authority on the concept of poverty. AiCC states that learners are developing their ability to “define different types of authority, such as subject expertise...societal position...or special experience,” and that experts in this frame have “an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought” (ACRL, 2015). Thus, using AiCC as a framework for this activity allowed our students not only to compare different types of cognitive authority but helped them to consider the misconceptions they have about poverty and where those misconceptions might have originated.

Our collaboration began with an exploration of the intersection between a social science methodology known as *participatory photo mapping* (PPM) and the concepts embedded in the “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” frame. PPM involves those who have a stake in the research (i.e., community members) taking photos to address a research question,

allowing social scientists to learn about the community from its participants. It combines participatory photography (also known as photovoice), community mapping (often using GIS), and community-based participatory research. Results from PPM can inform solutions to identified needs and highlight community assets and issues (Dennis, Gaulocher, Carpiano, & Brown, 2009; Loebach & Gilliland, 2010; Teixeira, 2015). We thought that engaging students in a PPM project might additionally allow them to contrast what they could learn from members of an impoverished community versus what they might learn from traditional sources of cognitive authority, such as their professor or a class textbook.

Our participatory photo mapping project is also inherently connected to issues of social justice. While the *Framework* might not be thoroughly explicit about social justice, it provides a number of opportunities for librarians and educators to address such issues (see, for example, Gregory & Higgins, 2017; Saunders, 2017). The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox includes lesson plans that address this issue. For example, in Hasse's (2018) "Matters of Authority" lesson, students are asked what type of source "knows the most about [a relevant social justice issue]," and are then engaged in a conversation about the advantages and disadvantages to each type of information source. Issues of social justice are evident throughout our course, especially in relation to the causes and consequences of poverty. By providing an additional, more personal perspective on what poverty can look like, the PPM project in this class helped students gain further insight into an important social justice issue.

Modeled on the projects of Auyero and Swistun (2007), Dennis et al. (2009), Loebach and Gilliland (2010), and Teixeira (2015), students in our PPM project worked directly with young people living in low-income environments to take photos of significant aspects of their community. Young people can provide perspective and insight into their communities that an outside researcher cannot, and PPM also engages them in the research process. PPM research not only brings to light the lived experience of the children in their location but can engage them in community change (Teixeira, 2015). Although PPM tends to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of a community, for this project, we decided to focus on the strengths of the community only because we wanted both the young people and the college students to be able to recognize the strengths in low-income areas given the societal emphasize on the weaknesses in those areas.

This article describes an innovative grant-funded pilot project in which we (a social sciences librarian and a sociology faculty member at a regional public university) partnered to facilitate a series of in-class discussions and activities and an experiential learning project

designed for the students in Sociology of Poverty to gain an understanding of the AiCC frame. The goal was for students to explore the contextual nature of cognitive authority and give them practice in applying their *sociological imagination*—the application of individual experiences to broader public issues (Mills, 1959)—to a local community. Through the project, students learned about forms of cognitive authority and knowledge situated within a community versus traditional scholarly authority, and that both types of authority have different kinds of validity, depending on context.

## The Project

Our participatory photo mapping project worked well in part because of the specifics of the course. Sociology of Poverty is an upper-level, three-credit elective at the university and is classified in our general education curriculum as “Explorations Beyond the Classroom,” which means that students are required to do some activity outside of the classroom setting. This pedagogical approach is especially important in a course about poverty because many students may not have encountered poverty prior to coming to the university. The information literacy component and PPM activity not only allowed students to compare what they learned in the classroom to the real world but also challenged misconceptions they may have had about poverty. These misconceptions may be due to the sources from which they previously received information about poverty, such as social networks or popular media.

Two student learning outcomes (SLOs) from the course are especially relevant to the information literacy component:

SLO #1: Students will use information from real-world experiences to gain an understanding of poverty and various forms of authority that they will demonstrate in their final papers.

SLO #2: Students will learn information about poverty and incorporate this information into the participatory photo mapping project so that it is theoretically and research based.

Our goal was for students to discuss sources of authority related to poverty in their final papers in such a way that it was clear they understood the types of information that could be obtained from our community partner in contrast to the types of information that they could obtain from academic sources. Students also completed reflections on how learning about poverty from two different types of sources contributed to their understanding about the concepts of poverty. In the participatory photo mapping project, we wanted students to

demonstrate a sociological understanding of poverty (not focused on the individual, but rather on larger sociostructural factors).

This course was also designed to include high impact practices in experiential learning. For example, students gained “experiences with diversity, wherein students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that [are] different from those with which the students are familiar” (University of North Carolina Wilmington, n.d.). More specifically, students developed individual relationships with local children in impoverished circumstances and learned about their lived experiences in their community. Students also displayed a “public demonstration of competence” (University of North Carolina Wilmington, n.d.) by working with their community partner to select photos for an end-of-semester public exhibit in the campus library.

At the outset of the course unit that focused on the PPM project and the nature of authority, we co-led a class discussion on cognitive authority to distinguish it from political authority or power. The concept of authority has a long history in the field of sociology. For example, introduction to sociology students learn about authority defined as “the justifiable right to exercise power” or “political authority” and about Max Weber’s classification of different types of authority: charismatic (the individual has authority because of their personality), traditional (authority is a result of past or traditions), and legal-rational (the rules give authority) (Conley, 2017). Going beyond sociology, the general, “everyday understanding of authority is as political authority” (Hofer, Lin Hanick, & Townsend, 2019). Because of the way that students, and sociology students in particular, are accustomed to thinking about authority in terms of the political, or power relationships, we decided that this introductory class session would be essential to the students’ understanding of the concept. Since Weber’s types of authority are a main concept taught in introduction to sociology classes, we anticipated that it would be the main way our students viewed authority, and we were correct. Even after the class session, Weber’s types of authority were discussed in their reflections and final papers.

Before the class session, the students were assigned to read a chapter from Wilson’s *Second-Hand Knowledge*. The in-class discussion considered the following questions:

- How would you define *authority*?
- In what areas would you be considered an authority?
- What grants you authority on those topics?
- Are you an authoritative source on poverty? Why or why not?
- Who/what are some authorities on poverty?

- What different types of information would you want to try to get from each type of authority?

We used these questions to lead into a discussion of the upcoming PPM project, so that students would be primed to think of the children with whom they would be working as potential cognitive authorities for understanding the local community and what it can be like to grow up there. We asked the students to allow the focus to be on how the children viewed their community, rather than on how outsiders viewed it. In this way, we hoped, the college students would come to appreciate the fact that something that might look impoverished to them may have a wealth of resources that they cannot see as outsiders.

Our community partner for this activity was a local satellite chapter of the Boys and Girls Club, which was located in a public housing community in a low-income area of the city. Most but not all of the club members who participated in the PPM project lived in the community. We received grant funding from the university to purchase supplies such as cameras and the materials for the subsequent public exhibit of the photographs. Seventeen children, ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade, participated in the project. To respect the club members and the community, we never used the title of the course (Sociology of Poverty) with that group; our focus was on exploring community.

In line with the four-step PPM process outlined by Dennis et al. (2009), the students and young people first took photos of the community; then they attached captions to the images; and finally, the photos and captions were displayed publicly to inform the broader public about the community assets. Due to project constraints we omitted the third step, which involves mapping the photos directly onto a map using GIS, but we plan to include it in future iterations of this project.

The 22 college students enrolled in the course met with the club members twice. During the first meeting, as the club members and their college student partners walked around the community, the club members took photos of things that were important to them and described to their college student partners why those things were important. In the second meeting, the club members and college students together selected photos that represented the best parts of the community to the club members. These photos were included in the subsequent library exhibit. We attended both meetings so that we could introduce the project and be available for any questions that arose.

After the students completed the PPM project with their partners, the class came to the library for another session. At the beginning of the session, we led a conversation with the students about the types of things they learned from their partners about the community

and how they might use one of those topics as a basis for a research paper on the sociology of poverty. The students chose topics such as recreational opportunities, food access, housing, and education, and used the rest of the time in this session to work with us on finding scholarly research on their topics—a more traditional form of academic authority. With a partner, they wrote final research papers based both on their PPM experience and the articles that they found, with the goal of demonstrating that they understood which form of cognitive authority would be useful in presenting which type of information.

## Outcomes

We assessed the information literacy student learning outcomes through an evaluation of their reflection papers and final papers. As part of the experiential learning process, we asked students to write reflection papers exploring their personal takeaways from the PPM experience. We received IRB approval to analyze the results of the reflections and the final research papers, and 20 students consented to have their products included. However, we only received prior permission to quote from their reflections, not the final papers. We coded these materials using ATLAS.ti 7 to systematically examine student experiences with the project, with a focus on how they understood sources of authority.

We designed the reflection assignment to assess student experience in the community. The reflection prompt related to authority asked:

What were some similarities between what you learned in class and what you learned from your experience in the community? What were some differences? Did you find that you learned more about poverty from one or the other? (Think here about our discussions around sources of authority, and the authority that the material you learned in class has compared to the authority that you learned from the community).

We began by looking at the term *authority* in the reflections, where we found that explicit student understanding of the term was mixed. Although 14 of the 20 students used a form of the word *authority* in their reflections, only six of them used the term accurately throughout their reflection by putting it in terms of cognitive authority. The others focused on political authority, often noting that the children had trouble listening to authority figures. To further demonstrate how confusing the term was for students, there were three instances of students using *authority* the way we had defined it in class but also using the political authority version in their reflection. They even used the phrase *source of authority*, which we used in class, but they did not use it correctly. Students who did reflect accurately on

cognitive authority noted things such as “the ‘community’ authority of the...kids provided context for what we learned highlighting facts by adding depth, actual sensory input, and emotion.” Similarly, another student wrote, “We learned basic facts and statistics from academic sources of authority...[but] the children served as a source of authority in their own community and about poverty in America.” These examples demonstrate students’ understanding of how academic sources provide one type of information as well as how the children provide a different perspective.

Although the results of the students’ explicit reflections on authority were mixed, many of the students did implicitly reflect on how what they learned during the PPM experience differed from what they learned in class or through assigned readings. For example, one student wrote, “Poverty is something that looks very different from theory to practice.” A second student appreciated the positive aspects that were evident in the community that weren’t evident in class materials: “I think a lot of times with readings and educational materials we can get caught up in the negatives of poverty, but this community demonstrated much more than that to me.” Another student felt more was learned in class than in the community, but this reaction may be due to the limited time spent there, and not the specific source of authority. The student wrote, “All in all, I think I learned more from class than I did from the visit to the neighborhood simply because one or two visits don’t allow the broad insights we were able to gain through the class material and readings from the perspective of general academic authority.” Other students pointed to the similarities that they found, including one student’s opinion that “a lot of the information we talked about in class was similar to what I saw in the...community. It was pretty much learning information in class and then going to the community to see it.” Relatedly, another student wrote, “The readings seemed to put my interpretations into perspective, because I was able to see firsthand, what they were talking about, and instead of reading examples in a book, I was able to witness those things happening.” Whether they ultimately concluded that there were more similarities or differences between what they learned in class and what they learned in the community, the students were attempting to think critically about the cognitive authority they were granting to each type of source, which was our goal.

Student comments on the impact that this activity had on them were generally meaningful and focused on the effectiveness of going outside of the classroom to learn about poverty firsthand. One student wrote:

This project was one of the most eye-opening experiences I have ever had...  
I did leave The Boys and Girls Club that day feeling sad for all the families

who live there, since I have never seen poverty it opened my eyes to a whole new perspective.

It is clear from this quotation that viewing poverty firsthand made more of an impact on the student than just reading about it in a textbook or journal article. Another student directly addressed this impact:

My experience...made everything from the readings much clearer and relatable. Reading about something is good but being able to put a picture or place to it makes it way more impactful. If it was not for the project I feel that I would have had a good idea of what poverty looked like but I would never have understood it like I do know [sic].

Both of these quotations echoed the importance of getting students out into the community to view poverty firsthand.

We also analyzed students' final papers to determine if they understood the differences between sources of authority and how to use each of these different sources. The prompt about sources of authority included in the final paper asked:

How do your findings tie into what we have learned in class about poverty, especially the geography of poverty, neighborhood impacts, structural and cultural causes of poverty, and consequences of poverty? What contrasted with your PPM experience? What information did the community authority (youth) provide that was not present in the academic sources of authority? What has that taught you about types of authority and the value of different sources of authority?

Eight of the ten student group papers included accurate descriptions of this concept. Five papers, including four that described cognitive authority correctly, also used it incorrectly. One paper did not mention sources of authority at all. This finding is similar to what we found with the reflections—not all students understood this concept accurately and consistently.

## Takeaways and Lessons Learned

### Student Learning

Overall, our assessment found that this PPM project helped students begin to achieve our intended student learning outcomes, but not consistently. Perhaps analyzing reflections and

final papers was not the best way to determine student understanding of the concept of authority (SLO #1). In class discussions, students at first did not understand the concepts of authority in the way that we were hoping, but after a while it seemed like everyone was on the same page. Because they did not demonstrate the same understanding in the reflections or final papers, it is possible that the way we created the assignments did not allow our students to demonstrate their full knowledge and understanding of the concepts. Alternative assignments may better capture this knowledge, such as specific exam questions explicitly asking about different types of authority. Another option might be including smaller formative assessments during the class sessions in which authority is discussed, such as minute papers or clicker questions asking students to weigh in on when they might rely on the different types of authority.

Even though students may not have understood the concept of authority the way we intended, it was clear that they understood the idea of different sources providing different types of knowledge (SLO #2). Their understanding was evident in class discussions during the library session after the PPM project as well as in their reflections and final papers.

#### Working with Community Organizations

When considering a PPM project, it is important to keep in mind the challenges faced by community organizations: they are often short staffed, rely on volunteers who may be transient, have limited budgets, and need to focus on their mission. Due to these constraints, a PPM project may not be a high priority for them. Although we had discussed with the on-site Boys and Girls club coordinator our desire to work with an older age range of children, the members who ended up participating were a bit too young for the activity to be completely successful. Many of them were mostly interested in having pictures taken of themselves, and they didn't necessarily understand what kinds of pictures we were asking them to take. With an older group of club members, they would better understand the purpose of the activity and be able to communicate more easily with their college student partner. Other research using PPM has been successful with middle and high school age participants (Dennis et al., 2009; Teixeira, 2015; Teixeira & Gardner, 2017).

Unlike the PPM projects described in the research literature, this project was a course assignment with college students as researchers, which created an additional layer in the process and posed further complications. The majority of the preparation for the project was in the classroom with the college students, and not directly with the Boys and Girls Club members. In the future, providing students with a reading on how PPM is conducted, additional preparation with both the college students and the club members, and a greater

number of interactions between the college students and club members, could increase the success of the project. That way, ideally both groups would understand the project's goals fully, and the college students and young people would have more time to create a rapport and be more comfortable sharing information with each other.

Finally, while PPM projects generally involve mapping, often using GIS, due to the nature of this project, we did not create a specific map with the photos overlaid on it. The Boys and Girls Club members were too young, and we also didn't have enough time to train the college students to create maps themselves. In future projects, students will generate an actual map of the community in which to locate the photos, which will help the college students visualize community assets as well as show the children their community from a different perspective.

Regardless of these challenges, it is important to do this type of work with the community. When the club members came to the campus library for a reception associated with the photo exhibit, it was the first time many of them had been to a college campus despite its location about ten minutes from their community. The experience also gave the children agency; they had the opportunity to educate their college student partners about where they lived. It is also important to challenge college students to get outside their comfort zone. Although some were initially hesitant or fearful of going into the low-income neighborhood, by the end they recognized the value in this experience.

#### Collaborative Teaching and Future Directions

The collaboration between the library and academic department was an unqualified success. Both of us brought our own expertise to the project (the librarian as cognitive authority on information literacy and the faculty member on the course topic), and the college students benefited from this collaboration. The value of embedded librarianship to faculty, librarians, and students has been well-documented (for examples, see Drewes & Hoffman, 2010; Kesselman & Watstein, 2009; Kvenild & Calkins, 2011; Monroe-Gulick, O'Brien, & White, 2013; Muir & Heller-Ross, 2010; Olivares, 2010; O'Toole, Barham, & Monahan, 2016). In our version, the librarian gained a greater understanding of the subject area simply by being involved in the class from the beginning at a much more granular level than is typical with a "one-shot" session. The faculty member learned through the experience about more sophisticated concepts in information literacy that go beyond how to use a database. Finally, the students in the class gained a deeper familiarity and comfort with the social sciences librarian, which helped them within the course and has the potential to help them in future courses as well.

Using experiential learning to contrast academic sources of authority with community sources of authority could be applied to any course in a variety of disciplines in which some learning occurs outside of the classroom. It is, however, important that students understand the contextual nature of cognitive authority before they begin the activity. Student outcomes would have improved in this particular example if the students had grasped this concept more fully. Additionally, as previously stated, the word *authority* was a challenge because of prior definitions that the students entered with. It is possible that simply using different terminology might help with student understanding; as librarians, we know that expertise and authority are two different concepts, but perhaps for undergraduate students, this distinction simply isn't important and using the term *expert* might avoid confusion.

Although developing an in-depth, semester-long partnership might be the ideal, it is not feasible for every course. There are several ways in which this type of initiative might be scalable. For example, in our case, although the librarian will not be able to be as fully immersed in this class every time it is taught due to time constraints, the faculty member will now be able to take the concepts used in this pilot project and apply them in future semesters. Librarians might also consider developing more generic lesson plans centering on the concept of community versus scholarly authority and sharing them with faculty teaching relevant courses. In that way, the librarian would not need to be involved in every class directly, but would be providing the context and structure for faculty members to implement this higher-level information literacy concept themselves.

Enhanced information literacy collaborations beyond the one-shot instruction session have the potential to greatly strengthen student competence in information literacy. With the one-shot model, there is often little time to go beyond the practical and discuss higher-level threshold concepts from the *Framework*. This case study of a successful librarian-faculty partnership communicates one potential model for how students can acquire the understanding necessary to develop their information literacy abilities.

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