



Critical Credulity: Seeking Balance in a New Era of Information Literacy (Online)

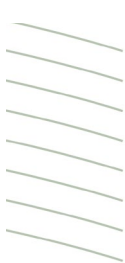
By Kate Wimer

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The work of librarians is diverse and often requires wearing many hats. It also requires us to be observant, discerning, and adaptable. In my own work developing information literacy instruction, I've increasingly found myself wrestling with the common understandings of information literacy, especially as it relates to the students of the post-COVID, post-truth, digitally native and artificially intelligent era.

For many, information literacy could be described to some extent as 'critical thinking about information.' This makes sense. For at least a decade, we've noted an apparent lack of critical behaviours regarding information. In the meantime, we've seen a rise in fake news and misinformation as well as rising polarization. As a field, librarians have doubled down on teaching better ways to recognize 'good information,' usually by providing a more critical lens, but I wonder if this might be too one-sided?

Aristotle suggests that his identified virtues sit in the middle ground between two extremes. For example, courage sits on the mean between cowardice and rashness. Virtue thus exists in balance



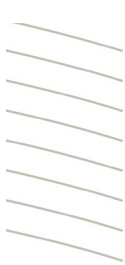
or tension. As Aquinas would later put it, lack of virtue can be described both as “exceeding the measure or ... falling short of it”.¹ I’d like to suggest that we should consider a similar approach to information literacy, seeking a mean between the critical and the credulous. I believe that this is especially critical in our modern context where we are explicitly and implicitly taught to deconstruct arguments and ideas, but not necessarily taught belief as a skill. Even more than that, I suspect that many student behaviours that present as lack of critical thinking are rooted in this inability to practice belief. If this is the case, doubling down on messages of doubt and critical deconstruction may actually reinforce the imbalance, promoting continued lack of information literate practice.

Peter Elbow wrote in 1998 that credulity isn’t believing something because you haven’t heard of a different perspective but rather believing something in spite of hearing a different (better) perspective. At the heart of the reasons why someone might behave this way is, “that for him, X was easier to believe than Y.” He goes on to say, “The ‘credulous’ person really suffers from difficulty in believing, not ease in believing; give him an array of assertions and he will always believe the one that requires the least expenditure of believing energy.”²

Our students are information-rich and attention-poor. Not only do they have access to a vast array of information in their back pockets, they are actively inundated by information all the time. If attention is a scarce commodity and offering belief to unfamiliar authority is an under-developed skill, it makes sense that we would see belief offered less critically to the familiar and doubt offered unilaterally to the unfamiliar – who has time to get into the weeds? Even more than time, I believe that many of our students feel the risk of being wrong or misled even more strongly than previous generations. In an increasingly online community, our students’ professed beliefs become critical markers for their communities. If they don’t believe the “right” things, they might risk losing that community. The pressures created by the commodification of education, which prioritize

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 64, a. 1, New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3203.htm>.

² Peter Elbow, 1998. “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game: An Analysis of the Intellectual Enterprise.” In *Writing Without Teachers*, 183.



correctness and efficiency over the messy work of seeking understanding and nuance, only reinforce these stakes.

I'm still developing my approach to integrating belief as a skill in my information literacy practice and instruction, but I believe that there are some key factors we can think about now that will begin to move our practice toward a more balanced approach.

I believe that we must pause and take careful stock of where today's students really are in terms of information literacy. Even more than modelling curious generosity for our students, I think we need to offer it toward our students. How can we acknowledge the skills that they already have (for example, critical deconstruction of ideas), and offer value to them? Can we explicitly acknowledge the cultural and educational pressures they feel to 'succeed' or 'be right' in information spaces?

One strong approach I'm currently engaging is explicitly teaching students to seek understanding, not correctness. Mark Lenker wrote a wonderful paper on this shift in his own practice that I highly recommend.³ Seeking understanding can help us to address issues of imperfect knowledge, nuance, and context, and can be a good way to introduce conversations around the affective realities of research, namely that it can increase uncertainty and raise uncomfortable questions.

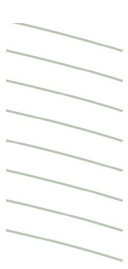
Within that context, I also believe in teaching critical ignoring as a skill.⁴ If the goal of research is to understand, then not all information we encounter is useful to us. If our students are to effectively manage attention as a resource, we must give them permission and instruction to spend it and withhold it wisely.

Finally, I believe in explicitly engaging kindness in our research methods, toward our resources, toward sources of information, and toward ourselves as researchers. This means embracing mistakes and discomfort in the research process.⁵ It also looks like offering respect to the things

³ Mark Lenker III, 2023. "Dwindling Trust in Experts: A Starting Point for Information Literacy." *Communications in Information Literacy*, 17(2): 554-572. <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.12>.

⁴ See papers by Hertwig & Kozyreva in the Further Reading.

⁵ See Maluski & Symphony (2022) or Borton & Fratantoni (2024).



our students already know and modelling that same respect to external sources by replacing the question “Is this a good source?” with “What can I learn from this source?”

My thoughts here are as much a reflection of my current reading as they are of my experiences on campus, so I invite you to consider the works in my further reading section. I believe that a sea-change is needed in information literacy instruction, requiring us to be thoughtful and dynamic as we respond to our students in their own contexts. I also believe that the needed adjustments are well-within our professional skill sets, even as they are not as prominently discussed as I think they should be. To that end, I have great hope and even excitement for the work that is to come.

Further Reading

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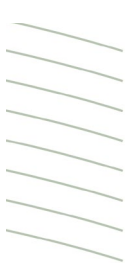
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