Communications in Information Literacy

Volume 17 | Issue 2 Article 12

12-2023

Dwindling Trust in Experts: A Starting Point for Information Literacy

Mark N. Lenker III
University of Nevada Las Vegas, mark.lenker@unlv.edu

Recommended Citation
Lenker, M. N. (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

Dwindling Trust in Experts: A Starting Point for Information Literacy

Mark N. Lenker III, University of Nevada Las Vegas

Abstract

Librarians and teachers encourage students to include expert perspectives in their research, but recent public discourse includes high-profile examples of experts being inconsistent or wrong, and recent studies suggest that public trust in experts is declining. Waning trust makes it difficult to teach information literacy: I can push students to find high-quality research sources, but what if these sources turn out to be yet another example of experts getting it wrong? After a period of living with this worry, I found a way to move forward by centering class discussion on the public's dwindling trust in experts. Part of this discussion addresses reframing the point of library research. The goal is not to find sources to support an irrefutable argument; rather, the idea is to build a more thorough and realistic understanding of a research question. Research for understanding emphasizes acknowledging points of contention and pursuing complex questions with intellectual humility.

Keywords: information literacy, evaluating information, authority, experts, trust, understanding, humility, first-year English, higher education

Perspectives
edited by Andrea Baer

Lenker, M. N., III. (2023). Dwindling trust in experts: A starting point for information literacy. *Communications in Information Literacy, 17*(2), 554–572.

Dwindling Trust in Experts: A Starting Point for Information Literacy

In the summer of 2022, I found myself in a new kind of information literacy funk. This was not just the usual anxiety about my efficacy as a teacher. It had more to do with my concerns about my students. Three years into the pandemic, after everything my students had been through (or were still going through), would they care about something as mundane as information literacy? Even deeper, was the information literacy I had been teaching sophisticated enough to meet the information challenges of the 2020s? Could I prepare my students for the most dubious features of our information ecosystem: political campaigns showering us with manipulative messaging at every turn, partisan agendas shaping our discourse concerning research, and artificial intelligence and deep-fake technology challenging our sense of what counts as authentic information? Even when I was at my best as a teacher, it felt like I was sending my students into the vast, wriggling snake pit of contemporary discourse with nothing more than a bulleted list of things to watch out for and my heartfelt best wishes.

The news of 2022 featured particularly unnerving examples of experts getting things wrong, arguably influenced by the political expediency of their conclusions (Hanson, 2022). For example, several influential economists claimed in 2021 that the Biden administration's economic policies would actually reduce inflation (inflation in the United States reached a year-to-year peak increase of 9.1% in July of 2022 and has been called the defining economic characteristic of 2022; Wiseman & D'Innocenzio, 2022). Likewise, high-profile military experts predicted that the Afghan government would keep the Taliban in check after American forces withdrew (now in power for nearly two years, the Taliban have recently decreed that girls can no longer go to school; Rothwell, 2022). Examples like this fed my anxiety about teaching information literacy. If my own trust in experts was on the wane, how could I maintain sincerity as I encouraged my students to seek out expert perspectives for their research?

My typical response when I feel uneasy about teaching is to keep calm, keep my insecurities in perspective, and keep moving forward. But something told me that pressing forward was the wrong move in this case. Sinking deeper into my unease gave me a chance to learn something that students could really connect with because it came from something real in

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol17/iss2/12
DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.12

my experience. If I could find a way to help students balance trust and skepticism as they move through our rough and tumble information ecosystem, my teaching could make a real difference. But achieving that goal would require reexamining my ideas about the value of research in an information ecosystem that is hard to trust. After a period of wrestling with my doubt about experts, I came across a 2022 Pew Research Center study that offered a handle I could use to grasp my problem: what should library instruction look like when people stop trusting experts?

The Pew study reported that the American public's trust in experts is declining significantly, a finding that applies to scientists, medical experts, politicians, and journalists. Only 29% of respondents said they had a great deal of confidence in scientists and medical experts to "act in the public's best interests" (Pew Research Center, 2022). Confidence in other experts and public figures was even lower. A recent AP-NORC poll corroborated Pew's findings about Americans' levels of trust in the news: 16% of respondents expressed a great deal of trust in the media to "report the news fully, accurately, and fairly," 45% "indicated little to no confidence at all," and the remainder fell somewhere in the middle (AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2023).

This paper proposes teaching information literacy in a way that addresses declining trust directly. This approach asks students to pursue a more thorough *understanding* of a research question (including points of controversy and directions for further research), rather than undertaking research to settle a question or support a particular point of view. Specific recommendations include describing desirable sources as "worth taking seriously" or "being part of the picture" in order to encourage students to consider competing perspectives genuinely. I also recommend posing metacognitive questions about trust to students that challenge them to consider their trust in sources actively and reflectively.

I share an outline of a lesson plan that incorporates these ideas and practices. This plan invites students to reflect on their own level of trust in experts. It also asks students to consider how including a range of perspectives on a research question actually makes their research more trustworthy. By acknowledging areas of ambiguity and contention, a researcher can help the reader understand the depth of their research question. Presenting one's research in this way establishes the researcher as thorough and realistic. Such a researcher comes across as more trustworthy than one who attempts to railroad the reader into a simplistic conclusion with evidence that supports a single perspective and that excludes other points of view. Before sharing any of these recommendations in detail, I

want to look more closely at the circumstances that made me clarify my thinking on the goals of library research and reexamine how I teach.

Library Instruction in a Time of Declining Trust in Experts

A climate of decreasing trust makes it difficult for teaching librarians to go about their work confidently. A significant aspect of our role is to promote the library and its personnel as convenient avenues for finding expert knowledge in the form of books written by researchers, studies published in scholarly journals, data sets curated by research specialists, and journalism in a range of formats published in a broad range of locations. Even if publicly available sources turn out to be more relevant than library resources, working with a librarian is a sound strategy for getting the expert information one needs efficiently, especially for course-related research assignments.

But the trend of waning trust in experts identified in the studies by Pew and AP-NORC suggests that our public is not necessarily looking for the library's expert perspectives. Academic libraries contribute to learning in many ways, but their signature contribution, the one that distinguishes them from other types of libraries, is their emphasis on collecting and sharing research conducted by experts. If our students follow the prevailing trend of increasing wariness toward the claims of experts, how do library instructors establish the academic library as a meaningful resource for learning? And with doubt taking an increasingly prominent place in the information landscape, how do we talk about learning from libraries in an authentic way?

Let me be clear: I do not feel that my students in my one-shot classes are particularly suspicious of me personally. To the best of my (admittedly unscientific) knowledge, I still come across to my students as friendly, well-intentioned, and occasionally tedious. But my students are not the only ones who learn, work, and socialize in a trust-withering information landscape—I take part in the same increasingly dubious information ecosystem, and that has impacted my confidence in my teaching. I am less hopeful about the accuracy and transparency of the sources I am encouraging my students to learn from. (At the same time, I regard information literacy as more crucial than ever, especially as the pitfalls of trusting experts become more apparent).

One approach to meeting the challenge of teaching in a period of declining trust is to redouble our efforts to teach students and users about the characteristics that make some

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol17/iss2/12
DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.12

sources more trustworthy than others. As Fister (2021) put it, one should provide explicit instruction "about the ethical frameworks and daily practices of truth-seeking institutions such as science, scholarship, and journalism" and how these principles and practices constrain experts from just saying whatever is commercially or politically expedient. This strategy is worth exploring further—it may be successful with some students.

It is worth noting that instructors may face an uphill battle in getting some students to appreciate the professional-grade methods of research that Fister identified. Skeptics and partisans are unlikely to find such instruction convincing, especially if the expert perspectives we promote are at odds with students' fundamental beliefs about political and social questions (Lenker, 2016; Baer, 2018; Sullivan, 2019). Indeed, some recent studies have complicated our understanding of motivated reasoning. What may have previously been regarded as unconscious bias may be better understood as either a deliberate choice to avoid thinking critically or a conscious and willful disagreement with information from authoritative sources. Sometimes, people choose not to reexamine their existing beliefs when new information contradicts their point of view. Relevant studies include Pasek's 2018 study on disagreement with scientific consensus, Pennycooke and Rand's 2019 study on susceptibility to fake news, and Cusimano and Lombrazo's 2023 study on how people recognize and approve of morally motivated biases in their processing of new information.

An alternative starting point is to encourage students to reframe their expectations about how library research is supposed to help them learn about their research questions—there is more ambiguity in library research than one might expect. Students and faculty often come to academic libraries looking for trustworthy information sources, sources they can use to establish a degree of certainty in their conclusions. But certainty on controversial questions is a difficult threshold to reach in an information ecosystem as complex and misleading as ours. Instead, a more motivating goal for research is building an increasingly thorough *understanding* of a research question (Riggs, 2003; Zagzebski, 2001). In this sense, understanding is less a question of establishing truth and falsity and more a matter of seeing how ideas and accounts relate to each other. Understanding involves piecing together seemingly disparate beliefs and questions in order to see how they bear on one another. It is a promising aim for research in periods of declining trust because it is harder to doubt one's increasing understanding than it is to dispute the reliability of any single source. The sections below share recommendations for information literacy instruction that encourages students to pursue research for understanding.

Teaching Strategy: Emphasize Research for Understanding Rather than Certainty

Keeping library research meaningful in a period of declining trust requires a sophisticated understanding of the point of research. It is less a matter of answering a research question with certainty and more about developing an understanding of what is possible by considering a range of perspectives on a research question. The distinction between settling research questions and building an understanding of them is subtle, but it comes up frequently in library work.

To consider my own experience, my job as an instruction librarian began to change when the idea of fake news captured the popular imagination. Increasingly, students (and instructors) would come to my classes with the expectation that the librarian can (a) help them avoid misleading sources and (b) find sources that they can safely believe in because the trustworthy sources will relate what really happened in the events and issues that they cover. This new attitude presents the librarian with the opportunity to have more engaging conversations about the evaluation of information, which promises to have a more broad-ranging and lifelong impact on students than concentrating on tool-based search strategies (the features of search tools change more quickly than do the features of information that make it worth learning from). However, the increased thirst for sources that can be certified as credible also presents challenges for the teaching librarian, particularly because the expectation that library sources are "safe" is too optimistic about the connection between information and certainty (Sullivan, 2019).

Why should students not look to library resources to settle their research questions with certainty? Some questions (especially the questions about social policy that many beginning undergraduates pursue in their research) do not admit definitive, uncontroversial answers, and other questions cannot be settled without further advances in research. Furthermore, library sources themselves have important limitations regarding the certainty they provide. To address the types of sources frequently used in academic research and writing, even professional-grade news articles will not cover all the perspectives on a complex issue. The discoveries of meticulously designed, peer-reviewed empirical research need to be taken with a grain of salt, as researcher error, experimental conditions (such as limited sample sizes), and changes in the subject matter over time can all constrain the applicability of those findings. Theoretical work finds itself superseded by newer advances in the field. So, there is

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol17/iss2/12
DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.12

little hope of finding sources that will settle one's research questions for good. This is a disappointment that needs to be shared with students with great care; otherwise, some students could give up hope of learning anything meaningful from library research.

A promising strategy is to help students establish a more realistic frame of reference for what they are achieving with their learning. The field of philosophical epistemology introduces a helpful distinction between knowledge and understanding. Zagzebski (2001) and Riggs (2003) differentiated between knowledge and understanding as overlapping but divergent goals for learning. The aim of knowledge is the accumulation of true beliefs and the avoidance of false beliefs. Knowledge, it seems to me, is what many early-career students seek to gain from their interactions with library sources: "I want to avoid fake news; help me find something that gives me the facts." By contrast, understanding is less about truth and falsity and more about finding coherent order among seemingly disparate occasions of meaning, whether they be beliefs, sensations, symbols, questions, or probabilities. If a student were to ask for a robust review of the literature to help them learn about the scholarly conversation in a field of research, they would be using library research to advance their understanding.

The distinction between knowledge and understanding is important because, as Zagzebski (2001) pointed out, understanding is less prone to demotivating skeptical doubt than knowledge. This makes understanding a particularly desirable goal in periods of declining trust in expertise. It is easier to question seemingly true beliefs (but how do you know it's really true?) than it is to second guess one's increasing understanding of a subject matter over time (as I put together this literature review on wind farms, I see more clearly why there are differing perspectives on their viability as a source of energy—the issue turns out to be more complicated than I first thought). To clarify, the problem is not skepticism itself, as in questioning the possibility of arriving at certain knowledge claims. It is possible to be a skeptic and to lead a vigorous life of the mind. Rather, the thing to avoid is allowing skepticism to discourage further learning. If your aim in learning through research is settling a question with a certain answer, encountering persistent questions is likely to be disheartening—I will never be able to answer this question, so why even try? On the other hand, if the goal is building a more thorough understanding of the range of possible responses to a question, then gray areas, ambiguous ideas, and open questions are less likely to be demotivating. From the perspective of understanding, coming across a new question is a discovery rather than an obstacle.

This difference between knowledge-based expectations for research and understanding-focused expectations for research is important in making discernible progress in learning, which is significant when it comes to student motivation to do research. Proving my thesis about the ethics of wind farms with certainty may seem like a losing battle. Still, I can always learn more about the controversy around wind farms, see better how the competing positions fit together, and reflect on how those perspectives square with my own beliefs and experiences. I may be unable to settle the question, but I can still learn more about it.

Teaching information literacy at the college level, I find that some of our practices support the idea of research for understanding (the "research as conversation" metaphor, exploratory annotated bibliographies, reviews of the literature). Other teaching practices tend to obscure the aspects of research that lead to understanding. For example, argument-centered approaches can mislead students into thinking that successful research involves proving one's thesis with a collection of sources to "back up" one's claim, which discourages them from seriously exploring perspectives that do not support their chosen conclusion. True understanding recognizes the demarcation of areas of disagreement and directions for further research as significant achievements in learning. At the same time, the back-up-thesis-with-sources model tends to minimize these elements because of the uncertainty they involve. By reframing how we talk about research to emphasize understanding, we can help students set more realistic, meaningful expectations for what they can accomplish in a research project. We can also help them see that intellectual growth is achievable even when placing one's complete trust in a single expert perspective is inadvisable.

To give students an opportunity to practice research for understanding, instruction librarians may need to advocate for changes in the design of research assignments. For example, in an introductory composition class with a semester-long research project, instruction might be scaffolded in order to explicitly emphasize researching for understanding. Students are more likely to see research as an opportunity to build a more thorough understanding if they are pursuing a research topic that they are genuinely curious about, rather than causes that they are already informed on or passionate about (Deitering & Rempel, 2017). Later, as students do the research for their annotated bibliographies, asking them to develop a list of stakeholders involved in their research question can help them become more strategic about building a more thorough understanding of the perspectives on their research question. Initially, the first few perspectives on the stakeholders list could be the results of a brainstorming session, but the list should grow as students read and gain a

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol17/iss2/12
DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.12

greater understanding of the complexities of their research question. Ideally, each source in the bibliography would consider one or more of the perspectives in the stakeholders list, leaving no viewpoint unaccounted for (within reason—some perspectives will be challenging for undergraduate researchers to seek out given constraints on their time, resources, and developing levels of expertise). At this stage of the research, students should also be looking closely at the evidence for each perspective. While research for understanding requires considering all readily available points of view, it does not necessitate pursuing a false balance in which all perspectives are considered equally convincing despite the differences in evidence associated with them—some positions will have more compelling evidence than others. Finally, asking students to write their conclusions to include directions for further research (either for their own personal research or within the research literature) would give them a chance to demonstrate that their understanding of their research question includes areas in which there is still more to learn. For a provocative take on the drawbacks of not teaching students to take questions seriously in their research, see Fister (2022).

Teaching Strategy: Avoid Discussing the Quality of Sources in Binary Terms Such as Credible or not Credible.

A teacher's word choice can influence student attitudes, especially regarding information literacy. Holliday and Rogers (2013) found that describing research as "learning more about x" rather than "finding sources about x" helped students appreciate their research questions more fully and devise more meaningful strategies for learning about their topics. This study demonstrates that a teacher's word choice makes a difference in how students understand the point of their research.

Hoping to achieve a similar effect, I am stepping away from characterizing sources as *credible* or *not credible*. I worry that students could interpret "credible sources" as *good* or *true* sources in a simplistic way, ignoring the possibility that credible sources can disagree with one another. Instead, I want to describe desirable information as *worth taking seriously* or say that a high-quality source *should be part of the picture*. My goal is to reinforce the idea that even sources that meet important standards for reliability do not necessarily provide the whole picture of a question. A source worth taking seriously deserves to be part of the mix as students seek a better understanding of their research question, but students can expect to learn more by considering additional perspectives. Rather than seeking to trust any single

voice in a discussion, I want my students to put their trust in their growing understanding of the research conversations that relate to their questions.

But, in this way of thinking, what makes a source worth taking seriously? The usual things that the information literacy community has been discussing over the past thirty years have a place in this discussion. In Lenker (2017), I described a developmentalist approach through which the ways of considering the value of information are divided into criteria-based methods, use-based approaches (like BEAM; Bizup, 2008), and ways that emphasize how much the researcher learns from the source. Each of these categories of methods, plus Caulfield's (2021) corroboration-based SIFT method, have something to say about what makes information worth taking seriously. Ideally, teaching librarians will incorporate each of these methods when it pertains most directly to their students' research challenges. But, from the standpoint of teaching research as a process of building understanding, the most important thing is that students do not stop researching until they have considered the viewpoints of a broad range of stakeholders in their research question.

Teaching Strategy: Cultivate Metacognition to Encourage Students to Question Their Trust in Sources Actively and Reflectively

An information landscape as overgrown and treacherous as our own means that an education in information literacy must teach strategies to maintain self-awareness in the face of potentially misleading information. When cultivating self-awareness for learning from information, metacognitive questions are indispensable. Approaching new information with questions rather than fixed criteria gives learners more flexibility to judge how new information (which may include unexpected details) applies to the learners' circumstances (which may vary over time or within multiple contexts). Here are a few metacognitive questions that I have adapted from philosophical treatments of open-mindedness. The original intent of the questions is to help learners discern when an open-minded attitude is likely to help them reach the truth and when it is likely to lead them astray by making them too gullible (Baehr, 2011; Fantl, 2018). But they also work as excellent questions to examine one's inclinations to trust or distrust new information:

- What are my reasons for believing document x is true?
- How strong is the evidence *against* the claims of document x? Do these claims conflict with other things I have learned? Do they seem far-fetched?

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol17/iss2/12
DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.12

- Everyone makes mistakes; wise people own up to mistakes and learn from them. Have I been too trusting of information on topics like this one in the past? What am I doing to make my learning more thorough this time?
- How well can I comprehend the evidence in favor of x? If I cannot even understand the argument, maintaining my current beliefs may be most sensible until I find a more straightforward account.

Note that the fourth question shifts the standard for evaluation considerably from what has previously prevailed in information literacy. Transparency and accessibility of the argument are at least as important as the author's credentials and the format in which the account is published. If we take this fourth question seriously, it puts a greater onus on writers, instructors, and librarians to guide students toward materials that students can readily learn from.

Undergraduate education should support students in developing competencies in finding clear, thorough accounts of complex questions that are accessible to non-experts. For example, some books give thorough introductions to complicated issues, and careful science journalism can explain developments in research in ways that a layperson can understand. Emphasizing sources that students actually understand would have radical implications for how we support undergraduate research and writing. It would negate the imperative for beginning undergraduates to cite scholarly research articles even if they do not understand the research that supports them. Imagine how much more meaningful research could be for such students.

Teaching Strategy: Address Declining Trust as Part of Library Instruction

I use the following lesson plan to prompt discussion about trust, expertise, and research, usually in one-shot classes for first-year English. I have always used this activity near the beginning of class to establish context for more assignment-centered instruction about tracking down information for annotated bibliographies. Here are the learning outcomes for this part of the class:

- Students will reflect on their own level of trust in public authorities in order to identify factors contributing to the breakdown of trust in contemporary discourse.

- Students will compare and contrast two reporting sources that draw on interviews with different sets of stakeholders. The point of this comparison is to see the value of building and sharing a more thorough understanding of their research question.

I introduce the activity by sharing the question that led me to this inquiry: if people's trust in experts is declining, is it still helpful to connect learners with the work of expert researchers? Is library research still a meaningful way to learn about important questions?

To make this question more personal for students, I use a Mentimeter poll to replicate a portion of the 2022 Pew study on experts discussed earlier in this paper. After briefly explaining how telephone surveys work (many students have never participated in them), students indicate their level of trust in the following experts, which I take directly from the Pew study:

- When it comes to medical scientists, how much trust do you have that they will act in the best interests of the public?
- When it comes to other types of scientists, how much trust do you have that they will act in the best interests of the public?
- When it comes to public school principals, how much trust do you have that they will act in the best interests of the public?
- When it comes to journalists, how much trust do you have that they will act in the best interests of the public?

As students register their responses, I briefly make a note of the class's aggregate scores, e.g., 35% of the class indicates a great deal of confidence in medical scientists. Then, I walk them through the results that the Pew researchers found in their study, comparing the scores of the class with the percentages in Pew's national survey.

I have run this lesson plan with approximately a dozen sections of first-year English. While I have not kept careful records of the students' responses from class to class, I have observed that student percentages roughly mirror the rates that the Pew researchers saw in their study. In none of my classes have the majority of students reported a great deal of trust in any of the public figures featured in the Pew survey.

To set up my first discussion question, I point out that the Pew study was published in early 2022 and that the phone interviews that provided the data were conducted in November and December of 2021. I invite students to reflect on that period of time and ask how they would explain the trend of declining trust in experts that the Pew researchers observed.

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol17/iss2/12
DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.12

I have enjoyed my students' engagement with this question. In most classes (not all), four or five students will volunteer their perspectives. My paraphrasing below reflects some of the themes that come up in discussion:

- We were told that the CDC was an expert on COVID-19, but time has shown that their advice was questionable or at least inconsistent.
- Experts are not transparent in how they arrive at their conclusions.
- Experts communicate their methods and results in ways that I do not understand.
- During pandemic-era lockdowns, the internet was the best way to communicate with the outside world. But the internet, especially social media, opens one to so many competing perspectives that it is hard to know whom to trust.
- Political partisanship in the media makes it hard to find objective perspectives.
- Political partisanship in the media makes people generally distrustful of one another.
- Experts are frequently under pressure to conform to political or commercial expectations. This hampers their ability to be objective.
- I feel like the news is more about grabbing my attention than helping me understand anything meaningful.

After discussing the factors that erode trust, I bring the discussion closer to my students' work as researchers with this question: In a climate of declining trust, what can researchers do to build trust with their audience? Responses to this question generally do not come as quickly and easily as to the question about why trust is hard right now, but after a pause, a handful of students will share their ideas. Some of the students' responses address the factors identified in the earlier discussion:

- Be transparent about how you do your research. Be clear about any monetary support you get to do your research and where it comes from. This transparency makes it easier for the audience to judge your objectivity.
- Explain what you learn in terms your audience will understand.
- Don't be like the news. Don't alarm everyone before you clearly know what is happening.

Other responses venture into new territory. These ideas apply more directly to the type of research students will be doing in class:

- Strive to be objective. Look at more than one side of a question.
- Leave politics out of it.
- Be transparent about who your sources are and why you are including them. What are their credentials?
- Don't just use sources that agree with what you already think.
- Explore counterexamples.
- Use actual evidence or data, not just what people say, because people can say anything.

There is potential for discussion to wander in unexpected directions. To make sure that students find their way to the importance of understanding a range of perspectives, I share the following question in Mentimeter in order to demonstrate how a writer's choice of sources can help readers consider more than one perspective on a question, a strategy that students themselves identify as a way to make one's research more trustworthy:

Two magazine articles conclude that UNLV is an excellent university for undergraduate students to attend.
In each article, the author interviews five sources. Consider each article's sources. Which article do you trust more?

Sources for Article A	Sources for Article B
UNLV President	UNLV Vice President for Student Affairs
UNLV Vice President for Student Affairs	President of the UNLV Student Government
UNLV History Professor	Recent graduate of UNLV who has not yet found work in their field of study
UNLV Librarian	CEO of a major employer in Las Vegas
UNLV Athletic Director	A UNLV undergraduate who just completed their first year

After giving students a chance to discuss their reasons for trusting one article over another, I share how my perspective on this question has evolved over the course of my career. When I was first starting out as a librarian, I might have been tempted to select Article A because it features interviews with many insiders with decision-making power within the university. The interviewees are also likely to have impressive academic and professional credentials. Who would know more about the university and its strengths relative to other colleges than the university president?

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol17/iss2/12
DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.12

But, after eighteen years of teaching information literacy and at least four decades of weighing the quality of things I read, I find myself inclined to place more trust in Article B. Even though both articles draw on the same number of sources for interviews, Article B appears significantly more thorough to me. While Article A interviews leaders in a range of positions within the university faculty and administration, Article B casts the net more broadly by interviewing stakeholders with markedly different perspectives. The university dignitaries interviewed in Article A all have a vested interest in promoting the university to potential new students for a range of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the university is the source of their livelihood. However, the group of stakeholders in Article B has a more wide-ranging set of connections with the university. They include current and former students, potential employers, and the upper-level administrator who is arguably best positioned to speak on the student experience at the university. There is more potential for disagreement among the stakeholders in Article B, which makes me feel that Article B will provide a more complete picture of the university experience for undergraduates. The variety of perspectives helps me build a more thorough understanding of a complex question.

To wrap up this portion of the lesson plan, I advocate to students (and to their instructors) for a clearer notion of a research argument as one that prioritizes questions and critical inquiry over definitive answers. A research argument is distinct from the persuasive arguments one sees in marketing or courtroom dramas. A research argument involves:

- Learning as much as you practically can about an area that raises questions for you.
- Clearly stating an informed opinion or thesis concerning the research area. If your conclusion is tentative or provisional, note why.
- Sharing your reasons for your opinion and acknowledging areas in which you are uncertain or need to learn more.

To illustrate what I mean, I post a slide with a number line to represent the potential levels of understanding one can hope to have about a research question. Near the lower end of the line, I plot a point to represent "what an average person understands about x." Much further along the number line is another point that signifies "what a researcher who specializes in x knows about x." Between these two points, but much closer to the point representing the average person, is a third point that represents "what a first-year English student understands about x after completing a project about x."

By arranging the points in this way, I hope to acknowledge that students' research makes a difference in their learning—by the end of their project, they will likely know more about their subject than the average person does. But I also want to open space for students to embrace intellectual humility. It is unrealistic to think that, even after eight to ten weeks of studying their subject intently, their understanding of the subject matter will approach that of a researcher who has devoted years or even decades of their life investigating that area. So, there is no reason for first-year students to try to construct air-tight arguments for their conclusions based on reading eight to ten sources as if they had no gaps or gray areas in their understanding. Even the expert researchers, who occupy an advanced position on the number line, regularly point out areas for further research in their published writing. Students should feel free to write about what they have learned rather than try to railroad their readers into agreeing with their thesis. As I mentioned earlier, asking students to conclude their projects by identifying directions for further research is a promising way to make intellectual humility an explicit part of the undergraduate research experience. Real research is about works in progress, and researchers build trust with their audience by acknowledging that there is more to learn.

Parting Thoughts on Research for Understanding

I have made a case for using library instruction to address the declining trust in experts in contemporary discourse. Conversations about trust give students a chance to reframe their expectations for how library research should contribute to their learning. I have argued that, at its best, library research is not a matter of collecting facts to settle questions and make further inquiry unnecessary. Instead, library research aims to make one's understanding of a research question more comprehensive. A growing understanding of a research question can include competing accounts, aspects for which evidence is ambiguous, and areas for further research. Unlike argument-centered, conclusion-driven approaches to research, research for understanding leaves room for students to adopt and express intellectual humility in the face of complex research questions.

Some may wonder whether research for understanding is any less prone to intellectual error than other approaches to research. Why take in a collection of competing accounts and gray areas when an ostensibly more direct path to truth lies in trusting the most reliable sources (however one may conceive of the reliability of information)? And what happens when a new, compelling piece of information comes into view, a perspective that had not been

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol17/iss2/12
DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.12

included in the understanding-centered network of viewpoints, and that shows how all that came before it was limited or erroneous? Isn't the understanding-centered collection of perspectives just as wrong as the previously settled point of view built on the work of the most impressively credentialed experts?

When new information invalidates previous knowledge in revolutionary ways, both the researcher who seeks certainty and the researcher who pursues understanding will find that their previous understanding is suddenly less trustworthy (I am separating the two attitudes to make a point—it is possible to pursue both approaches, at least to an extent).

But the important difference lies in what happens next. The certainty-focused researcher is more likely to be shaken or discouraged at having felt like they had an important question settled and then being proven wrong. In contrast, the researcher seeking to build a more thorough understanding would likely show enough intellectual humility to know that they probably had more to learn all along, and they will approach the new discovery as an especially valuable opportunity to make their thinking more comprehensive.

Intellectual humility, intellectual vigor, and a drive to pursue understanding all reinforce one another. These qualities are also foundational for persistence as learners, even when prevailing attitudes toward experts make it hard to know who is worthy of our trust.

Acknowledgments

I shared earlier versions of this project at the 2022 Nevada Library Association Annual Conference and the 2023 LOEX Annual Conference. Discussions with colleagues at these venues helped refine my understanding of the potential for teaching about declining trust in library instruction. Andrea Baer's editorial suggestions were also indispensable for molding this essay into its current form.

References

AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. (2023). *Assessing the news media: trust, coverage, and threats to a free press.* https://apnorc.org/projects/assessing-the-news-media-trust-coverage-and-threats-to-a-free-press/

Baer, A. (2018). It's all relative? Post-truth rhetoric, relativism, and teaching on "Authority as constructed and contextual." *College & Research Libraries News, 79*(2), 72–75, 97. https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.79.2.72

Baehr, J. (2011). *The inquiring mind: On intellectual virtues and virtue epistemology*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199604074.001.0001

Bizup. (2008). BEAM: A rhetorical vocabulary for teaching research-based writing. *Rhetoric Review*, *27*(1), 72–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/07350190701738858

Caulfield, M. (2021). Information literacy for mortals. *PIL Provocation Series, 1*(5). https://projectinfolit.org/pubs/provocation-series/essays/information-literacy-for-mortals.html

Cusimano, C., & Lombrozo, T. (2023). People recognize and condone their own morally motivated reasoning. *Cognition, 234,* Article 105379. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2023.105379

Deitering, A. M., & Rempel, H. G. (2017). Sparking-curiosity—Librarians' role in encouraging exploration. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2017/sparking-curiosity/

Fantl, J. (2018). *The limitations of the open mind*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198807957.001.0001

Fister, B. (2021). Lizard people in the library. *PIL Provocation Series*, *1*(1). https://projectinfolit.org/pubs/provocation-series/essays/lizard-people-in-the-library.html

Fister, B. (2022). Principled uncertainty: Why learning to ask good questions matters more than finding answers. *PIL Provocation Series*, *2*(1). https://projectinfolit.org/pubs/provocation-series/essays/principled-uncertainty.html

Hanson, V. D. (2022, August 6). Why we lost trust in the expert class. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. https://www.reviewjournal.com/opinion/opinion-columns/victor-davis-hanson/victor-davis-hanson-why-we-lost-trust-in-the-expert-class-2619344/

Holliday, W., & Rogers, J. (2013). Talking about information literacy: The mediating role of discourse in a college writing classroom. *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, *13*(3), 257–271. https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2013.0025

Lenker, M. (2017). Developmentalism: Learning as the basis for evaluating information. *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, *17*(4), 721–737. https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2017.0043

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol17/iss2/12
DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.12

Pasek, J. (2018). It's not my consensus: Motivated reasoning and the sources of scientific illiteracy. *Public Understanding of Science*, *27*(7), 787–806. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662517733681

Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2019). Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning. *Cognition*, *188*, 39–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011

Pew Research Center. (2022). *Americans' trust in scientists, other groups declines.* https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/02/15/americans-trust-in-scientists-other-groups-declines/

Riggs, W. D. (2003). Understanding 'virtue' and the virtue of understanding. In M. DePaul & L. Zagzebski (Eds.), *Intellectual virtue: Perspectives from ethics and epistemology* (pp. 203–226). Clarendon Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199252732.003.0010

Rothwell, J. (2022, December 21). Taliban 'bans girls from primary school' after closing university doors to female students. *Daily Telegraph.* https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/12/21/taliban-bans-girls-primary-school-closing-university-doors-female/

Sullivan, M. C. (2019). Libraries and fake news: What's the problem? What's the plan? *Communications in Information Literacy*, *13*(1), 91–113. https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2019.13.1.7

Wiseman, P., & D'Innocenzio, A. (2022, December 15). *High inflation and efforts to tame it define 2022 economy.* Associated Press. https://apnews.com/article/inflation-taiwan-economy-federal-reserve-system-mark-zandi-81d06279f6b03c8e9e096226d95552da

Zagzebski, L. (2001). Recovering understanding. In M. Steup (Ed.), *Knowledge, truth, and duty: Essays on epistemic justification, responsibility, and virtue* (pp. 235–251). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0195128923.003.0015