**The Sphere of Discourse**

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This activity provides an interactive, student-centered, fun opportunity to explore skills of critical thinking and evaluation of resources. By allowing students to connect those things that they already know (even if they don’t know they know it) to larger concepts, we encourage them to trust themselves and to begin to develop their intuition as scholars, moving away from checklists and formulas for resource evaluation and toward a thoughtful critique of sources based on individual need and use.

**Materials**

Beach ball (mine is approximately 16”, multicolored stripes) – can be purchased very inexpensively at dollar stores or in bulk.

Marker

Space

Projector or speakers (optional)

On the beach ball are written 16 different information types that together can form one’s “sphere of discourse” – in this case used to describe the different conversations that someone may be a part of or exposed to that shape their world view. These types are:

* Books
* Social Media
* Scholarly Journals
* Popular Magazines
* Friends & Family
* Maps
* Statistics
* Government Information
* Archival Material
* Websites
* Blogs & Podcasts
* Faculty/Professors
* Newspapers
* Databases
* Reference Sources
* Media (including visual, audio, tactile, etc)

**The Activity**

This activity is primarily used during first year seminars. In cases where there is a research component to the class I will often do this early in the term to get the students familiar with these concepts and as a basic orientation to the kinds of materials that may be available to them. When there is no research component to the course this can stand alone as an introduction to resource evaluation and critical thinking.

At the beginning we discuss the wide variety of information that we are inundated with at all times. We work together to generate a list of standard questions that can be used to better understand just about any source. Despite being student-led (though I do help guide), the list is almost always similar. The questions generally cover:

* What is it?
  + Basic description, examples
* Why does it exist?
  + Why was it made, and for whom?
* How do you get it?
  + Is it a library resource, free on the web, behind paywalls, etc. Who has access?
* Would you consider it for research?
  + This often evolves in to two questions: If you are looking for scholarly sources would you use it? And for what kind of research project could you imagine it potentially being useful?

The game then begins. This follows the basic structure of Hot Potato, in which the students pass the ball around while music plays (more on that later), and when the music stops, the student holding the ball is responsible for guiding us through the evaluation of the source (they can choose between t he sources under each hand). Repeat for as much time as is available.

I have been amazed by how astute the students are about evaluating these sources. In some cases they require prompting or assistance with complete description (government information for example), but in most cases they can figure out how to approach these types of information. Questions arise, examining specific example, but they are remarkably able to explore these concepts.

**The Soundtrack**

As mentioned above, this activity is played to music. In some cases it can be any music you choose, but in many cases I try to make the music an additional lesson. One way this has worked is be playing a video of Mexican Breakfast (https://vimeo.com/groups/263701/videos/32967061) on a projector during the activity. At the end I inquire if any students had notice it (invariably a few have and are amazed. I then play a short segment for the whole class to observe and ask them to watch closely and see if it looks familiar. I make sure that this segment includes 2:18-2:20. At least so far someone in every class has had a moment of recognition. I then show Single Ladies (Put a Ring On It) by Beyoncé and usually the rest of the class catches on to the similarities. This leads to a discussion of inspiration vs imitation, attribution, and how the concepts of academic honesty don’t end at the edge of campus. There are other examples of this that can be used (more with Beyoncé even!) and as time passes I will need to work on making sure examples are recognizable to the students.

**Assessment**

My main assessment of this activity is that students are engaged, active, and responsive during the activity, asking and answering questions, and fully participating. In cases where I have met with those students again later in the term I have been able to see that they remember the activity, the basic questions we asked about sources, and we are then able to use those questions as a starting point for further discussion. I also discuss the activity with the faculty member and have so far had enthusiastic response.