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Teaching Matters: Developing as a Teacher/ Librarian. Budding Researchers and the Process of Framing Research Questions

Patrick P. Ragains
University of Nevada - Reno, ragains@unr.edu

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TEACHING MATTERS [EDITORIAL]

BUDDING RESEARCHERS AND THE PROCESS OF FRAMING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Patrick Ragains
University of Nevada-Reno

Janelle M. Zauha
Montana State University

This column focuses on the conceptual and practical aspects of teaching information literacy. Column co-editors Patrick Ragains and Janelle Zauha write about trends and issues that have come to our attention, but also solicit contributions to this space. Readers with ideas for Teaching Matters may contact Patrick Ragains at ragains@unr.edu, or the editors of Communications in Information Literacy at editors@comminfolit.org.

Conducting research poses challenges, including identifying a problem and having a workable plan for investigating it. It is more than picking a topic, gathering information from publications and Web sites, then sitting down to write. Reflecting on this helps one place information literacy instruction appropriately within the educational process and enables librarians to assist students better. In this column, I'll discuss some things that caused me to think more about this.

This week I met with an undergraduate class in historical methods, a class for history majors, with about 22 students enrolled. The instructor (whom I'll call George) and I planned to begin the session by asking students to discuss their research interests, since that would let me get acquainted with them and allow them to bring to light some topics we could investigate in primary and secondary sources. George and I conducted this part of the discussion from the *back* of the computer lab where we held the class, so students would be facing away from their computer screens.

> RESEARCH REQUIRES PRACTICING THE HABITS OF MIND NEEDED TO ASK MEANINGFUL QUESTIONS AND THEREBY ENTER A SCHOLARLY CONVERSATION.

Several topics seemed straightforward, such as discovering the influence of aircraft in warfare upon military doctrine and strategy or looking for adaptations of Norse mythology in medieval Ireland. We didn't have time to discuss everyone's topic in depth, but one student wanted to describe how federalism had been dismantled in the modern United States. The instructor, several students and I responded. George advised the student to become thoroughly familiar with the important federalist writings, since the concept of federalism, itself, is an abstraction. I suggested that the student should not make up his mind about the fate of federalism until he had rigorously examined recent history, judging it in terms of his understanding of federalism's original values.

After the class ended, George approached me and said, "You know, I think it would be better for these students to explore more sources before committing to a topic. That's the opposite of how many of them are doing it." He also acknowledged the recursive nature of refining one's inquiry, but he sensed a clear need for the young Federalist and several others to move away from simply proving a point and toward identifying a problem, investigating it, and drawing conclusions more objectively (i.e., to begin practicing historical scholarship, rather than simply running with one's initial assumptions about a topic).

The following day I met with Kyle, an economics major wanting data to support an investigation into employment and earnings of women in information technology-related occupations. Since several state and federal government sources we checked did not have the data for the level of detail he requested, I referred him to two experts, a demographer and an economist, both employed by my state government and regular users of population and labor force data. I told Kyle these researchers would most likely be the best to identify the applicable data sources and discuss their limitations. As we wrapped up our meeting he said, "Finally, after all the time I've spent

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searching, this should help me define the scope of my project."

These types of encounters are not unique, but they reminded me that one needs some grounding in relevant sources in order to frame a valid research question. Deeper knowledge of information sources will often lead a researcher to revise her question, creating a recursive, nonlinear relationship. Of course, this is simply part of learning to practice an intellectual discipline. In our own profession, John Budd has labeled it "phenomenological cognitive action." (Budd, 2009) The need for detached and persistent questioning is also implicit in Robert Ennis' definition of critical thinking as "reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do."(Ennis, 1987, p. 10).

The American Historical Association has endorsed a related statement:

> *Students need to be aware of the kinds of sources used by historians, and they should become adept at extracting meaning from these sources, comparing their findings with other evidence from the period, formulating conclusions about the issue under study, and testing these ideas against additional evidence and the ideas of other historians. (AHA, 1998)*

Think about your own intellectual growth. I would bet that the terms nonlinear and recursive strongly apply. A student's epistemology, as the study of the nature of knowledge, its limits and validity, evolve and become more sophisticated as she learns an intellectual discipline, including its standards for evidence and, ultimately, what counts as true. Research, as the deliberate search for truth and learning, does not consist of stating an opinion about something, finding sources, then aggregating it all into a paper. No one becomes a skilled researcher overnight, but the danger is that students will get rewarded for doing this, become habituated to gathering and summarizing (or maybe just gathering and pasting), and think they're doing real research. Not all student assignments call for research. But librarians would do well to keep in mind a more nuanced model of the process of formulating and investigating questions when assisting budding scholars. Research is about more than exploiting the sources at our disposal – it requires practicing the habits of mind needed to ask meaningful questions and thereby enter a scholarly conversation.

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