Modeling Scholarly Inquiry: One Article at a Time

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Introduction

Why is the media racist? Why are gamers violent? Why are political ads so sleazy? These are possible research questions that any librarian might hear from a student at the reference desk or in an information literacy session. While they are serious questions posed honestly, how will the student approach searching the literature, reframing the question based on research, and writing an evidence-based paper based on scholarly articles?

At the University of Dubuque, these research questions were reframed in an English composition class to: When local television news programs report violent crimes, do they reinforce negative stereotypes of African-Americans? Does playing violent video games increase aggression in college students? Are negative political ads effective tools for getting candidates elected? With these controversial topics as a framework, students work together to use scholarly resources, craft a focused thesis statement, and write a paper supporting the thesis with valid evidence from a variety of sources.

How did students go from the first set of questions to the second? The second ones are planted. Students did not come up with them, they were written by librarians for a unit in the required first-year course Composition & Rhetoric II (ENG 102). In this process-based, collaborative unit, the class is given one common research question and three common articles. The class reads these articles to find evidence relevant to the research question, both as a class and in small groups led by librarians, peer/professional writing tutors, and the faculty. The class creates a common thesis and each student writes his or her own paper using the evidence the class identifies.

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The Assignment

This assignment, created as part of a campus-wide ethics initiative and in collaboration with the Writing Center and English faculty, incorporates critical thinking, ethical inquiry, and information literacy in a beginning-level composition course. The Wendt Character Initiative was established at the University of Dubuque to infuse discussions of ethics through the University, designating fairness, truthfulness, honesty, and the Golden Rule as key values. Each semester, selected faculty design and propose an ethics component for a 100-level class. Mary Anne Knefel, library director at the university, designed and presented this ENG 102 unit, framing the research process as a search for a type of truth, or evidence, as defined by a scholarly discipline.

Partnering with the Writing Center was a natural fit. The Writing Center, part of the Academic Success Center, is housed in the library. Writing tutors refer students to librarians when they need research help and librarians send students to the Writing Center for help during all stages of writing. But, as Elmborg and Hook (2005) state, separating research from writing can undermine the success of modeling these processes for students. In this unit, librarians, writing tutors, and faculty present a holistic, integrated view of the research writing process

The ENG 102 assignment was designed to fill a perceived gap in students' skills before they enroll in the subsequent course for first-year students, Introduction to Research Writing (RES 104). In RES 104, students are required to formulate and narrow their own topics, conduct research on focused questions, and write three five-page thesis papers. Librarians and faculty observed that some students were intimidated by the many tasks they were expected to perform in a short period. Librarians found that students were reluctant to use journal articles and book chapters. More problematic,

however, was students' lack of understanding of the role of the research question in driving both research and writing. They gathered materials during the library research sessions but did not know how to formulate a research question and choose information from their sources to answer the question. Frustrated, they would change topics and end up with a paper full of facts with a vague or non-existent thesis.

In the ENG 102 collaborative unit, all classes are given a single research question and three journal articles that directly address the question. The class meets as a whole and in small groups led by faculty, librarians or peer/professional writing tutors to discuss the scope and meaning of the research question, examine the articles in detail, and compose a common thesis statement. Each student writes a four- to five-page paper using the articles to support the common thesis statement.

Modeling research as a collaborative process is key. Because many aspects of research writing are internal, first-year students may find them difficult to learn (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). The assignment makes the process transparent. This call to conversation helps students re-examine their expectation that research and writing are lonely, isolated processes.

Because of the Wendt Character Initiative, librarians consciously chose provocative, ethical topics of interest to students. Librarians and tutors often remind students that, for this assignment, they must set their personal opinions aside and engage with the evidence. Because this is most students' first interaction with journal articles, the librarians choose clearly written, empirical studies in the social sciences that support an easily understood research question.

Objectives

The assignment's objectives address key skills students must learn to be successful in RES 104 as well as upper-level major courses. These objectives are listed in Table 1 to the right with the corresponding *ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards* and *Council of Writing Program Administrators* outcomes.

Table 1

Unit Outcomes	ACRL Outcomes	WPA Outcomes
A. Identifies a valid thesis for a short research paper	Recognizes interrelationships among concepts and combines them into potentially useful primary statements with supporting evidence (3.3a) Extends initial synthesis, when possible, at a higher level of abstraction to construct new hypotheses that may require additional information (3.3b)	Focuses on a purpose
B. Identifies a credible source (author, journal, etc.)	Examines and compares information from various sources in order to evaluate reliability, validity, accuracy, authority, timeliness, and point of view or bias (3.2a) Analyzes the structure and logic of supporting arguments or methods (3.2b)	N/A
C. Identifies evidence from 3 journal articles to support or refute a thesis	Reads the text and selects main ideas (3.1a) Restates textual concepts in his/her own words and selects data accurately (3.1b) Identifies verbatim material that can be then appropriately quoted (3.1c) Recognizes interrelationships among concepts and combines them into potentially useful primary statements w/ supporting evidence (3.3a) Uses consciously selected criteria to determine whether the information contradicts or verifies information used from other sources (3.4b)	Understands a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources.
D. Writes a short paper based on credible sources.	Organizes the content in a manner that supports the purposes and format of the product or performance (e.g. outlines, drafts) (4.1a) Integrates the new and prior information, including quotations and paraphrasings, in a manner that supports the purposes of the product or performance (4.1c) Communicates clearly and with a style that supports the purposes of the intended audience (4.3d)	Is aware that it usually takes multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text. Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading.
E. Cites the sources used in a paper in correct form.	Differentiates between the types of sources cited and understands the elements and correct syntax of citation for a wide range of resources (2.5c) Records all pertinent citation information for future reference (2.5d) Selects an appropriate documentation style and uses it consistently to cite sources (5.3a)	Learns comment formats for different kinds of texts. Practices appropriate means of documenting their work.

Implementation

Thirty-two sections over five semesters have participated in this assignment, which typically involves eight class sessions. Librarians and tutors are involved in class for five of these eight days. The schedule is as follows.

Day 1: The faculty member and librarian describe the assignment and introduce the topic. Librarians show students how to access the three required articles on e-reserve through the University's course management system. Each student is responsible for reading and annotating each article throughout the unit.

Day 2: Librarians use a news article or website to introduce the topic. These sources are not used in the paper, but this scaffolding reduces student anxiety by starting with a type of source more familiar to them. Librarians discuss using websites and news articles to generate topics, then compare these familiar sources with a scholarly article by examining each source's audience, authority, bias, and reliability. Led by a librarian, the class reviews the first journal article together, reading the abstract, finding the hypothesis, and identifying sections relevant to the research question.

Day 3: After concluding the discussion of the first article, students divide into small groups, each led by a faculty member, librarian, or peer/professional tutor. The two remaining articles are divided among the groups, who repeat the process the class modeled. Each group identifies and records key points from their articles on poster paper, prompted by leaders who encourage the group to clarify their understanding of the relevant evidence.

Day 4: Small group discussion continues.

Day 5: Small groups present their evidence to the class for further discussion and clarification. All groups get the benefit of close examination of the three articles. The faculty member or librarian then leads the class to a conclusion about the evidence and helps them turn the research question into a common thesis. This ends the librarians and writing tutors' work in the classroom.

Day 6: The students begin the writing process, discussing how to logically structure their paper and creating a tentative outline as a class. Throughout the semester, ENG 102 students work on quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing. In this unit, they discuss these concepts again, focusing now on using scholarly research. They also review citation style. While ENG 102 papers typically use MLA style, this particular paper follows APA format as a bridge to RES 104, in which students' first paper will be in APA.

Day 7: Working from the common outline and their accumulated notes, students bring in a rough draft. After peer review, the class discusses how to improve their papers and how to integrate research findings. After discussion, most students understand how to improve their work. Many have questions about this type of writing and will stop by the Writing Center outside of class time for extra help. This fulfills a secondary goal of the assignment, that students become more familiar with Writing Center and librarian support.

Day 8: The final paper and portfolio is due. A portfolio typical of ENG 102 papers includes all work associated with the unit, such as annotated articles, an outline, and various drafts with peer review forms. This reinforces the idea that all writing, including research writing, is a process, and gives students the opportunity to reflect on how they arrived at the final draft.

Assessment and Evaluation

This assignment is part of an overall information literacy assessment plan based on TRAILS (Tool for Real-time Assessment of Information Literacy Skills) developed by librarians at Kent State University. Entering first-year students are given TRAILS to obtain baseline data. Selected TRAILS questions relevant to this unit are asked as part of the course assessment. Selected results from the pilot fall 2007 assessment are below.

- 83.3% could identify appropriate research paper topic (+7.6%)
- 62.5% could identify resource type from MLA citation (+24.4%)
- 75.0% could identify example of proper paraphrasing (+38.2%)

An obvious assessment is to examine the grades students received on their papers to determine if the students successfully achieved the objectives of the unit. Were they able to synthesize information into a coherent, thesis-based paper based on evidence from scholarly sources? This product-based assessment, however, belies the incremental, process-based learning this unit is designed to foster.

It should be no surprise to those who work with first-year students that this assignment will be difficult for many, even with the clear structure. Rather than be discouraged when the students do not become expert research writers on the first try, we must consider the value of the process. If we have faith in the process we have modeled in this class and in the scaffolding that faculty, librarians, and writing center tutors have structured throughout the core curriculum, we can expect that the students will become better over time. Therefore, a process-based assessment, perhaps based on student portfolios, may provide a more authentic assessment of the unit.

The process they learn in ENG 102 is reinforced almost immediately for most students in the RES 104 course, which requires more independence in research writing. A more authentic assessment of the ENG 102 unit may be a qualitative analysis of students and faculty in RES 104 as well as TRAILS assessment data.

Discussion

Librarians, faculty, and writing tutors have observed several themes throughout the assignment:

- *Peer collaborative learning is central to research writing and critical thinking.*

  Most students are able to successfully write the research paper required in the assignment. Collaboration is key to their success. Within their team, students are invited to consider complex questions together. Peer tutors, mostly seniors, are critical to this conversation, providing a bridge between the first-year students and the faculty, librarians, and writing center tutors.

- *Ethical questions lead to critical thinking.*

  The assignment encourages students to consider ethical issues in a different light. Students examine complex questions within the framework of scholarly research, a novel experience for them. In this research process model, truth is framed as a type of evidence. Group leaders shift students' thinking from their opinion to a concept that truth is more than personal conviction.

- *Librarians and writing center professionals are well-positioned to lead in teaching critical thinking.*

  Faculty see the value of teaching scholarly discourse and critical thinking but may be unsure how to accomplish this. Because librarians and Writing Center staff work in multidisciplinary, process-based models, they are uniquely positioned to partner with faculty to teach critical thinking throughout the curriculum. In addition, they are creative at pedagogy and can create scaffolded assignments because they are familiar with assignments throughout the curriculum.

Future Directions

Some English faculty are creating additional assignments to provide more structure and to further integrate the unit into the writing assignments done throughout the semester. In addition, because the students respond so positively to the peer tutors, we are considering recruiting English education majors as small group leaders.

We expect that this success will lead to more collaboration with the librarians, Writing Center staff, and faculty. At one point, a sociology professor wanted to collaborate in this assignment, using the same articles read in ENG 102 but further analyzing them using a sociological perspective. Librarians and Writing Center staff also will continue to work with faculty to reinforce these concepts in upper-level courses and through the majors.

Conclusion

Students cannot be research writers if they do not use valid evidence in thesis-driven writing. Research writing, especially on ethical issues, takes students out of their comfort zone. For them to be successful at the many tasks involved, the process must be scaffolded and modeled in a community.

Librarians and Writing Center staff can provide leadership, expertise, and structure for our students to become successful researchers, writers, and critical thinkers.

Note: This article is excerpted in part from:

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