

## Engaging Sources: Information Literacy and the Freshman Research Paper (Part II)

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*In Part I, published in LOEX Quarterly 36(4), we described a qualitative research project in which we deeply examined six student papers to see how they used their sources. In Part II, we further summarize what we observed in students papers, make an argument to foreground inquiry, and share some changes we made based on what we learned.*

### What We Observed in Students' Papers

#### *Surface Plausibility*

Each of these papers is, on its surface, a plausible effort at making an argument supported by information drawn from reliable sources. All of the students earned passing grades for the assignment and the course. Only when we looked in detail at the sources could we see how poorly our students understood what they were reading and what they were called on to do.

#### *Presentation of Sources*

Students tried to attribute quotations, but were less diligent in identifying authors and their qualifications: authors were introduced by name in a signal phrase only a third of the time, author's credentials or affiliations were rarely noted, and not one student gave evidence of recognizing the source author's purpose by summarizing a source's overall argument to provide context for borrowed material. While we did encounter some unattributed quotations, intentional plagiarism did not appear to be a significant issue.

#### *Use of Sources*

In most cases, cited material was offered as fact, evidence, or authority. Rarely did students use a source to represent an alternative point of view. In many instances, students misidentified quoted text, attributing it to the source author when in fact the author was quoting another voice. Students even used materials out of context in such a way as to distort or contradict the author's meaning.

Students appeared most concerned with using their time efficiently to get the assignment done, preferring easily accessible information. For example, every source used by the students was available online in full text, whether from free websites or in the library databases. In addition, students sought easy access to information within the sources they used: a third of their references were drawn from the first three paragraphs of the source. Further, over a fifth of the references used were drawn from an abstract, table, or

bulleted list. These "easy access" quotations appear to take the place of thorough reading of the sources, which in several cases would have enriched the student's argument. They suggest that the student is simply mining for quotes to prove a thesis.

### Foregrounding Inquiry

Students didn't go wrong in using their sources because they were dishonest or because they weren't interested in or committed to their ideas. Our evidence suggests that they went wrong because they were encouraged to regard the research project as producing a thesis-driven argument with a mandated number of sources. Because they had decided what they wanted to prove before they began their research, they declined to learn anything that would call their premature thesis into question.

To be truly information literate, students need research strategies when answers are not predetermined. Our focus at UNM on thesis excluded the steps most people take in academic, professional, and civic life when they have a real problem to solve: asking questions, reading for information, considering our interests and those of our sources, examining the quality of evidence, and testing possible answers.

Our students chose to address real problems: preventing malaria, reducing childhood obesity, and decreasing gun-related violence. How might we have organized their work to support critical inquiry while equipping them with the skills they need in finding, presenting, and acknowledging the work of others? What if, instead of an isolated research paper, our course integrated research in a longer process of inquiry, reporting, and analysis, leading to—but not driven by—an argument about a real-world problem or question?

#### *Asking*

We think Jack's research project was inspired by Walter Williams' (2004) column where he argues that DDT is a useful chemical whose use has been restricted because of the dishonest claims of "environmental extremists" such as Rachel Carson. If his instructor had required Jack to use Williams' article as a prompt to pose questions about such topics as malaria, mosquitoes, disease prevention, DDT, and environmental activism, he might have discovered how much there is to know and how much is genuinely unknown.

A canny instructor could have asked Jack categorize the types of questions he was asking: Questions about scientific fact? Questions of policy? Questions on motives? These questions would help him understand the problem at the heart of DDT—balancing its usefulness against its dangers. With a rich store of questions, Jack would approach the library with a different agenda: instead of mining for quotes to support his thesis, he would search for texts that would help answer his questions.

### ***Reading and Reporting***

To consolidate their understanding, students need to report their findings by summarizing the main arguments of source texts and identifying the authors, their credentials, and their purposes. Our case studies suggest they would need help doing so; reading complex texts appears to be one of our students' weakest skills. But as English instruction expert David Jolliffe notes in his review essay, "reading as a concept is largely absent from the theory and practice of college composition" (p. 473). We wrongly assume that students already know all they need to know about reading when they come to college. Jolliffe argues, rightly in our view, for "teach[ing] our students to be constructive, connective, active readers of *all* the material that comes their way" (p. 479).

Students can't be expected to put texts into conversation with each other unless we teach them how to follow arguments and to use summarizing as a tool for clarifying understanding. Unless they can competently report the arguments of their sources, they cannot be expected to make sound judgments about how texts can be useful in supporting their own arguments. To report her gun education sources satisfactorily, Louise would have needed to recognize them as, respectively, a philosophical essay and two research reviews that consider what's known about the usefulness of gun control policies. Had she understood these purposes, and on that basis developed a summary of each author's major arguments, she could have developed a much more interesting thesis than the thin "Gun education...is crucial" that shapes her paper, and she might have avoided attributing to her authors claims that were in fact the objects of their criticism.

### ***Analyzing***

Several instructors' prompts demanded that they evaluate sources for bias. Students who understand what they've read can ask what evidence supports the author's claims and make judgments about that evidence. They can compare evidence from different sources and decide which is more credible. Students who understand what authors are trying to accomplish can assess how ideology may have led the author to mischaracterize the work of another writer. Students able to ask questions like these and propose answers to them

are ready to write arguments that will be worth the time it takes to compose them. Joseph, for example, would have realized that the studies he cited about nutrition programs were sponsored by companies having an interest in the results and could have incorporated that idea into his discussion.

### **Conclusions**

After completing this study, we set aside for quite some time the idea of publishing our findings in an article due to a fire in the library and Wanda's move to a new job. But, we each changed our practice based on what we learned. Wanda has now returned as Director of Core Writing and the library has recovered from the fire, so we are once again eager to share our thoughts:

***Wanda Martin:*** Our findings led me to redouble my efforts to foreground inquiry in the first-year writing courses. We revised the program's learning objectives to make "finding information" an outcome for each course in the program. Then, I began to focus attention on tasks that would encourage students to choose topics in which they were genuinely interested and to ask questions prolifically. I began asking teaching assistants to plan genre-based assignment sequences that require research throughout the semester. Teaching assistants now ask students to begin with a question that will drive their research for sources whose views they will be taught to summarize, analyze, and synthesize in an essay addressed to a specified audience, to accomplish a specific rhetorical aim.

***Cassandra Amundson:*** As a teaching assistant, our study proved very productive in helping me become aware of students' actual research and writing processes. I have become more conscious of articulating to students "how" it looks to research and assess arguments in both the proscriptive and inquiry-based methods. I have become more aware of guiding students through exercises that help them pay attention to authors' biases or agendas, potential deeper meaning behind arguments, and authors' affiliations so that they may "experience" how to write more effective, balanced, complex arguments. Our study has given me an inside scoop into the research and writing habits, tendencies, and preferences of our first year writing students.

***Carroll Botts:*** I have been teaching undergraduates in art history classes for many years at UNM and wasn't too surprised by the way students use sources in their papers. The one real eye opener to me was that students took their quotes from the abstract of their articles rather than from the article itself. I have since made a point to mention that the abstract is a research tool and most definitely NOT part of an article to be cited.

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**Mark Emmons:** For me, the study was enlightening and led to several changes. To begin, our findings have become part of the training we conduct each year with the English instructors, changing the way they approach the library visit. While most instructors continue to bring their classes to the library after their students have developed a research question and are prepared for the research stage that Carol C. Kuhlthau (2004) describes as *information collection*, many now bring their classes to the library during the earlier exploratory stages of research that Kuhlthau describes as *topic selection*, *prefocus exploration*, and *focus formulation*. Students conduct preliminary research that helps them focus upon a topic, find background information, and help shape a question. Because most instructors do not take advantage of a second optional library visit, we have increased the emphasis on asking questions and gathering background information in all classes. In addition, instead of focusing exclusively on scholarly resources, we now explore the different purposes various types of sources serve by demonstrating how popular and scholarly sources answer different types of questions. Finally, as with our first study (Emmons & Martin, 2002), our

engaging conversations as we conducted the research strengthened the working relationship between the library and the writing program.

### Works Cited

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### **What books or articles influenced you?**

Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher by Stephen D. Brookfield (1995, Jossey-Bass). He talks about looking at yourself as teacher from four different viewpoints: your own, your students, colleagues, and literature-lense (ground what you do in research, not just what seems to 'work' in the classroom).

How to Get Ideas by Jack Foster [Author] and Larry Corby [Illustrator] (2007, Berrett-Koehler Publishers). It (focuses) on being creative in your thinking, looking at things from different viewpoint and angles. It has a whole bunch of different exercises you can do.

Creative Whack Pack by Roger VonOech (1989, U.S. Games Systems). It is an illustrated deck of cards. It helps you look at things in different ways. For example, one of the cards is – if you look at a door, and you think of it as just a door, you will be bound in certain ways. But if you think of it is a portal, it changes things and challenges you. Or, how is your instruction program like an orchestra – do the strings practice more than the brass or does percussion not follow the director? Sometimes in teaching you get stuck in a rut – 'this is the way I have to present this information' – and it is really helpful to think about it in a different way and its different aspects.

**What technology, if any do use? Is there any you dislike because it does not add sufficiently to the learning process?**

I think we rely on PowerPoint too much, and it's good to see people get away from that and being more interactive in the way they approach their teaching. It makes things too linear, inflexible for the particular needs of learners and classes.

I like chat – we do a lot of chat reference. I still find it challenging to do instruction through chat, such as doing videos on the fly, and we've got a long way to go to get everyone at the same comfort level, but it is where the students are and it is certainly here stay.

***You've mentored dozens of LIS grads – are there 1 or 2 best pieces of advice, particularly in instruction, that you typically share with new librarians?***

No, because with each person, the best advice I give them is not what I tell them, but the experiences I provide them with so they come to those 'a-ha' moments on their own. The people I feel have been the most successful didn't really ask my advice, but came and talked to me about a situation and I asked them questions so they come up with answers themselves.

It goes with the throughline of what we discussed earlier-try and recognize everyone's individuality and different needs, so you let that manifest in different learning situations you put together. That makes people realize what their style is, what they're good at/need to work at- by letting them bring to you their individual challenges, that's how you mentor them.