Teaching Students to Keep Research Sources Under Control

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Introduction

In this chapter, I present a writing assignment designed to teach students fundamental methods of working with primary and secondary research sources. This assignment methodically and carefully guides students through all stages of the research and writing processes, from selecting and evaluating their sources, to generating and supporting an informed point of view about their topic.

Unlike the traditional research paper assignment, which often focuses too much on teaching library and information compiling skills, the assignment described here helps students to use research sources for learning and constructing effective arguments. First, I describe the assignment and the context of the course in which it was offered to students. Second, I analyze samples of student writing that I received in response to this assignment. In my analysis, I focus on two key elements of student writing. The first such element is audience awareness, as established in the essays' opening paragraphs. The second one is the authors' efforts to achieve what Joseph Harris, in his 1997 book *A Teaching Subject,* describes as the ability to keep one's research sources under control (45–46). I chose these two elements of student writing for this discussion because of the long-standing inability of the traditional research paper assignment to teach these elements successfully. This drawback of the generic college research paper genre has drawn abundant criticism in composition literature

since the advent of the research paper assignment to the writing instruction scene in the late 1920s-early 1930s.[1]

The Traditional Research Paper Assignment

In order to understand the important differences between the kind of process and rhetorically oriented teaching of research writing that I am proposing here and the traditional research paper genre, it is worth reminding ourselves what the term *traditional research paper assignment* stands for and the kinds of pedagogical practices that the generic research paper assignment usually invites. James McCrimmon defines the college research paper genre in the 1950 edition of his influential textbook *Writing with a Purpose:*

> In general, undergraduate research papers are of two kinds: *reports* and *theses* [italics in the original]. The chief difference between these types is one of purpose. The writer of a report wishes to find out the facts on his subject and present them in a clear, orderly, and detailed account. The writer of a thesis research paper is studying the facts to draw a conclusion from them; this conclusion becomes the thesis of his essay; and he selects and organizes his material to develop his thesis. (240)

Although McCrimmon's definition of the genre is fifty years old, it has remained largely unchanged as can be verified by even a cursory glance through the latest research paper-writing handbooks and manuals. Because, as McCrimmon states, both reports and thesis papers ask students to find facts on the subject, a large portion of research

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[1] For historical analyses of the shortcomings of the traditional research paper genre, see work by Douglas Brent (1992), Bruce Ballenger (2000), Wendy Bishop and Pavel Zemliansky (2001), Zemliansky (2002), and others.

paper instruction is devoted to library skills and methods of information gathering. Caused in large part by a strong institutional pressure to prepare students for writing in other disciplines, such excessive attention to the information-gathering stage of the research process has often caused writing teachers to neglect teaching research writing as a rhetorical and process-oriented activity. Consequently, when writing a traditional research paper, students are often simply given library tours and left on their own to produce research papers.

Departmental Context and Environment

My assignment is a part of a first-year required writing course that I teach at James Madison University. As in many other universities, the first-year writing requirement at JMU is a part of the general education curriculum. When the assignment was designed and taught, the second-semester first-year writing course was offered in four different versions, known as "packages," each emphasizing different topics and themes. The first-year writing course at JMU has since then been revised to eliminate packages, while still allowing individual instructors considerable freedom in the design and implementation of assignments. My course was offered in package E, which focused on issues of media, technology, and culture and was taught in a computer classroom where each student has access to a computer and the Internet. There were four writing projects in the course, each requiring students to conduct primary or secondary research. Descriptions of all writing assignments from the course, including the full description of the assignment under discussion in this essay, are included on this website.

In designing the assignment, I had two basic considerations in mind. The first consideration was pedagogical. I think that all writers should study various discourses and ways in which language is used. My belief is in line with the social-constructivist idea that reality is created through the use of discourse.[2] The second consideration was both pedagogical and programmatic. The writing program where I teach emphasizes discourse and rhetorical analysis assignments in first-year composition, among other types of writing tasks. According to the statement of the program's goals and objectives, after completing first-year writing courses, students should be able to:

- develop and support a relevant, informed, argumentative thesis, or point of view, that is appropriate for its audience, purpose, and occasion (rhetorical knowledge).

- analyze and evaluate information to identify its argumentative, credible, and ethical elements; students should also be able to reflect on civic responsibility as it relates to written discourse (critical thinking, reading, and writing).

- demonstrate an understanding of writing as a series of tasks involving invention, research, critical analysis and evaluation, and revision for audience, purpose, and occasion (processes).

- effectively incorporate and document appropriate sources (traditional and nontraditional) to support an argumentative thesis or point of view; exhibit control over surface conventions such as syntax, grammar, **punctuation,**

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[2] The main premises of social constructivism are too well known to restate here. My thinking about social constructivism is informed by the work of James Berlin (1982, 1988), Patricia Bizzell (1992), and many others.

and spelling that are appropriate for the writer's audience, purpose, and

occasion (knowledge of conventions). (JMU Writing Program's website)

Thus, creating and teaching this assignment made a lot of sense both for me as

a teacher and for my department. Most importantly, of course, I created this assignment

because, in my opinion, it helps students to see beyond the dreaded research paper

genre and to begin realizing the potential of research for learning and creativity.

The Assignment

Before describing the assignment, I must mention that, at least in part, I was inspired to

create it by studying the so-called controlled method of teaching research writing

advocated by many writing specialists in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1969, *College

Composition and Communication* published an article by George Bramer in which the

author explained the method. Briefly stated, instead of writing one long research paper

and being on their own throughout most of the process, Bramer's students receive

constant feedback from their teacher. Bramer assigned sources to students and guided

them through the research and writing processes. The writing produced in response to

the assignment was highly engaging and combined personal elements with researched

ones.

The assignment asks students to study the discourse, rhetoric, and style of

online communities. Given the general themes of the course (technology and media),

such a choice of topics seemed natural. The assignment is also based on the premise

that research should be taught as an integral part of all writing, all semester, and not

through a free-standing term paper.

In preparation for writing, students are required to join an online community of their choice and participate in it for about a week, keeping a daily research log in which they record their observations. Although many virtual gathering places exist on the Internet, most students tend to gravitate towards online discussion forums, perhaps because transcripts of past verbal interactions on such forums are stored, which makes them easier to study. In directing students to online communities, I encourage them to pay particular attention to the language used on them. We ask the following questions: How do participants establish and develop verbal contact? What constitutes successful and unsuccessful communication? How is verbal communication online different from face-to-face communication? Toward the end of the observation, I invite students to become "participant-observers" by joining the community they are studying and posting messages on it themselves.

After the period of collecting these primary research data is over, I give the class the following writing prompt:

> Now that you have observed and participated in an online community for a week, consider the following suggestions in your first draft, though you are not limited to them alone:
>
> - Describe the online community you studied
>
> - Describe the members of the community
>
> - Describe and analyze the kinds of language used by the members
>
> - Describe your experience as a participant
>
> Be sure to use the observations and thoughts that you collected during your research.

I usually recommend that the first draft be four to five double-spaced pages long, although many students write more than the required minimum. After working on the first draft in peer workshop groups and after receiving my comments on the draft, students are required to reflect on their experiences in online communities by incorporating secondary sources into their papers. In preparation for the writing of the online community paper, the class is asked to read and respond to two essays about online communities. One is Howard Rheingold's 2000 piece "The Virtual Community," in which the author presents an almost unguardedly optimistic view of online meeting spaces. Rheingold argues that online communities can play the same positive role in community building as various physical meeting places, such as cafes, local newsstands, and so on, have played up until now. He bases his conclusions on his analysis of an early online meeting place called WELL, in which participants offer each other practical help and life advice.

The other assigned reading is Julian Dibbell's 1998 "A Rape in Cyberspace," which exposes the darker side of the online world. Dibbell describes a verbal "rape" committed by an unscrupulous character in the virtual text gaming environment called Lambda MOO. After the character commits his crime, other inhabitants of Lambda MOO expel the criminal from their virtual environment.

By assigning both Rheingold's and Dibbell's pieces, I wanted to introduce the students the somewhat nontraditional approach to research that these two authors take by combining analysis of sources with personal and even fictional narratives. To accomplish this, I give them the following writing prompt for the next draft of the paper:

Consider the issues addressed by both Rheingold and Dibbell in their

essays about online communities. Try to relate their discussions of the

subject to your experiences with online meeting spaces. On the basis of

both your observations and the class readings, develop and explain a

claim about online communities. Analyze and generalize your

experiences, but remember to use specific details and examples from the

readings. Try to go beyond simply stating whether you agree or disagree

with Rheingold or Dibbell. Instead, make your own claim about online

communities using your research data to explain, support, or complicate it.

    I deliberately do not ask students to form a thesis (or claim, as I prefer to call it in

this assignment) until after they complete their research. After all, used to writing

traditional research papers, many students begin their research with a preconceived

idea or thesis which they then set out to "prove" by finding only such information that

agrees with their ideas. Such an attitude leads to a familiar problem—the writer is

unable to use research as a learning tool, because he or she automatically shuts off all

ideas and concepts that do not agree with his or her current worldview.

Writers' Control Over Their Research Sources

Earlier in the chapter, I briefly mentioned the reasons why, I believe, analyzing the

development of students' ability to use their research in order to achieve a greater

rhetorical goal instead of simply reporting preexisting knowledge could be a good

indicator of the success or failure of a research writing assignment. At this point in the

assignment, for reasons I explored earlier in the chapter, I measure success or failure in

the assignment by students' demonstrated ability to use their research in order to achieve a rhetorical goal. It is not enough for them to simply report the results of their research. According to Joseph Harris,

> One way of getting at the voice or stance of a writer is to look closely at how she quotes and uses the words of others. By this I mean how she uses quotation both in the technical sense of the term . . . and another, much broader sense of how she draws on, echoes, alludes, or responds to the language of others. (1997, 46)

This ability to draw on sources, echo them, and allude to them is one of the defining characteristics of a successful researcher. Harris continues:

> You can thus look at the problem of quotation as one of trying to keep an upper hand over the languages and materials you're working with, of trying not to slip into a form of ventriloquism in which you can no longer tell the words of others—readers, teachers, editors, authorities, from your own. (1997, 46)

In designing the assignment, I paid particular attention to encouraging students to go beyond simply collecting and reporting research data. Instead, they were expected to use their primary and secondary research data to inform, illustrate, complicate, and support their claims about online communities. They were supposed to stay away from the kind of research paper ventriloquism that Harris mentions in the passage above.

Obviously, it is not enough to proclaim a pedagogical goal without having a clear method of achieving it. My main means of teaching students how to make a transition from simple reporting of information to forming their own theories on the subject of their

research and rhetorical argument was the analysis and extensive discussion of the readings assigned in the course. Howard Rheingold's "Virtual Community" and Julian Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace" come close to the kinds of researched writing I want my students to produce as a result of this assignment. Both authors conduct extensive rhetorical and stylistic analyses of specific online communities before drawing broad conclusions about the nature of these online gathering places in general. Both Rheingold and Dibbell "echo," "allude," and respond to their research sources in the ways Harris mentions (1997, 46). It is this kind of relationship between the student writers and their sources that I tried to teach through this assignment.

Importantly, I ask my students to focus their discussions of these and other readings in the course on their rhetorical structures and the stylistic and other devices used by the writers, rather than on the issues discussed in the essays. While talking about the content of an assigned reading no doubt provided students with useful material for invention and writing, it is the meticulous attention to the professional writers' rhetorical and stylistics strategies that, in my opinion, helps beginning writers improve.

Let us see how some of the students reacted to this demand.

Heather

Heather chose to study an online discussion forum devoted to the debate of creationists and evolutionists, which she found through the Netscape website (www.netscape.com). Looking for a suitable online forum to study, Heather read through several other online meeting places, such as discussion boards dedicated to TV

shows, fashion, and so on, but found none of them appealing. In her paper, she wrote,

"After reading several other posts [on the board dedicated to the TV show *American*

Idol] and deciding that the site was on a circular track of interested TV viewers making

comments on the same topic over and over, I searched on to find other board options

with more engaging discussions…" She finally found a board entitled "Creation vs.

Evolution" and described it as very active, noticing that "the board has a core group of

members that post daily…" Heather noticed that the forum had a moderator who always

welcomed new users with an email. After observing the interactions on the forum,

posting to it herself, and analyzing the posts in her paper, Heather came to the following

conclusion about the nature of online discussion spaces:

> Online communication has changed a lot in the last few years. Obviously,
> there are many sites to be avoided on the Internet, but now there are also
> contact sites designed to stimulate the brain and challenge…ideas. More
> importantly, some sites are established to build friendships and a sense of
> community…. Relationships are built on inner qualities and interpersonal
> connections as opposed to physical attraction and intimidation. Online,
> everyone is equal.

In this passage, Heather begins to prepare her readers for the kind of "expanded thesis"

statement about online communities she makes one page later. She writes,

> After reading Rheingold's article advocating the warm sense of community
> found within online discussion boards and then experiencing one for
> myself, I can make a decision for myself on the validity of today's online
> communication. For individuals looking for a new place to meet friends, for

those with physical boundaries that hinder normal relationships, or for those looking for intelligent conversation and discussion on a variety of topics,…online communities are a fantastic place…. I do not believe that these forums will replace traditional forms of starting friendships and…a sense of community in local hangouts and neighborhoods.

As a reader and as a writing teacher, I value Heather's ability to go beyond simple agreement or disagreement with her research sources. She offers sophisticated commentary of her research results. She acknowledges positive potential of online communities, almost agreeing with Howard Rheingold's position in the essay "The Virtual Community." At the same time she questions Rheingold's idealistic view of online forums. By analyzing her experience in one online community, Heather is capable of complicating and challenging the views expressed in her secondary sources. As a writing teacher, I look for this kind of reasoning in my students' writing, and I have not been able to find it in most traditional research papers that I have read. Two elements built into this assignment that are usually absent from the traditional research paper genre helped Heather make this transition. The first is the meticulous analysis and discussion, in class, of the research sources, particularly of their authors' rhetorical strategies. The second is the ability of the writers in the class to sound their theories and conclusions not only off of bookish secondary sources, but also off of their own experiences with online discussion forums.

Alex

Naturally, not all students in the class responded to the assignment as successfully as Heather. Alex's writing failed to establish authority over research sources to the same extent as Heather's writing did. The first four pages of Alex's eight-page essay consisted of apparently borrowed, but poorly cited, passages from secondary sources. When I began reading the essay, I came very close to suspecting Alex of plagiarism until I saw some attempts at citation and documentation. When the writer finally began to discuss the results of his primary research on page five, there was no apparent connection between those results and the barrage of data from secondary sources which he gave on the first four pages. In an attempt to formulate some kind of a claim about his research, Alex concluded the paper with the following: "On the whole it was a positive experience, much like the experience Howard Rheingold had on his trip to cyberspace. I investigated the participants' conversations to see if any hot debates were held…" And a little further on, he adds "It appeared as I was reading into these people's lives, loves, and secrets."

What we see here is this writer's willingness to agree with the authority of a secondary source, even though his primary research provides very little ground for such agreement. Alex clearly misunderstood the assignment, assuming that his task as a writer was to confirm the views stated in his secondary sources. In *A Teaching Subject* (1997), Joseph Harris points out that, "many beginning writers…hunt [around their sources] until [they] can isolate a passage that comes close to what [they] already wants to say" (49). Alex is doing the opposite: he hunts around his experience in the online space he studied for something that would more or less closely match the ideas

expressed by one of his sources. In doing so, he as a writer, is being controlled by his sources, or, in Harris's words, has succumbed to research paper ventriloquism.

Opening Paragraphs as Evidence of Audience Awareness

Audience awareness is a characteristic of an experienced and skillful writer. At the same time, the traditional research paper assignment has often been criticized for its failure to address audience awareness. Traditional research papers more often than not turn out to be products of "school writing" whose only audience is the teacher. As Tom Reigstad points out in his chapter on the I-Search paper in *Research Writing Revisited,* such writing is often done in Engfish, to use Ken Macrorie's term. According to Macrorie and Reigstad such language has no voice or personality.

Experienced writers often use opening passages not only to set up the context of their writing, but also to establish contact with the audience and to get their readers involved with the piece. Therefore, introductory paragraphs of student essays can be important indicators of how well student writers understand their audience and work to engage it in the reading process. The next two student papers were written in response to the research assignment discussed here.

Allie

Allie makes a conscious effort in her opening paragraphs to let her readers know that she understands who they are and that she has something important to tell them. The opening paragraphs of her online community essay were as follows:

My father was one of the first people on our street to buy a modem and sign up for America Online. In sixth grade, my friend Sharon and I would sit for hours "talking" to dozens of people from all over the nation….To mothers in the 90s, chat rooms were a fad to be feared. Their innocent children, typing happily away, were being subjected to lewd, deceitful material and strange people all over the world…

In order to learn more about the nature of…online communication, I logged onto AIM in my dorm room…

In these opening paragraphs, Allie shows that her essay is more than just a school assignment. She explains to her readers the reason why she undertook the studies of online communities. She achieves this goal by using an appropriate personal example and not mentioning early on in the paper that the essay is written in response to a college writing requirement. Throughout the introductory paragraphs, this writer demonstrates considerable awareness of her audience and realizes that one of her tasks as a writer is to interest her readers in the subject of her writing.

Nick

Nick does not use his the opening of his paper to establish the kind of contact with the audience which Allie does. He opens his essay with the following: "I sat at my computer for a week actually going over the half-hour a day that was allotted in these online communities. I was so interested in what people were saying, and that some people were actually interested in what I had to say."

One thing is obvious from Nick's introductory paragraph: he is writing a school assignment meant only for the teacher and, perhaps, his classmates, if they are

interested in reading it. As many beginning writers of research papers do, this student assumes that his audience knows why he is writing this paper. The teacher who is clearly meant as the primary audience here will read it anyway since this is the teacher's job.

Checklist for Teachers Wishing to Use This or Similar Assignments

- Assign and discuss any readings you would like the students to use in their papers before they begin drafting the paper. Discussing the readings and responding to them in writing prepares students for drafting by familiarizing them with the important issues within the topic.
- Encourage students to conduct sustained and regular primary research. I ask my students to visit online communities daily, for at least thirty minutes, and keep a research log.
- In the first, exploratory draft, ask students to report and reflect on the results of their primary research. Discourage them from forming theses and claims about their topic too soon.
- In the second draft, ask students to think how the class readings and other secondary sources may be used to enhance their arguments. Now is the time to think about developing a claim about the topic.
- Encourage students to move beyond simply agreeing or disagreeing with their secondary sources.
- Be aware that the assignment can be used with any topic.

Implications and Conclusions

I do not want to overstate the success of the assignment. It is clear both from experience and from the examples I have given that some students will respond to any writing assignment better than others. However, while working on this assignments with my students, it has become clear to me that student writers are more likely to understand the research process when they are guided through it rather than simply given a research topic, sent off to the library to collect information, and then expected to bring the finished paper to class. The project I have described asks student to use a very limited number of sources, and it that it is different from the traditional research paper assignment which, usually involves extensive library and, in recent years, Internet research. However, regardless of whether a writer uses one, two, or ten sources in his or her writing, the fundamental principles of working with those sources remain the same. They need to be evaluated, carefully studied, and, when possible, discussed with others. Most important, research sources in writing should be used to achieve a rhetorical purpose—be it persuading, informing, or entertaining the reader. In the assignment, discussed here, students used primary and secondary research first to learn about online communities and develop an opinion about them and second, to convey this opinion to their readers.

Strange as it may seem, perhaps one of the most important achievements of my students in this assignment is the fact that they wrote researched essays without thinking that they were writing a research paper. Writing teachers know that many students come to our classes with a significant baggage in relation to research papers— negative emotions and memories. This fear of research and research writing almost

paralyzes students, preventing them from learning and writing to their full potential. Assignments like this one can show beginning writers not only that research is essential for sound writing, but also that it can be an enjoyable and rewarding activity. As I mentioned earlier, students need to engage in research regularly and for different kinds of writing assignments. Teachers need to show them the differences between this kind of assignment and the generic school research paper before too much class time has passed. Therefore, I would recommend that assignments of this kind be used early in the term.

One of the students in my class wrote in her process memo, "I would call [this project] more of an investigation rather than a research paper…. I interacted with people to do my 'research' and afterwards I formed an opinion about my interactions." And although statements that students make in process memos should often be taken with a grain of salt (many of us have been guilty of trying to please the teacher), this particular statement shows that in the mind of this student, the image of research writing as always meaningless and aggravating might have been shaken just a bit.

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