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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

How to Address “I’ve Already Written My Paper, Now I Just Need to Find Some Sources”:
Teaching Personal Voice through Library Instruction

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Teaching students how to employ their personal voice has always presented a unique challenge to composition instructors. Although teaching students how to engage in scholarly dialogue lies at the heart of every composition program, many students remain unsure, intimidated, and even skeptical of this mode of communication. As a result, research papers often take the form of unsupported monologues in which citations are merely ornamental, lengthy summaries, or numerous information resources are cited without one voice serving as an arbitrator. Library instructors face the same dilemma as composition instructors do when teaching students how to apply information to their research. Beyond teaching students how to identify an information need and to effectively and efficiently access and critically evaluate information, library instructors must teach students how information and personal voice are incorporated into research. In doing so, library instruction corrects the common misunderstanding that research equates to integrating resources into a prewritten paper, that any opinionated resource is acceptable to use, that the research process is similar to writing book reports, and that mediation between scholarly voices is unnecessary. By learning about personal voice in library instructional sessions, students begin to develop their own scholarly identity, understand the conversation of scholarship, and realize the function that their personal voice serves, as well as the strength and integrity that the research process lends to it.

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Teaching students how to use their personal voice has always presented a unique challenge to composition instructors. Although teaching students how to engage in scholarly dialogue lies at the heart of every composition program, many students remain unsure, intimidated, and even skeptical of this mode of communication. As a result, research papers often take the form of unsupported monologues in which citations are merely ornamental, lengthy summaries, or numerous information resources are cited without one voice serving as an arbitrator.

Library instructors face the same dilemma as composition instructors do when teaching students how to effectively apply information to their research. Beyond teaching students how to identify an information need as well as to effectively and efficiently access and critically evaluate information, library instruction must also teach students how information and personal voice are incorporated into research. In doing so, library instruction corrects the common misunderstanding that research equates to integrating resources into a prewritten paper, that any opinionated resource is acceptable to use, that the research process is similar to writing book reports, and that mediation between scholarly voices is unnecessary.

By teaching personal voice in library instructional sessions and at the reference desk, librarians enable students to begin to better develop their own scholarly identity, understand the conversation of scholarship, and realize the function that their personal voice serves, as well as the strength and integrity that the research process lends to it.

Although it is not typical for librarians and writing instructors to maintain a notebook of favorite research paper sentences, commonly heard student remarks, or anecdotal comments regarding libraries and the research process, the premise for this paper stems from a particular conversation heard one morning. The following is a true story with only the names changed.

Jim: I’ll see you later tonight at the game.
Paul: Why are you going in there? I thought you already finished your paper?
Jim: Yeah, I’ve already written my paper, now I just need to find some sources to cite.

Composition teachers, who may bring their classes to the library for formal research instruction each semester, always relate the countless unsettling tales of student e-mails received the night before assignments are due. They also recount the individual writing consultations during which students question the necessity of citations, seem puzzled by the nature of the peer-review
process, and equate the overall quality of their work with the question “how many sources do we need for our paper?” College students remain uncertain and even skeptical of scholarly dialogue as a mode of communication. Brabazon (2006, 161), writing about how Google has affected the way in which students assess and incorporate information sources, relays several such student accounts. After providing her students with thirty-eight unique information sources during the first six weeks of the semester and asking them to include a minimum of ten in their research papers, she received the following e-mail correspondence:

Hi Tara, Sorry to be painful but this should be my last question. Do we really need to have ten references from the readers? It’s just that by coincidence (my parents bought me a subscription to Time) I have found a couple of articles, one regarding obesity in America and one about everyday people creating wealth through the internet (with blogs, short films, etc.) I’d like to use these but I feel that I am getting too wound up on having ten references from the unit material, Have a good weekend.

Similar to composition instructors, information literacy librarians are daily faced with e-mail inquiries and reference questions, as well as perplexed looks, from students who do not understand what is meant by the conversation of scholarship and how effectively to locate and apply information to their research. Again, while several generic examples that illustrate this problem can be found—such as “I need to find articles on World War II” or “Where are your books on capital punishment?”—I have decided to share some of my own personal favorites, classifying them appropriately by name generalizations. There is:

Give-Me-Any-Two Gary, who asks: “My professor said I need to include at least two scholarly articles in my paper on teen pregnancy. Any two that you can find for me that are short will work fine.”

Cite-Something Sam, who inquires: “My bibliography on violent lyrics in rap music is due this afternoon. I need at least seven sources. Can you help? They can be anything! I just need to cite something.”

Any-of-Those Amy, her question when asked: “I am not sure. My topic is gun control and I only need 3 sources. Any of those 3854 articles will work. Can you e-mail some of those to me?”

Full-Text Terrance, who says: “If that article isn’t available full-text, can we find one that is? I only want full-text articles for my paper.”

And That’s-Too-Lengthy Lisa, who wants to know: “How do you cite an abstract? This article is too long for me to read.”

Writing about the collaborative efforts of library instructors and writing teachers, Norgaard, Arp, and Woodard (2004, 223) appropriately identify
the shared dilemma that each faces, stating that “students come to see citation merely as a means to avoid plagiarism, not as a productive means to frame questions, establish currency and credibility, advertise allegiances, and explore disagreements and open questions” While Norgaard, Arp, and Woodard recognize that many students view the idea of citing sources simply as a few quotation marks, a number, and a “where did you get it” page, this does not seem to be the case with Jim: “I’ve already written my paper, now I just need to find some sources to cite.”

Students such as Jim, whose completed research paper consists of an unsupported monologue, seem to have a different perception of why other information resources—other voices—are needed and should be integrated into their work. Alternatively, other student papers that incorporate any opinionated source, or several information resources without letting one voice, their voice, serve as an arbiter, seem also to hold the same impression. One could easily dismiss the whole premise as a matter of laziness and conclude that the two research paper tactics of (1) “write now and cite later” and (2) “randomly gather everything one can find and cite it without mediation” are commonly used by students simply as a way to complete composition assignments. The suggestion that personal voice is potentially thought of by students as somehow sufficient enough or, on the other hand, totally irrelevant and superfluous in the research process is a matter of great concern to both library and writing instructors. Harris (2005, 8) notes that

> Student writers must understand that the use of sources that speak for or against [his or her] ideas adds value to academic writing. This is clearly more than a “skills and drills” process, and a work of attribution is tied to this value; it cannot be separated. Just as a brilliant paper lacking attention to grammatical correctness loses its functionality, its power, and its persuasive appeal, a paper that uses sources improperly suffers the same loss.

In addition to traditional student responses to the question “why cite sources?” that is asked each semester in composition courses, Harris (2005, 7) outlines several in-class prompts and questions that force students to think critically about the nature of citations and “the more subtle (and often invisible) philosophies for ‘why’ we offer attribution to our sources.” These include

- allowing the reader the opportunity to see related sources that would allow the reader the opportunity to continue their learning on the topic;
- allowing the reader the opportunity to see related sources so that they may review the current discussion and consider how the conversation may continue;
participating in the tradition of the academy and of scholars who, like students today, gave credit to their sources; and

situating the writer’s work within the other voices and discussions on the topic.

Despite the various instructional solutions that Harris offers, teaching students how and where their personal voice functions in the conversation of scholarship requires a more comprehensive approach and seems to be something that cannot be conveyed during a brief class lecture, a private research consultation, an afternoon reference desk drop by, or even in a traditional one-shot library instructional session. After illustrating that the problem is shared by both writing instructors and librarians, a collaborative solution seems to be the most practical and effective answer. Isbell (1995, 61) contends that “research and writing should be viewed as a continuum, and that they are inseparable and weave continuously into each other.” He adds that

The traditional approach to research is that it is done early in the semester until one has collected enough sources . . . a process one completes before writing or separately from writing; [where] the two processes have little influence on each other. This is especially the case when most library instruction is of the one-shot lecture variety so common (and unavoidable) in academic libraries.

Isbell’s unfortunately true observation is illustrated by countless publications in each field that outline the numerous collaborative efforts between library and composition instructors who teach how information is located, accessed, evaluated, and incorporated. Norgaard, Arp, and Woodard (2003, 124) reaffirm Isbell’s argument that “writing and information literacy have much to learn from one another, if only they would engage each other in a sustained conversation. On most college campuses, librarians and writing teachers can point to each other as classroom colleagues and curricular compatriots. Yet the conversation is often limited to this level—and thus dismissed as a matter of local lore and personal friendship.”

While information literacy and library instruction programs across the country have been built on these collaborative one-shot or one-time research sessions, few have moved toward a sequential library research agenda, in which a tiered approach is implemented throughout the semester, and, even more extensively, throughout a student’s undergraduate academic career. Studies such as those of Mackey and Jacobson (2004), Christensen (2004), and Dorner, Taylor, and Hodson-Carlton (2001) lobby for a systematic, multiyear, tiered approach to teach students the information skills necessary at their point of need, alleviating the problems that naturally arise from the one-shot instructional sessions, during which content is potentially
redundant and too much information is conveyed, causing students to be confused and overwhelmed. Samson’s (2000, 336) work on this issue further reinforces the model, noting that “while curriculum integrated library instruction builds on critical thinking and research skills, tiered instruction addresses the developmental stages that students experience as they proceed through their four-year curricula.” More than simply a mere “look up” skill (Norgaard, Taylor, and Hodson-Carlton 2001) or a faculty member who is confident that students will learn naturally on their own during the research and citation process, this tiered approach assists students in assessing the worth of the information retrieved, learning how one source, one voice, builds on another, realizing that not finding a particular piece of information is a valuable experience as well, and understanding the many ways their personal voice can function. In moving away from the one-shot library instructional approach that “deemphasizes the conceptual understanding of information, the development of broadly applicable research strategies, and the critical evaluation of information in favor of a which-button-do-I-push next” (MacDonald, Rathemacher, and Burkhardt 2000, 241) approach, and implementing a tiered strategy, librarians should focus on how “we judge and evaluate information and integrate it into effective communication” (Norgaard, Arp, and Woodard 2003, 126).

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail each learning objective, competency, and class assignment necessary to teach students how an information need is determined, accessed, critically evaluated, and effectively incorporated in conjunction with their own scholarly identity, some generalities on how this approach can be effectively integrated are apparent. Similar to the one-shot instructional session, students will still need help orienting themselves to information resources, navigating the library’s Web page, moving from general to specific thesis statements so that their topics are focused and manageable, and require assistance to rephrase and refine search strategies to ascertain the highest-quality information. After the initial hands-on session, information previously retrieved must be assessed and further evaluated to ensure its substance and quality. At this stage, with guidance from both the librarian and composition instructor, search strategies may be revised to seek out new, missing, or additional information, which comprises the conversation of scholarship. In addition, this may involve altering or completely changing the thesis statement based on the initial core of the information retrieved. Finally, the student’s own personal voice must be woven into the dialogue, potentially serving as an arbitrator, a mediator between other voices, creatively synthesizing information to create new solutions, offer new insights, and even strengthen the integrity of others.

Through a tiered instructional approach, students are more effectively taught that their personal voices play a significant role in the function of creative thought and ongoing research. Moreover, they understand that
citations do not merely function as ornamental details, randomly inserted by an overly loud narrator, or that research equates to citations alone, cleverly strung together, rendering the absence of their personal voices.

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