

'Beating the Bounds': An Inquiry into Information Literacy and Student Learning Ecologies in the Library and the English Department Writing Program

Jeremiah Chamberlin | Aaron McCollough | Kelly Davenport

English Language and Literature + MLibrary



CRLT

Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

Investigating Student Learning, 2012-2013

Varying Conceptions of Source Engagement

Rhetorical

Audience / Rhetorical stance / Genre / Authority / 'Truth'



Empirical

Impact factors / 'Good' journals / 'Scholarly' as shorthand / Format

Overview

Our project is designed to develop a common working language in the library and in the English Department – to 'map the territory' – for micro-level tasks that blur the line between writing and research. We call this set of tasks **'information use behaviors'**, a term drawn from the third aspect of the ACRL definition of information literacy: 'to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information' (ACRL, 2000).

Such 'information use behaviors' include:

- Evaluating whether one source is better suited to a student's writing purpose than another.
- Identifying general information sources and synthesizing sources' ideas as a form of invention for a student's own writing.
- Summarizing and quoting from outside sources in a way that contributes to a specific purpose in a student's own writing, such as developing an original argument.

Project Scope

1. **What are the key breakdowns in student understanding of how to effectively use sources in writing?**

2. **How do instructors characterize both breakdowns & model processes in working with sources in first-year composition?**

3. **What heuristics have instructors developed for teaching source engagement or 'information use'?**

Outputs

- Interviews with 9 first-year composition instructors in Fall 2012
- 69 pages of coded transcripts, drawn from 20 hours of interview recordings
- 132 responses from survey of FYC students
- 77 responses from survey of FYC instructors

Qualitative Coding Scheme

- Model
- Sticking Point – Student
- Sticking Point – Instructor
- Heuristic
- Constraint

Findings

Identifying Areas of Intervention

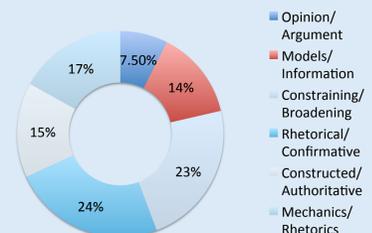
Survey and interview responses point to the potential for library instruction to provide additional pedagogical support in the areas of 'information use,' especially in the areas of source assessment, such as determining whether a source is suited to a student's writing purpose, and whether that information is accurate, timely, and credible.



Models of Source Engagement

Moving from **opinion** ('I know') to **argument** ('I think')
Models vs. information
Constraining vs. broadening
Rhetorical vs. confirmative
Constructed vs. authoritative
 Assessing source engagement:
Mechanics vs. Rhetorics

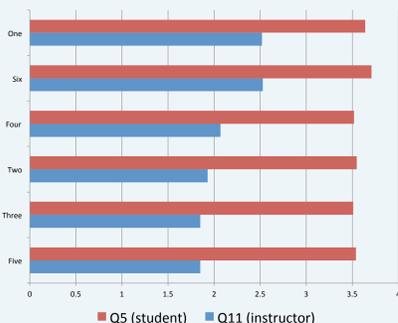
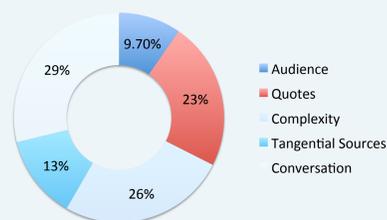
Frequency of Qualitative Subthemes: Models of Source Engagement



Challenges to Student Understanding

- Varying conceptions of 'academic' **audience**
- Lack of **engagement** with quotes
- **Complexity** not seen as a goal
- Using **tangentially related** sources
- Students don't feel part of a larger scholarly **discourse community**

Frequency of Qualitative Subthemes: Student Sticking Points



Gaps between Instructor and Student Perceptions

Comparing survey responses from instructors and students shows the areas where students are more confident in their ability to work with sources than instructors believe them to be. Particular gaps were perceived in students' ability to integrate source material without overreliance on other writers' ideas, in transitioning between others' ideas and students' own ideas, and in using summary and quotation in service to a particular argument.

Implications

The language that composition instructors use to talk about research-writing processes is particularly interested in **problematising sources** as authorities, a contrast to the often more **empirical approach** taken in library instruction, where concepts of 'scholarly' or 'appropriate' sources represent a kind of shorthand for a complex process of knowledge production.

While instruction on locating sources remains important, we see evidence for **incorporating more metacognitive writing about sources in library pedagogy**, borrowing heuristics from successful FYC instructors, who emphasize **process**:

- Using **close reading** techniques to evaluate sources' arguments.
- Creating **annotated bibliographies** to explore decision-making with source material: What to use, and for what purpose?
- Using **literature reviews** as a technique for identifying a more nuanced niche for argumentation.
- Reading/writing about **sources on the same topic but from different disciplines** to examine how they marshal evidence.
- Reading/writing about **first drafts of published work** to uncover elements of process and knowledge production.

“

Instructor, discussing ineffective source use: But the main way that they misunderstand, I think, is that they view sources as wells of facts that they pluck out the fact, and then they pluck out another fact, and then those two facts pepper their argument with legitimacy. They largely see sources as a way to back themselves up and suggest that they have done the homework and are making a confident and non-debatable, well-supported point.

Instructor, discussing effective source use:

And for me, these qualities of effective source use are not just presenting them, not just saying, 'Yeah, these fit, these are in the ballpark of what I'm talking about.' But having them either in a dialogue with each other saying, 'Listen, I agree with the first part of the statement but not the second.' The idea of shaping the information for the best use.

Sample Instructor Responses

”