PART II

Collaboration and Conversation
CHAPTER 4

SUPPLANTING THE RESEARCH PAPER AND ONE-SHOT LIBRARY VISIT

A Collaborative Approach to Writing Instruction and Information Literacy

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Founded in 2003, the Critical Writing Program of the University of Pennsylvania has built an evidence-based, “lab style” curriculum that is taught by faculty from across the disciplines. All teach a shared curriculum inflected by writing in their own disciplines as well as by their individual course topics and readings. A core mission of the program has been to develop a curriculum that positions students as authentic participants in generative knowledge practices. Our chapter will explore the development of our curriculum and our collaborative approach to teaching information literacy, highlighting productive areas of overlap between writing studies and information science and literacy scholarship, including the ACRL Framework (ACRL, 2015; Elmborg, 2003; Norgaard, 2003). It will address some of our challenges and mishaps as well as successes, including the development of an organic, mutually beneficial form of professional development that reinforced curricular development, advancing our shared understanding of generative knowledge practices and how students learn.

BACKGROUND

The Critical Writing Program of the University of Pennsylvania is one of about 60 independent writing in the disciplines programs in the United States. The program rosters the first-year writing course required of all students enrolled in the university’s four undergraduate schools: the College of Arts and Sciences, the Wharton School, the School of Nursing, and the School of Engineering. The writing seminar is the only course taken by all Penn undergraduates and as such represents a uniquely shared academic experience. As an ideal vehicle for reaching all students, the course is perpetually at risk of becoming an outlet for promoting organizations and events for all who wish to connect with students.

Our faculty are varied in terms of their disciplinary interests. Nearly all hold PhDs in a diverse range of disciplines from the humanities to the social and natural sciences; a few have terminal degrees in journalism and creative writing; and six doctoral candidates from across the disciplines are recipients of a competitive teaching fellowship designed to mentor them in best practices in writing studies. Our faculty choose their own topics and texts, based on their disciplines and interests, and use a range of approaches to teach a set of shared writing assignments. Penn’s program is distinct from most other first-year writing programs in that our writing curriculum functions as a kind of lab in which faculty immerse students in individual disciplines and topics but all students complete the same set of writing assignments, including a literature review and digitally based editorial. With approximately 2,600 students enrolled in our seminars each year, we have sufficient data to share, test, and refine our approaches to writing instruction. As such, our intensively collaborative, outcomes-based curriculum is always a work in progress, built by a multitude of constituencies: faculty across the disciplines, administration, students, employers, librarians, our own writing faculty and administration, as well as other scholars and practitioners in the field of writing studies. Our main objective is to teach students how to adapt to new writing situations based on generative knowledge practices. Our committed interdisciplinary faculty has fostered a productively layered process of inquiry and problem-solving within and across the 100 seminars rostered each semester. Over the past decade, faculty and students have
steadily transformed the curriculum into an increasingly more authentic, active learning experience, including in its approach to information literacy (IL).

THE WRITING CURRICULUM—RETHINKING THE RESEARCH PAPER

The first great challenge to creating an authentic writing curriculum was posed by the research paper. By 2003, many in writing studies were rejecting or substantially revamping their approach to research papers (Hood, 2010). In keeping with this trend, many faculty in our program experimented with various alternatives to research papers, including websites, podcasts, maps, recipes, case studies, and posters. The sheer range of alternatives taught us all much about different sorts of literacies, from their remarkably diverse processes of production to the differing demands on faculty and university resources each entailed. This proliferation of new source-based assignments also led us, counterintuitively, to developing a shared curriculum. Depending on which course students enrolled in, they might face profoundly different demands upon their time as well as radically different assessment criteria. How were we to assess the differing skills, knowledge, process, and products of students who might be creating cookbooks in one class and a 30-page research paper in another? Furthermore, what could we confidently conclude about student learning when they faced such a variety of topics, disciplines, approaches, and assignments? This was further complicated by the fact that seminars were capped at 16, a sample size too small to allow for generalizations about learning outcomes.

Our Writing Center, part of the Critical Writing Program, was in these early years also exploring how best to support students who came to the center for help with their writing assignments. To get a stronger sense of the range of assignments our students were encountering, we asked our undergraduate tutors, as part of their training, to interview professors across the disciplines about their own practices as writers as well as the kinds of writing they were asking students to do. Over 40 disciplines and 100 interviews later, the findings were unsurprising: Professors were mostly assigning timed essay questions, short response papers, and conventional research papers. And these assignments had at most an attenuated relationship to the kinds of writing the professors themselves were doing.

The research paper is an assignment as familiar to the library community as it is to the writing studies community. Its aim is to teach students how to find, synthesize, and document sources in a paper that makes and supports a claim about a topic. Students are meant to immerse themselves in library resources, looking up information, narrowing their scope, reading, note-taking, and documenting sources. Sometimes the students are taught to research as they write, concomitantly; sometimes they are given a more scaffolded approach (e.g., annotated bibliographies, note cards, outlines). In many cases, they are given topics, questions, even a set of suggested sources or a particular database. Nearly all the intellectual work is done for them by the teacher or professor, an elaborate scavenger hunt followed by laborious documentation substituting for the purposefulness and excitement of actual academic research, where one seeks solutions to problems that others presumably regard as significant and engaging.
Despite its longstanding popularity among teachers and professors, the “research paper” has been criticized for many years by those in writing studies and is rarely assigned in writing classes, though source-based writing remains a central feature of writing curricula (Brent, 2013; Hood, 2010). As a “mutt genre” (Wardle, 2009), the research paper is “school writing” as distinct from authentic writing. Students perform it to assure a teacher that they are able to go through certain motions: finding and reading sources; quoting, paraphrasing, documenting them; delivering them in a paper that is coherent and unified. While such practices mimic aspects of authentic academic genres, just as sifting and measuring flour mimics aspects of baking a cake, the typical research paper assignment has no social or intellectual purpose, no readership. Equally important, as Larson (1982) observes, the research paper misleads students in terms of how real scholars research and write. Larson notes that the activity of research contributes to innumerable academic and popular genres, from literature reviews and lab reports to grant proposals, research articles, and biographies. But the research paper we assign to students has no such motive, no future; it is an end in itself written for a grade rather than a purpose. “If almost any paper is potentially a paper incorporating the fruits of research, the term ‘research paper’ has virtually no value as an identification of a kind of substance in a paper” (Larson, 1982, p. 813).

As members of our writing faculty from across the disciplines put increasing pressure on the research paper, its artificiality and limitations grew difficult to ignore. In addition to the sorts of critiques being generated by those in the field of writing studies, our interdisciplinary faculty realized that the word “research” itself was nearly nonsensical when we attempted to use it program-wide. Most obviously, “research” is not an activity limited to library search, nor is it broadly understood as the activity of locating secondary sources, except within a handful of text-based fields such as literary studies. What we were calling “research papers” were actually exercises in locating and patching together a set of secondary sources that had little to do with the research practices in any of our fields. As writing studies scholars have pointed out, when a student is asked to write outside a genre’s “natural environment” the writing becomes “pseudotransactional” (Petraglia, 1995). Where transactional writing is authentic in both its audience and purpose, the pseudotransactional research paper is written merely to meet a teacher’s expectations, rather than to create or transfer knowledge to an interested audience. Stripped of context and purpose, the research paper is a classroom exercise that does not organically lead to more authentic research and writing skills. Instead of learning how to build knowledge, students are asked to practice a set of behaviors that actually muddy students’ understanding of why, when, and how scholars seek, write about, and document secondary sources. Recent research suggests that the research paper may even be teaching students how to become increasingly sophisticated if unwitting patchwork plagiarists (Howard, Serviss, & Rodrigue, 2010). Information scientists have recognized this problem when it comes to retrieval. Teaching people to find information in the abstract—devoid of an actual information need—creates fake procedures that get in the way of understanding how to find information when one actually needs it. Writing without a purpose (beyond fulfilling an assignment) has been shown to decrease skill transferability (e.g., Wardle, 2009); the same is true.
of searching without a purpose: As Purdue (2003) noted, “information literacy cannot exist in a vacuum; it has to be part of a lived response to research.”

The research paper also poses a problem from the perspective of teaching situated information literacy practices. Information scientists have long understood that information needs change throughout search (Bates, 1989). Using the analogy of “berrypicking,” Bates (1989) argued that in a real search users engage in a “bit-at-a-time” retrieval where the information need and information query changes as new information is gleaned. However, the way a student research paper is often conceived is that it follows a very specific, and sometimes static, sequence of events. These student papers commonly have a minimum number of sources that are required (e.g., “find and cite seven other papers”). Naturally, students who are working to fulfill these basic requirements also tend to use a minimum number of search strategies and venues to find their required sources. Moreover, under this curricular model, information search practices or other library “research” skills are commonly taught in a single class, to students who already believe they are highly proficient in search and online search technologies (Brown, Murphy, & Nanny, 2003). As a result, the larger conception of search, or writing, being iterative is frequently lost.

Also within this student research paper curriculum, being informationally “literate” is a term that is problematized by most information literacy researchers (e.g., ACRL, 2015; Purdue, 2003). Learning how to authentically write requires an understanding of how text is produced, accessed, and distributed (Norgaard, 2003). If the writing and scholarship is to be authentic, it also requires writers to place themselves into that larger academic discussion or what Bruffee (1999) notes as an approach to teaching that helps students “converse with increasing facility in the language of the communities they want to join.” Information scientists understand this notion of scholarship as conversation. As the ACRL framework (2015) sets out, scholarship is ongoing. For example, practices such as attribution are not simply an ethical obligation of participation. These forms of attribution are what actually allow “the conversation to move forward” (ACRL, 2015). The goal of information literacy is to allow those who are apprentices to recognize that conversations are ongoing, to seek them out, and to ultimately learn to contribute to those discussions.

Our faculty set out to find a replacement for the research paper—a genre that was authentic, identifiable, that could be found in each of our disciplines, that was purposeful and instructive, that asked and answered questions we could not anticipate for the student; that advanced students’ skills as information-seekers and rhetoricians; that sought to transfer and build knowledge; and that had an intended, interested audience beyond the professor as grader. After much discussion and debate, we landed on the literature review in 2015. Faculty from the different disciplines were asked to post examples of literature reviews in their fields, at which time we learned that there was much variation in how each discipline approached the review but in the end the social functions and knowledge practices, as well as the strategies for finding and documenting sources, were reasonably shared enterprises. What we didn’t anticipate was how difficult it would be to break students of the bad habits they had developed from years of writing research papers.
THE WRITING CURRICULUM—RETHINKING THE ONE-SHOT LIBRARY VISIT

As with rethinking the research paper, we quickly recognized that we also needed to rethink the one-shot library visit, which had been a feature of our writing courses, as we discovered in the early years of the program that our students tuned out during these “talking head” visits and only began to show concern for finding sources when they were in the midst of trying to do their assignments. A few of our instructors also quizzed students after library visits about what they had learned and, to the instructors’ dismay, discovered that the students had very low recall of what had been presented in the hour-plus class time absorbed.

The 80-minute one-shot librarian instruction approach is widely viewed as ineffective (see Artman, Frisicaro-Pawlowski, & Monge, 2010; Jacobs & Jacobs, 2009). As Norgaard (2003) pointed out, information literacy isn’t simply an act of being able to find a piece of information online. Rather the social context—or activity system—in which that information is produced must also be understood and evaluated. Moreover, the research process exists in a larger process of writing (Elmborg, 2003). Effective research requires revision, thinking through, and reflection (Jacobs & Jacobs, 2009).

To address this problem, we partnered with the libraries to develop a process that abandoned the talking-head, skills-based workshop in favor of a more authentic process. In 2009 two things happened: (1) a source-based writing assignment appeared that was not yet the literature review but rather an improved “mutt genre” that was based on Kenneth Bruffee’s (1993) source synthesis assignment, which had the virtue of being self-directed and of teaching students how to create and transfer knowledge; and (2) the writing program began a formal collaboration with Penn’s undergraduate library. The first move was the fall 2009 introduction of a program-wide writing assignment that was designed to allow students to legitimately engage in a disciplinary discourse community. Each writing seminar was to be designed around a different research text—an accessible but well-cited scholarly monograph. In the various seminars, students would read the text and its bibliography. The introduction of the research text to the seminar allowed the undergraduate, primarily freshman, apprentice scholar to quickly engage in a scholarly conversation, as defined within that research text, and also understand the network of citations within that text. Students would then use the research text and one of its citations to begin a project of synthesis. Those first two sources—the research text and one of its sources—were the beginning of their writing assignment. This helped students define their own topic of research. It also gave them a real and credible starting point for the research and writing process. The resultant paper, a complex synthesis, served as a major component of their semester’s writing portfolio.

In order to write this explanatory paper, students needed to acquire a series of information literacy skills. At the most basic level, they had to be able to read and locate bibliographic references as well as engage in keyword searching. Those two processes, however, were multilayered in terms of the writing and information skills required. Students had to learn how to read a citation, evaluate source
credibility, understand why scholars use certain kinds of sources as evidence (e.g., specialist vs. nonspecialist texts), citation chase, and generate discipline-appropriate keywords. They also had to learn how to cite the source within the appropriate disciplinary context, integrate those sources effectively into their writing, and treat them ethically. At the same time, students needed to learn how to write while researching, since the synthesis of these scholarly sources was an intellectually demanding process.

In the summer of 2009, the second move was made in which the writing program began to partner with Penn’s undergraduate library to introduce library research into the writing seminars. Each writing seminar was paired with a related subject librarian. Prior to the semester’s start, librarians and faculty were asked to meet to discuss the research text and the kinds of sources the student might need to engage in. Many of the subject librarians read the seminar’s research text and became familiar with its bibliography. Like other library-writing program collaborations (e.g., Jacobs & Jacobs, 2009), writing faculty had productive discussions among themselves and with the librarians about what constituted a research source within their fields. Some working in new media, for example, had to deal with issues of recency and outdated controlled vocabulary. Others needed to understand when primary sources were appropriate and when they were not.

As a result of the partnership, the Critical Writing Program and the undergraduate library produced a series of instructional artifacts and sessions to support students and writing faculty. The most successful was having librarians attend all seminars each term in order to provide a hands-on library research workshop. Librarians, in cooperation with the writing program, developed an instructional script. Early in the student’s research process, the librarian was invited to the class. Each librarian was asked to spend 15 to 20 minutes providing a targeted review of some of the primary multidisciplinary databases as well as a few subject-specific resources available to students. Many librarians used one of the student’s research topics as a way to model a search process. In successful sessions, librarians were often able to show the students the differences between the large-scale Google Scholar searches versus the results list in a PsychInfo search. Students were asked to follow along with the search, getting some hands-on experience with the databases. The next 60 minutes were dedicated to workshop time when students did their own searching and the librarian was available for consultation and brainstorming, as well as for when students got stuck. The librarians also produced customized online library guides for each class. This resource included links to the primary multidisciplinary and subject-specific databases students would be expected to use in the class, tips on how to read a citation, and a walk-through on how to use the library to find known citations. Finally, the class library session and online library guide were meant to create a personal connection between the student and librarian. The online guide provided a photo of the librarian as well as his or her direct contact information. Students were encouraged by the librarian and many of the faculty to follow up with the class librarian throughout the course of their research.

The next curricular move was in the fall of 2015 when the writing program made the switch to teaching authentic writing genres.
Instead of a complex synthesis paper, students are now asked to write small-scale, stand-alone scholarly literature reviews. From a writing studies perspective, this curricular move brought an end to the “student research paper” and invited students to engage in a real-world writing genre. From an information literacy perspective, the literature review posed some similar challenges for students’ information skills—search, credibility, documentation. However, the literature review assignment did something that the previous synthesis paper did not. It forced students and faculty (and, perhaps, the librarians) to more authentically grapple with the scholarly conversations that comprise academic discourse communities. The literature review assignment starts in a similar way to the previous complex synthesis assignment: the research text was the basis and from there students were to find sources, define a field of research, and write a review of that field. The challenge for students and faculty has been scaling and understanding what comprises a field of research. Students have to start drawing lines and mapping fields of inquiry by understanding some of the disciplinary connections (and disconnects) within those inquiry fields. This pushes students to think beyond ACRL’s scholarly conversations and strategic searching. They can’t just search for some keywords. They have to learn about scholarly timelines and understand the contours of a research inquiry over time. They have to make decisions about validity, whether or not scholars in different research fields are really talking about the same thing (and therefore would be contained in the same literature review). They also have to make decisions about scale, how generalizable a statement they can make when they have to operate within a necessarily limited source set.

Through our eight-year partnership, we have clarified many of the goals and outcomes in keeping with a commitment to continuous improvement of our curriculum. However, many challenges remain. The curricular structure is the first serious impediment. How do we simulate the messy, recursive practices of source-based writing? Students, whose habits have been formed by “research papers” that they typically binge-write, are (not unlike their instructors and librarians) likely to view the workshop as the day when they find the sources for their projects. Yet experts know that such a lockstep, linear approach, such a belief in tidy stages, are an unattainable fantasy. Our literature review is structured as a five-draft process with students meant to integrate their sources as they go along, but some students do the majority of their research in their first drafts, binge-style, while others have brief, undeveloped drafts until the end of the cycle. Most, however, follow the assignment’s suggested path and build in chunks, though some complain that it feels artificial to do so. This is because they are generally not writing bona fide literature reviews. One of our greatest surprises was how difficult it was for all of us—students, instructors, librarians, and writing tutors—to shift from research papers to literature reviews. The negative transfer—which is to say, the problematic application of something one has learned in the past to a current problem—has never been so evident as when we ask students to abandon their well-practiced mutt genre and instead write something that looks suspiciously like that same mutt genre. It typically takes students the entire semester to absorb the difference between a “research paper” and a literature review, which points to
why, perhaps, college graduates have such difficulty adapting to writing in the workplace. Meanwhile, instructors and librarians exhibit textbook “tacit knowledge” behavior when they try to explain the differences between a research paper and a literature review. They know when something isn’t a literature review but is instead a patchwork of paraphrased and direct quotations hitched together by “transitions,” as students are taught to call them, to support a claim. But none of us as yet has developed sufficient language and concepts to help students build a bridge from the research paper to the literature review. Despite a mountain of analogies, examples, and scaffolding, students seem mostly to be experiencing their epiphanies through the old-fashioned means of osmosis, imitation, and trial and error with feedback. However, once they grasp the difference, their understanding of scholarly inquiry blossoms.

Another timing challenge has to do with how (or whether) to keep students involved with their librarians throughout the semester. Anecdotally, freshman usage of the library jumped substantially when our partnership first began; unfortunately we did not think to track it. Our study of knowledge transfer from the writing seminar to other writing situations, now in its fourth year, suggests that students are building upon the topics and research strategies that they learn from their instructors and librarians. In our partner meeting of 2014, some librarians wondered whether we should be concerned that some of our students were continuing to work with the librarians on projects they had commenced in their freshmen seminars, rather than developing interests in new topics. From the point of view of scholarship, the question seemed surprising but points to how common it is to see students as writing a series of papers rather than building knowledge. In the past several years, students have developed sustained scholarly projects that they began during their freshman year writing seminar. After taking a writing seminar on ancient magic, for example, one Penn student went on to develop his research from the class, taking additional coursework, collaborating with faculty in Penn’s Classics department, and ultimately helping to curate a new exhibit at the Penn Museum entitled “Magic in the Ancient World.” Currently he is working on finding and categorizing magic gems, developing new definitions—all of which he intends to include in his senior thesis.

A third issue concerning timing has to do with when to run the library workshops, and how many to run. Visits set early in the semester proved too abstract for students; those set too late felt to them like busywork. We have been experimenting with how to divide the responsibility of teaching information literacy skills, and this in part depends on the research sophistication and experience of the instructor. Our latest approach is to allow instructors and librarians to work out their own schedules. In general, experienced writing instructors introduce students to known-item searching and citation networks. When questions arise that are beyond the instructor’s expertise, they contact their librarian via chat or videocast—thus modeling for students the social activity of research, which is characterized by uncertainty and cooperation—or they invite the librarian to visit the class; sometimes the best solution is for an individual student to meet one-on-one with the librarian. In general, librarians are responsible for teaching students how to generate and strategize about keyword searches and then, together, the librarians and instructors provide students with strategies for evaluating
and narrowing down sources. Many of our writing instructors have observed that these sessions have over the years substantially advanced their own library research skills; in turn, librarians remark that what they learn from working with instructors and students in these semester-long relationships illuminates the complexities of teaching source-based writing. Less experienced instructors often invite librarians back for second and third class visits, underscoring the centrality and expertise of librarians in the research enterprise. In many cases, librarians develop customized materials for each of their classes, and together the instructor and librarian for a given class may come up with a range of extracurricular activities, such as trips to special collections. This structure allows instructors to remain the primary educator when it comes to citation, credibility, and plagiarism in their fields, while also introducing students to librarians as expert researchers and problem-solvers to whom they can turn throughout their academic careers.

Without doubt, the greatest challenge for all of us is that old habits die hard. Some instructors and librarians are deeply averse to the risk of not having the answers, even though uncertainty and commitment to finding answers are at the very heart of research and thus contain the richest lessons for novices. Some librarians have been doing “one-shot” library sessions for years; and of course most of our faculty have been audiences as well as arrangers of such workshops. For a few years we asked instructors to write brief transcriptions of the visits so that we could get a sense of the kinds of questions and problem-solving activities that took place during the hands-on sessions. Perusing a mound of these transcripts in an effort to gather data for this article, we were astonished to see how instructor after instructor described in great detail the first 10 or 15 scripted minutes of the workshop—during which librarians uniformly discussed such things as hours, services, features of the library website—and then wrote almost nothing about the 30 minutes of hands-on activities, reducing this to a sentence or two about how “they helped students with their questions for the remainder of the session,” a testament to how teaching is still trapped in the “banking concept” of education, in which the key activity of teaching is to insert factoids into the heads of students, rather than actively engage them in authentic learning experiences (Freire, 2000).

Some librarians do not relish the chaos and gregariousness that characterize the active learning workshops; and some instructors do not like handing their classroom and authority over to the librarian. The desire on both sides to formalize the interaction, to (re) turn it to a one-shot visit with a couple of prefabricated exercises and a Q&A, is seductively familiar and predictable. Yet all agree that, when things fall into place, the workshop is an extraordinarily rich learning environment. The instructor and librarian have conferred with each other prior to the workshop; often the librarian has read the texts assigned to students; the students have come to the class ready to commence or advance their research; and as students in the workshop begin to encounter roadblocks, from the simple (“How do I tell if this is an article or a chapter in a book?”) to the complex (“How do I know if this is a good source for the literature review?”), it all comes together, not only the process, but the attitude (Edelson, 1998). Everyone is listening, thinking, attempting to help each other out; there is cooperation
and competition and commitment, the stuff that makes research pleasurable and engaging. Moreover, the librarian and instructor together see what students face as novice researchers; and students are able to see how experts, their librarian and their instructor, tackle research problems. Sometimes other students chime in who have already begun their research and encountered (and in some cases solved) that very problem. Each such moment is an initiation into the authentic practices and social life of research. While we know that students are actively engaging in sophisticated IL and writing skills, and we know that instructors and librarians are informing each other’s approaches to research and writing, we are only beginning to explore how our collaboration may contribute to our combined fields and to the pedagogical complexity of source-based writing. It remains to be seen whether this emphasis on authentic learning experience will prove fruitful. For now, it appears to be pointing us in useful directions.

REFERENCES


