Teaching Information Literacy and Writing Studies
Grace Veach

Published by Purdue University Press

Veach, Grace.
Teaching Information Literacy and Writing Studies: Volume 1, First-Year Composition Courses.
Purdue University Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/62529.

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CHAPTER 5

PRIORITIZING ACADEMIC INQUIRY IN THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

*Information Literacy and Writing Studies in Collaboration*

Alanna Frost
Lacy Marschalk
David Cook
Michael Manasco
with Gaines Hubbell
The argument made transparent in Andrea Baer’s (2016) recent book, *Information Literacy and Writing Studies in Conversation*, frames the project we describe in this chapter. We, an instructional reference librarian, the campus coordinator of student research, and two English Department faculty, recently collaborated on a first-year experience (FYE) curriculum that specifically drew from information literacy (IL) and writing studies (WS) work that articulates the dispositions demanded of a curious student to discern contextually appropriate information and credible authority, craft a written argument, and demonstrate adherence to a dynamic academic discourse community. Asked to plan the curriculum for an Honors FYE course, we chose to contribute what we each knew best. Heeding the arguments of Baer (2016) and those scholars who preceded her (Braunstein, Tobery, & Gocsik, 2016; Norgaard, 2003, 2004; Simmons, 2005), we chose to ground our curriculum in academic inquiry and designed a semester-long project that asked students to gather their own primary and diverse secondary information to answer the question “What advice would you give to first-year students?”

We were supported in our collaboration by scholars like Rolf Norgaard (2003) and Michelle H. Simmons (2005), who argue for an interdisciplinary approach to teaching information literacy. Baer (2016) specifically cites connections between the position statements of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) as evidence of collaborative exigencies, arguing that they “illustrate that writing and information literacy education must be collaborative efforts that are pursued within university writing programs” (p. 87). We were further supported by IL and WS scholars’ resistance to perceptions of library instruction and composition as the “places” where one learns the rules for the search and the writing, respectively. Baer (2016) refers to Norgaard’s (2003) oft-cited call to challenge the “one-stop shop” concept in her assertion that the “once and done” model itself perpetuates “a perception of information literacy as being simply about search mechanics” (p. 5) and “writing as a mechanical and simple skill” (p. 8). Importantly, we found support undergirding much current IL and WS research, which works to make transparent the complexity of research and writing and to encourage pedagogies that reflect the complexity of information, discourse, genre, and inquiry. As we report in this chapter, our findings from our preliminary data analysis support our collaborative efforts. Finally, and importantly, we were supported materially, as the FYE course itself is compensated with a stipend. Thus, in this chapter, we describe the exigencies for this collaboration and describe our process and the curriculum we designed; additionally, to offer a model for investigating this partnership, we outline our methods for assessing our curriculum and discuss preliminary findings from a small sample of interview participants. We feel that our experiences and those we anecdotally describe of our students suggest the merits of such an institutional partnership.

**THE COLLABORATION**

At our public research university, all incoming first-year students are required to take a one-credit FYE course. The year before our collaboration began, each college, including the Honors College, was tasked with
individualizing the FYE course to meet the needs of students in their majors. The first iteration of the Honors College FYE had students in split classes with their honors and home college cohorts. So they met in small honors sections for part of the time and in large lecture-style sessions with, for example, the College of Engineering part of the time. Although this sort of dual enrollment had some merits, it made it difficult to build community—one of the most important objectives of FYE—and resulted in some information being repeated between colleges while other information was missed entirely.

Thus, after the inaugural semester, the Honors College dean met with FYE faculty to discuss the future of the course, and the decision was made to develop a curriculum specifically geared toward the needs of all honors students. Rather than dividing their time, the students would spend the entire semester with their Honors College peers and Honors FYE instructor. The four of us, all experienced FYE instructors, answered the dean’s request for a committee to develop this new curriculum.

We decided to design the course around a semester-long group research project, which would help foster community while also allowing for the teaching and reinforcement of information literacy and academic writing. These skills are particularly important to honors students, who are required to take a first-year English seminar (EH 105) and who must complete a capstone project near the end of their undergraduate studies. Thus, we began by imagining how best to foster student engagement with the complexity that is academic inquiry. Acknowledgment of this complexity, we feel, cements arguments for IL and WS collaborations and counters pedagogical philosophies of one-time inoculations. In her apt summary of IL and WS scholarship, Baer (2016) asserts that this work “reflects how critical inquiry and knowledge creation are at the heart of both composing and information practices” (p. 11). We decided to pay particular attention to the ACRL and WPA framework statements, which work to make transparent the practices and dispositions of researchers’ complex practices. Specifically, we heeded Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle (2007), who argue that conducting primary research is particularly important to “clarify for students the nature of scholarly writing” (p. 562). Finally, when planning assignments, we considered scholars such as Jody Shipka (2005), who argue that students should be encouraged to present arguments using the most appropriate media and modes to persuade an audience.

We saw an opportunity to counter the “one and done” measure of library instruction typically found in FYE and composition and to support the research and writing that students produce in EH 105. EH 105, which is taken in the same semester as FYE, was instituted in part because many honors students were placing out of English Composition I and II but were underprepared for the research and writing requirements of their upper-level courses and especially for the capstone project. By having two English department faculty members, who also teach EH 105, on a committee with research and information literacy specialists, we were able to address the needs of both the composition and honors programs and bring them together in this new FYE curriculum. What we felt the FYE course could be, in conjunction with EH 105, was a dual support system for students’ first introductory forays into academic inquiry—into becoming meaning-makers.
THE CURRICULUM

In order to be ready for a fall 2016 launch date, we began meeting in February 2016, and we met as often as once a week, even during the summer. From the beginning, our committee wanted to make the entire course a research “experience” rather than just several interconnected classes that happened to talk “about” research. Rather than viewing the tenets of information literacy as afterthought or supplementary content, we took advantage of this opportunity to create an inquiry-driven, exploratory course that would allow our students to become more information literate by engaging in research built around the six core frames for information literacy established by the ACRL. The Framework’s (2016) emphasis on information literacy concepts and abilities that empower students “as consumers and creators of information who can participate successfully in collaborative spaces” was especially attractive to our committee, as was the flexibility of the system. The frames are broad enough to capture the general, translatable concepts of research skills that a student of any discipline should hone, but also interconnected and structured enough to maintain a coherent and somewhat directed experience. As we examined the ACRL Framework, the fourth frame, Research as Inquiry, became our overall mantra and the thematic center of our design process.

At the same time, because we were designing an FYE course and not an “introduction to information literacy,” there were specific topics that needed to be integrated into our curriculum and program objectives unique to our institution that needed to be met. Collaborative learning is strongly encouraged at our university, especially in FYE, so we knew student collaboration and community building had to be at the heart of our curriculum. We also knew the course needed to address certain academic/life skills, such as time management, and to underscore the Honors College’s degree requirements, advising process, thesis/capstone project, and undergraduate research opportunities. To meet all of these objectives, we designed a semester-long group project that focused on a research question commonly found in FYE curricula: “What advice would you give to incoming first-year students?” Rather than posing this question at the end of the term, though, we wanted students to reflect on this question from day one, work together to develop an evolving thesis based on personal and experiential data, locate and evaluate sources to support their findings, and creatively present their conclusions at the end of the semester. We found that this approach served the same purpose as Shipka’s (2005) “task-based multimodal framework” in that it “offer[ed] students opportunities to engage with course materials that are, at once, personally and socially relevant and intellectually rigorous” (p. 284).

On the first day of class, students were assigned the course project, placed into groups, and given a collaborative folder in Google Drive to serve as their team’s information repository and workspace throughout the semester. The folder gave the students a chance to engage with one another in a way that loosely invoked the second ACRL frame, Information Creation as a Process. While this frame was not a primary focal point when designing the course, developing a collaborative, customized library of resources allowed the students to become aware of the value of having different methods of information dissemination for multiple purposes at their disposal, as implied in one of Frame 2’s Dispositions. While their group members had
permissions to edit and add to this folder, the other groups in class had “viewing” privileges, which encouraged students to look outside their own experiential data in the research process. For example, one of the smaller projects assigned at the beginning of the term asked the groups to adopt one of six time management models for a week. In the second week, the groups modified the model to better suit their needs, and in the third week they presented their findings to the class. The visual artifacts they generated along the way—including scans of planner pages, screenshots of calendar applications, and self-designed spreadsheets and time management tools—were placed in their folders, where this information could be used by other groups interested in advising future first-year students on the importance of time management. The time management module, along with a later assignment about academic advising and degree planning, allowed the students a means of developing and sharing a rudimentary understanding of experiential and primary data early in the semester. While we addressed primary data more thoroughly later in the course, these “data collection” activities were helpful in demonstrating the impact of their own observations in the latter stages of the research process.

These early modules were then followed by six weeks of intensive information literacy training; the “one-and-done” library session from previous years was reconceived and expanded into three instructional sessions, each followed by a praxis week. The research sessions were designed in a way that not only taught basic navigation skills of our library resources but also enabled and empowered the students to seek out, navigate, and evaluate resources on the Web. In the first session, students were brought to the library for a librarian-led introduction to basic information literacy concepts, including differentiating between popular and scholarly content and giving attribution to others’ ideas. This session, which included an introduction to library resources and the concept of information “paywalls,” also encouraged the students to examine their own information privilege as university affiliates with access to expensive electronic databases. The second IL session, led by the FYE instructor using librarian-designed materials, explored concepts related to the ACRL’s first, fifth, and sixth frames: Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, Scholarship as Conversation, and Searching as Strategic Exploration. Our committee found these frames most useful in their emphasis on encouraging students to question traditional notions of information “authority,” to view themselves as researchers entering into a scholarly conversation, and to consider thoughtfully matching the correct resource with the appropriate information need. The third IL session, also taught by the FYE instructor and entitled “Thinking Outside the Journal,” challenged students to consider sources outside of the curated “library” experience, including the use of think tank reports and raw data sets. This session also afforded the opportunity to further discuss the concept of primary data and to consider how students’ own documented experiences fit in thus far in the context of academic conversation.

By the end of this inquiry-focused research project, the groups had been exposed to a blend of peer-supplied experiential data, traditional academic sources, and a variety of public-domain information types. The Framework’s flexibility and concept-driven design philosophies provided our committee with enough structure to implement the
research-focused course we had envisioned. It was also invaluable in framing the acquisition and refinement of research skills in the context of core, threshold information literacy concepts that our interdisciplinary group of honors students could apply beyond the First-Year Experience.

**METHOD**

In addition to designing the course, we were interested in measuring its success. To see where students stood in terms of a baseline understanding of information literacy and its applications in conducting research, a pre- and postsemester survey was sent to all eligible first-year composition students. Institutional review board (IRB) approval was applied for and granted by the university’s IRB committee. The student populations were both honors and nonhonors students. Honors students participated in the Honors First-Year Experience (FYE) curriculum and were enrolled in English composition for honors students (EH 105). Nonhonors students participated in the FYE curriculum designed by the college in which they majored and were enrolled in English composition 1 or 2 (EH 101S, EH 101, or EH 102). The surveys were made up of both Likert questions to gauge students’ feelings about research and multiple-choice questions to assess their understanding of key concepts. The surveys were strictly voluntary, and unfortunately we did not get productive response rates. We were, however, able to use convenience sampling to recruit a small number (N = 14) of interview participants (both honors and nonhonors). The students were sent an e-mail inviting them to participate in the interview, and if they expressed interest in participating, a member of the research team answered any questions they had about participation and arranged the interview. In order to reduce the perception that the students’ grades depended upon participation or specific interview responses, each student was interviewed by a researcher who was not their instructor.

For the purposes of this chapter, we offer a discussion of the themes that emerged from our honors students’ pre- and postsemester interviews. Our sample size here, too, is small (N = 6), but our purpose was to explore methods of qualifying students’ information literacy and to create a dialogue with subjects about how they conduct research and how their research process evolved over the course of the semester. We find, at least anecdotally, that we can offer results in these specific terms.

**PRESEMESTER INTERVIEWS: RESEARCH = SEARCHING THE INTERNET AND WRITING**

The first interviews took place early in the semester before the FYE information literacy sessions and before the EH 105 research essay was written. We crafted presemester questions that would help us gauge the participants’ understanding of the research process at the outset of their university careers. We were curious about their existing knowledge of academic research and what kinds of research projects—if any—they had been assigned in high school. Essentially, we wanted a baseline of participants’ conceptual frameworks for approaching an assignment, engaging with scholarship, and reporting their findings. As such, we asked students to explain their research process and then prompted them...
to discuss that process in terms of a particular project. Finally, we asked how they felt about conducting research. The themes that emerged from our questions indicate that, for these participants, “research” specifically indicated searching for source material and producing a document.

What we feel that the themes from our presemester interviews touch on are the participants’ narrow or limited understanding of research. Our initial interviews offered participants limited time to explain their processes, but we were most interested in investigating students’ “sense” of their own research concepts. Thus, in terms of our conclusion of the limits of that “sense,” participants’ explanations of the research process revealed that, for these six students, “research” is the search for information, and for five of the participants, “research” is the search and the written product. Indeed, the immediate response of five of the six participants to our first question, “Describe your research process,” was to explain their information-searching strategies. Four of those participants specifically detailed the search engines they use (e.g., conduct “a basic Google search”) or strategies they had been taught (e.g., “look for EDUs”). The one participant who did not directly complete the “process” question with her Internet-search practices responded with the second most common concept that “research is the written product.” As she offered, “First I try to formulate where I am going to be coming from. What my thesis will be, roughly, and what the course of the essay will take, so introduction and conclusion and the research that I do will make up the body paragraphs.” A second participant offered a similar “outlining” process in her interview; a third followed her discussion of her Internet search with a very specific, “Then of course you would use the MLA citation and all that, and quote your references throughout your paper.”

These preliminary presemester themes, the students’ sentiment that research equals searching the Internet and writing, cohere directly with the work that both librarian and composition instructors prepare to do with first-year students. They position our understanding of “where students are” in terms of an understanding of research that equates it with information gathering and reporting. That students are immersed in “find-report” research concepts makes some sense. Indeed, as we assert in the introduction to this chapter, much of the scholarship of both IL and WS is framed by the exigency that we remain mired in public and educational views of library-pedagogy and the composition program as the “one-stop shop” for, respectively, “research” and “writing” skills acquisition. We can suspect, then, that the students we have interviewed have experienced library and writing instruction that coheres with the very perceptions IL and WS are engaged in challenging.

But of course, ultimately, we are asking students to construct their own meaning from vastly complex information and by employing complex rhetorical practices. We want first-year students to engage in this complexity of meaning making and not simply complete the find-report process they may imagine. Constructing knowledge, making one’s own meaning from one’s own and others’ data and arguments, frames all the work we reviewed for this chapter. As Baer (2016) asserts, the goal of the researcher’s “writing and source-based research” is “ultimately communication about the relationship between one’s own ideas and those presented by others” (p. 4). In the introduction to the ACRL Framework,
its creators offer that “[s]tudents have a greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge” (ACRL intro), and as Simmons (2005) argues, “facilitating students’ understanding that they can be participants in scholarly conversations encourages them to think of research not as a task of collecting information but instead as a task of constructing meaning [emphasis added]” (p. 299). In her research on the differing epistemological stances of student and experienced academic writers, Ellen Barton (1993) refers to the work of Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalito (1983), who found that students’ writing involves “knowledge-telling” while experienced academic writing involves “knowledge-making” (p. 765). This work has informed our understanding of our participants’ reflections on their research process. At least preliminarily, these students’ find-report responses support a knowledge-telling view of research.

**POSTSEMESTER INTERVIEW: RESEARCH = CRITICAL SEARCH, AND WRITING = KNOWLEDGE MAKING**

The second interview took place at the end of the semester, and participants were asked to bring their research essays to the interview and to explain the research processes they used to complete the essays. In our postsemester interviews, we worked to determine how students’ research concepts had changed over the course of the semester and as they completed their final honors composition essays. We asked them how they approached the research for this project; how they found, selected, and/or rejected material; and finally, how they felt their understanding of research had changed. The themes that emerged from these second interviews indicate that their research, in terms of the search for information, had become more critical, and they were beginning to understand the complex knowledge-making nature of research.

When the students described the process they engaged to research their final essays, we found that participants described search strategies more critical than their presemester references to an Internet search. Students demonstrated their critical strategies by, in five of six cases, referring to productive library-based and public databases and by making reference to engaging in an iterative process of research. Students expressed confidence in using library-supported tools and resources, such as our university’s OneSearch discovery service, as a productive resource for academic articles or JSTOR for literary criticism specifically (mentioned by three of six). Further, four of six students made references to the iterative nature of their research. For these students, their research process seems to have evolved from simply finding materials to support a static argument. One student explained that he now understood that he didn’t need to find material that precisely matched his own topic. He explained that his interest in “self and other” in a novel could be explored by exhausting a search on “the self and other in Ender’s Game” and then by searching for material on “self and other” and “Ender’s Game” separately and applying the concepts to support his original claims. Another student, working on an ethnographic study of a theater performance, explained the search adjustment she engaged during her process:
First, I just started searching ethnographic theater, kind of just broad, kind of just before I started doing my actual research. So I was finding articles that were geared towards my studying actors rather than the student community, so I started off with those, and then after I’d done my primary research, I went back and looked for more articles that were more focused on autoethnography and based on student collaboration.

In these cases, students’ find-report processes had clearly been complicated by their first-semester’s research.

Most interestingly, in five of six cases, the students’ understanding of research, in terms of reporting their own findings, seems to have evolved from reporting the information of others into a process of making their own arguments. In terms of the knowledge construction our curriculum was meant to facilitate, five of six students described their processes and what they had learned in terms that indicated their understanding of knowledge-making, as opposed to knowledge-telling. Our final question, about how their research had evolved, elicited interesting responses in this regard. One response hinted about an evolution to a knowledge-making philosophy: “I had to do most of the connections and the research, instead of branching my points off of other people’s research,” while another more directly indicated this growth: “I think it’s more shifted from that view of taking what already exists and summarizing into more of a using what already exists to support a new idea.”

In at least two cases, engagement with the variety of information-gathering we asked of students in the FYE curriculum, and specifically primary data, seems to have influenced their different research perspectives. One student referred to a survey he and his FYE team distributed to their friends: “it wasn’t a huge sample size, but how people with larger sample sizes, the work they have to do to comb through all that data and find what they want, it was definitely interesting to see that side of it, rather than just the . . . [l]ook at a source and pull up some stuff.” Finally, another student directly cited her primary research work: “I guess research that I’ve done in the past, I haven’t been able to do primary research. It’s all been just taking secondary resources and pulling them together to kind of recite things that have already been said. But then I got to look at secondary resources and then provide my own research as well. So that was cool.” These students relate a research process clearly more complex than that which they articulated at the outset of the semester.

**CONCLUSION**

In their references to the iterative and knowledge-making nature of research, four of six honors students demonstrated that their research concepts were more complex than at the outset of the semester, when they seemed to equate research with a static research-report process. We are excited by these cursory findings. We feel the process we engaged in, of collaboratively planning the FYE curriculum to employ an inquiry frame and of investigating our students’ progress, offers evidence that the FYE intervention can only reinforce what the composition programs do and, further, that the collaborative efforts of library and composition faculty offer a particularly salient relationship in terms of students’ sustained education in academic inquiry.
REFERENCES


