CHAPTER 22

ADDRESSING THE SYMPTOMS

Deep Collaboration for Interrogating Differences in Professional Assumptions

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Writing faculty and librarians often collaborate with one another in the teaching of research in first-year writing (FYW). In doing so, they share a common aim, namely helping first-year students develop as researchers so that they may effectively incorporate their research into their learning and writing. Trained professionally with respect to research practice, writing faculty and librarians respectively carry with them certain theoretical and operating assumptions about research—what it is, what it involves, how it works, how to pursue it most effectively, and so forth. These professional working assumptions about research inevitably have implications for how research is taught to first-year students.

Despite differentiation and debate, it is nevertheless possible to get some sense of how those who work in writing studies and information literacy understand research from their respective recent professional statements. The sense one gets initially is that librarians and FYW faculty share several aims and interests. As just one example, the Association of College Research Libraries’ (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (IL Framework; ACRL, 2015) includes the frame Research as Inquiry, which details knowledge practices in terms familiar to writing faculty: identify gaps or conflicts in information, determine the appropriate scope of a project, ask good questions, determine the appropriate scope of a project, ask good questions, analyze and interpret the work of others in order to draw reasonable conclusions, and organize and synthesize ideas and sources (p. 9). In fact, these practices are similar to what the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) articulates as certain outcomes and experiences in its WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (Outcomes; CWPA, 2014) and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (Writing Framework; CWPA, 2011) (see in particular the outcomes “Critical Thinking,” p. 7, and “Writing Processes,” p. 8). It comes as no surprise that a reading of the professional statements of writing faculty and librarians reveals some common ground.1

Yet careful reading of the statements also reveals telling differences that reflect divergent professional assumptions. This kind of reading is known as “symptomatic” reading in the traditions of English studies. Symptomatic reading may be especially familiar to writing faculty through the work of Kathleen McCormick, who promotes this reading practice among others within the undergraduate writing classroom. She encourages students to read symptomatically in order to “look beyond the literal message of any kind of text” and to explore the “tensions of a culture” (2003, p. 40). Similarly, symptomatic reading is employed here to better understand the possible disciplinary presuppositions of writing faculty in particular—that is, what convictions regarding research that writing faculty tend to adhere to in their professional identities and what blind spots they potentially suffer. The more aware writing faculty are of the ways their discipline may shape their understanding of research and research instruction, the more conscientious and reflective they can be as teachers and as collaborators.

In particular, professional self-awareness of difference can make evident the need for collaboration with librarians, both in terms of what writing faculty have to offer as well as what they have to learn. Of course, in most universities collaboration at some level is already typical; writing faculty regularly share their assignments with librarians, schedule research instruction for their courses, and so forth. What we propose here, however, is “deep collaboration” among writing
faculty and librarians, the kind of collaboration in which professional ideological disjuncts might surface and be meaningfully discussed. Deep collaboration is unlikely to happen when communication is superficial (e.g., scheduling) or unidirectional (e.g., sharing an assignment without asking for feedback). Opportunities for deep collaboration can be time- and planning-intensive, yet they are vital if we are to meaningfully instruct students as researchers and writers without crossing purposes with one another.

One opportunity for deep collaboration occurs when writing faculty and librarians research and write with one another, something for which librarians have been calling for some time now (see, e.g., Rabinowitz, 2000). This chapter describes what we learned from one such ongoing research and writing collaboration. By reading and coding first-year student writing together, we “address the symptoms” by meaningfully interrogating the kinds of professional differences evident in our professional statements. Our work is deeply collaborative; it has provided us with opportunities to reconsider our professional assumptions and, on this basis, to change the ways we teach research in FYW.

DIVULGING THE DIFFERENCES: A SYMPTOMATIC READING OF THE WRITING FRAMEWORK AND OUTCOMES

What becomes clear in a symptomatic reading of the professional statements of writing faculty is that they highly value the activities of reading and writing in the research process. In the Outcomes (CWPA, 2014), for example, sense-making with respect to information is enacted in reading and writing; the outcome “critical thinking” occurs when students analyze, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate as they read and compose. The Writing Framework (CWPA, 2011) is even more specific in highlighting the ways in which a variety of reading and writing experiences can prepare students for college-level critical thinking: reading texts sympathetically and critically; writing in order to summarize, analyze, interpret, critique, respond, and synthesize; and writing so as to “put the writer’s ideas in conversation with a text’s” (p. 7). Underlying these statements are the professional convictions that information is materially, textually situated and that students think about and make meaning of information by working with texts.

However, another “symptom” is less a conviction than an oversight. Even while describing the activities of reading and writing with some nuance, the disciplinary statements of writing studies do not seem to acknowledge other complexities of the research process beyond the finding and evaluating of sources. The Outcomes (CWPA, 2014) do recognize that “composing processes” (pp. 146–147) involve many steps (including research) and are often nonlinear and require flexibility. Yet the term “research” seems to be employed in the sense of finding possible sources rather than the several ways librarians understand researchers as working conceptually with information (described above). “Research” first appears as part of the “critical thinking” outcome; it modifies the kind of material the student is to “[l]ocate and evaluate,” categorized as “primary and secondary research materials” (p. 146). Examples are provided, including both kinds of sources (“journal articles and essays, books . . . and internet
sources”) as well as resources for finding sources (“scholarly and professionally established and maintained databases or archives, and informal electronic networks”) (p. 146).

“Research” next appears as a verb, as part of “composing processes.” Yet here again, “research” is narrowly employed, this time not as a kind of material to be found but as an act of finding potentially recurring at different times: “a writer may research a topic before drafting, then conduct additional research while revising or after consulting a colleague” (p. 146). In both instances when “research” is discussed as part of FYW, it is associated with just two activities—finding and evaluating.

It is strange, too, how the Outcomes (CWPA, 2014) speak to the process of evaluating research materials, as decontextualized from otherwise rhetorically rich processes of reading and writing. The description of evaluation occurs as a heuristic chain of familiar means of assessment, bookended (to highlight? as a kind of afterthought?) by parentheses: “evaluate (for credibility, sufficiency, accuracy, timeliness, bias and so on)” (p. 146). The presentation represents the list as a kind of checklist for making an objective determination of the quality of a source in and of itself, albeit an open-ended one. There is no expressed concern for the source’s context—its author’s purposes, its audience, what is trying to be achieved—nor for the rhetorical situation of the student writer. Does the author’s research project involve an overview of an issue for a general audience to be published as a blog? Dispute a definition used by scholars as part of an academic research paper? Analyze a trend in the rhetoric or representation of an issue? The contextual attributes of the source and of the writer’s research project surely have implications for what criteria for source evaluation like “credibility,” “sufficiency,” or “bias” mean, yet context is nowhere acknowledged here. The decontextualization of evaluative criteria is particularly unexpected given the Outcomes’ earlier emphases on the rhetorical with respect to practices of reading and writing.

These assumptions or symptoms—prioritizing texts and textual practices, reducing research to locating and evaluating research materials, and decontextualizing source evaluation—are highlighted not merely in order to celebrate or critique the orientation of writing studies with respect to research and its instruction. These assumptions inform our understanding and our instructional practices as writing faculty. They also make the “one-shot” library session make sense to writing faculty who otherwise protest that writing proficiency is not acquired from the “one-shot” experience of FYW. To share these understandings or to challenge them in order to enrich our mutual research instruction involves the kind of conceptual work characteristic of deep collaboration.

**RECONSIDERING PROFESSIONAL ASSUMPTIONS, CHANGING TEACHING**

**Complexifying Processes of Writing and Research**

Any writing faculty will be familiar with the processes of writing—for example, brainstorming and prewriting, drafting, peer review, revision, editing and polishing. And in our professional and personal lives, we engage regularly with the processes of research. Yet we may not be as aware of those
research processes, or as readily able to articulate those processes to ourselves and our students. There exists longstanding scholarship in our field conceptualizing and examining students’ processes of research and writing—for example, certain read-to-write studies (see, e.g., Nelson, 1992) and more recently a focus on “writing information literacy” (D’Angelo, Jamieson, Maid, & Walker, 2016; Norgaard, 2003). Even so, as demonstrated in the reading of the Outcomes (CWPA, 2014) above, there can be a tendency on the part of writing faculty to reduce the complexities of the research process to finding and evaluating sources, at least as far as their teaching.

This potentially reductive portrayal of research has implications for how we understand the teaching of research with respect to our first-year students as well the role of librarians with respect to instruction. If research is construed as finding and evaluating sources, then these activities are what we focus on in our classrooms and convey to students to be central to their research processes. We often outsource these activities to librarians, understanding them to be experts in these regards. We give librarians a single session to cover research—often referred to in the literature as the “one shot”—perhaps with a physical tour of the library and, more frequently these days, a virtual tour of the catalogue, databases, and other search tools. In other words, our pedagogies risk depicting research processes as an Easter egg hunt: special, occasional, and all about the finding. Students undoubtedly come to understand themselves and their task as researchers as finding the right sources, that is, research as a high-stakes exercise.

At least two challenges impede a different conceptualization of the research process, a better working relationship with librarians, and more effective research teaching. First, instructional librarians traditionally have seen and represented themselves primarily as experts in information retrieval and evaluation (Fister, 1993). It can be difficult as a result for writing faculty to imagine librarians’ roles differently in order to better coordinate research instruction. Fortunately, the IL Framework (ACRL, 2015) is challenging some of those identity assumptions. Second, as with any discipline, librarians share a professional vocabulary with one another that may not be familiar to others with whom they work (like writing faculty) (Rabinowitz, 2000, p. 344). Despite the richly complex ways that librarians think of research processes, it can be difficult to articulate these complexities and to coordinate with writing faculty in teaching them.

Curious to understand the complexities of the research process and the ways first-year students perceive it in relation to their writing, we collaborated as part of a research team of two campus instructional librarians and four writing faculty. Several hundred students enrolled in FYW in fall 2012 agreed to participate. We asked these students to respond to a “process narrative” prompt, requiring them to imagine how they would go about writing a 1,500-word argument paper including at least three outside sources. Students were given 20 minutes in class to respond to the prompt at the beginning and end of the semester. A simple random sample of participating students yielded dozens of process narratives from the beginning and end of the term. Together as writing faculty and librarians, we collaboratively coded these process narratives, labeling each segment of a narrative that described a distinct activity and eventually developing a common list of codes. This “Code Log” included the everyday practices identified by students in which both writing and research
were potentially involved, what we termed “writing-research” activities.

The coding of the process narratives and the creation of the Code Log was deeply collaborative work because it provided an opportunity to reconsider our assumptions regarding student research (and our teaching of it) as predominantly an activity of finding and evaluating. We certainly recognized these activities as we coded students’ process narratives (as “gather sources” and “evaluate source quality”). However, they were just two among the 15 research-related activities we identified (see Box 22.1), spanning from “understanding an assignment and its tasks” to “integrating sources textually” (Scheidt et al., 2016). This list of activities provided us with a much more expansive view of students’ research processes as well as our responsibilities in teaching and facilitating it. As a negotiated list of common terms, it literally put us as writing faculty and librarians on the same page, providing us with a shared vocabulary for conceptualization and action.

Our research work together also was deeply collaborative in that it prompted us to rethink our teaching and instructional practices. In the following sections we outline changes in our practice.

**From the “One-Shot” to Shared Responsibility**

In revealing the complexities of students’ writing-research processes, the Code Log makes evident the improbability of one-person or one-shot coverage. It highlights the need to effectively scaffold and coordinate research instruction. What writing-research activities should be taught when? As acknowledged in the Outcomes (CWPA, 2014), writing (and research) processes are necessarily nonlinear and flexible. The Code Log activities can be grouped, however, into suggestive sequences of activities such as the one indicated above. These groupings might serve as a guide to organizing multiple classroom sessions with librarians, moving from a single “Find/Evaluate” session to a differentiated sequence: “Determine Task—Explore Context—Navigate/Locate Oneself—Plan/Write.” Because the research process is as recursive as the writing process, the order may be determined by the course.

On our own campus, the Code Log informed how librarians involved with the study revised the research guide for FYW, opting to highlight connections between

**BOX 22.1**

**LEVEL 1 CODES**

**Determining Task, Purposes, and Beliefs**
- understand assignment and its tasks
- find topic of interest
- brainstorm prior knowledge or beliefs

**Exploring Research Contexts**
- gather sources
- process/engage sources
- learn more about chosen topic
- determine what is available

**Navigating and Locating Oneself With Respect to Specific Sources**
- take a position
- locate support for claims
- acknowledge different views or opinions
- evaluate source quality
- determine relevance of sources to topic or purpose

**Planning and Writing**
- organize/arrange/outline
- use sources
- integrate sources textually
writing and research and contextualizing these activities within writing-research processes as a whole. For example, the librarians redesigned the research guide from a focus on finding sources (with tabs like Find Books, Find Articles) to highlighting four key steps in the research and writing process: Brainstorm, Learn, Evaluate, and Integrate. These terms are employed in ways suggested by the students in our study. Students who “brainstorm” are described as considering their purposes for writing as they read around in order to generate a topic. “Learning” involves students deepening their understanding of their chosen topic in order to create contexts for themselves and their readers in their writing. “Evaluate” concerns the credibility of potential sources but also whether they are appropriate for the student’s assignment and purposes. Students “integrate” effectively when they consider how best to employ their research in light of their goals and their writing project (beyond just dropping a quote). These four steps are also described as nonlinear, as with the larger processes of writing and research of which they are part. Each page includes links to search tools, but it also includes information and guidance related to that particular research and writing activity. When librarians introduce students to the research guide for FYW, they ensure that students understand that they may navigate back and forth among the tabs as they conduct their research and writing.

Replacing the “Find Articles” and “Find Books” tabs acknowledges the illogic of the one-shot library session and raises a fundamental question: Who should teach what writing-research activities? Respective professional expertise may lend itself to particular activities: Writing faculty may be somewhat better equipped to instruct in writing planning (organizing/arranging/outlining) and librarians in gathering sources and determining what is available. With many writing-research activities, however, responsibility should probably be shared and coordinated, lest it be overlooked altogether. As just one example, librarians can be terrific partners in teaching students strategies for finding and narrowing their topics (or research questions). (It is after all Carol Kulthau [2004], a library and information sciences researcher, who has most carefully documented the anxious step of focusing a topic and its implications for young researchers.) In this way, the Code Log helps us to reimagine our identities and roles with respect to one another as writing faculty and librarians in the teaching of research.

Relevance and Rhetorical Use

In addition to changing the way both faculty and librarians talked about the processes of writing, the practice of collaborative coding also revealed that both groups valued context when determining the relevance of a particular source. This shared value, however, was belied by the type of instruction that librarians are typically called on to provide. In teaching students to distinguish between scholarly and popular sources, for example, these source types are often pitted against one another, with scholarly sources occupying the high ground of credibility and reliability. However, in our conversations both librarians and FYW faculty agreed that getting students to conflate scholarly sources with credibility should not be the aim of these sessions. Rather, it was more important that students choose sources that were appropriate for the given assignment and the questions they were seeking to address.
Students in our study readily acknowledged that locating sources was an important part of research and could easily enough locate scholarly articles. What they largely overlooked, however, was the importance of determining the relevance of those sources and how to integrate them into their writing. Furthermore, many FYW faculty were structuring their courses around current events and issues for which scholarly articles were not always available or necessarily appropriate. Thus, conversations about evaluating sources shifted from just talking about “scholarly versus popular sources” to a larger discussion around how to determine a source’s value in the given context and for a particular rhetorical purpose.

This shift led to some important changes in vocabulary. Librarians had been teaching the ABCs acronym for source evaluation (Authority, Bias, Currency) and using the term “bias” to discuss how to evaluate the author’s or publication’s viewpoint. FYW faculty considered the term problematic, because first-year students tend to narrowly understand it in relation to media or political bias and then overgeneralize. If an instructor wants to teach that every writer has a perspective and every text positions a reader, “bias” is too blunt an instrument. In the librarians’ redesign of the research guide for FYW, this discovery (as well as the others from this research project) prompted the librarians to design a method for source evaluation called PARTS (Position, Accuracy/Authority, Relevance, Time, Source Type). This new acronym addresses several of the issues discovered during the course of our study. First, by moving from “bias” to the more neutral “position,” it eliminates the negative associations and political bent associated with the former. Second, adding “source type” encourages students to consider genre. Many of the sources students look at are simply words on a screen. By asking them to determine the genre of a source, students must look more deeply at the source and evaluate its characteristics, whom it speaks to and how, as well as its appropriateness in the given context.

That “bias” is delineated in the WPA Outcomes as one criterion for evaluating sources (see above) points again to the ways in which the professional statement articulates research as rhetorical in ways that reading and writing are not. To further integrate source evaluation as a situated and rhetorical activity, both writing faculty and librarians adopted Joseph Bizup’s (2008) BEAM taxonomy for rhetorical use (Background, Exhibit, Argument, or Method). In a shift from intrinsically evaluating or categorizing primary and secondary sources, Bizup argues for an attention to the ways sophisticated writers put sources to rhetorical use: writers rely on background, analyze exhibits, engage arguments, and apply methods. In order to determine relevance, a writer has to evaluate the appropriateness of a source for its rhetorical function. Librarians added an illustration of the BEAM model to the research guide under the “Integrate” tab. When librarians work with students on evaluating sources, students are encouraged to use BEAM to consider a source’s value, not just in and of itself, but for their purposes as writers and the context in which they are writing. For example, librarians sometimes ask students to question how the inclusion (or removal) of a particular quote/paraphrase/summary affects the structural integrity of the entire paper. Many writing faculty have also adopted BEAM as a method for teaching critical reading, research, and writing.
CONCLUSION

Librarians and FYW faculty share a common goal: to enable students to develop as researchers and writers and to apply their abilities across their academic lives and beyond. This goal is, however, frequently undermined by undertheorized mutual conceptualizations of research and shallow collaboration between the two groups. As our symptomatic reading of the disciplinary presuppositions of writing faculty and instructional librarians reveals, the two groups often bring to the partnership different conceptions of the intellectual habits and activities that are fundamental to effective research and writing. As a result, students can encounter unacknowledged gaps and contradictions in their learning about how to navigate and employ the vast amount of information available to them. Given that these gaps and contradictions so frequently materialize in students’ first years of college and sometimes as their only direct instruction in research risks equipping these students with habits and ideas that limit, rather than expand, their research and writing.

The differences in conceptualization are, as librarian Celia Rabinowitz suggests, “differences in culture and language” (2000, 343). Our argument here is that such differences can and should be mitigated by deep collaboration, by work that is undertaken in the spirit of mutual respect, shared interests, and innovation. Deep collaboration between FYW faculty and librarians can, as our study has shown, unearth the complexities of students’ research processes and our teaching of them. At the same time, it can fundamentally alter and deepen working relationships that can inspire further inquiry and improve our teaching efforts. On our campus, deep collaboration has led to greater student-librarian interactions in class, as well as to conscientiously scaffolded and coordinated learning activities between librarians and faculty. Our hope is that these changes in our conceptualization and teaching of research and writing impact our students’ understanding of these as complex yet navigable and engaging activities of inquiry and sharing.

NOTE

1. See, for example, Part I of this volume.

REFERENCES


