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Pairing Texts and Podcasts

Teaching Scholarship as Conversation in First-Year Seminar

This article describes how pairing texts with podcasts helped students in my first-year seminar to enter into scholarly conversations. The experience was noteworthy because, prior to bringing podcasts into the class, my fall 2022 cohort of first-year students went silent during discussions of the assigned readings. Where my usual instructional techniques, such as small group analysis of the text, failed, podcasts succeeded in leading students into lively discussions that contextualized, expanded, and challenged ideas that they had encountered in the academic literature. While this report may be limited to my experience using podcasts in a credit-bearing course to develop understandings of Scholarship as Conversation, I believe that the strategy can be adapted for different scenarios and to advance other information-literacy concepts laid out in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.[1]

Updating the College's Information Literacy Outcome

First, a little background. Rhode Island College is a regional public college and Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) with an enrollment of approximately 5,500 undergraduate and graduate students. As part of its General Education curriculum, the college requires that all first-year students complete two first-year experience courses: first-year writing and first-year seminar. In spring 2022, my colleague Dragan Gill passed a formal proposal through the Committee on General Education to replace the college's old Research Fluency outcome, which was tied to ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, with a new information literacy outcome based on the Framework for first-year experience courses. Years of collaborative planning, piloting, and assessment went into the information literacy outcome proposal. A long-standing partnership between librarians and program directors, who worked together to map four of the six threshold concepts from the Framework to the first-year experience, was critical to its success.[2]

The new information literacy outcome tasked writing faculty with incorporating two of the Framework's threshold concepts, Searching as Strategic Exploration and Authority is Constructed and Contextual, into their first-year writing courses. In the first-year seminar program, faculty would focus on teaching Research as Inquiry and Scholarship as Conversation. As explained in the Scholarship as Conversation frame, "research in scholarly and professional fields is a discursive practice in which ideas are formulated, debated, and weighed against one another over extended periods of time."[3] When learners begin to understand the larger context for scholarship on a topic, they are able to contribute more in places such as

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undergraduate publications, presentations, and guided discussions.[4] To that end, the creators of the college's new information literacy outcome intended for students to complete their first-year seminar having gained an understanding of how scholars contribute to disciplinary knowledge over time and recognizing that an individual scholarly work represents just one perspective on a topic.

After the Committee on General Education approved the new outcome, the faculty teaching first-year experience courses were provided with an information literacy rubric, adapted from the University of the Western Cape Libraries' ACRL Framework Rubric, as well as professional development workshops to create and revise learning activities that support a developmental approach for integrating the designated threshold concepts.[5] In the first-year seminar program, the faculty director worked with librarians to develop a student self-assessment to collect data on their information literacy learning experiences. Implemented for the first time during the fall 2022 semester, the First Year Seminar Questionnaire on Information Literacy included fourteen questions, eight of which were based on concepts from the Scholarship as Conversation frame. For instance, the first part of the questionnaire asked students to rate from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) the statements, "I am able to acknowledge the ideas of others in my work" and "I learned that experts may disagree on a topic." The second part asked students to reflect on those statements in writing. Faculty could administer the questionnaire at any relevant point in the semester and then forward the completed forms to the first-year seminar program director for aggregation and analysis. Copies of completed questionnaires would be returned to faculty in the subsequent semester.

Integrating Scholarship as Conversation into First-Year Seminar

Several years ago, as a way to involve students in critical studies of our library collections, I developed a first-year seminar called "Raid the Collections."[6] The seminar uses collections-based learning methods to engage students in researching an array of materials in the James P. Adams Library. For example, students in the class complete an object biography assignment for which they work together to research and present the life-history of items held in Special Collections. Over several iterations of the course, students have undertaken object biographies of a *Pilon* from Cabo Verde and a College scrapbook created for the Columbian Exposition of 1893. One class conducted an oral history of a library mural painted by Rhode Island College alumnus and professor Heemong Kim. Another class described the contemporary resonance of digitized archival manuscripts pertaining to early-20th-century Black history in Rhode Island. Our course projects generally culminate in a public product, such as a panel discussion, exhibit, or digital publication to share with the college community.

To prepare students for the practical work, I begin each semester with five weeks of assigned reading and discussion focused on disciplinary approaches for studying material collections. The readings are academic: book chapters, journal articles, and pieces on the web. In past years, it has been sufficient to provide students with guidance on how to read an academic text, followed by small group activities that lead us into a larger classroom discussion of its structure, purpose, themes, etc. This sequence has yielded productive conversations and debates on topics ranging from the Kardashians to college archives. After a few weeks of reading and discussion, students were generally ready to move from thinking about methods to applying them in their course projects.

For numerous reasons, dependable techniques for structuring a classroom discussion proved ineffective with first-year students in fall 2022. We labored through strained conversations during our class meetings. It was an awkward situation for everyone and probably played a role in student absences. Equally distressing, without guided discussion of the reading, students weren't learning how to work together to think across different methodologies for studying collections before undertaking their first group project. I was also worried about satisfying the newly devised information literacy outcome for a first-year seminar. As explained earlier, the outcome was based partially on the Scholarship as Conversation frame and due to be assessed by the end of the term. Looking for help, I went to the Cult of Pedagogy website and found Lindsay Patterson's article, "Why You Should Bring Podcasts into Your Classroom."[7] Patterson summarized the learning benefits of podcasts, including the link between exposing students to "listen-only content" and improved reading comprehension. She made a case for using audio rather than visual media to grab students' attention without introducing another screen into the classroom.[8] After weeks of attempting to sustain discussion in a room cluttered with laptops and smartphones, I was enticed by the thought of a screen-free experience in our first-year seminar.

According to the Framework, learners who are developing an understanding of Scholarship as Conversation are able to "suspend judgment on the value of a particular piece of scholarship until the larger context for the scholarly conversation is better understood."[9] Incorporating podcasts into class time would allow me to place the assigned readings into a scholarly context, albeit a limited one, which would enable students to make judgments without the burden of additional reading and work outside of class. It occurred to me that at least one of the assigned readings was published in 1999. If I could find a podcast that delivered a more current and inclusive perspective on the subject, students might be intrigued by the narrative structure and excited to compare the older and more recent interpretations of the material. I also hoped that the students would feel more comfortable proceeding from the conversational medium offered by podcasts into the type of participatory discussion that we expect in a seminar.

For our first listening activity, I asked the class to reread a scholarly article that I had assigned earlier in the semester. Written two decades ago by museum curator Laura Peers, the article traced the history of an embroidered Métis pouch collected by English fur traders and later acquired by the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford.[10] The paper was helpful to students as an example of how to use the object biography method to study material culture in a university collection. During a subsequent class, we listened to "Museums, Beadwork and Indigenous Agency," the first episode of the *Beyond the Binary: Gender, Sexuality, Power* podcast, produced by the Pitt Rivers Museum in 2020. The episode featured an interview with Métis artist and scholar Dan Laurin, who shared his own interpretation of the embroidered pouch, as well as his process for creating the Indigenous floral beadwork designs now exhibited alongside the pouch in the museum.[11]

Before starting the podcast, I instructed students to stow all devices, bring out a pen and paper, and listen carefully to Laurin's interview while bearing in mind Peers' earlier scholarship on the pouch. I asked them to make a note when they detected between the two scholars' points of agreement, points of disagreement, and points of departure. Then we switched off the fluorescent lights and listened to a Bluetooth speaker for 33 glorious minutes. Sounds of Dan Laurin's Michif-language introduction and the host's British pronunciations filled the room. Students were focused and took good notes. When the podcast ended, we started

talking. Our discussion drifted from questions of cultural property to a conversation about the scholars' backgrounds, methods, and contributions to their fields. A music major in the class expressed her appreciation for how creators will look at the same subject from unique aspects to make new works.

In short, the discussion was both enjoyable and supportive of knowledge practices associated with Scholarship as Conversation. These included, for example, learning to join a guided discussion and identifying the "contribution that particular articles, books, and other scholarly pieces make to disciplinary knowledge."[12] More than that, the discussion highlighted the importance of learning to recognize different critical perspectives and why they must change over time to be more representative and inclusive, as exemplified by Laurin's scholarship, which centered Métis knowledge and interpretations of Indigenous material culture. This was exactly why I developed the course in the first place——to delve into our library holdings with a diverse group of first-year students and support them as they researched, reinterpreted, and created their own meanings within the collections.

Because it succeeded the first time, I searched for a podcast when the class read anthropologist Jarrett Martin Drake's article "Blood at the Root" from the *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*. Published in response to Harvard University's refusal to remit possession of daguerreotypes depicting Renty and Delia, an enslaved father and daughter, to their descendent Tamara Lanier, Drake's paper put forward a new archival theory and call-to-action for contending with racial violence in archives.[13] Before discussing this challenging text, we listened during class to an episode of the *Hyperallergic* podcast featuring Tamara Lanier.[14] I asked students to listen for new information: What would we learn from hearing Lanier share her experience that we didn't derive from reading Drake's theoretical article? We listened to a 20-minute segment and then I asked students to begin by discussing the meaning of Drake's title, "Blood at the Root." That led into a conversation about the creation of archival records and the various stances on them taken by Lanier, Drake, and Harvard. One student said that Drake wrote the article to "put Harvard on alert." Another said that, while listening to the podcast, Lanier's story about her mother—a civil rights activist from Montgomery, Alabama—changed an assumption that they had made while reading the article. They explained that what had seemed like Lanier's personal battle was actually a strategic next step for a family whose commitment to social justice spanned generations.

In my view, pairing "Blood at the Root" with Tamara Lanier's interview underscored a critical aspect of Scholarship as Conversation: newer modes of discourse invite participation from individuals whose experience and expertise may be either underrepresented or absent in traditional forms of scholarship. The pairing also helped students enter a complex and unfinished scholarly conversation.[15] After these discussions, when students in the course completed the fall 2022 First Year Seminar Questionnaire on Information Literacy, nine out of eleven reported strong agreement with the statement "I learned that experts might disagree on a topic." One student explained that exposure to opposing views can lead to better understanding of a subject. Altogether, this was helpful preparation for the next phase of the course, during which students worked cooperatively to apply ideas from the scholarship to their studies of materials in the Library Special Collections department for their panel presentations.

Conclusion

Teaching a first-year seminar provides me with the time and autonomy to integrate significant information literacy elements throughout the semester. Because I also teach in other formats, including one-shot and embedded library instruction, I think about how to scale the lessons described here, for duplication in other settings, as a way to get students thinking—and talking—about conflicting perspectives, constructions of authority, research in the disciplines, and other critical topics embedded in the Framework. Even a 50-minute library instruction session provides enough time to listen to a brief podcast segment and then discuss it with students and their professor in the context of the coursework with the goal of drawing connections to an information literacy concept. It is a simple and inclusive activity for engaging students at multiple academic levels as they develop information literacies not just limited to Scholarship as Conversation.

Notes

1. Scholarship as Conversation is one the six frames outlined in the Association of College and Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, January 11, 2016, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.
2. For background, see Amy Barlow and Dragan Gill, "Integrating the *Framework* into General Education Revision," Annual Conference of ACRL New England Chapter, June 5, 2023, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/acrl_nec_conf/.
3. Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, p. 20.
4. Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, p. 20.
5. ACRL Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox, https://sandbox.acrl.org/library-collection/acrl-framework-rubric; Rhode Island College Information Literacy Rubric for General Education courses, https://www.ric.edu/documents/research-and-information-literacy-rubric.
6. The title of the seminar takes its inspiration from the exhibition, *Raid the Icebox I* with Andy Warhol, RISD Museum, April 23–June 30, 1970; To hear more about the first-year seminar, see Amy Barlow, "Student Power and Meaning-Making in Library Collections," *The Academic Minute,* WAMC Northeast Public Radio, June 21, 2021, https://academicminute.org/2021/06/amy-barlow-rhode-island-college-student-power-and-meaning-making-in-library-collections/.
7. Lindsay Patterson, "Why You Should Bring Podcasts into Your Classroom," *Cult of Pedagogy*, August 8, 2021, https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/podcasts-in-the-classroom/.
8. Patterson, "Why You Should Bring Podcasts into Your Classroom."
9. Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, p. 21.
10. Laura Peers, "'Many Tender Ties': The Shifting Contexts and Meanings of the S BLACK Bag," *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2, (1999): 288–302, https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.1999.9980447.
11. Dan Laurin, interview with Jozie Kettle, "Museums, Beadwork and Indigenous Agency," *Beyond the Binary: Gender, Sexuality, Power* episode 1, University of Oxford Podcasts, June 1, 2020, https://www.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/beyond-binary-gender-sexuality-power-episode-1-museums-beadwork-and-indigenous-agency.
12. Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, p. 20.

13. Jarrett Martin Drake, "Blood at the Root," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021): 1–24, https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol8/iss1/6.

14. Tamara Lanier, interview with Hrag Vartanian, "Tamara Lanier's Fight for the Photographs of Her Enslaved Ancestors at Harvard," *Hyperallergic* episode 97, April 21, 2022, https://hyperallergic.com/726156/tamara-laniers-fight-for-the-photographs-of-her-enslaved-ancestors-at-harvard/.

15. See practices and dispositions of Scholarship as Conversation in the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.