Amy McLay Paterson

Against First-Year Research Papers

A Librarian Perspective on Nurturing Intellectual Curiosity

Last year, Thompson Rivers University librarians partnered with English department faculty to teach a multiweek information literacy tutorial to first-year academic writing classes. The main goal of the program was to advance student research skills to complete major course assignments and was, by most metrics, quite successful.[1]

As the program came to an end, I found myself in the position of providing feedback on more than sixty search strategy and citation mini-assignments. I had thought these assignments would be simple things—that the comments would be straightforward tweaks swapping one keyword for another—rather than the reality: that I was mostly scratching the surface of what would ideally require some focused course correction. I don't know if I'm quite ready to proclaim all first-year writing courses ill-conceived, but unless and until significant changes are made, I no longer believe that first-year students should be writing research papers.

Fostering intellectual curiosity will always be a chicken versus egg sort of problem, whereupon final essays in first-year writing courses are (at least at my institution) commonly assigned with open topics so that students may follow their bliss. But most of these emergent scholars have not yet any bliss to follow, and the course instructor does not have the disciplinary-specific resources to provide inspiration. Both librarians and instructors can tell students what is too broad or what is too narrow, but we can't tell them what's truly interesting and, more importantly, why. No single person can take simultaneous kernels of interest in, say, colony collapse disorder or the housing crisis or the myriad long arms and looming shadows of artificial intelligence and nurture them all so that they sprout equally. Students by and large don't come to higher education because they have deep disciplinary interests to pursue; they come to explore and make connections.

Further, the typical librarian advice to narrow a topic often ends up at cross-purposes to fostering interest in it because big questions always come before small questions. And these big questions need to be answered before any of the smaller, more detailed questions can emerge with clarity. Finding scholarly resources that comprehensively answer big questions about a topic is nigh impossible within a single course; but without strong foundations, any small corner of a topic will end up, at best, vaguely ethereal to a new undergrad or, at worst, actively repellant. Impelling students to engage with scholarly sources when they cannot confidently participate in the conversation only sends the message that they do not belong in their chosen field.

If you invite me (or any librarian) into your course, the reason I am there is generally to coax students into finding and using scholarly sources; but a librarian visiting a classroom once is like a ship passing in the night, assuming there is no other scaffolding in the curriculum

Amy McLay Paterson is a librarian at Thompson Rivers University, email: apaterson@tru.ca.

for this engagement. More importantly, scholarly sources are not written to converse with undergraduates. I have tried to pick apart the reflexive equation of scholarship with reliability and authority, but I don't believe that this is a popular tack to take in our profession. I can tell students that scholarly sources are not written with them in mind, and I can give advice on how to read them, but I cannot change the overall landscape of accessibility in scholarship.

If students are compelled against their will to use scholarly sources that are not written for them on topics where they have a burgeoning interest at best, then what else is to be concluded but that we first make plagiarists and then punish them? We are not setting students up for honest engagement, sending them adrift through a sea of articles on the minutest of topics, all so far removed from their original spark of interest. I tell students they can argue with authors, that they should read things they don't agree with, but this advice doesn't mean much when they have had little guidance or experience finding their voice and few paths to confidence in any opinions that manage to surface. So much of the conversation in librarianship about student engagement with texts is focused on rote citation and antiplagiarism instruction that it's impossible to rescue the notions of relationship building and having meaningful conversations in the space of a single library instruction class.

So, what do we do? Librarians may read this and wonder about the place for library instruction in a first-year course without research. My humble recommendations would start with engaging with select primary sources rather than scholarly ones, which would shift the focus of early information literacy instruction to *using and engaging with sources* rather than finding them. The ways students use sources should be at least as urgent a concern to librarians as their ability to identify them.[2] Overidentification of one-shot instruction sessions with Boolean search practices persists in our profession, despite waning evidence of the usefulness of Boolean to early undergraduates.[3]

Using scholarly sources and writing research papers aren't the first steps to becoming scholars. Instead, we need to prioritize developing perspectives in order to scaffold participation in conversations. Similarly, this would ground citation practice in a few deliberately chosen sources in which the whole class would participate. Primary sources often engage with the grandiosity of ideas in a way that is readable and challenging, which would allow students to take up the thread of the source that interests them and to follow it. Ultimately we need to recognize that students become scholars by developing their curiosity through discussion and exploration within a welcoming academic community.

Notes

1. Amy McLay Paterson, Benjamin Mitchell, Stirling Prentice, and Elizabeth Rennie, "Three Shots Are Better than One: Establishing and Evaluating the English Library Instruction Pilot," *Journal of Information Literacy* 18, no. 2 (2024): 140–68, https://doi.org/10.11645/18.2.651.

2. Stephanie Rosenblatt, "They Can Find It, but They Don't Know What to Do with It: Describing the Use of Scholarly Literature by Undergraduate Students," *Journal of Information Literacy* 4, no. 2 (2010): 50–61, https://doi-org.ezproxy.tru.ca/10.11645/4.2.1486.

3. M. Sarah Lowe, Bronwen K. Maxson, Sean M. Stone, Willie Miller, Eric Snajdr, and Kathleen Hanna, "The Boolean Is Dead, Long Live the Boolean! Natural Language Versus Boolean Searching in Introductory Undergraduate Instruction," *College & Research Libraries* 79, no. 4 (2018), 517–34.