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Kate Hinnant
University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire

Robin Miller
University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire

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RESEARCH MEDITATIONS: A LOW STAKES ENTRÉE INTO RESEARCH AS INQUIRY

KATE HINNANT AND ROBIN MILLER

INTRODUCTION

For many students, research projects are high stakes experiences in which curiosity and inspiration take a back seat to open-ended exploration. Students may fear that their topic or search terms will not yield enough sources to meet the assignment's requirements. When students consider taking up questions that are untested but intrinsically interesting to them, one of their first questions is often, "Will there be enough sources?" This concern is so significant that many capitulate to using time-tested and well-trod research topics, such as whether college athletes should be paid or the ethics of legalizing marijuana. They predict that with such topics, the number of sources available and the likelihood of their meeting the length target is not in question.

The ACRL Information Literacy frame "Research as Inquiry" creates an intellectual space for learners to cultivate an exploratory disposition. Drawing on our experience with first-year composition students, we introduced students to open-ended inquiry through a low-stakes assignment called "Research Meditation," an activity that allows students to dwell in the first stages of research without intimidating source requirements or page counts to curb their curiosity. The concept of low stakes assignments emerged from the field of rhetoric and composition and it transfers easily to information literacy instruction settings.

THE PROMISE OF LOW STAKES ASSIGNMENTS

Low stakes assignments gained popularity in composition studies when championed by Peter Elbow, most notably in the essay "High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing" (1997). Elbow noted that students struggle with "high stakes" writing assignments "in nonproductive ways and produce terrible and tangled prose" (p. 7). Writers are distracted from the content because they focus on lower-order concerns, such as grammar, academic register, and citation style requirements. Low stakes writing allows students to focus on the ideas they are discussing, and their critical or non-critical responses to them through such assignments as reflective responses and journaling. As a composition instructor, Kate Hinnant began testing out low stakes research assignments in 2009. Robin Miller, a librarian, adopted low stakes assignments when co-teaching an information literacy course with Hinnant in 2015 (Hinnant & Miller, 2019). Other librarians have advocated the low stakes approach. Amy Stewart-Mailhot writes about her attempt to mediate "library anxiety" with low stakes research assignments and exercises (2014).

In 1986, Constance Mellon published a landmark article in which she enshrined "library anxiety" in our professional vocabulary. Mellon identified four components to library anxiety: feelings about size of the building, lack of knowledge about location of items, uncertainty about how things worked, and fear of beginning the research process. There are different strategies for dealing with these problems, and the research anxiety component particularly interested us.

As librarians, we know that topic selection can be a great moment to learn that research is responsive, both to the researcher's experience and to the conversation about a given topic. But first year composition students are not always comfortable with the ambiguity of a flexible research topic or question. The concept that scholarship is a "conversation" is new to these students, and possibly an issue they are also grappling with in a composition course, so they may not be ready to cross that threshold. Instead, they try to pluck fully formed research topics out of the air, follow up with background research, and finally attempt to formulate a research question or set of questions. But starting with the fixed notion of "background research" is also troublesome. Novice

researchers have a harder time distinguishing between the different kinds of information that they may gather about a subject, or even identifying the intent of their initial questions: are they background or exploratory? For this exercise, we chose to interpret inquiry more broadly: the Research Meditation is an intentional prompt for the students to engage in open and unrestricted questioning. Involving both individual inquiry and small group discussion, Research Meditations are designed as short experiences that can build on each other if conducted as a series.

The Research as Inquiry frame lists many knowledge practices and dispositions, but the two listed below are the focus of Research Meditations:

- **Knowledge practice:** Formulate questions for research based on information gaps or on reexamination of existing, possibly conflicting, information.
- **Disposition:** Consider research as open-ended exploration and engagement with information.

RESEARCH MEDITATIONS: THE ASSIGNMENT

The Research Meditations assignment can be deployed in multiple ways, but its basic structure is exploring, questioning, and brainstorming about possible sources. Assigned in the context of credit-bearing course, we required students to do the majority of the work outside of class, with some class time devoted to group discussion. This activity could also be assigned prior to a librarian's one-shot information literacy session, with the cooperation of the course instructor.

For the exploration phase, students choose from an array of sources in different formats, including text, audio, and video. We urge students to select an artifact that interests them. The instructor can constrain the choice by theme, sources, medium, or other criteria. For example, the instructor might offer a list of acceptable publications or ask students to limit themselves to articles related to a course theme. Students are asked to read, listen, or view and write a short summary and response. How do they connect with the content? What about it interests them? Sometimes students home in on one part of a piece and focus on a surprising detail. This gives us a chance to talk about how inquiry is both responsive and subjective. You never know what's going to prompt a question.

After submitting the written portion of the Research Meditation, students participate in an in-class discussion. With a few guiding questions, small groups discuss the sources they considered and talk about what more they want to know. They respond with questions. Some questions might indicate a gap in personal knowledge—something they would need to learn before researching further. Other questions might require deeper or broader research.

The last stage, thinking about possible sources, allows for some level of fantasy. First year students are not yet acquainted with the range of information sources available (or not available) to answer their questions. For example, a student might understand that the nature of their question calls for information about a group of people, what librarians would call demographics, but they might not know whether that information is gathered or by whom. When we ask students to think about where they would go for information, we are simultaneously asking them to consider their information needs. This conversation may spark some introductory searching, which offers students the chance to develop search terms and build search skills; however, locating more information is not the goal of the Research Meditation.

SAMPLE MEDITATIONS

Students frequently connect to topics with which they identify, but as the example of a student's written Research Meditation below shows, they frequently extend their questions beyond their own involvement in the topic.

Knowing the effect of the drug and its aftertaste personally, this article interests my fear and reminds me of the late nights and groggy mornings. It makes me question why I felt the 'need for speed'. Why do we feel the need to exceed in life through ways that lead to excruciating mental exhaustion? And how do you cure an addicted generation? We're told that those who are addicted to certain substances are looking to relieve a stressor in their lives, but what am I trying to relieve when I'm popping a pill to make it through a late-night paper?

This student's Research Meditation responded to an essay dispelling the connection between the stimulants and productivity and raised pointed questions about social norms, addiction and their own desires.

Some students' meditations read like they are stacking up multiple potential inquiries, often because of the broad or substantive nature of their article choices. In the example below, a student contemplates prison rights in the United States, proposes a cross-country comparison, and identifies some more granular aspects of the problem, including specific rights that might be abridged.

Prison reforms and prisoner rights are often overlooked, I think that it would be interesting to extend this article by going further into various mistreatment and lack of rights given to various prisoners. This could include voting rights, commissary privileges, educational classes etc. I would research to what extent prisoners lack basic human rights in comparison to regular citizens in the United States as well as in other countries.

The assignment can also inspire vague responses from students who are either unsure, uncomfortable, or not committed to the content they selected. In the example below, the student seems effusive about their topic, but offers no specifics or references to the content of the article they chose. While it would be easy to read this as “writing what we want to hear,” it is also possible that the student is trying to model an inquiring disposition but has not yet formulated a response.

I would love to research topics like this. I think researching animals and nature is so interesting. I could research different things that humans do that are dangerous for wild life. I am especially interested in ocean life and biomes that I am not really familiar with. I am looking forward to doing different types of research about travel, nature, and culture around us.

ATTEMPTING A RESEARCH MEDITATION

During our session at LOEX 2019, we asked attendees to read a short article from *The Economist* titled “To be young is not quite heaven” about declining participation in organized religion in the United States, particularly in younger generations. Participants were asked to write down and discuss questions the article inspired, so that we could simulate the first two stages of a Research Meditation.

Even with the caveat that librarians would certainly participate in a much different way than first-year college students, the results of our model Research Meditation were instructive. One table of four people came at the article with questions aligned with four different perspectives: for example, one was wondering about immigration patterns and religiosity, while another asked about rural vs. urban communities. Each perspective was associated with a larger context or frame of reference that the attendees at the table were already familiar with. The questions participants raised, though advanced, would not be impossible for a first-year student to come up with, but without the librarians’ knowledge and experience, our students would likely not understand the significance of these questions at this stage. Likewise, participants recognized gaps in the original article and generated questions from those. One participant asked about the relationship of race or ethnicity on religious participation, a topic the article was silent on.

Audience members asked us about source formats for the exercise. A brief article from *The Economist* was ideal for demonstration purposes because of its brevity. But format or medium are less significant to students’ success with this exercise than their ability to choose their content. We have had students listen to podcasts, watch videos, and try out periodicals in a variety of genres. Students finding a piece that can prompt their engagement is the key both to their own inquiry and their engagement in class with their peers.

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