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RHETORICAL REINVENTIONS: RETHINKING RESEARCH PROCESSES AND INFORMATION PRACTICES TO DEEPEN OUR PEDAGOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Rhetoric and composition scholars have long examined how people (particularly students) construct and share knowledge through reading and writing. It is a messy and iterative process, but in this struggle to make meaning out of chaos a writer's knowledge can be transformed (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). In contrast, librarians—in an effort to fit within time constraints and reduce student anxiety—often fall prey to the temptation of presenting students with a view of research that is linear and uncomplicated. While the library and information science literature is full of case studies on the practical intersections of composition and information literacy, there has been less work on understanding information literacy *through* theories of rhetoric and composition. Norgaard (2003; 2004) challenges librarians to invite rhetoric and composition theories into our repertoire of mental frameworks as we approach instruction. He tells us,

information literacy can itself be conceived of as a recursive process that is one important dimension of the way we all make and negotiate meaning. In this sense, information literacy is less a formal skill linked to textual features than an intellectual process driven by engaged inquiry. It is less an outcome or product than it is a recursive process, something to be drafted and revised—by students and by ourselves. (Norgaard, 2003, p. 128)

In contrast, relying on efficient, methodical, and linear approaches to teaching research leaves librarians with an impoverished understanding of what the research process looks like in practice, and therefore what we should be helping faculty and students to achieve.

Viewing information literacy through the lens of rhetoric and composition has the potential to completely remap the profession's understanding of information literacy. While librarians and many classroom faculty tend to focus on students' final product (the research paper), composition scholars urge them to focus on students' process. Brent (2013) suggests that educators replace the phrase "research paper" with "writing-from-sources" because "it changes the focus from what the product is to what the writer does" (p. 38). To this end, rhetorical acts match choice to circumstance. To communicate effectively, writers must balance their purpose and expertise with the expectations of an audience. Elements like form, tone, style, and word choice are chosen strategically. Students will know not only how to define questions, but how to select questions that need to be asked. Tools and keywords are strategically chosen through exploration with a dash of mystery, where the process of seeking out relevant voices of authority in a scholarly, professional, or public discourse trumps a checklist of format attributes that need to be met. Information is evaluated and selected for its rhetorical ability to support a particular purpose. Results are shared in recognizable and rhetorically appropriate ways, speaking directly to specific audiences. The purpose of a writing-from-sources project is not simply to assemble facts on a topic, but to learn how to think like someone in the discipline (Carter, 2007).

The authors of this paper have each read, interpreted, and applied rhetoric and composition theories in their information literacy instructional work. Each has experienced a significant shift in thinking through this engagement. They will map this shift by examining three traditional aspects of information literacy—formulating a question, searching for information, and evaluating sources—and sharing how theories of rhetoric and composition, in dialogue with the Association of College and Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2015, hereafter “ACRL Framework”), have expanded their understanding of these activities to more accurately reflect the complex, non-linear, and iterative reality of research. The aim of this paper is to encourage librarians to embrace this reality in how we think about research and the pedagogies we use to teach it.

QUESTION FORMULATION

Traditional library instruction tends to reduce the rhetorical complexity of the process of formulating research questions. Conceived as a generic activity, applicable in any academic context, it typically asks students to determine if a question is “too broad” or “too narrow.” Fixing the focus is simply a matter of including related elements or concentrating on specific aspects (e.g., concept, time, geography, population, etc.). Considerable attention is given to developing a question that yields enough information. While important, such instruction does not ask students to provide a rhetorical justification for that question. Academic questions have audiences that are situated within specific discourse communities “whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things” (Harris, 1989, p. 12) that can be said. Participation in the conversations of these communities begins with aligning questions with their expectations of what constitutes an acceptable and meaningful question. To help students develop as contributors to scholarly conversations, librarians can teach them how to consciously navigate these expectations.

If inquiry begins with the identification of “problems or questions in a discipline or between disciplines that are open or unresolved” (ACRL Framework, 2015), offering rhetorical justification for a question can be challenging for students who are not yet members of a particular discourse community. It occurs in the context of disciplinary activity: “laboratory or field experiments, formal or intuitive observations, or extensive reading” (Reich, 1986, p. 185). Because of their domain-specific knowledge and experience, active participants in a discipline’s scholarship are better positioned to identify problems and questions worth investigating. They are also better positioned to frame questions in rhetorically persuasive ways. As Bizzell (1982) puts it, “To ‘define’ a problem is to interact with the material world according to the conventions of a particular discourse community” (p. 232). These rhetorical conventions—influencing aspects like topic, scope, discourse, and structure—provide “ways to maintain communities and structure common purposes and beliefs” (Hyland, 2004, p. 17). For students to participate in a community’s scholarship, therefore, they must

assume privilege without having any. And since students assume privilege by locating themselves within the discourse of a particular community . . . learning, at least as it is defined in the liberal arts curriculum, becomes more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery. (Bartholomae, 1986, p. 11)

Unaware that these conventions even exist, students may formulate questions that ignore a community’s beliefs, concerns, or practices.

Clearly, we cannot expect students to pose original questions and offer compelling justifications in the early stages of their academic careers. They need time to learn about their chosen community and the problems that interest its members. Over time, however, they should experience question formulation as a complex, rhetorical activity. This will help them participate confidently in the contextualized conversations into which we invite them. The point is not assimilation into a disciplinary culture; it is empowerment. As students gain knowledge and experience, their rhetorical awareness increases. They become capable of posing meaningful questions with minimal guidance. They also become capable of critiquing (and perhaps resisting) the structures that govern their choices, which may push a disciplinary community’s conversations in new directions.

INFORMATION SEARCH

Efforts to intentionally rhetoricize academic librarians’ approach to teaching information search can be traced back over twenty years to Fister’s 1993 exhortation that we teach the “rhetorical dimensions of research” so that students develop not only practical skills but conceptual understandings about the meaning of research and the works that result from it. Fister (1993) proposes a language shift in how librarians describe the act of search to students (and themselves), from that of “finding” or “locating” information to “tapping into a scholarly communication network . . . [of] voices with something important to say” (pp. 214-215). This framing runs counter to the methodical, linear approach of teaching search as a series of steps to be followed resulting in the “correct” number and types of sources for a given research assignment. This latter approach is a vestige of bibliographic instruction, when a librarian’s expertise was associated with the concrete tools and resources to which the library traditionally subscribed.

An approach influenced by rhetorical theories and praxis eschews this step-by-step method in favor of an engagement with search tools, strategies, and processes that is flexible, iterative, and exploratory by design. This is an approach that the ACRL Framework (2015) supports through its frames “Searching as Strategic Exploration,” “Scholarship as Conversation,” and “Research as Inquiry.” The ACRL Framework (2015) describes research as an “ongoing conversation in which information users and creators come together and create meaning.” Information search, evaluation, and use are socially negotiated and interconnected acts between people with something to say (and the communicative means to say it), for “experts realize that information searching is a contextualized, complex experience that affects, and is affected by, the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of the searcher” (ACRL Framework, 2015). Rhetoric and composition theories attend to these dimensions of the searcher in constructive and important ways, making them a valuable complement to the ACRL Framework as a tool for instructional praxis.

One accessible source of rhetoric and composition theories *as pedagogical praxis* is the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (2011). This Framework for Success (2011) maps comprehensively to the ACRL Framework (2015), and introduces habits of mind that will encourage students to approach research and writing rhetorically: creativity, curiosity, persistence, flexibility, and openness are habits of mind that will cultivate a rhetorical approach to search, and that a rhetorical approach to search will in turn cultivate. Similarly, Davis and Shadle (2000) argue for “mystery as a source of inquiry, research, and writing . . . where the unknown is approached from many directions, using a variety of ways of thinking, writing, and making” (p. 441), further integrating literacy practices and habits of mind in constructive ways.

Hayles (2007) theorizes the database—the tool through which information search is so often taught in the library—as a genre unto itself which presents and represents information and meaning in ways whose significance is not often considered. She argues that database as a genre needs narrative as an interpretive lens, and that narrative—“the inexplicable, the unspeakable, the ineffable . . . [that] models how minds think and how the world works” (Hayles, 2007, pp. 1605-1606)—is what the human researcher brings to the database searching act. Attending to the differences between how databases present information, and how researchers process and make meaning from the information in its database presentation, is a significant way to rhetoricize the search process for ourselves and our students. This, coupled with transforming the ways we describe information search to humanize both the process and its “products” (i.e., the specific sources/voices explored and identified), will go a long way toward bringing our ways of teaching search closer to the reality of search as it unfolds in rhetorically authentic research contexts.

SOURCE EVALUATION

As Swanson (2006) points out, good judgement is at the heart of information literacy. Perhaps this is most evident when considering information evaluation, where a writer selects which sources to use and how to use them. However, librarians too often limit evaluation to the external qualities of a source, such as format, where it is indexed, and the author’s educational background. As such, instruction rarely requires students to actually read a source—it does little to help students decide what information to use and how to use it in their own writing.

In rhetoric studies, evaluation is impossible without authentic and meaningful comprehension of the information at hand. Readers must deeply understand a source before they can evaluate it beyond surface features not only for quality and accuracy, but above all for its suitability to their own rhetorical goals. This requires looking for clues within the text and coming to some elementary understanding of the conversation of which a text is a part. While educators generally take students’ reading skills for granted, cross-disciplinary research shows that many students do not understand the scholarly sources they are asked to read for research assignments, nor do they know how to effectively use the information in their own writing (Howard, Serviss, & Rodrigue, 2010; Holliday et al., 2015). Educators need to better understand the complexity of reading comprehension skills and how they relate to students’ ability to complete research assignments, and then provide the support students require to succeed.

Readers compare new information from texts to their own existing knowledge, experiences, and beliefs to determine which parts of the author’s worldview they will accept into their own worldviews, which they will reject, and to what extent (Brent, 1992). This drawing on background knowledge for comprehension and evaluation generally happens without readers being aware of it. Educators can help students be more conscious of these processes until they reach a certain level of proficiency in them.

Educators must also acknowledge and teach students to recognize how their own rhetorical goal directs their use of time, attention, and evaluation when reading. Readers need to not only understand the goals and message of the author, but how the information presented helps them complete their own assignment. Sound judgements of relevance are critical in constructing an understanding of a text and become even more important as readers begin to synthesize information from multiple sources and use it in their own writing.

Nearly all students need support in reading comprehension of single texts and synthesis of multiple texts. MacMillan and Rosenblatt (2015) argue that librarians are particularly well-positioned to support student reading because they are expert general readers, yet not insiders to most of the academic disciplines they support. Therefore, their “novice expert” status may well help them bridge the gap between students and faculty. Because reading comprehension is so integral to using the resources provided by the

library, they argue that at the very least, librarians should advocate for increased student support in this area. Furthermore, reading comprehension skills are central to every frame of the ACRL Framework (2015), including (but not limited to) matching a source type to an information need and understanding how their writing-from-sources choices affect how their information product could be used (“Information Creation as a Process”), monitoring information for gaps or weaknesses and synthesizing information (“Research as Inquiry”), and understanding contributions of individual sources to the topic’s ongoing conversation (“Scholarship as Conversation”). By improving comprehension, educators can help students to not only critically evaluate a source, but also the information contained within the source, in order to use it to meet their own rhetorical goals.

CONCLUSION

Norgaard (2003) theorizes information literacy through the lens of the five canons of rhetoric: invention, delivery, memory, arrangement, and style. His sketch of the ways information literacy is an act of invention provides a clear and persuasive case for inviting rhetoric and composition theories into our instructional praxis: “information literacy can and should be connected to rhetoric’s first canon and the larger purposes of rhetorical invention: discovery, problem-formulation, and problem-solving” (Norgaard, 2003, p. 129). Norgaard’s (2003) emphasis on using the research process as an “inventional resource” (p. 129) offers a breath of fresh air to teaching students not only about question formulation, information search, and source evaluation, but all of the various and interconnected processes that make up information literacy. We all should welcome it into our repertoire of approaches to rhetorically reinvent how we both think about and teach information literacy.

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