Reinforcing College Reading Strategies in the Library Classroom

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How can schools get college students to write papers using more scholarly texts? This problem became quite clear to us because of an incident one of this article's authors, Richard, witnessed during his MLIS internship, team teaching a two-week introductory library course to freshmen at a California State University. Already an English Composition instructor trained in Rhetorical Theory, Richard worked closely with his mentor librarian during this internship to design curriculum that would help students to see the value of scholarly journals. The lecture went smoothly, and students seemed to understand how to get to these scholarly texts and how the sources would deepen their research and impress their professors. Students saw the actual physical journals and how articles are digitally represented within databases. At the end of the activity, Richard asked if anyone had questions. A student, seated at the front, opened up one of the journals, pointed at the page and said, "I have a question: I can't read this."

Problem

We both have seen students avoid academic articles during their research even when their professors were encouraging scholarly sources. For example, during reference interviews, students regularly demonstrate a preference for sources that use language they can more easily integrated into their own texts. These shorter articles that give broad, shallow overviews—rather than the in-depth narrow focus of academic research articles—are naturally attractive to students who do not know techniques for culling the main ideas and core examples from longer scholarly sources. Even when students use a database like JSTOR, where they might find a wide variety of in-depth academic research articles, we see them gravitate to two-page book reviews.

We both also know professors who do not assign scholarly articles to their students because they claim their students are not yet prepared to read them effectively on their own. Some of these professors argue that their students are not developmentally ready to learn from scholarly articles and they encourage students to rely on magazines, newspapers, and websites when they are writing research papers in courses like history, English, and reading.

The risk-avoidance that some faculty and students demonstrate about academic research articles inspired us to find an approach that might open up new possibilities for students to develop their willingness and ability to read a complex text.

Our Pedagogical Approach

We drew on our experience with Reading Apprenticeship and Rhetorical Theory to find a solution to this complex text avoidance challenge.

Reading Apprenticeship

Reading Apprenticeship is a research-based approach to teaching inexperienced readers new skills for engaging in reading as a process of critical thinking and self-monitoring. RA gives instructors and students a way to understand the complex process of reading and it is based on these basic premises:

- Reading is problem solving.
- Fluent reading is not the same as decoding (i.e., translating printed words into sounds).
- Reading proficiency varies with situation and experience [so transferring reading skills from one setting to another does not happen automatically, but requires attention]
- Proficient readers share some key characteristics [which readers can learn]. (Schoenback, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012, p. 18)

RA is based on the theory that learning happens within communities; we usually learn new skills and habits directly or indirectly from the skilled people around us. In RA, instructors learn to make their reading strategies explicit to get students talking about their own reading experiences. This dialog makes the often invisible experience of active reading visible to students who may otherwise read passively (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012). Practitioners have referred to this as a process of "demystifying" (Schoenback, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012, pp. 22-23) and have shown improvement in students' motivation after receiving RA training (Quirk & Schwanenflugel, 2004). April saw a place to apply these RA techniques for a workshop focused on teaching community college students how to read strategically during their research process.

Rhetorical Theory

Rhetorical Theory focuses on genre analyses of various texts. The basic premise is that all texts consist of a set of "rhetorical moves" – classifications of information whose presence define the genre. A quick example is that "Once upon a time" signals that a fairy tale is about to begin. Young readers are taught these meta-discursive phrases to help them distinguish fictional from non-fictional texts. In a similar way, headings, like Method, activate scholars' schemata. Understanding these advanced rhetorical moves, and what they signal, is paramount to information literacy.

The Instrument

The handout we created offers students a spatial representation of the elements of scholarly articles and includes tips for leveraging the articles' typical organization to strategically use these sources during research and writing stages.

Rows

One key feature of this handout is its emphasis on similarities among scholarly articles from different disciplines. Analyzing the generic rhetorical moves in these articles, Richard identified that most authors do each of the following whether writing in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Sciences, or even many of the professional disciplines: **Summary**; **Claim** about the gap in the existing research; **Context** for the study that includes existing relevant research; the **Researcher's Approach** to answering the research question (often referred to as the Method); **Analysis** of the findings and insight into the implications; and the **Conclusion** that states the overall meaning of the article.

These rhetorical moves fall into two general categories that split the handout horizontally across the middle: Older, received knowledge comes near the beginning of scholarly articles and newer, created/discovered knowledge (in the form of research results, findings, discussions, analyses, and conclusions) comes at the end. This insight alone changes many students' reading strategies. In an instant it explains why they've been frustrated by articles that spend the first several pages going over past research and seem to "go nowhere" or give them "mixed messages" about what the authors really think about their topic. By releasing students from the expectation that they should read articles from start to finish, students are free to read with purpose, the way that experts read. For example, one common purpose is to quickly evaluate a source for relevance; and starting with the conclusion is often the most efficient way to do that. Another common purpose is to find background for your topic that explains to your readers why they should care about your paper. Once students know that scholarly authors are also trying to give their readers context at the beginning of their articles, students will sometimes find that they can draw upon these sections as they start defining their own context. This distinction between old and new knowledge can give students a strategy for deciding when an idea is worth quoting. We emphasize that quoting is for special occasions since paraphrasing is a more appropriate since it requires analysis and synthesis.

Columns

The handout is split down the center with Social Sciences/Sciences article sections listed on the left and Humanities sections on the right. In different disciplines and publication styles, these common elements may be called different things. So we list keywords that are typical headings that students can use as guideposts during their reading. Doing contrastive analysis between these two disciplines does three important things: a) reaches students with different academic goals, b) activates students' reading goals, and c) demystifies what could otherwise remain hidden from novice readers, who have not seen enough research articles to have identified these patterns on their own.

Instrument Deployment

The handout was originally created for a 50-minute drop-in workshop called, "Reading for Research," but could easily be used for any information literacy lesson. At the start of the workshop, we provide a brief description of what scholarly articles are, and what their purpose in academic scholarship is. We find that students come to the workshops with little to no knowledge about who is writing these articles and how they differ from other genres.

For the first activity, we give students two scholarly articles with the instruction that they should quickly scan the content as they would if they had found these articles during their research. Both articles are on the topic of Roller Coaster Excitement: one is written for a mixed-methods social science journal, and the other is from a humanities perspective (DeAngelis, 1997; Meston & Frohlich, 2003). After students have had a few minutes with the articles, we start a discussion to get a baseline of discomfort (e.g., articles student found intimidating) to see if we are able to move beyond this by the end of the session. This discussion also shows students that it is natural to find these texts intimidating, but there are techniques for gaining control over them. Next, students work in pairs for a few minutes to jot down a list of similarities and differences between the two articles. For example, students will find headings within the social science article, typical of the IMRAD (**I**ntroduction, **M**ethods, **R**esearch **a**nd **D**iscussion) form. They also notice that the social science article has numerical data and multiple authors – some even notice the citation styles are different (MLA vs. APA).

Once students have described the differences during a brief call-out period, we introduce the diagram handout. Our purpose is to show how both articles are shaped by the IMRAD genre. We go through the features of the handout, describing the different ways it might help them. To assess for learning, we then ask pairs to look through the humanities article, which does not have the bold-typed titles, and see if they can now see some parallels with the social science article. Usually, they notice things like the early parts of both articles are using old information, describing other scholars' research, and that later sections describe the author's new insights. We conclude by showing how to find the Thesis in the conclusion, rather than in the Introduction, and showing why students will more likely paraphrase early parts of an article, and directly quote later parts, where authors make their own claims.

Variations

1. Integrated One-shot: the librarian may switch out the articles for topics more relevant to the professor's discipline. For example, when working with a Business professor, instead of comparing humanities with social science articles, the librarian could compare an academic article with a professional trade journal in the business literature. You should alter the handout to reflect this change. Also, since you will need to show students how to use the relevant databases, consider focusing on the most useful sections of the articles for the instructor's requirements. Informative reports, for example, will draw from different article sections than will analysis or problem/solution papers.

2. Lesson in a Library Course: Introduce it to students when they are at the 'Exploration' stage of Khulthau's (2004) Information Search Process model and then extend their use of it during the 'Collecting Information' stage.

3. Networking with Faculty: solve a problem for faculty who have become reluctant to push students to use scholarly articles because they believe students are not ready on their own; help faculty who are teaching interdisciplinary or general education classes to build on students' existing knowledge of their own discipline's discourse and show how that knowledge will transfer to other disciplines; use with grad students who are returning after an absence and need reassurance that they can manage the reading load for their thesis or dissertation.

Conclusion

We have come to see that neglecting to teach these reading techniques leaves our students in the dark—unable to read the texts we help them to find. When students see that scholarly articles are made up of more than just the difficult, jargon-y sections, like 'Method', they feel hope because there are usable portions, like 'Discussion', where the voice of the scholar is more direct, and they can draw upon these sections for their own work. By being prepared for lingo and jargon, along with the article structure in which it is used, students can more readily participate in the scholarly discourse, without quite yet feeling like a 'scholar' themselves.

References

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To see the handout, see http://bit.ly/1dX5j8R