Using Primary Sources to Help Students Discover their Voices in the Research Process

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The existing literature indicates that plagiarism continues to be a reoccurring discussion within academic discourse (Perry, 2010). As instructional librarians, teaching students methods to avoid plagiarizing should be a focus of our pedagogical goals. New students, in particular, are ignorant of plagiarism as a form of academic dishonesty, are unaware of their colleges' plagiarism policies, lack preparedness for college-level writing and research, have received insufficient instruction in citation techniques, or may lack confidence in their readiness for college-level research and writing (Head, 2013). As a result, we regularly see new students struggle with topic selection and effectively integrating source information into their writing.

There is no easy solution to address these student struggles. However, instruction which encourages authorial identity may help resolve some of these issues by empowering the individual voices and identities of students. Authorial identity is defined as "the sense a writer has of themselves as an author and the textual identity they construct in their writing" (Elander, Pittam, Lusher, Fox, & Payne, 2010, p. 159). This concept is primarily discussed in the literature on college writing research where important connections have been made between plagiarizing and the lack of confidence new students typically feel in their roles as authors. Since the writing and research processes are often intimately linked, it can be argued that even before these students begin to write, a weakly developed sense of voice and identity may also be closely tied to the struggles they experience with selecting a topic of interest to research, understanding expert language found in scholarly sources, and effectively integrating newly found information in their writing. When confronted with the rigors of college-level research and understanding new, discipline-specific language, freshmen are left to "learn by holding the expert's tools in their hands, trying them out, imitating as they learn" (Sommers & Saltz, 2004, p. 135).

The reality is that most novice researchers lack the knowledge or confidence to expertly synthesize the information found in academic literature. As a result, they will settle for research topics in which they may not have an authentic interest, or will imitate the expert ideas found in secondary sources. Recycled research topics and over-citing or under-citing are the results. However, college-level research and writing calls for students to dig deeper in the inquiry process and the expression of ideas. Students need to be given the tools to move from simple imitation towards deeper inquiry to find their own voices and identities in the research and writing process. Given our charge as librarians, what can we do in our instruction to teach the concepts and skills necessary to help students discover their own voices in the research process and better synthesize new information in their writing?

Primary Sources and Authorial Identity

Having experienced many times student struggles with handling secondary source material, we examined the possibility of using primary sources as an instructional tool in introducing critical thinking skills while empowering student voices in the research process. The use of primary sources in information literacy instruction satisfies a variety of pedagogical goals, including developing critical thinking and encouraging a sense of ownership. Primary sources are free of the influence of expert interpretations found in secondary sources, allowing students the freedom to develop their own opinions, observations, and conclusions. Students will "become more adept at sorting through, analyzing, and then synthesizing large amounts of information before determining what 'knowledge' they learn and claim as their own" (Morgan, 2002, p.69). Primary sources can be effective instructional tools in empowering students to feel a sense of ownership in part of the research process and encourage authorial identity.

Primary Source Instruction to EOP Students

In the summer of 2014, the growing collaborative relationship between the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) and the First Year Experience Librarian provided an instructional opportunity for the use of primary sources. During the early planning stages for that summer's four week long program, the EOP director, instructors, and the librarians agreed upon a focus on teaching critical thinking skills. During weekly ninety-minute sessions, librarians worked with students to introduce them to the library, its resources, and the concept of primary sources. The critical thinking involved in the study and analysis of the differences between primary and secondary sources offers a host of opportunities for engaging pedagogical experiences. Students used primary source material related to their assigned reading, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, to write a response paragraph. The response was integrated into the graded process portfolio which had to be completed by the end of the program. A crucial element of this collaboration was the sharing of student writings after the instructional sessions to help librarians evaluate the impact of our instruction.

Students

There are ninety EOP students, and these incoming freshmen have been identified as coming from an economically disadvantaged background and in need of mentoring

and additional support for college success. While on campus, the students take a writing course, mathematics course, and receive support in study skills, time management, library research, and other skills.

Instruction Goals

- Identify primary sources.

- Differentiate between primary and secondary sources.

- Develop keywords to locate primary source material in library catalog.

- Analyze primary sources at an introductory/beginner level.

Tools

- Primary source material from the student's summer read, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot

- A set of guiding questions to help students exercise their analytical skills (see Figure 1).

- Penfield Library's Primary Source LibGuide which includes examples of discipline-specific primary sources and secondary sources.

- A Penfield Library video tutorial introducing the concept of primary sources.

- An encyclopedia entry of the 2008 election for U.S. president.

- A secondary source article on the 2008 election for U.S. president.

Strategies

Assess student knowledge of primary sources: We began the instruction by inquiring if the students if they had heard of primary sources before. We utilized a think-pair-share strategy for students to discuss their findings. The majority of students were unable to offer a formal definition; a few students offered examples, including a diary and old photographs.

Introduce primary source concept: We used a brief video tutorial the librarians at Penfield Library have developed titled "What are primary sources?" to offer more definitions and examples to students.

Telephone Game: An alternative strategy for introducing the topic of primary sources is to play the Telephone Game. We discovered this activity in *The Library Instruction Cookbook* edited by Sittler and Cook (2009) and we have found it to be a fun and engaging way to help students understand primary sources by showing them how an original

message (the primary source) can be transformed as people pass the message along (the secondary sources).

Discussion to reinforce the concept of primary sources: We lead the discussion and demonstration by asking the students "How do you locate primary sources?" Many students were able to identify sources of primary source material, such as newspapers or photographs, but failed to describe how to locate these materials. We used this as a lead-in to our instruction about locating primary sources in the library.

Instruct how to use keywords to locate primary source material in library catalog: Next, we introduced students to the concept of discovering primary source material in our library search engines. We also introduced them to the concept of the research guide, and allowed them to explore the library's Primary Sources Guide, http://libraryguides.oswego.edu/primarysources, which provides students with several options for obtaining primary material in print and electronic formats.

Comparing Primary and Secondary Sources: To help them understand the value of primary sources, we walked through the 2008 election of President Barack Obama, as this was a significant historical event for the students. We had students recall their memories of this event and compared/contrasted their vivid memories with an encyclopedia entry and a secondary source article describing the event. This allowed students to see the difference in primary and secondary material; most notably the richness that primary content provides and how those details can be lost as they become interpreted by someone else.

Analysis of primary sources: We selected three primary sources from *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,* which included a picture of Henrietta and her husband, Henrietta's death certificate, and a newspaper clipping from the *Richmond Times Dispatch* from the date of Henrietta's birth. We had students work in pairs to choose and analyze these primary sources. To guide their analyses, we provided students with guiding questions. The students worked together for about ten minutes. In general, students shared personal connections between their experiences and the primary sources. It was evident that they felt more at ease by focusing on their meaningful connections rather than a "correct" answer. Following their analysis, we conducted a group discussion about their different interpretations of the primary sources.

Overall, the students were very receptive to working with primary sources and seemed engaged throughout the process. The overall lesson with primary source lasted approximately thirty minutes before we moved on to another topic. We did not conduct a formal assessment of the student learning, since we had arranged to view writing samples from their primary source analysis papers to analyze their understanding.

Results of Instruction: Student Writing Samples

Access to student writing samples was instrumental in closing the loop in assessing our instructional impact. At the end of the summer session, the writing instructor shared samples of student writing responses to the primary source analysis (see Appendix at http://bit.ly/412_BishopWest for a selection of student writing samples). These samples provided initial confirmation that students were able to use the primary source material to identify topics of interest to them. Having worked with the primary source materials, student responses included phrases like "I wonder…", "I'm curious…", and "I'd like to know…" When examining Henrietta Lacks' death certificate, one student made a surprising connection between the immigrant experience and the status of African Americans. She wrote, "This document revealed a few facts about life during the 1950s, documents were handwritten by officials at the hospital, documents were also specific to gender and finally African Americans did not have social security numbers. It was as if African Americans were considered illegal immigrants even though they were born in the country." The questions generated in the students' writing were expressions of their authentic interests and could serve as an important step towards developing original research topics.

Conclusion

New students will struggle as they adjust to academic discourse. As instructional librarians we recognize that this struggle is a natural part of the process of introducing novice researchers to their respective communities of practice. Issues with plagiarizing and integrating new information into their research and writing can be indicators of challenges to figuring out who they are in the midst of expert voices. Primary sources present us with rich pedagogical opportunities for encouraging original points for student inquiry and expression, in addition to teaching traditional critical thinking skills.

References

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Figure 1

Guiding Questions for Student Analysis

(Adapted from "Engaging students with primary sources" from the Smithsonian, http://historyexplorer.si.edu)

Instruction to students: Use these questions to write the Primary Sources Response for your portfolio.

Analyzing Photographs

1. What are your first impressions?
2. What is happening in the photograph?
3. What kind of clothing are the people wearing?
4. List two things the photograph tells you about life in the U.S. at the time it was taken.
5. What questions do you have about this photograph?
6. What does this photograph suggest to you? Describe your reaction in a statement.

Analyzing Documents

1. What are your first impressions?
2. Is there a date? What is it?
3. Who wrote or created the document?
4. What does it imply without stating directly?
5. Can you tell the point of view of the writer? Is it objective?
6. List two things the document tells you about life in the U.S. at the time it was written.