Keys to Designing Effective Writing and Research Assignments

SPECIAL REPORT

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Teaching Research Methods: Alternatives to Assigning Research Papers

Joseph A. Mayo

As a longstanding psychology faculty member at my institution, I routinely teach junior-level classes on research methods in the social sciences. Successful completion of an undergraduate course in research methods is vital not only in my field but in many others where, if not expected to conduct research, students (especially those headed for graduate school) must understand applied research mechanisms and processes. Many college graduates in a variety of professional positions need to be able to make informed decisions about research findings. However, the technically complex content of a research methods course often makes it difficult to keep students interested and motivated, and, at the same time, provide meaningful learning experiences. In meeting these challenges, I find it useful to integrate constructivist learning assignments into the course.

In my book, *Constructing Undergraduate Psychology Curricula,* I've defined constructivism as an active process that supports students' metacognitive and critical thinking skills through personalized knowledge creation and transfer to real-life environments. The typical student-developed research project that includes the research proposal and/or original student research is a widely used constructivist assignment. Projects like these provide students with experiences beyond those usually found in a potentially lecture-heavy course that relies on students memorizing research terms and definitions. I have assigned such projects to my students, but there are alternatives and I'd like to share the descriptions of two other constructivist assignments.

> *"Projects like these provide students with experiences beyond those found in a lecture-heavy course that relies on students memorizing..."*

One of these assignments I've dubbed "Live" Research Case Analysis (LRCA). In it, students identify and evaluate the elements, methods, and stages of research, as depicted in a refereed journal article that functions as a reference case. Using the article as an in vivo case study in research methodology, I give students a series of research topics regarding the article's content. Organized into corresponding subheadings (literature review, hypotheses, variables, participant selection and assignment, instrumentation, research design, measurement, data analysis, and conclusions

and recommendations), students discuss and critique the article in terms of each of these areas. Within the overall framework of the assignment's intended purpose, the specific parameters are flexible enough so that the nature, breadth, and depth of the topics to be addressed can be customized, contingent on the focus of the course.

The second assignment I call the Applied Research Log (ARL). In this assignment, students keep an ongoing record of the times throughout the semester when they observe research concepts being applied in the world around them, including at school, home, work, recreational environments (e.g., gyms, restaurants, vacation destinations), in the popular media (e.g., TV, radio, movies, videos, books, magazines, newspapers), and in scholarly publications (e.g. peer-reviewed journal articles). I assure students that the content of their log entries will be kept in confidence at the same time I encourage them to exercise appropriate discretion in their self-disclosure. Completed logs consist of 40 numbered entries. When citing others' work, I require students to provide proper referencing (APA Style) both in the body of their logs and in a separate reference section.

I do give students the option of completing a traditional research paper but so far no one has selected that option. Through systematic comparisons that I have done in my own classes, I have found that objective testing of learning gains and analysis of students' perceptions of assignment completion favor both the LRCA and ARL over the traditional research paper

In conclusion, alternatives exist to assigning research papers in teaching research methods classes. The key to the success of these alternative assignments appears to lie in engaging learners in higher-order evaluative thinking (LRCA) or allowing them to construct knowledge that relates to their own life experiences (ARL).

Note: Portions of this article were adapted from Comparing Constructivist Learning Assignments in Research Methods Classes, by Joseph A. Mayo, as published in The Constructivist, 16 (Fall 2017). Available at: http://acteducators.com/the-constructivist/. Reproduced here with permission from the Association for Constructivist Teaching.

Hidden Opportunities to Get Students Writing

Robert Grant Price, PhD

Let's never read student writing again. In fact, let's not even talk about it. Not because student writing is dull or unworthy of serious readers. No, let's stop talking about student writing because it doesn't exist—or at any rate, shouldn't exist.

In my time as a writing instructor—I started as a writing center tutor in 2002—I've learned that the surest way to belittle a writer's effort is to stick "student" in front of the "writing." The writer might be a student, but that doesn't mean their writing is unschooled.

"...Teachers will find more traction in treating students like writers and demanding students act like writers, even in courses where writing isn't the primary subject."

Dispensing with this adjective is an old idea. The writing instructor Peter Elbow made a similar argument in the late seventies. In the nineties, the academy openly argued over the question, with people like David Bartholomae arguing that students had to apprentice before they earned the title of "writer."

I'm with Elbow on this matter. Rather than trying to improve "student" writing—which, by definition, can never be anything but amateurish—teachers will find more traction in treating students like writers and demanding students act like writers, even in courses where writing isn't the primary subject.

I don't mean to suggest that calling students "students" is slanderous. It isn't. But the word is sometimes used in the derogatory form. Attitude influences outcomes. If students consider themselves merely students working on projects that are just for school, and if faculty look at their students as only students and their work as school work rather than real work, students will respond by acting like students—possibly the worst kind of students.

Treat students like writers

Admittedly, I write from a privileged position. I teach in a writing program at the University of Toronto Mississauga, and most of my students want to get out from under the label of "student" writer as quickly as possible. The faculty facilitates this shift in perspectives from day one, when we circulate the "Special Rules of Engagement," a list of behaviors expected of writers in the class. The rules of the class demand that writers attend every class, meet deadlines, show up on time, and disconnect from phones and social media while in class

(Allen, n.d.). What's important about these rules—and this applies in any course where the teacher assigns writing—is that they impart on students an attitude of respect toward their work, their audiences, and themselves. For lack of a better word, these rules encourage young writers to behave as professionals, not students, and that's relevant across the curriculum.

The writing classroom is well-suited to professional standards because professional standards support learning in the writing class. We treat deadlines as sacrosanct because that's what professionals do—and because missing deadlines impedes learning. In the writing workshop, we power down distracting technology and give our full attention to the reader out of respect—and so we can listen and practice giving feedback. We assign enough writing to keep students writing every day because professional writers write every day—and because daily practice leads to understanding and mastery of course concepts.

"...When we write, we put our thinking on to the page where we, and others, can examine our thoughts, test them for truth, and revise our thinking through the act of revising our writing. This is learning."

Make students write—and learn—every day

Practice leads to mastery and fluency. To develop competency leading to mastery, I ask writers in one of my classes to free-write for 12 minutes a day, every day. In every class, I assign reading responses, project deadlines, and exercises designed to teach the technical aspects of prose—all to keep them writing every day. In addition to the course work, I encourage writers to keep a diary, write a blog, or trade stories with one another. Whatever it takes to hit that daily word count

In the writing classroom this makes sense. Writers need to write every day to develop. Even though developing writing skills may not be the main agenda in other courses, writing every day can promote learning in any course. Students can deepen their understanding of course content by looking at notes from the previous day and writing a short summary of what they learned. They can look at an assignment and write what they think the teacher wants, share their writing and discuss their impressions with their peers and teacher, and set out with a clearer understanding of the assignment's objectives. They can write tentative answers to questions, write questions they'd like to have answered, respond to scenarios, generate hypotheses, predict results. Writing can play an important role in learning across the curriculum. Writing aids in retention. It clarifies understanding. More important, when we write, we put our thinking on to the page where we, and others, can examine our thoughts, test them for truth, and revise our thinking through the act of revising our writing. This is learning.

The point of daily writing isn't to produce work for the teacher. In fact, some writing I only grade for completion, and I don't read early drafts unless a writer asks. The point is to instill habits that promote the idea that writing is a way to learn. In my courses, daily writing instills the habits of the professional writer and brings them into the lifestyle that writers live.

This principle of daily writing practice translates well into other kinds of learning.

Habit-making has utility in other disciplines. Memory drills, daily readings, regular on-campus meetings, and systematic, structured study build a learning environment in the class and at home. Daily practice has another benefit: it structures the students' lives and ushers them into a discipline and a profession.

Give space for failure

One of the major strengths of portfolio grading—a procedure where teachers only grade final drafts at the end of semester—is that it gives students space to work through ideas without having those early ideas graded. Nobody should judge a writer's first draft, yet that's what we often do to our students. Portfolio evaluation forces new writers to hit the deadline—an essential lesson in the writing class—but gives them time to refine their work so that they put their best work forward for evaluation, not their first effort. By judging a student's best effort, teachers can rightly hold writing to a high standard.

Portfolio evaluation has other advantages. First, it gives students time to master course concepts. With deep writing should come deep understanding. And second, portfolio evaluation privileges hard work over raw talent. Students who put in the hours often prove themselves as capable as writers who nail the first draft. I'm never surprised to see them outperform the hotshots who put too much trust in their gifts.

The draft system built into portfolio grading allows a writer to rework the same material many times and to integrate this learning into the drafts of future assignments. In my classes, writers work on multiple assignments, reading responses, and technical exercises at the same time. I check drafts for completion and follow up with writers who miss deadlines, but I don't partition assignments—that is, I don't divide up writing assignments and grade every part: the outline, the proposed list of references, the first draft, and so on. Partitioning assignments can communicate the wrong ideas about the writing process—that the parts are distinct from other parts, and that once a part is "done" it requires no attention. Portfolio grading and draft systems assume a more holistic approach, one that sees writing as a complex process that leads to understanding, and not as a linear set of measured, compartmentalized milestones.

Portfolio evaluation and draft work systems are not new. Indeed, many disciplines already ask students to submit and revise drafts, in part because draft systems aid learning, and to teach students that revision is as important to the writing process as the first draft. Instructors who shy away from portfolio evaluation should experiment again. Draft systems force writers to subject their writing to a methodical, iterative process that reinforces course concepts and produces writing worth reading—and not first draft "student" writing.

Showcase and celebrate writing

Disciplines where writing forms the core of the learning should encourage students to publish their work in campus newspapers and blogs, and departments should develop publishing opportunities, such as undergraduate departmental journals, where students can reach an audience. For most students, publishing is a distant dream, an honor reserved for other, better writers. Helping students to publish will help legitimize their work. This isn't student writing, publishing says, it is writing that garners a real audience.

Publishing is a major undertaking for a department, so consider it a long-term goal. In the interim, teachers can showcase and

celebrate the writing in their classes by sharing it with students. Publish A-level work on course websites and course readers, ask students to read excerpts of exceptional work aloud to the class, and share some of the best work with other faculty members. A half-day symposium where students read their writing to an audience of their peers and faculty members will help students see themselves as writers.

In the courses I teach I've seen the motivating power of publishing that emerges in the classroom. At UTM, we publish peer model texts regularly, as well as a range of journals. These locally-produced texts build a community of writers and readers. As importantly, they tell new writers to take writing seriously, because we, your readers, take you seriously.

If we want to motivate students, let's not relegate our students to "student" writing. That's a basement many will never escape from. So, let's stop calling students "student writers." They are already writers. If new writers struggle, call them writers. Say it until they become it.

Reference

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20 Questions About Writing Assignments

E. Shelley Reid, PhD

At the end of English composition, I ask students how what they've just learned in my class might be useful in their other classes. They're often bemused and surprised to learn that professors in other courses care about their writing. To encourage them to take responsibility for succeeding in their future writing assignments, I hand out a list of 20 questions that they might ask to better understand "what the professor wants," and thus continue to apply what we've been practicing.

I'm sharing this list in the hopes that it will help you help students transfer good writing skills from English composition to your class. By answering these questions about your own writing assignments, you may cue students to write better by building on some learning principles common to first-year composition classes.

Questions students could ask a professor about getting started with a writing assignment:

1. If I have my own idea for a topic or angle that's interesting to me, can I use it, or do I need to complete the assignment exactly the way it is described?

2. Is there an assignment model, a sample essay, or a kind of published writing that I could look at to help me better see how to do this assignment?

3. If I write an essay draft early, can I come see you to talk about it or email you to ask a few questions?

Questions about the assignment's main purpose:

4. Why do people in this field write or read a text like this? What's the main goal for this kind of writing? 5. Should I mostly review the similarities, differences, events, theories, or key features? Or should I make arguments, draw conclusions, or give my interpretations about these ideas? Do I need to answer the question "So what?"

6. Should I broadly survey the field or issue, or should I narrow my focus and "go deep" with my analysis?

Questions about the assignment's target audience:

7. Should I write for a knowledgeable audience that has read what I have read or do I need to give additional background or summary?

8. Should I try to write for a resistant audience that will need a lot of evidence or should I write for an audience that generally agrees with my point? Should I address and refute counterarguments?

9. What kind of evidence will be most convincing in this field (or to this audience): numbers, descriptions, direct quotations, logical reasoning, examples, case studies, expert testimony?

10. Will I need to consult outside sources, and if I do, what kinds of sources are appropriate for this field, audience, or genre?

Questions about style and format that differ among disciplines:

11. Is it preferred that I use the scholarly language or format of this discipline or genre or should I use standard paragraphs and plain, direct language accessible to a range of readers?

12. Are lively, graceful introductions and extended paragraphs expected by readers in this field (or for this assignment) or will short, informative paragraphs be sufficient?

13. Is it important to readers in this field that I write smooth, stylistic sentences or is a straightforward "just the facts, ma'am" style enough?

14. What citation format should I use for outside sources?

Questions about style and format that differ based on the assignment, context, or professorial preference:

15. Is it okay to use first person ("I") or second person ("you")? Is it okay to use specific, relevant examples from my own life or experiences?

16. Should I try to avoid passive voice? Does it matter whether I use present tense or past tense verbs?

17. Is the page-length specification an absolute requirement or is it more of a guide to how much information I should plan to include in order to satisfy the audience's needs?

18. Can I include relevant visual or other nontext information or should I include only text?

Questions to gauge individual professors' goals and concerns:

19. What is the most difficult part of this assignment? What are the most common mistakes students make with this assignment?

20. What is the most important aspect of this assignment? What should I spend most of my time and energy on as I write and edit?

One final, crucial thing you can do that will help students draw on what they've learned in classes like mine is to get them working on the assignment before it's due. Require them to write something—a proposal, a thesis statement, an introductory paragraph, a rant, an outline, a bibliography—at least a week or two before the due date. Even if you provide no in-depth feedback at that point, you've

indicated that you know the fundamental principle of good writing in English courses and beyond: it requires good revising, and thus takes more time and attention than we initially think.

If you'd like to duplicate this set of questions and share them with your students, you're welcome to do so. This way we work together to send the message that the good writing skills learned in English apply in every course.

How Students Can Learn the Research Process through a Class Blog

Daniel Kotzin, PhD

One of my primary objectives in my upper-level history classes is for students to develop their research skills. This involves the long, laborious task of sifting through primary and secondary sources to identify patterns and make discoveries.

But I often observe students rushing through the research process trying to find their sources quickly. This leads to poorly conceived research papers that demonstrate a lack of historical methodology, poor writing skills, or a deficiency in informational literacy.

I wanted students to "slow down" as they researched and wrote instead of merely try to get the project completed and move on to the next task. To achieve this, I implemented blogging in two courses: students would report on their research findings in an incremental way as they did their research, rather than as a single report at the end. This would get them focusing on the process of doing historical research, not just the product. Blogs are ideal for this purpose because they are constantly updated sets of reflections by their authors. Plus, the public aspect of a blog provides students with an opportunity to get continual feedback on the research process from both their instructor and their classmates.

For my History of the Civil War course, I directed students to the Valley of the Shadow website, which has digitized dozens of diaries and letters of both soldiers and civilians who lived in southern Pennsylvania and northern Virginia during the Civil War era. This provided the primary source material for their research. I assigned specific historic individuals to each student and expected them to blog about a

different letter or diary entry written by their individual each week, analyzing the primary source by placing it within a larger historical context based on their research of a secondary source—either a scholarly article or a digital source.

The purpose was for students to constantly analyze and contextualize primary sources throughout the semester, learn how to look at primary sources within many different historical contexts, and develop their research skills in a thoughtful and deliberate way. Each week I made sure to reserve at least 30 minutes for students to work on their blogs, though they were also expected to work on them outside of class.

In addition, I assigned each student a classmate's blog to comment on. Besides offering constructive criticism, students posed questions for further research and compared what they had learned from their own research to the research being documented in the blog they were commenting on. This proved enormously effective as it helped focus each student's research. Meanwhile, as the instructor, I regularly provided feedback to students about their blogs through email. I purposely did not make my comments public, because they were generally corrective in nature, meant to ensure that students were properly following directions and being discerning with any websites they were using. With this constant, consistent feedback from their peers and their instructor, students demonstrated improvement in their research and historical thinking skills throughout the semester. Assessment results showed that by the end of the semester, 82 percent of students could properly source and contextualize primary sources.

With its success in my Civil War class, I implemented the research blog in another course I teach, History of Ethnic America. But here students were given specific topics to write about in each posting. Also, instead of focusing on a single individual, students in this course focused on an ethnic group and were required to find all the information on their own.

"The purpose was for students to constantly analyze and contextualize primary sources throughout the semester..."

In the first posting, students introduced themselves, identified an ethnic group they wanted to research, and posed historical questions. In the second posting, students wrote about a website they found that discussed their group, explained what made the website legitimate for historical research, and shared what they learned about the history of their group from the website. In the third posting, students identified three or more primary sources available online related to the history of their group. They used these primary sources to answer the historical questions they developed in an earlier blog post. In this longer blog entry, they also contextualized their sources based on secondary sources they found online and offered a historical interpretation based on their sources. Finally, in their fourth posting, they reflected on what they learned about the history of ethnic America through their blogging activity and connected their research to one of the concepts or themes discussed in class.

As I did in the other class, I also assigned each student a classmate's blog on which

they would post comments that offered constructive criticism, posed questions, and made comparisons. I also regularly provided feedback to students about their blogs through email. For this research blog, students also had the opportunity to revise any of their blog entries based on the feedback they received; the vast majority of students took advantage of this opportunity. Assessment results showed that by the end of the semester, 67 percent of students were able to properly source and contextualize primary sources.

A comparison of the assessment results shows me that the regular practice of demonstrating historical thinking skills via a blog improved results in my Civil War class. That said, in both cases I observed that students improved their historical thinking skills over the course of the semester. By writing continuously about their research and receiving regular feedback, students focused their attention on historical methodology.

The Research Paper that Thwarts Plagiarism

Carmen Noel Eichman-Dorr

I teach research-based Composition II courses every semester. My students learn information literacy, look up academic, peer-reviewed journals, create and correctly structure works cited pages, annotate bibliographies, learn rhetorical writing strategies, read diverse authors, watch diverse films, and discover the purpose of audience. Their pinnacle assignment: Construct the research essay—that oft-dreaded chunk of work students would just as well leave until the last moment.

"And therein lies the potentially plagiaristic problem--waiting until the last minute."

And therein lies the potentially plagiaristic problem—waiting until the last minute. When students wait until the last minute, they discover that looking up research articles isn't as simple or fast-paced as they thought. At this point, panic mode presents itself. This usually corners them with several options: Not do it, recycle an old essay, plagiarize bits and pieces, or purchase an essay online.

This often happens to struggling students, and suddenly you receive an almost impeccably written essay with a more sophisticated sounding, graduate student vocabulary. Or they've been practicing MLA works cited, and you get an essay written in Chicago Style. By refining my curriculum, I came up with a fool-proof way to not only help students learn to write a research paper but to write their own research paper. How? It's not that hard.

We begin constructing the research paper at the start of the semester, and we construct it in stages throughout the semester. This begins with giving them the first week to think of a topic they'll really enjoy—one about which

they want to learn, one that is personal to them, a topic that becomes an experiential, meaningful process for them. Once they get that narrowed, I assign three works cited assignments each about a week apart and each one with five citations/academic sources. The beauty of this is they look up citations on their topic, not just random sources. So, by the time their third works cited assignment is completed, they have at least 15 peer-reviewed journals from which to pull six to eight sources required for their research paper. At this point, they've just invested a solid 50% into their research paper and are on their way to becoming nascent researchers.

Because we know students often don't want to creep their way through dense scholarly articles, I assure them that scholarly articles are dense reading for everyone. I don't want them to think they're not up to the task because they must reread, look up unfamiliar words, and must often recontextualize the material to better understand it. This leads to assigning two annotated summary bibliography assignments, with three journals each from their works cited. At this point, we are at least a good month into the semester, while filling other class period space with select and diverse readings, films, discussions, and other resources to enhance and supplement the course and make unconventional literary connections with their topics. Thus, the research paper becomes an organic part of a cohesive semester course.

The annotated bibliography moves them deeply into their articles. I keep it at three sources per annotated bibliography. I've found students get overwhelmed having to annotate six sources, so I simply broke it in half. Thus, these and the works cited homework become great, low-stakes assignments. Once they've completed the annotated bibliographies, it's time to build the paper paragraph-by-paragraph. This takes away the monstrous aspect from the abstract thought of a long, unmanageable research essay. And we do this in the classroom, typically two paragraphs per week. Students work independently, as well as peer review each other's paragraphs. This provides a nice way for them to earn participation points, too. I also grade these first handfuls of paragraphs along the way, which count as more low-stakes assignments. At this point, each student is getting in a lot of writing and revising, which is critical to the writing process. I'm also involved in their paper every step of the way. It is a nice and slow, carefully metered out process while helping build their skills and mitigating stress. It also helps me gauge those who are struggling, and get in the extra help when and where they need to be successful.

Once they have constructed half of the paper, they put it in finished form and turn it in. I then grade that first half. This gives me the opportunity to provide feedback on their strengths and weaknesses. In the meantime, they begin roughing out the paragraphs for the second part of the paper, but I don't grade this second half by itself. What happens is by the time they're finished roughing out the second

half, I give them the opportunity to revise the graded first half. This encourages them to look at the second half with more critique after my feedback on the first half. They often realize common editing mistakes in their own writing, such as leaving out a direct quote or forgetting an exposition sentence or logical discussion resulting in an undeveloped paragraph.

Student feedback over the past two years has strongly indicated they like this process. It makes for a manageable research writing process, where the process is broken into parts, it is not long and tedious because we multitask with other reading, viewing, and discussion activities, and they never feel rushed. Because of this writing process, my students have grown more confident in their writing skills and understand that the same process can be successfully applied across their curriculum for any rhetorical/persuasive essay.

Chapter Essays as a Teaching Tool

David A. Locher, PhD

A few years ago, I added a simple assignment to my introductory sociology classes, and it has paid off in more ways than I ever expected. Each student writes a two page essay for each chapter we cover in class. Each essay is worth enough points to influence their semester grade. In the essay, which is prepared outside of class, the student identifies what he or she considers the single most important concept from the chapter unit (anything in the textbook or class lecture and discussion). They then explain why they think it is important. They must give an example from their own life experiences that illustrates the idea, establish the importance of their example, and then relate it to the topic.

My idea behind creating the essays assignment was to encourage students to think about the concepts as we discuss them and to apply them to their world outside of the classroom. Preparing these essays forces students to actually sit down and reflect on the information, its ramifications, and meaning. One of the unexpected payoffs has been how this process makes course content more interesting for the students and for me. They take it seriously, and frequently make connections that I would not have considered. Doing the assignment well requires students to not only know and understand the material but to apply, analyze, and (in a really good essay) synthesize and evaluate the material.

This approach may not work for every kind of class, but I can imagine adapting a similar approach for any of the social sciences and several other kinds of courses as well. Some professors may be inclined to ask students to be broad rather than specific with the topic of the essays. I would recommend against broad topics. My experience has shown that asking the students to focus the essay on one very specific concept makes for better essays,

and does not leave the bigger picture out. A student who writes about a specific term or concept almost always places that idea into a larger context, but those who try to write about too broad a topic invariably skim across generalities.

"Too often we expect our students to immediately and intuitively understand why the subject we teach is important to them. We expect them to automatically see how it applies to their own lives and the world."

Too often we expect our students to immediately and intuitively understand why the subject we teach is important to them. We expect them to automatically see how it applies to their own lives and to the world around them. However, I have observed that students consistently do just the opposite: they compartmentalize, treating each unit as an isolated piece of information to be memorized for the next exam and then forgotten or filed away. I have also found that telling students the course material is important doesn't seem to make much of a difference to most of them. Writing these essays, and engaging in the thinking required to write them well, helps students turn otherwise abstract ideas into concrete reality. No one walks out of the classroom at the end of the semester thinking they didn't learn anything "real" or important.

Sometimes completing this assignment does more than just demonstrate that they have learned the material and can apply it to their own lives. Sometimes writing these essays gives students an entirely new perspective on themselves or their world, to the point where they actually take on a new level of determination and ambition for themselves. Every semester I receive a few essays that clearly stand out from all the rest. They tend to be longer than average, and reveal a great deal of thought and attention. Often they begin with a phrase like "I never understood why I…," and usually end with a phrase similar to "now I know how to…" I won't reveal any personal information, but one of my students last semester applied the concept of cultural capital to her own family and upbringing. She wrote several pages, connecting the concept to specific aspects of her own past and her relationship with her family, and concluded by explaining that she now understood them better, understood herself better, and understood what it would really mean to "pull herself up" by being the first member of her family to ever get a university education.

These breakthrough essays are the most interesting to read, of course, but even more exciting is how they document the process of a student fully realizing the connections between their own world and the world of higher learning. They discover what sociology has to offer, and how to use their new knowledge to understand and perhaps better their own lives. Through experiences like these students discover that college is not just something that you do in order to get a job, but can be a place where real learning takes place. They sometimes realize that learning about the world means learning about themselves, and that means gaining a better understanding of both.

How to Conduct a 'Paper Slam'

Stephanie Schlitz, PhD

Last year, I attended a digital humanities conference where the highlight of the program was undoubtedly the "Poster Slam." The poster what? I'd wondered when I'd first read about it. I'd never heard of a 'poster slam' and had no idea what to expect, but my interest was piqued. I hadn't attended the conference before, but I assumed that because the program was as rooted in technology as it was in the humanities, I shouldn't be too surprised to find myself in uncharted territory.

As more information about the conference program and the mysterious poster slam was disseminated, I learned that the poster slam, which turned out to be one of the most well-received and informative aspects of the program, was simply a conference session devoted to sharing information about the various posters that would be on display during the poster session.

Poster session participants had been invited to create one slide (in PowerPoint or a similar format) depicting the principal content of their posters, and each would be allotted one minute to entice conference participants to visit their poster during the poster session. During the slam, poster session presenters lined up and took turns at the podium in front of the room, speaking about their research while their slides were displayed. If a presenter spoke beyond the allotted minute, the session organizer rang a bell, and – in good humor – the presenter was stopped and the next ushered forth.

Loosely modeled on a poetry slam, this new version of 'slamming' most likely originated in the technology community. When programmers sought new ways to make the most of their time during conferences and meetings, they broke from more conventional formats by offering participants one to three minutes to preview their current research, an in

progress project, or a useful programming shortcut. Because doing so provided a succinct and efficient way to cover a lot of ground in a very short time, the slam concept caught on and eventually found its way back into the humanities community via the digital humanities.

Shortly after attending the conference, I introduced another version of slamming in my college classes, the 'paper' slam: an in-class activity held on paper due dates. College students, like academics and programmers, I reasoned, regularly write interesting papers about intriguing and diverse concepts, and they regularly unearth and apply research that deserves a much broader audience than their professor. Students often have much to gain from one another's research as well. Yet, the traditional paper submission process, wherein students submit a text document that has virtually no circulation beyond their professor's office, fails to recognize this. While asking students to discuss their papers on their due dates is a worthwhile venture, extending the slam concept to the classroom improves upon this format and formalizes the submission process in an innovative and pedagogically astute way.

> *"Students often have much to learn from one another's research, but too often the opportunity to exchange ideas is missed."*

Toward the end of each semester as paper due dates draw closer, I explain the slam requirements to my students. I ask them to develop one slide that highlights the key ideas explored in their papers, and I require them to prepare a sixty to ninety second oral narrative that explains their work to their peers.

Since they are free to use images and color and to explore various modes of composition, the slide preparation invokes their creative energy. It also links an otherwise static document to another mode of technology. And being asked to prepare a slide and oral synopsis to effectively distill the significance of their work encourages student authors to think carefully about the content, organization, and delivery of their message – in their slam materials, and, as I learned from my students, in their papers as well.

Students email their slides to me in the days before the slam, and I organize them alphabetically by last name since I use this criterion to determine the presentation order. I then compile the slides into a single slideshow. Finally, I create a text document that lists the students' names and their topics in order and distribute copies to the class so that everyone can follow along and take notes during the slam.

On the day of the slam, I seat students in alphabetical order and appoint a timer to keep track of time and to hold up a "stop" sign when a presenter exceeds his or her allotted time. The slam advances as I scroll through slides and students move to the front of the room to present when their slides are displayed. Some students prepare and read note cards while others extemporize in response to prompts built into their slides, but importantly, all of my students convey their ideas to their peers, and the process is as fun as it is illuminating.

Students often have much to learn from one another's research, but too often the opportunity to exchange ideas is missed. A paper slam can rectify this by inviting students to present their research in a way that acknowledges the importance of their work and continues the academic tradition of sharing it with their peers.

Helping Students Develop Digital Content Curation Skills

Brad Garner

In our 24/7, always-connected world where we are inundated with information from all sides, the ability to identify quality resources to inform our research and actions has become a major focus in higher education. Digital Content Curation, as it is called, is something that many faculty believe they should be teaching their students, but they are not sure where to start. I have created a model of Digital Content Curation that faculty can use to help students sharpen their digital literacy and research skills (Garner, in press).

Specify

At the beginning of any journey, it is important to specify the desired destination. This is also true when looking for information. Students should start by stating what they want. The key questions for them to answer are:

- What types of questions am I trying to answer as a result of my search?
- What are the criteria that define a successful search?

To answer these, students should: (a) Draft specific research questions, related to their topics of investigation, or (b) Generate hypotheses related to their area of investigation. These questions will guide their further research.

Survey

The survey phase is focused on choosing the tools that will be used to explore the Internet.

There are a variety of tools that can be used to seek the information and answers needed at any given moment. If searches are related to common, everyday topics, then "Googling it" would suffice. At the same time, however, if searches are related to disciplinary or research topics, those with greater levels of nuance and sophistication, then students should be equipped to take advantage of varied and specialized search tools (e.g., EBSCOhost, PsycINFO, PubMed/Medicine). The key questions that the student should answer at the survey level are:

- What type of information is being sought (e.g., general information queries, academic journals, books, conference presentations, video/audio)?

• What subscriptions to academic databases are available?

It is important for student-scholars to be fully aware of the search tools available in their academic disciplines. To facilitate this, faculty could, for example, require students to submit initial listings of those resources gleaned from a variety of search databases (e.g., Google Scholar, WorldWideScience, ResearchGate). This beginning step would serve to illustrate similarities and inconsistencies between the selection and rankings represented by search tools in response to common query terms.

Search

The next step is to search for sources. While everyone knows how to Google for information, many do not consider how they are crafting their search terms and queries. When Internet information was limited, it was often better to use very general terms to capture all possible sources, but now it is better to start with very specific terms to eliminate poor sources. The key questions that guide students at the search phase are:

• What types of search terms and queries will yield the best results?

• What are the expectations for this search process (e.g., number of potential resources, variety of sources?)

Faculty can help students become better, more efficient searchers by providing demonstrations of how different search terms yield different resources, from poor to good. Faculty should include terms that give results for websites that feature erroneous content to demonstrate the need to be mindful of how one is searching for information. Faculty in online classes can shoot a narrated screencast video of different searches to teach students how to craft searches in their field.

Select

After gathering a collection of information gleaned from digital resources, the challenge becomes one of selecting the most relevant and accurate content. Engagement in this process requires a thoughtful and systematic examination of the available information with an eye toward finding themes, inconsistencies, and newly identified pathways for further searching as a way of strengthening the final product. The key questions that guide activity at the select level are as follows:

• What types of strategies could be used to assess and verify the quality of collected information?

• Is there an openness to the possibility that final conclusions might be contrary to or change initial hypotheses?

A viable search process should result in a listing of resources worthy of further examination and possible inclusion in the developing final product. Now as we move into the select phase it may be advantageous to require a writing plan that includes topics to be discussed and the relevant resources. This could take the form of a word document or a graphically-oriented "Mind Map" (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map for more information). In this way, students are encouraged to create a plan of attack and identify their chosen resources. There are variety of online tools to assist students in creating these graphic representations of their planned project, with Coggle being one of the best.

Here is where you want to help students select content wisely. There are a number of good websites that can help faculty teach students about poor reasoning. One is a good blog by Gary N. Curtis called Fallacy Files that uses modern headlines as examples. Another is an explanation of how science critiques

claims based on work by Carl Sagan.

Synthesize

Systematic research procedures should culminate in a process of summarizing and synthesizing the works found. Faculty often require students to draw the results of their research into a report, but do not require students to summarize individual works. But the ability to summarize an author's position is critical to validating its veracity, as it often alerts students to gaps in the author's reasoning. When a student cannot piece together an author's argument, it might be that the author's work does not have a coherent argument. Thus, resource assignments should include a requirement to summarize the arguments of the works used.

Share

After synthesizing results of the process thus far, the major task then becomes one of determining the most effective and appropriate format for distribution to external audiences. Historically, in higher education, the gold standard for sharing has long been the research paper (with subsequent conversion to a journal article, book chapter, or presentation). Although this pattern is likely to continue, researchers can now consider alternate ways to share their work in digital contexts (e.g., website, blog, wiki, podcast, video, audio, social media, electronic journals, academic social networking sites). The key questions that guide activity at the share phase are:

- What are the primary and secondary locations that are intended destinations for this content?
- Are additional skills or resources necessary to take full advantage of the exposure and dissemination possibilities of the chosen venues?

As educators, we are all vitally interested in having our students master the content in our academic disciplines and achieve the identified learning outcomes. Now consider the possibility of a value-add: Students demonstrate what they have learned through the creation of an authentic digital product (e.g., website, video, blog, infographic). The Internet offers a vast collection of resources and tools in each of these areas, along with tutorials and step-by-step directions.

Steward

Students normally forget about the research sources they used once the class is done. But students should be encouraged to become "intellectual hoarders" by preserving their sources in a format that can be used in later classes and even after college. As digital creators, curators, and consumers, there will be an ongoing struggle to determine which content should be saved (i.e., short-term and long-term) or discarded immediately after use. These decisions are subject to considerations about access (i.e., getting back to saved content on an as-needed basis), capacity of storage options, cost of storage, and the level at which saved content is secure from outside sources.

Stewarding information is more than just saving it as files on computers, CDs, or the cloud. It also means developing an organizational system that allows the information to be found quickly. It could be as simple as a Word document set up as an annotated bibliography of sources the student has used. This allows the student to later survey those sources to see what can be of benefit in research. A more sophisticated approach would be notetaking software such as Evernote, which allows students to post a summary of each resource,

or even the resource itself attached as a PDF, along with tags that allow the student to query their resources with search terms.

Consider the possibility of guiding your students through the process of digital content curation as a way of helping them learn and practice these disciplines. Knowing how to accomplish that task is one that will serve them well throughout their personal and professional lives.

References

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Writing Assignments: A Self-Assessment for Faculty

Deidre Price

Do your writing assignments focus on the product or the process? How about your students? Where do you think their focus is?

At the end of the day, our students aren't going to take from our courses the products they developed and use them in the future. But they certainly will use and refine the skills they needed to develop that product—as they move on to other courses and well into their respective fields.

When working with online instructors, I found that many will de-emphasize the writing process. They tend to assign a major project or a final paper and all eyes are on the end goal of where students need to ultimately get. But they don't oftentimes spend a whole lot of time breaking that process down in the same way that they might in a face-to-face class.

Below you'll find a self-assessment to help you step back and reflect on how you approach writing assignments. It can serve as a helpful reminder of the various steps along the writing journey and how you can help guide students along that path.

Questions for Self-assessment

- Do you consider who your students are and their background for the course prior to developing writing assessments?
- Do you teach the writing process in your course?
- Do you teach students how to modify the steps of the writing process to play to their individual strengths or learning styles?
- Do you remind students of the importance of writing process within each assessment and include specific recommendations for each step of that process?
- Do you offer multiple means of assessment for non-drafting steps even though the ultimate product will be written?
- When do you allow student writers to see the rubric or overview of how the assignment will be evaluated and scored after the final draft is submitted? Is it early enough in the writing process to offer guidance without impeding creativity?

- Is the rubric or other evaluation tool framed in a positive way to emphasize student strengths and possibility for growth in each area?
- Have you offered a checklist for minimum requirements with ideal standards included to offer students an additional checkpoint to evaluate their own work and adjust it if necessary before sharing their writing with others?
- Do you offer students opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction during the prewriting or revision stages?
- Do you offer preliminary feedback during various stages of the writing process in order to identify students who may be getting off track and to support them in their writing process?
- Do you remain engaged during the drafting phase of the writing process so that writers do not work in complete isolation and are encouraged to pace themselves?
- Do you offer clear and specific suggestions for how writers can get editing support?
- Do you link or embed external sites that may support writers during the editing process?
- After reading a set of drafts, do you offer collective feedback through News or email so that students can gauge their progress according to the class's progress and benefit from affirmation and correction of others' general strengths and weaknesses?
- Do you ever offer such collective feedback in the form of a video or audio clip to enhance instructor presence in the online writing classroom?
- Do you offer a self-evaluation of writing assignments in quiz form so that students are encouraged to remedy any lingering editing issues and meet any unfulfilled assignment requirements prior to submitting their final draft?
- Do you provide feedback in a timely-enough manner so that writers can incorporate your response in the following assignment?

For more on writing assignments, read Writing Assignments: A Self-Evaluation for Students.

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