



Beyond Mechanics: Reframing the Pedagogy and Development of Information Literacy Teaching Tools



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, compositionist Wendy Hayden and librarian Stephanie Margolin describe how the newest movements in their respective fields helped drive their collaborative development of a rich but simple Research Toolkit. With student-facing worksheets and exercises and a Faculty Guide, it was built to meet students and faculty “where they are” and to advocate for a pedagogy that moves beyond mechanical proficiency to a deeper and more critical experience of inquiry-based research.

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In August of 2011, the *New York Times* reflected debates among academics and students in its “Room for Debate” feature, asking: Are research papers a waste of time? Has the internet made the assignment obsolete? Can shorter argumentative essays effectively replace the research paper? All of the participants in the debate agreed that the internet has changed the research paper. For some, the key issue is that students no longer visit libraries, work with primary documents, or read extensively on a topic. Rather, they go to *Google* and *Wikipedia*, copy and paste from a few articles, add some of their own words, and call it a paper (Bauerlein, 2011). Building on that idea, some pointed out how the internet has made the research process faster, which means students don't spend as much time thinking about what they read and producing thoughtful work (Delbanco, 2011).

Others still find the research paper valuable, especially since reading (regarded as a somewhat passive act) can only take one so far; writing in-depth on a topic is what promotes real learning about a subject (Fitzhugh, 2011). A student respondent insisted on the value of the research paper to her learning. She felt that criticisms of the research paper are not the fault of the genre itself, but how it is taught (Ban, 2011). She argued that teachers need to emphasize that research is not merely reporting, but coming up with an original question and thesis based on extensive reading of the topic. Only then will learning occur

(Ban, 2011). Finally, a librarian expressed a popular sentiment: the research process teaches valuable skills that shouldn't be abandoned, but the process does not necessarily have to end in a traditional research paper (Young, 2011).

The *New York Times* revisited this idea in January 2012 with “Blogs vs. Term Papers.” Columnist Richtel characterized the research paper as a genre “meant to force students to make a point, explain it, defend it, repeat it (whether in 20 pages or 5 paragraphs).” He cited the work of Cathy Davidson, who praises shorter blog assignments, and Andrea Lunsford's study on the benefits of new literacies to college students' writing (Richtel, 2012).

Recent columns in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* echoed the sentiments that while the research process is integral to student learning, the task of the research paper often hinders it because it promotes a “a smash-and-grab assault on the secondary literature” (Bousquet, 2014). High-profile plagiarism cases and studies on student research processes and source use, such as *Project Information Literacy* and *The Citation Project*, have made the debate about the value of the research paper a public one. Indeed, articles in *Inside Higher Ed* and librarian Barbara Fister's blog often cite the findings of these studies to open discussion on whether we should still be assigning what is often deemed a dead genre when it is clear that students are not learning what we want them to learn from it (Berrett, 2011; Fister, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c).

Similar debates about the value of the research paper occur in academic settings. In a 2013 presentation, Fister provocatively asserted, “Research papers should not be part of the first year experience.” She argued that we too often scaffold the *mechanics* of researching and writing when we should instead scaffold the *process*. After all, she asked, “Is research

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primarily a matter of sounding stuffy and formatting footnotes correctly?” (p. 6) Rather, she suggested it’s about the intellectual processes of asking questions and understanding arguments (“patterns in the literature”), a process often unfamiliar to students. Students often learn that the mechanics—which we define as correctness in quotation, attribution, and citation, the citation of scholarly sources, and the number of sources used, for example—are what matters because these items are more easily measured in the final product. Faculty can create a checklist and a successful paper means students checking every item on that list. This checklist mentality prevents students from using sources to create and analyze a conversation about a topic or exploring the different facets of a topic.

In the same presentation Fister (2013) also posited, “Librarians should spend as much time working with faculty as working with students” (p. 14). Fister sees librarians as change-makers who can influence faculty who can, in turn, influence their students: “We can help the faculty help one another to figure out how this kind of learning will take place across campus for all students, wherever it can be practiced in their courses, in their majors, in general education.” We can encourage our students to ask, “So what?” (p. 14).

As stakeholders and pundits alike throw their hands up in despair at the state of American higher education, the research paper is one of their targets. Academic librarians, as a profession, continue to evolve their perspective on how to work with faculty and what and how to teach students in terms of information literacy. As we write this paper, that transition is seen as a committee of Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) members has just completed a new document, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015), to replace the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, ratified in 2000. When introduced, the *Standards* officially named librarians’ teaching output as “information literacy,” rather than the “library skills” they had taught in the past. This new umbrella term, and the accompanying, detailed *Standards*, helped to better describe the role of teaching librarians and provided an opportunity for them to advocate for change within academic departments and throughout institutions (Thompson, 2002, p. 219).

According to Project Information Literacy’s 2013 report, *Learning the Ropes: How Freshmen Conduct Course Research Once They Enter College*, “Composition instructors in entry-level English courses (29%) and librarians (29%) were identified by freshmen as being most helpful with learning the college research process” (Head, p. 20). (Note: those numbers indicate the percentage of students that gave a positive response to each.) We acknowledge that being sought out by fewer than one-third of your potential students is nothing to brag about; however, according to this report, librarians and composition instructors are the most-often cited people from whom first-semester freshmen sought help.

As an instructional design librarian (Margolin) and first-year composition program director (Hayden), we both are engaged in discussing the pedagogy and academic value of the research paper and sharing our research with other faculty. We began to consider how we might develop resources for teachers and students to make the process of teaching and writing research papers more meaningful and effective. While we both believe the research paper continues to have pedagogical value, we also see a wide range of research-related assignments that can offer students similar learning opportunities. We feel having this conversation is critical and, to that end, built a tool we call the Research Toolkit, which we hope will foster still more conversation. Ultimately we believe that, much like the iterative process of scholarly research, our own process is iterative. The Research Toolkit was built to foster conversation which, in turn, helps us to further develop the Toolkit.

Initially, we conceived the project as a collection of resources and exercises to support student learning at critical phases in research-writing projects. We quickly realized how valuable our exercises could be for some instructors, who struggle with how to teach students at these key junctures. We wanted to help faculty and students see research as a process of inquiry and discovery, not a collection of information proving a narrow thesis. This paper details how we have attempted to

reframe pedagogical approaches to information literacy. As the project now stands, we see the Toolkit not only as a collection of teaching and learning tools, but also as a starting point for us to collaborate with other faculty and to advocate on behalf of better approaches to research assignments. We see the Toolkit as an opportunity to initiate change throughout our institution.

LIBRARIES AND FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION (FYC) AS COLLABORATORS

Both first-year composition (FYC) faculty and instructional librarians have struggled to legitimize their work as intellectual work integral to higher education institutions. The “one-shot library visit,” though, is often perceived by non-library faculty as an introduction to simply finding keywords or using academic databases. Seldom are library faculty called upon to collaborate with subject faculty on creating research assignments or to share their expertise in the field of information literacy pedagogy. In 2002, Thompson argued that the incorporation of the ACRL Standards by various regional accrediting bodies essentially acted as “‘barometers of acceptance’ of the mandate for information literacy/general integration of the library into the larger information community of colleges & universities” (p. 220). At the time, Thompson found that the “Middle States Commission on Higher Education has been one of the most vociferous proponents of information literacy as an intrinsic part of the standards of accreditation” (p. 222). (Note: The Middle States Commission is the accrediting body of Hunter College, our own institution.) Middle States’ integration of the ACRL Standards led to requirements to integrate information literacy into the curriculum, to mandates for collaboration between librarians and faculty, and to inclusion of information literacy measures in assessment (p. 222). Though the process might have seemed gradual at first, the ACRL Standards have changed the relationships between librarians and faculty, librarians and students, and, hopefully, between students and information.

While the ACRL Standards helped to greatly move the conversation forward, today librarians are questioning some of the concepts behind information literacy and the ACRL Standards, leading to movements like Critical Information Literacy: the idea that, in their teaching, “librarians must focus less on information transfer and more on developing critical consciousness in students” (Elmborg, 2006, p. 192). ACRL has recently finalized the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, based on the idea that in every discipline there are “threshold concepts” a student must master in order to become competent in that discipline. Information literacy is both its own discipline and interconnected with all other disciplines, and thus the six thresholds identified are goals for all students. Our own interests align with the ACRL thresholds in moving beyond mechanics toward greater critical thinking about and interaction with sources.

The field of composition has also continually examined its approach to the research paper and has also moved away from a “skills” mindset. Compositionists’ approach to the research paper has been complicated by its history of FYC being perceived as a “service course.” Teaching the research paper is seen as a service to other disciplines, but compositionists have been wary of the transfer of skills actually occurring. For some, teaching the research paper in a FYC course seems artificial. Larson (1982) famously called the research paper a “non-form of writing” (p. 811), with many compositionists agreeing that this format is essentially “genreless” (Hood, 2010). Macrorie (1988) has pointed out the inherent banality of the process of “research” itself, as it is simply “re-searching” what someone else has already “searched” (p. 14). Many would agree with Fister’s (2013) stance to eliminate this type of writing in first-year courses because disciplinary knowledge is needed for a successful research paper. For example, Downs and Wardle (2010) criticized the way traditional research papers taught in FYC lack disciplinary knowledge (p. 174), are written to a non-specialist audience (p. 174), lead to “regurgitation of sources to ‘take a stand’” (p. 177), and don’t promote new

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