Overview

Our project is designed to develop a common working language in the library and in the English Department – to ‘map the territory’ - for micro-level tasks that blur the line between writing and research. We call this set of tasks ‘information use behaviors,’ a term drawn from the third aspect of the ACRL definition of information literacy: ‘to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information’ (ACRL, 2000).

Such ‘information use behaviors’ include:

- Evaluating whether one source is better suited to a student’s writing purpose than another.
- Identifying general information sources and synthesizing sources’ ideas as a form of invention for a student’s own writing.
- Summarizing and quoting from outside sources in a way that contributes to a specific purpose in a student’s own writing, such as developing an original argument.

Project Scope

1. What are the key breakdowns in student understanding of how to effectively use sources in writing?

   Outputs
   - Interviews with 9 first-year composition instructors in Fall 2012
   - 69 pages of coded transcripts, drawn from 20 hours of interview recordings
   - 132 responses from survey of FYC students
   - 77 responses from survey of FYC instructors

2. How do instructors characterize both breakdowns & model processes in working with sources in first-year composition?

   Qualitative Coding Scheme
   - Model
   - Sticking Point – Student
   - Sticking Point – Instructor
   - Heuristic
   - Constraint

3. What heuristics have instructors developed for teaching source engagement or ‘information use’?

   Challenges to Student Understanding
   - Varying conceptions of ‘academic’ audience
   - Lack of engagement with quotes
   - Complexity not seen as a goal
   - Using tangentially related sources
   - Students don’t feel part of a larger scholarly discourse community

   Gaps between Instructor and Student Perceptions
   - Computing survey responses from instructors and students shows the areas where student instructors are more confident in their ability to work with sources than instructors believe them to be. Particular gaps were perceived in students’ ability to integrate source material without overreliance on other writers’ ideas, in transitioning between others’ ideas and students’ own ideas, and in using summary and quotation in service to a particular argument.

Implications

The language that composition instructors use to talk about research-writing processes is particularly interested in problematizing sources as authorities, a contrast to the often more empirical approach taken in library instruction, where concepts of ‘scholarly’ or ‘appropriate’ sources represent a kind of shorthand for a complex process of knowledge production.

While instruction on locating sources remains important, we see evidence for incorporating more metacognitive writing about sources in library pedagogy, borrowing heuristics from successful FYC instructors, who emphasize process:

- Using close reading techniques to evaluate sources’ arguments.
- Creating annotated bibliographies to explore decision-making with source material. What to use, and for what purpose?
- Using literature reviews as a technique for identifying a more nuanced niche for argumentation.
- Reading/writing about sources on the same topic but from different disciplines to examine how they marshal evidence.
- Reading/writing about first drafts of published work to uncover elements of process and knowledge production.

Instructor, discussing ineffective source use: But the main way that they misunderstand, I think, is that they view sources as wells of facts that they pluck out the fact, and then they pluck out another fact, and then those two facts pepper their argument with legitimacy. They largely see sources as a way to back up their argument. And for me, these qualities of effective source use are not just presenting, not just saying, ‘Yeah, these fit,’ these are in the ballpark of what I’m talking about. But having them either in a dialogue with each other saying, ‘Listen, I agree with the first part of the statement but not the second.’ The idea of shaping the information for the best use.

Findings

Identifying Areas of Intervention

Survey and interview responses point to the potential for library instruction to provide additional pedagogical support in the areas of ‘information use,’ especially in the areas of source assessment, such as determining whether a source is suited to a student’s writing purpose, and whether that information is accurate, timely, and credible.

Models of Source Engagement

Moving from opinion (‘I know’) to argument (‘I think’):
- Models vs. information
- Constraining vs. broadening
- Rhetorical vs. transformative
- Constructive vs. authoritative

Assessment-source engagement:
- Mechanics vs. Rhetorics

Frequency of Qualitative Subthemes: Models of Source Engagement

Challenges to Student Understanding

- Student vs. instructor views of sources
- Lack of engagement with quotes
- Complexity not seen as a goal
- Using tangentially related sources
- Students don’t feel part of a larger scholarly discourse community

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