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# TEACHING INFORMATION LITERACY THROUGH “UN-RESEARCH”

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Students who write essays on research topics in which no outside sources are cited and where accuracy is treated as negotiable should generally not expect to receive good grades, especially in an information literacy course. However, asking students to do just this was the first step in the “un-research project,” a twist on the familiar annotated bibliography assignment that was intended to guide students away from “satisficing” with their choice of sources and toward a better understanding of scholarship as a conversation. The project was implemented as part of a credit-bearing course in spring 2014 with promising results, including a more thoughtful choice of sources on students’ part. With some fine-tuning, the un-research project can offer an effective alternative to the traditional annotated bibliography assignment and can be adapted for a variety of instructional situations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Students who write research essays in which no outside sources are cited and where accuracy is treated as negotiable should generally not expect to receive good grades. This is especially true for essay writing in an information literacy course, where they are being taught how to effectively locate, evaluate, use and cite information appropriately. However, the results of the present study show that having students avoid using outside sources at all can be an effective method of teaching them about the role of source materials in the research process.

Like many credit-bearing information literacy courses, the culminating project for LIBR 113: Research Strategies for Education Majors was an annotated bibliography assignment. The course was offered at Coastal Carolina University, first as a face-to-face course in fall 2013, and then as a fully online course in spring 2014. The instructor observed that the quality of work submitted for the final annotated bibliography project could vary significantly from student to student. Even students who were otherwise successful in locating and citing sources fell short in evaluating those materials or articulating the role each source would play in their overall research. Essentially meaningless comments such as, "This source is good for my research because it relates to my topic," and "This is a good source because it comes from the library," were common. Some of this could be explained by students' lack of motivation, given that LIBR 113 was a one-credit, elective course. However, more engaged students were not immune to the shortcomings observed in the annotated

bibliography assignment. It was clear that changes needed to be made.

Time between fall and spring semesters was too short to design an all-new project to replace the annotated bibliography. Instead, the solution was to put a twist on the existing assignment. This adjustment was intended to help students make stronger connections between the sources they were finding and the role those sources would play in the research process. To begin, students were required to write essays based only on existing knowledge on a chosen topic. Next, students searched for supporting sources to cite and annotate. The results were promising; students better articulated the significance of sources, and showed a more thoughtful choice of sources overall. The following article discusses the reframing of the annotated bibliography assignment as the "un-research" project, including the project's positive outcomes and considerations for its future use in both credit-bearing courses and one-shot instruction sessions.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOLARSHIP AS CONVERSATION

The ability to effectively select and evaluate sources has been a central tenet of information literacy since the implementation of ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000). The traditional annotated bibliography may, in theory, be an ideal way to fulfill learning outcomes related to these areas, but where it often falls short is in helping students view scholarship as a conversation. This idea has now been articulated as a core concept of ACRL's *Framework for Information Literacy for*

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*Higher Education* (2015).

It would be unfair to say that the concept of scholarship as conversation has been missing from information literacy until now. It was represented in the ACRL *Standards* among the performance indicators for Standard Three, which focuses on the evaluation of information. There, the information literate student is described as someone who “determines whether the new knowledge has an impact on the individual’s value system and takes steps to reconcile the differences” and “validates understanding and interpretation of information through discourses with other individuals.” However, these skills, by virtue of being listed last among the performance indicators for this standard, seem to be less of a priority. This placement emphasizes summarizing and evaluating sources over seeing oneself as a participant in a scholarly conversation.

Traditional annotated bibliography assignments are designed to require students to select and evaluate sources before understanding that they are being asked to analyze and contribute to a scholarly conversation. These assignments line up well with the implied prioritization of the Standard referenced above. In the original version of the annotated bibliography assignment for LIBR 113, students were asked to choose sources that met format and quality requirements. The better annotations usually included commentary on whether sources were scholarly or passed the CRAAP test<sup>1</sup>, which had been taught to students as a method of evaluation. Examining the place of sources in the larger context of research was not a priority, and so it was rarely addressed in

students’ work.

Evaluation of information is not represented as a separate skill or concept in the ACRL *Framework*. Instead, it is woven into each of the core concepts. The *Standards* prioritize the evaluation of information over the idea of scholarship as a conversation; the *Framework* inverts this, placing scholarship as conversation as a foundational concept that must be understood in order for a novice researcher to develop his or her skills. According to the *Framework* the learner must “suspend judgment on the value of a particular piece of scholarship until the larger context for a scholarly conversation is better understood” (p. 10).

This shift in prioritization from skills to concept makes sense when considering the shortcomings of students’ work in completing an annotated bibliography assignment. It is also in line with discussions about the value of a rhetorical approach to research instruction that have been well-represented in literature published both before and after the implementation of the *Standards* (Davidson & Crateau, 1998; Deitering & Jameson, 2008; Emmons & Martin, 2002; Fister, 1993; McMillen & Hill, 2004). Students selecting sources in isolation from the idea that scholarship is a conversation fail to understand that the point of research is not to find “good” sources that lead them to the “right” answers. Rather, information-seeking is about engaging with the works of other scholars and discovering how those works converse with each other.

The un-research project was designed without knowledge of the new ACRL *Framework*, which was released in its first

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draft form around the same time the project was implemented. However, the project aligns with the *Framework's* shift in emphasis by helping students recognize that they are engaging in a conversation with the sources they select.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues with students failing to satisfactorily complete annotated bibliography assignments are not new or limited to the failure of recognizing that scholarship is a conversation. Faix (2014) documents students' failure to accurately identify the types of sources they chose for an annotated bibliography project assigned as part of an information literacy lab. In her study, students misidentified source types almost 50% of the time.

Many students who completed the annotated bibliography assignment for LIBR 113 were not able to satisfactorily articulate their evaluation of a chosen source. There are many possible reasons for this. One possibility is a phenomenon known as "satisficing," the subject of a study by Warwick, Rimmer, Blandford, Gow, & Buchanan (2009). The authors of this study found that as undergraduate students develop information-seeking expertise, they use the skills they learn not to evaluate the quality and appropriateness of a source more carefully, but instead they put forth the minimum effort required to choose sources that minimally fits the criteria laid out for the assignment. The sources students chose as part of the study tended to be of sufficient (rather than excellent) quality and the students stopped searching once the requirements had been met. The authors suggest that students who develop better

research skills use those skills to find the shortest possible route to the information they need rather than to engage in a more meaningful search for and evaluation of information.

Kim & Sin (2011) also found that students' selection of sources is based more on convenience than on an objective evaluation of information. Students in their study rated qualities such as accuracy, accessibility, ease of use, cost, and currency as important criteria for evaluating information. However, their actual selection behavior showed that students favored sources that were both accessible and familiar over those that met the valued criteria but were harder to access.

In a research report for Project Information Literacy, Head & Eisenberg (2010) took a closer look at the criteria students use in their evaluation of research materials. The authors found that students applied less rigor in evaluating library materials than online sources. The authors suggest that this may be because students assume that information found through the library has already gone through a selection process that ensures its high quality. These findings could lead to a better understanding of why so many LIBR 113 students substituted meaningful evaluation of their sources for statements such as "This is a good source because it is from the library."

Purdy (2012) used Head and Eisenberg's findings in his examination of students' choices of online resources for research. Purdy found that students prioritized ease of use, quality and the ability to easily connect to a source's full text as the main reasons for using search engines such as Google.

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Students who participated in the study were least concerned with the number of relevant results a search tool could return. The author speculates that this is because students do not see research as an exploration of knowledge, but as a task in which they are required to find sources that meet their instructor's expectations. Requiring students to explain the relevance of each source they reference can help them better understand the importance of engaging with relevant sources. This solution could help students move away from treating sources as items on a checklist (Purdy 2012).

The goal in redesigning the traditional annotated bibliography project was to prevent students from simply "satisficing," basing their choice of sources on convenience without applying meaningful evaluation or engaging with the idea of scholarship as a conversation. The "un-research" project took students through a three-part process that challenged them to treat the bibliography as something other than a simple checklist. The students would now need to more thoughtfully articulate the role those sources would play in their research. It was hoped that students would begin to develop an understanding of the rhetorical aspects of research.

## PLANNING THE UN-RESEARCH PROJECT

The first part of the "unresearch" project was a writing component that was due early in the course. Students were asked to write a brief essay on a topic of their choosing. The essay was to be written the same way they would write any formal essay for a course assignment with the following exceptions:

- Not to do any research.
- Not to cite any sources.
- Not to use any quotes.
- Not to worry (much) about accuracy.

The intention was for students to write this essay based only on their existing knowledge. Students were encouraged to be creative in how they covered any gaps in their knowledge. Being wrong or making up information to fill these gaps was not off limits.

The second part of the un-research project was an annotated bibliography. Students were asked to choose sources that would build on the information in their un-research essay. While format was to be a consideration in their choice of sources, it was not the sole focus as it had been in the past. The criteria for this part of the assignment was:

- Choose one source that supports a point you made in your original un-research essay. Explain how the source supports your original point.
- Choose one source that adds a new piece of information to your original essay. Explain how this new piece of information would affect your original work.
- Choose one source that reveals an inaccuracy in your original essay or that challenges your point of view. Explain how you would incorporate this source into your essay.
- Choose a quote from one source that would enhance your essay. Explain how you would use the

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quote in a revised draft of your essay.

This new set of criteria was intended to challenge students to look more closely at the sources they were choosing and to have them articulate, in carefully directed ways, how the source enhanced or changed their thinking about their chosen topic. These questions were also meant to contribute to students' understanding of scholarship as a conversation by deliberately asking them to choose at least one source that challenged their point of view and consider how they would use such a source as part of their research. As students began forming their own thoughts on the topic, they would also need to acknowledge and negotiate meaning from competing perspectives found in the literature.

The final part of the project was a brief reflection on the research process; students were asked to consider the following questions:

- What level of expertise do you feel you had about your topic when you wrote the original essay? Did you feel comfortable writing about the topic without doing additional research? Were there any pieces of information you included in the original essay that you were not sure about?
  - What did you learn about your topic through the research you did? How did the sources you found change your understanding about your topic?
  - What further research, if any, would you want to do to further your understanding of this topic?
- Would you recommend your original essay as a source for someone doing research on the topic? Would you recommend a revised version of your essay (with the information from the sources you gathered for the annotated bibliography) as a source? Why or why not?

This reflection piece made it necessary for students to take their thinking about their research process a step further. Rather than acting as passive consumers of information, students were asked to articulate how their research affected their understanding of the topic as a whole (rather than just on a source-by-source basis) and whether they felt their understanding of the topic was complete. Engaging with these questions also guided students toward a better understanding of the work they had produced as a potential source for other researchers.

## IMPLEMENTING THE UN-RESEARCH PROJECT

The un-research project was implemented in the fully online section of LIBR 113 in spring 2014. This half-semester course was elective; enrollment was low with only seven students. The un-research essay was introduced to students early on. There was little evidence that students were confused by the essay and its unusual requirements regarding outside research. Students generally chose research topics they were already working on for other assignments rather than topics of personal interest to them. As a result, their topics were easily researchable.

The directions for the assignments made

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clear to students that they were not being graded on accuracy. They could include questionable information and they were encouraged to be creative rather than break the "rules" of the assignment by using outside sources for verification. They could even fabricate evidence to hide gaps in their knowledge. A few students took advantage of this opportunity for creativity by including information that seemed to stretch credibility. One unanticipated benefit was that the instructor found the grading process to be both entertaining and educational.

Most students adhered to the rule of writing the essay as they would any other assignment, keeping their tone appropriately formal and authoritative. However, a few students wrote the essay as a more informal narrative, explaining the reasons behind their choice of topic and why they felt it was appropriate for the project. This resulted in some minor deduction of points, but was the only major error observed in the completion of this part of the project. This might be avoided in the future by making an example essay available and requiring students to read it before attempting the assignment.

Two-thirds of the way through the course, students were asked to submit a rough draft of citations and annotations for two-to-three of the five sources that were required for the final annotated bibliography. From these rough drafts, the instructor could judge how well students understood the assignment directions and suggest adjustments while there was still time.

The most common error in the rough drafts was in labeling. Students were asked to include two labels for each source. The first indicated what type of source they were

citing. The second indicated which of the required criteria the source was intended to fulfill. While students were generally successful in citing a variety of sources, the labels indicating the type of source were often missing or inaccurate. The citations also showed many of the common errors observed in past iterations of the assignment, usually of the type associated with citation generators.

Though the inaccuracy of the labeling and citation was disappointing, the choice of sources was not. In the past, when students had been asked to choose sources based on format, their choices often seemed to be informed by whatever came up first in a keyword search. The relevance of the source was not a priority. By emphasizing format less, students chose more relevant sources.

By using the revised criteria to make their choices, students were able to better articulate the connections between each source and the chosen research topic. The more accomplished students were able to indicate where the new sources could be used to support a point they had made or add new information. Unfortunately, students often failed to identify an actual quote from the source they had chosen to fulfill the related criterion. A slight rewording of the assignment directions could help make this requirement clearer in the future. Students' work generally showed evidence that changes to the assignment led to the desired improvements.

The final reflection proved to be the most illuminating piece of the un-research assignment; students' views on their level of expertise at the beginning and end of the project were particularly interesting. Most



students expressed that they felt relatively comfortable with their level of expertise on their topic when writing only from existing knowledge. Writing about topics they were already learning about elsewhere or that genuinely interested them seemed to make them feel adequate to the task of writing a brief essay about the topic. They likely would have felt less comfortable if the essay had been written on a topic they knew very little about or were not interested in.

The students generally advised caution to researchers who might want to use their original essay as a source, pointing out that without citations, there would be no way for them to verify the accuracy of the information. These brief revelations were valuable for illustrating what students had learned about evaluating sources. They also showed that students were capable of thinking of themselves as producers of information and contributors to a scholarly conversation.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Following the spring 2014 semester, the author planned improvements for use of the un-research project the next year. However, the improvements were not implemented due to a job change for the instructor and the subsequent cancellation of the scheduled course. Plans for changes included shaping the content of the course so that it more clearly connected to the un-research project. The original course used the different formats of information as an organizing principle. For example, one week of the course was spent on discussing characteristics of scholarly journals, how to find them, and their role in the research process. This focus better matched the

original annotated bibliography assignment where students based their choice of sources primarily on format. Placing more emphasis on the rhetorical aspects of research might have helped students better understand the purpose of the un-research assignment.

Another change would have required students to think about which types of sources would be most appropriate for their chosen research topic and why. This change would give students more flexibility in their search while also challenging the notion that research can or should be limited to the use of certain types of sources.

The time constraints of the course were such that it was not possible to have students rewrite the essay to incorporate the sources they found. In a course where time is less of an issue, this could be a logical and worthwhile final step to the un-research process.

The un-research project can easily be implemented as part of a standalone online or in-person information literacy course. Librarians can also integrate brief exercises into one-shot session that include elements of the full un-research project. An example exercise might start with students outlining what they already know about their research topic. At the end of the session, students can articulate how a source they found might fulfill one of the criteria from the un-research project. Librarians might also work closely with faculty to make elements of the un-research project a bigger part of the overall research assignment.

## CONCLUSION

The un-research project led to promising

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changes in the quality of students' work with regard to their ability to evaluate sources and think of scholarship as a conversation. Moving away from assignments that compel students to treat the sources they find as items on a checklist, with little or no relationship to the end product, can help them value finding and using sources that meet specific rhetorical needs. The un-research project is a step in this direction.

## NOTE

1. The CRAAP Test, originally developed by Sarah Blakeslee at California State University Chico, is a rubric commonly used by many librarians in teaching students the criteria needed for the evaluation of sources. CRAAP stands for Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose.

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