Visibility and Intentionality: Assessing the Research Process through Student Research Narratives

Melanie Sellar, Education Services Librarian, Marymount College
Patrick McMahon, Professor and English Program Coordinator, Marymount College
Andrew Ogilvie, Adjunct Professor of English, Marymount College
Mary McMillan, Director of Library Services, Marymount College

Abstract

Small innovations at Marymount College (California) are leading to far reaching assessment and curricular reforms of the information literacy (IL) program within the institution. A key tool to these reformations has been the student research narrative - a seemingly simple, yet potentially very powerful pedagogical and assessment tool. Use of these narratives allows educators to pivot information literacy assessment away from examining exclusively end products (e.g. final papers) -- which obscure whether the critical thinking skills espoused by the ACRL standards are actually being exercised -- to piloting assessments that allow us to encourage and evidence student thinking about their research process. In this session participants learned about the value of research narratives to learners and educators alike, they compared evidence of student learning in end products versus research narratives, and they acquired strategies for how to launch this pedagogy collaboratively with writing faculty at their own institutions.

Discussion

Introduction

Information literacy (IL) programs have achieved a certain maturity and stability within composition programs in institutions across the country. A scan of the LIS literature and conference programs reveals that IL practitioners' focus seems to now center on how to determine if students are actually learning what we are teaching in those programs– a question that reflects a national concern in higher education. While IL practitioners have established a repertoire of assessment tools that attempt to gauge student learning – such as pre- and post-tests, citation analysis, and portfolios – these methods rarely provide a window into students' thinking, nor do they engage students in reflection on their own research process.

In spring 2011 when Marymount College (Los Angeles) initiated an IL program review within the freshman composition sequence, they wrestled with the challenge of how to make student thinking about the research process visible. Tackling this challenge collaboratively with composition faculty, they began to pivot information literacy assessment away from examining exclusively end products (i.e. final papers) -- which obscure whether or not the critical thinking skills espoused by the ACRL standards are actually exercised -- to piloting *research narratives,*

an assessment and pedagogical tool that they believed would allow them to evidence and encourage student thinking about their research process.

Research narratives were piloted in a sample of freshman composition courses to generate materials for program review. The assessment team found that, indeed, the narratives provided insight into students' research skills, behaviors, and attitudes that could not be seen from reading traditional research papers alone. Based upon this success, the pilot was extended to multiple composition courses in fall 2012 and the librarians/composition team began growing awareness and appreciation of this tool across disciplines.

Description

Librarian and composition faculty from the pilot initiative at Marymount College presented in this session, each speaking uniquely from their individual roles and tenure within the institution. The librarians began by providing context about the college's history of IL instruction and accompanying assessment approaches since integrating with composition ten years ago. While they considered themselves fortunate to have two IL workshops in freshmen composition, both they and the composition faculty felt that students were not applying the skills and concepts of those workshops to their research papers. The structure of the composition course did not seem to strongly support student application of IL, and the assessment tools they had been using were not providing insight into the critical thinking side of IL that they library aspired to inculcate.

The summer 2011 freshmen composition program review was regarded as an opportunity by both to pilot a novel tool that might support greater student engagement with the research process, and give them greater insight into student thinking. The tool that the English Program Coordinator introduced to the assessment team was the *research narrative*, which has its roots in literacy narratives from composition scholarship.

These narratives, the presenters explained, embrace the notion of meta-cognition, or "learning to learn" by requiring that students reflect critically on their research process. Narratives situate students as the expert by giving them the freedom to write using the first-person voice and the discretion to select and comment upon those experiences from their research process they feel are most significant to them. Composition faculty argued that first-person writing is also a more natural place for freshmen to write from as they are only beginning to enter and understand formal academic discourse.

After explaining the theoretical foundations and perceived benefits of research narratives, the presenters circulated pairs of research papers and research narratives to the session participants for them to skim and compare at their tables. Participants were given a sample holistic IL rubric for freshmen composition to help guide them in scanning for IL skills and behaviors. After skimming the pairs individually, participants shared and discussed what differences they observed between the end-product research papers and the reflective research narratives with their table and then with the session at-large.

The Marymount College presenters concluded the session by sharing some results from their IL program review using these research narratives. Librarians were particularly struck by the articulation of research being simply a matter of clicking and collecting resources, and the idea that students saw themselves already as research experts who needed no further development. Student allegiance to Google was overwhelming strong, and they often felt resentment that they should need to use other tools or ask for help. As a result of this assessment, composition faculty and librarians piloted curricular changes in the freshmen courses this past academic year, which included a required research narrative that asked students to directly apply and reflect upon the IL skills and concepts from the library workshops.

Key Points

The presenters articulated three goals for the session: establish the value of letting students reflect on their learning via narratives; compare evidence of student learning in end products versus research narratives; impart strategies for launching initial discussions with instructors to collaboratively encourage student reflection on the research process. Key points related to these goals are summarized below.

The introduction to the session established the theoretical basis of the narrative and Marymount's rationale for selecting this approach. It was argued that narratives help instructors make visible students' thinking processes, attitudes, and behaviors regarding research.

Session participants then had the opportunity to skim read and compare for themselves pairs of research papers with research narratives sampled from Marymount's freshmen composition program. The conversation at the tables was lively (although all wished for more time) and the presenters roamed the room to facilitate the activity and answer questions.

Thematically, the observations that participants shared post-activity individually or at-large might be summarized as follows:

- Narrative writing clearly showed students' personalities and opinions, and students seemed more comfortable and natural in that voice
- Narratives foreground student assumptions and values about the research process
- Reading narratives was more engaging than reading normal academic papers
- One can see certain IL skills in action by looking at the works cited and how sources are used in-text in research papers, but narratives seem to have the potential to illuminate the why and how a student came to use a particular tool or choose a particular source

Some discussion about Google ensued when participants noticed the extent to which non-library database sources were selected by students. The Marymount Librarians advocated for teaching freshmen students how to intelligently use Google, moving them beyond a simple basic search. They argued that for freshmen, beginning with the tool they value most and building upon that to introduce other "search engines" was an appropriate starting place in the curriculum.

In their view, critical thinking about sources is more important than heralding specific kinds of tools.

Although Marymount College is implementing research narratives at a program level, they argued that one can pilot change in a single course. If a librarian has an established relationship with a particular faculty member in composition or another discipline, starting with a single course is an achievable, realistic first step in introducing research narratives into the IL curriculum. After the session ended, many participants approached the presenters enthusiastically proclaiming their interest in transforming their composition relationship following the presenter's advice.

References

Detmering, R., & Johnson, A. (2012). Research papers have always seemed rather daunting: Information literacy narratives and the student research experience. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, *12*(1), 5-22.

Fister, B. (1993).Teaching the rhetorical dimensions of research.*Research Strategies*, *11*(4), 211-219.

Fluk, L. (2009). The narrative of research as a tool of pedagogy and assessment: A literature review. *In Transit: The LaGuardia Journal on Teaching and Learning*, *9*(4), 40-56.

Jacobs, H., & Jacobs, D. (2009). Transforming the one-shot library session into pedagogical collaboration: Information literacy and the English composition classroom. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, *49*(1), 72-82.

Sellar, M. (2012, April). Information Literacy Narratives. *Information Literacy Narratives*. Retrieved from http://infoliteracynarratives.wordpress.com/