Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Classics

Why Do I Have to Write That?: Compositionists Identify Disconnects between Student and Instructor Conceptions of Research Writing that Can Inform Teaching

A Review of:
Schwegler, R. A., and Shamoon, L. K. (1982). The aims and process of the research paper. *College English, 44*(8), 817-824.

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Abstract

Objectives – This classic article discusses research-based writing assignments. Schwegler and Shamoon sought to identify differences between college students' and college instructors' conceptions of research and research paper assignments, particularly in terms of their purpose and process. The authors also sought to identify common features of academic research writing that could inform writing instruction about research writing.

Design – Qualitative interviews with college instructors and students about their views of the research process and about forms of research writing. Instructors were also interviewed about evaluation standards for academic research papers.

Setting – Unspecified, though the description suggests a college or university in the United States.

Subjects – College instructors and college students. (Number of subjects unspecified.)

Methods – The authors, a university writing program director and a writing program instructor, conducted one-on-one interviews with college instructors and students about their views of research and the research paper. Questions focused on conceptions of the research process, the purposes of research, and the forms that research writing takes. Instructors were also asked about standards for effective evaluation of research papers.

The limited description of the research methods and interview questions employed in

this study hinder the ability to critically assess its validity and reliability. Potential limitations of the study, such as selection bias or unclear wording of interview questions, cannot be adequately assessed based on the provided information. The authors also do not identify limitations of their study. As is discussed in more detail in this review's commentary, the study does not conform to the conventions of most research studies from the behavioral, health, physical, and social sciences. The authors' methods, however, may be better understood in light of particular disciplinary approaches and debates in Composition Studies.

Main Results – Interviewees' responses illustrated notable differences between college instructors' and college students' conceptions of the process, purpose, forms, and audiences of research paper assignments. While instructors understood the research paper to be argumentative, analytical, and interpretive, students generally described it as informative and factual. Students, when asked why research papers are assigned, identified purposes such as learning more about a topic, demonstrating one's knowledge, or learning to use the library. Instructors indicated that the purpose of the research paper includes testing a theory, building on previous research, and exploring a problem that has been presented by other research or events (p. 819). At the same time, most instructors described research as an ongoing pursuit of "an elusive truth" (p. 819), rather than as primarily factual in nature. According to Schwegler and Shamoon, instructors also indicated during interviews that research and writing involve a clear though complex pattern that is evident in the structure and conventions of research papers. For example, the research process usually begins with activities like reading, note-taking, identifying problems with and gaps in current research, and conversing with colleagues. These instructors also reported that writing conventions which are implicitly understood in their fields are used by other scholars to evaluate their peers' work.

Reflecting on these interview responses, Schwegler and Shamoon suggest that

pedagogical approaches to writing instruction can be informed both by acknowledging disparities in students' and instructors' conceptions of research and by identifying shared characteristics of academic writing. The authors therefore make several general observations about the nature of professional research papers and describe the structure and conventions of academic research papers. They conclude that the structure of scholarly research papers across the disciplines reflects the research process. Such a paper opens with identification of a research problem and a review of current knowledge and is followed by a variation of four possible patterns: 1) Review of research, 2) Application or implementation of a theory, 3) Refute, refine, or replicate prior research, and 4) Testing a hypothesis (pp. 822-823). Schwegler and Shamoon indicate that the key features of scholars' writings are also apparent in student research papers which instructors evaluate as highly-ranked and absent in lower-ranked papers. Furthermore, they provide an appendix that outlines the essential textual features of a research paper (Appendix A) (p. 822). It is unclear, however, if these descriptions of scholarly research writing are based on the instructor interviews or on other sources, such as previous analytical studies or an analysis of academic research papers from various disciplines. The researchers do not articulate the specific methods used to arrive at their generalizations.

Conclusion – The authors conclude that students' and instructors' differing conceptions of the research process and the research paper have important implications for writing instruction. Many of the interviewed instructors described research as involving methods that are quite different from those needed for most research paper assignments. The discrepancies between class assignments and academics' approaches to research suggests that differences in instructors' and students' views of research often are not addressed in the design of research paper assignments. Instructors who teach the research paper should ensure that the purpose, structure, and style of assignments reflect what content-area instructors will expect from

students. Schwegler and Shamoon argue that because the basic conventions of the research paper generally apply across disciplines, instruction about those conventions can be integrated into composition courses and lower-level undergraduate courses. Such an approach can assist students in better understanding and approaching research writing as would a scholar in the given discipline.

Commentary

Schwegler and Shamoon's 1982 article was published during the rise of the Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) movement in higher education. College writing programs, many of which had been established in the 1960s and 1970s, were recognizing that for writing instruction to be most effective and meaningful it must be taken beyond the freshmen composition course and integrated throughout curricula. Many college writing programs therefore were developing Writing across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) programs and initiatives. For librarians this may call to mind recent and ongoing efforts to integrate information literacy into undergraduate education.

Schwegler and Shamoon's 1982 study reflects concerns of writing instructors and WAC proponents frustrated by the limitations of the generic research paper and the mandatory freshman composition course. The questionable value of the standard research paper assignment would gain further attention that same year with Richard Larson's frequently cited article "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-form of Writing" (1982). Larson's description of the standard research paper assignment as a decontextualized, artificial, and inauthentic writing task that does not foster genuine inquiry still resonates with college teachers across academic fields.

The WAC movement, which would expand significantly in the 1980s and 1990s, has greatly influenced – and continues to shape – undergraduate curricula and writing programs. Nonetheless, the generic research

paper remains a common assignment, and debates about if or where "the research paper" should exist in undergraduate curricula remain part of an ongoing debate in composition studies (e.g. Larson, 1982; Schwegler & Shamoon, 1982; Ballenger, 1999; Davis & Shadle, 2000; McDonald, 2000; Mezler & Zemliansky, 2003; Hood, 2010). Schwegler and Shamoon's "The Aims and Process of the Research Paper" (1982) is repeatedly cited within such discussions, as Schwegler and Shamoon sought to examine the deeper roots of the research paper's flaws.

Disciplinary Contexts & Research Methods

Schwegler and Shamoon's study, while most often cited in the composition studies literature, has also received the attention of some librarians and library and information science scholars interested in information literacy and student information seeking behaviors (Sheridan, 1992; Fister, 1993; Hubbard, 1995; Rabinowitz, 2000; Nutefall & Ryder, 2010). The implications of Schwegler and Shamoon's article for information literacy and library instructional services, however, are more far reaching than is suggested by the frequency with which the article is cited in the library science literature. As information literacy education moves to more collaborative, integrated models and shifts its focus from more mechanical aspects of information seeking to higher order skills like critical thinking, rhetorical analysis, and source use, the cross-disciplinary relevance of studies like Schwegler and Shamoon's becomes increasingly evident.

Interdisciplinary approaches, of course, often require some understanding of critical frameworks and methods common within various disciplines. Schwegler and Shamoon's work may be better understood when contextualized within its disciplinary and sociohistorical origins. Many empirical researchers might give pause when considering Schwegler and Shamoon's research methods, which, as the abstract above indicates, remain largely unclear. The authors provide little description of who the subjects were or how they were chosen. Nor do they

identify the specific interview questions posed or the duration of the interviews. Because of this lack of detail, the study cannot be replicated and specific limitations in the research design and findings are difficult to pinpoint.

For most researchers in library and information sciences, and for many in composition studies, this raises questions of validity and reliability. Yet, it is important to recognize the sociohistorical moment in composition studies and in higher education when this publication appears. Throughout composition studies' (relatively short) history as an academic discipline, a tension has existed among compositionists who view their research and scholarship in more humanistic or more empirical terms. Many in the discipline argue that the notion of empiricism as a means for representing human experience fully and accurately is a myth sometimes used to obscure research biases, cultural biases, and the varied nature of human experience (Johanek, 2000; Driscoll, 2009). Along with this critique, some composition researchers believe that human experiences such as literacy development are best expressed through narrative and descriptions of individual experiences rather than through quantified data (Berkenkotter, 1993; Roberts-Miller, 2002; Driscoll, 2009). Others contend that for research to be most meaningful it must be replicable and data-driven (Johanek, 2000; Haswell, 2005; Discoll & Perdue, 2012). The scope of this article does not allow for a detailed discussion of this debate, but the lack of critique leveled at Schwegler and Shamoon's methods may be better understood in light of these variations in composition research methods.

Related Research Studies

Despite the methodological limitations of Schwegler and Shamoon's study, other research from both composition studies and library and information sciences has yielded similar results. While the research methods of these different studies vary, their findings appear fairly consistent and suggest legitimacy in Schwegler and Shamoon's main assertions.

Among the earliest of these related studies is that of the compositionists Nelson & Hayes (1988). In a two-part study, they examined students' and instructors' views of and approaches to research through student writing process logs, instructor interviews, and analysis of research assignment prompts. Similar to Schwegler & Shamoon, Nelson and Hayes found that most students view research as an act of fact-finding and apply "low-investment" strategies which reflect a fact-finding approach to information gathering. In the first of their two-part study, however, advanced students (upper classmen and graduate students) usually applied "high-investment" research strategies which were driven by inquiry into and analysis of issues, in contrast to college freshmen.

Perhaps even more significant are the results from the second part of Nelson and Hayes (1988) study, in which student research strategies were analyzed alongside the related assignments. The results indicate that the nature of assignments and accompanying instruction powerfully influence students' research processes. Like the advanced students of the study's first portion, students who were given scaffolded assignments that emphasized process and incorporated instructor feedback at various stages tended to take an issue- and analysis-driven approach to research. These individuals also invested more time and effort in their work. This stood in contrast to the tendency of most students (whose assignments did not incorporate scaffolding or instructor feedback) to focus on information gathering and "low-investment" strategies. (Nelson & Hayes, 1988).

Limberg, through phenomenological research, has similarly noted that students tend to understand research in terms of fact-finding. In a series of interviews with high school seniors at various stages in completing a research assignment, Limberg (1999) identified three common ways students experienced information seeking and use: as fact-finding, as balancing information in order to choose the appropriate information, and as scrutinizing and analyzing. This third category of information use, scrutinizing and analyzing,

was the least common conception. Students' understanding of information seeking and use appeared to correspond with their research strategies: those who focused on discrete pieces of information and "surface" approaches to research described their purpose as fact-finding; those who took a "deep or holistic approach" which analyzed and related sources to one another perceived their research purpose in those terms. Limberg (1999) has noted important implications these findings have for pedagogy, particularly library instruction, which often focuses primarily on tools for locating sources and which may influence students' understandings of information seeking (p. 11).

Fortunately, student perceptions of the research process are not necessarily fixed, and instruction may facilitate more sophisticated understanding of information use. This is evident in Limberg, et al.'s three related research studies (2008), each of which indicated that a focus on learning goals and content fosters more sophisticated practices of information seeking and use. Instruction that encouraged more complex understanding of and approaches to research stressed the quality of research questions, negotiation of learning goals between students and teachers, and source evaluation. Use of technological tools, on the other hand, tended to strengthen an orientation toward procedure and skills. Pedagogy's influence on student views of research is also supported by Nelson and Hayes' (1988) observations about assignment design and further research by Limberg and others (Nelson, 1990; Limberg & Sundin, 2006; Limberg, Alexandersson, Lantz-Andersson, & Folkesson, 2008; Holliday & Rogers, 2013,).

Despite the teaching which emphasizes that an inquiry-based approach to research appears to be more effective in encouraging deeper engagement with research writing, in practice both students and instructors appear to focus more on procedure and skills than on knowledge content or learning process. In Limberg and Sundin's 2006 study, instructors' intended learning goals, which were more process-centered, usually did not align with their pedagogical practices. Interviews with librarians and teachers at schools from preschool to universities reflected great discrepancies between instructional content and the assessment criteria used to determine the quality of students' information seeking. While instruction tended to focus on the procedures of locating information, the assessment criteria centered on more complex abilities related to source use such as reading and understanding source content, critically evaluating information, and synthesizing information from various sources. (Limberg & Sundin, 2006). This suggests that what teachers wanted students to learn was not actually taught.

Holliday and Rogers' (2013) observational study of research instruction in a college writing course is further evidence that college educators may reinforce a conception of research as fact-finding. The researchers noted that the majority of instructors' course content and writing assignments described sources as objects (or containers of facts), while placing little emphasis on the act of learning about sources. Holliday and Rogers (2013), reflecting on both Limberg and Sundin's findings (2006) and their own observational study, conclude that classroom discourse on the research process may influence how students view research and writing. More specifically, an emphasis on "finding sources" may limit student engagement with research as a process of inquiry.

In addition to reinforcing students' views of research as fact-finding, tool-based instruction may also encourage students to prioritize the end product of research over its process. Through interviews and process logs from college freshmen completing writing assignments, Nelson (1990) found that students concentrate more on the final product than on process. In doing so, students often develop shortcuts for completing assignments that circumvent the learning processes their instructors intended for them. However, Nelson (1990) also found that assignment design can facilitate student engagement with the writing and learning process, particularly through the use of evaluation criteria, instructor feedback, instructions, and other

assignment-related support materials. These results align with her earlier study, discussed above (Nelson & Hayes, 1988).

The student concern with product over process appears closely tied to an emphasis on grades. In interviews about research paper assignments, college students identified grades as their chief concern and described strategies for determining an instructor's expectations and the most time- and energy-efficient way to receive an acceptable grade (Valentine, 2001). Some students only looked at the objective criteria of their assignments, such as the number of required pages and sources (Valentine, 2001, p. 110). Gathering the appropriate number of sources or the appropriate types of sources (e.g., scholarly articles, books) was perceived to be more important than the process of inquiry or knowledge production. This suggests an emphasis on objective assignment criteria over the purpose and process of a research paper again mirror a fact-finding approach to research.

The idea that students tend to apply limited rhetorical analysis or critical thought to research writing assignments is further supported by studies of plagiarism. Howard, Rodrigue, & Serviss (2010), in a detailed analysis of 18 college student papers, found that plagiarism and patchwork are commonplace. The authors contend that the frequency of student plagiarism and patchwork writing may be due more to a lack of engaging with and understanding sources, rather than to an attempt to cheat, since there was little evidence that students comprehended the content of their information sources (Howard, Rodrigue, & Serviss, 2010). In keeping with the idea that students often approach research writing as a process of uncritically patching together facts, Head and Eisenberg (2010) found that students tend to consistently use the same research strategies and sources, regardless of the task at hand (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). The inclination to apply the same search strategies regardless of rhetorical purpose again may reflect a view of research as an act of fact-gathering.

Implications for Information Literacy Instruction

These various studies have strong, and generally consistent, implications for information literacy education. Instructors across disciplines, including writing and library instructors, often experience a disconnect between how they and their students approach research and information use. This discrepancy is often evident in student research papers that fall short of instructor expectations. In practice, however, instruction often does not encourage the more inquiry-based approach that many educators hope students will apply to research.

The studies discussed above indicate that pedagogies which represent and support student research as a recursive process of inquiry, critical thinking, and knowledge production can help students understand research in the terms of inquiry and analysis which appear to concern instructors most. Effective pedagogical practices include: breaking down the research process through staged assignments and learning activities, providing instructor feedback throughout the learning process, emphasizing the value of genuine questions and investigation, and inviting students to reflect on their own learning and research process. In contrast, the tool-based instruction that traditionally has characterized information literacy instruction may communicate to students that research is a mere matter of gathering sources to insert into a paper.

As instruction librarians now often argue, the complex skills needed for meaningful engagement with research indicate that for information literacy education to be most effective it must be integrated into assignments and course content, rather than limited to one or two class sessions. As librarians experience considerable challenges in shifting from traditional instructional models to more collaborative partnerships, many librarians are redefining the role and relevance of their instructional services. Such efforts, occurring both within and beyond library walls, will, it is hoped, continue to grow substantially.

The need to develop more collaborative and cross-disciplinary partnerships is also true for researchers of composition studies and information sciences. The studies discussed above emerge primarily from these two fields. Given the strong connections between these various studies, it is notable that research in these disciplines has not intersected more often. While interdisciplinary effort is increasing, citation patterns, along with discussions with both librarians and writing instructors, suggest that these collaborations are still limited. As the information literacy movement places increasing emphasis on critical thinking, transferable skills, and research within the disciplines and on information literacy integration, the time appears ripe for cultivating more cross-disciplinary conversations and research.

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