Incorporating Secondary Sources in the Freshman Writing Classroom

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Introduction

Students understand that secondary sources can include books, articles, newspapers, and other media. But finding the right secondary source for the right situation involves:

- Understanding written work as participating in a wider conversation with other writers;
- Identifying which sources are most useful in constructing and supporting an argument;
- Engaging with secondary sources in a way that clarifies arguments without obstructing or diminishing the writer’s voice.

These are each crucial steps in the transition to college-level composition.

Objectives

As instructors, the way we teach the use of secondary sources can be haphazard. Our goal is to create reproducible teaching and assessment strategies in order to determine which practices are most effective in helping our students develop this writing skill.

To that end, we proposed to:

- Assess baseline competency and prior experience.
- Research, develop, and implement teaching strategies and exercises in accord with the results of the baseline assessment.
- Create graded assignments that provide opportunities to put learned skills into practice.
- Design a rubric that will assist in evaluating performance based on an acceptable standard of success.

Methods

- Analyze quantitative data from two anonymous surveys, one administered prior to instruction and one after.
- Apply rubric to student essays in order to assess understanding of and skill in using secondary sources in a systematic way.
- Facilitate and observe in-class discussion in order to develop and assess student confidence and familiarity.

Survey

A Likert-scale survey was administered before and after instruction in both classes. The scale was numbered 1 through 5, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree." Radus’s class included nine students, while Rosenberg’s included sixteen.

Sample Questions

1. I understand what counts as a secondary source in my written work.
2. I am confident in my ability to use secondary sources in my written work.
3. The secondary sources I use in my written work are authoritative.
4. I am comfortable disagreeing with the secondary sources I use in my work.

Lectures, Prompts, and Exercises

In-class and take-home writing workshops were designed as low-stakes assignments meant to facilitate student comfort and competency with the rudiments of incorporating secondary sources.

- Handouts and workshops in which students are taught proper MLA style, citation format, and how to create annotated bibliographies.
- Sequential writing assignments in which students are tasked with paraphrasing others’ arguments and engaging with them in their own words.

In-class group work and formal essay prompts were designed as higher-stakes assignments meant to demonstrate student progress and achievement.

- Group work tasked students with presenting on secondary sources by explaining their arguments and their relevance to primary texts.
- Sample Rosenberg essay prompt: Productively relate some of the issues raised by Foucault in the "Panopticism" chapter of Discipline and Punish to the hell imagined in Sartre’s No Exit.

Rubric

A rubric was created to quantify student achievement and to provide students with a clear sense of our expectations.

Results and Conclusions

Survey Results

- Students gained a better understanding of what counts as a secondary source.
- Students became more confident in their ability to use secondary sources.
- Students became more adept at evaluating the merits of secondary sources.
- Students gained a better sense of how to disagree productively with sources.

Rubric Results (so far in Radus’s class of 9 students)

Example 1

As Hillary Wysong expresses in her article Captivity and Conversion, it is this time period that narratives of female captives were used to impose the will of the 'savage' ways of Native American cultures and "perpetuate the remembrance of the atrocities of the savages in former times" (Wysong 66). These violent and embittered stories were written to show the inhuman white aesthetic how dangerous and vile the indigenous people of this land were and the immediate need for their removal. The presence of this denigrated white woman living in the middle of a 2/3/6/6 = 17

Example 2

White Beaver gives Jemison's transformation from white society to Seneca culture a negative connotation. Hillary Wysong argues that Jemison "is a woman who has chosen to align herself with Native cultural traditions". With nothing but her blue eyes and pale skin to portray her white heritage, Jemison has completely acquired a Native American character. Although Source states that she may have been better off in a white

Lesson Learned and Next Steps

- Being clear about why certain skills are important—not just how to achieve them—motivates students to learn in a self-directed fashion.
- This project has revealed that best practices (in our classrooms) in teaching this skill approach incorporating secondary sources as a sequential process
- The rubric will be used to evaluate more essays, providing additional data with which to track and quantify student progress. The rubric will also be integrated into a grading system that accounts for other necessary components of college-level composition.
- Additional activities and exercises will be devised to target specific areas that need improvement, for individual students or for a whole class.