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 worksheets 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.

	Poor (1)	Sufficient (2)	Excellent (3)
Formatting Sources (x1)	The essay contains numerous errors in its attempt to format sources properly. The format of secondary sources detracts from reader comprehension.	The essay's formatting of secondary sources is flawed, but does not mar meaning or comprehension. The essay reveals a good-faith attempt to format sources properly.	The essay demonstrates mastery in formatting secondary sources. All formatting guidelines in the handout "Rules for Incorporating Evidence" are followed.
Introducing Sources (x1)	The essay does not introduce secondary sources using appropriate attributive and contextual markers. Essay provides no context for understanding provenance or utility of secondary source.	The essay attempts to introduce sources using attributive and contextual markers, but the result is awkward at the level of tone, syntax, or meaning.	The essay properly introduces secondary sources using attributive and contextual markers as outlined in "Rules for Incorporating Evidence."
Analyzing Sources (x2)	The essay does not attempt to analyze any secondary sources. When sources are used, they are isolated from the rest of the essay. Both the utility and meaning of the sources to the student's claims are presumed self-evident.	The essay attempts to analyze secondary sources properly but does not accomplish all three goals described in "Excellent" category. The secondary source is not properly contextualized within the student's argument.	The essay analyzes secondary sources by accomplishing three related goals: one, translating sources into one's own words; two, relating the source's material to one's own ideas; and three, acknowledging how the source works to support or complicate one's claim.
Controlling Sources (x2)	The essay is entirely overrun by the secondary sources it uses. A majority of the essay consists of summaries or the uncritical ventriloquizing of secondary sources. Original thoughts and voice are replaced by those of sources.	The essay attempts to control its secondary sources, but those sources occasionally dominate the author's own voice and ideas. At times, the essay reads like a mere summary of secondary sources rather than an engagement with them.	The essay demonstrates thorough control over the secondary sources used. The author's voice and ideas are not subordinate to those of his/her secondary sources. All sources are used *in the service of* establishing the author's goals.

Results and Conclusions

Survey Results

- Radus Pre (n=9)
- Radus Post (n=9)
- Rosenberg Pre (n=16)
- Rosenberg Post (n=16)
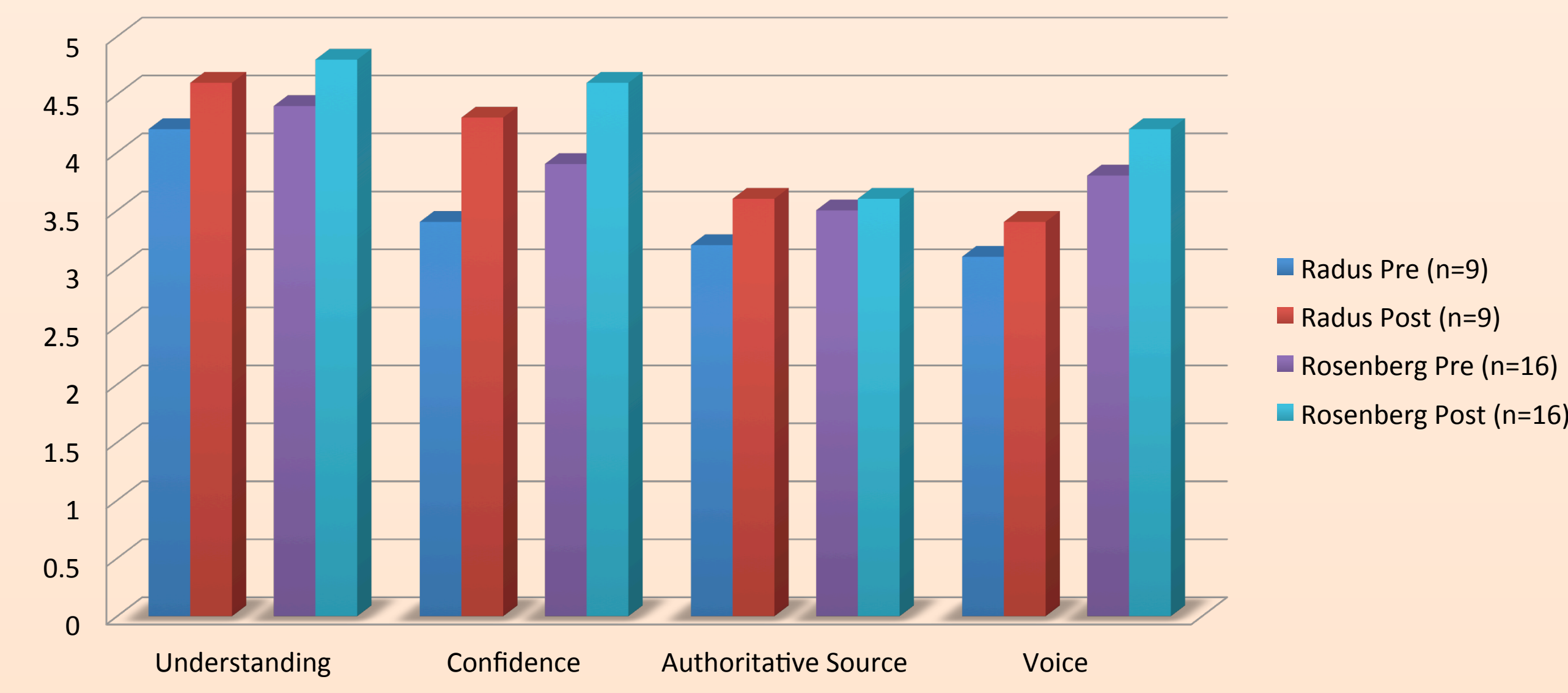
- Students gained a better understanding of what counts as a secondary source.
- Students became more confident in their ability to use secondary sources.
- Students became more adept at evaluating the merits of secondary sources.
- Students gained a better sense of how to disagree productively with sources.

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

Example 1

As Hilary Wyss expresses in her article *Captivity and Conversion,* it is this time period that narratives of female captives were used to expose the world to the 'savage' ways of Native American cultures and "perpetuate the remembrance of the atrocities of the savages in former times" (Wyss 68). These violent and embellished stories were written to show the incoming white settlers how dangerous and vile the indigenous people of this land were and the immediate need for their removal. The presence of this domesticated white woman living in the middle of a

2/3/6/6 = 17

Example 2

While Seaver gives Jemison's transformation from white society to Seneca culture a negative connotation, Hilary Wyss 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 Seaver states that she may have been better off in a white

1/3/4/4 = 12

Formatting Mean: 1.9
Introducing Mean: 2.7
Analyzing Mean: 4.2
Controlling Mean: 4.7
Total Mean: 13.4
Total points possible: 18

Lessons 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, whether for individual students or for a whole class.