

Entering the Conversation: Scholarly Sources and Student Writing

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Our "Big Question": How can we teach students the value of incorporating scholarly sources and efficient ways to do so?

Project Stages

To provide some "control" for the project, we each implemented the following steps in each classroom and graded using the same rubric. This project progressed over the course of 7 weeks, following Spring Break, and included two essays and all the associated "pre-writing."

1. Introductory survey
2. Library Research Session
3. Pre-writing exercises on using secondary sources, (in Hannah's class, this included writing a summary and an article review)
4. Drafts completed and peer reviewed
5. First unit essay, in which students "converse" with two articles
6. Pre-writing essay planning, including proposal, outline, annotated bibliography and student presentations
7. Drafts completed and reviewed by instructors
8. Second unit essay, in which students choose a research topic and use at least three scholarly sources
9. Exit survey
10. This project is ongoing and will culminate in a final "reflection" paper, where the students will be asked to comment on how they see their own growth as writers over the course of the semester.

Entering the Conversation?

We asked students to share what they think the phrase "enter the conversation" means before and after completing the project. Here are examples of the changes two students made.

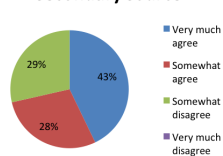
Student 1:
Before: "To give my own ideas and arguments to others speaking of the same topic."
After: "To find a topic that has already been discussed by authors in previous papers and respond with your own ideas, either agreeing or disagreeing with them"

Student 2:
Before: "Giving your own perspective."
After: "Providing your own opinion and argument to a relevant topic debated by scholars. Formulating your own ideas is key."

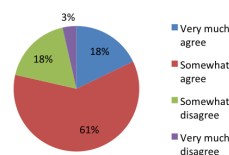
Charts represent the combined samples of both classrooms, 28 students. Samples and quotes are taken from anonymous "intro" and "exit" surveys given at the start and finish of the project.

Before focused instruction

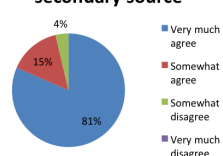
I understand what constitutes a "reliable" secondary source



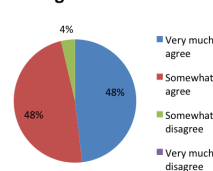
I know how to integrate sources well



I understand what constitutes a "reliable" secondary source



I know how to integrate sources well



After focused instruction

Takeaways

Although it is hard to show with charts and graphs, the quality of our students' work has certainly improved as a result of this project. Many of them have constructed critical and complex research papers that engage with scholarly articles in a truly academic way. While they are exhibiting the symptoms of higher education ("the more I know, the more I know that I know nothing"), their papers have developed in depth as well as scope. As "future faculty," we have found this to be a useful formula and one that will easily transition to other writing classes.

Hannah: This project has shown me the powerful potential that focusing on teaching one skill can have. I think our students are not only better prepared to write a paper, but also better prepared to make bold claims and support them using reliable, scholarly sources.

Ruth: I felt this project not only had the benefit of encouraging students to really pay attention to how and why they use secondary sources, but also helped them think more critically about their own work. This critical attitude gave students the confidence to see and present their own ideas alongside those of published scholars.

Testimonials

"I would be more inclined to use secondary sources when I research now."

"It helped me incorporate secondary sources more effectively into my essay. Before I would mention a secondary source but fail to tie it in with my idea. Now I know how to analyze a secondary source and fuse it with my own argument."

"I feel that the primary effect was changing the way I use sources from using quotes to make points, to using quotes to support points."

"Doing research helped me come to have a deeper understanding of not only the [research] topic I chose, but also helped me understand the books better."

"[The project] didn't affect the way I did research, but it definitely helped elucidate how to incorporate sources without just plopping them into the essay. It helped with determining what quotes were effective as well."

"I didn't really know how to find reliable, scholarly sources before, or how to write a research paper. Now I do so I would say it had a big effect."

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