

The Research Paper and Why We Should Still Care

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that, despite cogent arguments to the contrary, teaching writing from sources (often referred to as “the research paper”) is not only relevant to writing programs, but is central to the entire academic mission of the university. It draws on literature in writing studies, information literacy, activity theory and situated learning to illustrate both the importance of the task and the immense difficulties that many students experience when they attempt to build arguments based on sources. It concludes by arguing that the activity of writing from sources deserves a central rather than peripheral place in writing programs, and that teaching it requires not just traditional attention to locating and citing sources, but also deep engagement with rhetorical reading.

One of the greatest challenges of writing program administration, particularly when resources are tight, and we must depend on a handful of courses—or perhaps even one course—to fulfil the aims of the program, is to decide where to put our emphasis in terms of curriculum. What do we want students to write, and how can we best support both their own growth and their success in the institution as a whole?

In programs that have a particular focus on professional practice, we will want to concentrate on the skills and genres that will be required by the target profession or professions. Of course, it is not easy to determine exactly what those skills and genres are, which are the most important, and which are most potentially transferrable to professional practice. However, we at least have professional practice to provide some sense of direction. In more academically-oriented programs, the question of what we should teach is even more fraught. Should students concentrate on expressive genres that focus on personal development? On academic genres that they are likely to meet in other parts of the academy? On civic discourse—the more general rhetorical project of learning to argue cogently about the

problems of life? On all of the above, thereby providing proportionally less time for each? In this article, I seek to answer these questions by arguing for increased attention to a particularly controversial genre, the undergraduate “research paper.”

In order to make this argument, I review and rethink the literature on the research paper. I do so, not in an attempt to be comprehensive, but in order to map out the main threads of argument in this contested domain, focussing especially on arguments about what the form is and on why we might or might not want to teach it. I do not offer new insights on how best to teach the research paper, although I review briefly the insights of some who have suggested answers to that important question. Rather, I concentrate on issues of definition and teleology that are prior to the question of instruction, and try to locate the genre’s place in the mission of the university and of writing programs. I argue that the genre is real, if blurry and often badly defined, and also useful, if in contested ways. To do so, I draw on a set of theories that have been immensely productive in the recent history of writing studies, but which have not been brought to bear to any extent on the research paper: rhetorical genre studies, situated learning and activity theory.

I will break the study into parts defined by some guiding questions: what is the research paper, why is it important to teach it, what is the role of the writing program in teaching it, and what are the particular challenges of learning to master the genre. The last point leads me into an argument that the research paper is not just one genre among genres, but is rather a fundamentally important genre that underpins the basic intellectual project of higher education itself. In short, this article is an extended argument for concentrating the scarce resources of our programs on teaching students the vast constellation of skills required to write good research papers.

WHAT IS THE “RESEARCH PAPER?”

Despite uncertainty about its identity and mission, the research paper or something like it by other names (the “library paper,” the “source paper,” or perhaps least informatively, the “term paper”) remains a staple of writing instruction. Manning traces the genre back at least to the 1920’s, and reported in 1961 that 83% of colleges and universities across the US required a paper explicitly based on the use of the library (75). In 1982, Ford and Perry found the situation little changed, reporting that the research paper was offered in 84.09% of freshman composition programs and 40.03% of advanced writing programs (827). In 2009, Melzer surveyed more widely across all disciplines, and although he did not break out an

exact percentage for the research paper as such, he found that the research paper in one form or another remained the dominant genre in his sample.

Despite its apparent ubiquity, we remain uncertain as to what exactly the “research paper” is and what it is intended to do for students. Manning’s 1961 survey allowed institutions who no longer emphasised the research paper to tick off a reason why they did not. He found that “35% answered that it did not serve the purpose for which it was intended—a rather vague phrase but perhaps necessarily so, for there is general disagreement about the purpose of the freshman paper” (77). The reason Manning gives for the vagueness of the phrase is far more interesting than the percentage of institutions ticking off this response, for it sets a tone for disagreement about the nature of this entity that persists to this day.

In 1982, Richard Larson articulates the most-cited criticism of usefulness of the term “research paper” as a label for a genre of writing. Larson argues that

The “research paper” has no conceptual or procedural identity. Research, while it can inform almost any type of writing, is itself the subject—the substance—of no distinctly identifiable kind of writing. . . . There is nothing of substance or content that differentiates one paper that draws on data from outside the author’s own self from another such paper. (813)

Similarly, the research paper has no formal identity: “I cannot imagine any identifiable design that any scholar in rhetoric has identified as a recurrent plan for arranging discourse which cannot incorporate the fruits of research, broadly construed” (814). In fact, if the definition of “research” is extended to include searching for information in any place outside the writer’s own self, then almost any writing is research writing. To represent research as a purely a matter of going to the library, taking notes, and writing them up, Larson argues, is to misrepresent the complex ways in which researchers acquire data.

Larson is simply arguing that the term “research paper,” if taken literally, denotes a wide variety of genres, not all of which are captured by the common-sense notion of the “research paper” that is sometimes employed in first-year composition (go to the library, look up three sources on capital punishment, and come back with a paper). “Research” can mean both secondary and primary research—research that sends us to the library as well as research that asks us to look at the world—and it can refer both to formal research conducted according to conventions borrowed from science, and to informal research that consists of observation and experience.

Thus Larson draws attention to the fact that the term “research paper” is a clumsy way to describe what we generally mean by it. What people generally mean when they say “research paper” in a pedagogical context is much narrower than any paper “that draws on data from outside the author’s own self” (813). The term is generally used to mean a paper that depends largely or exclusively on secondary sources arranged and integrated into the author’s text according to a varied but relatively stable set of conventions. These conventions are not merely formal—where to place the quotation marks and how to arrange a reference list—but also structural and procedural—how to use the ideas of others to construct an argument of one’s own. The paper you are reading now is, by this definition, a research paper.

If the “research paper” is not a very useful—perhaps even dangerously misleading—label, then why do we persist in using it and its synonyms? Do we do so merely from deeply ingrained habit?

The field of Rhetorical Genre Studies can give us a much more nuanced idea of what such “deeply ingrained habits” may really mean. In her seminal 1984 article, Carolyn Miller recognizes that genres are not merely a convenient way of classifying broad categories of texts based on their textual features, as the concept has traditionally been used in literary studies. Rather, a genre is a set of repeated actions in response to what is *perceived as* a repeated rhetorical exigence: “What recurs is not a material situation (a real, objective, factual event) but our construal of a type” (157). Genre is thus freed from dependence on what writers such as Bitzer see as real, material situations in the world, and is attached instead to socially constituted repeated activities.

Later writers have refined Miller’s original concept and used it to explain what genres do in the world, how they function, and how writers learn to work within them. Devitt, for instance, emphasises the usefulness of genres in helping writers understand what to say and how to say it in a given situation:

If each writing problem were to require a completely new assessment of how to respond, writing would be slowed considerably. But once we recognize a recurring situation, a situation that we or others have responded to in the past, our response to that situation can be guided by past responses. (576)

Bawarshi extends the analysis further, emphasizing the ways in which genres are not only functional but also constitutive. That is, we not only recognize a recurring situation and thereby gain valuable clues to how we might respond to it. Recognizing a situation as falling into a genre also helps an individual conceptualize the experience and see it, not as an iso-

lated experience, but as a member of a type. “This is why genres are both functional and epistemological—they help us function within particular situations at the same time they help shape the ways we come to know these situations” (340). Bazerman shows how genres can shape entire epistemological perspectives. In “Codifying the Social Scientific Style: The APA Publication Manual as a Behaviorist Rhetoric,” he argues that the gradually emerging conventions of the APA manual, if followed in its meticulous details rather than simply used as a guide to citation, guide the user into a certain view of the world as materialistic, behaviorist, and revealed through impartial observation rather than humanly constructed knowledge (275).

Later in this article, I show what the genre of the research paper does, and what students must know in order to do it. Here, I merely use the basic insights of Rhetorical Genre Studies to rebut Larson’s argument that the research paper doesn’t exist. Larson looks for a set of formal features that papers involving research have in common. But, following Miller, we can look instead at what a community—in this case, the community of people who teach writing and of students who learn to write—perceive as a commonly recurring exigence that is responded to in certain commonly recurring ways. The boundaries of the genre may be blurry, since no two people will pick out the same collection of exigencies and call them “the same,” but where there is loose agreement, there is a genre.

By this definition, then, the research paper as commonly understood is a genre because the rhetorical exigence of basing an argument on others’ texts presents special problems that are not presented by, say, an expressive paper, or one that relies chiefly on primary empirical data such as a lab report. The repeated rhetorical actions that are required by a research paper of this type—finding and focussing a topic, locating and evaluating sources, finding a point to argue based on those sources, writing an argument that incorporates those sources without turning into a book report—all present students with serious problems quite different from the problems presented by other forms. Near the end of this paper, I review some of these problems in greater detail and touch on some of the ways that scholars have proposed helping students learn to solve them. Here, I wish only to point out that these problems are indices of a unique rhetorical exigence, and therefore, by extension, of a genre.

A large part of our problem, then, might be solved by finding a better term for this genre, one that highlights its own set of rhetorical actions without spilling over into other research activities in the ways that Larson rightly objects to. In the late 1980s and 1990s, a cluster of researchers associated with the Center for the Study of Writing at UC Berkeley and Carnegie-Mellon published a string of technical reports, journal articles and book

chapters that represents the first significant, sustained outpouring of interest in the research paper. These researchers, who include Nelson, Hayes, Flower, Kantz, Ackerman, Berenkotter, and many other familiar names, seldom if ever use the term “research paper” to describe the object of their interest. Instead, they use terms such as “reading to write” and “writing from sources.”¹

This cluster of labels does two things. First, it denotes more exactly what most people mean when they use the term “research paper”—a paper that uses secondary sources in a more or less formal way. It still leaves some boundaries fuzzy—for instance, a critical exegesis of a single source, a simple summary, or an experiential paper augmented by some literary references could come under the umbrella of “writing from sources” without being what most people mean by “research paper,” or even what the Berkeley/Carnegie-Mellon group means by “writing from sources.” But the term is far clearer conceptually than “research paper.”

More important, it changes the focus from what the product *is* to what the writer *does*. In doing so, it generates new research questions. Less often do we ask what such a paper looks like, or should look like. Rather, we ask what demands it makes of the writer. What do students or expert writers do when they need to find sources? What circumstances propel them to do so? How do they select and interpret the sources they find? How do they construct a more or less original argument informed by those sources? More subtly, how do they avoid being overwhelmed by sources, producing either their own argument with a few sources tacked on or a literature review with their own conclusion tacked on? In short, what *activities* are involved in producing a source-based paper?

WHY TEACH WRITING FROM SOURCES?

Before we spend time answering those very good questions about what students have to do when they write from sources, we first need to ask why we should teach students to write this genre in the first place, despite a number of cogent arguments why we should not do so, or at least not in the composition class. In the same issue of *College English* that featured Larson’s eloquent plea for retirement of the term, Schwegler and Shamoon published one of the first attempts to get a grip on what the research paper actually does for students, or is thought to do. When asked about their own research, the instructors they interviewed saw the research paper as a way to “test a theory, to follow up on previous research, or to explore a problem posed by other research or by events” (819). They saw the research paper as analytical and interpretive, in pursuit of an elusive truth but tolerant of

uncertainty, and most importantly, open-ended, contributing to an ongoing conversation. When asked about the purpose of expecting students to write research papers, the instructors were virtually unanimous: the aim of the research paper is “to get students to think in the same critical, analytical, inquiring mode as instructors do—like a literary critic, a sociologist, an art historian, or a chemist” (821). In other words, academics typically think of writing from sources as a means of introducing undergraduates not only to discipline-specific ways of writing but also to discipline-specific ways of thinking.

This view parallels that which Bartholomae articulates and critically interrogates in his foundational chapter, “Inventing the University”:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (134)

Here Bartholomae anticipates Lave and Wenger’s concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” or “situated learning.” Apprentices internalize the operations of their trade by participating meaningfully in those operations, beginning first on the margins but then operating more centrally as they become more proficient and are given greater responsibility (32–37). Or, to choose another metaphor, Bartholomae sees the university as welcoming students to the academic Burkean parlor and inviting them to put in their oar.

Importantly, Bartholomae includes ways of knowing along with ways of speaking, acknowledging that the two are inseparable. Learning to write like a scholar is learning to think like a scholar. Writing from sources is what we do in university, and if attending university is to involve more than simply banking information, students must become legitimate peripheral participants (Lave and Wenger) in the discourse community of the university. Bartholomae acknowledges that this act of invention is damnably difficult and at times next to impossible for most undergraduates, let alone beginning basic writers, but he insists that it is still worth their while to learn how to “carry off the bluff” (135).

If we see writing from sources as one way of integrating students into a research-based discourse community, the question arises: are we, in teaching research processes and research-oriented modes of thought to undergraduates, primarily preparing them to be graduate students, and ultimately, academics like ourselves?

This is a troubling question. First, casting our role as turning out little copies of ourselves, more academics ready to do academic things including educating more academics, can seem depressingly circular. It sounds more like a description of a virus than of an important academic enterprise. But there is an additional, more pragmatic problem. Certainly those who do go on to graduate school will appreciate having been eased into appropriate ways of thinking and doing from their undergraduate years. However, even in major research universities, not all students go on to graduate school. In some, the percentage is quite small. What, then, is the role of writing from sources, and the mindset that it entails, in the education of a student who will not become a copy of ourselves, preferring to go directly into a professional or other career?

There are many possible answers to this question, all drawn from variants on the argument that teaching students to engage in dialogue with other voices, including academic and discipline-specific voices, is one of the more important things that a liberal education is supposed to do. Developmental models of education that trace their origins to William Perry's work in the sixties are often founded on a belief that a liberal education should help students progress through stages of intellectual and epistemological development marked by increasingly complex engagement with the ideas of others. With this engagement comes increasing facility with "metathought," the capacity for comparing the assumptions and processes of different ways of thinking. As Perry puts it:

Many institutions of higher learning have succeeded, sometimes through careful planning, sometimes through the sheer accident of their internal diversity, in providing for students' growth beyond dualistic thought into the discovery of disciplined contextual relativism. Many would hope to encourage in their students the values of Commitment, and to provide in their faculties the requisite models. To meet this promise, we must all learn how to validate for our students a dialectical mode of thought, which at first seems "irrational," and then to assist them in honoring its limits. To do this, we need to teach dialectically—that is, to introduce our students, as our greatest teachers have introduced us, not only to the orderly certainties of our subject, but to its unresolved dilemmas. (109)

In all its complexity and messiness, writing from sources can expose students to "unresolved dilemmas" and to the difficulties of grappling with them for the benefit of an audience. To invite students to the academic Burkean parlor and thereby to invite them to think in a more complex, critical way—as Bruce Ballinger puts it in *Beyond Note Cards*, "to experi-

ence the ‘revolution in identity’ that Perry believes is a mark of intellectual growth” (74)—is arguably the chief goal of a liberal education. In short, this is an argument for finding good ways to introduce students to the process of getting in touch with the conversation of scholars and learning gradually to speak their language.

WHY TEACH WRITING FROM SOURCES IN WRITING COURSES?

If we accept that engaging students with sources is a worthy educational activity, we still need to ask why a major portion, or indeed any portion, of this task should fall to us in the field of writing studies, given that there is a strong line of argument in the writing studies literature that tells us that we shouldn’t, or even that we can’t. For example, the authors represented in Joseph Petraglia’s collection, *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*—often called (not necessarily unkindly) the “New Abolitionists”—make a convincing case against the ability of writing courses to teach much of anything that is transferrable to other contexts, including ways of writing from sources. More recently, Dias, Freedman, Medway and Paré use activity theory to argue perhaps the strongest and most cogent case for the difficulty of transferring skills and knowledge between activity systems, as reflected in the title of their book, *Worlds Apart*. Dias et al. are particularly interested in the very large gap between school and workplace activity systems, but their scepticism about transfer applies equally to the gap between the disciplines and the writing class.

This activity theory argument against transfer is a strong one, and it has spawned a legion of WAC/WID programs that place responsibility for writing from sources, and all disciplinary writing, back with the disciplines where it arguably belongs. But one of the key arguments for WAC/WID, the argument that little or nothing we do in our classes is likely to influence what students are able to do in others, may be exaggerated.

The study of learning transfer has a long and complex history that is often overlooked by those who study it from the writing studies perspective. Many of the arguments against the notion of easy transfer of skills from writing classes to others point out that such transfer presupposes that skills are neat modular units that can be moved around and reapplied in new contexts at will (see, for instance, Smart and Brown). But this view is a caricature of transfer theory that the subfield of transfer studies—rooted in but not bound to cognitive psychology—has itself moved beyond. As I have discussed in much more detail elsewhere (Brent 2011; 2012), many of the more recent and more productive studies of learning transfer reject this simplistic notion in favour of much more complex relationships between

one field of activity and another. For instance, Hatano and Greeno argue that, rather than looking for simple transfer, we should be looking at the “productivity” of the old skills, that is, their ability to facilitate new learning in a new situation. Similarly, Hager and Hodkinson use the term “reconstruction” to describe how, on entering a new situation, people call on analogous knowledge and skills to help them relearn how to deal with more or less novel tasks (129).

These more complex notions of transfer are also seen in some of the more recent writing studies literature that calls on activity theory. For example, Smart and Brown studied a group of professional writing students on an internship. They were impressed with the speed with which many of these students picked up on the very different tasks imposed by this new activity system. To Smart and Brown, they seemed to be, not transferring skills learned in another environment, but transforming those skills by using them as a bridge to new learning. Significantly, one of the concepts that appeared to be the most helpful in mastering this new environment is general rhetorical awareness—that is, the ability to read a new situation and recognize the rhetorical moves that are called for (130).

In short, transfer of knowledge and skills is complex, elusive and hard to measure, and sometimes does not happen at all. But sometimes it does, or at least it does to the extent that students can bring habits of mind (what Bereiter calls “dispositions”) learned in one environment to bear on learning to function in a new one. The argument from transfer, then, provides no compelling reason why writing classes cannot teach students to write from sources in order to help them reinvent their skills more easily in new contexts.

But this is simply an argument from a lack of clear negatives. Are there positive reasons why we should continue to shoulder at least part of this responsibility, and perhaps a larger part than is borne by any one class in any other discipline? To understand what I believe to be the most compelling argument for teaching writing from sources in writing programs, we need to consider what students are up against when they are asked to take on this genre, for it is the sheer enormity of the task that makes it difficult for instructors in the disciplines to accomplish it on their own.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LEARN TO WRITE FROM SOURCES?

An important, and frequently overlooked, source of information on writing from sources can be found in the literature of our colleagues, the academic librarians who often must help our students navigate the tasks which we have assigned them. While much of the literature on information literacy

concentrates on the narrow problem of how to help students locate and evaluate sources, other variants locate this problem in terms of how students approach the entire activity of writing from sources. In fact, much of the literature on information literacy calls explicitly for more rapprochement between the library and the disciplines, particularly the discipline of writing studies (see for instance Dennis Isbell, "Teaching Writing and Research as Inseparable," Celia Rabinowitz, "Working in a Vacuum," and Barbara Fister, "Connected Communities"). Some sources, such as Barbara Fister's "Common Ground: The Composition/Bibliographic Instruction Connection," even map out the writing studies literature for the benefit of librarians. On the other hand, most of the writing studies literature seems blissfully unaware of this important source of cognate studies. Since the librarians frequently are the ones to clean up our messes when we create ill-conceived research assignments, we would do well to listen more closely to what they are saying.

Some classics of information literacy scholarship of particular interest to writing studies include Fister, "Teaching the Rhetorical Dimensions of Research" and "The Research Processes of Undergraduate Students," and Rabinowitz, "Working in a Vacuum: A Study of the Literature of Student Research and Writing." Rabinowitz suggests gloomily that "Despite striking similarities in results, there has been little exchange of knowledge or effort at creating shared research agendas between the two groups of researchers. Pedagogical literature about library research written by classroom faculty reveals serious misconceptions about the role of librarians in the student research process" (337).

From this large domain of literature, let me cite in detail one article that is particularly striking for the way it points up how difficult it is for students to learn to write from sources. In "Desperately Seeking Citations: Uncovering Faculty Assumptions about the Research Process," Leckie distinguishes between the strategies of expert researchers, who use a finely-tuned information seeking strategy, and those of students, who often fall back on a coping strategy that many of us are familiar with: heading for the library at the last minute, desperately seizing the first sources available that bear on their topic, and mining them for nuggets that support a thesis conceived in advance. She argues that a significant cause is poor assignment design and a lack of support from the course instructor.

Leckie singles out assignments that require students to become familiar with a wide variety of important and unfamiliar concepts at once. She describes a student in a second-year course in resource management who turned up in the library bearing the following assignment:

Choose one of the following topics:

- Biodiversity;
- Ocean pollution;
- Transportation of hazardous wastes;
- Desertification; or
- The Tropical rainforest.

In your paper, discuss:

- The nature of the issue;
- Its natural/biophysical aspects;
- What has been done on the issue since 1980;
- What is being done on the issue currently. (203)

The problem here is not just the immensely broad nature of the topics. The problem is that the task requires students to perform a great variety of tasks in succession: read around in the general area of biodiversity to get an overall feel for the subject, then start reading in some of the more expert journal literature, reject any studies that deal in minute detail with questions of interest only to specialists, and watch for names that come up repeatedly—a likely sign of a seminal author. To do well on such a task, the student would also need to follow citation trails to map out the web of ideas that connect to these studies (rather than starting every search afresh back at a subject index, as many students do), and then sift the studies found so that “what has been done on the issue since 1980” could be narrowed from potentially hundreds of studies to a few important examples. And the student would have to do all of this before even deciding on a specific thesis. Yet these requirements are all implicit. There is nothing in the assignment itself to alert students that all of these tasks are required in order to do a good job, let alone provide guidance on how to do them.

Leckie does not assume that a student would know how to do all of this even if told—*pacé* Schwegler and Shamoan, who optimistically state that “the features of the academic research paper are easy enough to identify and convey to undergraduates” (821). Rather, Leckie suggests a radical reformation of the assignment to permit what she calls a “stratified methodology,” in which the assignment is broken up into sequential components that ask students to focus on learning only one new task at a time. Of course, some of these steps still contain an immense number of subtasks—one step, for instance, is “finding and using scholarly literature,” which alone could be the subject of many courses. But at least instructors could guide students through more manageable chunks of the process rather than simply turning them loose in the library.

Much of the writing studies literature mirrors Leckie's insistence that teaching students to write from sources needs to be a drawn-out task. As mentioned earlier, another key cluster of literature on writing from sources is that which was developed under the auspices of the Center for the Study of Writing at UC Berkeley and Carnegie-Mellon. Some of the most useful of this literature echoes the literature on information literacy in its emphasis on the critical importance of the assignment and its pacing. Nelson and Hayes' seminal 1988 study *How the Writing Context Shapes College Writers' Strategies for Writing from Sources* gives a particularly clear message for curriculum design.²

Nelson and Hayes studied a number of both novice and advanced students writing from sources. They note two very different sets of strategies: *low-investment* strategies in which students wait until the last minute and then quickly find a few sources that contain "easily plundered pockets of information" (5), and *high investment strategies* in which students use broader information-seeking strategies and then write a paper that constructs a complex argument around an issue. Although novice writers in the sample used low-investment strategies more often than the more experienced writers, the writer's level of experience only partly predicted which set of strategies she or he would choose. What seemed most strongly to predict the strategies chosen was the structure of the course itself. Students given a topic and left to fend for themselves were more likely to choose low-investment strategies. They were more likely to use high-investment strategies when instructors broke the task into portions and provided feedback on each portion, a technique similar to the "stratified methodology" that Leckie calls for. Requiring drafts, response statements, log entries and other forms of reporting increased students' sense that the assignment was a dialog rather than a simple task of evaluation. Audience also mattered: students who had to present their results orally to the class were much more likely to use high-investment strategies. Not surprisingly, then, students' willingness to invest in an assignment is proportional to the instructor's willingness to make a similar investment.

More recent scholarship reinforces the depth of the investment required, frequently by adding reading strategies to the list of things that students must master in order to write successfully from sources. The Citation Project, for instance, is the largest collaborative study of writing from sources since the Carnegie-Mellon/UC Berkeley project in the eighties. Overseen by Sandra Jamieson and Rebecca Moore Howard, twenty-one contributing researchers have coded 174 papers from first-year writing courses in sixteen institutions, identifying both the type of sources used (book, journal, encyclopedia, etc.) and the way each is used (summary, paraphrase, patchwrit-

ing, and quotation). In Phase II of the project, the researchers will expand the sample to include papers from discipline-specific courses and writing-intensive courses beyond the first year (*Citation Project*).

The full results are scheduled to be published in book form later in 2013. However, an overview of the results of a pilot has been reported in an article by Howard, Serviss and Rodrigue in *Writing & Pedagogy*, and its message is disturbing. Common wisdom usually divides the use of sources into two types: paraphrase and quotation. In keeping with the taxonomy used by the entire Citation Project, Howard, Serviss and Rodrigue divide the use of sources into four types: copying (with or without attribution), patchwriting, paraphrase and summary (181). They argue that summary consists of restating large portions of the original text, and sometimes an entire text, in fewer words. This is the form of writing from sources that is most valued in academic work, as it implies comprehending and digesting the gist of a text and then using it as part of a larger argument.

Disturbingly, in the eighteen sample papers they studied, Howard, Serviss and Rodrigue found no instances of summary. Instead they found various forms of copying, patchwriting and paraphrase in which only tiny portions of the original text were pressed into service in students' texts. In fact, they argue that "these students are not writing from sources; they are writing from sentences selected from sources" (187).

Howard, Serviss and Rodrigue conclude that students' problems with writing from sources begin long before they begin to write. Their problem begins with comprehending sources, both individually and in their broader intertextual context—their relationship to the larger discipline-based conversation in which they are embedded. When students have a slender grip on what they're reading and why they're reading it, they are more apt to cherry-pick a few sentences that seem to bear on their topic rather than applying the meaning of the whole text. Students, it appears from Howard, Serviss and Rodrigue's study, often attend only to narrow windows of text, and therefore cut themselves off from an ability to summarize the gist of an entire text. This helps to explain Nelson and Hayes' observation that many students search for "easily plundered pockets of information" (5). If they are unable to render text down to its gist, such pockets are all that is available to them. The upshot is that instruction in writing from sources, already clearly a large task, becomes even larger, for it also needs to involve instruction in reading sources as whole arguments. This in turn tells us even more strongly why disciplinary instruction can benefit from having help from the more focussed environment of the dedicated writing course. Cynthia R. Haller suggests that writing courses have a role to play in helping students to read difficult sources more strategically, including breaking

down the cognitively overwhelming task into smaller pieces reminiscent of Leckie's stratified methodology. She also underlines the need for writing program administrators to "search for programmatic ways to articulate what students do with sources in first-year composition with what they do in advanced composition courses, other general education courses, and disciplinary coursework" (55)—in other words, to co-ordinate courses so that what students learn in first-year composition is used and reinforced in advanced composition and disciplinary courses so that students can progressively build skill in understanding and using sources

Adler-Kassner and Estrem make a related argument in "Reading Practices in the Writing Classroom." Drawing on and expanding the WPA Outcomes Statement, they argue that the writing classroom should help students to:

- Use writing and discussion to work through and interpret complex ideas from readings and other texts (reading and roles)
- Critically analyze their own and others' choices regarding language and form (roles)
- Engage in multiple modes of inquiry using text (reading)
- Consider and express the relationship of their own ideas to the ideas of others (roles) (37)

Again, this is a tall order, and Adler-Kassner and Estrem use this fact as an argument for drawing reading through the entire course, despite the fact that (they claim) little instruction in reading pedagogy is woven into materials and programs that seek to train teachers of writing.

Similarly, Joseph Harris devotes all of his well-known textbook, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* to discussing a series of rhetorical moves—*coming to terms*, *forwarding*, *countering*, *taking an approach*, and *revising*—that he sees as fundamental to interacting profitably with the words of others. This book again points up the fact that, regardless of the precise context, coming to terms with the words of others is tricky business. A course that used Harris' book as I think it was meant to be used would devote an entire semester to walking students through its multi-layered advice. Harris' complex approach to reading and writing is not a technique to be touched on in a three-week unit.

This literature on the complexity of learning to write from sources brings me back to the question of why writing program instructors and administrators should still care, and should still find ways of incorporating writing from sources into our courses. All suggest in their own ways that instruction in using sources is a huge job that must be broken into smaller

tasks and pulled through an entire course, or even better, a succession of courses, if it is to be successful. Moreover, we have to incorporate instruction in how to read sources as well as in how to write from them.

Instructors in the disciplines have a major advantage over us in that, at least when dealing with majors, their students likely possess more of the disciplinary knowledge that is fundamental to comprehension. On the other hand, writing instructors are better positioned to avoid what I call “the anxiety of coverage.” An instructor in a disciplinary course may feel an immense pressure to cover a certain amount of material in order to provide students with the secure foundation of subject matter knowledge that they will need to pursue higher-level courses in the discipline. For us, the need to familiarize students with large quantities of subject area knowledge is not as powerful a driver. This is not to say, of course, that a composition course can be a “content free zone” in which students simply write on a miscellany of trivial subjects. In the next section, I review several approaches to giving composition students something consistent and important to learn about, write about, and make knowledge about with their classmates. I just mean to say that, with the writing task in the foreground and the content more in the background, we can spend a great deal of time working students through various phases of getting to know the source texts that they will need in order to answer their particular research questions, understanding how they relate to their own ideas, and drafting and revising various pieces of writing based on those texts, in ways that only the most dedicated instructor of a disciplinary course will feel able to do. As a side benefit, moving the focus away from content coverage may also reduce the temptation to assign the broad, sweeping topics that Leckie refers to, which seem to be designed to get students to deal with large swatches of subject area knowledge in a single assignment. While a robust WAC/WID program is important, the task of teaching students to write from sources is simply too big for us to hand over entirely to the disciplines.

CONCLUSION

I can remember, in my early years as a new writing instructor (now, alas, long past), assigning a wide variety of writing tasks in a first year course, of which a “research paper” was just one. My disappointment with the results and my conviction that there has to be a better way to do this has propelled me on a career-long journey to understand what this familiar assignment really entails.

In this article I have argued that students should be engaged in writing from sources both as a means of entering the academic discourse commu-

nity and of developing increasingly complex epistemological stances; that it is our job as writing teachers to take a particular interest in teaching them to do so (although certainly not on our own); and that the literature on the subject, both from writing studies and from information literacy, tells us that it is a big enough job to warrant being front and center throughout an entire course or even through an entire writing program.

There are, of course various ways to do this. I have argued elsewhere (2005) that, in institutions that have instituted them, the first-year seminar is an ideal place to introduce students to research culture. The first-year seminar, when it is focussed on academic content rather than on general orientation to the university, provides a venue in which instructors in any field can build a course around a topic that relates to their own research but is broad enough to allow students to find their own area of interest within it. The instructor of a first-year seminar on, say, the role of transportation in the development of nineteenth century North America, does not need to fret that her students may not come away with as much knowledge of the history of transportation as they might have absorbed in a lecture course. She can concern herself instead with whether students have come away with an enlarged understanding of how to find out about transportation history, including how to find sources, how to read them and compare them, and how to base an argument on them. She can also, if she wishes, build the whole course around one escalating series of interlocking assignments rather than trying to assign a range of different topics to ensure coverage. While academic content remains an important lynchpin of the course, the fact that the course is not *primarily* about banking content knowledge allows more freedom to spend time on process.

Where an institution does not use first-year seminars, or uses more specifically writing-oriented courses as well, writing instructors can do much the same thing. James A. Reither recommends turning an entire class into a discourse community in which reading and writing occur in the context of an ongoing exploration of a subject that involves all the students all the time. Another possibility is the “Writing about Writing” approach championed by writers such as Downs and Wardle. This approach has the advantage that, rather than writing on various “general interest” topics that have little relevance to the writing course other than as things to write about, students can research and write on topics that reflect an expanding conversation about writing itself, and which tap into a subject area that the instructor knows well and is well-positioned to help students with. Here, the main advantage is the synergy between what is being researched and written about and the instruction in reading sources and writing from them. While the approach as described by Downs and Wardle does not

specifically focus on the research paper as defined in this article, they insist that writing about writing is a very large tent: “What we advocate for, and what remains stable in our own classrooms, is simply the underlying set of principles: engage students with the research and ideas of the field, using any means necessary and productive” (“Reflecting,” n.p.). One of those necessary and productive means could be immersing students in the controversies of our field by asking them to engage in writing from sources—the sources in this case being some of the more accessible scholarly discussions of what it means to write, to learn to write, and to be a writer.

I have touched only briefly on these few approaches because my goal in this article is not to champion one particular way of configuring a course that teaches students to write from sources. Rather, I am arguing for a repositioning of the source-based paper in our thinking. It is not, I argue, one genre that is of equal stature with many others. It is, rather, a “master genre”—that is, a genre that gets at the heart of the entire academic project.

The lesson for writing program administrators is that we should design our programs to make space for reading and writing from sources—ample space, space that reflects the fact that when we teach students to deal with sources we are, as Lea and Street argue, teaching “academic literacy” itself. Writing from sources is central to the entire mission of the academy, and has resonance far beyond training students to be academics. It teaches them to engage deeply with complex texts and diverse ideas. The importance of the job is matched by its enormity, and if we want to do it well, we must be prepared to devote the entire, or at least most of, the resources of our courses (and by extension much of our scholarly literature) to creating environments where students can truly engage in the process of finding, understanding, and using sources. Anything less is to leave them scouring the library for bits and pieces of information without engagement in the academic community as a whole.

NOTES

1. Relatively few of these studies have been published in journals. Anyone interested in the extant research on writing from sources should look at the string of technical reports published by the Center for the Study of Writing. These may be found at <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/resources/techreports.csp>. Another set of studies is collected in Linda Flower et al., *Reading to Write: Exploring a Cognitive and Social Process*. (As an aside, I dearly wish I had had access to this material in 1992 when I published *Reading as Rhetorical Invention*, my first attempt to come to grips with this subject.)

2. This study is the first of a series of studies by Jennie Nelson, all of which are well worth attention. See Nelson, "Easy Assignment," *Constructing*, "Library Revisited," "Rhetoric of Doing."

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