

DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS WITH LOW STAKES ASSIGNMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Early in my career as an academic librarian, I heard a colleague refer to “low stakes research” as a way to help students become familiar with conducting college-level research. Some years later I went looking for more information on the topic but came up empty-handed. This set me off on a quest for further information that ultimately led me to the field of composition studies and the strategy of low stakes writing. This article explores the connections and commonalities between information literacy instruction and composition, and ponders what librarians might learn from our writing program and composition colleagues and how we might more intentionally develop a low stakes model of research instruction.

A major responsibility of instruction librarians is to help students develop a more extensive and flexible information literacy repertoire. The teaching and learning of information literacy most often takes place in one of two ways, within the context of single, 50-minute library sessions or at the reference desk; in both cases it usually takes place when students have received a high stakes assignment. I believe a low stakes model offers an intriguing alternative to the teaching of research skills (defined here as locating and evaluating sources for inclusion in a paper or project) However, it is first necessary to understand the extent to which students are assigned research, how students emotionally experience the research process, and how they learn and employ research skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conducting library research is still a common experience for undergraduate students. Burton and Chadwick (2000) found that 94% of students surveyed had an

assignment that required locating information in “sources beyond the course textbook,” with 66% of respondents being assigned a research paper (p. 320). This corresponds with the findings from the Project Information Literacy (PIL) team (Head & Eisenberg, 2009a; 2009b) that 91% of students had written some type of research paper in the previous 12 months, with the most common being a “5-7 page argument paper” (2009a, p.3). Other researchers have reported similar results (Birmingham, Chinwongs, Flaspohler, Hern, Kvanvig, & Portmann, 2008; Hood, 2010). What these data imply, though do not directly address, is that the average student is most often required to utilize his/her research skills in high stakes or high point value situations. The high stakes nature of these assignments often brings out an increased level of anxiety in students.

The phenomenon of library anxiety has been explored in the library science literature for the past three decades. Mellon’s (1986) seminal work on the topic describes library anxiety in this way, “when confronted with the need to gather information in the library for their first research paper many students become so anxious that they are unable to approach the problem logically or effectively” (p.163). The language students use to describe the research process highlights both the frustration and emotion involved; students respond, “I’ve always been lost when I do research” and “I never know where to begin looking for information” (p.162). Detmering and Johnson (2012) found similar responses in their work with student narratives describing the research process. Student distaste and discomfort for these projects is evident in the language used, including such terms as, “dreaded research paper,” “being tortured,” and “an absolute nightmare!” (p.11). One demonstrated

approach to alleviating research-related anxiety is to provide students instruction to familiarize them with the library and librarians. Both Mellon (1986) and Van Scoyoc (2003) found evidence that this type of instruction decreased levels of stress in the students they surveyed.

Beyond the theme of library anxiety, a number of studies have addressed the ways in which students conduct research. Common themes in these studies include the difficulties students face in the initial step of topic selection, how students gather or locate information to provide the background knowledge needed to move forward in their research, and the extent to which students rely on classroom faculty to help direct their research (Fister, 1992b; Head & Eisenberg, 2009a, 2009b; Kuhlthau, 1991). Other studies have focused on how the strategies employed by students differ from those of professors (Bodi, 2002; Leckie, 1996). For example, faculty members are more likely to rely on scholarly peer networks, personal research collections and an extensive knowledge of the subject area, strategies not generally available to undergraduates. As a result, faculty members may overlook these differences and not clearly understand the problems students confront when conducting library research for high stakes assignments (Leckie, 1996).

Recent reports by the teams at Project Information Literacy (Head & Eisenberg, 2009a, 2009b) and the Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) Project (Asher, Duke, & Green, 2010) highlight additional challenges that college students face in conducting research. Both point to the issues of information overload as a key influencing factor on student research strategies. As technology creates expanded access to a wider variety

of resources, students are inundated with more and more information to sift through as they seek to fill their information need. They also encounter a larger universe of tools, search engines and databases. In the face of this reality, many students turn to those tried and true sources that have served them well in the past rather than turning to the most appropriate resource for a given need or assignment (Head & Eisenberg, 2009b). This raises the question of how students learn and become familiar with various steps and tools required for college level research.

LEARNING TO RESEARCH

How students learn to conduct research is dependent on a number of variables including previous (high school) experience, the extent of classroom information literacy integration by librarians on campus, and the personal preferences of classroom faculty. Examining the literature from both the library and composition fields, one finds as Barbara Fister (1992a) noted, a great deal of common ground (e.g. emphasis on process-centered skill development vs. content) but little systematic collaboration between the two disciplines.

In addition to the topics covered above, the library literature includes examples of successful information literacy instruction methods, as well as case studies of librarian/faculty collaboration in various settings (Deitering & Jameson, 2008; Miller, 2010). On the composition side, the literature focuses more on strategies for constructing research assignments and teaching of research-based writing (Bitzup, 2008; Gellis, 2002; Hood, 2010). As Birmingham et al. (2008) explain, much of the literature in the discipline “suggests that compositionists expect research to inform student writing, but they don’t necessarily

teach research processes” (p.9). This disconnect between teaching writing and teaching research can lead to frustration for librarians at the reference desk, like that described by Farkas (2011), when students indicate the need for a particular type of source, but do not clearly understand how to locate the item or why they actually need it. In an article on writing-across-the-curriculum within first-year seminars at the University of Calgary, Brent (2005) goes against the compositionist trend by including specific reference to the faculty member’s role in teaching research. By drawing on both the literature of composition and library science, he weaves together the common threads that Fister wrote about over a decade earlier.

On the library side, Gibson (1995) also provides a compelling overview of ways to connect the similar processes of library research and writing within the context of writing-across-the-curriculum. He points to the problem-solving work of Flower, as a key connection between “writing-as-process and research-as-process” (p. 56). Writing in 1995, Gibson also foretells the work of Project Information Literacy and the ERIAL Project, as he expresses concern about the “electronic information deluge” and its impact on student research (p.58). Finally, he highlights some of the political and institutional considerations to keep in mind as librarians move toward a more collaborative, integrated model of information literacy instruction.

This review shows that college students are still assigned high stakes research projects and that many of them feel anxious about the research process. It also illustrates the lack of clarity and consistency in terms of who (librarian or classroom faculty) is responsible for teaching these skills to students and shines a light on areas where

the two professions can expand their collaborative efforts.

WRITING APPREHENSION AND LOW STAKES WRITING

As in library science, researchers in composition have focused considerable attention on student anxiety. Daly & Miller (1975), drawing on earlier work about communication apprehension, were the first to label the phenomenon of writing apprehension and to provide an instrument to measure it. Their work indicated the connection between writing apprehension and an aversion to writing similar to the debilitating frustration Mellon described in students experiencing library anxiety (Daly & Miller, 1975; Mellon, 1986). Later researchers have expanded on Daly and Miller’s work in a variety of ways, ranging from a focus on helping students cope with the physiological symptoms of anxiety (Martinez, Kock & Cass, 2011) to developing pedagogical approaches to alleviate the influence of writing apprehension on the students’ writing experience and exploring different approaches to grading (Elbow, 1997; Fox, 1980; Goodman & Cirka, 2009; Veit, 1980; Warnock, 2012).

It was within this literature that I found the article that ultimately helped unlock the reference to low stakes research my colleague had mentioned so long ago, Elbow’s 1997 “High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing.” I believe that within this article is the seed to an alternative approach to teaching research that builds on the low stakes writing strategies. Before going any further, it is necessary to acknowledge that Elbow has been at once an influential and a polarizing figure within the composition community. As a champion of pedagogical approaches

such as freewriting, peer feedback, and alternative grading models, he has frequently found himself at the center of a debate on the role and placement of writing instruction within the academy (Bartholomae, 1995; Bartholomae & Elbow, 1995; Elbow, 1993; Elbow, 1995). Elbow and co-author Belanoff reference the debate in the cover letter of the textbook *A Community of Writers*:

There are many in the field of writing, teaching writing, and rhetoric who think that all writing should occur in subject-area classes, that no classes should be specifically devoted to writing as a subject. We disagree. In our way of seeing it, students need space and time to work directly on writing. To think about how you go about writing. To try out -- with some degree of safety -- new approaches, new styles, new forms. To spend time on sharing and responding to writing. (1995, p. 2)

Elbow’s 1997 article expands on these themes. He argues that providing students multiple opportunities to write through the

relative safety of low or no stakes assignments helps them develop stronger writing skills without the anxiety or writing apprehension that high-stakes assignments can create. These assignments may include weekly half-page reflections on course readings or lecture or in-class freewriting activities. A key benefit of low stakes writing can be summed up in one of two ways, “students learn to write by writing” and practice makes you better (Gibson, 1995, p. 60). Elbow makes reference to the neural changes that result in allowing students repeated low stress practice writing, an idea that is supported by research in cognitive science (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; van Gelder, 2005). By removing the internal stress created when a major portion of the grade is on the line and allowing students to find their own voice, to engage with course materials, and to develop effective habits of writing, the outcome is likely to be more confident writers (Elbow).

Table 1 lists the five benefits Elbow notes when integrating low stakes writing into the curriculum (1997, pp.7–8).

TABLE 1 — BENEFITS OF LOW STAKES WRITING

Low stakes writing helps students involve themselves more in the ideas or subject matter of the course
When students do high stakes writing they often struggle in nonproductive ways and produce terrible and tangled prose
Low stakes writing improves the quality of students’ high stakes writing
Low stakes writing gives us a better view of how students are understanding the course material
Probably the main practical benefit of frequent low stakes assignments is to force students to keep up with the assigned readings every week

Note. From “High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing,” by P. Elbow, 1997, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 69, pp. 7–8.

Support for Elbow’s claims can be found in the literature both before and after the publication of his 1997 article. Though much of the support is anecdotal, Fox’s 1980 study found that the effects of student-centered instruction, along the lines Elbow suggests, resulted in a statistically significant decrease in writing apprehension among composition students (p. 47.) James (2006) found that a low stakes model for assigning points when using classroom response systems resulted in a greater participation in peer discussions, conceivably the result of removing the anxiety that higher stakes can cause. More recently, Warnock (2012) wrote in support of what he calls “frequent, low-stakes (FLS)

grading,” (p.5). Echoing Elbow, Warnock indicated that FLS grading can “remove unproductive grading pressure, encourage intellectual risk-taking, and discourage plagiarism/cheating” (p. 5). Additional evidence of the influence of the low stakes approach to teaching writing can be found by conducting a simple internet search, with page after page of results from university and college writing centers that reference Elbow’s 1997 article.

A similar strategy that incorporates low stakes research assignments into information literacy instruction courses can be implemented. Table 2 illustrates a crosswalk from Elbow’s original text to an

TABLE 2 — BENEFITS OF LOW STAKES WRITING AND RESEARCH

Elbow’s Summary of Low Stakes Writing Benefits	Summary of Potential Low Stakes Research Benefits
Low stakes writing helps students involve themselves more in the ideas or subject matter of the course	Low stakes research helps students involve themselves more in the ideas or subject matter of the course
When students do high stakes writing, they often struggle in nonproductive ways and produce terrible and tangled prose	When students do high stakes research they often struggle in nonproductive ways <i>and too many often locate unreliable and irrelevant resources</i>
Low stakes writing improves the quality of students’ high stakes writing	Low stakes research improves the quality of students’ high stakes writing & <i>research</i>
Low stakes writing gives us a better view of how students are understanding the course material	Low stakes research gives us a better view of how students are understanding the course material <i>and/or the overall process of research within a discipline</i>
Probably the main practical benefit of frequent low stakes assignments is to force students to keep up with the assigned readings every week	Probably the main practical benefit of frequent low stakes assignments is to <i>provide students practice for high stakes assignments</i>

Note. Adapted from “High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing,” by P. Elbow, 1997, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 69, pp. 7–8.

initial list of benefits for low stakes research assignments. In this model, low stakes experiential learning provides a way for students to develop research skills and strategies that can then be applied to both high stakes assignments and information needs of everyday life. By adapting this model to the research setting, it may be possible to help students develop greater research proficiency and alleviate library research anxiety.

EXAMPLES

Low stakes research assignments can vary by level of complexity and duration and should be designed to address the particular learning outcomes of the course. Like the informal writing pieces Elbow (1997) mentions, these activities provide students the opportunity to engage with research tools and processes before they are needed for a high stakes assignment. For example, students who have had experience working with multiple subject specific databases may be less likely to rely solely on a general database or Internet search when conducting research. Through frequent assignments focused on effectively selecting and navigating a database rather than on finding the right answer or article, students will develop a familiarity with the wide range of options available for use in locating materials for high stakes projects.

Table 3 includes a list of possible low stakes assignments, a statement of rationale, and the relevant ACRL standard(s). The examples will strike many librarians as similar to active learning exercises that take place within current information literacy sessions. The key difference is that they are integrated into the classroom setting and assigned by the classroom instructor.

In keeping with Elbow's low stakes writing

model, a distinguishing feature of the assignments is that they are exercises with few, if any, points that impact the final course grade. By scaffolding a number of these activities, or repeating a particular activity in different contexts, faculty members can provide students multiple opportunities to practice the research skills they will need for major course assignments and receive feedback in a non-stressful environment.

IMPLEMENTATION AND FACULTY BUY-IN

Of concern to librarians will likely be the ability to gain support of faculty, without whom the low stakes approach will fail. One selling point of the model is that it can be seen as an extension of the stratified or scaffolded pedagogy many faculty members currently use when assigning research. For example, Birmingham et al. (2008) found that 73% of faculty members teaching first-year writing were already ladderizing the assignments into smaller sections.

A key goal of information literacy instruction is the need to ensure relevance by connecting it to a specific assignment or course outcome. The low stakes research model provides a way to meet this goal. The fact that the classroom faculty will assign and provide feedback on the assignments increases the likelihood of an authentic learning experience that connects to the course content in a more meaningful way. This is not an attempt to have librarians relinquish responsibility for information literacy instruction, but rather it should be seen as an opportunity to develop a culture of shared responsibility with the faculty.

The low stakes research model places librarians in an important position to work with faculty to design effective assignments

TABLE 3 — EXAMPLES OF LOW STAKES RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS

Low stakes Research Assignment	Rationale	ACRL Standard
Select one topic that was discussed during lecture. Develop and write out a list of questions or possible research topics related to it.	Students often struggle with selecting a topic. This gives students an opportunity to practice developing and narrowing a topic.	One
Highlight only those citations on the assigned bibliography that are citations to articles.	Students often have difficulty distinguishing between citations for books, chapters, and articles. This can help them develop that skill and prepare them for citing sources correctly in their own work.	Five
Working with today's class reading, determine how many sources it references and try to find out how many times it has been cited in other sources (books or article)	Students often see citations as a requirement for avoiding plagiarism, without understanding the value of citations as part of the ongoing conversation taking place within the scholarly literature. This exercise can help clarify this connection.	Two & Five
Locate one article each week on the main theme of the course (e.g., Poverty). You are required to use a different database each week and include a brief written description of the database contents/focus (subject coverage, type of publications, ease of use, etc.)	Students often rely on general databases such as <i>Academic Search Complete</i> or <i>ProQuest Research Library</i> . By requiring students to explore other databases, they will become more aware of the breadth of subject specific resources available for future research projects.	Two

to meet the specific learning outcomes of the course and prepare students for high stakes course assignments. This echoes Leckie's (1996) call for librarians to support faculty in the creation of stratified course-integrated instruction strategies that place librarians in the role of "bibliographic mentors, assisting and encouraging faculty with respect to integrating information literacy into their courses" (p. 207). This approach also provides a collaborative way for librarians to move away from the 50-minute, one-shot instruction model that is still the norm at many institutions. The librarian can be available to conduct short teaching sessions when a low stakes assignment is given and return in a consultative role for the follow up discussion in the classroom or in one-on-one sessions. It is also expected that longer, more detailed instruction sessions will still be needed to support the specific research skills that are not covered within these low stakes activities.

As an example, over the past year, I have worked closely with a faculty member in Political Science to determine low stakes research assignments that complemented the topics she was covering in class. Initial feedback indicates that the assignments did provide students with opportunities to practice research skills and introduced them to important resources within the discipline. Additionally, the follow up discussions within the class, as students reflected on both the search process and the resources they located, provided a new dimension in the teaching and learning of the course.

The specifics of how an individual librarian or library collaborates with faculty to implement the low stakes approach to teaching research will be dependent on a number of variables including staffing levels and institutional structure. However,

this model provides a clear way for faculty and librarians to work together on developing student research skills in a manner that decreases student anxiety and increases student confidence and performance.

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