

**Conference on Teaching & Learning**  
**August 24, 2011**  
**“Responding to a Changing Student Body”**  
**Concurrent Session**

**Title of session:** A Generation with Too Much Information: Reversing the Research Paper Process

**Format:** 30 minute session: 5-min intro, 20-minute discussion, evaluations at the end of the session

**Introduction:**

I'm Kim Ranger, Arts & Humanities Librarian.

Information literacy within the theoretical framework of phenomenography is based on observation and practical application: learners' ideas must be drawn out so that we assess their understanding and readiness before we try to help them increase their knowledge.

This past winter semester, I struggled in a GVSU undergraduate course to come up with a unique topic for a research paper. I fully realized the frustration that our students face! From a student's perspective, writing a report is easy, but writing a thesis statement for a research paper is challenging to the point of being overwhelming. Despite being a librarian and faculty member for 21 years, after reading the research on a topic, I felt as if I had nothing new to say.

**Any of you ever feel this way in your own research? If so, what do you do (to get past the frustration of feeling you have nothing new to say or the “writer’s block”)? Could I get a couple of brief examples?**

In previous work with Writing faculty members, I observed the progression of assignments from writing based on personal observation to a fully-fledged and unique thesis papers. More recently, the following blog post response reminded me of the value of a process which opens up possibilities rather than shutting them down:

In *Whither the research paper?*, <http://acrlog.org/2011/02/18/whither-the-research-paper/>, Maura Smale (ACRLog, Feb. 18) questions the value of formal research paper assignments. It is the comment by Joan which has the most insight: "It's really hard to present your own ideas when you've read all the experts' thoughts. What are your own ideas at that point? Even as a graduate student in English studying in a relatively new area, after a thorough lit review that covered all the questions I had about a piece, I wasn't sure what was left to say. ... Perhaps a remedy would be this: get the students to

choose the topic and write about it in-depth and thoughtfully \*before\* they do any research. Then, they research and review the important articles and learn what the experts have to say; they write this up as a lit review. Then, they write a third piece explaining how their thoughts have evolved or changed given what they've read. So they write about their own perspective, but bolstered and informed by research. (And, as a former writing instructor, I would probably toss in a fourth piece where they reflect on the whole process, reading their original essay and final essay and comparing them.)"

**Have any of you tried something similar, moving from free-writing to more formal writing informed by the literature? As a writer yourself or with your students? What was your experience with it?**

**If not, what do you think about this idea?**

**Hand out handout! Here's a summary of a suggested process echoed by the blogpost.**

**Summary:** Students often feel overwhelmed by the amount of information available to them in research assignments. Typically, we present the process as reading expert opinions before trying to create a thesis which puts forward a new idea. However, if student inquiry originates with observation, writing from what they know, conversation, and finally, addressing the research, then anxiety (and plagiarism) will decrease. I hope this session has stimulated some ideas about practical ways to engage students in evaluation, interpretation and synthesis (a.k.a. information literacy).

**Outcomes:**

Participants think creatively about research assignments which will engage a wide range of students and result in improved research papers. Group discussion may focus and refine the ideas generated.

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1. Have students begin with:
  - an observation exercise; write about it in-depth before doing any research
  - their own position/idea/definition
  - identifying their own biases by “guessing” what particular statistics may be (e.g., labor stats for women hitting the “glass ceiling”)
  - a drawing of their concept
2. Then have students research and review the important articles/statistics to learn what the experts have to say.
3. Students write this up as a:
  - literature review (evaluation)
  - discussion
  - addressing the statistics and discussing previous biases/guesses
  - connection and integration or synthesis of ideas
4. Write a third piece explaining how the writer’s thoughts or perspective have evolved given what they have read, bolstered and informed by research (interpretation). Or at the graduate level, identify the limitations of a particular study and follow up or validate with a survey, etc.
5. Reflect on the whole process, comparing the original and final essays (synthesis) or doing a post drawing and reflecting on their original drawing

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