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Beth Fuchs

University of Kentucky, beth.fuchs@uky.edu

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Helping First-Year Students Consider Multiple Perspectives and Think More Broadly Through a Freewriting Activity

Beth Fuchs, University of Kentucky

As instruction librarians who often have just a single opportunity to teach students about doing research, we work hard at making the most of our limited time with students. This constraint affects our instructional choices: we want our time with students to be meaningful and transformative for them, and we also want our time with students to be immediately relevant and helpful as they work on research assignments in their courses. Accomplishing both goals simultaneously is a tall order, but we persist nevertheless. By drawing on published research often grounded in a number of different disciplines—including education, psychology, writing, and information science—we can determine how to most efficiently use knowledge of student research behaviors to drive and refine our instructional choices. Given this relationship between published research and our pedagogical decisions, it seems natural that critical reflection and continual refinement are at the heart of our professional practice.

This article addresses how an in-class freewriting activity was designed to inspire learning by addressing student research behavior—all informed by articulated student needs and encounters with published research. First, I will describe the freewriting activity, and then, I will share how students' needs and published research aided in both its initial creation and a subsequent revision.

Freewriting Activity

I developed a freewriting activity for use in classes when students are developing a research question for their first-year writing and communication courses. The writing instructors in these courses direct students to create complex semester-long research projects centered around a topic that is local and/or personal. While the intention is to help students become better acquainted with their new campus and city and to make their research projects more personally meaningful, the assignment's design ends up making secondary research more difficult for students. My experience working with instructors and students in these courses has shown that students tend to focus on looking for scholarly sources for their chosen local community or space and are routinely disappointed and surprised that none exist. For example, students may select their residence hall as their research topic but then are unable to find any scholarly sources written about their specific residence hall. I knew that my instruction had to address this problem by asking

students to draw connections between their local topics and relevant secondary sources. This realization led to the creation of a freewriting activity intended to help students think more broadly about narrowly-focused research topics. I hoped that this activity would help students recognize that sources do not have to explicitly mention a local topic for them to be useful in a locally-focused research project.

The freewriting worksheet (see Appendix) is comprised of three large sections labeled, "Describe it," "Trace it," and "Connect it." Students are asked to focus on one section at a time, taking a few minutes to respond to any of the questions that appear in each section to spur on their freewriting. For example, in the "Describe it" section, students are prompted to consider what they know about their topic and what types of people would be interested in their topic. The "Trace it" section asks students to consider how their topic may have changed over time, perhaps in response to particular events or people. The "Connect it" section is an attempt to move students outside of their own experiences and encourage them to see the larger context of their topic. Reflection questions in this section include, "What influences your topic? What does your topic influence? How might people argue about your topic? What assumptions are made about your topic?" The sections were deliberately created to become more complex as they moved from section to section, so students may struggle to come up with answers to some questions in the "Trace it" and "Connect it" sections, particularly since they are often in the early phases of determining their research topics when I see them. At the same time, students are reassured during the activity that while they may feel pressure when writing under a time constraint, they should remember that this is an idea-generating activity above all, so any ideas are useful starting points. At the end of the freewriting time, I ask them to reflect on the thinking and writing they have just done. First, I ask them to circle the idea that seems most interesting to them to research right now. Then, I ask them to underline any new ideas or questions that occurred to them during the freewriting. I do this to emphasize that research is meant to help us explore interesting ideas and that new ideas will frequently occur as we spend time thinking about topics. I usually allow about 15 minutes for this activity.

After multiple semesters using this activity with students, I was pleased with the improvements I noticed in students' approaches to their topics, but I felt like further

refinement of the activity was necessary. I wanted them to be able to step outside of themselves for a moment and consider the larger picture surrounding their topic while also considering perspectives other than their own. By asking students to spend most of their time focused on their personal experiences, thoughts, and beliefs as a vehicle for exploring the larger context of their topics, however, I realized that I was neglecting the value that other perspectives could bring. While I was already asking students to consider how other people might argue about their topic and the assumptions that are made about their topic, I felt that I might be too subtle in my questioning because what I wanted to see most was evidence that they were not focused only on their own experiences. For this reason, I added these questions for reflection beneath the “Connect it” box:

- How do your cultural, gender, race, ethnicity, and social class backgrounds as well as life experiences influence your view of the topic? How might someone with a different background view the topic?

After making this change, when I ask for volunteers to share with the rest of the class one new idea that occurred to them as they were writing, the examples that are most regularly shared were generated from the “Connect it” section of the freewriting activity, as well as from these additional questions beneath it. Many instructors have mentioned to me how helpful this activity has been for helping students to think about their topics more broadly, and several have expressed feeling pleasantly surprised by the ability of their students to consider multiple perspectives, even at very early stages of the research projects.

Research, Reflection, and Multiple Perspectives

This freewriting activity reflects the Learning Partnerships Model, as described by Pizzolato, Hicklen, Brown, & Chaudhari (2009). Developed in 2004 by Marcia B. Baxter-Magolda and Patricia M. King—after Baxter-Magolda conducted a longitudinal study of young adults from their teens to thirties—this model emphasizes the relationship between student development and autonomy in learning practices. While an individual moves gradually from dependence to autonomy in their learning practices, college experiences can be designed to assist with this transition by using the three principles of the model: “validate students as knowers, situate learning in students’ experiences, and define learning as mutually constructing meaning” (Pizzolato, Hicklen, Brown, & Chaudhari, 2009, p. 477). By asking students to respond to questions about their topic in the freewriting activity, students are led to recognize that their own knowledge and curiosity are the starting places from which all further exploration proceeds. For students who have limited

prior experience with academic research projects, this activity has the potential to provide a lasting mental model regarding how the research process works. Without a mental model or prior experience, students do not often know the purpose behind completing research projects and do not realize that research requires engaging with a variety of sources and ideas on their topics.

When we lead library instruction sessions to help students tackle upcoming research assignments in their courses, we also have the opportunity to play a role in transforming their perceptions of research. Reflection is identified in research as the means through which students are able to make transformational changes, and at its core, the freewriting exercise is a reflection activity. According to Laird, Seifert, Pascarella, Mayhew, & Blaich, reflection and metacognition are essential components that help students move through developmental levels to achieve cognitive and critical thinking gains (2014, p. 425). All learners benefit from reflecting on their own views and incorporating multiple perspectives into their viewpoints (p. 427). More specifically, viewing issues from new perspectives helps first-year students to clarify their own patterns of thought and helps to lay the cognitive groundwork for future learning to occur (p. 404).

Helping students to develop more complex strategies for engaging with information encountered during research projects and then encouraging student reflection on those strategies seems to play an important role in transforming their perceptions of research. Insua, Lantz, & Armstrong (2018) propose that helping students to use a variety of sources where they will encounter differing viewpoints may help those who struggle with reading and using scholarly sources, which is a common difficulty for students (p. 152). In addition, an essential part of the Learning Partnerships Model is helping students reflect on their own perspectives through seeking out multiple perspectives of others. In turn, this act of reflection encourages more complex meaning-making strategies in learners (Pizzolato, Hicklen, Brown, & Chaudhari, 2009, p. 478).

Conclusion

The freewriting activity has been a successful way to get students to think about narrowly-defined local research topics in new and broader ways that better lend themselves to finding secondary sources. For example, if their topic is the campus gym and recreation facility, they were able to consider related topics such as the relationship between exercise and stress management or how

(Freewriting Activity...Continued on page 6)

(Freewriting Activity...Continued from page 5)

gender expectations influence behavior at a gym. The activity tends to generate a lot of writing from students but I can feel confident their time is well-spent as I know it is grounded in sound research on learning practices. This activity helps students engage in reflection and gently coaxes them toward complex thinking strategies to better understand their topics through a variety of perspectives, all of which are important in helping students to have a more complete understanding of the research process.

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(Interview...Continued from page 11)

I also think that we are at a point where we need to develop both as strong classroom teachers, and as skilled designers of instructional programs. It would be really fun to work on learning opportunities for library professionals that foster these as interrelated skills.

What books or articles have influenced you?

- *How to be an explorer of the world: Portable life museum*. Smith, K. (2011).
⇒ A really fun, interesting, and interactive book that has made me rethink the roles of note-taking, experimentation, and reflection in research and writing.
- *Where good ideas come from: The natural history of innovation*. Johnson, S. (2010).
⇒ My favorite thing about this book is how it reframes creativity as an environmental factor rather than an innate quality. It is fun to think about the many ways we can reshape our environments to foster more creativity, experimentation, and joy.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organizations*. Retrieved from <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-leaders-new-work-building-learning-organizations/>.

⇒ This article argues that for learning organizations the most important roles for leaders are as teachers, designers, and stewards. I think this means rethinking many of our traditional approaches to leadership and management and that there are key implications for how we bring more diverse perspectives and skill sets into library leadership positions.

Resources mentioned in the interview:

- See <https://ucla.app.box.com/v/build-something-toolkit> for the mini-manifesto as well as examples of the learning design activities used by WI+RE and shared in the "Build Something Workshop"
- See <https://uclalibrary.github.io/research-tips/> for WI+RE's website of embeddable online activities and handouts for writing and research instruction. You can also find, copy, and adapt all of the open source code for the WI+RE website and activities at <http://github.com/UCLALibrary/research-tips>
- See <http://twitter.com/WIREbruin> and <http://facebook.com/WIREbruin/> to keep up with WI+RE on social media.

Appendix: Freewriting Activity



Use *Your Ideas* to gain *New Insights* through Research

Describe it: *What do you know about your topic? What are its interesting and distinguishing features? What types of people have opinions about your topic? What types of people would not be interested in your topic? Why?*

Brainstorm:

Trace it: *How has your topic changed over time? What do you know about the history of your topic? What events have influenced your topic? What people have influenced your topic?*

Brainstorm:

Connect it: *What influences your topic? What does your topic influence? How might people argue about your topic? What assumptions are made about your topic? What roles do social structures (politics, economics, culture, environment, religion) play in your topic? What differences exist between your observations/experiences of this topic and the research that you've encountered?*

Brainstorm:

***Check yourself!**

How do your cultural, gender, race, ethnicity, and social class backgrounds as well as life experiences influence your view of the topic? How might someone with a different background view the topic?