

**A New Perspective on Reference:
Crossing the Line between Research and Writing**

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**Shifting Points of Reference and New Directions in Higher Education
5th “Reference in the 21st-Century” Symposium at Columbia University
March 9, 2007**

Introduction

“Crossing the line” is a very useful metaphor to express what researchers must do to present the results of their investigations to the academic community. Whether a seasoned scholar or a newly minted undergraduate, the process is always the same and involves crossing from the realm of facts and ideas into the realm of a written text. In the context of undergraduate education, on which the paper will focus, this act of crossing represents perhaps a single most important and advanced act of learning. Undoubtedly, a complex learning of many skills occurs through the process of research and writing. If we are to support our learners in this enterprise, we have to cross the same line ourselves in order to be able to understand the challenges the crossing creates for those whom we intend to support.

In the institutions of higher education, the designated supporters of research and writing are reference librarians and writing tutors. Since both roles comprehend the support of learning, it is important to consider their function in terms of teaching rather than service.

Based on findings from a recent anthropological study of undergraduate research, this paper will explore the students’ obstacles to writing successful research papers, and what educational benefits can be gained by crossing the line that usually separates research assistance from writing support. What can we learn from “the other side”? We will examine how the pedagogy of writing can inform the pedagogy of library research, and how crossing the line between research and writing can bring new knowledge about our users and great rewards to our roles as librarians.

Undergraduate research study

At the University of Rochester we have recently concluded a two-year study of how our undergraduates use library resources in the process of writing research papers and completing other research-based assignments for their courses. The results of this study have greatly influenced the design of new library facilities, reference outreach activities and our web presence. We started our project with a survey of faculty expectations for students’ research in order to gain an insight into what exactly students are asked to do when they are assigned research-based projects, and how they are evaluated. We also wanted to know whether there was any consistency of those expectations across disciplines or even across the institution. We interviewed 14 faculty members representing a wide range of academic disciplines and asked

them about hallmarks of good research papers, obstacles to students' success, how they expected their students to find materials needed to complete the assignment and how the librarians at the reference desk can help their students.

When discussing their expectations, all interviewed faculty members commented more extensively on the problems of writing and critical thinking than on those related to gathering of information. Whereas finding appropriate scholarly sources is perceived as important, most professors believe that students are quite resourceful and able to find things independently. The instructors who do not share this optimistic view of students' finding abilities either provide them with all the needed materials or request a bibliographic instruction session for the class. Faculty members are unanimous, however, in their opinion that evaluating and interpreting information appear much more difficult for students than finding it. Without exception, all interviewed professors agree that one of the main failures of the research papers they grade is the lack of critical judgment students demonstrate in their use of sources. To start with, students are not able to discern the quality of the sources they find and in consequence, often make a poor choice. They lack sophistication of analysis and interpretation, and therefore fail to see implicit and explicit relations between the sources or to distinguish between strong and weak arguments. Secondly, undergraduates do not seem to know how to formulate good research questions and how to work with the sources in a manner that will produce interesting and coherent answers. Trained in high school to write reports, students tend to summarize the readings instead of reflecting upon them and writing critical, thoughtful papers¹. As one of the professors remarked, it's difficult "to get them to realize they're not there to just repeat what someone else has said, but to internalize and spit back out in their own words, to provide their own 'take' on it [...] a personal reaction, not just paraphrasing." Finally, all instructors complain about mechanical problems that plague students' writing: "florid, overwrought language, jumbled and verbose", "grammar declining over the years", spelling mistakes, lack of clarity and poor organization of the text, inappropriate style for the discipline and/or the intended audience. In faculty's opinion, bad writing is an acute problem that turns out to be another substantial obstacle to students' success in research.

Interestingly, the students' assessment of the situation rang very similar bells. The interviews conducted with the students in the next phase of the project confirmed that they feel

finding is relatively easy, but coming up with a thesis and developing a good argument is very difficult. Here is a quote from one of the interviews that conveys the essence of this experience:

“...finding things about her life was definitely very easy. [...] I had a lot of trouble coming up with a thesis statement that, I guess I didn’t really understand. [...] But at the time, I was just, I have all this research, how am I supposed to just come up with something that’s arguable, when all of it is right in front of me?”

As we well know from our experience at the reference desk, finding is not always easy, but from the students’ point of view it seems relatively less of a challenge than coming up with creative and coherent ideas for their papers.

Teaching of research and writing

Writing a research paper is a very complex process composed of a series of distinct activities generally understood as: topic selection, exploratory searching, formulating a focus, collecting information, brainstorming for new ideas, drafting, revising, editing.² The process is hardly ever linear, the sequence of steps can vary greatly from individual to individual, and very often more than one activity is performed at the same time. Notwithstanding its complexity, working on a research paper represents a single project and a single grade will be given to the student at the end of it. Nevertheless, the academic support our institutions provide for students engaged in this kind of learning does not really reflect the nature of the learning process but rather the traditional divisions of the academic institution based on disciplines or academic functions. Institutional boundaries developed over time translate into separation of research, understood as the domain of the library, from writing, the domain of the writing center. As Sheril Hook suggests, each of the sides tends to see the other side’s domain as subordinate to its own, and therefore does not pay enough attention to the demands and challenges of that part of the process.³ Furthermore, reference and teaching librarians on one side and writing specialists on the other have developed diverging theories and practices of supporting students’ learning. They speak different languages and employ different pedagogic strategies to achieve their goals. In result, the teaching of research and writing skills that takes place in the library and in the writing center usually goes on in parallel lines.

Apart from this institutional disconnect, students involved in the research-writing process face yet another conflict, and on a much more personal level. Peter Elbow, a renowned composition scholar, believes that an inherent conflict exists between being a writer and being an academic – “two ways of being in the world of texts”.⁴ In his view, this opposition of roles affects all academic writers in varying degrees, but in the case of students who are learning to write and to do research, it is like “trying to walk toward two different mountains”.⁵ In a nutshell, finding one’s voice as a writer requires being self-centered, subjective, strongly committed to one’s own ideas and being able to express them with authority. Being a researcher requires, first and foremost, being a reader, being objective and placing oneself always within the context of what others had to say on the subject.

The reflection upon these collisions and difficulties has inspired us at the River Campus Libraries to rethink our roles and practices as reference and teaching librarians. We have come to believe that by segregating research from writing we contribute in a way to weakening of students’ understanding that a research paper constitutes an important vehicle for developing their ability of independent and critical thinking, gaining new knowledge through active inquiry and expressing their ideas by clear and coherent writing.⁶ In other words, we contribute to the impoverishment of their learning. What could we do then to connect research with writing and provide a truly student-centered support for learning? We decided to cross the dividing lines and see how things looked on the other side. An account of our experience will follow shortly.

Crossing the lines

From the theoretical point of view, I want to suggest that there two levels of crossing the lines between research and writing. The first one implies an adjustment of perspective. We need to adopt a holistic view of the research-writing process that is recursive and includes all of its crucial components as described above. The second one requires a higher level of engagement, in which we develop a better understanding of the demands of each stage of the process and of the pedagogic strategies we can employ at each phase to further students’ learning.

For us at the River Campus Libraries, the adjustment of perspective occurred naturally as we were progressing in our study of undergraduate research as well as in our collaboration with the College Writing Center.⁷ The partnership with the center has been steadily growing for a number of years and bears fruit in the involvement of librarians in a variety of writing-related

activities such as research instruction for the freshman and upper level writing courses, the training of new writing instructors, and sharing of research and expertise. This form of collaboration has indeed broadened our perspective and allowed us to see writing as equally important part of the students' learning process, but it did not give us much of an insight into teaching of writing itself. To cross the lines between research and writing we needed a different approach. We decided to jump into deep waters to get better acquainted with writing.

My three reference colleagues: Isabel Kaplan, Ann Marshall, Shirley Ricker, and I signed up for a formal training required of all writing consultants who provide individual tutoring in writing across the curriculum. As any of the beginning consultants, we studied writing pedagogy, observed tutoring sessions, discussed appropriate techniques with more experienced colleagues, participated in a grammar workshop and finally were thrown to face the real life of a tutor. Since then we have woven our tutoring work into our regular schedules and currently provide 1-2 writing consultations per week. As librarians we represent a wide spectrum of disciplines - political science, modern languages and cultures, engineering, religion, and classics - and differ greatly in our personal relationship with writing, spanning from love to hate. Yet independently of these considerations, we all got captivated and stunned by how much we have learned from the "other side". We want to delve into writing even deeper. One of my colleagues is interested in teaching a writing course next year. I have branched out into Spanish to provide writing support for students in the Spanish program as well as for those who take courses in English, but whose first language is Spanish. For all of us it has been a very rewarding and eye-opening adventure, incredibly helpful in understanding the whole spectrum of student experience and challenges of the research-writing process. Each writing session brings us new insights that we can take back and use in our library life.

Similar yet different

What important lessons did we learn from our tutoring experience? First of all, we could not escape noticing how much we share in common.⁸ Reference librarians and writing tutors all work towards the same goal. We confront similar problems and try to solve them in a pragmatic fashion. We often play a role of intermediaries between students and faculty and help students figure out "what the professor wants".⁹ We do not have any authority connected to the power of grades, but we assist daily a large number of students who work under their pressure. We have

established a solid teaching theory and practice. However, within the frames of our institutions we are usually classified as belonging to the “service” rather than the teaching sector.

At the same time, it is the teaching practice that divides us the most. Traditional reference practice focuses on gathering and evaluating information while the writing pedagogy centers on interpretation and presentation. A widely used metaphor in composition theory is the one of joining the conversation with the sources.¹⁰ Reference librarians strive to cover the field of inquiry in an exhaustive and thorough fashion. Writing specialists do not even attempt to address all of the issues presented by a single text. Both sides rely on strong interview techniques to elicit information about the project, but at the end of it, reference librarians are quick to produce a list of relevant findings while their writing colleagues never edit or give ready answers. In terms of outcomes, reference is geared towards results and immediate fulfillment of the need, writing concentrates on the growth of the individual and the improvement of skills over time. Highly dependent on technology, reference emphasizes the technical aspects of searching. Writing uses searching for sources as a way of generating new ideas. Last but not least, reference service is usually provided by professionals whereas writing consultation is usually offered by peer tutors. A difference in rank affects the character of the interaction with the help-seeking student.¹¹

Convergence of research and writing at the reference desk

Our exploration of writing has had a lasting impact on our reference and teaching practices. The more we tutor, the more questions we ask ourselves about what we should be doing at the reference desk. Indeed, our experience in the writing center has been very thought provoking and has irrevocably changed our ways of operating as reference librarians. We have adopted the philosophy of the writing center “to work on the writer, rather than the writing”, and thus we have shifted our focus from the paper to the student. We ask more questions not only about the project, but also where the student is within that project, what questions he/she is hoping to answer, and what audience the paper addresses. We often find that this type of questioning and a bit of encouragement do help the student to sort out his/her ideas and to determine the direction of the search process we are about to begin. While looking for sources we do not try to be exhaustive. Instead, we steer towards critical reading and analytical searching to make easier the connection between finding information and finding a thesis for the paper.¹² Our goal is not merely to find books and articles on a topic but rather to discover what debates

on this topic are going on in the literature and what arguments the student identifies with. This strategy usually helps the student formulate his/her own arguments and conclusions. We encourage the students in their recursive moving between finding, reading, thinking and writing.

To facilitate the convergence of research and writing at the reference desk even further, we hired a writing fellow¹³ as a reference assistant to cover some hours at the desk as well as to help out with bibliographic instruction sessions requested by faculty for their classes. The experiment has played out very well so far. Lindsay, our new “research fellow”, has been very quick in grasping the basis of reference. She has also proven enormously helpful in our hands-on research sessions, thanks to her experience in assisting students with their writing projects. Since Lindsay majors in Spanish, her feedback has been instrumental in my preparing for tutoring in that language. The added benefit of Lindsay’s presence in our department is the visible and concrete connection between research and writing she represents for her classmates, who know that she can help them deal with the research-writing process all along.

Call for collaboration

Of course, I do not want to suggest that every reference librarian should become a writing expert. As much as it may be an interesting and beneficial undertaking, the constraints of our duties and schedules cannot always accommodate yet another commitment. What I do want to suggest is, however, that we all can cross the lines enough to recognize the importance of the intrinsic connection between research and writing and the need of greater integration of students’ learning experiences. Providing a truly student-centered learning support requires that we all become involved in crossing the intellectual and physical boundaries that divide us. A trend in this direction is already visible on many campuses in the delivery of library and computer services within an information commons.

Academic libraries and writing centers are natural partners and are poised for collaboration. Indeed, *Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration*, a book published in 2005, attests to the existence of a number of successful partnerships. However, these joint initiatives are not as common as we would expect. A survey of academic institutions conducted by two of my librarian-tutor colleagues in January 2006 indicates that only 47% of all the respondents report a formal collaboration between the library and the writing center on various levels:

- 24% of participants work together to create instructional tools such as websites and printed handouts,
- 20% meet jointly with students about research and writing,
- 19% meet jointly with faculty to plan instructional sessions.
- 16% team-teach classes, courses or workshops, and
- 7% train writing staff to teach library research.¹⁴

Establishing a collaborative relationship may be challenging not only because of differences in philosophy and organizational culture, but also because of lack of institutional support for creating sustainable partnerships out of the main stream. Nevertheless, a long lasting commitment can be achieved if we know our goal and share a vision. The forms of collaboration can span across a whole spectrum of activities – the sky is the limit. I want to suggest, however, that there are three essential elements each library-writing center partnership should embrace in order to be effective and to convey the idea of connectedness: referral system, cross-training and collocation in a shared physical or virtual space that is flexible enough to accommodate a variety of consulting needs.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the benefits of “crossing the line” are multiple, but first and foremost, the excursion into the other side allows us to reevaluate our professional practice from a broader perspective so that we can support our students and faculty in the most meaningful way. By creating a truly inclusive research-writing community we leverage our strengths and can accomplish more than if we worked separately. For students, a better, more integrated learning experience leads to better understanding of the subject, a better paper and a better grade. For us, the cross-institutional collaboration and deeper involvement with students leads to better alignment of our programs and services. For those of us who also play the role of department liaisons, it helps us maintain closer ties with faculty and develop better understanding of their current interests. My current experience with Spanish tutoring has quite unexpectedly heightened my profile in my academic department and put me much closer to the ideal of the “embedded librarian”.¹⁵

Notes

¹ This point has been extensively elaborated in Jennie Nelson, "The Research Paper: A 'Rhetoric of Doing' or a 'Rhetoric of the Finished Word'?" *Composition Studies* 22, no. 2 (1994): 65-75.

² This is a simplified scheme based on Carol Collier Kuhlthau, "Developing a Model of the Library Search Process: Cognitive and Affective Aspects," *RQ* 28 (1988): 232-42, and Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English: 1971).

³ Sheril Hook, "Teaching Librarians and Writing Center Professionals in Collaboration: Complementary Practices," in *Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration*, ed. James K. Elmborg and Sheril Hook (Chicago: ACRL, 2005), 21.

⁴ Peter Elbow, "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals," *College Composition and Communication* 46, no. 1 (1995): 72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶ For the role of the research paper in college education see Nelson, "The Research Paper," 65-66.

⁷ At the University of Rochester, the writing center not only provides writing support across the curriculum, but also is home to the freshman and upper level writing program.

⁸ For a good overview of similarities between libraries and writing centers see James K. Elmborg, "Libraries and Writing Centers in Collaboration: A Basis in Theory," in *Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration*, ed. James K. Elmborg and Sheril Hook (Chicago: ACRL, 2005), 1-20.

⁹ This topic has been well addressed in Barbara Valentine, "The Legitimate Effort in Research Papers: Student Commitment versus Faculty Expectations," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 27, no. 2 (2001): 107-15.

¹⁰ The metaphor of conversation as representation of academic discourse was forged by Kenneth Burke in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 110-11.

¹¹ For more on the interaction of peer tutors with students see Kenneth A. Bruffee, "Peer Tutoring and Institutional Change," in *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 80-97.

¹² Ann Marshall, "Lining up Research Paper Support: The Roles of Librarians and Writing Tutors" (paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Chicago, 22-25 March 2006).

¹³ In the context of our institution, writing fellows are undergraduate peer tutors who have been trained to assist at any stage of the writing project. They cover evening and weekend "walk-in" hours and participate in online tutoring service.

¹⁴ Shirley Ricker and Isabel Kaplan, "Are We Crossing the Line? A Survey of Library and Writing Program Collaboration" (paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Chicago, 22-25 March 2006) available at http://docushare.lib.rochester.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-22020/Library_Writing_Collaboration.pdf

¹⁵ Barbara I. Dewey, "The Embedded Librarian: Strategic Campus Collaborations," in *Libraries within Their Institutions: Creative Collaborations*, ed. William Miller and Rita M. Pellen (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Information Press, 2004), 5-17.