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Using Analogy to Teach Primary Sources

Eric K. Jones

Otterbein University, ejones@otterbein.edu

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afternoon, a student in our special education cohort wanted to know more about the use of aversive techniques at a special education school in Massachusetts. By tomorrow, I will have posted a link to several stories about the school. Kentucky School News & Commentary is easily searchable by keyword and serves as a news repository for students.

The blog's effect has been that students are better able and more willing to engage in classroom debates on topics of immediate interest. It has also proven useful to other professors in their classes. Drs. Steve and June Hyndman of Georgetown College and Eastern Kentucky University respectively use Kentucky School News & Commentary in their technology classes and in other education classes as a web resource. Steve says the blog is "both a one-stop site for education news at the state and national levels and also an excellent example of the effectiveness of blogs as education and communication tools." June likes the way the issues are "thoroughly investigated and all points of view are honored. Richard offers a 'level-headed' analysis of the most important of education issues."

After 18 months, the blog has gained some unanticipated notoriety, ranking (at the time of this writing) as the 6th most influential political blog in Kentucky according to BlogNetNews.com. News editors, state board of education members, local superintendents, principals, teachers and others who are influential in education policy circles have taken notice.

I would argue that the practice fits Ernest Boyer's broadened vision of scholarship. It contributes to the intellectual climate (discovery) of the university; makes connections across disciplines (integration); is clearly service-oriented and sits at the nexus of theory and practice (application); and at a university whose goals are Teaching, Research and Service (in that order) it models and promotes scholarly teaching for future teachers (teaching).

Richard Day
Eastern Kentucky University

Using Analogy to Teach Primary Sources

One of the most common problems I find when grading undergraduate student term papers is the overuse of secondary sources. It has been very challenging to get students to understand the importance of citing primary scholarly sources when they prepare their bibliographies. For the purposes of this teaching strategy, I use Burton and Chadwick's (2000) definition of primary and secondary sources. While they admit that the terms can vary across disciplines, they use the following description for the hard

sciences: "a primary source is the original research. A secondary source summarizes or discusses the primary research" (Burton & Chadwick, 2000, pg. 322). Increasingly, students are submitting bibliographies that list websites, newspaper articles, and Wikipedia entries as if these references represent the original source of information. Sutton and Knight (2006) have studied the issue of teaching students the difference between primary and secondary sources. They point out that there is little research being conducted in the area of primary source instruction. "A review of the professional literature reveals a scarcity of strategies for extending primary source instruction to students in general library classes through an information literacy based pedagogy" (Sutton & Knight, 2006, p.321). The "scarcity of strategies" they mention suggests a need for a practical teaching method. As a professor assigning undergraduate research papers in a broadcast media management course, I decided to prepare an instructional strategy designed to teach students the importance of using primary sources in their term papers. Before I explain this strategy, it is important to point out why students may be having such a difficult time understanding the importance of using primary sources.

Scholars who have studied undergraduate research behavior have said that students choose sources on the basis of convenience and not on the basis of originality (Davis, 2003; Valentine, 2001). Students tend to choose sources that they think are easy to find, easy to understand, and easy to cite. Much of this convenience can be satisfied by the use of Internet sources. During the rise of Internet popularity among college students, Davis (2003) found a significant increase of Internet sources (as opposed to more traditional sources like books and research articles) in student bibliographies. A more recent indicator of this reliance on Internet sources is the growing popularity of online encyclopedia websites like Wikipedia. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2007) released a report revealing that 36 % of online adults consult Wikipedia. In addition, 50% of these users have a college degree. This search for convenience and this dependence on the Internet for sources are a couple of reasons that students seem to be indifferent to the need to use primary sources in their bibliographies.

I have experienced some isolated cases in which students have shown a blatant disregard for the attribution of credit to researchers for their ideas. An alarming pattern of plagiarism has emerged as a major concern on many college campuses. In his longitudinal study on student cheating, Schab (1991) found that the percentage of students who admitted to copying material word for word out of a book without citing the information increased from 67% in 1969 to 76% in 1989. The problem of plagiarism not only suggests a lack of awareness of the formal rules of citation, but a misguided understanding that citing sources is an insignificant act and there are no negative consequences for stealing another person's idea. Taking this issue into consideration, we shouldn't find it surprising that so many students write term papers without a clear understanding that using primary sources is an important part of determining the credibility of research papers.

Even though many obstacles confronting professors who teach research to undergraduates exist, showing my students the benefits of using primary sources is worthwhile. In her research, Morgan (2002) says that students who read and study primary sources will become more skillful at sorting, analyzing, and synthesizing large amounts of information. D'Aniello (1993) recommends the use of primary sources to students because they learn to emulate the research practice of scholars and they begin to understand the contextual framework of information.

The following teaching strategy contains the use of an analogy to demonstrate the importance of primary sources. Research has shown that incorporating analogies into teaching strategies can enhance student understanding and reduce misconceptions (Glynn, 1991). The instructor begins this procedure by speaking very generally about the need for accuracy in bibliographic sources. Then the instructor facilitates a classroom exercise to engage students and establish the basis for the analogy. In this case, using secondary sources will be presented as analogous to participating in a "whisper-down-the-lane" exercise. At the end of the exercise, the instructor uses the analogy to highlight the inaccuracy of using secondary sources. The following is a summary of how I have conducted this lesson in a broadcast management course:

"Today we are going to talk about the importance of accurate references in your bibliographic sources. In order to demonstrate my point today, I want us to engage in a class exercise. I have a passage from a study that I want to show you. Let's assume that this hypothetical passage contains the conclusions from a journal article that you want to cite in your term paper. In order to reference this passage, you will need to determine what it says accurately. I will show the entire class the passage on one condition. Each person must whisper the passage into the ear of the person sitting next to them." (For this exercise it is worth arranging the seats of the class in a semi circle in order to make it easier for the students to complete the exercise). "Only one person will get to actually look at the passage, and that person will initiate the exercise. Everyone else must depend on the recollection of the person who whispers the passage into their ear. When the exercise is complete, the last person to hear the passage will repeat what they heard out loud and they will write their recollection on the chalk board. I will then reveal the original passage on an overhead so that we can compare the two versions together as a class. (I used the following hypothetical passage in a broadcast management class of only 6 students on the junior or senior level.)

Original Passage: This study finds that media employees showed evidence of increased production when managers gave consistent and frequent feedback.

(I allowed one student to read and closely examine the passage until she felt comfortable with her recollection. She then initiated the exercise. Students were not allowed to write anything down, and they were only permitted to whisper. This restriction makes each student depend on a summarized or paraphrased version of the original. This is how the exercise parallels the reliance on secondary sources. After the class completed the exercise, the last student wrote down his recollection on the chalk board).

Student's Recollection: Managers found evidence of increased production when their workers gave consistent feedback.

(At this point, the instructor facilitates a classroom discussion designed to point out the inaccuracy of the student version. These questions could help toward that end.) "Would you feel comfortable citing the student recollection in your research paper?" "Does this recollection accurately reflect the original version?" (After the discussion, I would clarify the analogy to the entire class by saying something to the following effect.) "Think back during the exercise. Notice that every time someone whispered the passage into the ear of one of their classmates, a new layer of sourcing was created. Each layer represented a version that was further removed from the original source. In this case the primary source was represented by the original passage - or the researchers who conducted the original study. The person who started off the exercise became the secondary source. The third person became the tertiary source and so on. Notice the further we got from the primary source, the more inaccurate the information became. This is why it is so important to find the original sources in your term papers!" (At this point, I show some specific examples of secondary source citations from old term papers that previous students submitted - without revealing their identity. I end the session with a strong caution to the students about using websites that depend on secondary sources for their documentation.)

This teaching strategy will reach some students, but it will not be a cure-all. Some students will still need more clarification of primary and secondary sourcing. Specifically, I've found this exercise to be effective at generating more engaged student learning about research. This strategy tends to make students more active in asking questions about the sources they are using in their papers.

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Eric K. Jones
Otterbein College
