# BEYOND INFORMATION RETRIEVAL: TRANSFORMING RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS INTO GENUINE INQUIRY

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*Academic writing, reading, and inquiry are inseparably linked; and all three are learned not by doing any one alone, but by doing them all at the same time. To "teach writing" is thus necessarily to ground writing in reading and inquiry.*

—James Reither

Vartan Gregorian, former head of the New York Public Library, has warned that the sheer volume of facts available in and through contemporary libraries creates a dangerous "fiction of freedom of choice." In an interview with Bill Moyers several years ago, he minced no words in describing the danger of citizens being beguiled by partial information and of the "mental gridlock" that can result from an inundation of undigested information. One need not look far from a library reference desk to see his point dramatized by a glassy-eyed student tapping fruitlessly through a subject search in the on-line catalog or trying to make sense of a yards-long InfoTrac printout.

Students awash in information need both rhetorical and disciplinary contexts for choosing materials that will help advance their inquiry and bolster their claims. All too often, the results of student forays into the library are papers that consist of information nuggets strung together by flimsy (but formal) transitions indicating that one source says *X* and another says *Y*. Unless students' papers discuss the context for and relationships among their various sources' claims, they only

convey information. They do not build knowledge. When we ask students to incorporate library research into their written work, we must teach them how to move selectively, and efficiently, among information sources. In other words, we must teach them how to engage in genuine inquiry.

Fortunately, the very technology that can bring an overwhelming plethora of sources to students' fingertips can also be used to help students discover defining issues within the disciplinary contexts of those sources—even before they begin the task of actually retrieving copies of the materials they find cited. The instructional model for library-based Evaluating Sources Workshops which we present in this essay uses bibliographic materials to help students uncover the history and terms of inquiry for a given issue and thus to introduce processes of inquiry that are knowledge-building, not merely library-using. In these workshops, students work collaboratively to uncover the disciplinary context of a reading that is particularly important to the direction of a given course—a critical essay, a research report, a book introduction, or a textbook. Bibliographic tools become both subject and object of study. They are the means of learning about the disciplinary conversation even as uncovering the conversation becomes a practical occasion for learning to use the bibliographic tools. This basic Evaluating Sources model can be used across the university curriculum, and can serve as well to refocus high school research assignments in ways that prepare students for the sophisticated demands of college writing. Variations have been used in introductory survey courses, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) classes, first-year composition courses, and service-learning courses (where credit is earned partly through involvement in community work).

## Using Libraries to Find the Right Questions

Classroom assignments that foster inquiry take students out of the relatively passive role of fact-gatherers and place them in more active roles of question-formulators and knowledge-makers. "Academic writing, reading, and inquiry," Jim Reither says, "are collaborative, social acts, social processes, which not only result in, but also—and this is crucial—result

*from* social products: writing processes and written products are both elements of the *same social process*" (625). By showing students how to gain a quick overview of a given discipline's treatment of a subject, the Evaluating Sources Workshops highlight the socio-rhetorical constraints on discourse (see Berlin) and help build students' understanding of the rhetorical strategies involved in the forwarding of knowledge claims (see Bazarman). Through the workshops, libraries become venues for teaching not only about databases and search techniques but also about rhetoric.

High school and college writing teachers customarily tell students to "consider your audience" or "write for a general educated audience," but they rarely explore the implications of this advice beyond students' own composing processes. Few undergraduates have considered in detail the rhetorical qualities of published texts; indeed, they may be unaware that assumptions about audience shape discourse. (Douglas Park's and Arthur Walzer's work provide insight about audience and rhetorical context.) Students new to college or to a particular discipline are frequently unaware of the prior conversation in which a source they are using has sought to place itself. Such students are not adept at what Christina Haas and Linda Flower term "rhetorical reading," which they define as "an active attempt at constructing a rhetorical context for the text as a way of making sense of it" (167-68). To read rhetorically and think critically about information sources, students need to learn to consider how these sources have constructed them as audience. They need to consider how readers' information needs, preconceptions, resistances, and even pocketbooks have impinged upon the texts available for retrieval and incorporation into the papers they write.

The Evaluating Sources Workshops are designed to introduce students to the larger contexts and multiple dimensions of the subjects and issues they intend to write about. To do this, the model reverses traditional assumptions about the location of questions and answers in the academy. Research assignments and library instruction have long been shaped by a paradigm in which faculty produce the questions by giving an assignment, librarians tell students where to find the answers, and the resulting term papers demonstrate the

writers' retrieval and summary skills. Unfortunately, the student's role in all this as thinker and writer is minimal. The term papers function primarily as information conduits. In contrast, by asking students to uncover the dynamics of published discussions on a given topic, an Evaluating Sources workshop gives students themselves the responsibility for articulating questions as well as reporting on, and perhaps arguing for, answers.

This form of inquiry probably imitates the work of scholars more closely than does the traditional term paper. The scholarly research that professors do, Stephen Stoan points out, is complex, idiosyncratic, and even messy, quite different from the ordered linear procedure presented by traditional library instruction. Faculty do their research within the context of a discipline, often on the basis of footnotes and bibliographies. In fact, a number of studies have found that scholars do not actually use, nor know how to use, the reference tools that librarians consider crucial to "research" (Stoan 101). As a result, to the frequent dismay of librarians, many faculty are not equipped to teach their students how to use those reference tools—a deficiency that Stoan considers not blameworthy but natural and inevitable. Scholars need to consult abstracts, subject indexes, and the like only when they venture outside their immediate fields. For someone immersed in a discipline, Stoan points out, "the context in which an item is cited is usually a better guide to its usefulness than an arbitrarily chosen descriptor or subject heading assigned by a third party" (103). Term paper writers in high school and college are not, of course, immersed in their fields, and so they are not prepared to interpret these contexts. But couldn't they be?

The Evaluating Sources Workshops guide students outward from one carefully chosen reading to explore its contemporary and historical contexts. As students work to map the context of the discussion in the reading, they move closer to seeing the field as a classroom teacher or an experienced librarian might. During the workshop session, which typically takes place during a fifty-minute class period, the students divide into research teams that use specified reference tools to investigate the author's background and publication record, check the perspective and scholarly reputation of the article's or

book's publisher, and compile an overview of discussions about the issue over time. This last can often be done efficiently by targeting subject searches in the catalog and indexes at specified five- or ten-year intervals (the descriptors having been scouted ahead of time by the librarian and instructor). The students use worksheets designed collaboratively by the librarian and classroom teacher, who have together walked through key aspects of the searching the students will do. The librarian assists the various research teams as needed. The classroom instructor sometimes works alongside the librarian and students, sometimes with one team assigned to analyze the argument of the reading.

During the final fifteen minutes of the class period, the class reconvenes so that the teams can report to their peers not only the information they have found, but how they found it. Follow-up assignments often center on further exploration of the author's ideas within the discipline or controversy. To take advantage of the students' varied experiences with different research tools, the instructor can create new task-oriented groups made up of members from each of the workshop teams. The workshop and subsequent assignments demonstrate a generalizable process of investigating the contexts of information and issues. Students learn the necessity of asking questions such as the following:

- What concepts are relevant to my information need?
- How are these concepts treated in discipline *X*?
- Who are the important researchers?
- Where are the resources being published?
- Which issues are central?

Instead of being hidden in the successes and failures of an individual search process, the discipline-specific questions and answers that result from the workshop investigations become available for classroom discussion. The goal is not that students would do this extensive, labor-intensive background investigation every time they consult a source—and certainly not that they become reference-librarians-in-training. Instead, the purpose is for them to acquire insight about uncovering the conceptual issues in any research project.

The Evaluating Sources process in effect reverses the focusing and honing of traditional library search methods. The emphasis on interaction with sources reflects a central concern of current approaches to library user education. The workshop design recapitulates librarians' own experience in adapting to the technological advances of electronic bibliography. With the increasing number of multidisciplinary databases (e.g., ERIC—Educational Resources Information Center—one of the first), librarians had to learn to work with specialized terminology and discipline-specific concepts so that they can anticipate the nature and relevance of discussion within sources from the different fields covered in a single search. The workshop approach grows as well from Cerise Oberman's Question Analysis technique for focusing and refining a research problem. Her two-step process involves identifying (1) the variables that define the scope of a given research problem and (2) the field(s) of study concerned with the problem. Retrieval and evaluation come together as students learn how to fit their project into the constraints of the disciplinary conversation they discover.

Question Analysis is the most recent of what can be described as three waves of library instruction over the past 30 years, each attempting to accommodate changes in both learning theory and library technology. The first wave, which no doubt defined the relationship many of us have with the library, operated on behaviorist assumptions, focusing on retrieval skills and emphasizing practice. One learned library skills through repetition. The approach assumed stable print resources, consistent over time and across disciplines, and paid little attention to the process of formulating the research problem itself. The inevitable shift away from this drills-and-skills approach paralleled a paradigmatic shift away from behaviorism.

The second wave of library instruction shifted emphasis to the search strategy, which is probably still the dominant approach in academic libraries across the country. Although retrieval skills remain primary, the research problem receives somewhat greater attention than in the earlier approach. Flow charts typically depict a linear progression from "choose topic" to "find background information," beginning with general

reference books such as encyclopedias. Next they direct the researcher/writer to "narrow topic" and "assemble bibliography." Without providing for the possibility that one's writing project might change in response to one's research, the charts branch into categories for the types of bibliography that might be compiled, then add two final steps: "read materials for information" and "write paper."

The increasing complexity of computerized bibliography has outpaced these earlier approaches' assumptions of stable, print-based bibliographic tools, distinct resource categories, and uniform search techniques across disciplines. Furthermore, writing teachers find the search strategy's oversimplified assumptions about linear composing processes troubling, and the search strategy procedures can be burdensome for short assignments. A student assigned to compare the opinions involved in a particular controversy, for example, would likely decide that following all the steps of a search strategy would be unnecessarily time-consuming and complicated. The fundamental problem is that the search strategy, like the retrieval skills approach, works cumulatively rather than dialogically. Except for the early narrowing of topic, it makes no provision for a researcher to articulate questions in dialog with the materials found, no provision for redefinition and refinement of the research problem. Instead, it assumes that answers lie prepackaged in the materials to be retrieved and that the chief challenge for library users is making their way to the right source. (Students' propensity for adopting as their paper topics the focus of whatever materials they find to be readily accessible should not be a surprising result of this approach. The steps from there to plagiarism or something closely resembling it are small ones.)

In contrast to the first two waves of library instruction, the Question Analysis approach of the Evaluating Sources Workshops provides a flexible inquiry paradigm that helps students discover the dynamics of the conversation they wish to join, even as novices. In the library, students are shown how to select appropriate bibliographic tools within a specific discipline and how to recognize the kinds of questions under discussion in the sources listed. In the classroom, these two practical steps provide an occasion for the teacher to introduce

larger historical, epistemological, and rhetorical issues that may be central to a course and discipline.

## Evaluating Sources within Disciplinary Contexts

Because Evaluating Sources Workshops are designed to teach about disciplinary discourse, not just about retrieval strategies, they may be used effectively early in a course, independent of a specific writing assignment, as a means of acquainting students with the basic terms of discussion that they will encounter in lectures and readings. Naturally, integration of a workshop into a syllabus depends upon the course's goals and students' backgrounds. In high school, these workshops can broaden students' experience and understanding of research processes by showing them how to use familiar and popular on-line technologies in fundamentally new ways. In introductory college surveys or WAC courses, workshops can introduce discipline-specific issues integral to the intellectual fabric of the course and likely to be continuing subject of class discussion. In composition classes, a workshop can help students focus individual writing projects and can foster collaboration among students investigating similar topics. In service-learning courses, a workshop can introduce issues, resources, and tools for the work students will do in the community, and for the writing they will do analyzing and reflecting upon it.

The workshops operate according to the hands-on principle that practical use of a tool, such as the *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, provides far greater and more relevant detail than a lecture describing it. To prepare for the workshop, students are assigned to read carefully a text that the classroom teacher and the librarian have chosen for the disciplinary insights it and its contexts will provide. Typically, a previous class session or library workshop has covered basic retrieval techniques for the library's catalog and InfoTrac, and introduced major reference works in the field, such as the *America: History and Life* index, the *MLA International Bibliography* or the *Social Sciences Citation Index*. Because a librarian is on hand to direct students to sources that will provide specific kinds of information—e.g., abstracts of book

reviews, biographical information, reputations of periodicals and publishers—sophisticated knowledge of the reference tools themselves is not essential.

In high school, where students need to gain familiarity with the library itself as well as with the process of formulating research questions, the classroom and library sessions should extend over several days. Before small groups work on the variety of different tasks in the full Evaluating Sources model, a class session could be devoted to discerning information needs, and additional sessions could provide large group practice with the specific retrieval techniques involved in each of the team activities. For example, to put sharper focus on different aspects of the process, one session could be devoted to examining authors' backgrounds and another to subject searching on-line. Emphasizing what the retrieved information reveals about the context of a given text rather than the mechanics of retrieval will help the teacher and librarian demonstrate the importance of critical inquiry as part of any research project. (See Oberman's suggestions for sequenced questions and charts for sorting the dimensions of factual and conceptual issues.)

The workshop process for an introductory college survey course is illustrated by an Evaluating Sources session designed for a sophomore level Reading Fiction course that included texts from the Middle Ages to the present. As the term began, students were assigned readings from several of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and from articles that oriented them to various literary critical approaches. During the first week, the students not only discovered that the discipline of literary studies has recognizable types of questions and approaches, but also learned that this discipline is in the process of redefining and realigning itself. Furthermore, they realized that they themselves had a variety of critical biases and beliefs of which they had not been aware. After discussion of Chaucer's *General Prologue* and *Knight's Tale* from a variety of perspectives, the instructor assigned as the focus for an Evaluating Sources Workshop a 1973 article by Kathleen Blake. In it, Blake questions the then received critical opinion that Chaucer's tales represent and shore up existing social structures. She does not agree that the *Knight's Tale* must be read as support for a series of male-dominated religious, political, and private institutions.

For the workshop, the thirty-five-member class divided into three groups—one working with the instructor to analyze the development of Blake's argument, and the other two working with the librarian who had led a literary studies retrieval skills lab for the class the day before. He guided the students toward reference materials that allowed one group to begin formulating a statement about the identity and history of the author and the publication. Another group investigated the place of Blake's argument within the critical conversation in literary studies about Chaucer. When the teams reported back at the end of the workshop, the students discovered that Blake's publications to date had most frequently concerned nineteenth century women's literature and historically grounded feminist approaches to canonized materials. They saw her as an expert in the field of literary studies, but a novice in Chaucer studies when she wrote this article early in her career. They saw that she uses the younger Chaucerians as sources and tends to challenge older models of criticism. They saw that her reading of the *Knight's Tale* as a cultural critique has become a not uncommon approach, but that she was an early proponent of this view. Having read the *Knight's Tale* themselves, they questioned whether she provides sufficient textual and historical evidence to support her claims. They also discovered that Blake had more recently published a highly respected book on *Love and the Woman Question in Victorian Literature,* which they would find valuable later in the term.

Evaluating Sources Workshops can also be used to contextualize course textbooks and primary materials gathered for research essays. In a writing course linked to an upper division history class called War and Society, an initial evaluating sources session focused on the introduction to Michael Walzer's 1977 book, *Just and Unjust Wars,* the course's only textbook. Basing their research on questions they had generated in a previous class meeting, student groups used bibliographic tools to learn about Walzer's writings on the justness of the Gulf War and to gather citations reflecting a broad spectrum of other work on just war theory in various disciplines. Later, the research assignment for the course asked students to gather primary documents from a single wartime event (chosen from a list distributed by the history professor)

and to use these documents to judge the validity of Walzer's argument about the way "just" and "unjust" are defined during war. Additional library sessions gave students tools to locate materials such as journals, newspapers, letters, and diplomatic records, and provided opportunities to discuss the type of information available from each type of document. Students working on the same events formed research, evaluation, writing, and revising teams. This collaborative process of turning research into inquiry and information into knowledge culminated at a final meeting with the librarian, who suggested strategies for answering questions that had arisen in the last stages of revising.

In first-year composition classes, where students typically choose paper topics that might be examined from a number of different disciplinary angles, the Evaluating Sources Workshops can help focus topics as well as investigate sources. Here the basic workshop model can be supplemented with Question Analysis activities to help individuals discover which disciplines are likely to have addressed the issues that interest them. For example, in a first-year composition course where students read Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's autobiographical *Farewell to Manzanar*, a major writing assignment asked students to investigate the social contexts of the Japanese American internment during World War II. Typically, they wanted to investigate two broad topics: the reasoning behind the decision to create the camps and the long-term effects of the camps on their residents. Question Analysis worksheets helped students formulate more precise research questions (e.g., about economic causes and repercussions, court cases, protest movements, evidence of sabotage), and then to consider the disciplinary contexts within which these questions might have been discussed. This work helped them see what kinds of answers might be obtainable and what kinds of paper topics feasible. Reports and analysis of the Roosevelt administration's decision-making process, for example, would be likely to appear in American history or general periodical indexes. Studies about changes in family life were likely to show up in sociology publications, and studies of individual personality issues or internal family dynamics might appear in psychology journals. In addition, the worksheets asked them to narrow the

search to a particular period—to during or immediately after the war, for example, the Redress Movement in the 1980s, or the 25th or 50th anniversaries of the Pearl Harbor attack.

After this preliminary work on individual topics, an Evaluating Sources Workshop introduced students to their library's range of multidisciplinary sources about the Japanese American relocation. To prepare for the session they read Edwin Reischauer's review in *Saturday Review* of Michi Weglyn's 1976 book, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps,* one of the first widely published books on the internment. Reischauer, whom the students would discover to have been a highly respected and widely published former United States ambassador to Japan, uses the occasion to educate his readers about the internment. His clear dismay over the relocation struck some students as "bias," but through ensuing discussions they came to recognize that bias—a given writer's particular angle on a subject—is inevitable. Their responsibility, the workshop process showed, was not to seek the mythical unbiased source but to detect, understand, question, and even use a source's viewpoint to develop their own arguments.

During the workshop, members of one group gathered information about Reischauer's background, including a check of the entry about *Saturday Review* in *Magazines for Libraries* for information about his intended audience. Another group sought background on Weglyn and tracked down other reviews of her book. To their surprise, they discovered that she is not a historian, but a theatrical costume designer, a Nisei who was moved to a camp when she was a teenager, and that her book drew little notice in scholarly publications. A third group spread out to search periodical indexes (general and scholarly) and the on-line catalog to assemble an overview of what had been published on the internment, and when. They learned that Weglyn's book was one of the first to set the internment in a political context, and that except for the occasional book of personal reflection, most modern publication on the topic had come in connection with the Redress Movement. This campaign, they discovered, gathered steam through federal hearings in the early 1980s and culminated in passage of the

1988 Civil Liberties Act, which authorized reparations to those who had been interned.

When the groups reassembled, reports on *how* students found information were as noteworthy to their peers as the information itself. Students who worked with biographical and book review indexes offered to show others how to use them. Those responsible for working with the on-line catalog reported other titles in the same subject category with *Years of Infamy.* Political issues that their subsequent research would cover more extensively surfaced early here when students reported that "Japanese Americans—Evacuation and Relocation" is the official Library of Congress subject heading, not "internment camps." As the class realized that much of what had been published recently on the relocation was politically charged with advocacy for redress, they recognized the general need to examine the perspectives a source is adopting or summarizing. They learned, too, that changing times bring changing perspectives on historical events. The United States Army's 1942 *Final Report* on the evacuation had been supplanted by a very different story in the report of a Congressional commission forty years later: *Personal Justice Denied.* Students recognized limits and possibilities for refining their own research projects as well. Studies that might have suggested answers to their questions about the internment's long-term effect on family life simply did not appear in the indexes, for example. But information gaps also led to paper topics. The paucity of material on the subject in the 1940s led some students to ask "what did the public know at the time?" and to begin using newspaper and periodical indexes to research papers about how the internment was treated by the media during the war.

In service-learning courses, students can use Evaluating Sources Workshops to gather and contextualize information for immediate practical use as well as for academic writing. In a writing course for students who were tutoring grade school children five hours a week, a workshop in the library's on-line classroom focused on Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities.* All students worked at terminals that could access the ERIC database and the library catalog. The librarian guided students as they worked with the reference tools to gather and discuss

abstracts of Kozol's other publications, various writers' responses to his work, and an overview of related arguments. After learning this basic retrieval and contextualization process, students began working in teams on issues they had chosen beforehand as particularly relevant to the children they were tutoring. Some continued to look at equity of funding, some at tracking, some at the relation among methods of assessment, teacher expectations, and student response. Others explored the role of parents and community members in education.

In all four types of classes and workshop situations, the collaborative workshop efforts became a model for the students' work throughout the term. The service-learning students produced panel discussions for the class and developed aspects of those presentations into individual research essays and case studies. Their inquiry in the library not only applied directly to their own and their peers' academic work, but also created knowledge they could put to immediate use in tutoring sessions. In the first-year composition class, student researchers shared resources as they developed their papers. Even though everyone in class was working with the same broad topic, the assignment became not an occasion to see who could get the most sources fastest, but an occasion for considering which sources might be most useful as support for certain lines of analysis or argument.

In the War and Society class, because students began the term seeking to understand Walzer's place as a historian in the just war debate, they could see that their own writing participates in an ongoing conversation. As they searched for primary documents related to victims of and participants in war, they began to ask substantive questions about "primary" materials. What were the conditions in which a given text was produced? Who is included in it, who excluded? What constitutes evidence and argument for a historian, and what for a student's paper in history? They saw that plagiarism, or the uncritical use of any single source, is a matter not just of plundering others' work, but of letting someone else speak for you. Members of peer revising groups became quick to ask a writer how he or she was *using* a source, how it fit into the relationships of evidence claimed in the essay, and how it helped evaluate the validity of Walzer's general claims in the

light of the particular wartime event about which the writer was becoming an expert.

In the literature class, when students were assigned to prepare group presentations on literary texts, they used the basic retrieval and evaluation skills presented in the workshop. These groups designed topics for study, discussion, and writing, and presented to the class at least one critical article, discussing it in the context of its place in the discipline. These presentations and the students' written work reflected an understanding that the discipline of literary studies asks certain kinds of questions, that these questions tend to change, and that the library provides access to the conversation which embodies this changing model of inquiry.

Ultimately, the Evaluating Sources process provides students with a means not simply to determine the usefulness of sources turned up by their research, but to understand the terms upon which they must make and write about that decision. The library becomes not just a repository of information artifacts, but a laboratory for the exploration of discourse. Student research becomes genuine inquiry.


## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article about collaboration was itself collaborative in many ways. We are especially grateful to Joan Graham, director of the Interdisciplinary Writing Program at the University of Washington, who first prompted us to include the evaluation of sources in library and then classroom instruction; and to Cathy Beyer, lecturer in the UW interdisciplinary program, who together with Randy Hensley developed the first Evaluating Sources Workshop for students writing about sociology. Finally, we are grateful to Gail Stygall and Barbara Cambridge for revision suggestions.


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