Building Triangles: Research and the Realization of Self in Making Sense

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Working with first-year students at Purdue University, composition instructor Mary Godwin joined efforts with librarian Alexius Smith-Macklin to explore the efficacy of a collaborative approach to freshman writing instruction at the university level. Combining expertise from the Purdue programs of English education, theory and cultural studies, rhetoric and composition, and library studies, these instructors initiated an action research investigation of curriculum designed to improve the research skills of first-year university writers. It was their purpose to tackle the challenge of defining a teachable process for directed, undergraduate student research in a culture networked and authorized by information technologies, to discover how instruction might better be structured to effect improved skills in critical thinking, information retrieval, data analysis, and subsequent student research and writing. This paper reports the process and preliminary findings of a work-in-progress, addressing first a brief introduction to action research methodology and situating this study as one of many arising from a gathering of experts who share in common a concern for student proficiency in information literacy.

Action research unfolds discovery through an iterative process, cycling participants through graduated phases of "planning (including situation and problem analysis), taking action (or implementing the plan), observing (watching and evaluating the action), and reflection" (on the process) before beginning the cycle again.[1] The purpose of action research is pointedly to explore and highlight pedagogical assumptions, the unobserved controls shaping choices and expectations we form as teachers. Success in action research depends entirely on the willingness of observed participants to invest in disclosure for the benefits to be gained in collaborative problem-solving—an investment much easier to describe than to practice, requiring as it does a significant measure of trust, openness, synergy, and the courage to be seen in failure.

The initial phases of action research (problem analysis and plan development) for this study were addressed as part of the work completed during weekend sessions where a larger gathering of content experts from rhetoric and composition, library studies, technology support, and legal services came together motivated by their desire for improved methods of instruction in information literacy. The question initially defined to focus this gathering was: Does integrated instruction in information and computer literacy improve student performance in skills associated with research in an English composition course at the university level? Cohorts formed during weekend sessions were charged with the task of generating a variety of possible approaches to research

instruction for beginning scholars. Strategies negotiated within each group were synthesized into a number of workable models. Cohort members with whom I shared the task (here including Alexius as the librarian on the team) worked from an instructional design I had developed prior to these collaborations to stabilize an improved and workable plan—that plan then serving to anchor a semester of qualitative research in classroom implementation. Having passed through initial phases of problem analysis and action implementation, Alexius and I were then ready to put our plan into action and begin the work of classroom observation.

For purposes of this study, the field of consideration for student research topics was limited to "the rhetoric of place/space," understanding rhetoric as the intentional construction of message/meaning. Students were directed to approach the research topic as an investigation of how a place or space is constructed on purpose to convey as well as define the composed culture. Students selected a *place* of interest to them and were expected to conduct an examination of that space in light of concepts introduced and explored through textual reading, classroom instruction, and class discussion. Introductory handouts detailed outcomes for a progressive regimen of research development, weekly report expectations and formatting, purpose of study, and concept definitions. In addition an "inventory for project success" was provided in the form of a checklist. Significant class time was dedicated to introducing the project. Discussion followed by a question and answer session served to further secure as much of a successful beginning to the project as possible. Finally, two required *special* sessions were dedicated to instruction delivered by Alexius *in the library* on the availability and use of electronic resources housed there.

Keep in mind that while the study being reported here focuses attention on developing a method for improving the teaching of scholarly research—a project arising from the initial gathering of concerned instructors, in classroom application the student research component being implemented was only one of three instructional emphases operating simultaneously for students in defining the course as a whole. Complementary components of instruction included weekly compositions exploring digital expressions of visual rhetoric and textual readings[2] engaged through class discussion and group or open-book quizzes. Weekly reports ("Research Reports") addressing the research component of the class were assigned to insure a measured and steady gait in topic researching throughout the semester, culminating in a summative *project* designed to 1) intentionally address a targeted audience, 2) be delivered in a medium that could be justified by the message, and 3) demonstrate an understanding for a variety of rhetorical devices employed in composition. Though a more standardized expression of research *paper* would certainly have been an acceptable option, students were responsible to justify project design as being in harmony with the culminating research thesis and the determined sensibilities of their defined audience, further practicing the realization of text *as* message. Though painfully understated, this brief course description does provide some context for an explication of the discoveries that would unfold for me as my own research on information literacy progressed. It remains only to describe the instrument with which students began the semester's study in gathering and reporting research.

Geoff Sirc, one of composition studies' foremost innovators, refers to the setting of his work with freshman writers at the University of Minnesota as a "shared classroom."[3] By this he means to acknowledge the wealth of information he *receives* from his interaction with students. The semester of study about to unfold for me would give way to a similar wealth of information. In first permutations of the "Research Report,"[4] page one of two asked students to informally record "process notes" from which I intended to receive a kind of *flow of consciousness* reflecting the thought path taken in approaching a problem-solving task. Following this, space was provided for students to list "surveyed sources," sources or locations considered as possibilities for yielding further fruitful

reading. A final investigative prompt gave place for "notes relative to an anticipated project or future research," space intended for notes reflecting bits of information found that *might* enrich a final project or prove fruitful in the process of reading. By surfacing the student's negotiation with task strategies, I had hoped to discover points at which instruction toward improvement in those strategies might be made. Page two of the report guided students through a formal report of one selected source. That report required: MLA documentation, an annotation addressing source summary, authorial credibility, and research currency, the value of source information when applied to the culminating project, and a summative thesis statement formulating argument relative to the article reviewed. Finally, students were required to list and define five new vocabulary words from their reading—this to encourage student engagement with a more challenging selection of readings. Turning to Sirc's model for evaluation, I consider a research report effectively completed when clear evidence of student engagement can be seen in 1) the thoroughness of investigation, 2) the *voice* of scholarly confidence, and 3) the pertinence of sources selected for report.[5]

Alexius and I collected copious notes over weeks of observations; Alex attended class daily, recording the details of word choices, gestures, analogies employed during instruction, clarity of assignments given, and student responses. Our interests were in recording the sometimes celebratory, sometimes wrenching but ultimately rewarding experience of action research in the classroom. Weekly "debriefing" meetings provided opportunity to exchange findings and rarely failed in disclosing some aspect of my instruction about which I had been unaware: Had I noticed a preference for a particular field of topic possibilities? Had I considered the recurrence of particular interrogatories as indicative of a shared confusion? How had I factored for student disconnect or miscalculation on assignments? Questions probing further for clarity or justification of instructional motivations regularly led to new awareness and subsequent adjustments to lessons still in the planning stage.

Profitable albeit emotionally difficult, these kinds of interactions might have been expected, but it is when consideration turns toward the intended focus of our research—the success or failure of our model for improving instruction in student research, that I must come to terms with an outcome for which I had not been at all prepared: the model for instruction wasn't working. The qualitative action research in which we were engaged was evolving, forcing us to a reconsideration of the initial research questions and a complete recalculation of what constitutes a *beginning* point for instruction in scholarly research. In seeking an answer to the question of whether or not an integrated approach to instruction would improve student performance in research, another quite unexpected set of questions competed for attention: what *is* research? what *are* resources? and, what do we do to make sense with all this information? Answers to these questions may be too easily dismissed as "obvious," glossing oversight with a presumption that previous instruction would certainly have addressed any need for understanding—annual assignments so regularly requiring, after all, lists of resources and pages of research. A studied consideration of these questions, however, may demand reconfiguration of our basic understanding of research, may in fact compel a complete restructuring of instructional methodology, one composed with a greater respect for the fluid and oft-conflicting nature of information as it (re)creates *with* the researcher to make sense in our networked and digital society.

With an eye to future curriculum development and remaining particularly attentive to the needs of mentoring programs in guiding teaching assistants new to composition, I am pressed to the question: To what degree are first-year composition teachers responsible for instructing skills commonly believed prerequisite to admission for university study? If well-reasoned, authoritatively supported, and critically positioned argumentation marks the currency with which developing writers are valued, what weight falls to the writing

teacher for insuring successful (acquisition) employment of these skills? What measure of instruction can rightly be dismissed as beyond the teacher's responsibility? To further complicate the matter, when considering evaluative practices, what guides the calibration of evaluation if not instruction? If skills fundamental to writing for academic success are found deficient and left without instruction, how then can the standard university-assigned research paper be justly evaluated toward an all-important final grade? In other words, are we content to see beginning writers evaluated against skills for which they have not received instruction? Certainly these questions are central to curricular planning in anticipation of building effective TA mentoring programs. Fledgling researchers themselves, graduate teaching assistants may too easily succumb to the "fall back" method of instruction: when you don't know what you're doing, teach the way you were taught.

As Alexius often commented, both the joy and the frustration of action research is that it works, and in this case it was able to expose pedagogical assumptions that would force the most basic of instructional practices into interrogation. A veteran teacher of now more than twenty-five years, I was taken by surprise in coming to see fundamental deficiencies in methods of instruction in research skills I had believed until then to be sound. Through action research taking place in my classroom, failed instruction owing to pedagogical assumptions so easily overlooked came to light. Though not enthusiastic, students had been generally receptive, believing themselves sufficient to the research tasks assigned; continuing class observations confirmed the clarity of instruction given and the strength of information exchanged in questions and answers. There was every reason to believe the instructional method was well developed, and there was every reason to expect a fruitful outcome, yet the method failed. What had happened? What was missing?

When fair allowance is given for postmodern sensibilities reflecting fragmentation, the digitization of information, the subsequently fluid nature of data, boundaries in motion, and the endless sub-dividing of knowledge, there emerges a pointed need for the reconfiguration of instruction in information literacy, critical thinking, and a fundamental understanding of what it means today to engage meaningful research and to participate in the productive industry of information. A confident beginning using the research report described above nonetheless quickly collapsed into confusion as students attempted to map information *on the move* with cognitive processes configured for conceptualizing stable packages of information. Though we worked to address this confusion through class discussion and continual adjustments to the reporting instrument itself, it became increasingly clear that students were largely unable to command a basic understanding not only for the task of research but for understanding the interaction of fundamental elements employed in that task. Further, it became painfully clear that the method prepared for instruction had failed to find a suitable beginning for teaching research skills, presuming instead as preceding instruction had done, that research was the art of lines and the work of *know what* when in fact research had evolved into the art of triangles and the work of *conversation.*

If we take as given that research is a well reasoned, authoritatively supported, and critically positioned argument, then where does one actually *begin* the process? What is a source? Why do I want one? How do I know I have found one, and what do I do with it then? Perhaps critically important: What part of the research project is ME—my writing, and where does that part come from or fit in? In other words, what do you want the writer to do when you ask her to research? The much-rehearsed linear process passing from broad topic to narrowed topic to question, hypothesis, and support too often results in little more than the collection and recitation of apparently stable facts. Conclusions drawn not so much reflecting the writer's position with regard to a critical analysis of disjunctive information as they do an ontological summation, a report of "the way it is" in the world—the writer situated as witness/reporter more than participant with the shifting

formations of knowledge. Clay Shirkey, Professor of Interactive Telecommunications at NYU, defines in essence the difficulty young thinkers/readers/writers must negotiate to engage in the business of handling information today. Speaking recently at the O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference, he argued, "It all comes down to a question of philosophy," and drew his presentation to a close with these comments:

It comes down to this: Does the world make sense, or do you make sense of the world? If you believe the world makes sense, then anyone who tries to make sense of the world differently than you is presenting you with a situation which needs to be reconciled formally because if you get it wrong, you're getting it wrong about the *real world.* If, on the other hand, *we* make sense of the world—if we, from a bunch of different points of view, are applying some kind of sense to the world, then you don't privilege one top way of sense-making over the other; what you do, instead, is that you try to find ways that individual sense-making can roll up to something which is a value in aggregate, but you do it without an ontological goal.[6]

What I offer here is a new model for approaching the research process, one intentionally designed to promote a realization of the writer in the project outcome, an outcome intended more to situate the researcher within the flow of information than to affirm a pre-existing worldview and to assist the writer not so much in an archival collection of information as in a sense-making analysis/exploration of information intersecting at the crossroads of knowing. The goal of this method is to engage the student as participant in the dynamic evolution of knowledge, to put the student in motion, equipped for conversation with information on the move.

Formulated as a triangulation of resources,[7] research begins as learning anchored in "received information." I define received information as that piece of "knowing" presumed to be correct inasmuch as it is given through instruction as a starting point, a presumption to be employed in the consideration of a selected topic. Again, learning *begins* with an anchor in text, instruction, discussion, and/or directed notes regarded as an entry point into research. This entry point is teacher provided, instructionally highlighted, and, for the moment, held to be beyond question as a place from which to launch critical thinking. It might be regarded in much the same way as "GO" is designated a starting point for the game of *Monopoly*—the significance is largely assimilated as the game moves into play. A concept such as "the politics of visual representation" discussed by bell hooks in *Picturing Texts* might serve to illustrate a point of entry anchoring the beginning of research.[8]

The triangulated process continues when the researcher employs received information as a filter through which to practice an examination of the assigned topic. Here the student endeavors to "locate" or identify herself—to affectively (real)ize herself invested in sense-making processes engaged as if *through* and accountable *to* the information she has received.[9] Here I am arranging for the student to become visible to herself as subject and author, to distinguish cognition as a productive (creative) act. She might reason along these lines: "If given that [received information], then I would observe/find myself to hold as known [the self experienced in sense-making]." The student now occupies the privileged location, authorizing the composition of self as both subject and critically invested text. This can be a difficult and frightening moment: to (real)ize a thought that has not first been given, sanctioned, or approved by another. It is at this point students are most apt to ask, "Is this right?" Here the instructor must resist the urge to frame the student's learning; the "insecurity" of this moment serves to fuel motivation for a negotiation with a third component of research.

Having formulated oneself as contributing text—both as reader and being read, the student now (*re*)searches the topic through an engagement with the third point of the

triangle: "found information," acquisition made of the celebrated *source.* Found information is that searched for nugget of knowing able to "speak to" the topic in such a way as to complement both the student's read of the topic and the received information with which the learning began. Though I initially direct the focus away from information-seeking by providing a list of resources from which to draw at the beginning of the semester, by the fifth or sixth (of ten) research reports, students are venturing from the list provided to search on their own for information better suiting their needs or interests. In every case, however, found information must supply *some measure* of critically pertinent topic development if it is to be regarded as a citable source.[10] Students must engage the negotiation of new information. A source comes to be understood then as information that authoritatively 1) affirms, 2) negates, or 3) significantly contributes to a conversation already in progress between the writer and the initially privileged received information.

The model assumes that for each week of research directed by the instructor, adequate instruction will be provided so as to clearly define (teach) the information that will anchor the learning experience as an entry point to research, equipping students to formulate their own "reads" of the particular topic under study. Further, the model presumes that the instructor will predetermine a range of sources from which the student may draw "found information" for the first weeks of study. It is clearly not the intention of this heuristic to address all aspects of the research project but to focus attention on what I believe to be the heart of difficulty for students engaging the research process: the realization of a substantiated self in the productive act of knowing. To this end, the research component presented here attends to the processing of embodied information, emergent cognitive mapping, and the reward of substantiation leading to effective argument from a clearly realized sense of position in scholarly engagement. Through this process it is hoped that the student will

- recognize *self* as an embodiment of received information
- undertake the cognitive mapping of disclosed convictions
- differentiate archiving (collecting) from the productive act of research
- (real)ize oneself as a contributing member in the act of sense-making

These simple changes may read as seemingly obvious, but the degree or two of recalibration with which they mark new methods for teaching research has made the difference between confusion and writerly confidence for students approaching their own work with research. There is a sense of "getting it" for many students who have until now known their writing mired in broadly sweeping generalizations but have had little understanding of why. Researching through a triangulation of resources empowers an expanding ability to compose oneself with authority for participation in ongoing scholarly debate, to situate the realized self as subject and author in the collaborative act of making-sense, and to equip oneself for argument by employing the support of some in response to counter-arguments by others. On the whole this method situates research as the productive act of composing a view of the world that "can roll up to something which is a value in aggregate" while respecting the fluid nature of sense-making for the 21 st century.
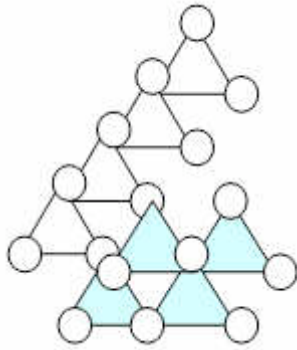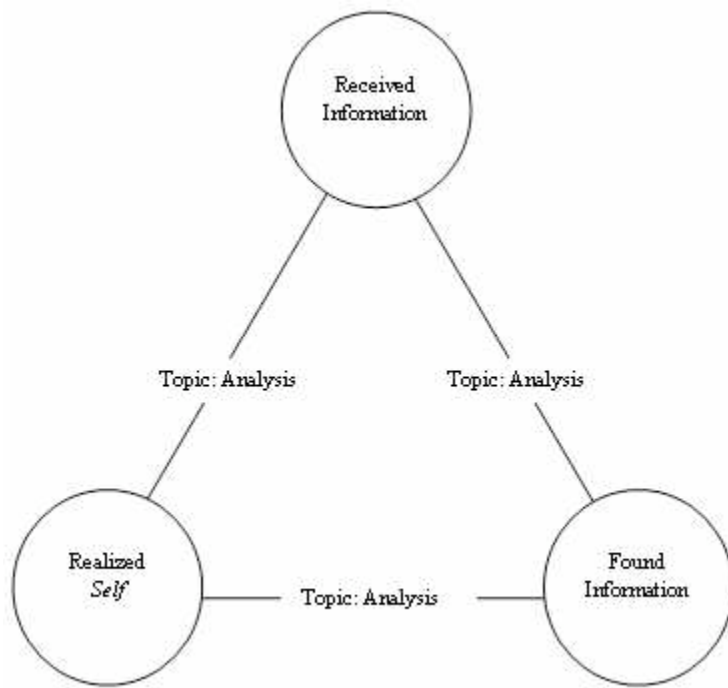
Data coded and notes compiled through classroom observations will, I suspect, continue to bear profitable outcome, but I will close by highlighting again the productive experience of being observed daily by (an)*other* as bearing the greatest fruit in research, bringing me anew to an exacting self-examination of my instructional methods, expectations, and suppositions. Coming semesters may take Alexius and me back to the classroom for another round of testing theories, refining curriculum, and collecting data with which to hone our developing ideas. We look forward to the continuing reward of this productive collaboration. Though we have made substantial gains in understanding

the needs of students as they venture into first considerations of scholarly research, more work needs to be done: first toward greater awareness of the digitally networked community and second toward study in the architecture of ideas as they are constructed for argument. The goal is to stabilize a sequenced syllabus approach with which to guide first-year teaching assistants as they engage the all-important work of becoming accomplished teachers of writing.

Model #1

name
RR#

Process notes:
_____
_____
_____
_____

Surveyed sources:
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_____
_____
_____
_____

Notes relative to anticipated project or research:
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_____
_____
_____

MLA citation:
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_____
_____

Annotation:
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Toward Project Development—Positioning Self:
_____
_____
_____

Vocabulary:
1._____
2._____
3._____
4._____
5._____

Model #2:

As this model is put into practice, the triangles multiply and begin to form a *network* of knowing. Through iterations of instruction, application, and topic "readings," the *real*.ized "reader"/student gradually in.*corp*.orates received information, coming to know it as her own. As one round of discovery gives way to the next, "received information" re.forms and resituates *it*self as realized, embodied in the evolving researcher. Connections form, strengthen, and are set in motion as found information itself now trans.forms and begins to function as received information – a next filter through which ongoing topic "readings" are processed. Time passes, research continues, and what was once found information is assimilated into the body of knowledge a student comes to regard as *known*. Each new generation of "found information" sets the triangle in motion: ever so slowly but with undeniable certainty, the student begins to move with the flow of information, venturing through a rhizome of conjugated triangles, resources in motion – dynamic, fluid, productive, and above all, participatory.

Notes

1 Otrun Zuber-Skerritt. "A Model for Designing Action Learning and Action Research Programs." *The Learning Organization.* 2002:9. ABI/INFORM Global

2 The text for used for this class is *Picturing Texts* (Lester Faigley, Diana George, Anna Palchik, Cynthia Selfe. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2004. ISBN 0–393–97912–1), though the syllabus sequence will be tested with alternative texts in the coming year to insure exportability of major concepts.

3 To pursue a further interest in reading more about Sirc, I recommend *English Composition as a Happening,* Utah Univ.Press, 2002. ISBN: 0874214351

4 See appended model #1 for a visual representation of this information.

5 Wysocki, Anne, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, Sirc. *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition.* Utah St Univ P: Logan. 2004, page 144.

6 "Ontology is Overrated: Links, Tags, and Post-hoc Metadata." O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference, San Diego, CA, March 14–17, 2005.

7 See model #2 for a visual representation of the information presented here.

8 "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," *Picturing Texts,* pgs. 175–183.

9 Mark B. N. Hansen speaks at length to the irreducibly transpatial nature of information in the digital age. See particularly his discussion of perception on page 101 of *New Philosophy for New Media,* MIT Press: Cambridge, 2004. ISBN: 0–262–08321–3

10 Here Paul D. Miller's discussion of *sampling* throughout *Rhythm Science* (MIT Multimedia Pamphlet, 2004) may be particularly helpful in guiding student selection and remediation of the bits of information that are brought together in a research project.

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