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Sequencing a Literature Review paper

Peter Smith

Western Libraries

In Fall 2013, I attended the Backwards by Design workshop sponsored by the Writing Instruction Center and led by Carmen Werder and Shevell Thibou. At that time I was just beginning to think about a new course, *LIBR 320: Archives and Special Collections Studies*. The purpose of the course is to engage students with the primary sources available in the Heritage Resources unit of Western Libraries, including the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Special Collections, and University Archives. Using the collections, students gain knowledge of and respect towards the institutions of special collections and archives globally, experiencing them locally.

Learning outcomes include:

- Articulate what primary sources are and why they are valuable for research
- Understand the importance of context in primary source materials
- Learn about organization, preservation, and use of special collections

Sequencing is the concept I applied to the Archives and Special Collections Studies course. Sequencing is described in the book provided at the workshop, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* by John C. Bean.

In a different course I teach, *LIBR 201: Introduction to Research Strategies*, students create an annotated bibliography of sources found using library resources: the library catalog, databases of periodical literature, and peer-reviewed scholarly journals. For the Archives class, a writing proficiency level three course, I wished to add more writing, and so expanded the annotated bibliography project into a literature review paper.

To sequence the literature review paper into less overwhelming segments, I followed the model presented in *Engaging Ideas*. Especially helpful was the table on page 246, *Example of a "Backward Designed" Assignment Sequence*. I did modify the sequence to fit the plan of the course. For

example, in *Engaging Ideas*, students are given a prompt research question to begin their writing. In the Archives class, I desired students to create their own research question in reaction to their observations of the primary source materials.

The final literature review paper assignment highlights the ideas represented in twelve scholarly journal articles related to the student's research question. The literature review may follow one of four approaches to organization as described in the Writing Center's documentation: chronological by publication, chronological by trend, thematic (by topics), and by research methods. The text includes the introduction, an overview of the literature, a critique of the literature, and a conclusion followed by a list of references for every article in the text.

The first segment in the assignment is to read a chapter from the book, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, by Neil MacGregor, and write a short essay about the content. The author is Director of the British Museum, and the chapters provide an illustration of how the students may approach primary resources.

The second segment is an assignment to read a scholarly journal article, selected from sample articles provided, and analyze the article to identify the argument, main points, and synthesize the ideas in their own words.

The next assignment is to find a scholarly journal article related to their chosen research question, to analyze and synthesize the article content in a one page essay.

Next the students find three more articles and repeat the process of analyzing and synthesizing the ideas. For the next three weeks, the assignment is the same, to add three more articles to their bibliography of journal articles, with text describing the content, analyzing the ideas, and synthesizing the authors ideas with their own research question.

I do encourage students to consider the articles they have found and look for new articles with their new sub questions, not using the first articles found. At midterm, I borrowed another plan from the *Engaging Ideas* book and asked students to write a Prospectus, an essay that is meant to make connections between the research articles and their research question concerning primary sources.

In the eighth week, a draft literature review paper is due, which is corrected and annotated with comments. The final literature review is due at the end of the course.

Sequencing the literature review assignment into many segments helped me a great deal and helped the students get started early and stay on track with getting the work done throughout the course, not waiting until the end. As the assignments came in, I was able to evaluate each student's understanding of the work and give feedback to support their efforts.

Another project in the course is for each student to create a research poster to put on display in the library Learning Commons on the last day of class. Students stand with their poster and answer questions from visitors attending the exhibition. The poster is an excellent component of sequencing the literature review paper because the poster is a brief alternative format of the literature review. There is interpretive writing to convey the research question and thesis to the reader, graphics of the primary sources, and three article references from the final bibliography. Having a public audience for the outcome may have created enthusiasm for the project. More questions and discussions about their research topics occurred while working on the posters.

I plan to use the same sequencing procedure again with the same assignment. I would like to build up the structure of the sequence with more precise instructions for each stage. I will spend more time explaining the reasons behind each stage of the research project. In my first experience using the sequencing approach, some students were late submitting their assignments. Being late, they were not in the proper stage of the sequence, especially when the Writing Center workshops were scheduled. Attending the *Getting Started* workshop without the preliminary reading, or the *Using Sources* workshop without collecting journal articles, the students who were behind did not have the full benefit of the workshops. The few students who did not keep up with each weekly assignment ran into a crunch at the end of the quarter, and I felt that they missed out on the benefits of sequencing the entire project. The students who did the assignments at the proper time did benefit and came to grips with the course learning outcomes, understanding the context of the primary sources and developing their research questions with supporting secondary literature.

A troublesome part of the assignment was the creation of the research question, determining

the topic for inquiry. Students repeatedly asked me to tell them what subject and primary sources they should use. The *Getting Started* Writing Center workshop was most helpful in getting students to think independently about their topics. An insight the students came to understand well is the relationship between primary sources and the secondary sources that provide context. This was evident when they presented their work with a research poster and discussed their primary and secondary sources with visitors to the exhibition.