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Dramatizing the Conversation: Creating Dialogue Scripts to Support Source Synthesis
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Overview

Kenneth Burke's famous parlor metaphor presents a picture of academic research as a conversation between ideas and perspectives:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about…You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance… (110-111)

Yet novice student writers often struggle to enact this concept in their own writing. Nancy Sommers and Laura Salz suggest that novice student writers "have difficulty synthesizing sources to see the 'big picture'" (133). Additionally, research on source use and citation practices, like that done by Sandra Jamieson and Rebecca Moore Howard as part of The Citation Project, highlights practices such as sentence-mining, or quoting or paraphrasing from a single sentence (127), and a pattern of students citing information from primarily the first or second page of a source (128). Findings like these bring into question how much or how well students read their sources in the first place.

This activity is meant to help writers better understand the sources

they have found for a research project, be able to summarize ideas and positions from these sources into their own words, and think critically about where their sources align and diverge. This activity can help students understand their sources and think about where they themselves fit into the "conversation" of their research by writing an imagined dialogue of a conversation between their sources, literalizing what Burke describes metaphorically.

This activity serves as a bridge between students collecting sources and then writing a draft of a research assignment. Even if students have completed scaffolding assignments like an annotated bibliography, this activity will help students see the connections *between* sources and the patterns of views, evidence, and arguments related to their research topic.

Time Commitment

30-45 minutes

Materials

Students need to have access to three to four sources that they plan to use for a research project that they have already read. The type of sources students can use for this activity will be dictated by the requirements for the specific assignment. For instance, some instructors might require students to use a set number of scholarly sources for a research assignment, so that would be reflected in this activity. The baseline guidelines for this activity is that the sources 1) should all consider similar or related topics/questions, 2) should be at least approximately 3 pages in length, and 3) should have an identified author or authoring organization. Students should also have access to any notes, worksheets or scaffolding assignments, such as an annotated bibliography, they have completed previously as part of the research process.

Activity Process

- First, have students think about and/or engage in a discussion of the characteristics of a successful and unsuccessful conversation in everyday life. The instructor might specifically want to highlight ideas such as not having one person dominate a conversation or how if people do not listen to each other, then their contributions will not connect or build off of each other.

- Next, introduce students to the idea of academic writing as a conversation by sharing Burke's parlor metaphor either in written form or through a video like this one created by Maynooth University: https://youtu.be/faaQuZQkRZQ

- After this preparation work, give students an imagined scenario: the authors from each of their source are all sitting down together at a table in a coffee shop discussing the topic of their research project. Students will be tasked with writing a script (like from a play) of the conversation between these individuals about their topic. Give students the following guidelines and rules for writing their script (or adapt as appropriate for assignment):

    o Each source will have one author represented in the conversation. If the source has multiple authors, you will just choose one; if a source has no author, you will have an imaginary person who works for the organization responsible for the source as a stand in

    o In total, the script should include 20-30 lines of dialogue, with lines representing a turn by each speaker.

    o Every author must speak at least four times in the script, and their lines must accurately account for

the ideas and positions presented in their article or source.

- o No direct quotations. You can use specific facts, ideas, or statistics, but all lines in the script must be written in your own words.

- After students have completed their scripts, discuss what they created and invite students to share their favorite exchange that they wrote as part of their script.

- Finally, discuss with students how they might use this activity and these scripts to help with drafting. Instructors might share a resource on synthesis in academic writing like what is available from the Purdue Online Writing Lab, which includes examples of less and more successful synthesis ("Synthesizing Sources"). Or, students might be tasked with creating a synthesis matrix to organize the major topics or themes emerging from their sources (Parks). Additionally, students might be assigned to read Kyle Stedman's *Writing Spaces* chapter "Annoying Ways People Use Sources" to help them think about how to integrate their sources smoothly into their prose.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Practice summarizing and paraphrasing ideas from sources into their own words

- Think critically about where, how, and why their sources align and diverge as part of an exploration of a research topic

- Gain an understanding of academic writing as a "conversation."

Learning Accommodations

- This activity can be completed synchronously or adapted to be completed asynchronously. If completed asynchronously, the preparation work introducing academic writing as a conversation might take the form of a mini-lecture students read, watch, or listen to before creating their scripts.

- Students can draft their scripts by hand or on a word processor. Additionally, students can be given options to bring hard-copy versions of sources and scaffolding assignments, access everything digitally, or a combination as makes sense for the sources they are using and their context.

Works Cited

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