Media and civics: A pedagogic strategy for integrating Internet research and writing skills

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Abstract

Information literacy and writing skills are widely represented by universities as generic attributes promoted through their undergraduate programs of study. By extension, postgraduate coursework students are assumed to have acquired these same skills. However, supporting the development of these skills through pedagogic practice is a challenging task in a communications environment where it is necessary to manage and evaluate expanding and diversified sources of information. Approaching this task from a particular disciplinary perspective, the paper shows how pedagogic strategies can promote the development of Internet research skills, in an area of communication studies concerned with the relations of media and civics. It describes a method for supporting that development, through which students can gain experience in managing resources with a measure of independence often reserved for higher level studies. The method links traditional techniques of rhetoric to uses of new information technologies and writing practice. A case study of a coursework module on the media and the Australian Commonwealth Government's Northern Territory Intervention in Indigenous communities illustrates how training in targeted Internet research helps students to write in informed ways about complex and contested social and political issues.

Introduction

This paper presents an approach for integrating Internet research into communications pedagogy, particularly in the study of media and civics. It describes strategies designed to help undergraduates and beginning coursework postgraduates to analyse and participate in academic and public discourse about controversial social issues. As the Internet increasingly becomes a site not only for myriad forms of publicity, debate, news, opinion and other data—often without "gatekeepers" (Booth, Colomb & Williams, 2008, p. 75)—but also for teaching and learning, it is important in media and communication studies to support students' development of independent skills of retrieving and evaluating diverse types of information. But this is a challenging project, requiring strategies that meaningfully link training in the use of research tools such as databases with the application of disciplinary concepts and methods, and calling for new forms of cooperation between academics, librarians and educational developers to coordinate the deployment of online resources. Ideally the process of research and analysis also encourages students to reflect on the approaches and value of the disciplinary field itself in raising questions about media and the cultural and historical contexts in which they function.

The following sections describe a case study in which experience in using Internet research methods has helped to provide students with a basis for writing in an informed way about complex and conflicted social issues—an activity relevant to the their

forming of civic attributes as participants in media and cultural practices. This basis connects with and, in relation to new technologies, extends a concern in the tradition of rhetoric with the means by which to create a "common ground" of communication between speakers or writers and their audiences (Dixon, 1971, p. 14; Larson, 2010, p. 21). It links in particular with aspects of the rhetorical faculties of invention and arrangement. The former is referred to by Peter Dixon as "the discovering of material pertinent to the cause" and the choice of logical, emotional and ethical forms of proof or appeal to an audience (Dixon, 1971, p. 24). Arrangement is the disposition of arguments and the division of a speech or written work into parts. The terms invention and arrangement are adapted here to include consideration of pedagogic techniques that foster research and writing skills in the digital information environment.

Methodology

As a guide for work on issues in media and civics, the principles of invention and arrangement help students to become familiar with what may be distinguished here as three closely related processes of research and writing. *Formal construction* is a matter of invention, a process of identifying a specific issue, deciding why it matters and formulating a question about it to explore, in a way that helps writers to situate what they say in a wider field of discourses, ideas and uses of media. It involves selecting a form in which to write about the issue or problem and, in rhetorical terms, one or more modes of proof to employ—logical argumentation or emotional or ethical appeals to a prospective audience. *Investigation* accompanies the formal construction of an issue and helps to focus or modify it. It includes identifying key words in the initial statements of an issue so as to use these terms as starting points to search for and arrange information. Also it can involve using formal terms like forms of proof and structure as cues for considering who is speaking or writing on the subject, and for whom; how they make claims and use arguments and evidence to support them (or not); and whether others have joined or countered particular positions on the subject. By locating and reviewing sources, students can begin to map what Roderick Hart has called the "persuasive field" of discursive strategies and messages that influence situations in which the meaning of events and issues is defined or contested (Hart 1997, p. 51). They can bring different sources into relation with each other by considering similarities, differences and intersections of argument, and weighing up uses of evidence. *Progressive writing* is a procedure of using a linked series of writing formats or subgenres to express, amplify and refine ideas. This procedure extends from the starting point of articulating an issue and sketching plans and ideas to evaluating sources and arranging the findings arrived at through research and analysis. These three general processes are not discrete but rather represent mutually supportive methods of posing questions; organising searches; and reading, thinking, and writing to test one's own and others' ideas and assumptions and seek understanding that can be shared with readers.

Case study

This section presents an example based on the general topic area of "media and the Northern Territory intervention" to illustrate the general approach just outlined. The topic area is one that I have included in some units in which I have taught in media, communications and writing programs at the University of New England. The following details are drawn mainly from a module on the Intervention that I have developed in an

online unit called "Research in Writing", which is available to undergraduate students in their second or third year and, in another version, to coursework postgraduate students who take the unit to update or enhance their research skills.

As some students knew more about the selected topic than others, a small set of readings was provided online through the university library, from which students could assemble information about the main events: the "Northern Territory Emergency Response" was an intervention by the Australian Government into remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory in June 2007. (It was still in force, albeit with modifications, at the time of writing.) It followed the release of the *Little children are sacred* report to the Northern Territory Government concerning child sexual abuse in some communities, and created widespread controversy over not only its rationale as promulgated with reference to that report but also its effectiveness in relation to other pressing problems such as the need to improve Indigenous education, employment, health and housing. This outlining of a general topic area avoided the potential confusion for students of having completely open-ended choices of media subjects (though of course the topic area chosen for the module in a given year could vary).

After they read these introductory materials, students opting to pursue this media and civics module were asked to formulate their own question so they could examine a specific issue within the broader topic area. Study of the issue formed the basis of a project on which they worked for the rest of the semester, culminating in a documented report. In formulating their issue, students were aided by keyword searches that could be based on the terms contained in descriptions of the general topic. This step was modeled in a procedure developed through collaboration between academic and library staff. Students were directed towards the university's Dixson Library online research guide, accessible via the university home page, which displayed systems and links for accessing discipline-related research databases; Internet sites, including screen and print media resources; reference works; and key journals for media and communication studies. Within this broader site, a more specific guide, designed by the library through consultation about the civics module, related several of the screen and print sources to the topic area of media and the Intervention. It illustrated a search by using the keywords "northern territory" and "intervention" and linked, for example, to databases for newspapers (Newsbank), screen resources including news and current affairs (TVNews), and journal databases (Informit), all of which yielded relevant results that helped students to see the kinds of issues arising in the more general debate. The trial database search showed how to use keyword truncations or variations and synonyms in order to widen or delimit a search, edit results, and access full text versions or transfer to library catalogues and other sources.

From this starting point, students pursued more detailed keyword searches of their own, by identifying recurring or differentiated aspects of the topic, including for example considerations of "abuse" (the need to protect children from sexual abuse having been noted as the initial reason for the Intervention). Using an online discussion forum established for the module, students made brief online postings on how they were conducting searches; comparing sources; and identifying main points, perspectives and forms of argument. Academic staff and student peers participated in giving feedback—usually along the lines of narrowing down a draft question and clarifying its key terms and hence the potential focus of the report to be developed—while the Arts Librarian responded to related queries about information retrieval, in a dedicated online discussion folder. While some students wondered initially why

research on a new topic would consist of more than general Internet browsing, they discovered that library subscription services, notably specialist databases, provide useful types of information that do not show up elsewhere, quite apart from giving access to some material free of charge that otherwise would incur costs for private use. They had the opportunity to consider the role played by various academic, media and institutional databases—for example, journal services disseminating refereed work, and sites (often including archives) of government departments, broadcasters, research centres and community organisations—which focused attention on forms of authority and gatekeeping in considering the quality and diversity of information.

Student work in this context was supported by readings and discussions of principles for developing a manageable research question, and finding an angle on a topic. As explained by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb and Joseph Williams in their guidance on how to move from a general topic to a specific issue, these principles include asking "the standard journalistic questions . . . *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*", but focusing on "*how* and *why*", or breaking a subject up into its "history, composition, and categories" (Booth et al., 2008, p. 41). So, for instance, students could search lines of debate about the Northern Territory Intervention around the "developmental context", or the "internal history", of a topic (p. 41), asking what came before the Intervention and how the previous situation was interpreted (in relation to the first of these terms), and how and why the Intervention priorities and procedures changed, or not, and were debated after it began (in relation to the second). Following such leads, students tracked particular categories of the subject, including terms of debate about the Intervention and "housing", "employment", "health", "education" and so on. Or they explored competing arguments, institutional and new voices (politicians, journalists, broadcasters, Indigenous media, community spokespeople), and tensions being negotiated between contending claims about the need for radical government action under conditions of emergency, about respecting hard-won civil and social rights that in the view of many the Intervention over-rode, or for wider community consultation and sharing of responsibilities to improve actions and outcomes.

The writing techniques and formats used to support the design and investigation of an issue included the initial drafting of a one-sentence question, a brief amplification of it, and a more detailed research proposal prepared in stages for online feedback and then submitted in consolidated form by mid-semester. The proposal contained several sub-types of writing:

- the refined research question;
- a rationale for the question;
- a section for which the term "work-in-progress abstract" was coined, to indicate the role of an early plan in focusing ideas, in contrast to the more commonly published form of abstract finalised "after the event";
- a record of main steps and problems in the search process, including keywords and main databases accessed;
- documentation of references;
- grouped annotations on a small set of sources, summarising relevant points and explaining how the sources related to each other and the research question; and
- a plan of main points to develop in further detail.

On the basis of feedback on the proposal and any further research to check facts or fill in gaps, students then wrote up a report that included the final version of their research question; a final abstract; the introduction, body and conclusion of the analysis; a source list; and a reflection on their role as writers and how they envisaged the role and interests of their readers.

The writing process, which progressed through the use of several formats, tied directly into the stages of designing an individual project and undertaking library-based Internet research. Students could make connections between deciding on search keywords and the meaning of key terms around which they were framing the research question, terms that were negotiated further in analysing materials and arranging points in an argument (e.g. see Quarton, 2003). They could order and reorder material and formulate "connections and complications" (Booth et al., p. 17) to develop, literally, new lines of thought by evaluating information. At both the undergraduate and postgraduate coursework levels, the students' feedback generally indicated that they saw the search and writing techniques practised as being transferable to other areas, and that the combination of library and academic guidance on their discipline-specific research project made them more aware of the value of the information resources, systems and support available through the university library.

Implications

The case study has discussed what is often referred to as the generic skill of information literacy for higher education students—understood as the capacity for "exploring information sources efficiently and critically evaluating results" (Quarton, 2003, p. 125)—while focusing on how to develop this ability in a disciplinary engagement with contemporary issues of civics in media and communication studies. The approach it illustrates responds to a more widely acknowledged need to provide students with experiences through which to develop research skills in an academic context, in ways that connect with their own perceptions of their situation and needs and help to develop "disciplinary habits of mind" (Gurung, Chick & Haynie, 2009). Relevant here is the kind of academic and library partnership indicated above that tailors applications of Internet-based research facilities to disciplinary objectives and methods. With reference to a broader range of academic fields, Barbara Quarton has argued the need to equip students with information literacy skills through the use of library-based technologies:

> University libraries have outstanding information resources available to their student populations . . . and they have powerful tools for accessing these materials . . . [but] many students move from course to course with only a marginal understanding about how to use research tools and how to evaluate resources. (Quarton, 2003, p. 120)

Many students are unfamiliar with, or take limited advantage of, the online catalogues, subscription databases and other support available through university libraries, which academics routinely use. Quarton notes that, when they need to seek information, undergraduates often tend to rely on the Internet, which is easy to access but can bring problems of knowing what to select, and how to determine the authority and reliability of sources. The academic–library partnership indicated in the media and civics case study created an interface of search tools, interactive guides and practical models that helped students to build on what they already knew and could do in the digital environment. In this way, it supported an inquiry-based teaching and learning strategy

that bridged what Quarton (p. 123) refers to as students' facility in "managing their daily Internet use" and managing academic study and research.

Matching this concern to support Internet research skills, others have argued the importance of providing students with experience in writing in a range of formats for varied research purposes. So, for instance, Harris (2006) focuses on methods for developing the capacities needed in scholarly research and writing (including proposals, abstracts and literature reviews), arguing that students cannot be expected to acquire them only through refinement of essay writing skills (see also Lovitts, 2005; Waite & Davis, 2006). Some students do not encounter the format of a proposal for original research purposes unless they reach the stage of planning to undertake an Honours year (in the Australian context) or a research higher degree. The case study above demonstrates one way of developing skills of planning and ordering research, through the process of writing in a series of formats to progressively define the purpose of inquiry, organise searches, investigate data and articulate ideas. It does not imply any standard solution to the anxieties that are sometimes expressed more generally about who should be responsible for teaching information literacy and where it should be taught (in computer or library classes, service writing courses, separate research methods programs, or so on, as noted in Quarton, 2003), or whether skills such as information literacy can always be embedded readily and appropriately in specific forms and tasks of disciplinary study (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2009, pp. 8–9). But it illustrates a strategy of arranging methods and activities to guide the development of capacities for independent learning, and grounds the guidance in disciplinary concerns with how knowledge is produced in academic, media and cultural practices. A useful general reference point here is the idea of a "rhetorical context", elaborated by Booth et al. (2008, p. 278), which "dramatizes for students their social role as researchers". These authors identify this context with a classroom situation in which students apply common procedures of research and writing and act alternately as readers for each others' work. They state that the process of imagining and then trying to meet "the needs and expectations of informed and careful readers" refines the writer's own process of thinking, and so helps to create "*a rhetorical community* of shared values" (p. 14; emphasis in the original). The pedagogic strategies described above attempt to support students' access to this community by integrating Internet research skills into discipline-based, online negotiations of writing and reading practice, but the case study on media and civics also suggests a further implication of the idea of rhetorical community. The definition of an issue, investigation of sources and arguments, and writing out of a considered view, are all means of working towards an understanding of issues in the public and media sphere, where the common ground for responding to new problems is not always automatically available, but needs to be constructed. This requires a will and a way to find out more about the conditions under which those problems arise and the reasons for the different positions, arguments and potential courses of action adopted in relation to them.

Conclusion

This paper has described a pedagogic approach that combines three processes for integrating Internet research skills and training into undergraduate and coursework postgraduate studies: formal construction of an issue; investigation through guided research; and progressive writing in linked formats, grounded in consideration of sources and the position of the reader. These processes are at once intellectual and

practical. They are supported by institutional collaboration that brings university library training and resources into the activities of analysis and writing in the online classroom. The pedagogic strategy has been illustrated by a case study of work on a social and political topic that has been the subject of much contestation, the Northern Territory Intervention. The integrated processes of investigation and writing that have been described help students to develop skills of independent research and informed communication in the immediate context of disciplinary study, skills that potentially can be applied in wider media and civic conversations.

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