

“They All Quote Each Other!”:

Discovering a Scholarly Conversation Through Guided Inquiry

Helen McManus

Policy, Government & International Affairs Librarian
George Mason University

ACRL Information Literacy Frame: Scholarship as Conversation

Discipline: Social Sciences

Subject: Interdisciplinary; any social science or humanities field

Pedagogies: Guided Inquiry; Freirean Pedagogy

Special Populations: Online Learners; Non-traditional Students; Multi-cultural/Diversity; Graduate Students; Undergraduate Students

When invited to review the literature, students come to me with two questions. First, “How many sources should I use?” and second, “How far back should I go? Is 10 years ago too old?”. They generate a list of books, chapters, and articles. This is a great first step. Those sources probably are part of “the literature” on the student’s topic. But what next? How can a student move from a list of sources, located via library databases, to familiarity with a scholarly conversation? If students are to contribute to a conversation, they need to understand not just that such a conversation exists but who are the main players and how they (as students) could insert themselves into that conversation. I created this lesson plan for students embarking on their first substantial research project.

Developing the Lesson Plan

This lesson plan began as an online module designed because I had to miss a week of teaching. I took a formulaic approach. Step 1: consult the Cambridge Companions Online (CCO) chapter closest to your topic. Scan the chapter's bibliography to identify potentially useful books and articles. Step 2: use Philosopher's Index to locate three recent scholarly articles on your topic. Step 3: note which items in the CCO bibliography also appear in the recent articles. And so forth. The results were astonishing. My undergraduates successfully located the most important secondary literature for their respective projects. I wanted to adapt the lesson plan for a more dynamic, face-to-face environment. I also needed the lesson plan to function without Cambridge Companions Online. I experimented with colleagues' learning activities for literature reviews (Allison Carr of California State University, San Marcos, whose work also appears in this volume, deserves much credit here!). I paid more attention to my own habits when exploring new literatures. The current version of my lesson plan, honed in workshops with graduate and professional students, is below.

Pedagogies: Guided Inquiry and Freirean Pedagogy

This lesson plan applies the principles of Guided Inquiry to provide students (a) structure at a particularly challenging point in their research and (b) an opportunity to reflect on the affective experience of research.¹ The lesson plan also draws on Paolo Freire's idea of dialogue, in which instructor and student interact as equals who care about each other's wellbeing.² Is the scholarly conversation such a dialogue? Opening and closing reflections encourage students to identify the power dynamics involved in the scholarly conversation and consider their own current and potential relation to that conversation. Within Freirean pedagogy, non-traditional students and students (or instructors!) with diverse backgrounds gain voice and agency.

Students conducting their first meaningful literature review become intimidated, overwhelmed, and confused. They experience self-doubt, wondering if they will ever understand this article or that book. They might even get that awful realization that someone made "their" argument or worry that they will not ever think of an original contribution. Kuhlthau's

work on the affective dimension of the Information Search Process (ISP) provides a great foundation for instructors seeking a student-centered approach to literature reviews.

The literature review would fall within the “exploration” stage of the ISP. This stage, Kuhlthau explains, is the most difficult. Students often skip it; they do not know how to explore, and the feelings associated with exploration are “confusion, frustration, and doubt.”³ Students need structure here. They need practical strategies for scanning large amounts of information. During the exploration stage, Guided Inquiry involves letting students “dip in” to sources and “look around” the existing literature.⁴ This lesson plan offers students specific ways of “dipping in” and “looking around”

Through Guided Inquiry, students gain familiarity with established academic practices and the emotional rollercoaster that accompanies those practices. Through Freirean pedagogy, students consider the implications of those established practices, who gains and who loses, who may speak and who will be ignored, and how they—as students, speaking from their own diverse subject positions—want to orient themselves to the academic enterprise.

ACRL Information Literacy Frame: Scholarship as Conversation

The Scholarship as Conversation frame encourages students to explore how researchers situate their work within the academic community. It also leaves room for students to recognize and question the power structures at work in “the literature.” The frame acknowledges that “providing attribution to relevant previous research is also an obligation of participation in the conversation. It enables the conversation to move forward and strengthens one’s voice in the conversation.”⁵ Students must engage the existing scholarship if they are to enter the conversation. But the frame does not stop at this nod to convention. One of the “dispositions” within this frame states that students should “recognize that systems privilege authorities,” and that without disciplinary knowledge, students’ “ability to participate and engage” will suffer. The frame uses the word “disempower” here.⁶ Students have to engage their disciplines in order to gain the authority they need to join the conversation. Without disciplinary language and methods, they are disempowered.

Students' first reactions to the activities in this lesson plan often go straight to questions of power. Credit for the title of this chapter goes to students in an early iteration of the workshop. When asked what they noticed after examining several articles' literature reviews, one student blurted out, "Academia is in-bred!" Others nodded, so I invited them to explain their comment. "They all cite each other," another student protested. The student was right; academics do cite each other. That is the point. The students were also right to wonder whether a new voice would get recognition, whether the peer review process is enough to allow new voices to emerge. Students returning to classes after years in the workforce seemed to appreciate the opportunity to speak frankly and question the academic enterprise, even as they learned its norms. Freirean pedagogy gave me the resources to welcome, engage, and learn from the students.

As the critical discussion above suggests, this lesson plan also speaks to the frame Authority is Constructed and Contextual.⁷ That frame suggests that "informed skepticism" is an appropriate orientation to authority claims and the norms they rely on. Thus, "novice learners come to respect the expertise that authority represents while remaining skeptical of the systems that have elevated that authority and the information created by it."⁸ In this lesson plan, students learn how the scholarly conversation works—they become "informed." They see the scholarly conversation in action and begin to appreciate how they, as novice researchers, can both use and contribute to that conversation. The lesson plan thus cultivates respect for scholarship as a conversation while leaving room for critical questions about the construction of authority in academia.⁹

Lesson Plan: Discovering a Scholarly Conversation Through Guided Inquiry

Learner Analysis

- This lesson is designed for graduate students and upper-division undergraduates. It also works well for professional students required to engage a scholarly literature.
- In this lesson, students from underrepresented groups have the opportunity to raise questions and concerns about power structures within academic publishing.

Orienting Context and Prerequisites

Pre-instruction learning tasks:

- None.
- Learner prerequisites:
- Some prior exposure to the idea of scholarly articles and peer review.

Instructional Context

This lesson plan works well in most face-to-face classrooms, though tables for group work and discussion are ideal. A whiteboard is helpful for the instructor. This can be a technology-free lesson plan in face-to-face classes.

Before the class, the instructor will need to identify a "conversation" of three to five articles (or book chapters). The articles should speak to the same question or topic and cite a shared set of canonical or "core" references. Identifying a suitable set of articles can take some time if you are less-than-familiar with the discipline in question. I now have one go-to example conversation for the social sciences and another for humanities. For online classes, post all the articles in the relevant module. For face-to-face classes, print out one set of articles (that is, the whole "conversation") per group. I find that groups of three to six students work best. You can save paper by copying the first few pages of each article along with the bibliography/notes.

A final note: The activities here do not speak to the traditional college essay assignment, in which students cherry-pick individual articles and books to "support" their argument.¹⁰ Bousquet describes the research for such essays as "a smash-and-grab assault on the secondary literature."¹¹ Here, the student's task is to discover what scholars have said about a particular topic or how scholars have approached a particular question.

Learning Outcomes and Learning Activities

Learning Outcomes: Skills

(Matched with learning activities below as LO1s, etc.)

After participating in this workshop, students will be able to

1. identify the literature review portion of an academic study as a resource for their own research;
2. use other people's literature reviews to identify key voices in a scholarly conversation; and

3. parse a literature review to notice the main categories, themes, or debates the author uses to characterize the scholarly conversation.

Learning Outcomes: Dispositions

(Matched with learning activities below as LO1d, etc.)

Students will

1. seek out the core voices in the literature on their research questions;
2. consider themselves potential participants in a scholarly conversation; and
3. recognize the structures and conventions that can empower people to contribute to a scholarly literature as well as those that disempower people.

Learning Activities

1. Reflect on How Conversations Work (*LO2d, 5–10 minutes, essential*)

Read aloud the following passage from Kenneth Burke's *Philosophy of Literary Form*:

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. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. 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. However, the discussion is interminable....¹²

This short reading often sparks hilarity when a student does, in fact, walk in late. (For online classes, create an introductory video for the module, in which you include yourself reading the above excerpt.)

Invite the students to share what *they* do when they enter a room full of people already talking. Tell the students to assume this is a room full

of people they want to get to know or have to get to know. How do they navigate that space and find someone to talk to? (Possible answers might include look for a familiar face, walk around and wait till you hear something interesting, pick a group at random and “lurk” until you find a way to interject.)

Use this time to start building up the idea of a conversation as something familiar, and to get students thinking about the practice and the stresses of joining a conversation. You can really dig into the “feelings” part here if the class is amenable. Research, as Kuhlthau argues, is thick with emotions.

2. Explore a Scholarly Conversation (*LO1s–2s and 1d, 10–15 minutes, essential*)

Divide the class into groups of three to six students. Give each group one packet of articles (the “conversation”). Instruct the students to

- identify the author name(s), title, journal, and year of each article, and
- scan the first two or three pages of each article, highlighting the citations. Alternatively, the students can list the authors cited. Have the students focus on the names cited, not the titles and other citation apparatus. Author names suffice at this stage.

Once the students have identified the authors cited in the articles’ literature reviews, ask the students to compare the citations from the various articles.

- Give the groups a few minutes to discuss as they compare.
- Ask the students to report what they noticed in this exercise. This is an open-ended question, an opportunity for students to ask questions, make observations, and try out ideas. If someone focuses on the dates of the citations, build on that. If another student asks about citation mechanics, take the opportunity to think about that convention.
- At some point, someone usually mentions that the article authors cite (a) each others’ work and (b) a few of the same sources. This is the moment to nudge students toward (a) the idea of a scholarly conversation and (b) the idea that any literature has a set of key works, which students should aim to identify, read, and cite in their own research.

- If no one notices that there are repeat citations across the articles, have the students call out the authors cited and which paper(s) cite them. This activity allows students to notice that some authors get cited in all of the articles, and others get cited in just one. The students can then draw inferences about what this means.
3. Digging Deeper into Other People’s Literature Reviews (*LO3s, 15 minutes, optional*)

Direct the students to focus on one of the articles from the conversation. Each group can take a different article. Ask the groups to take a closer look at the literature review in their assigned article. Their task is to figure out how their article describes the scholarly conversation. I use a table like this to structure the students’ investigation.

Category/Theme	Authors Cited
<i>From a political science perspective</i>	<i>Smith, Park</i>
<i>Economists, however, tend to ask</i>	<i>Gold, Chang, Jones</i>

Under Category/Theme, the students write the words the author uses to distinguish each part of the conversation. Under Authors Cited, they record every author mentioned as part of the category in question.

Once the students have filled out their tables:

- Ask each group to call out their article’s author, its year, and the categories from the literature review. Write these on the board.
 - Invite the students to compare the categories now on the board. What do they notice? If necessary, you might ask them directly, why do they think each article gives a different description of one scholarly conversation?
4. Closing Reflection: Students as Scholars (*LO2d–3d, 10 minutes, essential*)

Ask the students, “Do you think you can contribute to a scholarly conversation?” Follow up with why or why not. What would have to change for the student to say yes? (For online classes, this is a great discussion board topic.)

This is an opportunity to press the students on the “dispositions” listed under the frame Scholarship as Conversation, particularly that students should:

- “see themselves as contributors to scholarship rather than only consumers of it” and
- “recognize that systems privilege authorities,” so that students who want to contribute must embrace their discipline’s methods and vocabulary.

Assessment

Formative Assessment

During learning activity 2, students call out the names of repeatedly cited authors. Compare the names they mention to your list of repeatedly cited authors. Here, you check that students have mastered the skill of identifying citations. The instructions for activity 2 include a contingency plan if students do not spot repeat citations at first.

For learning activity 3, use an answer key (a completed version of the table provided above) to check groups’ responses. If students do not correctly identify categories and cited authors, take the opportunity to discuss the sample literature review. Be open to the possibility that the students have a valid interpretation!

Note that you will need to prepare both assessment tools (list of repeatedly cited authors for activity 2, completed table for activity 3) in advance.

Notes

1. Carol Kuhlthau, Leslie Maniotes, and A. Caspari, *Guided Inquiry: Learning in the 21st Century* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2007).
2. Paolo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1985).
3. Carol Kuhlthau, *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2004), 82.
4. Kuhlthau, Maniotes, and Caspari, *Guided Inquiry*, 56.
5. *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, Association of College & Research Libraries, February 9, 2015, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. I am grateful to Lauren M. Young for suggesting that I include the connection to this second frame.
10. Rebecca Schuman, “The End of the College Essay,” *Slate*, December 13, 2013.

11. Marc Bousquet, "Keep the 'Research,' Ditch the 'Paper,'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 14, 2014.
12. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 110–11.

Bibliography

Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL). *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. February 9, 2015. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

Bousquet, Marc. "Keep the 'Research,' Ditch the 'Paper.'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 14, 2014.

Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

Freire, Paolo. *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1985.

Kuhlthau, Carol. *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2004.

Kuhlthau, Carol, Leslie Maniotes, and A. Caspari. *Guided Inquiry: Learning in the 21st Century*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2007.

Schuman, Rebecca. "The End of the College Essay." *Slate*, December 13, 2013. http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2013/12/college_papers_students_hate_writing_them_professors_hate_grading_them_let.html.