2012

"'Research Papers Have Always Seemed Very Daunting:' Information Literacy Narratives and the Student Research Experience"

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abstract: Taking an interdisciplinary approach that draws on narrative theory, composition scholarship, and investigations into the affective dimensions of the research process, this article discusses stories written by college students about their experiences locating, evaluating, and using information in the context of academic research. These narratives provide insight into how students conceptualize the research process and perceive their often tenuous roles as researchers. A textual analysis of a selection of student narratives is included, demonstrating how narrative not only enhances our understanding of the research experience but also enables students to raise larger questions about authenticity and power in the classroom.

Introduction

In his recent essay "Information Literacy as Situated Literacy," Van Hillard characterizes information literacy "as a set of behaviors adapted to the contingencies of any particular context of use." Hillard goes on to pose several intriguing questions regarding this situated or contextualized view of information literacy, including "How can we best observe and identify the complex of behaviors, attitudes, and social practices that constitute information literacy in use?" and "What sorts of narratives of individual adaption or improvisation might be uncovered?"[1] Focusing on the contextual dimensions

of information literacy, this project attempts to respond to Hillard's questions by turning to what we define broadly as information literacy narratives, stories about locating, evaluating, or using information.[2] In particular, we explore the stories college students write about their experiences with academic research, their "narratives of individual adaption" to the classroom context. Indeed, Hillard's reference to narratives struck a chord; as librarians and writing instructors, we have often asked students to write narratives about their prior research experiences, and the resulting accounts have been enlightening and fascinating. In the face of the mountain of assessment literature on information literacy, student voices have been missing for the most part. This project, then, foregrounds those voices in an effort to better understand how students experience information literacy as "a complex of behaviors, attitudes, and social practices."[3]

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Narrative is a powerful device for students to transmit their experiences. In narratives, students shape the complex and sometimes chaotic realities of academic research into coherent stories, textual records that invite critical analysis and reflection. Suffused with descriptive details and rich in meaning, these stories provide vivid insight into how students conceptualize the research process and how they perceive their often tenuous roles as researchers in specific academic contexts. In their stories, students often describe the challenges they face during research, as well as their emotional responses to the research experience, including the feelings of anxiety and confusion that Carol Kuhlthau[4] and other researchers have observed in studies on the affective dimensions of information seeking. However, beyond the feelings themselves, students also raise larger questions of authenticity (What "counts" as research? Who is considered a researcher?) and power (Who is authorized to judge the quality of research? Who controls or determines the context in which research is carried out?). As storytellers, students reveal their assumptions and values in regard to research and, in the process, emphasize the dynamics of identity and power that inevitably structure the research experience, yet elude easy definition or description. In other words, through narrative, the typically inaccessible nuances of experience are given coherent form.

In this article, we present an interdisciplinary conceptual framework for analyzing information literacy narratives and discuss a small selection of actual student narratives, showing how narratives not only enhance our understanding of the student research experience but also give students an opportunity to voice their concerns about academic research. We do not attempt to reveal the unambiguous reality of the research experience; instead, we focus on exploring students' subjective understanding of their experiences and how their views might affect their approach to research and their sense of agency in the research process. In addition, we will consider how student narratives often challenge the authority of educators and call into question the value of traditional research assignments. In this sense, narrative becomes an opportunity for self-reflection, in that we learn as much about our teaching practices as we do about students' information literacy practices.

Theorizing Information Literacy Narratives: A Conceptual Framework

Narrative is a fundamental component of human thought and experience that H. Porter Abbott defines simply as "the representation of an event or a series of events."[5] Although many narratives are complex, at a basic level, a narrative is a way of structuring experience so that we can make sense of it. As Jerome Bruner asserts, the narrative process is a "mode of distancing" that allows us to contextualize and understand our experience, translating it into something meaningful to our lives.[6] That is, through distancing, narrative representation opens up experience to critical analysis. Like Bruner, Abbott argues that narrative offers a "frame or context" for comprehending one's perception of events.[7] Thus, narrative enables us to negotiate the complexities of life, giving an intelligible form to the world and, in so doing, inviting interpretation.

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Even as narrative facilitates reflective interpretation, however, its status as a representation of reality means that it structures experience in a manner that is both subjective and rhetorical. A narrative is not reality; rather, it is an argument about what constitutes reality or, as Bruce Jackson puts it, "a theory about what happened and why."[8] Despite their subjectivity, though, stories can be very convincing, determining for better and for worse how we view our experiences and both expressing and influencing what we value and believe. As Bruner points out in regard to autobiographical stories, "we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives."[9] It is precisely this power of narrative to not only contextualize but also shape our lives that leads us to information literacy narratives, wherein students reveal how they experience and construct academic research from their rhetorical perspective.

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For our primary interpretive framework for narratives, we turn to the composition scholarship on literacy narratives. According to Bronwyn Williams, literacy narratives are stories in which writers "tell about and reflect upon their experiences with reading and writing," the skills associated with traditional conceptions of literacy.[10] Mapping the individual experience of literacy within a larger social context, these stories serve as the closest analogue to what we have defined as information literacy narratives. Following contemporary literacy researchers such as Mike Baynham, we emphasize the contextual or situated dimensions of information literacy, lending our support to Baynham's assertion that "narrative is a particularly rich research site for evidence of how participants engage in constructing perspectives, ideologies, and values in relation to their literacy

practices and those of others."[11] In regard to this process of construction, there are many parallels between literacy narratives and information literacy narratives, between stories about the writing process and stories about the research process. Indeed, this connection and, in some cases, conflation between writing and research, will warrant further consideration below.

In discussing literacy narratives, scholars have stressed the capacity of such texts to contextualize reading and writing so that they may be understood not as isolated skills but as necessarily social practices. As Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen observe, literacy narratives "foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy" within a social and political context, thereby highlighting connections between education and power.[12] Mary Soliday explores how these connections manifest in student literacy narratives, suggesting that the narrative process offers a means of reflection and empowerment for those students who do not meet or conform to established standards of academic literacy. Primarily focusing on narratives written by students in basic writing courses, Soliday argues that such narratives provide insight into "the conflicts attendant upon crossing language worlds," as students begin to recognize and negotiate the differences among various discourses, whether privileged or marginalized by the academy. Soliday's conception of the literacy narrative as a locus of conflict, where languages or dialects with varying degrees of status collide, informs our reading of students' information literacy narratives. Students often present themselves as struggling, attempting without proficient skills or proper knowledge to meet the demands of the research process and complete a project acceptable to themselves and/or to educational authorities. These stories capture difficult moments of transition in the development of what we might refer to as academic information literacy. Ultimately, Soliday shows that stories enable critical distance, allowing for reflection on the conflicts and struggles associated with literacy, making them "interpretable" and thus open to analysis.[13] Similarly, we argue that the nuances of students' information literacy and research experiences become interpretable through storytelling.

According to Bronwyn Williams, when students compose narratives about reading and writing, they characterize themselves and their teachers in relation to literacy. Drawing on various studies of these narratives, Williams notes that students might see themselves as heroes of literacy, successfully meeting the challenges posed by teachers and assignments, or as failures, rebels, or any number of different roles. Students also represent teachers in diverse ways, portraying them as "heroes, martinets, nurturers, and buffoons," among other things.[14] These metaphorical representations and patterns that students employ figure prominently in the research on literacy narratives, where student values often challenge or conflict with the values of their teachers. Studies by Stephanie Paterson and Donna Dunbar-Odom are illustrative in this regard.[15] Students' metaphors, along with the conflicts they embody, underscore the rhetorical nature of narrative as an argument that provides insight into how a person sees the world. In our

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readings of information literacy narratives, metaphors are significant because they demonstrate how students understand the research process and its relationship to writing, as well as how their views may conflict with or create tensions in relation to librarians' and teachers' conceptions of the research process. In short, metaphors make the writer's perception of reality meaningful.

William Carpenter and Bianca Falbo's study of literacy narratives composed by college writing tutors is also significant. Their work demonstrates how narrative can, in some instances, simplify and mystify the complexities of the writing process, as less experienced tutors write relatively tidy narratives in which they present themselves as heroic figures, facing but ultimately surmounting difficult educational challenges on the path to becoming more advanced writers. As a result, these tutors "systematize what are often unsystematic patterns of literacy development" in the interest of narrative unity and simplicity.[16] We have observed similar patterns in information literacy narratives, where the intricacies of the research process often remain hidden from view, or certain aspects of that process are emphasized over others. In this manner, we get a sense of what students see and do not see as important or memorable, and their views may conflict with what librarians or teachers want students to value in their research experiences. Carpenter and Falbo's study is also important because it highlights the significance that many students place on the "extrinsic responses" (i.e. grades, evaluative comments, etc.) of teachers.[17] Just as some of the students in Carpenter and Falbo's study define the quality of their work based on such responses, the students we discuss here often define their research and their own identities as researchers through teacher commentary, though they also question the validity of that commentary in some cases.

While narrative, specifically the literacy narrative, has become an influential concept in composition scholarship, few articles in the library instruction or information literacy literature address narrative explicitly or directly. Sara Franks mentions the death of "grand narratives" in her argument for teaching information literacy in a more interdisciplinary way that emphasizes agency and action in examining information sources,[18] while Jeff Purdue contrasts the idea of story and information, arguing that stories are complex, mysterious, and often ambiguous in much the same way as the research process.[19] More broadly, though, using narrative is not uncommon in the library literature at large. A recent article promotes using a narrative-based marketing strategy to promote the value of the library in tough economic times,[20] while Peter Brophy presents the idea of using narrative as a form of evidence in the practice of librarianship, of not only creating stories but also listening to the stories of our patrons.[21]

While narrative has not been apparent in the library instruction and information literacy literature, there has been a growing interest in understanding students' experiences with research more holistically, including an awareness of the importance of the affective dimensions of that experience. Although not the first to identify it, Kuhlthau advanced the idea of an affective dimension of the student research experience by incorporating it into her Information Search Process model.[22] The affective dimension of students' research experience has also been examined as part of the growing body of literature on library anxiety. One recent example is a study by Nahyun Kwon, Anthony Onwuegbuzie, and Linda Alexander examining the affective domains of self-confidence, inquisitiveness, and systematicity; this study noted that students who were weak in these particular

areas showed higher levels of library anxiety.[23] While this literature offers us insight into the students' experiences, including their emotional responses to research activities, it nevertheless isolates certain aspects of the students' personalities, allowing insight into only a narrow slice of their thinking, with limited contextual information to illuminate larger "perspectives, ideologies, and values" in regard to information literacy.[24] That said, Kuhlthau encourages librarians to see the information-seeking process in a much more holistic way, acknowledging that students' previous backgrounds and knowledge are important in their process of meaning construction.[25] The idea of examining students' experiences with research holistically grew out of our experiences as writing teachers and as librarians. Rather than isolate one aspect of students' library research experiences, we wanted to find a means to

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In emphasizing the student perspective on the research experience, this project also shares some features with ethnographic studies in library and information science. Drawing on anthropological techniques, these studies utilize interviews, observation, and other methods to explore "real-world social processes" in context.[26] According to Diane Klare and Kendall Hobbs, in ethnography, the "goal is to attempt as much as possible to see the situation from the subject's point of view to understand how the subject approaches and construes the situation."[27] In this sense, the ethnographic approach parallels our interest in how students construe or interpret the research situation in an academic context. A number of researchers in library and information science have employed ethnography to better understand users and their behavior in both physical and online settings.[28] However, perhaps the most relevant ethnographic study for our research on student narratives occurred as part of the large-scale Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester, where researchers interviewed students to examine "work practices and attitudes" in relation to research assignments. After finding that librarians did not figure prominently in the research process for some students, the university sought ways to promote the value of reference librarians, including more extensive collaboration with faculty.[29]

At the same time, the University of Rochester study and other ethnographic studies in the library realm have not centered on textual narratives about past experiences as both analytical and pedagogical tools. Thus, despite some similarities, this project ultimately differs from these studies not only in its emphasis on textual narrative as an especially useful device for framing what anthropologist Charlotte Aull Davies calls "perceptions of particular life experiences," but also in its intense focus on language itself.[30] We examine, in detail, how students use descriptive and expressive language to construct their narratives, as well as how they make rhetorical choices to frame their experiences in certain ways. We also point to the potential pedagogical value of narra-

tive as a means for student reflection. Lastly, through our focus on narrative text and language, we hope to draw attention to larger social and political aspects of information literacy, which have generally been absent from ethnographic approaches employed thus far in library and information science.

The sections that follow focus primarily on four narratives written for a first-year composition course at the University of Louisville in response to the following assignment, variations of which we have used many times in our own composition courses:

> *Tell a story about an experience where you had to research something for school. How did this experience influence your current attitudes or feelings about academic research? How do other experiences you have had with research compare with the one you chose to write about?*

Although these four narratives are not necessarily representative of the thoughts and feelings of any specific student population, we selected them because they reflect many of the themes we have observed in student narratives over the years. Furthermore, their story arcs and rich details enable us to demonstrate the value of narrative analysis itself in understanding information literacy practices within an academic context.

Conceptualizing Research through Narrative: Telling Metaphors

The student narratives we analyze here often follow a typical story arc, employing metaphorical language to conceptualize the research process in particular ways. Students typically describe themselves as heroes facing the challenge of writing a research paper, often with the handicap of nonsensical or fiendishly difficult restrictions and rules given by the teacher. According to Sam,[31] who tells a story about a challenging experience writing a research paper on the Holocaust, "Research papers have always seemed very daunting." Sam's statement is representative of how many students talk about the research process.

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Echoing Sam, Terry refers to a "dreaded research paper" and "dark days of writing these wretched pieces." Adopting an even harsher tone, some students use the metaphor of "torture" to describe their experience with research, or at least certain types of research assignments. Shannon describes "being tortured" by the research-based writing process, while Lee calls a research project that required the use of unfamiliar sources "an absolute nightmare!" These intensely negative images and descriptions of academic research may be difficult for librarians to read and to acknowledge, but they represent, in our experience, a pervasive attitude on the part of the students we have encountered. The conceptualization of the research process as torturous and terror-inducing, whether accurate or fair, may influence the manner in which students approach their future research assignments. As Sam puts it, "I would be lying to write that my first research experience did not negatively impact my feelings about academic research in some way."

Sometimes, students will comment on a particular aspect of the research process, such as creating a bibliography, as difficult or frustrating. Lee, writing about a research paper on a popular author, says, "The class started off with a torture device known as 'bibliography cards.'" Lee later refers to the cards as a "brand of frustration." These metaphors and labels should be revealing to librarians. Many librarians, especially instruction and reference librarians, have chosen their profession based in some part on a desire to do library research, and often a passion for it. All four of the narratives we analyze here (and many of the narratives we have read that are not highlighted here) speak about the research experiences in this negative manner. Librarians need to be more forthright in acknowledging these feelings on the part of the students they are helping. They need to realize that even a good experience with research does not necessarily change the way students think about future research experiences. Even after relating a fairly positive experience, Lee describes researching and writing future papers as "less of a chore," suggesting menial labor rather than learning or inquiry. Students might feel this way for several reasons, but one possible explanation could be their conceptualization of the research process.

The metaphoric language employed by these students reveals glimpses into their understanding of the research process. In contrasting two different research experiences, Shannon says, "I got to apply my research and not just spit out information like every other research paper I have ever done." Shannon continues to describe these previous projects as "read[ing] others' papers and basically pull[ing] out a bunch of quotes from other people's work. These are then pasted together with a few topic sentences thrown on." Later in the narrative, the student gets to the heart of these frustrating experiences: "They [the research papers] weren't really my own work. To me, it was just a collage of plagiarism that people actually accepted as a real paper." The words Shannon uses are evocative: "spit out information," "pull[ing] out a bunch of quotes," "pasted together." All of this is then cohesively summed up in the "collage of plagiarism" image. What is worse for Shannon is that this collage is then accepted by those in authority as "a real paper." For this student, the key to a more successful research experience is "to incorporate my own findings in the information I researched." There is a sense of authenticity that is important for this student and for many others. Shannon later says, "I learned how research was really supposed to work."

Indeed, in contrast to some of the more negative images, students occasionally express tentative enthusiasm about research, particularly when they are empowered by a productive search for information, which defines research itself for these students. Sam defines the research paper as "amassing a large amount of material and being able to tie in (without plagiarizing) the main ideas of that information into my paper." Sam goes on to write, "I know how to delve into a book, find information that is pertinent to my topic, and thread the material into my paper." The idea of looking through large amounts of material is echoed by Lee: "I actually loved this part and spent many hours of my own time finding great quotes from his [the author's] book and interesting snippets about his life." Later, however, Lee finds it "difficult. . .to sift through what was just not relevant enough to fit into the paper, even if I loved it with all my heart."

The conceptualization of the research process as stating something (typically an argument or claim) and then supporting it with research is seemingly consistent, but

the students' reaction to this conceptualization is not. Shannon feels this conception is an improvement in contrast to previous experiences involving "pasted together" quotations, while Terry feels that this supporting of his own opinion is inhibiting, comment-ing, "I don't like how I am required to take the ideas of several others and support my own opinion which in the end of the paper isn't actually my opinion anymore; it's the collective result of the opinions I used to write the paper." This frustration is really a shared frustration, present in many of the narratives and often tied to the idea of plagiarism. Students want their own voices to be present in the paper. They want the voice to be authentic, but the way that they have conceptualized or understood library

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or academic research creates a struggle for many of them to achieve what they feel is an authentic piece of "research." They have opinions and feelings about the topics they have chosen to research, yet they also need to incorporate sources, in many cases a certain number and/or type. It is the "weaving together" of these pieces that creates a sense of awkwardness and discomfort. Terry says, "I have found that research papers are rather painful but they are even more so if you want to be original." Terry continues later, "I honestly just didn't want to waste my time working on a paper which used mostly old information to try and support an only slightly new opinion." Perceiving research as being part of a conversation was never mentioned overtly in any of these narratives, but that conceptualization appears to be at the heart of some of the students' frustrations. It is as if the students have the desire to be a part of the conversation or sense somehow that they should be, but they cannot determine how to join it. Librarians need to collaborate closely with writing instructors to develop a shared understanding of research-based writing that can be common to both the writing and library instruction classrooms.

Additionally, students describe being frustrated by sources they cannot understand or are not interested in. Lee contrasts research on a beloved author to research done for an Honors class requiring the use of particular sources: "I have no statistics background at all, and there were no graphs, so much of the data was Greek to me…so it was basi-cally writing six mini-analyses about how doctors in the United States are really racist, based on what I was gleaning from tables I didn't really get." The lack of sources proves to be an additional stumbling block for Terry in research on radio-controlled car racing: "After hours of digging around articles and databases I came up with nearly nothing to show for my effort…I felt at a loss and very bummed that I had a topic which could be so interesting to others and one that I was so passionate about but apparently no one else acknowledged or cared for." Terry very perceptively says later, "I felt like new ideas over rather untouched subjects were kind of unknowingly discouraged by the research papers I had done because of the prerequisites for a 'good' paper." Instruction librar-ians often emphasize the finding of high-quality sources, often scholarly, peer-reviewed articles written by experts. This emphasis can be problematic for students for the reasons the students express above: expert source material is not written for an audience of un-

dergraduates; consequently, an attempt to use that material often results in frustration and confusion on the students' part and can actively work against the learning process. A different but equally troubling frustration is the limit of scholarly, expert conversation to particular topics which may or may not be relevant or of interest to students, and which are, of course, shaped by political and social forces that students may lack knowledge of, and that librarians may often fail to acknowledge. Librarians may want to consider what alternative sources could be acceptable, or act as advocates for students in their dealings with their professors who may or may not understand the realities of the information landscape.

Research as argument is an additional way many students conceptualize the research process. Terry says, "I was proud of my work but I realized how hard it is to write a serious paper without bulletproof research." Terry's use of "bullet proof" here fits with the idea of research as argument and argument as a form of attack. Sam laments a negative experience working on the paper about the Holocaust: "when my teacher handed the draft back to me, I realized from his comments that my research argument was not an argument at all. The paper was merely a descriptive essay." Clearly the idea of research paper and the idea of argument are intertwined in this student's conceptualization. Even though Sam did research to write the draft, it is characterized as lesser or flawed. Again, it would be important for librarians to examine their own conceptualizations of research-based writing and how those ideas inform their information literacy instruction. Could it be that emphasizing the finding of sources over the examining of them or the use of them, although clearly our area of expertise, contributes to the students' idea that the sources are the key piece of the argument or that argument is the only form of research?

Whatever conceptualization the students use for research, the inextricable connection between research and writing was obvious in all the narratives. Students never divorced the research from the writing process. The outcome for these students is never about being information literate in the sense that librarians often talk about. This corresponds to Hillard's view that "though the concept of information literacy seems to work adequately to describe the activities of academic research from the librarians' perspective, it will likely not describe the rhetorical practices associated with academic writing."[32] While the students sometimes discuss how the research experience made them a better researcher or more able to research other topics in the future, they always address how it made them a better *writer*. For example, Sam says, "my 'catastrophic' experience taught me to be a better writer and also how to compose an argument with a definite outline and thesis." Interestingly, Sam also addresses the information literacy aspects of his experience: "I know how to search the catalogue of a library for books relevant to my topic and integrate my research into my final draft." The next sentence, however, demonstrates that the overarching context of writing is never far from the student's mind: "there is one component of academic research I have never been comfortable with: drafting."

Many librarians would not consider drafting the paper to be in the domain of research itself, but, for these students, there is no academic research without writing. This connection between research and writing is one that the library literature often overlooks, constituting a kind of blind spot for librarians. For students, the research paper is written for an audience as a means of communicating something that the student often feels quite strongly about. Shannon says, "I am actually looking forward to writing this

[upcoming] research paper because I get to incorporate an experience of my own into the paper.…I wish to inform people about…Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy and the amazing effects it had on my brother. I'm excited about letting others know." Similarly, Lee says, "once you let me free on a topic that I am passionate about, it becomes less of a chore, and more of a chance for me to expand my own knowledge on whatever my topic is, and a way to share my passions with others…" Certainly, Lee sees the purpose of learning how to do research, but it is again within the context of writing. The research process, as we can see from the students' conceptualizations and from the connections they express with the writing process, is often torturous, sometimes enjoyable, but always secondary to the primary purpose of writing.

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Contextualizing Research through Narrative: Conflict and Negotiation

In their narratives, students also contextualize the academic research experience in a larger sense, based on their individual points of view; that is, they provide insight into Hillard's "behaviors, attitudes, and social practices that constitute information literacy in use."[33] Thus, students not only conceptualize research itself as a particular type of class activity but also situate the research process within the complicated social world of the classroom, where power relations involving students and teachers inevitably structure the research experience. Narrative becomes a vehicle by which students present and interpret their vision of this experience, bringing a sense of coherence and meaning to a complex social process. Using narrative as a rhetorical device, many students foreground tension and conflict in such a way that their stories become arguments about power in the classroom.

More than simply showing that the educational environment is fraught with issues of authority and control, the narratives we analyze here suggest that the negotiation of such issues is central to the students' experience of the research process. For many students, although they do not generally express it as such, academic research is a political endeavor. They write about negotiating with tough teachers, working tirelessly to avoid punishment (in the form of bad grades or negative commentary), and trying to balance their passions or personal concerns with the formal expectations of difficult and/or unclear assignments. Based on many of the narratives we have collected over the years, the classroom context, what Hillard describes as the "lived context"[34] in which research assignments are carried out, is perhaps the essential component in how students understand research. In numerous instances, they define their experiences in terms of power dynamics, and they make both subtle and direct arguments about how that power operates, at times justifying classroom practices and behaviors, at other times critiquing them. In many respects, these students reaffirm the importance of exploring the contexts in which information literacy is practiced and their attendant power dynamics.[35]

Consider the following passage, where Sam relates a miserable experience with a draft that did not meet a teacher's expectations: "Everything appeared to be going perfect; I had plenty of material and eventually had my 18-page rough draft ready for my teacher. However, when my teacher handed the draft back to me, I realized from his comments that my research argument was not an argument at all. The paper was merely a descriptive essay. I was devastated. All of my precious research was for naught." While this passage clearly demonstrates the significance of the classroom context in bringing the student to a realization about the paper (via the teacher's intervention), it also highlights the student's view of the hierarchical teacher-student dynamic. Submitting the draft to the teacher, an anonymous taskmaster and judge who acts as the sole authority on the quality of the work, Sam must accept the evaluation and alter the approach to meet expectations. Sam goes on to narrate the difficult experience of researching and writing a completely new paper, an experience that leaves Sam "worn out" with "a bitter taste." In effect, the teacher has sentenced Sam to hard labor: "I had basically spent two weeks of my life cramped up in my room with books and outlines all around me." Such images of drudgery and confinement abound in our students' stories, as they detail their attempts to negotiate the requirements laid out by teachers.

In this particular story, Sam does not tell us whether the teacher engaged in more substantive dialogue with students or nurtured them through the research and writing processes. While we might assume (or hope) that there was greater teacher-student interaction than conveyed in the story, such interaction, if it occurred, apparently did not resonate with Sam. Instead, Sam's narrative describes researching and writing within a context of isolation. Nevertheless, Sam's minimal interaction with the teacher (when comments are handed down) serves as a critical moment in the story, as the teacher employs the power of "comments" to initiate the primary conflict: the student's view of a research paper as "descriptive" versus the teacher's institutionally authorized view of a research paper as argumentative. This conflict, which leads to a mentally and physically exhausting effort to rectify the problem, is what Sam finds most memorable about the research experience, at least according to the narrative. Indeed, by shaping these events into narrative form, Sam demonstrates that the classroom context, including the teacher's absolute authority, is crucial in terms of the meaning taken away from experience.

Interestingly, Sam still argues for the value of the experience, ultimately feeling a "sense of accomplishment" in this research ordeal. In fact, Sam's narrative embodies many of the aforementioned themes discussed by Carpenter and Falbo in their study of literacy narratives, including the student as heroic figure, the simplification of complex literacy practices, and the emphasis on teacher commentary.[36] According to Sam, "While many would consider my first research experience a disaster, I believe it was one of the most productive times of my life.…I have found that research papers require a lot of hard work and dedication, [but] when they are done correctly, they make me a much better writer and teach me many valuable lessons about life." Despite briefly mentioning several specific information literacy skills in the story, Sam mostly emphasizes the lesson gleaned from the labor itself, learning "to never give up even when fail[ing] the first time." Sam refers repeatedly to the importance of "hard work" but provides few details about why certain choices were made during the research process. Moreover, Sam mentions learning about what counts as authentic research and how to carry out

research projects effectively (i.e. research that is "done correctly"), but, taking into account the entire story, Sam seems most interested in the larger value of hard work and persistence leading to success. This is not to say that such lessons or values are inappropriate (in many ways, they may be in the student's best interest); however, this narrative of conflict and transition suggests that librarians might look more carefully at the relationship between information literacy practices and the tensions involved in adopting the ideology of the "good" student, committed to academic labor and obedient to authority. Sam's ability to develop the skills that librarians might

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associate with information literacy is necessarily linked to an ability to navigate the classroom context, survive its trials, and embrace its values, whether for better or for worse.

While Sam justifies the teacher's authority by focusing on the transmission of proper values, other students use narrative to question the validity of classroom practices they perceive as authoritarian, inappropriate, or unfair. Perhaps because of its association with rule following and particularly arduous intellectual tasks, the research experience seems to represent, for these students, the worst aspects of the classroom power structure. Unsurprisingly, such students are less willing to embrace the authority of their teachers; they complicate our understanding of the research experience by leaving certain tensions unresolved in their narratives. For example, consider Terry's inability to locate reputable sources on radio-controlled car racing: "Little did I know that personal experience and my own knowledge was all that I really had to write a paper from. Well that wasn't good enough for my teacher and therefore I nearly scrapped my idea. After hours of digging around articles and databases I came up with nearly nothing to show for my effort." The resentment Terry expresses toward the faceless teacher, that this approach "wasn't good enough," extends to those students in the class who apparently chose cliché topics that were not nearly as difficult to research. As with Sam's story, the larger classroom context appears in Terry's narrative as a vivid part of the research experience. Once again, a student's failure to meet a teacher's imposed requirements leads to conflict, what Terry calls a "seemingly fruitless struggle," and the teacher and classmates seemingly exacerbate these negative feelings.

However, whereas Sam's story concludes by resolving tension via the affirmation of teacher authority and the glorification of struggle, Terry's story presents a more ambivalent yet more critical view of the research experience. Despite the fact that Terry finds some useful websites and magazine articles, writing a paper that "turned out well" and eventually met with the teacher's approval, Terry offers few details about this ultimately successful research process and instead uses the story to critique the nature of research assignments and instruction. Comparing the experience with the paper on radio-controlled car racing to other past experiences with research, Terry points out the difficulty in carrying out an original research project in which one is personally invested, while simultaneously fulfilling the formal requirements of the paper, especially the need

for certain kinds of scholarly information: "New angles on previously covered topics were much easier because there was more information available," so most students have no incentive to choose more challenging topics. Educators might be tempted to point out that Terry's argument is somewhat misguided, since the goal of research is to develop "new angles" or new perspectives on "previously covered topics," to build on prior knowledge. Others might say that Terry's frustrations would be alleviated through information literacy instruction, that is, Terry would be more capable of finding scholarly sources and integrating them into a project. Nevertheless, Terry's perception of the classroom context as constraining suggests an inherent tension between following the rules and following one's passions in the research process. Like Sam, Terry had to struggle to be "good enough." However, Terry feels constrained by a lack of power, an inability to control the situation and forge a unique path. Terry refuses to proclaim the intellectual or moral value of the experience at the end of the story, even when acknowledging the inevitable authority of teachers and the powerful incentive of grades, which work to stifle, rather than encourage, creativity: "All of them [previous research papers] have not been very interesting and the one that was probably wouldn't have received the [high] grade it did if reviewed by a different instructor." Here, for a student unwilling to adopt a more submissive ideology, the narrative form leads to insight into how the classroom context may shape the research experience into a struggle without passion or purpose.

Lee conveys similarly complex feelings about the research experience, contrasting a personal passion for the topic with the imposed and seemingly oppressive requirements of the assignment. Again, the teacher plays the role of judge and disciplinarian, unleashing the aforementioned "torture device known as 'bibliography cards'" on the students, forcing them to "painstakingly copy" source material, and exercising complete authority over the quality of their work. Recalling the previously discussed episode from Terry's narrative, Lee says that the teacher was "not impressed" with the student's initial research, primarily because the sources were mostly biographies of the author. The language that students employ in such passages suggests that they often experience criticism about their research on an emotional and personal level. The teacher does not simply find fault with Lee's work; rather, she or he is not personally "impressed" with it. On the other hand, feelings of vulnerability and resentment disappear from the narrative when Lee writes about exploring the life of Douglas Adams. The story places this process of inquiry, which involved learning more about a "loved" topic and "sharing [individual] passions with others," in direct opposition to the rules and regulations associated with teacher authority. While certainly seeing value in the research experience, Lee argues against "formalities" such as bibliography cards, which Lee believes were used "to make sure everyone did a legitimate amount of work." In other words, the formal rules did not facilitate inquiry but served to enforce consistent standards of labor among the students. Lee is not empowered by, but rather in spite of, a classroom context perceived as restrictive and punitive. Lee's insightful narrative suggests that a student might enjoy and learn from the research experience, not by embracing authority and the value of work in itself, but by staying true to one's individual passions and negotiating the tension between following those passions and following the rules.

One final point about how these students contextualize the research experience in their narratives bears mentioning. In the stories we have read closely in this article,

librarians fail to appear even once. Anecdotally, this is a pattern we have observed in the vast majority of student narratives we have read over the years. While teachers typically serve as anonymous antagonists, librarians are often absent entirely, neither helping nor hindering the students. Occasionally, the library itself is mentioned, as when Sam refers to checking out "dozens of books from the library." Sam also writes about learning to find and use information sources, but it is not clear whether a librarian played a role in teaching these skills. If we specifically asked students about their experiences with librarians, they might have more to say about our work, but we are primarily interested in what the students themselves choose to include as important moments in their research process. The fact that these students do not mention librarians by their own choice suggests that they do not see librarians as central to the research experience. Although the lack of librarians in these narratives may be disconcerting, it may also represent an opportunity to talk with students about what librarians can offer in terms of research assistance. In other words, one might ask students how their experiences might change if a librarian were to figure more prominently in the research context, perhaps as a facilitator of effective information literacy practices and thus a kind of mediator of conflict and tension throughout the research process.

Furthermore, the absence of librarians in these narratives, coupled with the close relationship that the students forge between the research and writing processes, lends weight to the increasingly prevalent notion that librarians and composition instructors should collaborate in the teaching of information literacy. Rolf Norgaard has advanced a vision of "process-oriented information literacy" that involves extensive collaboration between librarians and compositionists,[37] and many recent articles in the library literature reflect and advocate this type of approach.[38] While beyond the scope of this discussion, it is worth noting that, if librarians wish to have a substantial impact on student learning, they need to

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first understand that they are on the periphery of the research experience in the minds of many students. However, by moving out from the margins and participating as active and engaged collaborators in the classroom, librarians may find excellent opportunities to prove their value to both students and teachers.

Conclusion

Although we have primarily emphasized what instruction librarians might learn from reading student narratives, we also believe that, by writing and interpreting information literacy narratives, students themselves might develop more complex views of the research process and their roles as researchers. As Williams asserts, having students

analyze and even rewrite their literacy narratives from different perspectives can be transformative, enabling them to see the constructed nature of their identities and perhaps adopt "more empowered" roles in their future literacy activities.[39] Though more cautious about literacy narratives as vehicles of empowerment, especially for students whose cultural experiences of language conflict with academic expectations, Caleb Corkery nevertheless echoes Williams, noting that literacy narratives can foster productive "self-analysis" among students.[40] Thus, student narratives are valuable, not only for the insight they give us, but also for the authority and sense of empowerment they might grant students who write and analyze them. As every librarian is well aware from purely anecdotal experience, if not from the literature on library anxiety, students often feel frustrated and helpless during the research process; in many instances, they do not understand what they are expected to do, nor what their research is supposed to achieve. By validating these moments of crossing (or attempted crossing) into new and perhaps more sophisticated information literacy practices, we hope to foster what Soliday calls "narrative agency,"[41] giving students the power to reflect on and learn from their experiences, as well as develop a more intricate understanding of academic research in both conceptual and contextual terms.

Through our reading of information literacy narratives, it is evident that the conceptual and the contextual aspects of the stories contribute to Hillard's "complex of behaviors, attitudes, and social practices that constitute information literacy in use."[42] Could the use of information literacy narratives in the library and the writing classroom foster a heightened awareness of the behaviors, attitudes, social practices, and power relations that would then, in turn, contribute to more meaningful research assignments and more positive experiences for students? Could research move from being described as "daunting," as a frightening "nightmare," to something more inspiring? Such questions offer rich and exciting directions for future investigation. Perhaps the research experience and, consequently, the learning process can be improved if we not only encourage students to engage in narrative reflection but also let them know that their stories—their voices—matter to us.

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Notes

1. Van E. Hillard, "Information Literacy as Situated Literacy," in *Teaching Literary Research: Challenges in a Changing Environment*, ed. Kathleen A. Johnson and Steve R. Harris (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2009), 18, 19.
2.   This definition draws on the popular conception of information literacy from the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*: "Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to 'recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.'" See Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000),

American Library Association, http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/ informationliteracycompetency.cfm (accessed June 3, 2011).

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4. Carol Collier Kuhlthau, *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*, 2nd ed. (Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2004).
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6. Jerome Bruner, "Narrative Distancing: A Foundation of Literacy," in *Literacy, Narrative, and Culture*, ed. Jens Brockmeier, Min Wang, and David R. Olson (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2002), 89.
7. Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 10.
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11. Mike Baynham, "Narrative as Evidence in Literacy Research," *Linguistics and Education* 11, 2 (2000): 113.
12. Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen, "Reading Literacy Narratives," *College English* 54, 5 (1992): 513.
13. Mary Soliday, "Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives," *College English* 56, 5 (1994): 511–526.
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15. Stephanie Diane Paterson, "Embodied Narratives: Ways of Reading Student Literacy Histories," (PhD dissertation, University of New Hampshire, 2001); Donna Dunbar-Odom, *Defying the Odds: Class and the Pursuit of Higher Literacy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
16. William Carpenter and Bianca Falbo, "Literacy, Identity, and the 'Successful' Student Writer," in *Identity Papers: Literacy and Power in Higher Education*, ed. Bronwyn T. Williams (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 92–108.
17. Ibid., 105.
18. Sara Franks, "Grand Narratives and the Information Cycle in the Library Instruction Classroom," in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth: Library Juice Press, 2010), 43–54.
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21. Peter Brophy, "Narrative Based Practice," *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 2, 1 (2007): 149–158.
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23. Nahyun Kwon, Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, and Linda Alexander, "Critical Thinking Disposition and Library Anxiety: Affective Domains on the Space of Information Seeking and Use in Academic Libraries," *College and Research Libraries* 68, 3 (2007): 268–278.
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28. In addition to the ethnographic studies previously cited, see also Joanna Bryant, Graham Matthews, and Graham Walton, "Academic Libraries and Social Learning Space: A Case Study of Loughborough University Library, UK," *Journal of Librarianship and Information*

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30. Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 210.

31. Student narratives used with permission. Gender-neutral student names were chosen to protect privacy.

32. Hillard, "Information Literacy as Situated Literacy," 13.

33. Ibid., 19.

34. Ibid., 18.

35. James Elmborg makes a compelling case for the study of the political and social contexts of information literacy, focusing in particular on the nature of schools as "hierarchical social systems." See James Elmborg, "Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, 2 (2006): 194.

36. Carpenter and Falbo, "Literacy, Identity, and the 'Successful' Student Writer."

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38. For example, see Anne-Marie Deitering and Sara Jameson, "Step by Step Through the Scholarly Conversation: A Collaborative Library/Writing Faculty Project to Embed Information Literacy and Promote Critical Thinking in First Year Composition at Oregon State University," *College and Undergraduate Libraries* 15, 1–2 (2008): 57–79; Heidi L. M. Jacobs and Dale Jacobs, "Transforming the One-Shot Library Session into Pedagogical Collaboration: Information Literacy and the English Composition Class," *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 49, 1 (2009): 72–82.

39. Williams, "Heroes, Rebels, and Victims," 345.

40. Caleb Corkery, "Literacy Narratives and Confidence Building in the Writing Classroom," *Journal of Basic Writing* 24 (2005): 52.

41. Soliday, "Translating Self and Difference," 512.

42. Hillard, "Information Literacy as Situated Literacy," 19.