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Negotiating the Archive: Redefining the Event of the Book through Collaborative Engagement

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CHRISTA: This paper addresses the emerging notion in information literacy scholarship that the teaching of writing and the teaching of information literacy form two interrelated and symbiotic cognitive and social processes. That is to say, neither the teaching of writing nor the teaching of research skills should happen separately. Too often, however, at the typical United States college or university, writing teachers, librarians, administrators, and students see the two activities as separate. Librarians take care of teaching research and source identification skills, and writing teachers focus on teaching critical thinking and how to write strong arguments. Our paper today stresses that these two activities ought to be seen as interdependent. We argue that an ideal pedagogical approach allows librarians and compositionists to collaborate as they enable students to develop a richer and more complex understanding of academic research, critical thinking, and information literacy.

CHRISTA: The theoretical framework alluded to in the title of our paper, “Negotiating the Archive,” is meant to imply both an expanded and specific view of knowledge practices that centrally involve texts and that call upon the expertise of librarians and of academic teachers. In fact, you can see here that we are arguing for a collaborative theoretical framework: to understand the work of librarians by incorporating ideas from philosophy and literary theory. The late French philosopher Jacques Derrida offers an influential account of archival discourse outside of library science in his 1995 book, Archive Fever. Derrida argues in his book that archives in their physical form are shaped by social, political, and technological forces. For example, Derrida writes that what we know today of Sigmund Freud’s work comes mainly from
his correspondence with colleagues; had Freud had access to phones, tape recorders, computers, printers, or email, what we call psychoanalysis would be different. Derrida shows that the methods of transmitting information shape what can be known in a given time period. Archival technology determines what can be archived and studied. The archive for Derrida is a situated production of knowledge rather than simply an objective and value-free recording of it. For example, the academic growth of examining popular culture has led to an expansion of materials deemed appropriate for research libraries so they now collect comic books, video games, and romance novels.

CHRISTA: At the same time, Derrida also draws attention to the archive as a practice of dealing with preserved texts by using certain modes of reading and scholarship. That is to say, what we do with the archive is also a matter of contingent social and political decisions. One can say that for scholars in the humanities the archive forms the equivalent to the research lab for scientists. How we work with the archive, how we interpret texts and for what purpose, are activities circumscribed by culture and conditionally authorized. Derrida’s archive includes systems of organization, which create and maintain the conditions for intertextuality, allusions, citationality, quotations, and the way we study influences between and among texts. In short, what we term literary criticism—research writing, argumentative writing, even “knowledge” itself—is a direct result of particular archival and textual practices. I hope to have conveyed, then, that the broad term “archive” when seen through a Derridean lens allows us to recognize that the practices of research and writing form complex and interrelated processes that cannot be fully appreciated and taught as separate intellectual and practical endeavors. That is to say,
research practices and writing pedagogy need each other and are flawed and incomplete when separated.

**ANNIE:** These disciplinary and intellectual divisions have created serious consequences for students. In their 2012 study on information literacy and students’ experience with multiple aspects of their research writing courses, Robert Detmering and Anna Marie Johnson identify the following problems: many students report intense and pervasive anxiety about academic research; they see the process as “tortuous and terror-inducing” (11); tied to ideas of plagiarism and punishment, students struggle with creating “authentic” pieces of research (13); students experience difficulty and frustration with sources they cannot understand or are not interested in (13); students do not see research writing classes as being about “information literacy” and instead view such classes as being about writing in a narrow sense; and finally, students see research and librarians as secondary to the primary purpose of writing. That is, students feel largely disconnected from the research process—hence their feelings of fear about research and their generally poor performance on research-based assignments. Something fundamental is missing.

**CHRISTA:** We have only ourselves to blame for our students’ negative and partial experiences. The current approach is characterized by what probably most of us in this room are thoroughly familiar with: a deficit model that sees research skills as functional and performative tasks. Rebecca Albitz has remarked that faculty are reluctant to relinquish class time to librarians (103). Nor is librarian-led instruction integrated into credit-bearing courses (Albitz 105). In response to these limitations, college students primarily learn how to use library resources and are introduced to information literacy (as defined by the Association of College and Research
“one-shot” workshops. Students visit the library during their regular class time while a librarian presents some combination of research topics and skills. Students may have more than one workshop over the course of their academic career but, for most students, this is all the instruction they receive. There are never opportunities to develop a more complex Derridean conception of information.

ANNIE: Caroline Barrett et al., a team of librarians and faculty from the University of Georgia—Athens, looked at four classes in which information literacy instruction was delivered in a variety of formats and assessed student performance on information retrieval and citations. The researchers saw no differences between courses that received traditional IL instruction from librarians over those that didn’t. Students used poor-quality sources in all four courses. Students favored online sources over print. None of the faculty teaching the courses or the librarians collaborated on assignment design and librarians—when they were involved at all—only taught one workshop to students. Barrett et al. found that students see research as secondary to the main “content” of the course and comment that “the assignment requirements were influencing which resources the students chose to read and cite” (47). Casey Kadavy and Kim Chuppa-Cornell found in their own studies that students struggle with basic information literacy skills: choosing topics, identifying search terms, and using databases (64). The message is clear: the workshop is not enough to help students even with the most basic levels of information literacy.

ANNIE: A recent development in the field of library science makes collaboration absolutely vital. In February 2015, the ACRL published its Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education. This framework moves far beyond the skills-based mindset of current
information literacy instruction. Much like Derrida’s work in *Archive Fever*, the new ACRL framework emphasizes the nature of information and information literacy as highly situational and contextual. The framework comes from a recognition that the ability to retrieve information is not enough to be truly information literate. The framework is not meant to be deployed in one-shot instruction sessions; it is meant to provide structure for students developing information literacy over their entire college career. There is still much argument among librarians as to how the framework is to be used in the classroom setting. Mandy Lupton and Christine Bruce propose a series of “windows” for using the ACRL framework in various courses (3-27). They view information literacy via generic, situated, and transformative perspectives. As students progress through classes, they begin with skills that are taught in traditional library instruction courses. Once the basic skills are mastered, instructors and librarians ask students to explore the context of information. The last “window,” the transformative perspective:

> goes beyond sociocultural practices by being concerned with emancipatory processes and outcomes. The basis of a transformative perspective is that to be literate is for individuals and groups to be empowered to challenge the status quo and to effect social change. (Lupton & Bruce 5)

As studies have repeatedly shown that students are failing to develop information literacy instruction through one-off workshops, using the framework will require new modes of delivering information literacy instruction. Lupton and Bruce gave four examples of collaboration between faculty and librarians to introduce students to a more nuanced and complex appreciation of information. All of these collaborations had one thing in common:
students were given multiple opportunities over the course of a semester to develop genuine information literacy.

**CHRISTA:** During the Spring 2015 semester, Annie Smith was embedded in my undergraduate course, Advanced Writing for English Majors, at Utah Valley University, a large, open-enrollment regional teaching university, located south of Salt Lake City. Embedding meant that she was present in nearly every class session. This course is a required upper-division research writing class for English majors. My section this semester focused on the contemporary German novel, *The Reader*, a novel that problematizes representations of the Holocaust. Through close reading of the novel, students develop individual interpretations that integrate information from scholars across the humanities. The class culminates with a research paper and a formal, brief presentation by each student. Both Annie and I conceived of this research course in the manner presented by Derrida: we attempted to genuinely integrate writing and research by emphasizing both processes as interdisciplinary and complex. We tried to model for the students how history and memory come to be in textual and archival processes; we discussed the specific mode of literary scholarship and of academic disciplines; above all, we stressed that archives—and thus knowledge—are reconstructions that always betray particular perspectives that cannot provide transparent access to the events themselves.

**ANNIE:** In the classroom, Christa would lead the discussion of the day while I would—where appropriate—prod students to consider the quality and relevance of source material and analyse scholars’ arguments. These blended discussions presented information literacy in an authentic manner and as a vital part of the literary discipline. Information literacy, as presented via an embedded librarian, shares much more with ACRL’s new framework than
with the previous set of standard competencies. Students met with me in the UVU Library for two workshops where I presented how to use literature databases to find resources for their final paper, while Christa would reinforce what I was teaching by pointing out how information in scholarly articles could be directly applied to the students’ work. A few weeks later, students returned to the library to meet with me for individual consultations on their research papers. In these consultations, I asked students to share their findings and their growing understanding of issues of memory, guilt, blame, and abuse in *The Reader* and in Holocaust literature. Together, the students and I discussed new avenues of research. I also helped several students understand the scholarly literature they were finding and illuminate connections between *The Reader* and its historical, philosophical, legal, and even psychological contexts.

**CHRISTA:** The decision to collaborate came from our shared dissatisfaction with how information literacy is taught at Utah Valley University. Semester after semester, we would see students who didn’t know how to locate high-quality information, understand scholarly writing, cite sources, and effectively integrate information from outside sources into their writing. Students saw the two processes, writing and research, as separate steps that had little or nothing in common. Like many other embedded librarian collaborations, ours came from a personal relationship that developed over time. Our collaboration worked exceedingly well. Both of us felt a real sense of the other’s contribution to the tasks at hand: I could more easily make the point that writing well means listening to others’ voices and realizing the interrelated nature of texts and information. **ANNIE:** And I was able to help students fully comprehend the complexities of research and its iterative nature: using *The Reader* as a jumping off point to explore scholarly discussion of representations of the Holocaust and abuse and using the
scholarly sources to reshape their original understanding of the novel. The research process came full circle. And I, for once as a librarian, got to see the fruits of their labors.

**CHRISTA:** The collaboration worked well for students, too. Their final papers were strong in both students’ sense of investment in the process and in their effective and rich use of perspectives and scholarly research. Students also developed individual relationships with a librarian, which is truly unusual in the typical university scenario. These students will *not* dread asking librarians for help in the future and will seek out a librarian’s assistance and recommendations in future research projects. **ANNIE:** I witnessed this during my experience embedded in the class. Several students approached me after class or later in my office to ask for help and advice on research projects in other classes. In one instance, a student wanted help with research for a personal creative project. In fact, four of the students’ final research papers are being published *this* semester in the English Department’s undergraduate journal.

**CHRISTA:** Our collaboration also revealed a number of challenges that indicate larger problems in both institutional structures and intellectual and theoretical models about the interdisciplinary nature of writing and research. The first barrier is the institutional separation between academic libraries and university departments. Breaking down long-established divisions between a university’s library and that university’s academic departments is a considerable challenge and requires support from all administrative and academic units on campus. The second is that there are not enough librarians to embed in every research methods course a university offers. For instance, Utah Valley University employs only 14 librarians at the present time. An embedded librarian—depending on how much of a part the librarian takes in the course—can require as much preparation time as a professor needs to be effective. Creating a
program or the structural possibility of embedded librarians means that librarians would need to have existing duties reassigned. Alexandra Peary and Linda Ernick remark that “this work is not scalable to other classes; the librarian could only competently do this endeavor with a single course per semester” (39). An option that would address this challenge involves the possibility of faculty and librarians seeking grants at their universities that would provide stipends and a reduction of teaching loads so both partners can devote sufficient time to a team-teaching effort.

CHRISTA: In fact, a good part of our own experience, and some research we consulted, speaks against a programmatic structuring of librarian/faculty collaborations. Since a team-teaching approach requires the fullest commitment of both partners, the ideal collaboration happens between interlocutors who genuinely share teaching goals and a sense of experimentation. Kadavy and Chuppa-Cornell echo this view and argue for a sense of “compatibility and like-mindedness” (66). Part of such a partnership also requires a sense of ownership for both faculty and librarians. As Ielleen Miller notes, faculty need to be able to articulate their own pedagogical outcomes and their own intellectual stake in a collaborative and integrated approach (655). Such a collaboration is time-consuming and as Peary and Ernick point out, “involves interaction on every level, from planning the syllabus to grading the final project” (39). Barrett et al. suggest that the best overall results in terms of students’ increased learning about research and writing in first-year composition courses came when teachers and librarians worked diligently together on crafting clear, rigorous, and sophisticated assignments that were evaluated by both and that in turn motivated students to produce sophisticated and complex arguments (51-52).
ANNIE: Another finding by Barrett et al. that the two of us saw confirmed in our collaboration is that exemplary rhetorical models—that is, well-written and well-argued scholarly research—form the foundation of writing a strong argument. That is to say, when students read longer, sophisticated pieces of scholarship, their papers become stronger conceptually and argumentatively. As we conclude this paper, we want to turn this point into both a major benefit of collaborative library and writing instruction as well as a major challenge. On the one hand, we want students to be exposed to complex scholarship that fully engages the depth of our cultural knowledge as it is captured in the archive, as Derrida has argued. On the other hand, to us this task remains incredibly difficult. In our collaboration, we found that the biggest challenge was helping students truly understand their sources, which is what Derrida scholar Richard Klein identifies as one of Derrida’s most lasting legacies; Klein lauds Derrida’s “extraordinary bibliographic grasp and astonishing erudition” and also “the seriousness with which he understood that to make a difference one has to command the bibliography” (921). This “command of the bibliography,” manifested in practices of close reading, slow reading, and reading to truly engage with text, stands to us as the paradigmatic and most difficult task of successful information literacy instruction.

ANNIE: In sum, the challenges to collaboration—and embedded librarian initiatives—are significant barriers. The rewards, however, make the effort worthwhile. As Rolf Norgaard argues, “information literacy shaped by writing would yield a distinctive literacy, perhaps more situated, more process-oriented, and more relevant to a broad range of rhetorical and intellectual activities” (125). We would like to end our discussion with a brief anecdote that illustrates the promise inherent in library/faculty collaborations. One of the students in our
Advanced Writing class was struggling, lagging behind her peers as they gathered and read articles and began work on their research papers. This student had meetings with both of us. Christa assisted her with her writing and with formulating her argument; I helped her with finding articles and understanding those articles. The scholarly language and sophisticated arguments of the articles eluded the student. It took several meetings between the student and myself before what seemed to her to be purest jargon began to reveal its meaning. She and I talked about the connections between articles she had found about Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*, judicial philosophy, and the politics of guilt, blame, and responsibility. This student’s difficulty—a difficulty of negotiating the archive and its demands to grasp arguments and make them interact with each other—highlighted to Christa and I that the students in our class were missing essential skills that together we address more effectively in our collaborative teaching: making real meaning out of the welter of available information.
Works Cited


