

## In the Classroom 128

# Teaching Students to Treat Research as a Conversation

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**Stan Skrabut:** Well, thanks everyone so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things. Perhaps you are, but you're still hanging out with me. I really do appreciate it. Do you have some students who struggle to properly cite their sources, perhaps they don't even know why they need to give credit to others in their paper? The Association of College and Research Libraries shared a framework that has helped me see research in an entirely different light.

This week, we're going to look at research as a conversation. We have conversations every day, and we adhere to the accepted protocols with no problem. Let's see how we can do this in the classroom. I started this conversation at the beginning of 2021 in an episode, ITC 102. It was focused on teaching information literacy in the classroom. During that episode, I explored the association's information literacy framework.

Today, we're going to focus on the portion where they discuss scholarship as a conversation. Naturally, this ties in to my belief that learning is about dialogue. Whether you're discussing something with another individual, or you're having those internal discussions with the content that you're reading, it is about dialogue. We are learning all the time. Sometimes the subjects have more gravity than others, but we're learning all the time.

In his 1974 book, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Kenneth Burke writes, "Imagine 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's 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 have gone before.

You listen for a while until you decide that you've had caught on to the tenor of the argument, then you put your oar in. Someone answers, you answer him. Another comes to your defense, another aligns himself against you to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your allies' assistance. However, the discussion is interminable.

The hour grows late, you must depart and you do depart with the discussion still vigorously in progress. That is current research. That's what research is. That's how research is happening all the time. There's discussions. In some cases, there's

famous arguments, one article coming after another with two different sides of a topic. Let's talk about it in the day-to-day form of normal conversations.

When we enter a conversation with somebody at work or when we're talking with friends, we have basic protocols that we follow. For example, we contribute to the conversation when we have something of value to add. This means we have to know something about the topic first, regardless of what the topic is. If we're off-topic, we sound pretty silly. If we say something blatantly false, then we sound pretty stupid.

We also gather our knowledge of a topic from multiple sources to include other conversations we've had, the media, schools, and a multitude of other sources. We have to use our experiences to discern whether the information we are adding to our knowledge base is correct or not. We're always building upon previous knowledge that we have gained. When we're involved in conversations, we regularly note where we got our information.

It may be a simple statement that, "My dad once told me that," whatever it was, or, "I was watching the news, and they said, x, y, & z. If we don't give up our sources, we're often challenged with the question, "Where did you hear that?" Conversations do not necessarily have to be face-to-face either. We can have conversations through email or text messaging, or through social media, many other platforms, but conversations are constantly happening.

We also do not originate most of the conversations. In most cases, the conversations have been going on for a long time, and we're entering in the middle of them. It is important to come up to speed. Today I was talking with a friend about a situation that I talked to her previously about and I had to catch her up from the last time we talked. Naturally, when sharing the story, I kept referring to the key players of the story, so and so said this, and so and so said this, and I said this.

That's how the conversation went. These are basic protocols that we have been working with since we've been born. These protocols can also extend into the classroom. The extension of a conversation fits naturally in the classroom. In an active classroom, there's often a discussion or dialogue going on. The conversation may also happen in an online environment such as a threaded discussion board.

In order for students to successfully participate in the discussions, they must bring some knowledge to the conversation. If they don't have some knowledge, they either do not sound intelligent or they cannot participate in the conversation and therefore, they're left out. In order for students to add credibility to the conversation, they are challenged to let everybody know where they gain their knowledge.

You'll often see in a discussion post that they will comment, "According to so and so when I was reading this chapter, blah, blah, blah, and now I think this or I'm adding to this conversation." As it was explained to me while I was working on my dissertation, I was allowed to share my thoughts as long as the thoughts were supported by others. I was not yet at the appropriate level where I could just go out there and put out my own theory. Even if I was putting out my own theory, it was built on somebody else's.

When we're adding to the conversation, we combine all our knowledge in order to provide our slant on the topic, how we're seeing that particular topic at that moment in time based on everything that we know. In the classroom, we share our knowledge at an appropriate level in forms of guided discussions, undergraduate research, presentations, both inside and outside the classroom poster sessions.

We may even contribute to a journal article and many other different ways that we share what we have learned and add to the conversation. This leads to the idea of treating research as a conversation. When we conduct research and publish articles or create conference presentations, we first enter the conversation by learning what was said before. This requires understanding how to access the conversations that previously happened.

With a library, there's often journal databases that you can check out. They also have conference proceedings, you can also check out books that have been written on the topic. There's a lot of different ways to gather that knowledge, but part of it requires that you go to the library. Once we have an idea of what has been said before, we can then provide our input to the conversation.

Ideally, we're sharing a new perspective or interpretation on the conversation. We do this through support of those who discussed the topic prior to us. Naturally, we have to acknowledge them as being part of the conversation. According to the ACRL Information Literacy Framework, 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.

In order to participate in an academic conversation, you have to understand and adhere to the protocol. You have to know the language of the discipline as well as the attribution model. As Macmillan and Hill noted in their article, this can be all like learning a second language. As you're entering this conversation, you want to pick out who the influencers are, who are the established voices, and the credible voices of the conversation. You have to also be willing to listen to new voices. Your research has to be broad, and it also has to be deep.

As time goes on, and others add to the conversation, they will acknowledge our part in the conversation by citing our articles, and our books, and our conference presentations. Because of these new voices, the conversation may head in a new direction. Naturally, the knowledge base continues to develop over time. Here's a quick exercise that you can show in your classroom on how the conversation happens through journal articles, and you do this with the help of Google Scholar.

Go to Google Scholar, search a topic to find a list of journal articles. Find an article from around 2010 to 2015. You don't want something that's 2021, that's not going to be as useful for this exercise, so 2010 to 2015. Ideally, you want to get the full-text version of the article if it's available. Otherwise, you have to go to the library and pull that article out. Try to find something with a full-text article.

When you find an article that you like, open the article and scroll down to the references. Here's where you get to show all the different voices that contributed to

the creation of the article. You can pick selected voices and go into the article and show how they added to the literature review or part of the discussion. Now, what's important is, when you're pointing this out that everything deals with a particular situation and context.

Not all the voices on that topic were part of that reference list, only the ones that contributed to the conversation at that moment in time on that particular topic. Naturally, some voices are missed. If you're in a cocktail party, you're not going to hear all the conversations and some of them may be even talking about the same thing you're talking about and you're just going to miss part of it, but you try to find all the conversations.

We're in this article, you're showing the students the reference list. What you can do if you want is you can pick a couple of those articles and search for them in Google Scholar, and pull up those articles and see who contributed to that conversation by going to the reference list and what were the voices for that particular article. You went into the past and looked at who started the conversation, and where it was picked up, and how the contribution was.

Next, returned to your original search, find the article that your original article that you're looking at. Part of that reference that Google Scholar shows is there's a link to Cited by. This will list all the articles written after your selected article that cite that particular article. You can show where you have articles where only one or two articles are citing it or in the case where you have hundreds of articles in those.

If you got hundreds of articles citing a work that you've created, you created something pretty special. Now, you click on that link, Cited by, and you'll see a list of all the articles that cite your original article. You can then pull up that article, look at the reference list, you can find the article, the original article that you're looking for, but you can also go into the article itself and see how it was used as part of the conversation.

With that new list, you can continue clicking on the Cited by links and keep moving into the future, or at least, ahead of that original article date, and see how the conversation kept changing, and how things were built upon each other. It's also important to note that the article dates will all be after your original article date, it's things that added on. Easy exercise to do, quite useful.

Other ways that you can help students with the research conversation. Contrary to popular belief, many students don't know how to research and properly cite article. I'm still seeing this in the graduate-level courses that I teach. When we ask students to create products, we need to ensure that they're properly extending the conversation through the appropriate protocol.

There's also a proper order to conducting research. Students must first enter a listening or reading phase of the conversation before providing input. I remember a student coming to me needing help with a paper. He had written the paper and now needed to provide it some sources because the teacher required them to do so. This is definitely in the wrong order. In order to combat this, combat is probably not the

best word, but in order to help students learn the proper way to do research, I would recommend breaking down the research assignments so it emphasizes the proper research protocols. This can be done by first asking students to do submitting a research topic and a research question, and signing off on that before turning them loose on a project.

Once you have the topic and research question in hand, next, have them create an annotated bibliography. This means they have to go find resources, look at the resources, identify what's important to their conversation, and build a list from that, and be able to submit that. Once they've gone through that phase, then you can go to the next phase which may require them writing a literature review.

If you do this in step-by-step, you can have them start more properly writing articles that add to the conversation because first, they're listening to what's been said, swirling it around in their mind, finding where the gaps were, and contributing to the conversation at that moment in time. To help with this, I encourage you to have students collect their research using tools like Zotero or EndNote.

I've talked about those particular or I've talked about Zotero at least in a previous episode, and I will link to it in the show notes. I'm going to provide some other links to the ACRL framework, I'll put a link to that plus a couple of other articles that talk about this idea of research or scholarship as a conversation. It's about having good engaging conversations, it's about dialogue. Learning is about dialogue.

I hope that regardless of what discipline you're in that you consider these things, let me know. Always leave a comment, feel free to leave a comment, and let me know how it works out for you. With that, I'm going to leave you a plug for my book.