The Conversational Nature of Sources of Information

Students are asked to examine two magazine articles that are different parts of a larger, more complex conversation.

CONCEPT IN CONTEXT

This lesson introduces students to the idea that scholarship is a conversation. Students are introduced to two articles, one of which is a rebuttal to the other. In the rebuttal, the author references other articles and sources of information, expanding the conversation to include additional voices. In reading contrasting viewpoints and examining the textual evidence the authors use to support their positions, the students get a sense for the practice of formulating and supporting an argument. They learn that this "conversation" between scholars is informed over time, drawing on the work of previous conversation participants. Importantly, this lesson also shows students that in order to contribute to any scholarly conversation in a meaningful way, they need to look for multiple views on a topic, including those that do not mirror their own.

Author: Andrea Baer, Undergraduate Education Librarian
         Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

Level: Intermediate to advanced

Estimated Time: The activity described under Input/Modeling will require varying amounts of time, depending on the sources assigned. However, it can be introduced prior to class and completed outside of class time. The remainder of the lesson requires approximately 35–45 minutes.

The examples given here are relatively short magazine articles that can be freely accessed online. Because of the articles' length, most students should be able to read them at the beginning of a class session, allowing for the entire lesson to be conducted in a standard hour or in one hour and fifteen minutes. Alternately, the librarian may choose to select longer, scholarly articles and have students read the articles prior to coming to class.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Computers with Internet access
- Handout for the Input/Modeling activity that includes:
    a. citations of the assigned sources
    b. list of source characteristics to be analyzed (See Input/
        Modeling section, Part 1 and Part 2)

    See Appendix or www.ala.org/acrl/files/handouts.pdf

LEARNING GOALS

- Students will identify how scholars use information to influence
  their own scholarly work.
- Students will recognize information sources as conversational
  and dialogic in nature.
- Students will apply a dialogic approach to evaluating sources.

ANTICIPATORY SET

Librarian Script: "When we encounter information out of context, it can be
difficult to see how that information is meaningful. All pieces of informa-
tion, however, are products of larger conversations. We can therefore think
about sources as snippets of these bigger discussions."

"When we examine one piece of information, we often find that
it references many other sources of information. Similarly, when we do
research, we are listening in on many different dialogues, which may hap-
pen in different contexts (and not just in written form). As researchers, our
challenging (and fun) work is to piece together those different conversa-
tional strands, to think about how they fit together, and to consider how we
will enter into and add to the conversation."

LESSON OBJECTIVE STATED

Librarian Script: "Today we will consider how sources (such as jour-
nal articles, books, websites) can be understood as part of a larger dia-
logue. In doing this, we will identify how authors and speakers use other
sources to support their own ideas. Finally, we will consider how we can
evaluate a source based on the supporting evidence that the author uses

from other sources. Evaluating sources can also help us think about how we use sources for our own purposes, such as persuading or making an argument."

INPUT/MODELING

This lesson begins with a pre-instruction activity that can be completed prior to or during class. Students read two brief articles or article excerpts that reflect varying viewpoints on a course-related topic. In order to emphasize the conversational nature of sources, the librarian might choose one article that explicitly references the other or two sources that allude to each other. For example, an article written in the *National Review Online* challenges a claim made in an earlier article printed in the *Rolling Stone*. (See citations below.) Comparing the views expressed in these two articles can start a conversation about audience, purpose, bias, or rhetorical conventions employed in various publications. If these examples are used, it is important to tell students that the Richwine article in *National Review* references and links to an earlier article Richwine posted at the Heritage Foundation website that contains a number of other references.

> Matt Taibbi, "Ripping Off Young America: The College-Loan Scandal," *Rolling Stone*, August 15, 2013, http://www.rolling-stone.com/politics/news/ripping-off-young-america-the-college-loan-scandal-20130815

> Jason Richwine, "What 'Profits'? Rolling Stone's Matt Taibbi Misunderstands Student Loans," *National Review Online*, August 23, 2013, http://www.nationalreview.com/cor-ner/356551/what-profits-rolling-stones-matt-taibbi-misun-derstands-student-loans-jason-richwine

The librarian should explain to students that they will be considering the rhetorical context of both sources (e.g., audience, purpose, genre, and bias) as well as the relationships between the sources. Students should be prepared to support their answers with details from the sources; annotating key parts of the sources may help them develop their answers.

Part 1: For each source, students will identify:

a. the publication source, as well as the publication's general audience and purpose (The librarian may provide tips on how to determine intended audience and purpose, such as reviewing other content in the publication, reading the publication's self-description, or examining certain stylistic features, visual elements, or writing conventions.)

b. the source's general purpose (e.g., to inform, to make an argument)

c. the source's central message or argument

d. one or two pieces of supporting evidence used to convey the central message or argument

Part 2: Finally, students will note a strong connection between the two sources which brings them into dialogue with one another.

GUIDED PRACTICE/CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

The above pre-instruction activity sets the stage for class discussions in large and small groups. While Parts 1a-c of the activity may be addressed more briefly as an entire class, students may benefit from both large and small group discussion for Part 1d and Part 2.

For Parts 1a–c, the class discusses and agrees upon answers. (Throughout this exchange the librarian can highlight ways to understand sources in conversational terms.)

During discussion of Part 1d, the librarian addresses the fact that evidence used in sources often comes from additional sources (which reflect additional pieces of a larger dialogue). Students will be asked to provide one example of supporting evidence used in one of the articles and, as a class, will be asked to assess the relevance and credibility of this evidence. This may become an opportunity to discuss source verification and citation. For example, are students able to identify and locate the sources from which the evidence comes? What does the practice of citation, or its absence, suggest about the sources or about the rhetorical conventions used by the author(s)?

Next the students work in pairs or groups of three, identifying in each source one piece of supporting evidence and evaluating that evidence

in terms of its relevance and credibility. Students should be prepared to share their examples with the entire class. After small group discussions, the class may share and discuss their examples and evaluation of each source's use of evidence.

Part 2 (the connection between the two sources) can be structured similarly to Part 1. First the librarian conducts a large class discussion shaped by student responses, then asks students to work in small groups, and finally brings the class back together for another large class discussion. At the beginning of discussion the librarian can state that there are often multiple connections between sources, so students may have various answers.

To further acknowledge the legitimacy of students' having varying answers, the librarian can note that different audience members may be more drawn to certain aspects of the sources than to other aspects. Part of understanding information sources as conversational involves viewing ourselves as audiences, researchers, and potential contributors to that dialogue. Conversations in class during this lesson are yet another example of how engagement with sources can be understood as conversational and contextual and shaped by the given rhetorical situation.
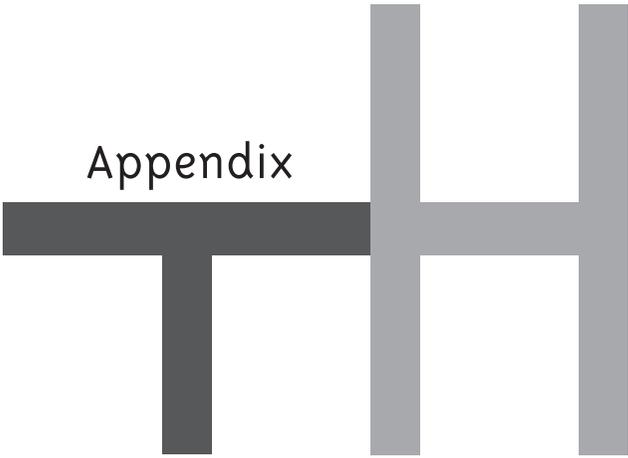
Appendix

Lesson Handouts

Also available online at www.ala.org/acrl/files/handouts.pdf.

CHAPTER 1
The Conversational Nature of Sources of Information

ANDREA BAER

Citations to assigned sources:

Taibbi, Matt. "Ripping Off Young America: The College-Loan Scandal." *Rolling Stone*, August 15, 2013. http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/ripping-off-young-america-the-college-loan-scandal-20130815

Richwine, Jason. "What 'Profits'? Rolling Stone's Matt Taibbi Misunderstands Student Loans." *National Review Online*, August 23, 2013. http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/356551/what-profits-rolling-stones-matt-taibbi-misunderstands-student-loans-jason-richwine

For the Taibbi article, identify:

1. the publication source, as well as the publication's general audience and purpose

2.   the source's general purpose (e.g., to inform, to make an argument)
3.   the source's central message or argument
4.   one or two pieces of supporting evidence used to convey the central message or argument

For the Richwine article, identify:

1.   the publication source, as well as the publication's general audience and purpose
2.   the source's general purpose (e.g., to inform, to make an argument)
3.   the source's central message or argument
4.   one or two pieces of supporting evidence used to convey the central message or argument