Docudrama: Why Sources Matter—And Why Citing them Correctly Doesn't

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Part of a panel presentation, "Looking the Wrong Way: Tales of Misdirection and a Call for Radical Revision in the Teaching of Citation (#burnthemanual)," given at the Conference on College Composition and Communication Annual Conference, Atlanta, April 2011

Abstract: From the vantage point of a library reference desk, it's clear that many students struggle anxiously to cite their sources correctly. It's much less clear that they spend as much time selecting good sources or drawing on their chosen sources effectively in writing. The fact that students rarely understand how to find cited works without help--and don't even realize that citations are valuable leads for research--suggests that the focus we put on giving credit and avoiding plagiarism charges has distracted students from the purpose of citation. The "service" provided to the academy as librarians and compositionists drill students on citation styles is a disservice to student learning. Rather than focus on rules and penalties, we should teach students that sources matter in every kind of discourse, documented or not. By focusing on reading citations rather than writing them, and by teaching students to identify sources used in non-scholarly writing ranging from blog posts to traditional journalism to official documents, we can minimize the drudgery of documentation while helping students understand its true rhetorical purpose.

My participation in this panel stems from a bad-tempered blog post that I wrote back in 2009 in which I vented about the nuisance of having to cope with helping students with new citation rules for APA and MLA in the same academic year. To add insult to injury, we were being instructed by the APA to add by hand corrections to eight pages-worth of mistakes that they termed "nonsignificant" into in their new publication manual. Since the book was not inexpensive, we were not insignificantly irritated. Eventually, the APA agreed to send corrected copies, but it seemed the perfect moment to ask "why are we even doing this?"

At a library reference desk, we get a lot of questions about how to format citations. I noticed that the number of these questions seemed to jump when our campus implemented an honor code. Conscientious students were suddenly much more concerned that they might get busted for making a mistake, and that anxiety seemed to express itself in questions about whether a particular part of a Website was a corporate author, a title, or a sponsoring agency and whether a particular word in a title should be capitalized or not. I want to say to them "don't worry about it," but I can't, because I can't be sure they *won't* get busted by an instructor who gives a lot of points to this minutia.

So I help them as best I can and as we figure it out, I try to frame the activity in terms of how a reader looks at references as they read the paper, how well-chosen sources can strengthen an argument, and how citing a source is like creating a hyperlink for the reader to follow, something they may need in order to understand and evaluate the argument the writer is making. And because I fumble around a lot, it reassures students that even experienced writers have to look at the rule book, that these are not magic spells that the initiated have mastered; they're technical trivia that drives us all nuts. They also seem relieved to find out that, because interpretation is involved, there may be many correct ways to cite a complex source. They seem to leave less anxious. But we've both wasted a lot of

time and energy on the wrong part of the process. And unfortunately, what I really want to ask them much of the time is "why on earth are you using *that* source?" But of course, it's far too late for that.

Why do we care so much about correctness of citations? I can think of a number of possible reasons.

- The student-in-training excuse: Even if we think it's not important, other instructors do, and if we don't teach students how to do it properly they might get hurt. I think librarians and composition teachers often fall into this trap.
- The convenience factor: It's easier to grade the formatting of a citation that it is to decide whether the student has chosen a good source and used it effectively, so we let format stand in for other, more difficult judgments.
- The moral rationale: Because if we don't crack down on citations, students might think it's okay to steal other people's intellectual property, and that's just *wrong!* The emphasis on composing citations seems to be strangely connected in some people's minds to plagiarism, which is also linked strangely to RIAA complaints and YouTube takedown orders as one big moral quagmire. Formally citing a source seems almost a legalistic means of requesting permission to use it.
- The lab rat training exercise: Learning how to follow arcane rules is the learning outcome that matters most. I suspect if I took a poll nobody would agree with that statement, yet Project Information Literacy, a multi-year study of undergraduate research experiences, [collected 191 research writing prompts](#) from faculty across the country and found they were most detailed in describing format requirements – length, arrangement of material, citation style – but said little about how to formulate a question or carry out research. Very few had anything to say about what kinds of sources should be used or where students might find them, but nearly all specified how to cite them. Likewise, more than three quarters specified punishment for plagiarism, but few addressed how to avoid it. In follow up interviews, instructors had plenty to say about these matters, and said that they addressed them in class. But the document meant to guide students usually sends the message that correct formatting *is* what's important.
- The "welcome to Burke's parlor" engraved invitation: We initiate students into our forms of writing so that they can see that knowledge is constructed and conversational, that sources are in dialogue, that their choice of sources is a rhetorical move that matters. If this is our purpose, we're expecting the crafting of citations to accomplish something that it does not and we should stop it, right now.

In fact, it seems to me that the fuss we make about citing sources distracts students from understanding what those mean symbolically. Here's a little test of this claim: give students a list of works cited and ask them to locate the sources. They will stare at you goggle-eyed. They have no idea how to interpret citations. They cannot chase them down, not without help. That should tell you something. It's as if you've just spent weeks teaching them to write passages in Greek, but in the end they have no idea what the words mean.

And that's a problem. We need students to understand why sources are important. We need them to value evidence. We need them to understand that sources are not merely ingredients they shop

for in the library or online so they can follow a recipe. We need them to stop thinking of citations as an ingredient label that they don't have time to read and can't really understand anyway.

Why? Because we're living in a world where too many people don't put any value on reasoning from evidence. Where too often evidence is cherry-picked and manipulated in the most cynical way. Where when the facts are inconvenient, they are dismissed or discredited. Where positions are taken and information sought to support them only after the fact. Where arguments are loaded and evidence is ammunition.

It would seem today that we should have alternatives. Almost every database now comes with "cite this" features. They are mostly faulty, but they offer an easy to cut-and-paste chunk of basic information that could be used to track down the source. Most colleges offer citation management software such as EndNote, RefWorks, or Zotero to store references and format them. Most students have favorite websites where they can paste in information and have a citation created for them. But this misses the point. They still take time, and they still distract from what matters.

And the rules grow ever more complex. The APA, for example, now suggests that DOIs be included in citations, and if that's not available, they should include a link to the publisher's website, so presumably the reader can purchase the article conveniently. They created a handy flowchart with five decision points, each of which is quite complex. This growing complexity seems in inverse correlation to the ease with which one can find information. In fact, when I was poking around preparing for this talk I found an article on Google Scholar that made an interesting argument for teaching plagiarism in disciplinary terms within a framework of professional ethics. The full text happened to be available. When I examined the link, I realized it had been posted at a site that sells thousands of essays, promising "inspiration through example" with a sliding fee scale for how much inspiration you want. Tagline: "*damn*, it's cheap." In so many ways, our rules for nailing down our sources in some carefully specified way is a hedge against a future in which information escapes its containers. And we are shifting this burden onto our students.

We need to involve students in research for two reasons: first, so that they are equipped to think for themselves by being able to interpret evidence used in an argument and to find and evaluate evidence themselves when they need to make a decision. This, to me, is an essential outcome of education. Second—and this one is trickier—students need to experience this so that they come think this way, so that they are open to asking a genuine question rather than starting from a conclusion and trying to back it up. So that they can have some faith in the fruits of other people's research. So that when they leave college they have some idea of how to make meaning.

When our students are distracted by arcane citation rules, when they spend more time creating a list of works cited than they do composing a paper, they won't be inspired to see themselves as people who can make meaning. Instead, they will focus on avoiding punishment by carefully describing the containers of other people's ideas. They'll miss the whole point. That's why I think it's time to burn the manual.