

Summary of the September 21st Teacher Talk: Should We Assign Research Papers to Freshmen?

At the Opening Workshop in August (2011), Sandra Jamieson presented data from the Citation Project (<http://citationproject.net/>) showing that freshman were doing a poor job of engaging critically with sources in their research papers (samples of which were taken from writing courses at a variety of colleges, including Wabash).

In our September **Teacher Talk**, we returned to this question from a new direction, and posed the question: *What is our purpose in assigning freshman research papers/projects?*

And, secondly: *How is that going for you?*

The conversation clustered around the following ideas:

If we don't start teaching research skills in the freshman year (because the students are not ready), why do we expect they will be ready later (say in the sophomore year)?

If our goal is simply to help them learn what research is, compared to offering one's opinion, then starting in the freshman year would seem to be critical.

If, however, our goal is to help students engage critically with sources (to analyze arguments, summarize them in their own words, to marshal evidence in support of their position), it may be that the research paper is not well suited to that task. Maybe we should focus on slowing down and scaffolding for the specific skills we expect: library literacy, evaluation of sources, unbiased summary, analysis of arguments, etc.

Students' abilities to engage with sources are only as good as their abilities to read sources thoroughly.

We should remember that we don't have to send students to the library or assign a classic research paper in order to prompt engagement with sources. Teaching them to summarize and analyze the class texts can also be useful.

If we are disappointed in the pattern of citations seen in the citation project (because students are not meeting our expectations), how much of this data indicates that we are not making our expectations clear?

We must remember that the things we are asking students to do—find, understand, and assimilate a range of written work—are hard (even for us) and take a lot of time. Many students also face time management issues that exacerbate the difficulties of research.