Making the Cookies: Helping Undergraduate Political Science Students Join the Academic Conversation

Dr. Ray Block¹, Dr. Ruth Cronje², Mr. Dan Henke²
¹University of Wisconsin–La Crosse; ²University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire

Objectives

Among other writing competencies undergraduates are required to master, students must be able to appropriately position their own ideas against the ideas and evidence of others. Only by combining their own ideas with other writers’ can students competently “make the cookies” of academic discourse. Our multidisciplinary intercampus collaboration created and piloted an assessment instrument to evaluate undergraduates’ ability to logically and coherently integrate the ideas of other writers into their own writing.

Methods

Writing artifacts (n = 38) were collected from two political science courses (POL 305, Spring 2011 and POL 365, Fall 2011) taught by Dr. Ray Block at UWL.

We devised an instrument to score students’ competence in integrating the literature into their writing. This instrument was refined with three coders in an iterative norming procedure using a subset of 4 randomly selected artifacts (see final scheme, below).

After blinding, three coders independently used the finalized instrument to evaluate all 38 writing artifacts. The total citation number for each artifact included all conventional in-text citations but also any clear allusions to outside source material even without proper in-text citations. For item 2, the artifact was given a score of “1” (yes) if at least 75% of the citations were logically integrated. Then, each coder determined an overall writing competency score between 0 and 3 for each artifact (Cronbach’s α = 0.88). Students interpret a “research paper” assignment in various ways. Students produced papers that fit into three academic writing genres: original research papers, literature reviews, and argument papers. Genre was a factor in the degree to which students logically integrated source materials into their own writing (Figure 2). Although the proportion of sentences containing citations did not vary by genre, overall paper scores were significantly higher in literature reviews than in original research reports or argument papers (P = 0.05).

Key Findings

Effective integration of information source material is a multifactorial, developing competence for many political science undergraduates. About a quarter of students included effective arguments for the significance of their research topics, but very few use external source materials to support these arguments (Figure 1).

A quarter of students integrated source material coherently and logically into their own writing at least 75% of the time (Figure 1). However, our rating scheme required that students make an explicit connection between their ideas and a source text they were citing, which did not allow us to differentiate incoherent/illogical citation from source integration that relied on readers’ logical inference. Nor did our instrument allow us to diagnose whether illogical source integration was due to inadequate research skills as opposed to inadequate reading comprehension skills. An instrument that would enable us to differentiate between integration of source information relying on logical inference and citation of logically unrelated material could be devised; however, the reliability of such an instrument would need to be tested.

Students’ ability to express coherent connections between their ideas and those expressed in other publications was independent of their mastery of the conventions of scholarly attribution of sources. Some students whose papers entirely lacked in-text citations nonetheless crafted logically coherent connections between their own ideas and those of other sources 100% of the time.

Conclusions

These baseline data will enable us to produce a more refined writing-intensive political science curriculum that can focus on helping students gain mastery of academic intertextuality skills, including the ability to logically and coherently integrate their ideas with support from the published literature. The assessment instrument we have devised will allow us to diagnose whether such instruction has been effective.