

Scholarship as a Conversation: A Metaphor for Librarian-ESL Instructor Collaboration

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Abstract

Invoking the metaphor of scholarship as a conversation offers academic librarians an excellent way to connect information literacy to university ESL (English as a second language) classes. This article describes how this particular metaphor has appeared in the literature of librarianship, and it suggests that this metaphor offers a deeper way to understand and promote information literacy to ESL students. It connects this deeper understanding of information literacy to ESL writing and speaking instructional approaches. These approaches include understanding scholarship as both a formal written end product and as a writing process in the creation, production and dissemination of knowledge. In addition, understanding scholarship as a conversation is described as including recognition of both formal and informal means of communication. Practical examples of classroom activities are also offered that librarians can use to support these different ways of illustrating scholarship as a conversation. Collaboration between librarians and instructors is advocated in order to fully invoke this metaphor as a way to connect information literacy to ESL classrooms.

Keywords: ESL (English as a Second Language); Information literacy; Metaphor

Introduction

Scholarship as a conversation is a compelling metaphor currently appearing throughout the landscape of librarianship. Listed as one of the threshold concepts in the newly emerging ACRL Framework for Information Literacy,¹ it offers academic librarians rich opportunities for reflection and incorporation into daily practice.

This metaphor lends itself especially well to academic librarians working with ESL (English as a Second Language) students. ESL students are students enrolled in language-intensive programs designed to raise the proficiency level of non-native English speakers. These programs may be either pre-academic programs which must be completed successfully before a student can enroll in a formal degree-granting program of a college or university, or they may exist as a supplemental set of courses designed to further the English language abilities of students already enrolled in a degree program. The types of classes offered to ESL students generally include speaking, listening, reading and writing classes because they correspond to the four lan-

guage skill areas that typically comprise ESL instruction.

The metaphor of scholarship as conversation is particularly apt in this setting because it contains concepts related to both writing and speaking practices. Speaking and writing proficiency are two important language skill sets taught in ESL classes. This article will consider the speaking and writing concepts that can be gleaned from this metaphor and how they can be connected to ESL teaching practices. It will also discuss the importance of academic librarians collaborating with ESL instructors in order to make these connections.

Literature Review

A metaphor is a way of expressing one form of reality through a comparison to another form of reality. Its purpose is to help people better understand one concept by explaining in terms of another perhaps more familiar or well-known concept. The seminal book on metaphors, *Metaphors We Live By*, came out in 1980 and established the study of metaphors as a legitimate field of inquiry in its own right.² Since then, many other linguists and cognitive scientists



have explored the use and meaning of metaphors across many different disciplines and in diverse applied settings.^{3,4} Drawing on these different investigations, librarianship has also explored the use of metaphors in its research and its practice. Nardini, for example, published an extensive historical survey of metaphors used to describe the library as an institution that appeared between 1876 and 1926, and found that, "Metaphors based on the school or university and on the church were the most common early in the period, while metaphors drawn from business and industry were later the favorites."⁵

The specific metaphor of scholarship as conversation is rooted in the general literature of higher education. Huff, for example, states that, "An important form of interaction among scholars can be usefully defined as conversation."⁶ Walker, in another example, invokes this metaphor from a publications perspective as a way to understand the importance of copyright and citation.⁷ And Massengill sees it as a way to explain higher level thinking skills in a particular discipline like sociology: "Approaching writing assignments through this metaphor of scholarly conversation thus invites students to think about how their writing can both be informed by and respond to the arguments of other sociological theorists."⁸

Librarians have investigated the specific metaphor of scholarship as a conversation within the literature of librarianship as well. McMillen and Hill, for example, explored "research as a conversation" in freshman composition classes and proposed the development of a research model based on it:

Conversation is a familiar activity, learning to research is akin to learning how to converse in a second language, conversation and research are both interactive processes, both are recursive processes, research and conversation are context sensitive and situated, meaning is constructed from both activities, and using a model of conversation provides a common terminology with which to talk about research across disciplines.⁹

In addition to offering the metaphor of research as conversation, it is also interesting to note that

the authors above embed a further metaphor of doing library research as learning a second language. This theme of library research as language learning has appeared in the library literature before, principally in the work of Kamhi-Stein who offered a model for library instruction that advocated for "teaching information competency as a third language" back in 1998.¹⁰ Although it is beyond the scope of this current paper to investigate the additional metaphor of doing library research as language learning, it could prove to be another fascinating area to explore. Continuing on with the main research as conversation metaphor offered above, these same authors further investigated the concept of "metaconversations" in a follow-up study that considered the use of "conversation as a metaphor to teach research writing."¹¹ In a final example, Giesecke, in a wide-ranging survey of many different types of metaphors in libraries, views all library services as part of a larger conversation metaphor: "Librarians facilitate conversations or learning through information literacy activities, teaching critical thinking skills, and by preserving the social record so people can connect with history."¹² All of these examples above attest to the appearance of this metaphor in the literatures of both higher education and librarianship.

Forms of Metaphors

One particular form of metaphor is the simile, which is an expression of comparison using the words "like" or "as."¹³ In describing scholarship "as a conversation", this article is using this particular simile as a way to more broadly represent metaphor comparisons in general. Its purpose is to demonstrate the usefulness of employing metaphors as a form of deeper understanding rather than to advocate for or extoll any particular form of metaphor such as a simile.

As with all metaphors, the metaphor of scholarship as a conversation contains two pieces, which are the different forms of reality that are being compared. In this case, the first piece is what scholarship itself means, and the second piece is what conversation is understood to be. Each piece of this metaphor will be briefly discussed below.

The first piece of the metaphor, that of scholarship, is defined most broadly as academic achievement or the attainment of learning. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, offers its primary definition of scholarship as “*the attainments of a scholar; learning, erudition...*”¹⁴ That these “attainments” often include various forms of writing can be seen in a very practical way through collective bargaining agreements that define what is meant by scholarship, research, or scholarly activity in a particular academic setting. At Brock University, for example, the collective bargaining agreement offers these examples, among others, of what is meant by scholarship: “the publication of books, case studies, monographs, and contributions to edited books; papers in peer refereed journals; papers delivered at professional meetings; editorial and refereeing duties.”¹⁵ Although not exclusively limited solely to forms of writing, many of these examples do in fact make use of writing as the vehicle for expressing scholarship. This article will therefore also make use of writing as a familiar and accepted expression of scholarship when considering how best to incorporate the metaphor of scholarship as a conversation into ESL classes.

The second piece of the metaphor, that of conversation, can also be defined in more than one way. One of the most common ways, however, is its understanding as verbal communication taking place between two people. Turning again to the Oxford English Dictionary, multiple definitions once again appear, among which is the following: “an interchange of thoughts and words; familiar discourse or talk.”¹⁶ This understanding of conversation as discourse or talk again fits readily into an ESL environment where speaking is generally considered to be one of the most important skills for a language learner to acquire: “Any cursory attention at the list of reasons [for learning English] is bound to reveal that speaking English occupies a central position without diminishing the significance of other skills.”¹⁷ Viewed in this way, the perceived importance and familiarity of conversation in an ESL setting again underscores the usefulness of employing this metaphor in this context.

Defining Information Literacy through this Metaphor

The threshold concept of “Scholarship as Conversation” appears in the new Framework for Information Literacy developed by ACRL (the Association for College and Research Libraries) made public on February 2, 2015. ACRL makes use of the metaphor of scholarship as conversation to serve as a pillar threshold concept in its new Framework. It establishes the importance of employing this metaphor to suggest the ongoing and ever evolving nature of scholarship, and to explore how students might best approach and understand it. It is defined in full in the following way by ACRL:

Scholarship as Conversation

Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.

Research in scholarly and professional fields is a discursive practice in which ideas are formulated, debated, and weighed against one another over an extended time. Instead of seeking discrete answers to complex problems, experts understand that a given issue may be characterized by several competing perspectives as part of an ongoing conversation in which information users and creators come together and negotiate meaning. Experts understand that, though some topics have established answers through this process, a query may have more than one uncontested answer. Experts are, therefore, inclined to seek out many perspectives, not merely the ones with which they are familiar. These perspectives might be in their own discipline or profession or may be in other fields. Even though novice learners and experts at all levels can take part in the conversation, established power and authority structures may influence their ability to participate and can privilege certain voices and information. Developing familiarity with the sources of evidence, methods, and modes of discourse in the field assists novice learners to enter the conversation. New forms of scholarly and research conversations provide more avenues in which a wide variety of individuals may have a voice in the conversation.



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.

Knowledge Practices

Learners who are developing their information literate abilities do the following:

- Cite the contributing work of others in their own information production
- Contribute to scholarly conversation at an appropriate level, such as local online community, guided discussion, undergraduate research journal, conference presentation/poster session
- Identify barriers to entering scholarly conversation via various venues
- Critically evaluate contributions made by others in participatory information environments
- Identify the contribution particular articles, books, and other scholarly pieces make to disciplinary knowledge
- Summarize the changes in scholarly perspective over time on a particular topic within a specific discipline
- Recognize that a given scholarly work may not represent the only or even the majority perspective on the issue

Dispositions

Learners who are developing their information literate abilities do the following:

- Recognize they are often entering into an ongoing scholarly conversation and not a finished conversation
- Seek out conversations taking place in their research area
- See themselves as contributors to scholarship rather than only consumers of it
- Recognize that scholarly conversations take place in various venues
- Suspend judgment on the value of a particular piece of scholarship until the larger context for the scholarly conversation is better understood

- Understand the responsibility that comes with entering the conversation through participatory channels
- Value user-generated content and evaluate contributions made by others
- Recognize that systems **privilege** authorities and that not having a fluency in the language and process of a discipline disempowers their ability to participate and engage.¹⁸

This discursive view of scholarship as a conversation can offer librarians many information literacy avenues into an ESL classroom. Such avenues could include an introduction to the nature and forms of researcher peer review, an explanation for the need to conform to accepted academic integrity standards to avoid plagiarism, the examination of topic exploration through different disciplines, and the exploration of citation connections through bibliographies and being cited by others. The emphasis on interaction between researchers underscores the back and forth nature of scholarship unfolding over time, which lends itself to being interpreted as a type of conversation.

ESL Writing and Speaking Instructional Approaches

The writing and speaking instructional approaches employed by ESL instructors afford librarians practical ways to connect information literacy instruction to these classrooms through the metaphor of scholarship as conversation.

ESL instructors who teach writing to non-native speakers of English have long used two different approaches to teaching writing: the product approach and the process approach.¹⁹ Scholarship as a conversation is a metaphor that works neatly with both of these writing approaches. The product approach offers students a model of writing, which they are then encouraged to emulate on their own. Different writing models include comparison and contrast, cause and effect, persuasive or argumentative essays and narration, among others. This approach to writing gives ESL instructors an explicit end product to show students. The process approach, on the other hand, has ESL students engage in the act of writing under the guidance of the instructor.

This approach can include free writing as a warm-up exercise, brainstorming, outlining, creating a rough draft, self-editing, peer editing, revising, and producing a final draft. This approach to writing stresses the act of creation. Both approaches have their place in an ESL classroom, and both approaches may be open to collaboration with librarians attempting to embed information literacy through a scholarship as conversation metaphor into ESL instruction.

In the same way that ESL instructors make use of both product and process approaches to the teaching of writing, so too do they use different approaches to teaching speaking as well. The idea of register, or formality of speech, often serves as the way to teach students differences between formal and informal modes of speaking. Formal modes of speaking often include the delivery of oral reports by the students in a particular format such as a persuasive speech, a narration, or an informational presentation. The use of language to support the development of formal speaking work can include vocabulary work, peer feedback, and native speaker or instructor input and feedback on cohesion and points of clarity. Informal modes of speaking, on the other hand, can include participating in group discussions, engaging in classroom conversations with a partner, or taking part in impromptu talks with a teacher. The type of language to support the development of informal speaking work can include multiple chances to practice through trial and error techniques, reacting to spontaneous classroom prompts, and learning how to keep a conversation moving by asking further questions of a partner.

The different writing and speaking instructional approaches used by ESL instructors can give librarians a way to connect information literacy to ESL classrooms. By making use of the metaphor of scholarship as a conversation, librarians can connect concepts about scholarly research to ESL writing and speaking skill development through these different instructional approaches.

Connecting Information Literacy to Scholarship as a Conversation in ESL Classes

The metaphor of scholarship as conversation offers librarians and ESL instructors an excellent way to introduce ESL students to specific ideas concerning the production and dissemination of scholarly research.

Writing Classes Product Approach

In a writing class, the scholarly conversation could be investigated as both a product and a process itself. As a product, scholarly communication generally consists of a ritualized form of written communication: An abstract summarizes the main points of the article at the start. The article itself then generally follows a pattern of introduction, background literature review, a description of methodology used, the presentation of findings, an interpretation of the findings, a discussion which connects the findings back to the literature, a set of implications, limitations noted, and then the conclusion, followed by a list of bibliographic references. In addition, the written language used in a scholarly publication often follows typical stylized patterns as well. For example, hypotheses in quantitative studies often take the form of research questions at the start of the methodology section. Specialized disciplinary vocabulary from a particular field is usually present as well, and often the writing style is very formal (the third person singular "one" is often used instead of the first person singular "I," for example). Language style and article appearance, then, typically follow a standardized format that can be presented and explained to ESL students as a formal mode of communication for presenting research results.

Classroom Activities

In terms of classroom activities to illustrate these points, a librarian could show the students an example research article on a screen, pointing out the abstract, introduction, background literature, findings, and discussion sections. Then the librarian could pass out printed sample articles stripped of those subheadings and have the students label each subheading correctly in groups. This activity would familiarize the students with the vocabulary used to label the sections and it

would allow them to connect what they saw on a screen to an actual example in front of them. It would also provide them with a model framework for a scholarly research article in finished form.

Writing Classes Process Approach

Similarly, scholarly research can also be described to ESL students in terms of the process of its creation. Scholarly research could be presented to them as a process of knowledge generation: First, a researcher has an idea. Then he or she looks through the literature. After that, he or she may formulate a research question. Following that, an appropriate methodology is chosen. Then the investigation takes place. Towards the end of this process, the researcher tries to make sense of the findings and relate them to other literature in the field. Finally, the researcher writes up his or her results as a journal article.

Classroom Activities

A classroom activity to underscore the process of knowledge creation could take the form of a timeline. After having described the process, a librarian could present a blank timeline and an accompanying list of activities to ESL students either individually or in groups and have them construct a logical timeline. An additional way to reinforce the different steps of the process could also involve the students explaining each step to another student in their own words as a further speaking activity. As a further writing activity, the librarian could ask the students to write a short process essay themselves that described the process in their own words as an in-class writing assignment and comprehension check.

After the process of knowledge creation is explained, the next process of knowledge dissemination could also be introduced to ESL students: Once written, the article is sent to a journal for consideration. An editor who accepts an article at this stage then sends it to peer reviewers. Once those peer reviewers finish reviewing the article, the article is returned to the editor. If accepted for publication at that point, copyediting and layout work take place, and then finally the article would be published. After its publi-

cation, it may appear inside a particular database, through another index, be made freely available on the open web, and its presence could be noted throughout various social media platforms. After being made available, reactions and discussions of the article could also take place either formally through academic responses and rebuttals within a journal, or informally, through reactions, comments and further posts on social media.

A classroom activity to help ESL students more deeply understand knowledge dissemination could ask the students to produce their own short piece of writing for dissemination and then have it go through the channels described above. For example, the librarian could provide the students with a sample popular article and a sample scholarly article, and ask each student to write a short essay describing the differences between the two forms of publication. Each student could then give his essay to a fellow student in the classroom for peer feedback on both form and content. After receiving feedback and making any suggested revisions, the student would then hand in the essay to the instructor or librarian who could act as the editor, giving either approval or a need to revise further response back to each student. Once all revisions are made and accepted, the librarian or instructor could post the essays on an electronic classroom discussion board and invite all members of the class to comment on each other's posts. While this activity would involve more than one class period and would involve the time for a librarian or instructor to offer feedback, post, and monitor results, it could also offer an excellent opportunity for ESL students themselves to experience and internalize the actual process of knowledge dissemination in a very meaningful way.

In all the writing classroom activities described above, librarians could emphasize the interactive nature of knowledge creation and dissemination, thereby reinforcing the metaphor of scholarship as a form of conversation.

Speaking Classes

Speaking classes may likewise offer ways for scholarship to be seen as a conversation by ESL

students. Speaking opportunities can already be seen in the examples of classroom activities above where students are asked to confer with other students in a group about how various parts of a scholarly research article should be labelled or to explain to another student orally what the different steps in a timeline are. Additional opportunities to paint scholarship as a conversation could be used as well.

Formal Speaking Classroom Activities

These additional opportunities could take the form of either formal or informal speaking activities. One formal activity that a librarian could potentially set up in a speaking class could be a panel discussion or a debate. This format would allow students to practice speaking formally in a very structured give-and-take environment in presenting information and responding to questions. The librarian could have one group of speakers represent one side of an intellectual debate, for example evolution. The other group of speakers could then represent an opposing view, for example, that of intelligent design. Having the students come to class already armed with research studies or background information supporting each side, the debate could take place as a formal conversation.

Another formal speaking activity that would invoke the use of scholarship as a conversation could be a role play. For an activity of this type, students would act out the parts of different sides of another clash of ideas. One example could take the form of a historical exchange, such as that between Galileo and the Catholic Church. The librarian could provide students in the speaking class with a short historical overview ahead of time, perhaps from an historical encyclopedia of science or a short biography of Galileo. The students could then use this information as the factual basis for their role play. The students representing Galileo could describe his personal investigations and observations of planetary motion and his use of a telescope to other students in the class. The students representing the Catholic Church, on the other hand, could report on Aristotle's ideas that described the planets in fixed distances from the earth and not the sun to the other students. A potential follow-up activity could then ask stu-

dents to orally report on Galileo's ideas through the literature of science as a way to show how they have been cited by other researchers over time. These activities would serve the purpose of showing how scholarship emerges from agreements and disagreements over time.

Informal Speaking Classroom Activities

In terms of informal speaking activities, the librarian could use impromptu conversation prompts as another way to show students how scholarship and conversation can be connected. A conversation prompt is an open ended question on any topic that is given to a student to answer quickly, without any time to prepare an answer ahead of time. So, for example, the librarian could ask students to pair off in class and engage in a conversation with their partner on a topic such as "What is the purpose of higher education?" Because students would not have prepared ahead of time to answer this question, they would instead be expected to articulate their opinion, and then agree or disagree with their partner over the course of a few minutes of discussion. Once that initial discussion was over, the librarian could then ask the students to find information from scholarly literature that would support their own opinions, and then to engage in the same discussion now armed with this information to back them up. The librarian could use this activity to emphasize the importance of evidence in backing up opinions in scholarly research as well as to emphasize once again the back and forth nature of emerging scholarship.

Another informal speaking activity that a librarian could use to get students speaking conversationally to each other around scholarly topics is brainstorming. In an advanced speaking class, for example, a librarian could assign a topic like hydro-fracking to several small groups of students. The librarian would then ask each group to brainstorm how this topic might be studied or understood from a particular disciplinary perspective such as engineering, environmental studies, or political science. After an initial brainstorming session, the librarian could then point each group to a different disciplinary database to search for scholarly information from that particular perspective. The small groups

could summarize their findings to the other groups. The librarian could then emphasize to all the students how scholarship can appear as different conversations in different disciplines.

Seeing scholarship as a conversation allows ESL students to understand scholarship on many levels: as a writing product, as a writing process, and as a way of speaking both formally and informally. It can also give them a good comparison between the often more formal expressions of academic writing and the generally more informal expressions of speaking, even on scholarly topics. It could further ask them to consider whether informal modes of communication such as blog entries, Facebook posts, tweets, and text messages should be considered forms of writing or forms of speaking, a question that even linguists cannot agree on.²⁰ From these considerations, ESL students should be able to see that both formality and informality exist in spoken and written conversations alike. An ESL classroom is therefore a very appropriate place to underscore that scholarship is produced in both registers of formality. Just as speaking can be very formal, such as giving a formal report in the form of a lecture to classmates, so it can also be very informal, such as a casual conversation among friends. Likewise, just as writing can be very formal, such as a scholarly research article appearing in an academic journal, so it can also be very informal, such as a researcher communicating with another researcher by email. Connecting information literacy to ESL classrooms emphasizes these different aspects of scholarly conversations.

The Role of Collaboration in Successful Embedding

Exploring the different facets of scholarship as a conversation in terms of writing and speaking processes familiar to most ESL students will not occur in a vacuum. Instead, it rests on successful collaboration between librarians and ESL instructors. As with many other endeavors on campuses, librarians need to establish good working relationships with instructors in order for these connections to be made with their students.

Perhaps one useful way to approach ESL instructors on the importance of exposing their students to concepts about scholarly production and dissemination is to stress the necessity of incorporating ESL students into the larger community of scholars that a university represents. This means viewing ESL students as legitimate learners at the university level, not as remedial students representing a drain on resources. Conteh-Morgan summed up the prevailing view of library literature that “presents international students as flat, non-evolving characters, continually laboring under the weight of linguistic, cultural, and technological disadvantages” and she challenges librarians instead to view them as more than a “one-dimensional image” of deficient students.²¹ In my own work, I have discovered that ESL students can offer linguistic and cultural benefits as well as challenges to librarians who work with them,²² and that it can be helpful for librarians to view this population of students as being both language learners and library learners simultaneously.²³ Seeing the development of English language proficiency in speaking and writing as a legitimate and necessary component of student learning, then, can give librarians an opportunity to connect with this group of students in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Presenting and describing how scholarly research is created and disseminated also offers librarians a way to introduce students from many different parts of the world to the ways in which this production and dissemination take place in their own academic setting. This could encompass making the students aware of local faculty researchers on the campus, describing research service offices that may help promote and celebrate local research being produced, and making the students aware of culturally acceptable practices relating to plagiarism and academic integrity. Helping these students become familiar with scholarly production and dissemination practices should also of course include making them feel comfortable and welcome in the campus library. In all of these ways, the students should be made to feel a part of a larger whole.

The metaphor of scholarship as a conversation could also be modelled by librarians and ESL

instructors themselves for the benefit of the students. Co-teaching workshops to ESL students on academic writing and speaking conventions could offer one way to accomplish this. Speaking jointly at conferences and engaging in formal research studies together could be another way to model this collaboration.

Conclusion

Scholarship as a conversation is a useful metaphor for connecting information literacy to ESL classrooms. It lends itself to many different modes of interpretation as to what both scholarship and conversation can mean. Included in these different interpretations are different modes of expression in writing and in speaking. These different modes include differences in register (formality or informality) and in understanding scholarship as both a process and a product. Even the understanding of process can be further examined through the separate processes of creation, production, and dissemination. Furthermore, understanding the interactive process of moving back and forth from one scholarly contribution to another to build a body of literature as a conversation also lends itself readily to an ESL classroom. Collaborating with ESL instructors to explore these different facets of scholarship with their students affords librarians an excellent way to connect information literacy to the ESL classroom. Employing the metaphor of scholarship as a conversation can offer librarians a way to do just that.

Endnotes

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