Writing from Sources for CCSS ELA/Literacy Instruction

by Anthony Petrosky

Academic Language Enables Academic Writing

Thinking and writing from text sources is at the heart of the CCSS ELA/literacy reading, writing, and speaking and listening standards. When students talk and write about texts, whether they give opinions or develop arguments or explain ideas, they need to use text-based evidence. In order to work with text-based evidence from their reading sources, students need to know and use a repertoire of academic language to identify, cite, introduce, and explain their sources.

To be successful with text-based talk and writing, students benefit from direct instruction in academic language that enables them to cite and use references. They benefit enormously from explicit instruction, for example, in the uses of in-text references, block and blended quotations, paraphrases, and summaries. When students internalize repertories of sentence and paragraph level academic “moves” to introduce and explain quotations and others’ ideas, they are able to use them in a wide range of essay writing in the disciplines.

An Example from a Course I Taught

The very bright and accomplished freshmen in my college composition course last fall came to college with the belief that five paragraph essays with thesis statements would be good enough to survive in college. They soon learned that college writing has little to do with these types of essays. They also learned that their tool kits for academic writing were pretty bare. No one came to my course with a repertoire of academic language for using, introducing, explaining, or pointing to sources and others’ ideas that are so necessary for meeting the demands of the CCSS.

The good news though is that within a semester of writing two essays a week, they became very good at using the small set of tools we studied for writing from sources. They also left that course with a repertoire of academic moves and language that they could use in essays in the disciplines.

What It Takes

Systematic direct instruction, many examples, and plenty of opportunities to practice are what it takes for students to develop toolkits for writing from sources. For many students, learning these
academic moves comes from reading wide ranges of challenging, complex texts
by authors who work with sources in their writing in the ways that students
need to in theirs. Not all students though learn these moves just from reading.
But everyone benefits from direct instruction that supports them to explicitly
understand and use those moves in their own writing.

For me as the teacher, I had to decide on the moves I’d teach, the order in which I
would teach them, the time I would begin the instruction (after they had opportunities
to write and revise four papers), the examples—both theirs and from the essays we
read in common—that I’d use with each move, and the ways we’d focus on the
moves, along with the content of their essays, when I duplicated and we discussed
their papers and excerpts from them. The instruction I’m suggesting isn’t easy,
although it doesn’t have to take much time because students get it quickly, but it
requires careful planning of sequenced lessons seeded into writing assignments over a
period of time with plenty of examples and opportunities for regular practice.

The Moves that Make the References

Before students begin their studies of these academic moves, they benefit from readings
and discussions about them. My students read chapters in the second edition of Gerald
Graff’s and Cathy Birkenstein’s They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic
Writing (2010). The readings allowed us to have a series of 20-minute discussions
focused on examples in the book and from their papers about the ways that specific
phrases and sentence constructions enable particular kinds of thinking in essays.

One of my favorite examples has to do with the simple yet powerful phrase “in other
words” that enables an explanation of quoted or summarized references. Students who
have this phrase in their academic toolkits have a simple way to begin such
explanations.

Imagine the freedom that students have to offer positions that differ from those of an
author when they can use the many variations on the basic sentence construction that
goes something like this—“x asserts that____, but my own view is that____.”

Imagine too the range of notes students can play when citing sources if they have at
their finger tips language such as x states, claims, purports, insists, reports, argues, and
so on. Each word carries with it the ability to both present others’ language and ideas
and to subtly comment on it. "Purports" means something different from "states."

Imagine the conditional thinking that phrases such as "If x claims____, then he can’t
also claim that____," or "If x argues for____, then it seems she would also agree
with____ because____."

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Putting the Systematic in Direct Instruction

Systematic implies regular new learning and practice. It implies a method for this learning and practice. The "what" of systematic varies by what students already bring to their text-based essay reading and writing. My students, for example, first read and discussed chapters of They Say, I Say. After that, I asked volunteers to prepare single page explanations with examples for citing in-text references, using block quotations, and bibliographic references for the APA and MLA styles. Once they presented them to the class, everyone was responsible for using one correctly from there on in their essays.

I then required students to keep a notebook of the new tools they would learn. Once I taught a tool, I then held them responsible for their use in their essays. For each assignment, I reminded them (in the written composition assignment) of the "moves" I expected to see in their essays. I purposefully kept the list small and focused. After we studied citations formats, we moved on to the range of possibilities for selecting (when to use what), using (quoted sentences, block quotations, and quotations blended into their sentences), introducing, and explaining source material.

Let me be clear. I am not arguing that students should learn formulas for academic moves. I am arguing that they should learn and practice repertoires of moves for selecting, using, introducing, and explaining sources; that they should experiment and play with moves; and that they should have opportunities to talk amongst themselves about the different effects of different moves in various writings. If they learn nothing but formulas that they repeat over and over, then they haven’t learned much, and their text-based writing will stagnate. But if they don’t have a framework for text-based writing, they will struggle with even its simplest forms.

Visibility, Repertoire, and Practice

My students made poster-cards of the academic language that they learned. They posted them on the walls around the desks where they regularly wrote (and they sent me photos), so they could look up and see them. They built a small but useful repertoire of academic moves and language for writing from sources, and they incrementally practiced this repertoire in their essays and their revisions. In other words, I systematically directed their learning, and although they were college freshmen, I could have designed the same sorts of instruction for any students once I knew where to begin.