The Risks and Rewards of Studying Students' Engagement with Sources

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Introduction

In Fall 2012, a new assignment was required as part of a small, comprehensive university's FYW requirement: a "synthesis essay" to elicit student performance of the learning outcome "integration of information and ideas of others." Program assessment prioritized capturing what readers valued about each essay: During the Dynamic Criteria Mapping (Broad) process, "Engagement" emerged as the most frequently mentioned criterion yet one so amorphous it could not be defined. Holly and Donna therefore wanted to construct a model for how students engage sources in writing and how faculty recognize that engagement as a valued quality of their reading experience.

Recent composition scholarship (Gere et al., Jamieson & Howard) investigates what it means for first-year students to engage with sources by examining students' essays. Our research contributes to this discussion by developing a model of students' source engagement grounded by the theory that meaning (and engagement) is not inherent in a text but constructed in the transaction between a reader and a text.

Methods

Holly and Donna drew a simple random sample of 33 synthesis essays to code. These essays were transferred to a spreadsheet, where we collaboratively coded them by consensus (Saldaña 28) at the t-unit level for two dimensions: Source Referentiality (explicit reference to a source, usually through citation practice, attribution, or acknowledgment of authorship) and, nested within that, Source Engagement (how students rhetorically constructed their purposes with respect to a source). The most time-consuming aspect, by far, was developing the coding schemes.

After coding, we included each essay's score associated with the *integration* learning outcome, assigned during program assessment (the Total Integration score). Codes were then assigned colors and essays arranged in ascending order of Total Integration score, resulting in the visual representation seen here.

RQ1: How Do FYW Students Engage Sources?

According to our final coding schemes, students engaged sources in the following ways (Source Engagement codes):

- Inform: refers to discrete or specific information, facts, definitions, etc. (yellow)
- Explain: summarizes, paraphrases, or integrates or refers to a quote that demonstrates awareness of a source or its author beyond mere facts (orange)
- React: reacts to or takes a position in relation to a source, regardless of accuracy (red)
- Develop: builds upon or analyzes ideas from the source (purple)
- Connect: makes connections between two texts or two authors (blue)
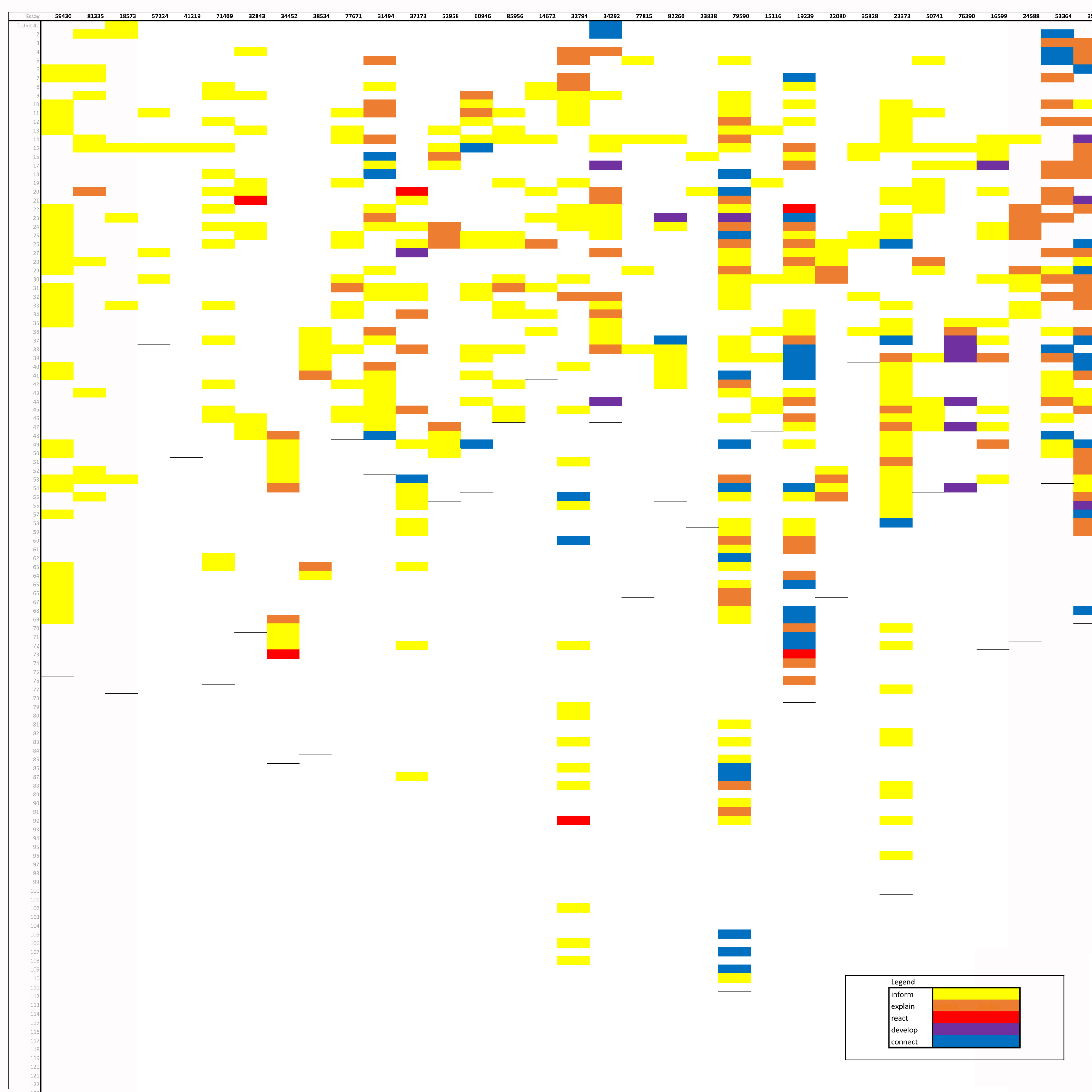
Total Integration Scores vs. How Students Engage With Sources

RQ2: What Do FYW Faculty Value About Students' Engagement of Sources?

According to Lisa's statistical analysis, FYW faculty scored essays higher in which students Explain, Connect, and Develop sources. That is, the Total Integration score is higher the more often a student:

- Explains ($p = .002$, highly significant)
- Connects ($p = .0296$, highly significant)
- Develops ($p = .062$, significant at .10 level)

FYW faculty also value essays in which students engage diversely with sources, as the Total Integration score is higher the more often a student uses sources in different ways (e.g., Inform *and* Explain *and* Connect, etc.) ($p = .0101$, highly significant).

However, FYW faculty do not value essays that only Inform. The negative correlation coefficient (-0.074156439) for Inform indicates that the higher the number of inform references, the lower the Total Integration score. However, the coefficient is close to zero so the relationship is not significant ($p = 0.6817$).

RQ3: Can Writing Research Be Done on the Same Learning Outcome, Different Assignments?

The complexities of our context with its common learning outcomes and high faculty autonomy (complexities shared by many writing programs) presented several risks for our research. Even so, our findings suggest methods that produce meaningful results.

Conclusions

Helping FYW students develop the habits of mind and experiences vital to their success as writers (CWPA et al.) depends on understanding what it means for them to engage sources. Our research contributes to this effort. It provides writing programs, faculty, librarians, and students with a powerful method and model to conceptualize, discuss, teach, learn, and assess FYW students' source engagement across a variety of writing programs. Jamieson and Howard suggest faculty "offer instruction designed to bring students into a deep engagement with sources, of the sort that enables them to talk with and about a source rather than merely mine sentences from it" (128). Our study explores what is meant by "deep engagement," the multiple means by which FYW students engage with sources in ways that are valued, or not, by faculty readers.

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