

“Down the Rabbit Hole”

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“Down the Rabbit Hole” is a method that encourages students to hone their intellectual curiosity, practice their information search skills, and advance their ability to discern good sources from questionable ones. It was born one morning as I was reading the newspaper at my kitchen table and realized that I wanted students to do the same kind of thing that I do when I read. As I suspect many of us do, I frequently “go down the rabbit hole” by following links, searching the web, and sometimes following up with scholarly searches for more information. We talk a lot in academe about intellectual curiosity, so I wanted to push my students to actually enact it in a formal way, demonstrate ways that I act enact it in my daily life, and encourage them to incorporate intellectual curiosity into their daily lives.

The following are two ways in which I have gone “down the rabbit hole” with my students, but the basic idea is adaptable to many course contexts and teaching styles. Having pre-tested it in the ways below with a small class of upper-division students, I plan to adapt it in the fall to much larger classes of lower-division students.

Option 1 – Down the Rabbit Hole: Developing Informed Conclusions

For an upper-division Sociology of Gender class of 12 students, I assigned a blog entry by Cordelia Fine where she took issue with the notion that gender is hardwired. She was responding to an article in *The Independent* about a study published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. I asked the students to read both of these sources plus the study itself, and then asked them to find additional sources that would shed light on the question (the assignment is included below).

Students brought their write-ups to class for discussion and then could revise them before turning them in for a grade. Because this was a small class, we had time to discuss the required sources as well as most of the additional sources they found. Each student then had the opportunity to go down more than just their own rabbit hole, and we were able to come to some overall conclusions about both the topic and the exercise. Students responded quite positively to this exercise, especially to the value in reading original studies that form the basis of mass media type articles and to the value of reading a variety of sources before coming to their own conclusions.

Because I had scheduled only one day to work with, I asked the students to find additional sources ahead of time. Next time, I might have the students do the first part outside of class but develop a list of additional sources together during class (starting in small groups and then finalizing a short list as an entire class). This would have better demonstrated the process of going down the rabbit hole and students would then all read the same additional sources, allowing for a more in-depth discussion on the second day of class.

Part I: This first part of this assignment is to read a blog post and start down a rabbit hole of investigating the claims made in the blog post.

1. Read Cordelia Fine's "New insights into gendered brain wiring, or a perfect case study in neurosexism?"
 - a. What primary claim or claims does she make?
 - b. How does she support her claims?
 - c. To what degree do you "buy" her claims? Explain
2. Click on the article published in *The Independent* that inspired her to write her piece.
 - a. What primary claim or claims does the author make?
 - b. How does the author support his claims?
 - c. To what degree do you "buy" his claims? Explain
 - d. What additional purchase did this source give you on what you thought after reading Fine? What do you understand better now than you did before?
3. Click on the link to the "study in question" that was published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.
 - a. What primary claim or claims does the author make?
 - b. How does the author support his claims?
 - c. To what degree do you "buy" his claims? Explain
 - d. What additional purchase did this source give you on what you thought after reading the prior sources? What do you understand better now than you did before?

Part II: The second part of this assignment asks you to go further down the rabbit hole on your own.

4. Search on the web for an additional source that will help you make sense of what you have read so far.
 - a. What is the source?
 - b. How did you find it (e.g. the search terms you used)?
 - c. What makes it a good source?
 - d. What primary claim or claims does the author make?
 - e. How does the author support the claims?
 - f. To what degree do you "buy" the claims? Explain
 - g. What additional purchase did this source give you on what you thought after reading the prior sources? What do you understand better now than you did before?
5. Search for a scholarly source that will help you make sense of what you have read so far.
 - a. What is the source?
 - b. How did you find it (e.g. on the web or in the library, search terms you used)?
 - c. What makes it a good source?
 - d. What primary claim or claims does the author make?
 - e. How does the author support the claims?
 - f. To what degree do you "buy" the claims? Explain
 - g. What additional purchase did this source give you on what you thought after reading the prior sources? What do you understand better now than you did before?
6. What did "going down the rabbit hole" teach you about this aspect of gender? What do you understand now that you would not have had you only read the original blog by Cordelia Fine?
7. What are your responses to doing this exercise? How could incorporate the gist of it into your daily life?

Option 2 – Down the Rabbit Hole: Interrogating Competing Perspectives

In the same upper-division Sociology of Gender class but later in the semester, I used the “down the rabbit hole” technique a second time but a little differently. In August 2018, the American Psychological Association came out with a set of guidelines for therapists working with men and boys. The guidelines created a small firestorm in the media about the concept of masculinity, with the coverage varying considerably depending on the perspective of the author. Given the extent of media silos today, I think it is fair to say that most people who read about the guidelines read coverage they were inclined to agree with, and I also think that it’s fair to say that most people didn’t read the guidelines themselves. I wanted my students to push past this tendency.

We did the exercise over the course of two days. On the first day, I told them about the existence of the APA guidelines and asked what they knew about them, which was not a lot. Next, I got them into small groups to search the web for articles about the guidelines. Based on their searches (and mine), we developed a list of six articles that came from reputable sources and were likely to include a range of perspectives. For the next class period, they answered some basic questions about each piece:

1. What are the primary points or arguments made in each article?
2. What were your responses to the primary points or arguments made in each article?
3. Which articles would you have been likely to read on your own? Which ones would you have been unlikely to read on your own? Provide some explanation.
4. Would you classify the perspective of the article as predominately left/liberal, neutral, or right/conservative? Say a little about why you classified the perspective this way.

On the second day, we had a very energetic discussion about the arguments in these pieces, which ultimately became a discussion about masculinity and the APA guidelines. Once it was clear that the students had begun to talk about the guidelines themselves, I stopped them to ask if anyone had read the guidelines. Unsurprisingly, most had not. I should say that I would have nudged the discussion in that direction had it not happened organically. At that point, I put the basic guidelines on the screen so that we could read them together. I then put the following questions on the screen for discussion:

1. To what degree did the sources provide full and accurate information about the guidelines?
2. What advantages are there of reading the guidelines themselves?
3. What advantages are there of reading a wide variety of secondary sources?

This resulted in an interesting discussion, especially since some of the articles really angered some of the students. For those articles, I had to push them on the utility of reading things with which they vehemently disagreed. Responses on tended to be variations on the theme of “knowing your enemy.” However, they did generally agree that reading beyond your own perspective and reading primary sources was a good idea if you wanted to understand something more fully. They also recognized that the label placed on a source (liberal or conservative) might hinder the search for full information. Although I did not put this question on the screen, we also talked about ways they could incorporate this practice in their daily lives.

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