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“Why Do They Have That Rule?”

Jill R. VanAntwerp

“Why do I have to put a sticker on my windshield just to park at school? They’re impossible to get off, and we have to get a new one every year.”

“I don’t mind the sticker, but I wonder why they think they own my car when it’s here. We can’t even go to the parking lot without signing our lives away.”

“What good is going to the parking lot? They won’t let us drive anywhere unless it’s for work-study. There are other places I’d rather eat than the school cafeteria.”

This conversation, typical of ones I’d heard many times from my high school students, revealed just three of the many school rules that leave students asking, “Why do they make us do that?”

The Rationale

Knowing that writing projects which ask students to address authentic topics usually lead to better writing, our 11th grade team of English teachers decided to ask the students to fulfill a curricular requirement to produce a cause and effect paper by conducting a study of the school rules they questioned. By including the opportunity to explain the results to their classmates and to produce a booklet for younger students, we gave the students an authentic purpose and a real audience. We hoped that these aspects of the project would provide both interest and motivation for writing which, in turn, might result in improved writing skills. In addition, we set ourselves the challenge of integrating other language arts skills into this unit along with the writing, including speaking, listening, reading, critical thinking, and self evaluation. Finally, we hoped to incorporate some aspects of other disciplines—artistic expression and social awareness to name two. The result, simply named by the team “The Cause and Effect Paper,” was a unit comprising much more than writing a paper,

and one during which we saw improvement in the writing and other language arts skills of our students.

Earlier in the year, the juniors had written papers in which they had expressed their opinions on a variety of topics, and they had written for the purpose of persuading their audience. For the Cause and Effect paper, we asked them to investigate a school rule or policy and stay neutral while reporting their findings in essay form.

Choosing Topics

Besides the usual gripes about parking stickers, closed campus, tardy policies, and the no-hats rule, students were also questioning a recent change in the location of graduation and some perceived inequities in how various sports teams were treated by the athletic department. With student help, as well as input provided by secretaries, guidance counselors, the athletic director, principals, food preparation personnel, security officers, custodians, and other faculty, a long list of rules and policies was compiled. The students in each class were asked to divide up the list so that each had a different rule to investigate. The effects were known—i.e., students couldn’t wear hats in school, students couldn’t drive their cars away from school during the day without permission, graduation would have a new location in June—but what were the causes of these effects?

Interviews

Most of the students’ investigation into the rules would take the form of interviewing. The first step was accomplished as a group: deciding who would be the best person or persons to interview about each rule or policy. Participating in compiling the list of topics and then choosing one of them was important to the students: Heather wrote, “My favorite part was being able to pick a topic of our interest and learning what the causes to the

issue/policy were.” It was up to the students to schedule their interviews. We only required one interview per student, partly because of the limited number of school personnel who would be tapped by almost two hundred juniors over the course of one semester. The students could use class time, seminar time, or their own time to conduct interviews. While one or two students were out of class doing interviews at various times in the next few class sessions, we scheduled activities which could be considered warm-ups for both the interviews and the papers.

The students spent time practicing both good and bad interviews, performing for one another to demonstrate these aspects of interviewing. Their exaggerated portrayals of tardy, gum-chewing, sloppy, inattentive interviewers were both humorous and instructive. After developing their questions for the real interview, they practiced on one another, this time trying to use all of the positive techniques of interviewing. We asked them to submit a transcription or summary of the interview and an evaluation of themselves as an interviewer as part of their final paper package.

Doing the interview proved to be a new method of gathering information for many students. Jeff remembered gathering information for a research paper: the process involved a lot of library time looking through periodical indexes and using the internet. He said, “I liked the break from the standard research and writing process, doing the interview and writing a different style of paper was challenging.” Trisha agreed: “I really liked the fact that we had to interview someone to get the facts.” Beth indicated that she learned more about good listening by conducting the interview. She added, “It helped me ask people questions and get a thorough response back other than yes or no.” Liz had a unique comment: “I felt important interviewing [the principal], and it was fun!” Ben’s comment underscored how valuable the interviews could be: “It never occurred to me that a person could be a valuable source for a paper.” Tasha’s comment shows how important it can be for students to write about subjects which impact them: “This method was more interesting than just using my own knowledge, and afterwards, I actually knew the real reasons.”

Graphic Organizers

As one of the preliminary activities, the class as a group read articles which provided examples of the kind of essay the students might write, such as Thoreau’s explanation of why he went to the woods. The students worked together to outline the effect and its causes from each essay. Then we asked each student to develop the most creative graphic

organizer he or she could for one of the articles. Art supplies were provided, and the results were colorful, clever, and, sometimes, a bit chaotic, but usually a clear graphic depiction of the effect and its causes. Some students carefully organized key phrases in a logical cause and effect sequence on their papers, while others developed symbols, portraying ideas with colorful objects and scenes. One student’s forest scene was busy with details like flowers and bumblebees, but it clearly depicted the causes for Thoreau’s decision to go to the woods. By doing graphic organizers from articles already composed, the students could envision the reverse procedure—developing graphic organizers from their interview information in order to help with the composing of their papers.

Before the students began their first drafts, we asked them to create a second graphic organizer, this one to go with their own papers. Of this requirement, Melinda concluded, “The graphic organizer helped me see my reasons” Beth found that “the paper itself was a bit tricky to write but with the help of [her] graphic organizer it was much easier.” Jennifer felt the graphic organizer kept her interest high as well as “letting [her] be creative.” She also found them a way of knowing “what others were doing.” Nicole’s comment was surprising: “Being organized is one thing that can only have a positive outcome. I realized this when I did the graphic organizer I said to myself my life should be more like this.” Trisha, however, didn’t like the graphic organizers “because [she doesn’t] like to present information in that way,” and Josh agreed, finding them “an unnecessary addition to the project.” These comments clearly show how important it can be to incorporate activities which address differing learning styles.

The Writing Process

Once students had their interviews and graphic organizers done, they settled into the workshop mode of working on the paper. They consulted one another, submitted writing for peer review, and worked through several drafts. Stefanie found the peer editing helpful and satisfying: “I have also become a better editor of my peers’ work. When we edited our cause and effect essay, I found that I made a few suggestions [which were useful to the writer] on the paper I read.”

Publishing

Several activities followed the submission of the final drafts. First, the students prepared oral reports with their graphic organizers as visual aides, in order to inform one another of what they had learned; second, each student condensed his or her paper into one page with title and author at

the top, to be compiled into a booklet entitled "Why Do They Have That Rule?" which they made available for eighth-and ninth-grade students; third, the students wrote an evaluation of the unit and an evaluation of their work during the unit.

Sarah felt "the oral reports were informative. It gave all the students a chance to hear about all of the rules." Tasha, too, liked hearing the reports: "I also found it interesting to hear why other rules exist. It was hard to choose only one topic to write about, and this way, we still learned a little about the topics we didn't choose." Austin agreed: "I learned many things that I didn't even have a clue about . . ."

Aaron found preparing his manuscript for the booklet tough: "I had to take my multi-page essay and trim it down to one single-spaced page," but he concluded, "this project was the best for my future [of all projects in English 11] because it involved so much." Erin expressed satisfaction because "it was [her] first publishing of anything [she had] written." Brandy echoed Erin's feelings: ". . . the publication was kind of exciting because something I wrote is in a booklet that others are going to read."

Evaluation

The self-evaluation was important to many. Sarah said, "I can look at my work and find things that are good and find the things that are bad. When I find something that isn't very good I can find better ways of doing it." Tasha had a similar finding: "I have learned a lot from my own writing habits . . ."

The entire unit proved to be educational in more ways than one. Besides giving the students

practice in using various language arts skills, they learned something about the difficulty of running a high school. "It was interesting to find out the reasons behind all the policies in school," said Melinda. "I have always wondered about a lot of them and now I know."

Students often reveal value in a unit which a design team will not anticipate. We knew it would be difficult for several classes at a time to be interviewing a few key people in the building, so we gave ample time. The result, according to Eric, was important to him: "I think the key was the low-stress experience with the amount of time we were given—it helped keep pressure off." Jennifer's summary helped the team to know that our basic premise may have been right: "This unit kept my attention and that helped me to understand what we were doing."

Our team evaluation, focused on our students' final products, their unit evaluations, and our own observations, revealed ways to improve upon this unit, but we definitely concluded that the unit was "a keeper." Our objectives were met, and the results were increased student learning and an enjoyable experience with writing.

I would like to thank the juniors at Lowell High School who shared their evaluations of this unit.

About the Author

Jill VanAntwerp prepared this unit with an 11th grade team from Lowell High School when she was a teacher there. She teaches English Education courses at Grand Valley State University.