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Inquiry, Experience, and Exploration: Rebooting the Research Project and Making Connections Beyond the English Classroom

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Trevor remembers (without fondness) his experience during his first year as a ninth grade English teacher of following a veteran teacher's advice to hand students a list of possible authors to research. That list, as you might imagine, was received with the fantastic groans that only a classroom full of ninth graders can produce. His memories of this experience mirror the recollections of other teachers who have lamented the prospect of reading another installment of papers "about last year's shopworn topics" (Barlow, 2015, p. 44).

The research project and the research paper are ubiquitous traditions in the English classroom. Both teachers and students have strong reactions to the mere mention of the time of year when the research paper unit is approaching. Our reflection on our past experiences motivated us to explore the concept of teaching the research paper and consider how we can learn from other teachers and researchers who are interested in re-imagining the possibilities for research papers.

While creative options for conducting research projects exist, such as Ken Macrorie's I-Search paper (Alvey et al., 2011), it can be a struggle to find ways to ensure that writing instruction goes beyond a focus on satisfying curriculum mandates that often reduce the focus to "producing form-centered texts" (Smagorinsky, Wilson, & Moore, 2011, p. 266). Many teachers feel pressure to adhere to curricular directives that leave little room for making a research paper unit become a space where students create texts that can add to the knowledge base, instead of simply replicating and repackaging existing knowledge. In many

cases, units focused on writing research papers simply provide students with opportunities to learn to mimic the genre. At their worst, students simply learn to do the delicate dance of avoiding plagiarism (Johnston, 1983, p. 39), instead of learning to make new meaning from the research they conduct. However, it does not have to be this way. Advances in technology are making it easier for teachers to help students "pose genuine questions of their own, look for answers, and write about their experiences of searching and learning" (Kaszyca & Krueger, 1994, p. 62) in order to extend the reach of their voices "beyond the classroom walls" (Stewart, 2014, p. 332).

The research project unit—one that "is often feared and loathed by many students" (Petrone & Borsheim, 2006, p. 78)—presents a unique opportunity for teachers to make authentic inquiry an organic element of the instructional day. As Petrone and Brosheim's work highlights, the research paper unit has the potential to reboot this ritual and make it a means for critical engagement where students can bring the traditional, school-based literacies into dialogue with their own lives and interests. More importantly, perhaps, their work demonstrates the value of thinking about how writing for a specific, *live* audience can reduce the frustration both teachers and students experience during this unit of study. Delane Bender Slack's (2001) work blending social justice exploration and multi-genre writing stands out as a model of what is possible when teachers deviate from the traditional research paper and ask students to connect personally with their efforts to conduct research and share what they find. Opportunities to enact this sort of research paper model are becoming more and more abundant as advances in technology have increased opportunities for multi-modal research and composition.

Research In the Digital Age

As we move deeper into the second decade of the 21st century, User-generated content (UGC) tools are creating increased opportunities to help students master the art of conducting research and communicating their findings. Blogs, wiki pages, digital images, digital stories, and other forms of media make it possible to conduct research and share it using myriad platforms. While technology is not a panacea that will automatically make the research paper unit

meaningful for all involved, it does create increased opportunities to engage students and re-imagine how we teach the process of inquiry and communication. It is important, however, to ensure that technology is seen as a tool that *enhances* the learning process instead of *dominating* it. In this paper we share our experiences working with middle school students to engage them in meaningful research projects that made technology a powerful, yet organic, part of the ways that these students developed authentic research questions, investigated them, and shared their findings with their fellow students, families, and members of the larger community.

Our Approach to Learning & Teaching

We see infinite value in making schools places where students will learn to solve problems and be prepared to contribute to a democratic society. We believe that students will be more successful in learning to think critically when, instead of answering questions with prescribed answers, they are given the opportunity to answer authentic (Nystrand, 1997, p. 29), open-ended questions and to allow dialogue to drive the process of making meaning. As Jerome Harste (2001) has argued, inquiry-based education can create opportunities for students to explore topics of social and personal interest in a collaborative environment. The importance of allowing students to follow their interests and connect personally with the content (Fecho, 2011a, p. 15) resonates throughout the literature discussing teaching and learning (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006; Lensmire, 2000; Kohn, 2000). Like Maxine Greene (1978), we believe that "students must be enabled, at whatever stages they find themselves to be, to encounter curriculum as a possibility" (p. 18). This occurs most effectively when teachers create learning opportunities that will make it possible for students to connect with the world around them, learn about how that world functions, and share their findings with members of their communities. However, we believe that teachers are unlikely to be successful in creating this sort of classroom environment without a framework and clear examples of its implementation. Drawing on the concept of a dialogic pedagogy (Fecho, 2011b; Stewart, 2010) we share our efforts to provide an example of such a framework and describe how

learning and teaching in the English classroom (and beyond) can bring content into dialogue with students' lives.

Learning With a School Community

As classroom teachers who have become teacher-educators and researchers interested in project-based learning, we set about finding a school that would enable us to work with teachers who were putting project-based inquiry into practice. Eliot Wigginton's work with the *Foxfire* approach in the 1960s provides an excellent example of a teacher who sought "to encourage [student] participation in the learning process" (Azano, 2011, p. 2). However, we were interested in exploring the possibilities that exist when the principles of project-based learning are combined with projects that include writing that employs UGC tools. Our search for a research site led us to Arthur Morgan School (AMS), a small middle school in the mountains of North Carolina with both boarding and day options. AMS serves students from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds through scholarships.

Founded in 1962, AMS calls itself a "living learning community" and positions real-world work and communal decision making at the center of its curriculum. In fact, John Dewey's belief that education is a process instead of preparation for living is a guiding principle at AMS. This focus on process, as well as the overall flexibility of the program, made the school an ideal place to study the possibilities that exist when students are engaged in creative projects. Although the freedom AMS affords students and teachers differs in many ways from a traditional public school, we believe this context provided a useful place for us to explore possibility and help highlight how project-based learning and digital storytelling tools can be combined to engage students in the research process. We believe much can be learned from studying what is possible and considering how these experiences might be adapted to the traditional public school setting. Thus, with the school preparing for 18-day service learning field trips, we began to meet with a group of students who would be traveling and working together on one of these trips. Our goal was to help them develop digital storytelling skills using a digital storytelling tool called Soundslides Plus as a part of their plan to document what they learned on their trip.

Extended field trips are a key component of the curriculum at AMS. Each trip has an educational theme, and students spend the first part of the winter learning about this theme and planning and preparing for the trip. Preparation for this group included reading Michael Pollan's text *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and instruction focused on writing editorials in English class. The students with whom we chose to work were learning about the politics of farming, issues of food choice, and the consequences of modern approaches to food production and nutrition. In conjunction with this course of study, they would be traveling throughout the southeastern United States visiting farms of all sorts, from small organic farms to large-scale industrial agricultural operations. During their trip, they would learn about and practice key research skills such as interviewing a variety of farmers and doing service projects on farms to learn, first-hand, as much as they could about the many ways food is produced in modern America. In addition, students on this trip would be involved in planning and managing their experience, making contacts with organizations, developing budgets, and planning for food and lodging during the trip. Thus, the project provided a rich context for us to help the students and staff use media tools to expand their connection to the people and ideas they would be encountering on their trip and to bring back stories to share with the rest of the school and the wider community.

Laying the Groundwork

One of the key elements of a dialogic pedagogy is immersing "teachers and students in an ongoing reflective conversation with the texts of their lives" (Fecho, 2011b, p. 5). In order to facilitate those conversations, we engaged students in class discussions to help them identify connections between the issues they were studying related to food production and their understanding of how this influenced the food they ate and the environment. As part of this process, we also helped them learn to create media products that represent their ability to understand and use appropriate media tools. The field trip the AMS students took offered an opportunity to help them learn how to document their learning about a topic of organic interest while also developing the media production and analysis skills required to be responsible citizens in a democratic society.

As the students at AMS prepared for their field trip, we began working with them one day a week to help them learn to use digital tools to document their learning. More importantly, perhaps, we hoped to help them see these tools as a way to focus their attention on the world around them and make connections to things they would encounter on their journey. We began by introducing the students to digital audio recorders and helping them think about how to use these tools to capture meaningful stories. Sessions included both discussions about interview strategies as well as technical issues such as setting sound levels, positioning microphones, and selecting recording spaces that would help them capture crisp sound. We also taught the students to use digital SLR cameras to document their experiences. Again, in addition to teaching the technical aspects of using the cameras, we prompted them to consider what kinds of images would help them tell an accurate and compelling story about what they experienced on their trip. As part of the process, the students practiced recording sounds by interviewing people on campus and, in one entertaining case, the resident dogs at the school. The students also practiced taking photographs of their interview sessions. Throughout the process, we engaged the students in discussions about primary source data gathering, specifically how purposeful interviews and photo documentation could help them learn about the politics of farming. As the students learned to develop focused interview questions, they were also gaining the opportunity to critically examine what they had been reading and explore the rationales and agendas that are inherent in the process of conducting research and interviews.

Learning the Art of Active Research

Much like a traditional research project, our approach required students to use research tools (web-based search engines) to develop an historical context for the topic, explore existing viewpoints, and clarify complex ideas and difficult terminology. However, this process was different in several key ways. First, the students would be doing more than learning about these topics to create and share a single report composed in the traditional third person expository essay. Much like Colleen Ruggieri's (2000) efforts to make the research paper personal, we sought to encourage students to "experiment with their writing and take risks in

writing about ideas they might have otherwise avoided" (p. 50) if they were constrained by the traditional voice and genre of research papers. We regularly reminded the students that they were conducting their research with the goal of being able to share their findings through the creation of digital stories to be shared on the web *and* through editorials they would share with their community in the local paper. Composing reports chronicling what they had learned for an audience beyond their teachers or their classmates gave the students a chance to try on the identity of author (Stewart, 2011) for an audience beyond the classroom. Second, these tasks were directly related to doing work in the world. Indeed, what set our group's efforts off from many other attempts to integrate life skills into education was that something real was at stake. In addition to logistical planning, the students had to prepare to conduct interviews with the most primary of sources: actual people who worked in the field of both small-scale and corporate agriculture. Since the group was small – just three adults and eight students – everyone could have a meaningful role in the research process during the trip, and when they returned each student played a key role in creating their digital stories and crafting letters to the editor for the local paper.

Exploring Multiple Perspectives

Though the trip leaders certainly had a point of view with respect to political and social issues around food, they were careful to guide the students to explore these ideas themselves and come to their own conclusions. It was notable that the group visited small organic farms and the offices of the agricultural giant Monsanto, whose controversial promotion of genetically engineered crops the students had studied prior to the trip; similarly, students had a chance to work alongside migrant farm workers and to discuss labor issues with farm owners. These opportunities for students to see multiple sides of an issue, develop ideas on their own, and share what they learned with others were key aspects of the research project.

These students were learning to conduct research in a way that was decidedly different than the traditional searches of library databases and Wikipedia pages. This could be seen most clearly during the preparation phase when, in order to put their new skills into practice in an environment that was

similar to what they would encounter during their trip, we took the students to a local organic farm. In this final pre-trip session before they hit the open road, students visited Green Toe Ground, a local biodynamic farm run by an enthusiastic couple, Gaelen Corazine and Nicole Delcagliano. The students spent the morning exploring the farm, taking photos, and interviewing Gaelen about his farming practices and his life as a farmer. As the students went about the business of documenting their trip, we were impressed with the seriousness with which they approached the task. There was, of course, the normal adolescent horsing around that you would expect to occur when students find themselves in a new place. However, this trip helped us see the way that digital tools (e.g. audio recorders and cameras) can help students focus on the experience at hand. Having the audio recorders running and the camera shutters snapping gave the students an authentic purpose for *paying attention* to what they were seeing and hearing. It was impressive to watch students walking around the farm with headphones on, checking sound levels on the recorders, and seeming to hang on Gaelen's every word. Similarly, as they explored the farm with their cameras, students could be seen attending to details of greenhouse construction, manure piles, and the layout of the barn. The visit to Green Toe Ground provided a microcosm of the larger trip that made it possible for students to practice their research techniques, get feedback on their processes, and get a chance to begin thinking about what kinds of reports they could create with the data they brought back with them. This experience better equipped the students for the work to be done as they set out on their research journey.

Making Organic Connections

Once the students returned from their trip, we began working with them to create digital sound-slide documentaries (using the Soundslides Plus software) that would document what they had learned over the course of their 18-day adventure. The creation of these stories offered an excellent opportunity to make concrete connections between the English content and their lives. As John Dewey (1902) argued, authentic learning is active and "involves organic assimilation starting from within" (p. 9). The digital stories we began helping the students create served as a chance for the students to tell *their* stories. Instead of simply

presenting information gathered during the research process, the AMS students had personal research experiences that they could now connect with the English content that forms the backbone of traditional schooling.

Working in the campus computer lab, we helped the students edit the audio they had captured, narrate their experiences, and use the photographs they had taken to create web-based digital stories that would represent what they had learned about the politics of food and farming on their trip. Much like students in a traditional English classroom, the AMS students had to consider the various facets of narrative structure in order to create the stories they wanted to tell. They had to decide on a theme that would serve as a framework for their stories, compose their narrations, edit text they wanted to include, and be clear about the messages their stories would convey. Thus, the process as a whole required the students to demonstrate their ability to engage in the collection of primary source documents and synthesize the information they collected much like they would in a traditional English classroom that was based on a framework, such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). However, this project extended far beyond these tasks.

Creating digital stories helped the students see the connections between the dietary choices people make, the business of farming, and the environment. At the same time, the students had an opportunity to draw upon their personal research experience to develop arguments for the things they saw as important after meeting and talking with the various people involved with the production and consumption of food. For example, the project connected their reading of Pollan's text and research on the politics of meat production with first-hand experiences in an organic slaughterhouse. At the end of the process, students could articulate some of the complex emotional and environmental issues surrounding the consumption of animals.

Generating Dialogue

We saw the value of exploring multiple perspectives play out in even more concrete ways than the creation of the digital stories that served as research reports. The students crafted letters to the editor for their local paper to share what they learned, which sparked a community dialogue. Two of the students from this

group chose to write about ecological issues they had encountered on the field trip. One of these letters (see fig. 1 below) was widely read in the community and sparked conversations at the local food coop and a nearby neighborhood meeting. Her letter represents her deep engagement with the concepts she and her classmates had studied and demonstrates her ability to think critically about the issues she was exploring.

(Fig.1) Student Letter to the Editor: Corn is taking over and extreme processing is bad.

Corn is taking over and extreme processing is bad

I go to the Arthur Morgan School. It's a boarding and day school for 7th, 8th, and 9th graders about 20 minutes away from Burnsville. Every year, there are three different 18-day field trips (which deserves a whole letter in and of itself).

This year, I was on the "Farm and Foods" trip. We had a 6-week class about the subject before the actual trip. First, we looked at industrial food and farms, then industrial organic, and finally, small-scale organic and sustainable farms. I was struck by many things about the food that we eat every day, and I will remember them for a long time.

Here is one of the many:

Corn is in everything. Why? Because it's cheap and easy to grow. Some common corn-derived ingredients are: corn syrup (obviously), citric acid (to be fair, this can be made from other things, but if you find it on the ingredients list of your favorite "from concentrate" fruit juice, it's probably made from corn), and guar gum (a thickener in almost everything and the wax on the outside of produce). So, we're all basically walking ears.

Why is this a bad thing? Well, for one thing, we are supposed to be people, not corn. More importantly, the corn that gets put in all your food is not sweet corn. It's feed corn, which means it's really, really hard and tastes disgusting. So, the food companies process it. A lot. I don't know if I need to explain this in detail, but the more something is processed, the worse it is for you. Every time they process the corn, the nutrients it got from the sun and rain and soil get taken away. So, the end product is something with little or no nutritional value that does not resemble the beginning product (in this case, corn) in the least. Also, have you ever heard the saying: "too much of a good thing"? Well, this is more like too much of a bad thing, but you get the point. Those points were only the health issues. There are more issues that have to do with big corporations ruling the world and things like that, but I think I won't go into those.

Thank you for reading this letter, and I hope the next time you're at the grocery store you'll at least look at the ingredients of what you're buying to see if it has corn in it. This issue is an important one and one that will stick with me for the rest of my life.

Sincerely,
Anna Zakelj

NC House approves budget plan

As of May 5, the NC House gave final approval of the proposed budget plan. We acknowledge that the budget plan seriously affects many areas; however, this letter focuses on one area. The NC Dept. of Agriculture must cut 10% of their budget. A proposal was made to do away with the Animal Welfare Division. This would result in NO oversight of animal shelters, boarding kennels, pet stores or large rescue groups.

The budget plan approved by the NC House would end routine inspections of animal operations, saving $578,000 and nine positions.

Approval of this cut would be a disaster for innocent animals in our state and will adversely affect the health and safety of the public by exposure to pets from uninspected facilities. We, therefore, urge you to contact Senator Ralph Hise 919-733-3460, ralph.hise@ncleg.net and Gov. Perdue 919-733-2391, governor.office@nc.gov. requesting that they do not approve of this cut.

Jane Mummert
YCHS President

Significantly, the second student's letter brought on a spirited back and forth in the paper with a well-known local conservative voice taking on the student and challenging his reasoning.

In keeping with the school's attitude about the value of dialogue, the opposing letter writer was invited to the school to present his views to the students in person and to engage in a healthy debate with them. Though on the surface, this person's values were antithetical to those expressed by the school, several weeks later, he wrote back to the paper to publicly thank the school for their hospitality and for being willing to give him a chance to express himself to them. This example also shows how an effective authentic learning experience can re-fashion the time-honored practice of having students conduct research and write about what they find. Instead of repackaging information gleaned from various sources and transmitting what they had learned to a teacher in the form of a paper or a class in the form of presentation, these students shared their findings with a wider audience and sparked *actual dialogue* between people with opposing points of view. Jeff recently had the opportunity to follow up with one of the students who participated in the project. When asked about her memory of the experience, she noted:

> When you write a research paper with information from the internet or databases or whatever -- in my experience what your are doing is looking for a series of words that fits in what you are trying to say, and you pop it in and you write it and you're done. It doesn't require a ton of thought or interest necessarily. Whereas, if you're putting together a presentation like the slideshows with multiple components, you have to really put more effort into it to really be good and interesting. -- but also you're more likely to be more interested in what you're doing because you're not sitting at a computer, you're like out asking people questions and touching cows!

Practical Suggestions for Reimagining the Research Paper

We recognize that 18-day field trips are not a common option in the majority of U.S. schools. However, we believe the principles that form the foundation for

this sort of work with students *can* be enacted in any school setting. The key elements of the framework we have outlined include:

- beginning with **student-generated topics** that can be explored through interviews and that lend themselves to visual representation;
- engaging in **background research** to inform interview and image collection;
- giving students a chance to do low-stakes **exploration of the storytelling forms** that will be used;
- planning for and implementing **multi-modal collection of data** (e.g. recorded interviews, photographs, video);
- **editing final presentations** for particular audiences;
- **sharing findings** with the wider community;
- and engaging in **ongoing dialogue** about the topics presented.

By approaching research projects with creativity, enthusiasm, and a commitment to bringing students into direct contact with content and the world around them, teachers can engage them in meaningful research projects that meet not just the *letter* but the *spirit* of curriculum goals that ask students to "synthesize multiple sources on the subject" and "write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts" (Common Core).

Traveling across multiple states is not a requirement for this sort of work. Opportunities abound within all local communities for students to visit with people whose lived experiences represent key primary source materials. Interviews with relatives, local shop owners and professionals in various fields can be facilitated within the school day and during after school activities. Skype and other forms of tele-commuting platforms make it possible for students in traditional schools to interact with individuals on a global level, and free screen capture technologies make it possible for students to save these interviews for analysis and presentation. While it is preferable for students to capture their own images to support their research, copyright-free image and video sources such as Wikimedia Commons and Archive.org offer options for students and teachers whose local contexts prohibit travel away from the physical school grounds. Indeed, even in situations where access to technology is severely limited, digital

stories can be replaced with hard copy artistic representations of research findings.

Regardless of the form the final projects take, the value of the general approach we have outlined is that it invites students to do meaningful research in the context of an authentic communication activity. The central components of a traditional research paper are not lost, but students are pushed to radically expand their conception of the task at hand. The planning, gathering, analysis, and storytelling skills are repurposed and take on new meaning as students explore topics of organic interest and focus on making new meaning to share with larger audiences. The skills students learn through these projects satisfy *Standards Era* curricular demands while also enriching students' connections to their classrooms, schools, and wider communities. Most importantly, perhaps, this expanded view of the research project has the potential to enliven the research process for both teachers and students, spark natural curiosity, and bring content into dialogue with students' lives.

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