

School-Sponsored and Self-Sponsored at the Same Time

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Numerous compositionists have argued that it is desirable to allow students to select their own writing topics, especially in extensive projects like research papers. But few researchers have compared students' work on assigned *and* self-designed projects where the students have kept extensive process journals. In this essay, I will demonstrate that when the context supports sustained writing, both assigned and self-designed tasks can foster learning and commitment to writing.

Substantial confusion exists over different types of instructor-designed and self-designed tasks. For example, few studies distinguish between such teacher-designed tasks as (1) placement essays; (2) single-episode, in-class writing; (3) single-episode, out-of-class writing; and (4) writing designed as part of a larger sequence. Even for self-designed tasks, it is essential to distinguish between (5) single-episode, in-class writing; (6) single-episode, out-of-class writing; and (7) writing sustained over a period of time.

George Hillocks warns of a simplistic view of school-sponsored writing, and he claims that research studies may not represent what is actually happening in pedagogical situations:

[Researchers] assume, for example, that assignments are given without preparation, that no specific criteria for judging writing are presented, and that no specific provisions are made for feedback and revision . . . Demonstrating that school-sponsored writing results in a lack of commitment to writing requires that evidence be collected over a range of programs with different characteristics. The studies at hand have not done that. (57)

One reason these studies have not been done is the strong empirical bias toward studies of writing that purport to control topic, setting, context, and/or audience so that these factors can be manipulated as variables in statistical analyses. Current writing process pedagogy, however, suggests that ethnographic studies can capture processes that show the role of assigned and self-designed writing topics in school settings.

Research on Topic Selection

In *Research on Written Composition* Hillocks reviews many empirical studies in which topic selection played an important role. He attacks the assertion that school-sponsored writing automatically results in lack of student commitment and maintains that this “is another important example of inferring cause-and-effect relationships without adequate evidence” (55). However, even Hillocks does not differentiate between school-sponsored writing that consists of tasks designed by instructors and tasks that students have designed. Lumping all school-sponsored writing into one category continues the confusion created by studies in which students have been given the option of writing on either a topic selected by the researcher or one the student selects. For example, in a study attempting to simulate school-sponsored writing, Sharon Pianko asked students to write in “five episodes,” four of which contained specific topics and a fifth “on anything you want in any way you want.” But then she comments that “in place of any of the first four assignments, students had the option of writing on anything, in any mode of expression” (6). She does not specify how frequently the students followed her topic selection except to comment that the “majority of the writing (55% of the products) was narrative *even when* the students wrote on topic” (7; emphasis added). Such studies then analyze the students’ written responses as if this important aspect of topic selection were not a significant variable.

Researchers frequently contrast free-writing and assigned writing, but this, too, is an inappropriate comparison. Writers can use free-writing as an exploratory technique to search for a topic, or as a way to write on a topic mandated by an instructor. The technique itself is not limited to topic search. Hillocks also describes research on free topic selection in which the students presumably were requested to write on the spot (for example, Bereiter and Scardamalia). Naturally, these students had difficulty generating ideas instantly. The problem is not so much with the free topic selection or with free writing; the problem is having to come up instantly with something to say about any topic.

The same is true with assigned writing. Arthur Graesser and his research team have noted that according to their “bankrupt idea generation hypothesis,”

It is difficult for writers to generate ideas that are informative, interesting, sophisticated, and relevant to a particular pragmatic context. Indeed, the present study has demonstrated that very few ideas can be generated “off the top of our heads” and that the lion’s share of this articulate knowledge is unsophisticated and obvious to the members of the culture. These properties of articulate knowledge make it quite a challenge to write something that will be informative, interesting, sophisticated, and relevant to a fellow reader in the culture. (361)

Thus, we should not be surprised that school-sponsored writing or protocol-analysis studies demanding instant responses lead to such facile responses; nor should we be surprised that many researchers believe that such teacher-designed, school-sponsored writing is ineffective.

To fairly compare instances of free topic selection with topics selected by instructors, researchers must provide optimal conditions for both types of writing activity: a sustained period of time to investigate the topic, to think, to talk with others, to write and re-write—time, that is, for thoughtful reading, thinking, and writing. Only then can we make appropriate comparisons between teacher-designed and self-designed tasks.

Much of the research on the effects of topic on student writing has come from those responsible for designing placement, proficiency, or competency tests. Reviewing such studies, Hoetker indicates that there are problems with interpreting the research on topic effects: the system of rating essay quality is not precise; there is no reliable system for distinguishing among modes of writing; little is known “about how the structure or the rhetoric or the vocabulary of a topic affects students’ interpretations of it or their affective responses to it” (380). Ruth and Murphy note that before responding to an essay examination topic, the writer

leans forward to *read* and *interpret* the text of a topic provided in the essay examination. So the act of writing actually begins in an act of *reading comprehension*, and we usually assume that each reader is getting the same message to direct his writing performance. (410)

But Ruth and Murphy recognize, as do Flower and Hayes, that even in a classroom situation in which “a teacher gives 20 students the same assignment, *the writers themselves create the problem they solve*” (22-23). Topics designed for assessment purposes demand instant response with little background information provided, to the writer except when a full rhetorical context is provided, and even the value of that has proved questionable. Thus, topic designs for assessing writing generally take quite different forms from those used to assess or promote learning. Recently, a few institutions (the University of Massachusetts at Boston, for example) have begun to base upper-level competency tests on sustained reading on a single topic prior to the actual writing of the examination.

Even in school settings, writers usually have the opportunity to change their rhetorical problems as their information and attitudes change. Although most of Flower and Hayes’ studies are based on situations in which writers respond instantly to a given task, they note that writers “build a progressive representation of their goals as they write” (27) and “alter their representation of the problem throughout the writing process” (31). More importantly, many changes take place *prior* to writing, especially as students gain new information through reading, observing or interacting with others. Thus,

given appropriate *extended* learning opportunities, students can change their problem definitions or topic stances *while* they are researching. In such cases, although writers may certainly continue to make changes during the writing itself, many prior fundamental changes will remain hidden unless they have been captured in some form, such as ongoing process journals.

A Case Study of Two Students

In order to learn more about the role of assigned and self-designed assignments, I conducted a case study involving students in two universities. In 1984 at Indiana University and in 1986 at The City College of City University of New York, I taught graduate courses in which the students examined their reading and writing processes in response to instructor-designed and self-designed reading and writing tasks. Both sequences were carried out over substantial periods of time and thus represent topic types (4) and (7) mentioned above. My findings suggest that *sustained* writing, both of instructor- and self-designed tasks, can lead to positive intellectual and affective changes. Thus, instructors need not avoid school-sponsored topics; instead, instructors must establish contexts in which substance and process are united to foster increased mastery of both. Case studies using both kinds of tasks will illustrate the changes that can occur under such conditions.

The students whose work I will now describe were enrolled in graduate courses in which they examined their own reading and writing processes. During the first half of the semester, students read a series of articles on the topic of introspection, wrote instructor-assigned summaries, analyses and reaction statements on these readings, and kept journal accounts of their reading and writing processes. During the second half, the students individually selected topics, wrote research papers or short stories, and kept journal entries on their writing processes.

The two students, Patricia (from City College) and Opal (from Indiana University), demonstrated initial insecurity with the complexity of the psychologically-based research articles on introspection. Each worked through her difficulty, demonstrating that initial confusion can lead to productive learning when sustained effort is undertaken. And each blossomed after being given the opportunity to select a topic for extended investigation.

Patricia: Teacher-Designed Tasks

Patricia, a Hispanic teacher of seventh and eighth grade students in a South Bronx junior high school in New York City, was a master's student in Language and Literacy at City College. The first reading, a chapter from D.N. Perkins' *The Mind's Best Work*, proved readily accessible to Patricia. She completed the summary and reaction statements easily. But when the readings took on a more scientific bent, she apparently felt overwhelmed: she failed to turn in the assigned writing and journal tasks and stopped attending class. After missing two classes, she came to my office to discuss her

difficulties. She had decided to persevere in the course and promised to make up the late work. Three weeks later, she submitted all overdue and current assignments simultaneously.

The first was a summary of an article by Elizabeth Valentine. In her journal, Patricia acknowledged that her summary had a piecemeal quality to it and that she had tried to report on all “results and conclusions” even though she had had to ignore material she could not understand even after multiple readings. She also chose to include information that “was interesting to me.” So, even with her difficulty in comprehending material in a field new to her, Patricia was already attempting to make the task her own by selecting that which interested her.

The next task was an analysis of a research article by Donald Olding Hebb. Patricia felt comfortable criticizing the author for his negative stance toward introspection, but she was not yet knowledgeable enough to support her reservations. Next, in summarizing a long review article by Anders Ericsson and Herbert Simon, Patricia cited many of the studies reviewed, but she failed to note which were supportive and which were critical of Ericsson and Simon’s position. Once again, she felt the need to make her summary useful *to herself*, and she reported in her journal: “At some points some information which I felt could be left out in an honest-to-goodness summary, I included because I considered it vital to my understanding of the article if I were going to arrive at a summary at all.”

Patricia noted that Daniel Dennett’s science fiction story, the next reading, seemed “simplicity itself in comparison with some of the others.” Her dilemma was deciding *what* to summarize. She chose to recount the story and made only a passing note of its “philosophical musings.” But her journal account focused on her realization that the story is “all an allegory,” and she provided an outline of philosophical dualisms posed by the story. Thus, Patricia “covered” both aspects of the reading but made no attempt to relate them.

The last in the sequence of teacher-designed tasks on introspection was to synthesize and evaluate the position of Barbara Tomlinson, an English professor, and the positions of several psychologists. Patricia’s evaluation demonstrates that by that point in the semester she was able to understand and internalize the major positions of the researchers she had read. For example, she was able to align Tomlinson’s ideas with those of Perkins, to note how Tomlinson draws on Ericsson and Simon’s research, and to see the areas of agreement and disagreement with Hebb; such synthesis was a formidable accomplishment for a student who only four weeks earlier had been close to despair.

Patricia had reached a level of knowledge about the value of introspective reports in studying the writing process (the topic of Tomlinson’s article) that was useful to her as a future researcher and as a teacher who might now consider inviting her own students to observe their reading and writing

processes. These teacher-assigned tasks were initially frustrating to this serious, hard-working student and teacher. But she persevered and demonstrated that knowledge building is satisfying when learning is allowed to accumulate over a sustained period. As Flower and Hayes write, "If we can teach students to explore and define their own problems, even within the constraints of an assignment, we can help them to create inspiration instead of wait for it" (32). Teacher-designed writing can lead to fruitful growth and a meaningful sense of accomplishment for students when it is sustained over a sufficient period of time to overcome initial resistance and allow learning to take place at a comfortable pace.

Patricia: Self-Designed Tasks

For such a student, then, what does the opportunity for sustained work on a self-designed project offer that goes beyond that in the teacher-designed series just described? At its best, such an opportunity permits the writer to examine cherished beliefs and attitudes and consider *changing* them. In the remainder of the semester, students identified a topic, conducted research, wrote a preliminary prospectus on the topic, and completed a final formal paper; simultaneously, they kept a journal in which they monitored and discussed their own writing processes.

Patricia decided to write about what she called an assault on her ears "by a bombardment of what, to put it in its mildest form, was coarse language." She was overwhelmed by the frequency and nonchalance of the utterances which caused her "to flinch if not gasp." She hypothesized that such language results from "the perennial problem of adolescent self-assertion, deprivation of several sorts, and the appeal of the *risqué*." Patricia commented in her journal, "Obviously I was disturbed if not dismayed, by the issuance of such words so maybe I could try to find some way of minimizing the utterance thereof."

Patricia noted that she chose to read one article that she hoped would help her understand the language of her female students, whose behavior seemed particularly troubling: "This article caught my eye because I am, at worst appalled at and, at best, curious about the sailor-like expletives of adolescent girls and their application verbally of the male sex organs to themselves." The readings initially supported her own hypothesis that "female speech should differ from males since this does happen in several cultures. There's something in language study called *sex exclusive*." Noting that women are taught to exhibit "better" social behavior than men, she began to question how her female students had been socialized: "Is their *loose* speech an attempt at toughness which conveys prestige?" This question indicated that she was discovering that there may be explanations of her students' behavior that she had not yet considered. It was the beginning of a more open stance.

Patricia's final journal entry reveals what happened to her attitude about her students' language as a result of her research, reflection, and observation:

“I have moved from being appalled to being enthralled at the modus operandi of the cursing.” In the final paper, she elaborated on her attitude change: “As work on the paper grew, I grew less appalled and more enthralled at language which I had first heard with a keen sense of outrage. Knowing ‘some’ if not all, I understand ‘some,’ if not forgive ‘all.’” Gone are the assaults on her ears, the flinching, the gasping. Knowing has led to understanding, if not acceptance. She concluded by asserting that adolescent cursing deserves to be explored as part of “the larger personal and social consequences as an aid in understanding other aspects of our complex youngsters.”

Patricia never moved to approval of her students’ use of profanity, but she was able to view it more objectively and compassionately, understanding its role as an outlet for frustration and a means of peer acceptance. Knowledge had brought her to a better understanding of a feature of her students’ experience that had previously deeply offended her. Because she could select a topic of deep personal interest, she could benefit from new knowledge, demonstrate a willingness to modify her perspective based on this knowledge, and develop a better understanding of her students.

Opal: Teacher-Designed Tasks

Opal was a first-year doctoral student in Language Education at Indiana University. Unlike the students at City College, who had started their reading with the more accessible chapter in Perkins’ book, the students in Opal’s class at Indiana had as their first reading an article by Valentine, replete with psychological terms and references to previous studies. This was the article that had first intimidated Patricia. Opal noted that this article, for which a reaction statement was assigned, “proved difficult to comprehend,” but she was uncertain of the reasons: “the result of the author’s writing style, my own fading knowledge of the concepts involved—years have passed since my undergraduate psychology classes, and the accompanying problems of terminology.” Doubtless, all of these contributed to her final journal comment: “I, unfortunately for me, found the task hideous and had great difficulty attending to it.” Not a very propitious beginning for a series of tasks on the topic of introspection.

For the next two sessions, I asked students to summarize the Dennett science-fiction story and the Hebb research article and then to synthesize them. In summarizing the Dennett story, Opal immediately recognized that the “point” of the story is the consideration of the “site of self.” She summarized the story in some detail but also examined the philosophical issues, a synthesis of the two levels that Patricia had separated into summary and journal accounts. The Hebb article also proved difficult for Opal, but in her journal she presented a rationale for having time for thought and reflection when undertaking a difficult task:

I wrote the summary based on the notes and highlights and left it for a time. When I re-wrote it I discovered that some of the ideas made a little sense. For me, difficult ideas need to be digested at several levels and through several processes. I must read and re-read, attempt to illuminate what I perceive to be ideas, re-read and let it alone. I can then go back to the text, pull together the highlighted ideas, read the surrounding passage again, and write. If I then read the summary and re-write it, the ideas make a bit more sense even if I still can't see them as part of a whole.

Clearly, Opal was experiencing difficulty with complex ideas, but given sufficient time, she had evolved a strategy for achieving partial understanding that would help her with future readings.

Opal had difficulty with the subsequent synthesis essay because she was uncertain of the accuracy of her summarizing statements in the previous assignment. If she had been wrong there, she would be wrong here. In her journal, she noted: "I question the term 'Machiavellian' to describe this assignment—'diabolical' or 'sadistic' seems a better fit." But by the time she finished the synthesis essay and the journal entry, she revealed that as a teacher and as a graduate student she was becoming sensitive to the nuance of assignment-making and assignment-doing: "Now I know how uncertain the students can be and how they might (if they are really trying) experience real frustration over what an instructor might construe to be a simple, clear assignment." In the synthesis essay, though, Opal dealt with some sophisticated concepts, comparing subjective and objective observations and concluding that the remaining question deals with whether one can observe the activity of the mind. Her understanding of the concepts concerning introspection was growing despite her insecurity.

Next, I asked students to read four articles from issues of the *British Journal of Psychology* and then to take a position on the subjects we had been considering. Opal was pleasantly surprised: "Identifying the two major positions presented in these articles wasn't all that difficult—surprise and hooray, especially after some of the texts I've sweated through." She didn't appear conscious, yet, that some of her ease had come from her increasing knowledge of the issues in the field of introspection. However, then she reviewed the earlier articles for her final position paper. Opal made a dramatic discovery when she re-read the Valentine article which she had previously found "hideous":

Given that I had no idea what was going on in it the first time through—despite the task of writing a reaction statement—I didn't enjoy the prospect of a re-acquaintance, but I was pleasantly surprised. All the struggling with the intervening articles and tasks had given me at least a small schema to utilize in re-reading Valentine—names and experiments were at least passingly familiar instead of swimming by in that great sea of the unknown. If I had been

able to deal with that article the first time as I did this time, maybe this entire series of tasks would have been less a mental gauntlet for me.

Clearly, Opal had reached a greater level of understanding than when she began. But it is important not to overstate her level of knowledge or even her security within this new field. In her final position paper, she supported introspection as a viable research methodology but took few risks with her ideas, staying close to the arguments and language of the researchers she cited. But she knew she had been learning and her self-confidence was growing. This realization enabled her to assert her own authority more confidently when she turned to the self-designed tasks.

Opal: Self-Designed Tasks

Given the opportunity to select a topic, Opal first chose to investigate current government-sponsored literacy programs. Although no discussion of suitable topics had taken place, Opal initially felt defensive about her choice, feeling it was less “academic” than others that her classmates might choose:

I’m probably really going to get nailed on this one—it’s the first time I’ve taken a risk in this class but the worst that can happen is that you say no. (I still believe you when you say there’s no right or wrong in here.) I’ve chosen to interpret the assignment *very* broadly and look at an issue within a topic. I realize that this is practical in nature rather than academic but . . .

Opal’s later journal entries reveal that part of her anxiety arose from the persona she wanted to project to her classmates, who were for the most part close to the end of their doctoral work while she was just beginning hers. However, she did not allow herself to be overpowered by others’ views of her seriousness as a graduate student, as can be seen by the fact that she selected the topic of greatest interest to her.

By the time she wrote the prospectus for her paper, Opal had shifted emphasis to “the role of functional literacy in third world countries.” She had also shifted in attitude, starting the accompanying journal by saying: “I have the feeling that this is to be the one task in this class that I will enjoy, probably because of the interest aspect.” The impetus for the change in topic direction came from a conference Opal had with my team-teaching colleague at Indiana, Sharon Pugh, who suggested that Opal “focus on functional literacy in third world countries because comparative education is a minor area for me and I have so much to learn.” So, although Opal selected her major area of consideration, literacy, the shift in focus came about through a conversation with one of her instructors. This collaboration exemplifies the difficulty of establishing major categories of “assigned” and “self-selected.” Much writing, both in-school and outside, evolves from such conversations in which an individual sees a legitimate reason to re-shape an inquiry while still working within an area of interest.

Opal's high interest level is also reflected in the changes in her work habits from the earlier series of papers. Opal noted that she planned to approach this paper systematically: "I'm tired of the organizational hassles at the end." Her journal entry indicates that she did work diligently and in a highly organized manner. She also worked more freely: "Since I'm interested in this area, I'm doing it without any feeling of 'here we go again.'" The journal-keeping experience had sensitized Opal to her reading-writing processes, so she became better able to articulate her experience in developing the research paper:

In other projects I would find myself becoming angry and frustrated when I realized that I didn't really know enough about the subject, but for some reason I don't have a sense of frustration but rather of simply being led further into something. Perhaps I'm not really formulating more questions than I normally do in the writing process, but rather that I simply have a much greater awareness of their process.

Here, then, is an instance in which awareness of process contributes to the building of substance so that the two support each other.

Opal was also aware of the benefit of being allowed to select her own topic:

As I mentioned before, the research is helping build enthusiasm again. I've been so overwhelmed by my course work that I have lost sight of my purpose. This paper is helping to re-establish my real interest in adult literacy education. I am once again being made conscious of the fact that literacy education is a political act and that literacy educators are political activists, to a greater or lesser degree, whether they realize it or not.

Opal's reiteration of the political aspect of literacy education reveals that this is a powerful motivator for her and that her study is purposeful both for the short and long term.

As Opal saw her paper's emphasis changing and the needs of her audience emerging, she realized that the goal stated in her original prospectus was unrealistic: "It would take a ream of paper to discuss those ideas. I'm having enough problems with just this one: functional literacy." Since the prospectus was by definition only a provisional document, and since enough time was built in for reconceiving and reshaping, Opal felt comfortable knowing that her paper would reflect her current thinking but that there was room and time for change. And since the subject of her paper would become a continuing interest in her doctoral program, Opal understood that even this final paper was a provisional document in light of the expertise she would continue to gain.

Through her paper on her self-selected topic, Opal had been able to refine her purpose to meet her personal-professional needs and had acquired the

knowledge to support her views. Unlike her experience with the articles on introspection, from the beginning she was able to evaluate the sources she read, cull from them the evidence she needed, and shape the information to support her position. The voice of her final project is confident; a reader would not recognize the insecure writer of the early journal entries. Through school-sponsored writing, teacher-assigned and self-designed, Opal learned a great deal about herself and had put that self-knowledge productively to work.

Conclusion

Meaningful writing is sustained writing. Sustained writing provides the opportunity for an individual to acquire knowledge about a new field gradually through reading, discussion and observation. Through this process, students can face and overcome their initial insecurities and change their attitudes and beliefs. School-sponsored writing, whether assigned or self-designed, should foster the opportunity for such changes. Contexts for reading and writing must provide students with opportunities to overcome anxieties and build self-confidence. When school-sponsored writing represents the product of a sustained process that has fostered learning, then it will deserve to be simultaneously called self-sponsored writing.

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