

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 15 | Issue 1

Article 5

1-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Shafer, Greg (1999) "Making Research Writing Meaningful," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1396>

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Making Research Writing Meaningful

Greg Shafer

Last fall, I began the school year by resolving to make the research paper a more meaningful experience for both my students and me. Much of what I aspired to do was based on my belief that research writing, when taught well, could be a very satisfying and productive activity. The key, I thought, was simply to put student curiosity and voice at the center of the assignment. Rather than fulfilling the routines of a textbook-driven paper, I wanted participants to approach the activity as a process of discovery and revelation. To do this, I would have to pare away much of the busy work that has forever plagued this time-honored essay. Students would do solid research, uncover scholarly and empirical sources, and make sophisticated decisions about difficult questions. They would not, however, be hindered by arbitrary requests for notecards, complicated thesis statements, or pre-fabricated structures.

The research paper would, in short, become a problem-solving activity—one that was rooted in authentic contemporary investigation and personal inquiry. Whereas David Bartholomae asked his students to write like academics in an attempt to “invent the university,” I wanted my class to become malleable enough to fit the various intellectual journeys my students chose to take. If this meant doing research on the local police department or the reasons why community residents supported the new adult movie theater, then I wanted my students to have the freedom to do so. Perhaps, I thought, I could move the dreaded research paper beyond the perfunctory, making it a vehicle for discussion and social awareness.

Researching the Research Paper

My project began with research, as I poured over the endless artificial practices that have become a required part of research paper writing. Most textbooks seem to treat the assignment as a mechanical, impersonal practice. Students, in each book that I reviewed, were ushered through a series of steps that rarely reflected the recursive, dynamic world of critical exploration.

The Bedford Guide to the Research Process, *Steps to Writing Well*, and *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*—three popular textbooks I read—all assume that personal engagement is ancillary to “proper form and procedure.” Each, in its own way—either by omission or subordination—made the research paper into a grand formula that only required replication. Indeed, each book seemed to assume that the subject would be academic and that the students would follow a uniform process. In particular, *Steps to Writing Well* failed to offer a place for research outside of the library. The other two books devoted little or no time to the idea of ethnographic or personal searches, while dedicating dozens of pages to proper form and process. And while it is important to do notecards and works cited correctly, the essence of research must begin with the spark of interest and personal passion that animates professional writers and scientists.

Transforming the research paper begins with a new perspective or philosophy as to why and for whom students compose. In the past, the paper demanded allegiance to the academy, to the proud traditions of a scholarly audience. Outlines, works cited pages, and notecards tended to overshadow the pursuit of intellectual curiosity, as students were passively guided through the ritual of the academy. From start to finish, protocol was observed, whether that meant the way one used the library or the subjects people chose. Through it all, decorum reigned as students muddled through a series of prescriptive stages.

Students Should Write for Themselves

To change this, I urged my students to momentarily forget about audience and write for themselves. Peter Elbow discusses this as a way “to dissipate the confusion, [so] the clenched, defensive discourse starts to run clear” (249). “After we have figured out our thinking in copious exploratory or draft writing—perhaps finding the right voice or stance as well—then,” argues Elbow, “we can follow the traditional rhetorical advice” (249).

Liberating students from the constraints of form and style makes the assignment much more acces-

sible and relevant. Without being deluged by rules and regulations, students feel empowered to take control of the assignment and generate ideas that mirror authentic concerns. Many students, it seemed to me, felt more ownership over the enterprise, realizing that the parameters had been widened to include various forms and styles.

Generating Topics

Part of this democratization begins with the topics for writing and the way in which they are generated. Nancie Atwell has suggested that allowing and encouraging students to choose their own topics fosters “an investment in their writing” (77) because writers realize that the assignment is student-centered. As I worked with my class to generate approaches to the paper, I found this premise to be true. Offered a wide range of topics, writers came to see the research as consonant with their lives and interests. During the early stages of the process, I encouraged students to reflect on personal and community concerns and the way local problems could be solved through information gathering. The research paper, I reminded them, was a way to expose injustice and articulate our views about the way society should operate. It didn’t have to be distant from the rhythms of their lives.

Of course, a teacher must never relinquish the collaborative role that is so integral to pupil success. As part of the process, I formulated a list of possible topics—ones that were far removed from the typical research paper on gun control or capital punishment—and then challenged students to produce some ideas of their own. Later in the week, I asked them to share their topics with each other, and as a class, we discussed the kind of research that each topic would require. And, as each participant contributed various plans and suggestions—many of them radiating from their lives at home—I began to appreciate Atwell’s assertion that “given time and a conducive environment, these writers can rediscover their voices and ideas” (78).

By week’s end, the idea of the research paper had been literally transformed into an organic set of individual projects that were in a rowdy kind of flux. As a whole, the class seemed energized by the license they had been given to delve into issues that were decidedly not a part of the typical academic paper. And, as we engaged in a second informal discussion of topics, I felt an alacrity, a galvanizing sense of purpose taking shape. Sheila chose to investigate prison life and the justice system. Because her brother had been in prison for a short time—and because he was African-American—she felt a special investment in exploring the equity and politics of the system.

Jim, another student, took an interest in religion and chose to research the tenets of his family’s church. Besides doing the typical library research, these students were aware that they would be ven-

turing out of the school, interviewing people, asking provocative questions, and exposing themselves to the uncomfortable. Jim’s plan to interview his minister and ask him about the accuracy of the Bible and the church’s stand on homosexuality were clearly beyond the range of the politely impersonal research paper. Sheila’s goal to gather statistics on the percentage of minorities in state prisons epitomized her commitment to her paper.

As the week ended, I took time to do an informal comparison of the topics chosen this year and the year before. Such a review helped underscore the impact a more democratic research paper has on topic selection. Whereas many of last year’s students had written on political controversies or sex education, this year they selected decidedly more personal issues. With few exceptions, one could see a congruency between the writer and the subject. Research and personal interest had merged to create a font of very original ideas. The class seemed intrigued.

Creative Methods of Gathering Information

All of this alacrity, it is important to mention, could not be achieved without a new philosophical approach to not only topic selection but the way research itself is done. Early in the class discussion, I introduced students to the possibility of empirical and ethnographic research and encouraged them to pursue more creative methods of garnering information. What is especially liberating about ethnographic research is the way it releases students from conventional modes of investigation. Frank Smith refers to it as a more “natural approach to fact finding” because it is based on the assumption that research is always best when it captures the daily rhythms of life. The ethnographer goes where life is occurring rather than treating subjects like lab rats. Like the cultural anthropologist, who observes and then learns about cultures, the ethnographer describes, interviews, analyzes, and reflects upon people as they live. The research becomes a snapshot of existence, open to interpretation and untainted by manipulation. Yetta Goodman refers to it as “kid watching.”

The possibility of ethnographic research fostered a more active, more community-based composition for many of my pupils. Instead of endlessly paging through books, students were able to inquire about their world, delve into their neighborhoods and towns. When augmented with more conventional scholarship, it represented a very natural way for students to learn about themselves and the world in which they live.

No person better exemplified this spirit than Cristina, a curious, easy-going student with a quick smile and a conspicuous lack of confidence. After spending much of the year insulated from the currents of the class, she seemed to come alive during her work on the research project. For her, the as-

signment was special because it allowed her the chance to interview her father, a Vietnam veteran who was disabled as a result of the violence. Only a few of us knew about the injuries he had incurred in the waning months of the war, but as Cristina began the process of interviewing him and other veterans, a new portrait of Vietnam began to manifest itself. Through our periodic reports and updates, we heard about Cristina's progress—the talks she had and the fascinating information she gleaned—and watched her research begin to take shape. "My father told me that he'll never forget the war, and that seems understandable since it took a part of his hand," she told us with a stoic face. Later in her research, Cristina had the opportunity to compare scholarship written on the war to those memories supplied by her father. Most of us stood frozen as this self-effacing seventeen-year-old questioned our nation's role in the war and the agenda of those who promoted it. "I wonder about this writer," she concluded, "since he writes without the benefit of having fought as my father did."

In Cristina's case, ethnography allowed an otherwise timid student to make writing a very personal learning process. It was not the robotic steps of learning the notecard that defined the paper but rather the opportunity to seek answers to questions that affected her life. Such research helps students to see the way a research paper can transcend protocol and become an extension of one's natural desire to solve problems, to find order.

Other projects, while not as emotional as Cristina's, radiated from the same kind of commitment and curiosity. With the invitation to step out of the library and the stifling array of regulations that seem to be part of this assignment, many students explored provocative issues. Again, some of the most memorable examples came from participants who had previously been reticent and disengaged. Paul, as an example, turned in assignments sporadically, often doing papers late and with a perfunctory effort. However, with talk of empirical and ethnographic research, he quickly thought of delving into the world of rock bands and the life of a musician. Because his brother had long been a part of a band, and because Paul aspired to one day play guitar professionally, the research seemed a congruent connection with his life.

A Community of Writers

What is particularly fascinating about expanding research avenues is the way it touches both the students who are doing the research and those who are part of the class. Indeed, with each progress report, our class became a little more involved in the life of a rock and roll band. As Paul discussed his interviews, his observations and analysis of this unique community of artists, our class became more involved in offering suggestions as to how he should organize his paper. Many, as an example, wanted more analysis of

why these musicians were special, why they deserved a closer look. As Paul contemplated these questions, he began to appreciate the need for elaboration, especially when the audience is not familiar with one's subject. It forced him to evaluate his own feelings about the life and philosophy of rock and roll musicians and identify those characteristics that best highlighted their unique lifestyle. As with Cristina, the ability to venture outside of the library allowed him to see and interact with his subject, rather than just read about it.

In both Cristina's and Paul's papers, one noticed a conspicuous change in the way most research papers—and most classes—are conducted. As Brunner suggests, "good teachers are often portrayed as those who are in control, as those who dictate and shape learning. Typically, only in portraits that present negative images do we see students interacting with students or teachers interacting with students" (96).

And yet, the willingness to abdicate power and present a research project that was neither neat nor predictable established a context of genuine inquiry. As Regie Routman suggests, "the ultimate in education is reached when learners—both students and teachers at all levels—take charge of their own learning and use their education to lead rich and satisfying lives" (147).

A review of final projects helped to illustrate this conclusion. Cristina's final draft, after several interviews with her father and other veterans—and after reading chapters of several books—resulted in a fascinating examination of the Vietnam conflict. Intermingled in her interviews were quotations from various books and newspapers, stating antithetical views on the righteousness of the war. Especially intriguing were the contrasting views of politicians and veterans, as many of the veterans commented on the reality of the carnage and the erroneous and overly patriotic statements of their representatives.

Weeks after she first introduced the idea of the paper, Cristina stood before the class and read her paper to students who were learning a valuable lesson about history and the people who made it. Her final draft helped underscore the ambivalence and rancor that still radiates from many Americans. Most memorable were the stories from her father and his pointed comments as to what "experts" said about the war. While many of us had seen history as a compilation of facts and dates, we now experienced its emotional, subjective reality.

Paul's final effort, while not able to pack the same emotional punch, was a very impressive montage of music magazines and personal interviews with musicians. As with Cristina, Paul's involvement in doing this paper, and engaging himself as well as his audience, represented a significant change from his previously erratic performance. Many students were intrigued by his honest portrait of these people and the nomadic existence they seemed to live. While many of us tend to glamorize the life of a rocker, Paul

did an exceptional job of bringing reality to the subject. The interviews with his brothers and friends helped us all to see the struggle that never becomes part of prime-time T.V.

Worth Trying Again

Using ethnographic and empirical research allows students to use their world as a laboratory. It makes research contemporary and fluid and involves the community in interdisciplinary learning. I will try it again and hope to make research writing a more organic experience for those who would otherwise become mired in the more ritualized, less personal aspects of research and learning. For me, this new approach was very successful and encouraging. I look forward to trying it again in the future.

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