

APPENDIX

D

THE “RESEARCH PAPER” IN THE WRITING COURSE: A NON-FORM OF WRITING

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Commentary:

Teaching research does not happen only in the traditional sense of a research paper. Research should be an ongoing activity rather than an event undertaken once a year usually during one entire marking period.

Remember, this is a college course description, and while the change in course description is significant, it is also developmentally appropriate for that level. Inclusion here does not mean to suggest it is equally appropriate for middle school or high school, although documentation in authentic ways may be adapted to various levels. Informed curricula writers adjust their scope and sequence to lay foundations rather than to engage students in watered-down versions of college courses.

Let me begin by assuring you that I do not oppose the assumption that student writers in academic and professional settings, whether they be freshman or sophomores or students in secondary school or intend to be journalists or lawyers or scholars or whatever, should engage in research. I think they should engage in research and that appropriately informed people should help them learn to engage in research in whatever field these writers happen to be studying. Nor do I deny the axiom that writing should incorporate the citation of the writer’s sources of information when those sources are not common knowledge. I think that writers must incorporate into their writing the citation of their sources—and they must also incorporate the thoughtful, perceptive evaluation of those sources and of the contribution that those sources might have made to the writer’s thinking. Nor do I oppose the assumption that a writer should make the use of appropriate sources a regular activity in the process of composing. I share the assumption that writers should identify, explore, evaluate, and draw upon appropriate sources as an integral step in what today we think of as the composing process.

In fact, let me begin with some positive values. On my campus, the Department of English has just decided to request a change in the description of its second-semester freshman course. The old description read as follows:

This course emphasizes the writing of formal analytic essays and the basic methods

of research common to various academic disciplines. Students will write frequently in and out of class. By the close of the semester, students will demonstrate mastery of the formal expository essay and the research paper. Individual conferences.

The department is asking our curriculum committee to have the description read:

This course emphasizes writing of analytical essays and the methods of inquiry common to various academic disciplines. Students will write frequently in and out of class. By the close of the semester, students will demonstrate their ability to write essays incorporating references to suitable sources of information and to use appropriate methods of documentation. Individual conferences.

I applauded the department for requesting that change, and I wrote to the college curriculum committee to say so.

While thinking about this paper—to take another positive example—I received from the University of Michigan press a copy of the proofs of a forthcoming book titled *Researching American Culture: A Guide for Student Anthropologists*, sent to me because members of the English Composition Board of the University of Michigan had decided that the book might be of use as a supplementary text at Michigan in writing courses that emphasize writing in the academic disciplines. Along with essays by professional anthropologists presenting or discussing research in anthropology, the book includes several essays by students. In these essays the students, who had been instructed and guided by faculty in anthropology, report the results of research they have performed on aspects of American culture, from peer groups in high school to connections between consumption of alcohol and tipping in a restaurant, to mortuary customs, to sports in America. If anyone was in doubt about the point, the collection demonstrates that undergraduate students can conduct and report sensible, orderly, clear, and informative research in the discipline of anthropology. I am here to endorse, indeed to applaud, such work, not to

We have here a clear example of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

Again, learning research must take place within a context. Doing research because the curriculum guide says so is not helping students see the connections between research and what they are learning.

A challenge for English language arts teachers may be to brainstorm what would constitute research for the level they teach.

Preoccupation with card catalogs and guides to periodic literature is both antiquated and shortsighted. Teachers like Larson want to broaden the definition of research.

question the wisdom of such collections as that from Michigan or to voice reservations about the capacity of undergraduates for research.

Why, then, an essay whose title makes clear a deep skepticism about “research papers”? First, because I believe that the generic “research paper” as a concept, and as a form of writing taught in a department of English, is not defensible. Second, because I believe that by saying that we teach the “research paper”—that is, by acting as if there is a generic concept defensible entitled the “research paper”—we mislead students about the activities of both research and writing. I take up these propositions in order.

We would all agree to begin with, I think, that “research” is an activity in which one engages. Probably almost everyone reading this paper has engaged, at one time or another, in research. Most graduate seminars require research; most dissertations rely upon research, though of course many dissertations in English may also include analytical interpretation of texts written by one or more authors. Research can take many forms: systematically observing events, finding out what happens when one performs certain procedures in the laboratory, conducting interviews, tape-recording speakers’ comments, asking human beings to utter aloud their thoughts while composing in writing or in another medium and noting what emerges, photographing phenomena (such as the light received in a telescope from planets and stars), watching the activities of people in groups, reading a person’s letters and notes; all these are research. So, of course, is looking up information in a library or in newspaper files, or reading documents to which one has gained access under the Freedom of Information Act—though reading filed and catalogued documents is in many fields not the most important (it may be least important) activity in which a “researcher” engages. We could probably define “research” generally as the seeking out of information new to the seeker, for the purpose, and we could probably agree that the researcher usually has to interpret, evaluate, and organize that information before it acquires value. And we would probably agree that the researcher has to present the fruits of his or her research, appropriately

ordered and interpreted, in symbols that are intelligible to others, before that research can be evaluated and can have an effect. Most often, outside of mathematics and the sciences (and outside of those branches of philosophy that work with nonverbal symbolic notation), maybe also outside of music, that research is presented to others, orally or in writing, in a verbal language.

But research still is an activity; it furnishes the substance of much discourse and can furnish substance to almost any discourse except, possibly, one's personal reflections on one's own experience. But it is itself the subject—the substance—of no distinctively identifiable kind of writing. Research can inform virtually any writing or speaking if the author wishes it to do so; there is nothing of substance or content that differentiates one paper that draws on data from outside the author's own self from another paper—nothing that can enable one to say that this paper is a “research paper” and that paper is not. (Indeed even as ordered, interpreted reporting of altogether personal experiences and responses can, if presented purposively, be a reporting of research.) I would assert therefore that the so-called “research paper,” as a generic, cross-disciplinary term, has no conceptual or substantive identity. If almost any paper is potentially a paper incorporating the fruits of research, the term “research paper” has virtually no value as an identification of a kind of substance in a paper. Conceptually, the generic term “research paper” is for practical purposes meaningless. We can not usefully distinguish between “research papers” and non-research papers; we can distinguish only between papers that should have incorporated the fruits of research but did not, and those that did incorporate such results, or between those that reflect poor or inadequate research and those that reflect good or sufficient research. I would argue that most undergraduate papers reflect poor or inadequate research, and that our responsibility . . . should be to assure that each student reflect in each paper the appropriate research, wisely conducted, for his or her subject.

I have already suggested that “research” can take a wide variety of forms, down to and in-

Consider the work of Donald Graves, Lucy McCormick Calkins, Tom Romano, and Nancie Atwell as examples of substantive research based primarily on personal observation taken systematically and organized in literate and interesting ways.

Consider, too, the difference between a research paper and research skills.

At best, this is merely copying; at worse, it is plagiarism. Additionally, most elementary, middle, and high school libraries are inadequate. Sending students to university libraries results in either frustration on the students' part, or aggravation on the librarian's part, or both. Case in point: A high school student from an honors class was told to research every article in the Washington Post related to the first thirty days of the Clinton presidency. The student sat at the microfilm reader in tears when she realized the enormity of the task. The college reference librarian finally walked off in disgust saying, "I don't know what your teacher wants."

In this sentence Larson opens up research, which, unfortunately, has been too often viewed as a closed activity.

Richard L. Larson is without peer as a scholar of integrity. He is equally respected by members of the Modern Language Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. That a professor of this caliber holds that the "research paper" has no formal substantive or procedural identity should give all teachers of English pause.

cluding the ordered presentation of one's personal reflections and the interpretations of one's most direct experiences unmediated by interaction with others or by reference to identifiably external sources. (The form of research on composing known as "protocol analysis" or even the keeping of what some teachers of writing designate as a "process journal," if conducted by the giver of the protocol or by the writer while writing, might be such research.) If research can refer to almost any process by which data outside the immediate and purely personal experiences of the writer are gathered, then I suggest that just as the so-called "research paper" has no conceptual or substantive identity, neither does it have a procedural identity; the term does not necessarily designate any particular kind of data nor any preferred procedure for gathering data. I would argue that the so-called "research paper," as ordinarily taught by the kinds of texts I have reviewed, implicitly equates "research" with looking up books in the library and taking down information from those books. Even if there [are goings on] in some departments of English instruction that [get] beyond those narrow boundaries, the customary practices that I have observed for guiding the "research paper" assume a procedural identity for the paper that is, I think, nonexistent.

As the activity of research can take a wide variety of forms, so the presentation and use of research within discourse can take a wide variety of forms. Indeed I cannot imagine any identifiable design that any scholar in rhetoric has identifies as a recurrent plan from arranging discourse which cannot incorporate the fruits of research, broadly construed. I am not aware of any kind or form of discourse or any aim, identified by any student of rhetoric or any theorist of language or any investigator of discourse theory, that is distinguished primarily—or to any extent—by the presence of the fruits of "research" in its typical examples. One currently popular theoretical classification of discourse, that by James Kinneavy (*A Theory of Discourse* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971]), identifies some "aims" of discourse that might seem to furnish a home for papers based on research: "referential" and "exploratory" discourse.

But, as I understand these aims, a piece of discourse does not require the presence of results, of ordered “research” in order to fit into either of these classes, even though discourse incorporating the results of ordered research might fit there—as indeed it might under almost any of Kinneavy’s categories, including the category of “expressive” discourse. (All discourse is to a degree “expressive” anyway.) The other currently dominant categorization of examples of discourse—dominate even over Kinneavy’s extensively discussed theory—is really categorization based upon plans that organize discourse: narration (of completed events, of ongoing processes, of possible scenarios), casual analysis, comparison, analogy, and so on. None of these plans is differentiated from other plans by the presence within it of fruits from research; research can be presented, so far as I can see, according to any of these plans. And if one consults Frank J. D’Angelo’s *A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1975) one will not find, if my memory serves me reliably, any category of rhetorical plan or any fundamental human cognitive process—D’Angelo connects all rhetorical plans with human cognitive processes—that is defined by the presence of the fruits of research. If there is a particular rhetorical form that is defined by the presence of results of research, then, I have not seen an effort to define that form and to argue that the results of research are what identify it as a form. I conclude that the “research paper,” as now taught, has no formal identity, as it has no substantive identity and no procedural identity.

For me, then, very little is gained by speaking about and teaching, as a generic concept, the so-called “research paper.” If anything at all is gained, it is only the reminder that responsible writing normally depends on well-planned investigation of data. But much is lost by teaching the research paper as a separately designated activity. For by teaching the generic “research paper” as a separate activity, instructors in writing signal to their students that there is a kind of writing that incorporates the results of research, and there are (by implication) many kinds of writing that do not and need not do so. “Research,” students are allowed to infer, is a spe-

Once again, integration, not fragmentation, is the key.

First, it is interesting to note that Larson comfortably uses personal pronouns, and these personal pronouns in no way distract from the import of his meaning. Second, I visited a high school class in La Joya, Texas. The students in Linda Garcia Perez's class had undertaken exciting research. They had interviewed the joyas (jewels), that is, the older members of the community, about their experiences. They were encouraged to note facial expressions and capture direct dialogue. Most students worked with tape recorders. The results were bound together in an anthology entitled Our Town, Nuestro Pueblo, which won second place in the national Arts and Entertainment 1990 Teacher Grant Competition, May 14, 1990, in Washington, D.C. As I read through Monica A. Gonzalez's account of her great aunt's memories of picking cotton, Miguel Ramos's interview with his grandfather who was paid seventy-five cents a day pruning orange trees, or Noralisa Leo's essay, "The Medicis of La Joya," I was struck with the individual style of each writer as he or she documented the data of their interviewee. The results were poignant, sometimes sad, often humorous, but always interesting. I couldn't put the anthology down. I even requested a copy to share with other teachers. Besides this rich book of heritage sat the students' other research. These papers were on such topics as John Donne's metaphysical poetry and the use of symbolism in the collected

cialized activity that one engages in during a special course, or late in a regular semester or year, or but that one does not ordinarily need to be concerned about and can indeed, for the most part, forget about. Designating the "research paper" as a separate project therefore seems to me to work against the purposes for which we allegedly teach the research paper: to help students familiarize themselves with ways of gathering, interpreting, drawing upon, and acknowledging data from outside themselves in their writing. By talking of the "research paper," that is, we undermine some of the very goals of our teaching.

We also meet two other, related difficulties. First, when we tend to present the "research paper" as in effect paper based upon the use of the library, we misrepresent "research." Granted that a good deal of research in the field of literature is conducted in the library among books, much research that is still entitled to be called humanistic takes place outside the library. It can take place, as I mentioned earlier, wherever "protocol" research or writers' analyses of their composing processes take place: it can take place in the living room or study of an author who is being interviewed about his or her habits of working. It can take place in the home of an old farmer or rancher or weaver or potter who is telling a student about the legends or songs of his or her people, or about the historical process by which the speaker came from roots at home or abroad. Much research relies upon books, but books do not constitute the corpus of research data except possibly in one or two fields of study. If we teach the so-called "research paper" is such a way as to imply that all or almost all research is done in books and in libraries, we show our provincialism and degrade the research of many disciplines.

Second, though we pretend to prepare students to engage in the research appropriate to their chosen disciplines, we do not and cannot do so. Faculty in other fields may wish that we could relieve them of the responsibility of teaching their students to write about the research students do in those other fields, but I don't think that as teachers of English we can relieve them of that responsibility. Looking at

the work of the students who contributed to the University of Michigan press volume of *Researching American Culture*, I can't conceive myself giving useful direction to those students. I can't conceive myself showing them how to do the research they did, how to avoid pitfalls, assure representativeness of data, draw permissible inferences, and reach defensible conclusions. And, frankly, I can't conceive many teachers of English showing these students what they needed to know either. I can't conceive myself, or very many colleagues (other than trained teachers of technical writing) guiding a student toward a report of a scientific laboratory experiment that a teacher of science would find exemplary. I can't conceive myself or many colleagues guiding a student toward a well-designed experiment in psychology, with appropriate safeguards and controls and wise interpretations of quantitative and nonquantitative information. In each of these fields (indeed probably in each academic field) the term "research paper" may have some meaning—quite probably a meaning different from its meaning in other fields. Students in different fields do write papers reporting research. We in English have no business claiming to teach "research" when research in different academic disciplines works from distinctive assumptions and follows distinctive patterns of inquiry. Such distinctions in fact are what differentiate the disciplines. Most of us are trained in one discipline only and should be modest enough to admit it.

But let me repeat what I said when I started: that I don't come before you to urge that students of writing need not engage in "research." I think that they should engage in research. I think they should understand that in order to function as educated, informed men and women they have to engage in research, from the beginning of and throughout their work as writers. I think that they should know what research can embrace, and I think they should be encouraged to view research as broadly, and conduct it as imaginatively, as they can. I think they should be held accountable for their opinions and should be required to say, from evidence, why they believe what they assert. I think that they should be let to recognize that data from "research" will affect their entire lives, and that they should

works of D. H. Lawrence. I randomly selected a few to read. Style, voice, and verve were gone. Lifeless prose, obviously copied from much too advanced scholarly works, rose up to greet me. At the end of the day, I stood with the anthology in one hand and the "research papers" in the other. "Do you see any difference?" I asked Linda. Of course she had. And it is doubtful that Linda as teacher-researcher will ever put her students through the generic research paper again.

If Julie as a third-grader (Chapter 12) was able to research her name, and Audrey and Leah as kindergartners (Chapter 12) were able to research mice, most certainly students on all levels are capable of research and should, in Larson's words, "be required to say, from evidence, why they believe what they assert."

know how to evaluate such data as well as to gather them. And I think they should know their responsibilities for telling their listeners and readers where their data came from.

What I argue is that the profession of the teaching of English should abandon the concept of the generic “research paper”—that form of what a colleague of mine has called “messenger service” in which a student is told that for this one assignment, this one project, he or she has to go somewhere (usually the library), get out some materials, make some notes, and present them to the customer neatly wrapped in footnotes and bibliography tied together according to someone’s notation of style sheet. I argue that the generic “research paper,” so far as I am familiar with it, is a concept without an identity, and that to teach it is not only to misrepresent research but also quite often to pander to the wishes of faculty in other disciplines that we spare them a responsibility that they must accept. Teaching the generic “research paper” often represents a misguided notion of service to other departments. The best service we can render to those departments and to the students themselves, I would argue, is to insist that students recognize their continuing responsibility for looking attentively at their experiences; for seeking out, wherever it can be found, the information they need for the development of their ideas; and for putting such data at the service of every piece they write. That is one kind of service we can do to advance students’ humanistic and liberal education.

We have often said that this cogent article by Larson should be photocopied (with permission, of course) and dropped by crop dusters over schools across the nation.

This kind of service best serves democracy.