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A Relevant Reading Assignment from a Surprising Source

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In a most surprising source, I discovered an accessible, engaging, and highly relevant nonfiction work perfectly suited for English teachers to assign to high school juniors & seniors. As people may naturally assume, however, the work is not a speech, memoir, editorial, or any other genre we traditionally define as "nonfiction."

It's an *English Journal* article.

Writing this, I imagine *LAJM* readers' stunned silences, puzzled frowns, and an understandable generalization: *English Journal? She wants our students to read the English Journal?* My response is "no" for an obvious reason—our students' interest or lack thereof—and a not-so-obvious one, thanks to James Phelan. In "On Teaching Critical Arguments: A Matrix of Understanding," Phelan claims "the thesis of any argument [in *EJ* or elsewhere] emerges in response to questions and ongoing dialogues, by means of methods of reasoning, through the application of certain assumptions and principles, and for certain purposes (528). This sensible observation reminds us that though our students can surely read the isolated words, sentences and paragraphs of any EJ article, they lack the specialized and socially constructed knowledge that render entire texts meaningful.

Not completely so, however, with the article I am recommending. Its exigency is actually a call for student voices in curricular decision making, and its topic addresses an on-going debate of supreme relevance: how best to prepare graduating seniors for university writing classes. Besides all this, the article provides an ideal opportunity for English teachers to teach, reinforce, and/or refine close critical reading skills, and it is filled with student voices arguing persuasively for rigorous process pedagogies.

So what is the name of this nonfiction work? It is D.R. Ransdell and Gregory R. Glau's "Articulation and Student Voices: Eliminating the Perception that 'High School English Doesn't Teach You Nothing,'" and it was published as the lead *EJ* article in January of 1996.

A Quick Overview of the Study

For veterans needing memory jogs and for new and/or pre-service English teachers entering the ranks, Ransdell and Glau's essay reports the results of a survey conducted at Arizona State University. The purpose was twofold: (A) to learn about the high school writing curriculums of entering college students and (B) to articulate what advice they would give to former English teachers.

Ransdell and Glau fully acknowledge their study is an introductory one, but most EJ readers will intuitively agree that the results ring true. First, they suggest a correlation exists between writing frequency in high school and course placement at college. More specifically, students who remembered writing an average of 3.4 high school papers a year were more likely to place into "regular" first-year composition courses, while those who remembered writing an average of 2.6 papers were more likely to place into "remedial" or "basic" classes. The implication, of course, is that college bound students would benefit simply by writing a greater number of papers. Makes good sense, right? Secondly, the study suggests that students genuinely wish their high school writing teachers had, overall, been more rigorous.

In particular, survey participants expressed disdain, and sometimes even loathing, for the so-called five-paragraph essay, just as Janet Emig did over thirty years ago, because it reduces writing to a simplistic formula. Rather than a five-paragraph essay, survey participants called for challenging and complex writing assignments, ones that could not be "knocked out" in a single writing session the night before the deadline. Similarly, students said they wished English teachers had included in writing assignments teacherly feedback on their rough drafts coupled with the time for substantive revision and

then, in turn, higher grading standards for final drafts. They said they believed these practices combined would have helped them grow as writers and also have given them a more accurate understanding of their rhetorical skill. Last of all, the students said they wished their high school teachers had assigned fewer literature tests and grammar worksheets and more writing.

High School Students' Reactions

Though calling for student voices, Ransdell and Glau did not imagine student *readers*, as I am proposing here. Nevertheless, the article worked beautifully in my classes at least initially because—I confess! I confess!—it reinforced my curriculum. More specifically, I wanted my students to know that my propensity for several complex assignments per semester, multiple drafts, and difficult (but obtainable) grading standards wasn't a pedagogical peculiarity. The essay accomplished this objective, but it also prompted some heated class discussions, something that I also hoped would take place. For example, my students couldn't fathom a curriculum comprised of only two or three papers a year total, and they said so in no uncertain terms. It was incomprehensible to them, too, that any student would call for higher grading standards. In fact, they found it suspicious that survey participants called for tougher grading standards after they, themselves, had graduated from high school. How unfair, they fumed! Some of my students also admitted quietly they knew plenty of "other kids" who tried to "skate by with the bare minimum work" in all their high school classes, but especially their English classes. With these classmates in mind, students cautiously speculated that perhaps some of the survey participants had, in fact, been given the time to revise papers in their high school English classes but hadn't taken advantage of the opportunity.

In addition to voicing personal reactions, students analyzed the research design, a task that was not beyond them with help from Sherblom, Sullivan, and Sherblom's "The What, the Whom, and the Hows of Survey Research." Most of all, students discussed the "remembered, self-reported data" upon which the results are based and debated if the survey participants could accurately remember the context and number of papers assigned to them two, three, and even four years previously. After all, as Sherblom, Sullivan, and Sherblom note, "A survey cannot . . . measure people's behaviors [composing or otherwise]. It can only measure perceptions of those behaviors" (58). This limitation of survey data was new information to my students, and it prompted them to question the results and implications of other studies, including those they had conducted, themselves, for other classes. Additionally, my students considered the "target population" of the Ransdell and Glau study, wondering if results would vary with survey participants representing a different university or a group of universities. With a little nudging, students considered, too, how results might have changed had they included teachers' reactions to survey responses.

It is important to note that discussing the limitations in the research design did not negate survey results, implications, or the overall reading experience; instead it enriched them all. In addition, the limitations helped students to agree with Ransdell and Glau's contention: that their 1996 study is introductory in nature and in great need of follow-up research.

College Students' Responses/ Follow-Up Stories

Six years and a new, university-level teaching position later, I still assign the Ransdell and Glau study but now to first-year college students and pre-service English teachers. My new students benefit for the same reasons that my high school students did: the article reinforces rigorous process pedagogies and it promotes close, critical reading, especially if students are encouraged to examine key features of the research design. Unlike my former high school students, however, my college students come from a broad range of high school experiences. As a result, their oral/written responses provide a window into high school writing curriculums not otherwise accessible to me personally or professionally. Though their stories are anecdotal and self-reported, common themes and overarching

patterns emerge, so they can function as a follow up of sorts to the Ransdell and Glau study. Like the survey participants, my students all call for fewer five-paragraph essays and more revision opportunities. Additionally, they have presented some fascinating pedagogical conundrums, especially when remembered high school experiences contradict each other, Ransdell and Glau's results, and/or conventional wisdom in the field.

Grades, for example, are often at the center of students' responses. When they read survey participants' call for tougher grading standards, it prompts many students to remember a time when they went 'head to head" with a very difficult high school writing teacher. This teacher assigned a lot of writing, and her/his grading standards seemed higher than the other English teachers' standards. Though students report being initially angry and even resentful, they eventually come to trust and respect this person, and they believe they worked harder and became better, more effective writers as a result of the tough grading standards. Interestingly enough, however, other students tell the opposite story, one more reminiscent of early-process narratives of the 70s. These students chronicle sad tales of a teacher who undermined their confidence and pleasure in writing, all for the sake of high standards. Though the second version of this two-sided story refutes Ransdell and Glau's findings, I'm convinced both versions tell pedagogical truths.

Another common theme is the correlation between writing frequency and course placement or success. More specifically, many students claim they wrote a great number of high school papers, far more than the survey participants reported in the Ransdell and Glau study, so survey results suggest these students would be automatic success stories in university writing courses. But this is not always the case, as they explain. When pressed, these students often reveal that their writing assignments called over and over again for the exact same mode or pattern: solely five-paragraph essays, solely journal entries, solely research papers, solely personal response essays. These stories extend Ransdell and Glau's findings by implying that students benefit by undertaking not only a large number of papers, but also by working within a variety of genres.

One student's story continues to haunt me. His teachers wisely believed in individual choice and multi-genre approaches, so this student was always given for each writing assignment a wide range of options, everything from making posters and drawing cartoons to conducting research and writing essays. According to my student, however, this approach backfired for him. Left completely to his own devices, he never wrote extended essays. Instead, he always opted for drawing posters or coloring advertisements. In his own words, he always took what he perceived was "the easiest assignment" and, as a result, wrote very little during his high school years.

Conclusion

Though professional teaching journals do not generally provide the best reading material for students, exceptions do exist, and Ransdell and Glau's "Articulation and Student Voices" is clearly one. Other noteworthy examples, however, are also available. For example, students will love Lisa J. McClure's "A Writing Teacher Relearns to Write" because of the storyteller's dual teacher/student roles and her subsequent, "writing as a process" confession. I also recommend Liz Mandrell's "Zen and the Art of Grade Motivation," a narrative-style teacher/student research project regarding grading practices in an honors English class. Results are surprising, and they appear applicable to students of any ability level. And a third article appropriate for student consumption is Marcela Fuentes' "Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*: Teaching True Diversity." According to Fuentes, the main character of *White Boy* is fully cognizant of two contradictory arenas in his multi-cultural education: the classroom and the schoolyard.

Why would these articles, which were written for English teachers, be relevant for our students? Why should pre-service, new, or veteran teachers read and then consider assigning them as required reading? The answer is simple. Most

obviously, the articles are likely to reinforce best practices, to foster great class discussions, and to promote critical reading skills. In addition, however, one other benefit exists, and it may be the most power of them all. Each of the articles has a multi-voiced quality that includes portraits of students assessing their own learning. Ransdell and Glau's participants share perceptions of their high school English classes. McClure compares her writing processes in graduate school to her teaching practices at the secondary level. Mandrell grants permission to her students to learn firsthand if grades really matter. And Fuentes introduces Gunnar, an African American student self-aware enough to see the irony of "growing up 'diverse' under the edicts of political correctness and multiculturalism" (63). These student portraits are accessible, compelling, and relevant, and they are likely to encourage our own students to reflect in substantive ways about their school personas and educational practices. What more could we ask of a reading assignment?

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