Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 11
Issue 2 *Focus: Teaching Writing*

Article 15

1995

Storytelling and the Career I-Search Paper

Michelle Walker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Walker, Michelle (1995) "Storytelling and the Career I-Search Paper," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 15.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1530>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Storytelling and the Career I-Search Paper

Michelle Walker

Telling their own stories and poking around in the stories of others has tremendous power to motivate students to write, even when that writing stems from a school assignment, because people are naturally disposed to talk about themselves and to be curious about the experiences of others (hence the human propensity for gossip). It is that focus on storytelling which makes Ken Macrorie's notion of the I-search paper so satisfying and which makes such searching ideal for career exploration. "Look at a two-year-old grabbing books off a shelf, seeing how they open, ripping pages, finding out how they taste. Not much different from a kitten first time out of his box. Apparently we're all born curious. Inside or outside school, research should be like that, but usually it isn't" (54). In using Macrorie's model, my colleagues and I have attempted to turn career research that "isn't" into what it should be: energetic and personal and motivated by curiosity.

What I Knew

About five years ago, when English graduation requirements in Ithaca still came in the form of semester offerings, one of which was a semester of beginning composition, my colleagues who taught this course and I were faced with the need to devise a writing assignment at the junior level to satisfy a new state mandate for career development. This mandate came under the auspices of

the twelve academic, personal management, and teamwork benchmarks of the Employability/Educational Development Plan Portfolio, and we struggled with how to create a meaningful assignment for students and to satisfy the state requirement. To do so, we selected two diamond skills within the benchmarks of responsibility and career development that we felt students could address in a research paper: 1) "planning for a decision that significantly impacts your life plans (e.g. choosing a college/career path)" and 2) "determining personal strengths, weaknesses, and interests relative to specific career areas."

Besides knowing that we must deal in some way with employability, we also knew some other things. We knew that in our information-glutted society, students need skills to sift through the daily bombardment of facts, and we knew that learning a variety of research techniques (e.g. locating first and secondhand sources, skimming, taking notes, using computer data bases, comparing and judging the validity of information, organizing findings, and documenting sources) could help. We also knew that students find research assignments dry and dull and often produce dry and dull papers as a result. Finally, we knew that students learn best and become most enthusiastic about their learning when they can tell their own stories and relate those stories to objective information and the stories of others.

What I/We Did

At this point I luckily stumbled upon Ken Macrorie's book *The I-Search Paper*, and in delving into that text discovered an answer to the dilemma of providing students with an opportunity for insight into their personal and career lives and for the development of research skills. After a couple semesters of playing around with different ways students might organize their information, my colleagues and I settled on a four-part format: personal narrative, research, interview, and conclusion. From experience, we knew that students of this level and wide range of ability feel most comfortable with some rather specific guidance about how a major paper should be organized, and we felt that this format provided such structure and still allowed for adaptation by students who might wish to be more creative.

As we used this assignment first in the semester composition course and now as part of an integrated year-long English 11 course, we use handouts and conduct mini-lessons to help students through the process. One of the first information sheets I give students contains searching tips to help them investigate a career which they may want to pursue after high school (Macrorie 62-63). Students are required to use a minimum of three sources of information, with most consulting two print sources and doing the one required personal interview with someone in the field. Some of the best papers, though, have been based solely on interviews with no secondhand sources.

Early in the approximately six-week process, I ask students to fill out a topic information sheet, which helps them focus their thoughts and gives me a sense of how I can best help each individual in the search. The sheet contains open-ended statements like the following: "I chose this career because . . .," "My idea for an interviewee is . . .," "I think this person would be a good firsthand source because . . .," "Problems I am having or anticipate having are . . .," "Specific help I would like along the way is . . .," and "The story I plan to use as the basis of my personal narrative is" I also give them an explanation of each of the four parts (Appendix), a work/deadline schedule (During the six weeks, we work in class on Mondays and Fridays with literature study on Tues-

days through Thursdays, having found that giving students some intervening time helps in meeting deadlines.), a packet of interview tips, and a list of interviewees from a variety of careers who have been willing to talk with students in the past.

We work together to make the personal narrative part of the paper come alive with specific, sensory detail and the avoidance of "be" verbs. We wrestle in the research section with quoting and paraphrasing information and documenting by using MLA style for a works cited list and parenthetical documentation. We brainstorm effective questions and proper ways to approach people for an interview. And finally, we talk about how to put closure on the paper by thinking about the search and what the findings mean to each student's future plans.

As students are collecting information, I try to provide support and feedback in a number of different ways. I meet with students daily to help them find the story that sparked an interest in this career, to decide on an interviewee and talk through how to contact that person, to find the print sources of information that will answer their most burning questions about the career (Early and often, I emphasize that this is their search and that I have no preconceived idea of what specific information the paper should include. For example, if a student is interested in discovering and sharing the career's approximate starting salary, fine. If not, that's fine, too.), and to settle on a comfortable format for reporting the interview findings. Also, certain days are designated as deadlines for first drafts of each section, and on those days the hour is spent sharing and getting peer and teacher response. As students revise the four parts and put them together, I give assistance with adding transitional material so that the sections flow smoothly together and by giving any editing help students request as they "clean up" their text in the process of moving to a polished draft.

What I Got

The wide variety of papers, each unique to its writer, that came flooding in just before final exams showed evidence of my students' thought and care in texts written, in many cases, from the

heart and soul; and the narrative and interview sections showed vividly the students' personal stake in their topics.

In their interviewing many students made connections with family members in the areas of business/restaurant management, agriculture, religious ministry work, nursing, auto mechanics, the FBI/CIA, aerospace engineering, and pharmacy, and in their papers they discussed how aunts and uncles, parents, cousins, and grandparents have influenced them in their search for a satisfying career.

Heidi, who was interested in exploring how a person might successfully tackle a career in restaurant management without going to college, began her paper with the following: "As you walk through the door of Main Street Pizza you see the employees making pizzas, subs and salads but you can't see the hard work it really takes to run a fast food joint. Making food is only a slice of the pizza when it comes to management"; and by interviewing her aunt, Heidi discovered that dedication, concentration, and patience are essential in dealing with such behind-the-scenes management tasks as hiring/firing employees and handling take-home paper work.

In his personal narrative, Calvin reflected on his life, his family's livelihood on the farm, and the contribution this career makes in society. As part of his focus question, he asked, "If my farm fail [sic] and others follow will this turn into another Somalia?" and then went on to find out from his mom about the business end of managing a farm operation.

A cousin provided Beth with an opportunity to walk around in the shoes of an emergency room nurse through two stories she told to illustrate the best and the worst of her job. When a 31-year-old man was brought in with multiple head injuries after being knocked off his bike by a car, Beth reports, "His family said good-bye to him there because they knew he would not live through the night. 'As I (cousin Fran) saw this happening I started to cry along with them.' The following day the family all decided to unplug the ventilator. 'To me, this is one of the scariest traumas I have had to go through.'" The happiest moment came when Fran was able to help with an emergency delivery of twins, whose mother arrived at the hospital five

weeks early with one of the baby's two feet presented for delivery and later came back with the newborns to thank Fran.

Andrea talked extensively with her grandfather about going to pharmacy school at Ferris State, owning a pharmacy for fourteen years, and being a state pharmaceutical inspector for over eighteen years. She said, "Talking with my grandfather helped me to understand what being a pharmacist is really about: helping people."

Other students sought people outside their families whom they knew, respected, and admired in order to discuss missionary work, the machinist trade, bookkeeping, accounting, special education, banking, physical therapy, registered nursing, basketball coaching, commercial lettering, law enforcement, emergency medical services, veterinary medicine, biology/zoology, commercial art, engineering, international business, and acting.

"Talking with my grandfather helped me to understand what being a pharmacist is really about: helping people."

For example, one student who despises writing, and struggles in English while excelling in vocational classes, wrote a very successful paper in which he drew on his own experience in his machinist class at the Mt. Pleasant Vocational Center and at his job at a local machining company in order to tell the story of his interest in the career. He then went on to learn about the different levels of the job above the one he currently holds and interviewed his teacher to discover the advantages/disadvantages of working in the skilled trade industry, remarking about Mike's decision to leave the industry and go into teaching, "He was making great money and had great benefits, and he quit, [sic] I couldn't understand it."

In a poignant personal narrative from one girl, I read about how she used to sit in her living room window every night when she was twelve and watch her neighbor Nan get out of her car in a "dressy black overcoat" with "hair curled" and

"nice earrings to match" and with her briefcase of paperwork. This unmarried seventeen-year-old mother of a one-year-old son was so impressed by Nan's professional appearance that ever since she has been fascinated with the career of book-keeping. Because of the career I-search paper, she was able to interview Nan and learn what is behind the coat and briefcase.

Two boys interested in different areas of law enforcement interviewed family friends, a Gratiot County undersheriff and the chief of the Gary, Indiana Bomb Squad, to learn about the dangers, stresses, and rewards of being a bomb squad technician, corrections officer, deputy, road patrol officer, undercover investigator, and undersheriff.

Other papers allowed students to tell stories which no school assignment had probably ever allowed them to tell.

Finally, a few brave souls approached total strangers in and outside the community for a personal view of photography, business finance, physical therapy, medical records, medical technology, zoology, medicine, travel services, law, foreign language teaching, and child psychology. The most notable example of tenacious persistence I have ever seen came from one in this group. Emily was determined to talk with someone who works in a zoo, not just a zoology teacher, for her interview. Finally, after she and her mother made "a dozen calls" and left "a dozen messages," Emily was able to conduct a phone interview with someone at Potter's Park in Lansing who holds a bachelor's degree in science and wildlife management. She found out from Kelly that practical experience is most necessary in this career because "... the book work barely scratched the surface in applying to zoos. . . [and] a zoo wouldn't hire a person unless he/she had at least two years of work with exotic animals."

Other papers allowed students to tell stories which no school assignment had probably ever allowed them to tell. I learned about one student's struggle with giving up when confronted with

difficult math problems and her worry about how that might affect her career. She wrote, "This year I decided to go into accounting and business management. Then I thought and asked myself what if I were discouraged about an account, would I give up just as easily on that as on my geometry problems? Would this job make me enough money to support myself and a child without having to depend on everyone else for necessities?" This last question was an important concern, given the fact that this student gave birth to a little girl during final exam week and for the previous months had been thinking of the results of being an unmarried young mother. Her conclusion was an interesting one, I think. After interviewing her business teacher, visiting Baker College, and searching through print sources, she decided accounting was not the job for her because of her lack of background and the long, irregular hours at tax time; instead, she discovered business administration. In another paper, based solely on six interviews with colleagues, Cory told her story as a bank teller having to deal with a rude customer and then used the rest of her paper to explore whether or not she would want to remain in banking. She talked to former tellers, former and current customer service officers, loan officers, an accounting clerk, a former trust department secretary, a head teller, and a teller coordinator/trainer to give herself a look at other banking positions that don't require a college degree. Justin and Amy used basketball injuries to jump into their search of the physical therapy career, and Mary told of rescuing an elderly woman's foot from a whirlpool bath during her first weeks as a clinical student at a local nursing home. Lisa revealed that she was born with Ventricular Septal Defect, a congenital defect in which the hole between the right and left ventricles is larger than normal, and said she was most impressed by the medical records personnel during the frequent visits she has made to the hospital in Alma and to Michigan State's Pediatric Cardiology Center ever since her birth. In another birth story, I learned from the beginning of Carly's personal narrative that, "December 28, 1977, a baby was born three months early. That baby was me." She then discussed her interest in the field of medical technology because it "has advanced

greatly since seventeen years ago and will continue to progress in the future. I have always thought a career in the medical field would be interesting because I could help save lives, just like the people that saved mine." Two other students told about wanting to explore the career of veterinary medicine after having served, while still elementary school students, as an emergency veterinarian's "assistant" in delivering sheep and pigs on their family farm. One of these girls, besides writing the most thorough paper I received (over twelve pages typed), gave an interesting twist to the rather dry book research section by using second person point of view, envisioning as audience someone considering the career she herself was searching. Molly wrote, "Don't get me wrong. This occupation is hard work. After you graduate from a college or university, getting into a veterinarian college is tough. Only those who have the best academic records are accepted."

Even my six exchange students from Brazil, Russia, Sweden, France, and Norway were able to connect themselves to the assignment and, in one case, have a most surprising experience. Brazilian student Humberto took the opportunity to interview an Italian marble factory owner during the week he met his father at an international business conference in Florida and decided by the end of his year here to stay in the United States, attend Lansing Community College for a year, and then transfer to Alma College to study international business. Another Brazilian student told a heart-wrenching story about her interest in a law career stemming from her mother's abandonment of the family when she was six and her subsequent job as protector of her younger brother. I suggested that she interview a local attorney noted for his support of education and interest in young people, since I knew he would be a willing interviewee, but neither my student nor I bargained for the wonderful experience she would find. Jeff shocked Carol by greeting her in her native Portuguese and carrying on a fluent introductory conversation, putting her immediately at ease. What we both discovered—the beauty of the I-search is not only what the student learns but also what the teacher/reader delightfully can learn—was that Jeff had been an exchange stu-

dent in Brazil in 1961 when he was a student at Ithaca High School. The career I-search assignment allowed my small-town students and exchange students alike to start with themselves and their earliest experiences and extend them to others in local or far-off places.

What I Learned

Certainly, personal relevance is what works in this writing assignment, and whatever I can do to take the experience of the career I-search paper and apply it to other assignments in my English classroom will undoubtedly be satisfying and educational in some way to my students and me. Also, as hard as it may be, pushing and prodding students to think of their own story first, something that connects them with, in this case, a career, makes for highly successful papers, I found. This assignment shows that as we give students as writers more ownership, they put more time into the process, and the quality of their products improve. Challenging students to pose their own questions to use as the basis of research and not requiring particular information helps students "buy into" the task, and allowing them to struggle to find the exact information they want and the right interviewee to provide a personal view is worth the students' and the teacher's frustration. I also learned how a common format can produce vastly different, but equally successful, papers in length, style, and focus; and I was reminded of how much students are willing to revise if the paper is one in which they have a strong personal interest. Finally, I learned how fascinating student topics can be when the writers themselves are interested in them. "For ultimately the product that any writer has to sell is not his subject, but who he is What holds me is the enthusiasm of the writer for his field. How was he drawn into it? What emotional baggage did he bring along? How did it change his life? . . . This is personal transaction that is at the heart of good nonfiction writing. Out of it come two of the most important qualities. . . : humanity and warmth" (Zinsser 5).

Works Cited

- Macrorie, Ken. *The I-Search Paper*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann/Boynton/Cook, 1988.
- Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980.

Appendix

Form of the Career I-Search Paper

1. Personal Narrative

This first part of your paper should be written to show your personal connection with the career you've chosen to research and be in narrative (story) form. It also has the purpose of grabbing attention for your paper. Make use of strong, active verbs and detailed, sensory description to make your experience come alive for your reader.

The personal narrative section should end with the focus (controlling) question of your paper—your thesis in question form.

2. Research

Your focus question and any other areas of the career about which you're curious should form the basis of your search for information from secondhand sources. Report whatever you find in books, magazines, pamphlets, the Michigan Occupational Information System, etc. that helps give you a clear picture of the career. Feel free to

interject personal responses about the dry facts as you present them. Use proper parenthetical documentation and create a works cited list according to MLA style.

3. Interview

This part of the paper should report the findings of your interview with someone who does the job you're contemplating. It should include concrete, specific information about the career and, more importantly, personal impressions, observations, experiences, etc. connected with the career that you couldn't get from print sources. You need to include direct quotes from your interviewee and other descriptive details of the person's surroundings as they relate to the career. Try to get answers to as many questions that you have about the career, especially the kind of information that you won't find in print sources. You may interview more than one person.

4. Conclusion

In the last part of your paper, draw overall conclusions now that you've completed your search. State your focus question and reflect on that here. You might also compare and contrast your original expectations with actual findings and share reactions (positive and negative) to the career and/or your search. What did you learn or how have you grown from your search? How will the information you gathered affect your future?