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CAMPUS RESEARCH: FINDING OUT FIRSTHAND

Susan Tchudi

All of us are researchers. When we need to know something that is important to us, we do research. When we want to know who has the best passing record in the last decade of pro football, or when we want to buy a new car, or when we want to know the cheapest or most posh hotel to stay in for a vacation, or when we want to find out how to get rid of athlete's foot, we do research. We may read *Consumer Reports*, we may ask a friend who's an expert in the field, we may read labels, we may ask the pharmacist, we may talk to a librarian, we may look in books. And we weigh the evidence we find—in terms of our own experience, in terms of other information we have learned, in terms of the reliability of the source. When we receive conflicting information, we may get a third or fourth opinion and factor that into our deliberations. The more significant our need for information—a serious illness vs. an argument about baseball scores—the more detailed our collecting, sorting, and weighing of information and evidence is likely to become.

All of us participate in this process to some degree. (My eleven-year-old, for example, knows the price of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle figures in six different stores.) But some of us are better at managing the process than others. We've learned how to ask questions and where to go for answers. And we've learned how to evaluate data and make judgments. The process is particularly important in a society in which we are continuously bombarded by claims and assertions from both the political and commercial world. We want people in our society who act thoughtfully and reasonably in response to these claims and assertions. We want people who make judgments based on information. We want people to learn to make good decisions on the basis of their discoveries. And, we want people who are seekers and learners, not passive receptacles accepting all information at face value. For me, these are the reasons to teach research methods to adolescents.

I am not so much concerned that our young students learn to be academic scholars as that they learn to ask good questions, gather answers, judge the information, and draw conclusions. If they become deeply involved in academic subjects later in their academic careers, they will apply the process to subjects to which they have made some commitment. But for adolescents, academic research assignments often get them in over their heads and lead them to ask inappropriate or irrelevant questions about complex issues for which they have no knowledge or tools to make judgments. Hence we get the gobbledygook hodgepodge paper that is prone to plagiarism and may be filled with outdated information and highly debatable conclusions.

I prefer to help students learn research techniques by working on subjects that are more accessible and of greater interest to them. I want them to ask questions to which they want to know the answers. Moreover, as a starting point, I want them to use research techniques that are more manageable for them than the ERIC system and microfiche. To this end, I assign a university-based research paper to my college freshmen. This assignment is true to principles that I believe should guide most research writing projects at any level, for the emphasis is on using the resources that are at hand—especially human resources—to learn more about the community in which students live.

The first instruction I give for this paper is quite simple: **Target an area of the university you want to know more about.** To help students think about this, I bring in the school newspaper and the university directory. We then brainstorm possible topics: the sports medicine clinic; intercollegiate athletics; intramural athletics; music, art, and theater offerings; student government; political, religious, and social organizations; recreation facilities; various academic majors; the testing center; the career information center; the placement office; financial aid; the health center; the student activities board; the department of public safety; campus media—TV, radio, newspaper, literary magazines.

All of these topics, of course, have subtopics on which students can focus more specifically. For example, popular topics among athletes in the intercollegiate sports area are subjects like football recruiting, the training program in basketball, the probation program for athletes with academic problems, and so forth. The list of possible topics and subtopics goes on and

on, and invariably several students will research topics that didn't emerge during initial brainstorming.

Once students have decided what aspect of the university to research, they begin dealing with my second instruction: **Target experts in this area of campus life from whom you can get information.** They begin this process by answering—usually in writing—these questions:

1. What do you already know about the topic?
2. What do you suspect (based on prior personal experience and impressions) you will find out about the topic?
3. What do you still want and need to find out about the topic?
4. How will you go about finding out these things?

The answers to these questions provide students with some ideas for setting up the interviews that will be their primary source of information. I require that students do a minimum of three interviews. The first interview must be with someone who knows more about this subject than any other person on campus—an expert. This may be a head coach, a department chair, a director of a center, a president of an organization. Because these people often have busy schedules, I have students make decisions about whom they will interview early on in their planning of their papers, so that they are able to interview in time to meet the deadlines of the paper schedule. We use a class period to discuss people who might be experts or might provide useful information, with students supplying suggestions for one another based on their own campus experiences and contacts.

The other interviews must be with people who use the targeted service or participate in the aspect of campus life being researched. For example, one student last semester wrote a paper on the workings of the Veterans' Office at the university, which he saw as badly managed. His research paper became like an investigative journalism report. Because he was deeply involved in his subject, he interviewed two campus officials responsible for administering both financial aid and the Veterans' Office. In addition, he talked to a number of his friends who were veterans and who had had difficulty receiving their VA benefits. Finally, since he himself was a veteran, he was able to integrate firsthand information, a practice which I encourage because I see personal experience as significant in the researching process.

When we are serious researchers, it is our own experience which leads us into furthering our knowledge in an area. I think we need to demonstrate that aspect of researching to our students.

The next step is initiated by giving this instruction: **Develop interview questions.** Students need to prepare two sets of interview questions, one for the expert interviewee and one for the participants. Students draft questions based on their own curiosity and needs. What information do they want about the subjects? Are they curious about the people who do the jobs? Are they seeking information that will help them make decisions? Have they heard criticism or experienced difficulty and want to find out the sources of the problems? Do they want to use the services? Do they want to become participants? By starting with questions such as these, the students develop interview questions— and ultimately the focus for their actual reports— on the basis of their personal interest in their subjects rather than on stock, textbook guidelines.

Students bring their drafted questions to class and share them with classmates. In small classes (fifteen or under) we do this with the whole group; in bigger classes we break into groups of five. Students read their questions to one another and other students suggest new questions, based on their interest in the topic. Although the writers are not required to use any questions suggested by classmates, I find that this activity often raises a new area of concern for them and adds a new dimension to their papers. In addition, novice writers are often unable to see ambiguity or lack of clarity in their questions. Classmates help out with this problem by expressing their confusion and suggesting new wording or a different sequence for questions.

The fourth instruction is: **Discuss interview techniques.** After students have developed their questions and made their appointments with the people they wish to interview, we discuss how they should handle the interviews. To do this, we look ahead for awhile to the paper they will eventually write, discussing things that readers might want or need in reading the essays. (This discussion is easy to carry on because in my writing classes the writer's fellow students are the audience for the papers unless the writer designates otherwise. Students share their papers orally or in class books which we publish twice during the semester.) I also try to encourage them to plan to pay attention to more than the words of the interviews. Sometimes the physical set-up or ambiance of a place (like the counseling center or the sports medicine clinic) is important; sometimes the interviewee's

physical appearance or age is of interest; sometimes the way the interviewee treats the student or the interview might provide useful insights in a paper. So, I encourage students to be observant of people and of their surroundings.

We also discuss how to capture the information the interviewee provides. Some students wish to tape record the interviews, and I remind them to ask permission before they begin. We also discuss the value of getting both general information and direct quotes addressing significant, controversial, or unusual information. In some cases, when students begin to write their papers they find they have gaps or notes that aren't quite clear to them. I suggest that during the interviews they ask if it would be all right to phone the interviewees if they have any additional questions.

I also emphasize the importance of flexibility and of listening. Students may go into interviews with a specific focus or agenda, but the people they are interviewing might surprise them with information that is more valuable than what they had been looking for. So, although they must be prepared questions, it is equally important that they be able to adapt to the interviewees' and develop questions on the spot that follow up on the interviewees' comments. At the same time, if interviews involve controversial areas, students may have to be persistent in getting their questions answered.

Almost to a person, my students have had extremely positive experiences with the "expert" interview. They often meet someone important in campus life, they feel more in control of their environment, and they have greater appreciation for some aspect of the university. Interestingly, there are always one or two students who investigate university food services, one of the most maligned functions of the institution. Those students come away with a much more generous view of the cafeteria when they learn the complexity and care that goes into serving thousands of meals a day.

Interviews with users and participants, on the other hand, often provide a somewhat different view of the service than that provided by the expert. Students may get a variety of views and must then draw conclusions based on their own observations and experiences, finally deciding how to balance and present this diversity of viewpoints to readers.

To supplement the interviews, my fifth instruction is: **Gather useful printed information.** I encourage them to make use of any printed information provided by the university services they are researching. Pam-

phlets, brochures, policy statements, and handbooks often provide basic information for the papers. Sometimes students gather these before they go for interviews so that they can get some basic background information when designing their questions, and sometimes they get these when they go in for the interviews so that they can fill in basic information from them when they write their papers.

Once all the data has been gathered, the students are ready for dealing with the next instruction I give them: **Discuss your findings, then plan and draft your paper.** When students have completed their interviews, they bring their findings back to class and again we have an oral discussion of what discoveries they felt were most significant or interesting. Sometimes the interviews neatly follow the students' original plans, and they can write the papers with ease. At other times, a student may need additional information and has to go back to the source or find someone else who might provide the needed data. Sometimes the focus changes altogether. For example, one student who intended to write about the functions of the Department of Public Safety found the head of that department so interesting that her paper became a profile of the person she interviewed, complete with physical description, biography, and her own impressions of his character and values.

Students have some trouble with organization of this paper. They are tempted to do a simple chronological recounting of the interviews. (Interview #1: I asked this; he said this; then I asked this; and then he said this. Then on to interview #2.) To prevent this, I encourage them to organize according to significance rather than chronology and to synthesize the information gleaned from all of their interviews by showing areas of agreement and divergence among the people they talked to. It often takes some discussion, drafting, and redrafting to discover the proper focus.

In addition, through class and group discussion, students learn what background information their readers need. In some cases, when writers are involved in the topic already (such as football players who are learning more about policies and procedures for recruiting), they fail to recognize how much more they know about the topic as insiders than people who are not participants. Fellow students can ask the questions during planning and drafting that will help writers decide what basics need to be included. I also ask them to consider the ways in which the observations of the places and people might provide more color or depth to their papers, making it easier for their readers to visualize and participate in their subjects. Finally, I

encourage students to integrate their own experiences and impressions and to draw conclusions which take into account their own views as well as the views of their informants. These discussions continue with students talking to one another and to me during the planning, drafting, and revising stages of their paper writing.

The final instruction is: **Share your paper.** Students are given the option of publishing one of two campus research papers in a class book at the end of the semester. A second paper involves surveying fellow students on a topic of interest to college students and writing up the findings complete with charts which provide a graphic display of the most interesting data. Students choose one of these researched papers to revise as a final project in the class, and the publication becomes a record of campus life during their freshman year of college.

We grown-ups, especially we academic professionals, tend to forget the complexity of learning the process of gathering, synthesizing, evaluating, and reporting data. That process needs to be guided and taught to novices, not simply dropped on them, a practice which often results in their writing badly. For me, the most important aspects of this project are that the students research topics that they care about, are directly affected by, and encounter in their immediate environment, all of which are more likely to ensure enjoyment and success—two significant elements leading to good writing.

Susan Tchudi, a former President of MCTE, now teaches English and directs the composition program at the University of Nevada, Reno.