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William Palmer

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CADAVERS AND COMPOSITION

William Palmer

Despite our efforts to help students use language in various forms for various purposes and audiences, we do not use much variety in our teaching methods. We usually stay in our own classrooms and on verbal, intellectual levels. We need to devise ways for students to have different—indeed, unusual—experiences to write about. If we turn periodically to the concrete world outside of the classroom, we can engage students in thought-provoking activities that are not dependent on written texts and that students can experience firsthand. These activities can reinforce course objectives as well as the liberal arts.

In my English 101 College Rhetoric course at Alma College, I have experimented with various out-of-class activities. For one class session I take students to our art gallery to write several cumulative sentences based on works of art that interest them; these are single sentences that grow long with distinctive concrete details forming a word picture (see Christensen 1-22). I have taken classes to our planetarium for a guided tour of the stars; students write a summary/critical reaction of the experience. I have students interview an elder at the Michigan Masonic Home in town and write a biographical report which they give to their elder; our local paper, *The Morning Sun*, has published several of these (see Palmer and Bender). But the most unusual activity I do is to take students to our human anatomy laboratory to learn about cadavers.

I have done this field trip for six classes, saving it for the second half of the term when students work on research papers. I use the activity as an intense change of pace, hoping it might spark a boost of energy to the course. It does. The activity provides a necessary contrast to the kind of secondary research—scholarly yet often passive—students experience while synthesizing library sources. The activity, more importantly, reinforces key skills and

ideas I stress in my course: seeing distinctive concrete details; engaging in inquiry; looking for contradictions; and thinking critically and creatively.

Here is what I do. I begin by contacting the director of our human anatomy lab, Dr John Davis, and set up times for him to meet with my sections of my class. He is willing to meet with my students because he believes that cadavers are not used often enough across disciplines in higher education. Also, this is an opportunity for him to introduce freshmen to the Exercise and Health Science program at Alma.

The writing assignment I give students is threefold: 1) to write an objective summary of what Dr. Davis says concerning human anatomy at Alma College; 2) to discuss key skills and ideas Dr. Davis uses that reflect what we have emphasized in our course; and 3) to give a personal reaction in which they analyze whatever intrigues or bothers them about their experience and explain what they learn from the experience. The audience for this report is myself and the student.

When I inform students that we will visit the human anatomy lab to learn about cadavers and science, I give them the option not to go. Usually one or two students from each class tell me they feel too afraid and squeamish. I respect their decision and ask them to write a report on another topic—a summary/critical reaction to a speaker or an event on campus.

During the class period before our visit I ask students to reflect about going. They write for five minutes on this question: "What are your thoughts on visiting the human anatomy lab?" This reflection helps prepare them for the visit and helps me get a sense of what is on their minds. Some sample responses:

I'm intensely curious yet hesitant about this opportunity. I've been surrounded by death from living on a farm and working in biology labs; I have even been close to my own death. But I have never been to a funeral. I'm curious how I will react once I'm there. Confronting one's own mortality is not done easily.

I have seen several dead bodies before, but if there is a smell to them I might gag. I am imagining that they will all be sliced and dried and my stomach will give up what it is holding. I am not really afraid of

death but, as you say, curious. I want to find out what exactly students and teachers do to these bodies.

I have never seen a dead person before. I had a friend die, but I could never bring myself to see his body, and I think if it happened today I still couldn't bear seeing his body. Death is something I deeply fear and I don't know how I will handle seeing it.

As these responses show, students feel inquisitive and challenged yet unsettled about seeing dead human bodies. Anticipation of the visit stirs wonder and dissonance. Most students look forward with some anxiety to discovering how they will react.

The day of the visit students meet in the hallway of the Academic Center basement where the human anatomy lab and psychology labs are. Excited yet nervous, they wait for Dr. Davis. When he walks toward us in his white lab coat, he smiles and greets us. Drama hangs in the air as he opens the door and asks students to sit down in the cold room. He explains that before he lets students see the cadavers, he will talk for ten minutes about how the college obtains cadavers and how they are used in health science. Behind him are three tables, each covered with a green tarp under which lies a body.

John Davis is friendly and humorous. He asks students if they noticed the smell of formaldehyde when they entered the room. He acknowledges that the smell is not pleasant, but one gets used to it— and no one has ever fainted in his lab yet. He says he likes to keep a "MASH-ian" atmosphere in the lab (similar to the television series): jovial but not disrespectful. Students begin to feel more at ease. I doubt this cadaver experience would work well with a lab director too serious and "stiff."

John presents information and answers questions by students along the way. Alma College uses cadavers so that students can learn from real human bodies. The college buys cadavers from Michigan State University and returns them after two years where they are cremated and a religious service is held. The average age of the cadavers is eighty-five. They typically died from natural causes such as cardiac arrest. MSU sends some informa-

tion with the bodies: their occupation, age, and cause and date of death. The names of the cadavers are never given.

After presenting this information and answering questions, John invites students to gather around the first table. He pulls off the green cover. Students stare at the dissected body; faces look stunned with disbelief. The cadaver is a male banker, eighty years at death. John picks up the man's abnormally large liver, weighing twenty pounds. The liver has been cut in half. John points out patches of red inside: cirrhosis— inflammation of fibrous tissue. He explains that alcohol causes this. The cadaver was probably an alcoholic but died of heart failure.

John says he encourages his science students to look for anything abnormal or different about a body— such as a twenty pound liver. Abnormality generates inquiry. Once when he had difficulty dissecting a heart, he discovered a pacemaker. He says, "Dissecting is like a scavenger hunt: you open up a body and look to see what's different."

The other two cadavers are female. On the second table lies an elementary school teacher, eighty-nine. She is on her stomach so students can study her back and leg muscles. Many of her organs lie beside her on the table. She died from heart disease. John picks up her heart, cut in half. He points out the aorta; it looks like a loose rubbery hose with a large diameter. We can see inside it. He shows us a kidney; it is small; a student observes it is shaped like a "kidney" bean. John mentions that a student he knew had four kidneys, which was very odd. "There is a lot of variability inside human bodies. They are all different. We need variability to survive," he tells us. Then he points out the epiglottis, which looks remarkably like a tiny tongue. He shows us a lung with little black dots on it. The woman was probably a smoker.

The third cadaver is a homemaker, seventy-eight, who died of gastric cancer. She is the most recent cadaver and is therefore "fresher" than the other two. The embalming fluid in the dish on which she lies is orange. John points out the staples in her stomach where a large part of it was removed; she probably had to eat twenty small meals a day. Her left arm is incredibly dissected: numerous pins with white labels like flags specify structures that anatomy students identify in tests.

After John shows and discusses the cadavers, he invites students to inspect the bodies more closely and to ask him further questions. He says he is glad we have come to the lab because the cadavers donated their bodies to be used so that students can learn from them. Several students stay and walk around each body, taking notes. Some touch the bodies.

The reports that students write are due the next class, in two days. They are typically two to three pages long. Writing about cadavers does not seem difficult or boring for students. Although most students write clear, concise summaries of the information John Davis presents, their personal reactions to their experience hold much more power:

When Dr. Davis unveiled the first body, it took my breath away, but I was fine after that. The cadavers were intriguing. I stayed after— it was the best part. I touched the leathery skin, the spongy lung, the hard liver, the fatty intestine, and the snaky brain. The hand was the most interesting. It is a mechanical masterpiece.

When Dr. Davis held up a half of one cadaver's brain, I thought of my own brain, of Albert Einstein's brain, and my friends' brains, and how many mysteries there are within the brain. The brain controls our every movement, yet we do not even realize it; we do not think about how many muscles we are using when we smile briefly or when we write down a simple journal entry. When Dr. Davis held up that brain, I began to appreciate that my brain was intact enough to realize my innermost feelings and thought.

The biggest question in my head was who were these people? What were they like when they were my age? Who did they love? What were their priorities? What made them happy? All three of these people had so many more experiences than I've had. I hope I will live to experience more. The most admirable thing is that after these people experienced life, they chose to "extend their life" by contributing to others. This way, their existence not only benefited them and their families but also total strangers. I find this noble, not morbid.

These excerpts reveal active voices and minds at work. Students pay attention to concrete details, to their own inquiry, and to the mystery of existence. Their reflection seems natural, full of wonder and meaning. Students demonstrate important writing skills and values I have tried to teach throughout the course.

Yet some students' experiences in the lab are not so positive:

I needed out of that room. I needed to walk; I needed to breathe fresh air; I needed (and need) to feel alive. I needed to rip the donation sticker off the back of my driver's license.

Eric and I discussed our experience after lunch. One thing he didn't like was how the private parts looked. They seemed unnatural to me, but then so did their whole bodies. Maybe it bugged him because he's a man and it was uncomfortable for him to see something he usually finds attractive so ugly and different.

They looked as if they had been molded and shaped by some demented artist. Their tendons looked like dried-up straw. They had an empty dismayed look on their face. As I stood there gazing at their gaping bodies I was tempted to ask, "Where are their souls, Dr. Davis?"

The experience with cadavers motivates these students to write the truth, however unpleasant. The dissonance they feel compels them to think and to express themselves honestly. Students naturally become engaged in writing about their firsthand experience with cadavers, whether positive or negative.

Within their reports students also demonstrate critical thinking skills. Chris, for example, raises and answers an important question: "Is it the cadavers that lose their human nature through being dissected, or is it the dissectors? I think it may be a little of both." Many students point out contradictions. Justin writes that he was "eager to come to grips with seeing 'real live' dead human bodies— if that makes any sense." And most students point out that Dr. Davis encourages them to donate their whole body to science— even though he has not donated his own. Most scientists and

physicians do not donate their bodies for research, John Davis has observed. Confronting cadavers helps students generate complex thoughts.

Although I enjoy experimenting with out-of-class activities and value the contrast they provide in a course geared to help students grow as critical writers and readers, I invite students to utilize our textbook in their reports. For example, I recently gave students an extra-credit option. They could read Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' essay "On the Fear of Death" in our text and relate the essay to their experience of confronting cadavers. Several students did this. They quoted Kubler-Ross, using current MLA style, even providing a separate "Works Cited" page at the end of their report. Synthesizing a written source with their own personal reactions helps students apply research skills which they will use in their longer library papers.

The visit to the human anatomy laboratory and the subsequent written report have strengthened my writing course. The unusual experience motivates students to feel, think, and learn. The thought of witnessing cadavers becomes a problem that puzzles and intrigues them. Such a problem stimulates thought, as authorities in psychology and philosophy (Piaget; Vygotsky; Dewey; Polanyi) and authorities in composition theory (Elbow; Flower and Hayes; Moffett; Young, Becker, and Pike) have argued. Students go beyond the information given by the laboratory director; they wrestle with what the experience means to them, which Bruner argues education should enable students to do.

Students also learn how it feels to face death. They gain new perspectives—a primary goal of writing courses and the liberal arts in general. Most students write comments like, "The bodies didn't look anything like I thought they would." For many students the visit seems to allay their fear of death: "I learned that dead bodies aren't as scary and gruesome as I had imagined. I thought I would get sick but found myself right up in front and actually touching the cadavers." For some students, though, the visit intensifies their fear of death: "Actually seeing a dead body makes me afraid of dying. I can't believe that I will someday end up like them."

Students also learn that cadavers are nameless for a good reason: without names, they have no personal identities. Without names, the bodies are more like objects than people. This is a lesson in the power of language.

The visit to the cadaver lab reinforces my course objectives. Before John Davis talked to my students most recently, I wrote him a memo outlining the key ideas and skills in my course that he might touch on in his presentation. He did this naturally, exemplifying and discussing concrete details, research/inquiry, contradictions, and critical and creative thinking. I especially liked his comments about the value of looking for differences and abnormalities. John applied my course objectives to his own field of science.

Before I took my first class to learn about cadavers, I was not sure if I should do it. I wondered if I was crossing the edge of acceptable pedagogy in composition, if I was going beyond the boundaries of what is appropriate or healthy in higher education, if the activity was morbid. I worried whether this exposure to dissected bodies would adversely affect how students might experience the death of loved ones in the future. But when I shared my concerns with John Davis, he assured me that cadavers are too valuable to be seen by only a few health science and art students. We were helping young students make connections between what happens in a writing course and what happens in science: inquiry. We were giving students an experience in the liberal arts they would likely never forget.

Although the field trip to the cadaver lab provides a powerful experience for students, I realize that few English teachers have access to cadavers, and finding a colleague as helpful as John Davis might be difficult. But I hope this activity stirs your wonder about how you might experiment with using *different* out-of-class activities.

As English teachers we can use more variety in our pedagogy. Difference motivates thought; abnormality generates inquiry. Utilizing difference can help us break away from our routines. By providing students with concrete experiences that are unusual yet reinforce course objectives, we can make our courses more dynamic for students—helping them grow in their use of language arts.

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William Palmer teaches English at Alma College in Alma, Michigan.