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Linda Boynton

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THE SATURATION REPORT: A COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH PROJECT

Linda Boynton

A year ago as I was preparing the syllabus for my freshman composition course, I stared at the ever-present research paper requirement, experiencing my annual desire to find an alternate approach for teaching research technique. Collectively, English instructors at Jordan College had agreed upon the necessity of developing research skills in our students. We also knew that, contrary to the talk in some professional circles, the research paper itself was not a dead form. One study revealed, for example, "clear trends, past and future, toward increased research paper instruction" in two- and four-year colleges (Ford and Perry 827). Nonetheless, students view the traditional research paper assignment as dull, mechanical, and unimaginative. I had my own subtle feelings of dread as "that unit" approached each term, feelings that I attributed to three concerns.

First, I was uncomfortable with the various flaws that critics repeatedly identify in the genre. Judy and Judy, for example, cite the sterile nature of topics picked from a list, the overemphasis on form and library research, and the tendency of research paper assignments to "undercut or militate against the workshop approach" to the composing process as a few of these undesirable characteristics (65). The tendency to teach research as a separate, distinct unit further emphasizes these flaws. Larson reminds us that research is an ongoing process that permeates all the writing we do. We are researching when we make systematic observations, conduct interviews, photograph phenomena, or watch what happens around us; even an "ordered presentation of one's personal reflections" (such as the type instructors ask students to produce in process journals) can be seen as research (813). When we teach research as a separate discipline, we incorrectly imply that there is just one kind of writing that incorporates research, and, therefore, most others do not. I wanted my students to know differently—to have, instead, a broader view of the occasions and values of research. To accomplish this

goal, I needed to find a research approach that would help students witness firsthand the value of various research methods as they might occur in a less conventional writing project.

A second reason for my dread of yet another typical research unit was related to professional responsibility. We live in a time of unprecedented problems and discoveries. Futurists are fond of imposing order on this chaos, telling us, for example, that the half-life of technical information is three years—meaning that after three years, half of what is known is no longer needed or even true. As a result, our role as instructors is changing; we are no longer here simply to instill the knowledge of our age. Instead, we are training students who must be natural assimilators if they are to experience sustained success in both their higher education pursuits and their career choices. This demands an inquisitive, confident nature, one able to use and identify a wide range of available resources. These include personal interviews and original data gathering, two methods that the traditional library-based research often precludes.

Sandwiched between my first two concerns, the flaws of the traditional approaches of the past and the need for a research sophistication in the future, was my third concern, the student we have in our classrooms today. It is sometimes too obvious that instead of classrooms filled with self-motivated learners, we have students who have adopted a frustrating passivity, appearing much too comfortable merely responding to demands made upon them instead of identifying a personal link with presented methods and materials. For the writing process to truly become part of their creative repertoire, a sense of ownership must accompany it as students exchange the structured atmosphere of the classroom for the self-directed world of career. Good research projects can develop this desired autonomy in student learners since no two searches are alike. The classroom can offer general recommendations for research that need not be, as students sometimes perceive it to be, a sterile, author-absent undertaking. It can be a dynamic process influenced and directed by choices the student makes along the way. Larson reminds us that these choices must include not only a summary of findings, but an evaluation of them as well. This means incorporating personal opinion into the findings and being held accountable for it, two life skills we consistently rely upon when conducting research affecting personal decisions we make throughout life.

As I searched for a research method which included all these needed characteristics, I read with interest various alternatives suggested in professional journals. Many of them involved a fictitious role-playing (Peacock 57), an assuming of another identity which necessitated factual research that would be shared with class members through letter writing. Another such assignment involved adopting the identity of a famous author for a similar search (Shanks 81). Others suggested historical fiction or imaginary journeys ("Alternatives" 72). But while discovering these imaginary voices within can lead to many self-discoveries, I wanted students to identify their own voices, voices that would provide a smooth transition as they entered a world that wasn't making any special preparations to welcome them.

Fortunately, some of the strongest voices in our discipline have salvaged the power and necessity of research technique from the stricture and artificiality of the way it is normally taught. One such voice is that of Toby Fulwiler at the University of Vermont, who has created research assignments which embody this active, student-controlled involvement. Using one of Fulwiler's approaches called the "saturation report" as my starting point, my own class began a semester-long journey into the discovery of the power of research.

The saturation report asks students to create a profile of a local institution (defined as a place of significant, ongoing importance in a community) taking into account its appearance; its physical, functional, and psychological operation; and its overall effect on the local community. The specific requirements are to select an institution which allows the student to collect the following kinds of information:

- a. description (physical and impressionistic)
- b. dialogue (observed, overheard)
- c. interviews (at least three)
- d. opinion (from someone outside the institution)
- e. a piece of writing produced by the institution
- f. library research about the institution (or one like it)
- g. an illustration or photograph

This list defines the basic data of the saturation report.

Since I was concerned with student-held prejudices about research writing, I wanted to discuss these openly. Students have been taught to see the research paper as a rigid, rule-bound activity that is close-ended, strictly informative, and skill-oriented. Their instructors, on the other hand, probably expect an open-ended, carefully aimed, interpretive piece of writing (Schwegler and Shamoon 817). The word "research" itself therefore needs clarifying within the classroom, since according to Larson, it can "refer to almost any process by which data outside the immediate and purely personal experiences of the writer are gathered"; this definition dictates no procedural format and is certainly not restricted to what is found in libraries (813). Encouraging students to share their individual preconceptions about the research process at the outset allowed me to suggest new directions in a free-flowing discussion atmosphere instead of in a lecture mode. I believe this helped lessen student anxiety about the project.

Next we defined the term "institution" as a class, trying to come to a class consensus of characteristics. Students identified such things as permanence, importance, productivity, and necessity as some distinguishing characteristics of an institution. Discussion led them to see entertainment, service, and interdependence with other institutions as other possible qualities.

Fulwiler compares the saturation report to a *Sixty Minutes* interview, so I taped an episode of the program which included profiles of Chernobyl and Grand Central Station, two very different institutions. We spent time analyzing overall reporting style, dissecting the types and content of interviews, and identifying the organization of the report. Students also explored the concept of objectivity by seeing how emotion and pathos were portrayed and deciding whether this was done in an appropriate manner.

This concept of objectivity is what guides students as they attempt to present a fair and complete picture of a place. Doing so means acquiring the ability to see something through eyes other than one's own. Using a clustering technique, we examined the *Sixty Minutes* report of Grand Central Station to see if we could identify various viewpoints represented (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Sample Viewpoint Perspective Cluster
For an Institution

We placed each viewpoint around the periphery of the center circle to indicate different perspectives from which the same set of physical attributes could be perceived. We then discussed Grand Central Station from each perspective. Next, as a way of showing how these perspectives could be expanded through good questioning, we brainstormed other questions we would have *liked* to ask those who were interviewed. This activity also provided a lesson in the editing of interview questions, for it revealed the extensive editing that must have been done for the televised report.

After these preparations, my students then chose an institution to research. We used Burke's pentad as a prewriting tool for this large project. The pentad helps students examine what the subject is as well as what it is not, suggesting many starting places for even less talented students to pursue. Students apply the who, what, where, when, why, and how questions to aspects of the institution using Burke's labels of action, agent, means, scene, and purpose (Irmscher 27). Regardless of which prewriting technique is used, the purpose is to get students to expand their initial areas of inquiry and instill in them a sense of excitement about their upcoming search.

Besides these initial external considerations, students were asked to examine their own internal prejudices and personal feelings about their chosen institution. Doing so, for example, led one student to admit stereotypical, negative views about the nursing home she was planning to investigate. Another student realized his present view of a company he planned to profile put its business address next door to Camelot. As a result

of this internal examination, both were led to see that such notions might hinder objective data gathering.

Information for the research project was collected and drafted throughout the term. Our composition classes generally follow a traditional curricular pattern, so that one way writing skills are developed is by exploring various modes of writing, a potentially over-structured method of teaching with its own set of problems. However, with the saturation report not only serving as a final product in itself but also providing an overall framework for the course, we were able to present modal writing as a series of possibilities for generating content instead of as a set of unrelated, separate writing templates or patterns.

The first modal writing assignment was a required one. Students had to choose a term relevant to their institution and define it, trying out the circular, "different shoes" clustering approach we had just discovered while analyzing the *Sixty Minutes* report. A student writing about a local recreation center, for example, chose to define "community" as the word might be perceived by people of different types and ages.

Students were not required to use their institutions as the topics for the assigned papers in other modes that were part of the class, but they were required to explore the institutions from those angles; they needed to draft notes for each modal approach so they could discover the value of such an approach as a prewriting technique for generating content. Their institutions were used very effectively for this, as the following examples will illustrate.

Description writing was enthusiastically incorporated into many reports. Students were told to make at least two visits to their institutions, one during peak operating hours and one during a slower time. At this point, students began finding the controlling ideas for their papers. For example, one researcher, while researching a nursing home, observed that the indentations on the concrete block resembled an aging face and realized that her description of the building drew upon characteristics of the patients themselves. She wrote of "hand carved rockers once formed by the same hands that now gripped the handles, grateful for the support."

The comparison/contrast mode helped two students develop some technical material since they both chose local factories with very different manufacturing processes to profile. Another student profiling a local sheriff's posse compared it to Hollywood's perception of posses in the past.

Classification proved to be a useful organizing device as students classified types of patients, types of customers in a local business, and types of church-going personalities. Analogies added interest to other reports. One student drew an analogy between the Declaration of Independence and the philosophy behind a local food co-op she was researching. Another saw an analogy between the philosophy of the investment firm she was profiling and the idea of education as investment.

During the term, other ongoing activities kept our focus on the saturation reports as well. A few minutes were set aside each week for students to ask questions, make progress reports, share interesting stories, or ask for help. Since most of my students are bound for business careers, I am anxious to provide a collaborative writing atmosphere whenever I can. Such ongoing discussion about projects in progress lets them experience an important part of collaboration, as when, for example, students brought in articles dealing with other students' topics.

Methods of documentation were covered in brief mini-lectures given throughout the term. I used student drafts and specific questions brought to my attention to illustrate methods of paraphrase and giving appropriate credit. In the same spirit, I worked with sources students happened to have on hand for quickly preparing "Works Cited" entries. I wanted very much to demystify this whole process, and indeed, students became more comfortable with it, even to the point of using a source or two in shorter papers that did not require "research."

Students attended personal conferences with me about three weeks before the term ended. Each was asked to bring interview notes, a polished lead, a scratch outline organizing their information, a piece of institutional writing, and specific questions about the writing ahead. I fully expected to have to lead the conferences but was delightfully surprised to find passivity replaced by an enthusiasm generated by having lots to share. Most conferences revolved around the dilemma of deciding what had to be left out, answering questions such as "How do I document an interview with an old man who wouldn't tell me his real name?" and listening to entertaining, personal stories regarding interviews and information gathering. It was interesting to watch students struggle with the sometimes conflicting demands of audience, which now extended beyond their classmates and me because representatives at most institutions politely requested that the finished product be shared with them as well.

These conferences also gave students a chance to discuss changing perceptions and reasons for their choices of institutions. One woman chose to profile a local mental health center because her daughter had a playmate who had spent some time there, and she wanted to get comfortable with her concerns. Another person chose a particular business simply because "I'm going to work there someday, and I want to see what it's like." More often than not, I could see that stereotypical notions identified early in the project were replaced with a more objective outlook as the research took place. One student exclaimed, "I thought I hated history, but I love searching it out for myself." Another student struggled with a focus that kept drifting toward the new building of a church she was profiling. This same church, she admitted to herself, was helping her rebuild her own life at the time, and once she embraced the personal connection instead of fighting it, order came to her work. As Fulwiler writes to students, "And always you are present, the guiding curiosity and controlling presence" (119).

Results of the project were shared orally at the end of the term. Students were aware of this requirement early in the semester, so the role of audience in decision-making was important from the outset. Also, I wanted to eliminate one traditional perception about the research paper— that it was a large, heavy exercise filled with dead references seen only by the instructor. Their research efforts were to be recognized not only by myself, but also by their peers and the institutional leaders themselves.

There were three presentation requirements. First, prior to the oral report, students were encouraged to mark specific passages of their final copies that they wished to read verbatim, so they could understand and share the power of carefully edited work. The rest was extemporaneous so they could not only get a feel for the knowledge they had accumulated on their searches but also gain confidence in their ability to share that knowledge with colleagues.

Second, each student was required to bring in some artifact from the institution. They brought in such items as carburetors, sugar free products, types of photography, slide presentations, and historical documents. Each also shared writing gathered from the institution itself, which ranged from items written by patients to mass-produced information pamphlets, most of which were efficiently critiqued by the presenter as being either truly representative or not descriptive of the institution he or she visited.

Finally, all students were required to participate in the question-and-answer session following each presentation. Both experiences—fielding questions pertaining to their research and formulating questions about the work of others—have value to these novice researchers.

On the last day of class, students were asked to share advice with students who would be doing this assignment in the future. One student, who early in the term was concerned about being buried by all the information she was collecting, said, “When you have an idea about your institution, write about it even if you aren’t sure how or even if it fits in with the overall project. Nothing you write is wasted.” The comment “Don’t be afraid to choose an institution you don’t know anything about” reflects the tendency of students to choose places they have had some previous connection with. Even if they do choose such “safe” places, the broad range of requirements ensures that students will still have to do some exploring in unfamiliar waters.

The most rewarding thing I witnessed during the immersion report project was an increase in self-confidence in my students, many of whom were extremely pleased to discover they had the inner courage to arrange and follow through with interviews with “important people.” Making those community contacts can be a frightening but ultimately rewarding experience for these students. It helps prepare them for those necessary contacts that will have to be made with college personnel when they are out on their own or with potential employers when they have finished their education.

I plan to try to expand this assignment in future classes, using interest surveys, for example, to help me suggest institutions with either personal or career-related connections to the student. Fulwiler’s current approach to this assignment reflects another broadened focus. He invites students to explore not only institutions but local topics, issues, and problems as well. His current approach uses even more collaborative effort than the assignment I have described. Project plans are shared formally with the class. Students carry on investigative work and share results. They are encouraged to use required journals to clarify intentions and plans.

Through such community-based research, we can help our students re-discover their own natural curiosity. After all, they are part of the workforce of tomorrow, one which will be more autonomous and have “the time and encouragement to make discoveries and use new resources creatively” (Applegate 135). By nurturing an interest in research, we are providing them

with tools which will help them find their places in such a world, regardless of which paths they follow to get there.

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Linda Boynton is an instructor of English at the Thumb Area Campus of Jordan College.