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COMPOSITION STUDENTS WRITE FOR RESEARCH

Virginia G. Polanski

During my many years of teaching writing from junior high school through graduate school, I have found that students enjoy solving problems which are real to them. And solving these problems leads them to empirical and library research as well as involvement with all the skills used in writing for research in the "real world." It even leads them into using a variety of forms of writing used in business and professions: research reports, position papers, proposals, and journal articles addressed to "real audiences" such as executives, legislators, local agencies, and journal readers.

This means that I can bypass the traditional generic "research paper" which according to Richard Larson (812) has existed only in classrooms anyway and which according to Robert Schwegler and Linda Shamoon frequently results in "sterile exercises" (823). Instead I can involve my students in writing for research in other disciplines and on the job. I do this by encouraging them to solve "real problems" and to find what Larson calls "appropriately informed people" (811) to engage in research with them. As a result I have history students recording data from old records; science and fine arts students describing observations; philosophy students analyzing arguments; and social science, education, and psychology students composing questions for interviews and surveys. I also have students reviewing literature for their studies and reporting their findings, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions in appropriate forms used in business and professions.

Before students start their projects, I pose four basic questions for them to answer:

1. What is the problem?
2. What have others done to solve this problem?

3. What additional information is needed?
4. How am I going to find this information?

Since answering one of these questions leads to the posing of the next, working through them leads students into an inductive process: defining a problem leads students to pose a question and search to answer it; finding what others have done through library research helps students narrow the need and sharpen the focus of their own search; identifying new areas to research leads to selection of procedures for finding new information. Students answer these questions according to schedule during the semester and share their responses and progress in small groups and with their teacher.

To find problems which they will be excited about solving, I ask my students to look around during their everyday activities, and I share problems which have excited previous students. A part-time clerk finds herself in a store where shoplifting is prevalent. A nature lover thinks that toxic substances from automobiles may be dangerous to the wildlife on a nearby reserve. An eager, politically-involved student is afraid his favorite candidate may lose if the candidate agrees to debate his opponent. A sensitive student notices the difficulties a special education student is experiencing because of mainstreaming. An art student has been asked to serve on a committee to recommend a painting for the front hall of a public building. A computer whiz is agonizing because his school doesn't have 20 IBM PC's.

Then I ask these students to pose precise questions which they will need to answer to solve their problems. The clerk asks: What can my employer do to cut down on losses from shoplifting? The nature lover asks: What effect do toxic automobile wastes have on our nearby wildlife preserve? The political science student asks: How will a debate affect my candidate's popularity? The sensitive student asks: How can mainstreaming help the special students in my school? The art student asks: How can we choose the right painting?

One music student in a freshman composition course was concerned about the current debate between teens and adults over whether teens could really study when listening to music. Thinking that the answer lay in the type of music playing, he asked: "Will one kind of music distract students who are studying more than another type?" Through library research he learned that

other researchers had found that popular music distracted female freshman college readers more than classical music did. While reading this study, he realized that researchers had not considered the familiarity variable. He then decided that he would test one group of readers while familiar music was playing and another while unfamiliar music was playing. With the assistance of a music teacher and a reading teacher in the public school from which he had graduated, he designed a study to test two groups of seventh graders and two groups of twelfth graders. Each group took reading comprehension and vocabulary tests: the seventh graders took two sections of reading comprehension tests and a group of vocabulary tests from the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (1971); the twelfth graders took the *Cooperative School and College Ability Test* (1955) and a vocabulary section from the World Book Encyclopedia's Vocabulary Inventories (1977). One group from each grade was tested while familiar music was being played. The results showed that students working while familiar music was being played scored lower than students who worked while unfamiliar music was being played, suggesting that familiar music was more distracting than unfamiliar.

Although this student lost the argument with the adults in his life, his eagerness to solve his problem led him to learn new library skills, to model a controlled experiment after one which he found, and to follow a problem/solution development as dictated by his material and as used in his model.

As students describe their problems and begin planning research, I encourage them to find "appropriately informed people" who will engage in research with them by suggesting previous studies to review and by designing methodology to follow. Sometimes the students themselves know such resource people; sometimes I make suggestions. Other times a number of us have to get our heads together to think of someone, but all the students always find someone. The music student previously mentioned approached a music teacher and a reading teacher whom he already knew. Others in that class sought assistance from psychology and sociology instructors with whom they had studied or were studying. One consulted a historian who was recommended by another student.

During the time that students are researching their problems, I plan classroom activities which give students opportunities to develop the following traditional library research skills and "real-world" research techniques likely to be needed for their studies:

- using in-the-library introductions to specialized indexes, bibliographies, and guides which they did not use in earlier classes
- creating guidelines for determining sample sizes, assuring randomness, and controlling conditions
- practicing the careful wording of questions for interviews and surveys, conducting trial surveys, and staging role-playing interviews

In addition, these activities involve the students in basic research thinking activities such as distinguishing between fact and opinion, selecting appropriate specifics, analyzing and interpreting data, and computing simple statistics. During this time, I also provide guidance in outlining, paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing, and using data to argue to conclusions.

Students planning to interview or survey with questionnaires need to study the questions posed by other researchers. They need to see that open-ended questions such as "What should college writing courses teach your future employees?" stimulate spontaneity and bring out the personality, attitude, and peculiarities of a business situation which the researcher might not think of. However, responses to this type of question may lack specificity and may be difficult to tabulate. Students need to see that, on the other hand, multiple-choice questions yield responses which are easy to tabulate but which limit the subjects' responses to those provided in the choices. To lead students into making these discoveries, I have them discuss their questions in groups and try their questions on small groups. I also have them look ahead to anticipate the form their results will take in their final paper: Do they want to report figures in charts and graphs, or do they want to quote and discuss the quotes?

Students planning to interview subjects may also want to take advantage of tips from experienced interviewers such as those offered by William Zinsser, the writer, critic, and editor. In his *On Writing Well* he advises potential interviewers to find "men and women who have a fierce attachment to what they are doing," research the background of the interviewee, make a list of questions, remember that most people like to talk about their work and will not feel imposed upon, establish a relationship with the interviewee and return for successive interviews if necessary, take paper and pencil but keep them out of sight until interviewee and interviewer get to know

each other, take a tape recorder if desired, and keep a balance between "what the subject is saying in his words" and what the interviewer is writing in his or her words "to explain and to connect" (75-87).

Then, as students begin to formulate their own questions, they query and interview their classmates and others with trial questions to determine how well their questions will elicit the desired data. Usually my students need to study a number of questionnaires in class with peers and conduct several surveys or interviews for peer and teacher review before producing a questionnaire which gets the desired information and gets it in forms which can be reported clearly.

While going through this process, one college freshman concerned about impressions acquired from TV by younger children decided to ask a sampling of young children several types of questions. To encourage spontaneity and allow for individuality she asked, "What is your favorite show?" and "When two people on TV are angry with each other, what [do] they do?" However, after trying her questions on peers, she saw that answers to these questions couldn't be tabulated. To get responses which could easily be tabulated, she changed to questions such as "On television, police (a) get hurt; (b) help people; (c) hurt people; (d) do wrong things;" and "On television, criminals are (a) strong; (b) smart; (c) exciting; (d) happy." (For each of these the child subjects could choose more than one response.)

Although these "real-world" assignments open doors to opportunities for exploration not traditionally opened to young students, some of these opportunities are limited. Students are frequently not able to get random samples or query a large number of people because of the limited time allowed to gather data. They may also lack the background in statistics to report their findings in a meaningful form. However, these limitations can be dealt with. For example, one of my students who was interested in the results of mainstreaming special education students did not have time or finances to get a cross-sectional random sample. However, this student was able to study a local situation. Instead of asking, "What are the benefits of mainstreaming special education students?" she had to ask, "What are the benefits of mainstreaming special education students in this local public school?" Then she was able to interview a resource-program teacher, a teacher for the hearing impaired, a primary teacher, and a primary-intermediate teacher at the local school. She was also able to observe students in their special classes and in the regular classes to which they had been mainstreamed as well as

consult records of their performances in both situations. From the data she gathered, she noted the advantages and disadvantages of mainstreaming.

In another case, a class member interested in changes in the sexual activity of college students was able neither to get a cross-sectional random sampling nor to wait ten or twenty years to conduct a longitudinal study. However, this student did find a master's thesis reporting a study of sexual activity among students at a comparable university twenty years earlier. He then posed the question "How does the sexual activity of college students at University X in 1983 compare to and contrast with that of students at University Y in 1963?" He chose a random sampling from his own university, queried these students with the same questionnaire used in the master's study, and noted the similarities and differences in the results.

While the results of these surveys could be reported in sophisticated statistics, I have found that many students, especially high school students and college freshmen, do not have the background to do so. However, I do not let the limitation hinder the study or the reporting of it. I encourage students to report their findings in terms familiar to them, such as raw scores and percentages. I also encourage them to express this data in forms familiar to them, such as charts and graphs.

Other students find themselves less limited in gathering and reporting data to answer their original questions. A student in a colleague's class who wanted to know more about her family history was able to trace it through records, letters, diaries, gravestones, landmarks, family Bibles, and interviews with older residents of her home town. Later her findings appeared as an article in a small local paper.

By the time each of these students has completed a final draft in a form appropriate for its intended readers, both the students and I have a feeling of accomplishment. Some of them have interviewed, queried, and/or tested people. Others have delved into written records and analyzed and interpreted them. They have all developed library skills because they have needed them. Students have also had many opportunities to interact with each other in peer groups, suggesting resources (including "appropriately informed people"), testing survey questions, reviewing writing, and assisting with editing. I have had the opportunity to guide this research, encourage contacts with professionals in other areas, direct the study and production of various types of writing appropriate for communicating this research in the "real world,"

and arrange the group work. Sometimes the finished products are sent to their intended audiences: school administrators, state or federal legislators, or publications.

In achieving these results, my students have proceeded with enthusiasm because they have started with problems which were real to them. As a result of their enthusiasm, they worked profitably together in groups. And partly because of the collaborative nature of their activity, I was most often placed in the preferred role of a coach, guiding and encouraging them through a non-traditional research process that was as enjoyable for me as it was for them.

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