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SHARING WHAT WE KNOW: A MEETING OF THE MINDS

Maribeth Carroll

The sleepless nights began in October. The research papers from over one hundred and fifty humanities students were due after Christmas break. Their semester grades would be due two weeks later. For eight years, my two humanities colleagues, Cyndi Burnstein and Sue Welker, and I had painfully yet promptly graded more than fifty papers each to meet these deadlines. But three years ago, when Sue took a pregnancy leave and Cyndi and I took over her humanities classes, we faced the prospect of grading seventy-five research papers each. It was impossible. What could we do? We couldn't eliminate the research paper requirement. After all, humanities was a year-long college preparatory class which drew from the very average to the very brightest English students in the senior class. We wanted our students to learn the research skills that writing the research paper taught them. But Cyndi and I couldn't possibly grade seventy-five research papers each and maintain high standards for the papers and our evaluation of them.

Help came in the form of Lisa Rohde, a former student of mine, who had just finished a semester as my student teacher. At the University of Michigan, she said, English students don't do research papers the way we had been teaching them— scientists do. So, she asked, why *were* we teaching our students scientific research and tormenting ourselves in the process? Leave the teaching of research papers to the science teachers, Lisa suggested. It gave me pause for thought. Why were we assigning research papers? We wanted our seniors to advance their research skills by dipping into college libraries, analyzing the point of view of their sources, and studying a topic in the humanities at a depth we couldn't touch in our fast-paced, year-long course. Was writing a paper necessary to achieve these research-oriented goals?

Our students always wrote (and rewrote) lengthy comparison/contrast papers, literary analyses, and journals on their after-school humanities

adventures. If we eliminated the research paper, our students certainly wouldn't lack writing experience, but they would miss honing traditional research skills. Still, I began to think about the hundreds of research papers I had evaluated in my sixteen years of teaching. They never went anywhere after I had graded them. True, Cyndi and I had attempted to share our students' research several years earlier by enlisting community readers—people who had some expertise in the students' research area—to comment upon our students' papers. Even with generous help from our community, however, it had taken me hours to make contacts, write directions and thank-you notes to the readers, comment on the readers' comments, and, of course, grade the papers. Our students had shared their research, but at what cost to us?

Then Cyndi remembered a program that had aired on PBS called "Meeting of the Minds," hosted by Steve Allen. Four famous people from different cultures and eras would meet to have tea and ponder questions raised by themselves and their host. The discussion was alternately funny, poignant, and heated as one by one the historical figures revealed their facts and foibles. Could we adapt this idea to teach our seniors how to do advanced research? There could be many benefits. The research on a character could be done the same way one would research a paper, yet our students could ascend to the top of Bloom's taxonomy as they *became* the characters and reacted to the other characters in ways that their research could only indicate, not dictate. We teachers could leap off the paper-grading treadmill, and our students would share their research without plagiarizing or cheating.

The more we thought about it, the more we thought that peer coaching, higher grades, more thorough research, and even some FUN were inherent in such a project. It would call on talents we rarely ask students to use in their academic classes: the artistic could execute beautiful advertising and sets; the fashion-conscious could create detailed and outlandish costumes; the actors and actresses could make performances lively and persuasive; the history buffs could ferret out bizarre facts; the writers and humorists could create skits that would reveal all of the characters; the uninspired could learn from their classmates; and everyone would have to search and research!

We decided we'd try a "Meeting of the Minds" project in place of the research paper. To begin, the students would choose their characters and have them approved by me. Then I would put them into groups with four or five other students. The groups would have two months to write and rehearse

a thirty-minute skit through which the characters could reveal themselves. On the day of their performance, the students would each turn in one hundred research notecards and an annotated bibliography of at least five sources (aside from reference books). The students would also dress from head to toe in character, pass out a broadside about their characters, set the stage, perform the skit, and answer questions from the audience.

To give my students a clear idea of what would be required of them in this project, I created a final grade criteria sheet called "Humanities I: Character Project" (See Figure 1), passed it out, and held my breath. I needn't have. A few weeks later, many of my students were enthusiastically researching in the bowels of the graduate library at the University of Michigan. Two months later I had a hit parade of skits on my hands. The research was profound and the sharing was exciting. We'd found a way to teach our students not only how to share their research, but also how to *become* their research, and we'd eliminated our *angst* at the same time. How did we get such remarkable results? Organization and high expectations.

Over the past three years, we have continually refined this project. I have learned how important it is to organize the project into stages, and how helpful my comments are at each stage. One stage of the project must be completed each week of the two months before the performances: choice of characters, research notecards, annotated bibliographies, anecdotes, xeroxed copies of costumes, drafts of broadsides, and print-ready broadsides. At each stage, I return the students' work with comments on the criteria sheets that I gave them when they began the project.

The first stage in this project requires students to choose their characters. One goal of our humanities course is to teach about many different people's contributions to the humanities, not just the well-known ones. One way I encourage my students to search for lesser-known figures is to make each student choose a different character. As long as they stick with their own sex, their characters can be fictional or non-fictional and run the gamut from kings and religious figures to authors and composers to peasants and criminals. When students find this stage difficult, I joyfully offer them characters that are off the beaten path. After I have approved all of their characters, I put the students into groups of five or six. I delight in creating groups of evil characters, religious figures, or artists who are from different eras and cultures. I also mix the simple with the wealthy, the holy

HUMANITIES I: CHARACTER PROJECT

PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

- ___ COSTUME creative and inexpensive
creates the aura of the character
xerox of costume from book handed in ahead of time
historically accurate attempt
complete representation: ___ head ___ body
___ feet ___ accessories
- ___ BROADSIDE beautiful 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
interesting
significant information
- ___ INDIVIDUAL accurate voice/language
accurate gestures/actions
well-prepared
interesting
good entrance good exit
participation was: more than less than adequate
conveyed significant information
stayed in character throughout performance
props were: more than less than adequate
good question planted in audience
- ___ GROUP skit accommodates all characters
skit brings out significant historical facts about all characters
skit brings out personalities of all characters
all characters participate equally in the performance
setting is: more than less than adequate

RESEARCH EVALUATION

- ___ NOTECARDS
- ___ ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

___ OVERALL PERFORMANCE

___ OVERALL RESEARCH

___ FINAL GRADE FOR PROJECT

(Figure 1)

with the lascivious, and the violent with the peacemakers, hoping for dramatic confrontations in their performances.

The second stage asks the students to complete fifteen research notecards in the spirit and letter of the *MLA Style Sheet*. Because they need so much information and their characters tend not to be the stuff of school libraries, most students must use college libraries for their research. My students have always found the information they needed at libraries within twenty minutes of their homes: the University of Michigan undergraduate and graduate libraries; the Eastern Michigan University, Madonna College, and Schoolcraft College libraries; and the Plymouth, Canton, Livonia, and Ann Arbor public libraries. Even Margery Kempe, a fourteenth-century mother and pilgrim, Queen Boudicca of the Iceni who battled the Romans in the first century, and Queen Tamar of twelfth-century Georgia who roused her men on the battlefield, have posed no problems for my intrepid students. I check the students' notecards and annotated bibliography at least six weeks before the project is due, so that if the characters are too hard for students to research, I can redirect their efforts. Less motivated or less accomplished students are free to choose more easily researched characters: Cleopatra, Henry VIII, Beethoven, and Shakespeare, for example. After I have commented upon and returned their notecards, I give the students one day in class to get together in their groups, share their notecards, and lay the groundwork for a skit that will incorporate all of them equally into the performance.

A week later, the first drafts of bibliographies are due. In the annotations, I ask my students to write about how their sources have helped them and what the authors' points of view are. For example, Chris Nelson wrote about a book on Rasputin:

The author seems to disapprove of Rasputin and tends to be very cynical. He states the facts, but almost turns the article into something that should be in *The National Enquirer* or used as a plot on a soap opera.

About a book on Heloise, Katie Slupski wrote:

This book is all about Heloise and all the people in her life. The book deals briefly with Abelard's parents. It is almost insinuating that Heloise and Abelard's lives were controlled by destiny. Her parents were secret/forbidden lovers in a way and his parents retire into a monastery and a convent. It is very ironic. This is a great book about Heloise.

And Brigitte Felix wrote about Louise Collis's book on Margery Kempe:

Ms. Collis' book about Margery Kempe is written in a fashion where you could almost imagine yourself to be there also. This book was written to portray the life of a very religious woman. This book was an important source to my research, because it gave me the most information on her day to day sufferings.

At the fourth stage, I try to check the depth of my students' research and encourage them to walk in their characters' shoes by having them write a two-page anecdote about their characters. The anecdote must not be about a well-known historical event, but something smaller that gets at the private personalities of their characters. Sometimes students must speculate on whether or not the anecdote they offer is a legend, and why such a legend would have evolved and been perpetuated. Often these anecdotes find their way into students' skits or onto their broadsides.

At the fifth stage of the project, students must turn in xeroxed pictures of their characters; a checklist gives them guidance. (See Figure 2.) The pictures help me to judge how well the students attempted to approximate each part of their characters' dress on the day of their performances. Students need to begin to work on their costumes as soon as possible. There are very inexpensive ways to make great costumes, but they take thought and time. In the past, a plastic trash can lid served as Thor's shield; cheap gold sequins sewn onto an old lace collar made an elaborate neckpiece for Cleopatra. One mom's gray velvet prom dress turned into a gown for Catherine de Medici, while another mom's wedding gown served Marie Antoinette beautifully. Gold braid and buttons added to still another mom's

old black velvet jacket made a fit coat for Napoleon, while cut-out squares of gold foil left from Christmas decorations served as his shoe buckles. The soles of old Docksidlers attached with rough rope made sandals for Caligula. Leftover Halloween hair spray turned Queen Boudicca's hair its characteristic red, while a variety of leftover beards were modified for everyone from Confucius to Ivan the Great. Posterboard, markers, and a can

COSTUME XEROX

- _____ Costume chosen is authentic.
- _____ Xerox is of a full-length costume, including footwear and headdress.
- _____ Details of costume (shoes, jewelry, etc.) are clear on the xerox.
- _____ If costume picture is xeroxed from a costume book, you also xeroxed proof that this costume is from the right country and era.
- _____ If no picture can be found in a costume book or a biography on your character, you may turn in a xeroxed written description of what the character's face and clothing looked like.
- _____ The source from which you copied your costume is listed on the xerox.

(Figure 2)

of spray paint can make everything from Empress Theodora's crown to a full suit of armor for Don Quixote. Most of the seniors LOVE this part of the project and can be depended upon for creativity, razzle-dazzle, and thrift. And, happily, this part of the project often turns into a family affair. Parents turn blazers into cut-aways, friends' moms make Robin Hood hats, and dads turn the house upside down for a skull cap for Thomas a Becket. Parents take snapshots of the metamorphoses at home and send in blank videotapes to catch the action at school.

The sixth stage of the project is when students draft their broadsides, which are one-page introductions to their characters. (See Appendix.) The broadsides must have visual impact and contain significant, memorable information about the characters. I copy the final versions of each group's broadsides on its own color of paper, staple them together, and pass them out on performance days while the groups are arranging the room for their performances. This way the class has a chance to sort the characters out before each performance begins. After all the performances are over, the students have information that may lead them to leisure reading and to topics for future papers. At this point it is about two weeks before the performance days (not including Christmas break), but I only allow students one class period to meet in their groups. On Fridays, there is usually an undercurrent of murmurs as groups make last minute plans to meet over the weekend; I sense their mad rush to finish up the scripts and rehearse.

A week after Christmas break, the performances begin. When the students are performing, I look for good organization and strong group cooperation. I am always happy to see how kind students are to each other. They make sure that everyone has a chance to say and do significant things during the performances, and they help along the ones in the group who are shy. I also look for the revelation of historical fact, an accurate portrayal of the personalities of the characters, and an attempt on the part of each student to *act* like the character. A striking example of a "great performance" was Jennifer Munstle's portrayal of Empress Maria Theresa of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the start of the performance, Maria Theresa (with Catherine the Great and Queen Isabella serving as midwives) bore a child and quickly changed into her soldier's garb, speaking all the while with a German accent. As Jennifer wrote in her broadside about the Empress, "She was a fighter and desperately wanted to fight up front, if she hadn't been continuously pregnant." We got the point, and I doubt any of us will ever forget it!

Can you imagine the potential for research and revelation when the sixteenth century Flemish artist of weird imagery Hieronymous Bosch, along with King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, the lascivious Empress Theodora of Byzantium, and the Roman Emperor Claudius get together for fun and conversation at a county fair replete with kissing booth, caricaturist, dart game, and, of course, a sword in a stone? How about a seance including Robin Hood, Confucius, and Marie Antoinette, who are told by Zeus that unless the secret sinner is revealed in the next twenty minutes, they will all end up in Hades? Imagine

BROADSIDE CRITERIA

VISUAL

- _____ There is at least one visual: drawing, photo, symbol, map, etc.
- _____ Visual does NOT contain large areas of black (gums up the xerox machine!).
- _____ Visual accurately presents your character.
- _____ All visuals on broadside are accurately labeled, if necessary.
- _____ All visuals are done in BLACK INK (color and pencil do not xerox well).

HEADLINE

- _____ Headline is brief and to the point (for example, the name of your character).
- _____ Lettering of headline is NOT thick and black (it gums up the xerox machine!).
- _____ Headline is beautifully lettered or printed. (Cut-out letters from magazines work well).

INFORMATION

- _____ Broadside contains the dates and geographical location of your character.
- _____ Significant information is included on your character.
- _____ Information is written in an interesting way .
- _____ Information is brief-either a list, or one to two brief paragraphs.
- _____ All information is typed, word-processed, or hand-lettered in BLACK INK beautifully.
- _____ Spelling, Punctuation, Grammar, and Capitalization are PERFECT!
- _____ If you use a dot-matrix printer, you have made SURE that the printing will be dark enough when xeroxed. (Test something from your printer on a xerox machine.)

LAYOUT

- _____ Equal space is between all elements of the broadside layout.
- _____ There is no trapped white space on your broadside.
- _____ The original of your broadside is turned in and NOT a xeroxed copy. (Scotch tape and overlapping paper does NOT show up when xeroxing an original.)

(Figure 3)

Napoleon, Saladin, and Genghis Khan fighting their greatest battles again under the critical eye of Confucius, using a gameboard and little soldiers from "Axis and Allies" as visual aids. Picture Marie Curie playing Pictionary with the nineteenth century Impressionist Mary Cassatt, Leonardo da Vinci, Bosch, and Artemesia Gentileschi, a female Italian Renaissance painter. There have also been moments of high soap opera: a native American medicine woman, Leonardo, Galileo, and Newton bound for a science convention on an ill-fated plane flight with only one parachute. There have been moments of game-show camp: the obligatory Dating Game quandary of which eligible bachelor Artemesia Gentileschi will choose from among the Baroque painter Caravaggio, Michelangelo, and Lorenzo de Medici. Three years ago Mozart, Beethoven, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Michelangelo serendipitously grabbed the same cab as they headed for a concert at Carnegie Hall. Leonardo, Martha Graham, and Scheherazade of *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights* planned the decorations, dancing, and storytelling for a banquet commissioned by Aisha, Mohammed's beloved wife. Two years ago Thor, the sixteenth century Arab leader Suleiman, Don Quixote, and Lady Macbeth all went through Freudian analysis. This year St. Benedict, the fourteenth century nun Heloise, Nostradamus, and the Russian monk Grigori Rasputin had a group therapy session recorded by Chaucer. We teachers were ecstatic over the research and the performances of our students!

The only consistent problem was that there were never enough good questions asked of the characters at the end of their performances. Most students in the audience were preoccupied with their upcoming skits and they often didn't know enough about the characters to ask interesting, probing questions. This year I told my students each to plant one question for themselves in the audience. It was fun to see how many students covered themselves by planting several questions; most of my students turned out to be overachievers in this regard! The planted questions worked beautifully. They made discussion after each performance lively and inspired their classmates to ask good questions spontaneously. The performers also had a chance to show the depth of their research and to convey important information about their characters that they could not bring out through their skits. These questions made the audience a part of the performance and gave everyone another way to learn by doing.

Although the "Meeting of the Minds" project is centered on the subject matter of first semester humanities (primitive times through the Renaissance), parts of the character project could be adapted to other English classes. In literature classes, for example, groups could be composed of characters and authors of different novels and stories. What would Huckleberry Finn have to say to Richard Wright and John Proctor, for example? In speech classes, costumed historical characters could give researched speeches on their views of a current event. Could Richard the Lionhearted and great Arab kings and warriors like Saladin and Suleiman give us insight into the difficulties America is having in the Middle East today? In acting classes, costumed characters could use props while presenting original monologues about their lives— an assignment used successfully for many years at Salem as a final project in our Talented and Gifted classes.

In English classes where students have weak reading and writing skills, teachers can assign familiar and more easily researched characters, and research can be done during school in the school library. When a teacher feels that group work outside of class is unwieldy, students can all appear in character on the same day, and the teacher can ask questions they are prepared to answer in character. If students are too cool to dress up (few ever are if *everyone* has to dress up), they can come with a single prop; everyone could just wear appropriate headgear, for example. Mary Hendry and Maryanne Turovaara teach "Odyssey," a one-semester humanities class for less linguistically skilled students— though certainly not less accomplished, as their character projects have shown over the past two years— and they have used these adaptations successfully.

Although we now have well over two hundred students in our humanities program, I could go back to assigning the traditional research paper. Sue has returned from her leave, Kathy Thompson is a welcome addition to our humanities team, and Cyndi and I are back to about fifty students each. But we'd all rather be grading character projects. We've given up any guilt over not assigning THE RESEARCH PAPER. Sue and Kathy have joined us in assigning the character project, and have contributed good new ideas. Our students are consulting the great libraries of Michigan and a variety of other sources in researching their characters. Students are using their talents in writing, acting, languages, drawing, dancing, and layout. They are helping, scolding, and encouraging each other. With their enviable energy, they are sharing their knowledge and creativity with us *and* their classmates. They are creating memories of active, interesting, and challeng-

ing research. This is the energy we felt when we were learning, and this is one reason why we became teachers. It is a sight we want to see in our classrooms for years to come.

Maribeth Carroll has been team-teaching humanities in the Plymouth-Salem High School English Department in Canton, Michigan for over ten years. In 1985, their humanities program was named an NCTE Center of Excellence.

Appendix

THE FOOTBALL TEAM WINS
STORY ON pg. 2

THE DAILY

HOW TO DO YOUR NAILS
STORY ON pg. 14

ED. 1 453 A.D.

ATTILA THE HUN IS DEAD!!

Today 453 A.D., Attila the Hun passed away in Jazzerin. He was born in 406 in Pannonia. Attila united the mongolian people, the Huns, when he inherited the Hunnish kingdom east of the Danube River. His Empire stretched from the Danube to the Baltic Sea, and from the Rhine River to the Caspian Sea.

Attila spent his childhood as a prisoner in Rome. He learned their culture, but never gave up his heritage. He returned home and became king along with his brother Belda in 434 until Attila murdered him in 445. Attila made the Eastern Roman Empire pay him so that he would not invade it. He spent the rest of his life trying to invade the whole empire.

Attila's death is under investigation due to the fact his new German wife, Ildico was asleep next to his body when guards came in the room. She is a suspect in the death; police say he may have been poisoned by her. Attila is survived by his many wives and three sons, Dengizik, Bismack, and Ellac. services will be held at 2:00 on Sunday at the Hun Cemetery. See pg. 5 for more details.

Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus "Caligula"

Lived between 12 and 41 A.D.

Nickname "Caligula" means "Little Boots" because he wore his father's army boots as a child.

Ruled Rome from 37 to 41 A.D.

Stood on the roof of the Basilica Julia and threw coins into the crowd below, causing a stampede of people which left 269 dead.

One of his favorite hobbies was watching people being tortured.

Demanded that his favorite horse be named a consul.

Used his sister as his mistress.

He was actually bald, but was so ashamed that he allowed no person to look down at him nor could a sculptor portray him without hair.

Claimed that he had defeated the British and the Germans, but had never fought them.

Was assassinated by the Roman Army in 41 A.D. when one of his insults finally pushed them over the edge.

Lorenzo de Medici was born in Florence, Italy in 1449. In 1469, at the age of twenty, he took over as ruler of the Medici, because his father died. The Medici had an important role in the government of Florence and controlled the financial affairs of the city. Lorenzo was a patron of the arts and founded an art and sculpture school on his property in San Marco. Michelangelo was a student there and Lorenzo helped start his career. Lorenzo's nickname was "Il Magnifico" or "The Magnificent." In later life he was referred to only by his nickname, because there was peace during his reign and the Renaissance flourished. He died of mysterious stomach pains in 1492.

LORENZO
DE
MEDICI