The Freshman Research Paper: A Near-Death Experience

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Those of us who teach the typical two-semester freshman composition sequence inevitably accept the responsibility of presenting a patient and quite protracted tutorial in the research paper. The idea is sound: Our students will be asked on several occasions later in their undergraduate careers (and, perhaps, past that point) to conduct research and to produce competent writing concerning that research. Thus, as a service to the college as a whole, we devote considerable energy to walking our first-year students through the research process. It is a worthy enterprise, to be sure, but one that too often proves highly frustrating. Like Charlie Brown at the beginning of the baseball season, we are filled with hope, confident that this time we will somehow manage to inspire our students to engage fully with their topics and to produce writing that will manifest and further refine their interest and capture ours. As the season progresses, however, our disappointment mounts. Doubtless they are learning something about process, about how one might go about writing a real research paper, but we discover, as does poor Charlie Brown, that our students are just going through the motions, not really invested in the topics that they have been assigned or have selected. They are not writing a real research paper, and they know it. And, truth be told, we know it, too.

I do not claim to have found a magic solution to this problem. We are, after all, introducing our students to a process, fully aware that, for our purposes in freshman composition, the topics of their research papers are secondary, even arbitrary. We concede that point, and then, because our students must have some sort of content to grapple with, we invite them to address topics that we think might engage them intellectually and simultaneously afford them the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of that process. When we are feeling particularly daring, we allow our students to select their own topics. When we are feeling a bit more cautious, we assign them topics that we deem suitable—topics we are certain they are clamoring to address. And, when, at semester’s end, we discover that most of our students never really connected with their topics, we are tempted to generalize that they just aren’t making them the way they used to—when we were students.

This past academic year, determined not to have another Charlie Brown experience, I tried something new, and it worked remarkably well. This new approach grew out of what was at first only a kind of idle question: What kinds of papers would I get if, instead of asking my students to write about topics, I asked them to write about people? Our popular culture these days is, after all, centered on celebrity. Consider, for example, the success of People magazine, Entertainment Tonight, and other television shows trading in celebrity gossip. Although I was pretty sure I did not want to offer my students the opportunity to write their research papers on Kurt Cobain or Puff Daddy Combs, I did want to explore whether this emphasis on people could be turned to good effect, whether it might be possible to lure my students into the world of ideas by allowing them first to inhabit the world of personality. At the heart of my questions lay the conviction that, even in a course where process was paramount, content still mattered. The right content could inspire students to produce better writing, to conduct more thorough research, and to complete the course having discovered that there is indeed such a thing as intellectual fun, that the joy of learning is an attainable felicity that is no less within their reach than within their instructor’s.

As I tiptoed into the world of personality, I resolved that I was not going to dilute the academic nature of a college English course by allowing my students to write their research papers about celebrities. Students can tell when teachers are pandering to them, and, although they would probably have gone along with an assignment to compose a research paper about a rap star or a sports figure, they would have spotted the condescension a mile away. I wanted them to
consider people who had achieved their fame and celebrity in academic circles rather than in the popular culture. Once pointed in that direction, I reasoned, they would soon enough come to the ideas for which these differently famous people were known.

I decided to match each student to his or her research paper subject by major. Students who had not yet selected a major were asked to indicate what they were leaning toward selecting (and, more important, to specify what majors they had firmly ruled out). And, because freshmen have not yet had a great deal of exposure to the academic disciplines, I decided to assign them a person to write about, using as my guide an interest sheet they filled out. Thus, the student who told me that she was majoring in communications and had a strong interest in documentary film was assigned to research Barbara Kopple, one of the two or three most renowned of current American documentary filmmakers. Among the several students who had selected a major in psychology, I assigned one Elizabeth Loftus, a scholar whose work on repressed memory led to her testifying in the murder trial of the Menendez brothers and in other high-profile criminal trials. A student majoring in occupational therapy was assigned Raymond V. Damadian, the inventor of the MRI.

For reasons that I will make clear a bit later on, I also decided that the people who would become the subjects of my students’ research papers should still be alive.

With these ground rules in mind, I began to cast about for suitable models of the sort of research papers I was hoping to coax from my students. Because I was asking them to write about people rather than about topics, I found the standard models in most of the composition and rhetoric texts unhelpful, except insofar as they provided useful illustrations of correct formats for documentation. I could not possibly conduct the course without offering the students at least some models, particularly because I wanted the paper to focus more on the subject’s professional achievements (publications, original research, other contributions to the field) than on the subject’s personal life (what he or she liked for breakfast or the name of his or her dog).

After some thought and considerable floundering, I found the model I was looking for: the obituary. The typical New York Times obituary of a prominent figure, for example, runs somewhere between a half and a full page, the equivalent of perhaps a ten-to-fifteen-page student paper. It emphasizes the person’s work more than the person’s life. For all the sobriety of the event that occasions it, it is lively writing (in the hands of the late Robert McG. Thomas, easily the best of the Times’s recent obituarists, it was even artful, entertaining, charming). It is an intellectual (non-gossipy) mini-biography of the sort I wished to elicit from my students. Obituaries do not, of course, contain the scholarly apparatus that my students would have to use, but suitable models for documentation and bibliography were available to them in Hacker’s A Writer’s Reference.

I decided to ask my students to learn as much about their assigned figures as they reasonably could in the course of a busy semester, with the ultimate goal of “killing off” their subjects in the final week of the term, so as to be able to submit as their research papers the obituaries of these notable, if somewhat prematurely ill-starred, personages.

The one exception from the Times model was that the students’ obituaries would have to be properly documented.

The idea was, to be sure, a bit macabre. It was also a bit risky. I did not particularly want any of the good people my students were assigned to write about in these papers to become alarmed over our cavalierly sending them off betimes. And even if we had not been “killing off” our subjects as a part of a writing assignment, it still seemed unfair to subject the people to undue pestering by college freshmen with papers to write.

As I discussed these matters with my students, we arrived jointly at another ground rule: Students agreed, for this research paper, not to initiate any communication whatsoever with their assigned subjects. This ground rule would not preclude a student’s attending a lecture given by his or her assigned person, should that person happen to appear on our campus or nearby.

With these rules in place, the students set about the task. Before composing the obituary itself, each student wrote two smaller papers in the form of book reviews, each devoted to a primary source, something written or created by the subject. In addition, each student submitted an annotated bibliography of secondary sources. The obituary itself would have to contain fairly detailed and concrete references to two primary sources, less-detailed but still concrete references to several other primary sources, and references to at least five secondary sources. Much of the work done on the two smaller papers and on the annotated bibliography was designed to feed into the composition of the final paper.

Even before the preliminary assignments were due, the students found it helpful to spend a bit of time getting lost in the library. Although they had already received a library briefing and tour, they were still less than proficient at locating research materials. Most knew how to find books, but almost none of them were aware of the existence of scholarly journals, much less able to search out relevant articles in them. Two library scavenger hunts—the first one a team exercise, the second one solo—took them a long way toward understanding how to access these materials. Each team or student drew at random from a batch of research questions, was given forty-five minutes to come up with an answer, and then was asked to describe on our class’s Web site the process that led to (or did not lead to) the answer. Students were free to use either Internet or hard copy resources in solving their problems. Some of the problems, however, were intentionally written to be solvable only via the Internet or only via hard-copy resources. The idea, of course, was to train the student in both methods. Regardless of method, each problem ended the same way: The student had to quote the opening five words of the journal article he or she had been challenged to hunt down. During the next class, we discussed each Web posting, learning from both their successes and failures. By the end of the second scavenger hunt, the students no longer saw the library as a place containing mysteries beyond their ken. And, even though they had only begun to uncover its resources, they had gained the confidence and the knowledge to begin.
Before setting the students loose on the first of the two smaller papers, I imposed on them only one further exercise: Each student had to present a five-minute oral report about the person he or she had been assigned. As a part of this report, the student was asked, "show-and-tell" style, to bring to the class the primary source he or she had selected as the subject of the first of the two smaller papers. This requirement assured me that the student had indeed been able to locate a primary source. The oral report itself offered the other students in the class a glimpse at the range of subjects being examined by their classmates.

After these opening exercises, the course pretty much ran itself. Students posted their two smaller papers on our Web site, and I conducted some exercises in peer editing in class, with an emphasis on sharing the lessons learned at each step along the way. Throughout the course, we examined useful models of the obituary form, paying particular attention to their opening paragraphs and overall organization. In each case, we noted the emphasis placed on the achievements of the deceased—on the work more than on the life. That emphasis was part of my aim from the start—to expose students to the work of someone alive and functioning in the academic discipline they had chosen to major in.

As we moved to the final weeks of the course—after the two papers and the annotated bibliographies had been submitted, marked, and returned to the students—we began to explore strategies for the opening paragraph or two of the obituaries. Using the "Discussion Board" feature of our course Web site, the students each composed and shared their opening paragraphs—learning as they worked just how difficult it was to pack all the right information into a first paragraph or two and still get it to make sense. As a delightful and unanticipated by-product of this exercise, the students came to a higher appreciation for the usefulness of the apposite as a way of conveying layers of added information; to a greater expertise in the crafting of compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences; and to a correspondingly high regard for the power of subordinate clauses to suggest the relative importance of one point over another. Until the students had to face the challenge of writing these opening paragraphs, they were largely unaware of the connection between these grammatical terms that they had been hearing all their lives and the robust writing that proved easily within their reach once they had seen the connection between theory and practice.

At some point near the end of the course, it became clear that the class could no longer derive much benefit from group activities. Each student had become fairly deeply involved in his or her own project and needed some assistance from me rather than more feedback from equally preoccupied classmates. So in lieu of classroom attendance during the penultimate week of the course, I scheduled individual appointments (thirty minutes apiece) with each student. I asked each student to send me a copy of his or her work in progress the day before his or her appointment. I read this material the night before the appointment, and then at our meeting we discussed it—along with whatever other problems the student may have been encountering. Acting on the suggestions that I provided at these appointments, they were then on their own to produce a final copy by the last day of class, some eight to ten days later.

The papers were markedly better written than what I had been used to receiving from English 102 students. There were, to be sure, individual papers that did not rise to the occasion, even as there were papers that would have been wonderfully well written no matter who the instructor, no matter what the course. But, as a batch, they were quite good. The biology major who wrote on ethnobotanist Mark Plotkin will now embark on his undergraduate biology curriculum with at least some sense of the range of possibilities open to him and some specific, grounded enthusiasm for his chosen major. The communications major who wrote on Leni Riefenstahl (having never before heard of her) has been exposed to the power of film in a way that is bound to influence her further studies. The pre-law major who wrote on Anthony Lewis can now converse intelligently about two landmark Supreme Court cases, Gideon v. Cochran (the right of a poor person to legal counsel) and New York Times v. Sullivan (libel and the first amendment). And there are some three dozen or so other students who will enter their sophomore years similarly engaged in some important aspect of their majors. In addition (the icing on the cake), because of the oral reports and the other information-sharing exercises we did in our virtual and actual classroom discussions, the twenty-three other students in the same section as that communications major, for example, now have at least a nickel's worth of knowledge about Plotkin, about Lewis, and about Riefenstahl, to say nothing of the several dollars' worth of information they have amassed about their own assigned subjects.

I am ashamed to admit that I began this experiment self-servingly: I did not want to read any more boring research papers. I had no further goals in mind. Now, of course, I am ready to claim that I knew all along that this model would also, almost automatically, do much more:

1. Offer students a multicultural experience. Because I could assign subjects of various cultures and ethnicities, I could make the course reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of the students enrolled in it, or even better, make it reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of the world beyond the classroom.

2. Invite students to make interdisciplinary connections. Indeed, the classroom discussions compelled students to consider the ways in which various academic disciplines connect with and diverge from each other. This interdisciplinary aspect of the course achieved—at least modestly—what we hope to and yet so seldom do achieve in an undergraduate general education curriculum.

By now, many veterans of the freshman composition trenches will have surmised that, really, the model I am describing merely replaces the topics approach with a biographical one, and that all that business about the obituary is nothing but a gimmick. One might as easily adopt the rest of the model and omit the obituary gimmick. What really counts is the assignment of academic "celebrities" based on the students' academic majors. The rest is distraction.

And so it may be. I will need to apply this model a few more times before I can
be sure that the obituary-as-research-paper is necessary. For now, two things persuade me that it is more than a gimmick:

1. The obituary is the liveliest available model of a mini-biography, far more interestingly written than, say, a biographical sketch in *Current Biography* or *Contemporary Newsmakers*.

2. The student who is asked to write his or her research paper in the form of a premature obituary, I discovered with some surprise, really warms to the task, taking a modestly perverse delight, I suspect, in being able to finish off the paper and the subject in one fell swoop. It may be that I will find students in future classes who will react differently, but thus far, my students have, if anything, looked forward to the closure (their word) that this model provided them.

As to my original self-serving goal, I can claim some genuine success. The papers were not boring. In fact, most of them were actually fun to read. It is a feeling I remember from my earliest years of teaching. How nice to get it back.