TEACHING LIBRARY RESEARCH: PROCESS, NOT PRODUCT

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Watch a group of freshmen set loose in the library to "write a research paper." Most of them head straight to the card catalogue and then either home with a stack of dubiously useful books or back to the teacher with the announcement that there is nothing at the library on their topic. A few may also check one or two volumes of the *Readers' Guide*, taking with them photocopies of the first four or five articles they find. Or get a group of writing teachers together at any level from middle school to college, and almost inevitably the question comes up: "How do you teach the research paper?"

Teachers are as frustrated about teaching library research skills as students are about learning them. Those who require the research paper, often as the culminating exercise of a semester or year, often face plagiarized, unfocused, uninteresting, uninformative, and stiff papers written by resentful students going through the motions of research. Nor is it surprising that those are the result of term paper assignments, for in a writing course, as Richard Larson argues, the research paper is often no more than a rhetorical exercise. Yet teachers who give up the research paper, either because they agree with Larson or because they find the whole experience so frustrating and unproductive for both themselves and their students, feel more than a twinge of guilt, holding themselves responsible for teaching students to "do" library research. More importantly, we all recognize that doing research, whether it involves searching the memory yet again, interviewing family or fellow students, observing events, or

reading in library sources, is an integral part of the writing process. Many more teachers, though perhaps unhappy with the assignment, continue requiring the research paper because they have no choice or see no alternative (Ford and Perry's survey of college-level instruction found the research paper required in 84.09% of freshman composition programs surveyed). Our general freshman texts offer little help in this quandary, most treating the doing of research in a traditional manner, assuming it will lead to writing a research paper. And, discussion of the writing process tends to focus on personal or creative writing or on writers who already know how to use research materials. So, many teachers find themselves in the uncomfortable position of agreeing that library research is important but hoping that someone else will teach their students how to do it.

We can more profitably teach our students to use library research if, rather than separating the activity out as relevant only for the writing of the research paper, we treat research as part of the recursive generative process of writing and so encourage students to see that doing research, whether in the library, the laboratory, or the "real world," is also a recursive process of discovery. We can help students see how to use library research the ways we do: to work up background knowledge on a new topic before exploring it in depth, to answer specific questions that come up while writing, to discover the current of opinion about a topic or view, to assemble authority to bolster an argument, to identify allusions. These are research tasks writers perform as part of a larger writing project, not in isolation, and students should not be asked to perform them in isolation either.

But writers can use research in these ways only if they are comfortable in the library, and we who find libraries so congenial often forget how intimidated many students are by even the smallest academic library, with its floors of stacks, Library of Congress catalogue numbers, large reference collection, microfilm and microfiche, and armies of librarians. We forget, too, that the conventions of reference and documentation, which we as members of the academic community find natural, if rather tedious, are to students arcane mysteries, almost the most important aspect of research. Part of our task, then, must also be to make students comfortable enough in the library and with reference conventions so that the mechanics of doing research do not impede the creative

intellectual task of writing and discovery. Just as beginning writers should not be asked to do research in isolation of a real writing-engendered need, they should not be expected to assimilate all the mechanics of researching at once.

Ford and Perry's survey reports that when the research paper is included in a freshman composition course, it comes as the culminating experience of a year or semester. Such placement requires that students learn to find, read, summarize, interpret, organize, and report on library sources all at once. Not only must they learn all these skills concurrently, they have not sufficient time for repeated practice. Furthermore, such a practice maintains the myth that doing research is something separate from whatever other writing students might have done.

We need instead a method for structuring research tasks into assignments in a way that teaches students, not just to find and use library sources, but to do so in a meaningful way. The assignments described below are designed to extend the exploration process of writing beyond the students' examination of their own experience in a natural and relatively comfortable way, so that students can see that conducting research using library sources is in many ways similar to the invention they have been doing. The assignments are structured in part to contradict what has often been these students' prior experience of writing a research paper, where the emphasis has been on note cards, documentation format, and summarizing a collection of sources on a particular topic without a clear sense that they are "making a new meaning," or without a clear rhetorical purpose for the research. Students are encouraged to see research as part of the rest of their preparation to write and to realize that research is like other kinds of invention. This sequence of assignments encourages such a view of research by providing a genuine rhetorical context in which library research supports a writing task, rather than the writing merely recording the research; by introducing the mechanical and technical skills of research (finding items in the library and using conventions of documentation and reference) gradually; and by giving students repeated practice throughout the semester in the skills and techniques of research. In most of these assignments, even though they are doing research, students are asked to continue to rely largely on their own ideas. Thus, they are encouraged to use the research rather than merely to do it.

These tasks illustrate several principles that can guide (in a variety of contexts) teachers who want their students to do research: the need for research material arises from the topic; students define the types of information they might want before going into the library; they are directed to a limited (but ever increasing) variety of appropriate sources; and they use researched information to support larger writing tasks (the research is not an end in itself). Though I have used these principles to incorporate research in a series of assignments designed primarily to help students learn to do analysis, similar tasks could be incorporated into courses where personal or persuasive writing is the focus. The analytical assignments are carefully sequenced so that each builds on the ones before as well as requiring new kinds of thinking; the "research" tasks are sequenced with the same principle in mind.

Before students can profitably use library sources, they need to be able to read analytically, identifying a piece's major points and sources of support or development, at the very least. To get practice in this kind of reading, students write short summaries early in the semester, then short analytical practices on limited topics. These practices give students the chance to try different ways of referencing authors and their works, using the preliminary footnote and parenthetical documentation. Because in these ungraded practices students have frequent occasions to use parenthetical documentation, they quickly become accustomed to referencing others' ideas as well as their words. The purpose of this series of assignments is to give students preliminary practice in reading, summarizing, and analyzing, but they also give students the chance to become comfortable with the conventions of reference and documentation before beginning library research. Thus, not only are they not asked to learn the conventions of reporting research at the same time they learn to do research; they are likely also to be more careful researchers and notetakers when they do venture into the library.

That first visit into the library supports one of their early formal essays, a description and analysis of a photograph of Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull (the assignment is an expansion of that in Barnet and Stubbs 57). Since the research required is fairly simple, and finding sources is not difficult, students can concentrate on deciding what information in a source is significant and how it can be used to bolster their own arguments. We can also discuss the appropriate use and selection of encyclopedia articles and the basic nature and

organization of the reference collection. Because the research is intended to support and challenge their own ideas, students venture into the library only after they have begun working on their analysis and have formulated some preliminary ideas. Typically, they have already spent two or three class sessions using various invention techniques to recall and share what they already know about Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull and to explore what the photo suggests to them, so they have articulated their attitudes about the American West, cowboys, and Indians, and they have described the composition of the photograph. Since most of those ideas have also been shared with classmates, they are likely to have raised questions they want answers to; they are *motivated* searches for information. I restrict their search to the history reference collection, academic encyclopedias, and Doherty's article on Buffalo Bill (which I place on reserve) so that students are not faced with an overwhelming wealth of information or possible sources. Further, the use to which they are asked to put the material they find encourages their being purposeful and selective readers. Because they are all working on the same assignment and have shared their initial perceptions and attitudes with one another, they often help one another in the library, so that their first experience with the reference collection is less likely to be frustrating. But since the information they find must be used only to support or enrich their analysis of the photo (an analysis that has begun *before* the trip to the library), they rarely plagiarize from library sources or one another. In fact, this assignment provides one of a number of occasions for discussing plagiarism and academic standards for honesty in using and sharing ideas in a positive rather than punitive context.

The second major essay students write for which they do research is an ad analysis. Rather that simply analyze the appeal of one ad, however, most students choose to work on a group of ads—ads for competing brands, ads from a single campaign, ads for a single product aimed at different audiences or from different times, or ads from a single magazine. This time, their library searches are more complicated because the assignment is, and because all the students are working on different tasks and so will need different kinds of sources. But, once again, the research task is not assigned until after students have begun articulating (in group discussions and writing) ideas from their own observations. During the initial invention stages we discuss the nature and purpose of adver-

tising and the techniques of the ads they have chosen. Some students, of course, need additional prodding. But before we venture to the library, all have at least one question worth searching the library to answer: why are these two ads for the same product so different in technique? how accurate are these "scientific" claims? does the image these ads create have anything to do with the product's position in the market? why has this company changed its approach in this campaign? After they have raised these kinds of questions, working in small groups and as a class, we review the organization of the reference collection and the basic types of sources it contains, students suggesting where they might begin their searches, I then recommending additional sources. For this assignment students frequently have their first experience using newspaper and magazine indices, microfilm readers, and basic references in business and economics. The research is started during a class session, so that students can cooperate with one another and receive suggestions for alternate search strategies from me and the reference librarians before they have the chance to become frustrated at not finding exactly the information they want in the first source they pick up.

In their final assignments students engage in more extensive and independent research. This final assignment is an analysis of an essay from Barnet and Stubbs (this past semester students chose to work on E. M. Forster's "My Wood," E. B. White's "Education," Martin Luther King's "Nonviolent Resistance," and George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant"). The research focuses on the author's life and career, on the context of the essay in the author's works, and on the essay's allusions. Having read the essay and Barnet and Stubb's brief blurb about the author, and having discussed in class what they collectively know already, students begin to formulate questions. First we focus on the authors themselves. Not every student's search proceeds in the same way, but typically they consult several biographical sources, book reviews, periodical articles, and historical or literary critical references. They may also consult other specialty reference works, special subject encyclopedias and dictionaries, collections of interviews, and faculty members or fellow students. As they consult this range of sources, students can formulate some kind of limited question they would like to report on: *Were* Stuart Little's character and adventures based on White's own? What was White's view on freedom? What was Forster's view of women? How did Martin Luther King's reputation change during

his lifetime? How did Orwell's early experiences affect his works?

Students can report on the results of this research in a variety of ways, though usually I ask for a four to five page documented essay written with the other members of their group (who are all working on the same author) as the audience. This short essay is the closest thing to a "research paper" the students write, but they do not approach it with dread because they have already had experience doing library research, summarizing, and documenting. Further, because the research they are engaged in is intended to serve the specific purpose of enriching their understanding of the essay they have chosen to analyze, their research is purposeful and directed. Finally, since they are writing for a relatively informed audience their research cannot be shallow, and they are motivated to try to reach some original insight. Most students become genuinely interested in, and a few excited about, the pursuit of information.

In preparation for writing their essay analysis, students engage in one more research task, searching reference books to identify allusions (to writers and artists, quotations, political and historical figures, mythical and literary characters, current and historical events or trends, and so on). I stipulate that the allusions must be located in a reference book other than the general encyclopedias, and again, the research is conducted in class, with me and the librarians (who receive the list of allusions to be identified in advance) as consultants. I tell students that this part of their research training is like a treasure hunt, and that the greatest treasure is enriched understanding of the essay they are preparing to analyze.

By the time students have finished these assignments, they have become comfortable with the library, the reference librarians, the microfilm and microfiche equipment, and the Library of Congress catalogue system. They have explored in depth several sections of the reference collection, so though they do not know the whole collection, they do have some sense of the range of information and help available beyond the *Reader's Guide* and card catalogue. They have learned some search strategies, and they have had experience with false starts. Most important, nearly everyone has had at least one exhilarating research experience, ranging from delighted mastery of the microfilm machine to a wider appreciation of childhood favorite E. B. White. They are ready, in other words, to be trained in the process of more extended research as it might be called for in specific writing contexts in their own disciplines.

I would not argue for these particular assignments as the best

way to teach research skills. What I am arguing is that any teacher of writers in a general composition course could more productively teach students to use library materials using the principles I have outlined to incorporate the activity of research into a number of writing assignments over the course of a semester, making the research serve the writing tasks. These principles mean teaching library research with tasks that allow us:

to separate instruction in reading and summarizing and in reference and documentation from instruction in finding library sources;

to make the search for information a legitimate, necessary part of a writing task by having students define their own needs for information before going to the library;

to help students shape real research tasks for which the card catalogue, encyclopedia, and *Readers' Guide* are unlikely to be sufficient or efficient;

to go to the library with the students, and to engage the help of the reference librarians, to create the same kind of collaborative learning atmosphere we use in the writing workshop to help students learn to do research;

and to introduce students to all these kinds of activities gradually and systematically, giving them varying degrees of independence and guidance.

The goal of most of us should not be to teach students to write a research paper. Rather, we want them to adopt the spirit of inquiry that makes doing research an indispensable part of many writing projects, and to gain the confidence in their library skills that will permit them to pursue that inquiry in a fruitful way.

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