RESEARCH AS A PROCESS: A TRANSACTIONAL APPROACH

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For many composition teachers the research paper continues to be an irksome and uninspiring part of an otherwise enlightened composition class. Just mentioning the word "research" creates problems for students as well as teachers, replacing enthusiasm with apathy, originality with apprehension, and process with haste. Shamoon and Schwegler state, "In such circumstances, even writers who usually respond in a creative manner to all aspects of a rhetorical problem are likely to adopt a restricted, protective approach characteristic of poor writers" (14).

Certainly teaching the research paper was a problem for me. After grading research papers written according to the traditional method, I felt discouraged and disappointed. I knew that I had failed my students by asking them to do the impossible—to engage themselves in an end-of-the-semester research project that lasted only two to three weeks. Since I could not abandon it, I decided to rethink the whole idea. I asked myself what is the point of research and how can it best serve the needs of students in Freshman Composition?

In a research project, ideally, students select topics that interest them. They read and gather information about their topics from a variety of sources and they learn to use the library. They reflect upon the information, form and reform perceptions, and acquire cognitive skills such as synthesis and analysis. Through continual reading and writing they become stronger readers and better writers. After narrowing their focus, they draft, revise and edit a final essay in collaboration with their

peers. Finally, students document the sources used in the final essay.

What becomes apparent here is that doing research is a process of transactions and that students need more time to engage themselves in the transactional nature of reading, writing and thinking.[1] They need decidedly more time than the last few weeks of the semester.

Because time is the critical factor, I begin the research process on the first day of class, and the project continues throughout the semester concurrent with other writing projects and classroom activities. The following list provides an overview of the proposed process:

Freewrite #1: "List the names of five famous people and tell why they catch your interest."

Selection of major figure

Freewrite #2: "What do you already know and what do you want to discover about your major figure?"

Library tour

Working bibliography

Research summations 1-3

Freewrite #3: "What surprises and/or disappointments have you encountered regarding your major figure?"

Research summations 4-6

Freewrite #4: "What aspect of your major figure's life—an accomplishment, a relationship, a tragedy—do you find most interesting?"

Narrowing-the-focus worksheet

Oral reports

Individual conferences

Research summations 7-12

In-class rough draft

Small group work with revised draft #1

Small group work with revised draft #2

Freewrite #5: Cover Sheet

Final draft submitted along with freewrites, summations, focus worksheet, multiple drafts, and peer-group editing sheets

On the first day of class I ask students to think of the names of five famous people they admire, and to freewrite on each of the five by explaining what makes each person attractive to them. In describing the freewriting experience Peter Elbow says, "Don't stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something" (3). As one of my students describes it, "It gives me a chance to let the words and ideas come out before I decide what to do with them." Frequent freewriting is essential to the success of the research process as it provides students with an opportunity to form and reform their perceptions, actually to see what it is they have to say.

From these initial freewrites I compile a master list of major figures. This master list, including people such as Horace Greeley, Edgar Allan Poe, Steve Biko, Mother Teresa, Ezra Pound, Fidel Castro, Golda Meir, and Marilyn Monroe, is distributed and discussed during the next class meeting. The list's diversity in terms of both historical periods and professions leads to a lively discussion concerning the uniqueness of the major figures and, by extension, the uniqueness of each student in the class.

Students are given a week to reflect upon the list and to choose one major figure. When the selections have been made, they freewrite again, stating what they already know and what they want to find out. Often they have had previous exposure to their major figures, either in or out of a school setting. A young woman who had visited Walden Pond on her last vacation chose Thoreau as her major figure, happy to have an opportunity to investigate further his life and works. The center for the university basketball team chose Larry Bird. In this way, major figures serve as points of departure, and students often end up narrowing their focus to events, ideas or issues. For example, the student researching Thoreau wrote her final essay on why the author of *Walden* returned to town. Another student, beginning with John Kennedy, ended with an essay on the

Cuban Missile Crisis. A feminist who began with Gloria Steinem as her major figure ended by writing an analysis of *Ms. Magazine*, contrasting the first issues published in 1972 with the more recent 1987-88 issues.

After major figures have been selected, students tour the library and are often surprised at the variety of departments and services available. The tour helps each student prepare a working bibliography that includes a mix of approximately 30 titles and authors of books, periodicals, and newspapers. (Many libraries have fifty or more years of newspapers such as *The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune*, and *The London Times* indexed and on microfilm.) Such a mix of reading material enhances the project due to the diversity of voice, tone, style, and purpose encountered in biographies, correspondence, histories, literary criticism, and factual and editorial reporting.

Students reinforce their awareness of tone, style and purpose by completing ten to fifteen written research summations at short intervals throughout the semester. Although the questions asked may vary somewhat, the following constitutes a sampling of what might appear on the research summation handout:

1. Title of periodical, book or newspaper.
2. Title of article or chapter headings.
3. Author and date of publication.
4. Is the reading persuasive or informative? Describe the overall purpose.
5. Briefly state the major points.
6. What new information, if any, have you found in this reading? Does it challenge or reinforce your present opinion about your major figure?
7. How does this author's tone and purpose compare to that of the last author you read?
8. What quotations might you want to use in your final essay? Be sure to include page numbers.

Research summations help in several ways. First, they allow students to use a variety of cognitive skills—summary, interpretation, speculation, analysis and synthesis. Students not only think about what they are reading at the time, but also must relate and compare the reading to previous ones in terms of

both content and form. Such analyzing and synthesizing sharpen critical thinking skills, another major objective of research writing (Trzyna 203). Second, students begin to sense the difference between objective and subjective points of view and begin to see the many ways writing is used to inform, instruct, and persuade. Third, research summations serve as traditional note cards later in the process when students begin to develop and expand their rough drafts with background information, details, statistics and quotations.

After students have completed three research summations, I ask them to freewrite about any surprises or disappointments they have encountered regarding their major figures. After six research summations are completed, I ask them to freewrite on what aspect of their major figure's life—an accomplishment, a relationship, a tragedy—they find most interesting. Through freewriting in this way students find a focus for their final essay.

Along with other freewrites done throughout the semester (Elbow suggests at least three each week), the major figure freewrites provide students with an opportunity to take risks, to record and reformulate ideas, and to develop their unique writing voices and rhetorical styles. Much of this development is lost if students are producing and editing their writing at the same time. Elbow explains:

> The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all interruptions, changes, and hesitations between the consciousness and the page. In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm—a voice—which is the main source of power in writing. . .
>
> Freewritings are vacuums. Gradually you will begin to carry over into your regular writing some of the voice, force, and connectedness that creep into those vacuums (6-7).

This unique writing voice and this personal force are essential ingredients in creating a final essay that is both spirited and perceptive.

After six research summations are completed, students need to begin narrowing their focus. The following handout,[2] easily

adaptable to other writing projects, may be used to facilitate this process:

Major Figure_____

Areas of Interest

_____
_____
_____
_____

Chosen Area_____

Area Components

_____
_____
_____
_____

Focus_____

Questions:

1) _____
2) _____
3) _____
4) _____
5) _____

Tentative thesis:_____

Using George Eliot as my major figure, I have completed the same handout to illustrate further its function:

Major Figure: George Eliot

Areas of Interest:

Childhood
Religious Belief
Relationships
Fiction Writing

Chosen Area: Relationships

Father and Brother
Herbert Spencer
George Henry Lewes
John Walter Cross

Focus: George Eliot and Herbert Spencer

Questions:

1) How did Spencer influence Eliot's philosophy? What, if anything, did they have in common?
2) What characteristics of Spencer's personality caused Eliot to fall in love with him?
3) Why did Spencer reject Eliot's love?
4) How did Spencer's rejection change Eliot's attitude toward men?
5) What would Eliot's life have been like as Mrs. Herbert Spencer?

Tentative thesis: Herbert Spencer was a major influence on Eliot for both emotional and philosophical reasons.

The focusing process involved in completing this worksheet is a key factor in the success of the final essay, as such focusing helps students sustain the required specificity of a five- to seven-page paper. More importantly, such focusing prompts students to make the necessary movement from essays that read like biographies and reports toward essays that deal with critical analysis, deduction, induction, reconstruction and speculation.

After completing the worksheet, students present their findings to the class in the form of oral reports. Highlighting a few such reports each class period is more productive than scheduling a continuous string in one or two days. Everyone benefits from a glance at the numerous ways of handling this phase of the project. Class members, sitting in a large circle, ask questions and make suggestions to further assist in the focusing process. Each oral report offers something new in terms of content, and invites each class member to create mentally a form suitable for that particular focus and thesis. Such collaborative interaction can be a most lively and interesting class activity. In discussing the importance of early collaboration, Richard Gebhardt notes:

> [C]ollaboration is as appropriate during the early stages of writing as it is after the completion of a draft. Students can receive feedback from sympathetic allies while they are generating ideas, jotting down notes about possible theses, running up against dead ends in research, trying to make sense out of their texts' instructions about discovering a topic, developing a rhetorical stance, supporting generalizations, and so on. Broadening the range of problems upon which collaborative writing works is important, since this can help de-isolate students and give them moral support, as well as bring them wider points of view, throughout the writing process (74).

The focus handout, as the sample demonstrates, also entails the formulation of several questions. Drafting these questions can be troublesome and time-consuming, but they are most helpful in touching the real concerns of the students and in directing subsequent research. In addition, these questions often serve as inductive leaps with which to conclude the final essays. For example, in my essay on George Eliot's relationship with Herbert Spencer, I might analyze the major components of their intellectual intercourse. In concluding the essay, however, I might speculate on the consequences of this same relationship ending in marriage. If she had become Mrs. Herbert Spencer, George Eliot, the great English novelist, would not have emerged.

Because narrowing the focus constitutes one of the most difficult and important parts of the entire project, I confer with each student after the worksheets and oral reports have been completed to ensure that he or she feels confident with the thesis. Since abilities and commitments may vary greatly within one class, and because the project constitutes 30% of the entire grade, such individual conferences permit me to evaluate each student's progress at midterm. These one-to-one conversations are an effective means of eliminating frustration, saving time, and meeting individual needs.[3] Although additional conferences are not mandatory for the research project, I encourage all students to see me whenever setbacks or breakthroughs occur.

Upon completing all research summations, students write an in-class rough draft of the final essay, concentrating on stating the thesis and the major points. Providing this class time for writing the rough draft eliminates many of the writing blocks and tensions of generating a first draft since students have been freewriting in class throughout the semester. And students have *much* to say, much that comes from memory and reflection rather than note cards. As Donald Murray points out, "[W]riting unlocks information stored in the brain" (81). Outside material, rather than becoming the primary focus of the essay, is secondary. In realizing that they need not resort to note cards or research summations to generate a first draft, students cross the barrier from learning into thinking and leave class with a sense of confidence and accomplishment.

After these in-class rough drafts, students read through their research summations outside of class, retrieving the necessary

support and development, dates, statistics, and quotations. At this point of internal revision, students "gather new information or return to their inventory of information and draw on it. They discover what they have to say by relating pieces of specific information to other bits of information and use words to symbolize and connect that information" (Murray 79).

While students are revising their rough drafts, I devote class time to showing them examples of research essays and discussing research conventions and patterns.[4] However, it is important to emphasize that any discussion of research conventions and patterns, especially in the first semester of Freshman Composition, must *follow* acquisition of content. When students know what they want to say and when they are self-motivated to say it, they are willing and ready to concentrate on creating a structure that will add grace and sophistication to all their hard work.

After revising their drafts, students return to class to work in small groups. They read their essays aloud, and after each reading all group members complete a peer-group editing handout which is then given to the writer. Such handouts vary according to the class and the stage of revision, but the first handout might ask students to respond to the following:

1. How does the introduction catch the reader's attention?
2. What is the thesis of the essay?
3. What major points are employed to develop the thesis?
4. Has the author included enough detail to support the major points?
5. Does the conclusion relate the thesis or make an inductive leap?
6. What would you change?
7. What do you like about the essay?

After these written responses are completed, each group member comments orally on the essay's strengths and weaknesses.

James Moffett emphasizes the importance of quality feedback in the writing process, feedback that is "candid and specific," and he states, "Classmates are a natural audience. . . . Students write much better when they write for each other" (193). Small groups serve a dual purpose in that they allow students to read their work aloud, to view it from another

perspective, and to receive feedback from an audience composed of peers. In small groups, inexperienced writers become experienced writers as they internalize what Donald Murray calls the writer's "other self":

> Writers perform a special, significant kind of reading when they read their own writing in process. Writers must achieve a detachment from their work that allows them to see what is on the page, not what they hoped will be on the page. They also must read with an eye to alternatives in content, form, structure, voice, and language (80).

Based on group member responses, students formulate and incorporate revision strategies which will serve as guiding principles in future writing situations.

After obtaining written and oral feedback from their peers on their revised drafts, students prepare another draft and again return to class to work in small groups, concentrating on organization, clarity and rhythm. The peer-group editing handout for this second group session might ask the following questions:

1. Draw a visual form representing the essay's organization.
2. Map the sentence lengths in paragraphs four and five.
3. Does the writer use varied sentence patterns? Do you see any repetition of words or phrases?
4. Describe one aspect of the essay which might benefit from further revision.
5. Does the content of the essay involve induction, deduction, analysis or speculation? Give support for your classification.

A student's ability to respond intelligently to these peer-group editing handouts in itself demonstrates an impressive familiarity with both the formalistic and ideational aspects of the composing process.

After the second small group session, a final draft is prepared and submitted along with all freewrites, research summation, the narrowing-the-focus worksheet, rough and revised drafts, peer-group editing sheets, and a cover sheet.

On the day the project is submitted, students freewrite in class in response to the following questions:

1. What did you want to discover about your major figure?

2. Did you accomplish this goal?
3. Describe your process in completing this project.
4. What didn't you like about this project?
5. What did you enjoy most?
6. Additional comments and/or advice.

This self-assessment freewrite serves as the cover sheet for the project and is useful to both the students and the teacher. It allows the students to reflect upon the prodigious amount of work they have completed and to see the whole project as a process of investigation, perception, discovery, and organization. It allows the teacher to evaluate the success of the various activities and assignments involved in order to alter and improve upon the whole.

It is my strong belief (or bias) that students become scholars through research as a process. Throughout the semester they experience the transactional nature of writing. They are continually writing, reading, thinking, and writing. Early predictions and vague generalities are constantly challenged and recast. Students are transformed in this dynamic process by reading and reinterpreting their *own* writing as well as by reading secondary material. This concurrent reading, writing, and thinking form an interdependent network; as one part in this network changes, so do others. As the semester progresses, uncertainty is reduced and ideas become clearer. Students find a sense of direction, and their motivation to move beyond the new-found knowledge becomes greater. They need to move beyond restatement and summary into higher levels of cognitive thought such as analysis, reconstruction, and speculation. Toward the end of the semester this need becomes imperative.

The time provided throughout the semester for shaping perceptions, forming and reforming ideas, taking risks, and focusing is decisive in determining not only the final essay, but also a sense of accomplishment and a positive attitude toward learning. In the traditional research setting, the last cluttered weeks of a semester, both students and teachers have too much to do. Rather than enjoying and engaging themselves in the project, students are left with a negative attitude toward research and toward the library. The time and setting provided by research as a process make the goals of enjoyment, engagement, and

transaction realistic. Students begin to enjoy intellectual pursuit and to internalize the need to read, to reflect, and to create meaning as writers. And, because students engage themselves intellectually in the process, their essays are exciting and rewarding to read, each one reflecting the unique style and voice of each student writer encountered.

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NOTES

[1]For a comprehensive discussion of the transactional nature of writing, see Nancy Shanklin, *Momograph in Language and Reading Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1982.

[2]The narrowing-the-focus worksheet is taken from Jeff Rackham, *From Sight to Insight*. 2nd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984. 173.

[3]See "The Writing Conference: A One-to-One Conversation" in *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*. Ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1980. 101-131.

[4]For a more detailed discussion of research conventions and patterns, see Robert Schwegler and Linda Shamoon in "The Aims and Process of the Research Paper." *College English* 44 (December 1982): 817-824.

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