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THERE AND BACK AGAIN: INTEGRATING THE RESEARCH PAPER AND THE NARRATIVE ESSAY

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At the core of the composition course I teach is a method of using both narration and research to help students become better writers and thinkers as they integrate their own feelings and experiences with facts and ideas related to them. My purpose, though, is not to sell this course. In discussing it here, my hope is that you will pick up some practical ideas you can reshape to fit your own situation and experiment with in your own classroom.

The course is based on the process approach to teaching writing in that students move through pre-writing, writing, and re-writing stages throughout the semester. During the first week of class I ask students to compose twenty-five spontaneous writings--four to forty minute pieces that record their thoughts, feelings, and observations on a variety of topics. Students who like more direction receive a handout that suggests several ways of beginning their spontaneous pieces. One of the most helpful ones has been to pick an emotion from a list I provide and write about an experience that comes to mind. I encourage them to think of their spontaneous writing as a mining expedition. They are exploring, not refining. Most of what they compose at this stage will be the equivalent of rocks and dirt, relatively worthless, but as they sift through this material they--along with their peer evaluation group and me--are on the lookout for potential gems, namely, topics that are worth developing into finished essays. In terms of critical thinking, what I am asking students to do in their spontaneous pieces is to gather information by recalling, observing, and questioning. As they evaluate what they have written in terms of its potential for further development, they are developing criteria and standards.¹

The peer evaluation group has been so essential in the course, it is worth explaining briefly. I divide students into groups of three, based on the results of a sentence combining exercise. I simply count the number of independent and subordinate clauses students use in combining a thirty-two sentence original.² More skilled writers already use appositive, participial, and infinitive phrases correctly, while less skilled ones depend more on clauses than phrases. (Hunt) Classroom furniture is arranged so that each more-or-less homogeneous group sits together which makes it easy for me to switch from a lecture/discussion format to small group work. I usually have eight groups per section, and roughly three-fifths of our time is devoted to small group activities. Training the groups to work autonomously is difficult but not impossible. I try to give each group my undivided attention approximately once a week for twenty to twenty-five minutes. An activity I call "ghost writing" enables me to evaluate the progress of one group while other groups help each other without my direct supervision. After reading a draft of his essay to the group, one member is interviewed, quietly, by his partners. The object is to keep the writer talking about his paper, commenting on whatever experiences, feelings, facts, or ideas the interviewers decide to pursue. After the interview, each member, including the writer, quickly composes a new or revised section of his choice, hoping to improve the style or content of the draft that has just been read and discussed. A camaraderie

develops among group members as they help each other discover possibilities they might not have come to on their own or with my help. Since students do want my undivided attention when it is their group's turn, disruptive behavior is rare.

During my first meeting with the small groups I try to teach students how to look at their spontaneous pieces for potential topics by highlighting phrases that strike me as interesting. Group members are encouraged, but at this point not required, to share some of their spontaneous writing with each other. Once students have identified several topics as "potential gems," I ask them to identify the central element of each one. Right-brained learners respond to thinking of their spontaneous piece as a target and the central element as the bull's eye. For more linear thinkers, I have a series of questions:

1. What do I know or believe?
2. What is my attitude toward what I know?
3. Why?
4. What, more than anything else, do I want the people who read my paper to understand and remember?

The answers to these questions help students recognize patterns and relationships in their spontaneous writing and to make decisions about which details are relevant and which are not. The answers to questions one and two form the basis of the thesis, the answer to number three, the body, the answer to number four, the conclusion. As a follow-up to question two, I ask students to name feelings they associate with their attitudes. So, Dan, who wrote about his parents' divorce, listed feelings one might expect: anger, hurt, grief, helplessness--but he also included pride. The bull's eye, he decided, was how proud he felt of himself for surviving as well as he did.

At this point in the course, I raise concerns that all composition teachers raise: organization, tone, transitions, word economy, and so on. A handout helps the small groups evaluate each member's finished essay according to five criteria: authentic, detailed, fully elaborated, carefully shaped, and memorable in style. We go through this process three times. Then it is time for another analogy. I tell students they have three horses in their stable now--three finished essays--and I ask them to decide which one they want to ride in the derby. The paper they choose will be the one they work with as their "best of semester" essay. It also provides them with their research topic. In doing research on a topic related to their narrative essay, students move away from the world of feelings and experiences and into the world of facts and ideas. When they revise their essays after completing their research papers, they see their feelings and experiences in a new way. They have discovered relevant outside sources and have to consider whether or not to integrate them as they revise the final copy of their best of semester essay. The following chart illustrates the specific way this method worked in one class. (I've changed names to protect their identity of some students.)

| GROUP | BEST OF SEMESTER TOPIC | RESEARCH TOPIC |
|-----------|---|---|
| #1 Sue | excited and afraid when friends drove to "haunted" house and were stopped by police | What is the truth about who lives there, and why are people fascinated by haunted houses? |
| Mike | angry that he has to travel to Illinois to bet on horses and/or buy lottery tickets | What are the pro and con arguments for legalizing gambling in Wisconsin? |

| | | |
|------------|---|--|
| Ed | pleased with his pool shooting ability | How do people become "pool sharks," and what are some typical "hustling" tactics? |
| #2 Dan | proud of the way he's overcome the pain of his parent's divorce | What are the typical stages a teen goes through when his parents divorce? |
| Kathy | resents her more talented sister | What causes sisters to compete with each other? |
| Kelly | feels empathy for her step-sisters who were victims of physical abuse | How do children who are removed from abusive homes deal with their new lives? |
| #3 Tom | bewildered by idiosyncrasies of the English language | What are reasons for some of our language's peculiarities? |
| Dennis | scared, frustrated, and amused as he hid in bathroom of girl's trailer while incensed grandfather demanded to know who was in there | What are fears and problems of adults who chaperone teenagers, and do they think teens will break rules if given the chance? |
| #4 Ruth | angry, frustrated and afraid when aunt died of alcoholism | To what extent can alcoholism be inherited? |
| Julie | resented more talented sister | How can sisters overcome rivalry? |
| Jenny | went into shock when she saw pet dog killed by van | How do people behave when they panic? Is thinking that someone else is screaming and hoping they'll stop a typical reaction? |
| #5 Sara | feels guilty about picking on neighborhood girl who later--as a teen--had unwanted pregnancy | Is there a correlation between being treated as an outsider as a young girl and unwanted teen pregnancy? |
| Sue | fantasizes about owning a '69 Mustang | Are comparably priced used cars of the late 60's/early 70's generally better buys than used cars of the late 70's/early 80's? |
| Mary | shocked, sad, and angry when friends coerced new neighborhood girl into going through an initiation into their gang which resulted in the girl's death | Why do people join gangs, and why do gangs put new members through initiations? |
| #6 Judy | disgusted and intrigued when, as seventh grader, older boy taught her how to French kiss | What are typical reactions to first French kiss? Why is it called "French" kissing, and how long have people been doing this anyway? |
| Melissa | feels sad and frustrated that she can't figure out how to help neighborhood friend whose personality changed several years ago, after the death of his father | How can someone be an "effective" friend to a person who is grieving, and when should a grieving person seek professional help? |

| | | |
|-------|---|--|
| #7 | | |
| Beth | enjoys deer hunting with her family | What motivates women hunters? Do they have special problems? What attitudes do men have toward women who hunt? |
| Becky | values closeness that developed among cast of school musical | What is the history of musicals in America? |
| Tammy | upset at losing father's livelier side now that he is on medication to control his manic-depression | What are the causes and treatment of manic-depression? |
| #8 | | |
| E. J. | enjoys working with family in pit area at auto races | How does someone become a race car driver? |
| Ted | regrets not having studied harder in grade school, especially when he sees kids he used to feel superior to getting good grades and planning on college | What causes students to develop good study habits and serious attitude toward school? |
| Brian | enjoyed helping relatives build their own house | How does someone become a carpenter? |

The wide variety of topics keeps the course interesting and challenging, especially when it comes to locating sources for the research paper. What I have found, though, is that students are willing to dig for information because the context of the research is real; they want to learn more about a subject that will help them understand their own experience or satisfy a genuine curiosity. They generally respond enthusiastically when I tell them their job is to become an expert on their research topic and then to use that expertise as they consider new ways of developing and refining their best of semester essays.

I am indebted to Ken Macrorie's work in a number of ways, both practical and inspirational. Students must use interviews as well as written sources, and the organization of their papers follows the four stages Macrorie recommends in *Searching Writing*:

1. What I Knew (and didn't know about my topic when I started out).
2. Why I'm Writing This Paper. . . .
3. The Search (story of the hunt).
4. What I Learned (or didn't learn. A search that failed can be as exciting and valuable as one that succeeded).

Thus, Mary (in group 5) started her research paper this way:

I know about a teenage girl who died. Died for reasons I can't define. She was being initiated into a neighborhood gang, and one part of the initiation killed her. . . .

I need to know why teens join gangs. Why do they feel that they must prove themselves? Why do others feel something has to be proven? Why do people go through initiations, and why do people make them up?

I started my search . . .³

Before Mary was finished searching, she had read numerous magazine and newspaper articles, interviewed the girls in her neighborhood who had planned the initiation, and actually had the chance to go on a call with the head of the Milwaukee Police Department's Youth Crime Division. She said she felt like an ace reporter on a hot story.

Though Mary's experience was the envy of her classmates, the willingness of adults outside the school to help my students was by no means unusual. Sara (group 5) spent an afternoon with a social worker at a home for pregnant teens. Melissa (group 6) interviewed a grief therapist. Beth (group 7) found a telephone interview with the editor of the *Milwaukee Journal's* outdoor/recreation section very helpful. In fact, Beth likes to think her interest is part of the reason the *Journal* ran two articles on female hunters in the few weeks following her call. Dan (group 2), as a result of his interviews with guidance counselors and his mother's therapist, ended up participating in a locally produced television show called "Children of Divorce." The list of helpful adults could go on and on. From race car drivers, used car salesmen, and carpenters to linguists, play directors, and psychiatrists, many people are out there eager to share time and talent with sincere teenagers who want to learn.

Of course, not all students found exactly what they were hoping to, and not all of them wrote as eloquently as I would have liked, but the majority of them found something in the process of their research that made them think about their narrative essays from a new perspective. Judy (group 6), for instance, who never did get through to Dr. Ruth and found all the manuals in the bookstores dealing with matters more complicated than "French kissing," was about ready to give up until she stumbled into anthropology. Did you know that the Egyptian word for "kiss" means to eat, or that in 1897 anthropologist Paul d'Enjoy reported that the Chinese regarded Westerners' custom of mouth-to-mouth kissing as cannibalistic? (Perella, 1-2) Judy was able to deduce from the theory that "the kiss may very well be a . . . carry-over of a primitive habit of eating and thereby assimilating into the self any object felt to be 'good' or desirable" (Perella, 2) that the more intimate the kiss, the stronger the desire, symbolically, to incorporate the person one kisses into oneself. She used this new knowledge in her best of semester paper to complete the section on what she felt with one on why she felt that way.

The last assignment of the semester is an essay exam on which students evaluate their own progress in a number of ways. When asked what effect doing research on a topic related to his best of semester essay had on him, Dan had this to say:

By researching divorce, I have opened up my thoughts to the feelings and actions of others. . . I have learned a good skill for future projects. I have been learning how to narrow down all the facts and be able to present them in a clear, concise manner that is informative to a reader yet not so technical as to make that reader lose interest. The research has also . . . made the things I've said in my own papers "feel" more substantial. I think of research now as a way to go out and prove what I've said in my writing . . . by getting the support of professionals "on my side."

. . . In my personal life, I have noticed a tremendous change. The research proved my normality to myself and has allowed me to feel good about how I've handled things.

Yes, Dan is an exceptional student, and one testimonial does not prove anything. I know, however, that I used to dread teaching research papers, and now I almost find myself looking forward to them. The first definition of "integrate" in the *American Heritage Dictionary* is "To make into a whole by bringing all parts together, unify." (682) In bringing together free writing, the narrative essay, and the research paper in this particular way, I feel as if I have found a way of unifying my goals as a teacher of composition and teenagers. My hope is that

students leave the course having had the opportunity to become better writers, keener thinkers, and more sensitive individuals.

Notes

¹A version of this paper entitled "Teaching Writers How to Think" was originally presented at the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English Convention on April 3, 1987 in Madison, Wisconsin. On that occasion, I distributed a number of handouts, including the "Rankin-Hughes Thinking Skills Framework" as designed by Stuart C. Rankin, Deputy Superintendent, Detroit Public Schools, and Carolyn S. Hughes, Assistant Superintendent, Oklahoma City Public Schools, for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1986.

²I use Kellogg W. Hunt's passage on how aluminum is manufactured because I can follow the exercise with a lesson which asks students to identify the same exercise as completed by a fourth grader, eighth grader, twelfth grader, and skilled adult. In grouping students with a similar number of clauses, I am careful to let them know that the groups do not necessarily separate good writers from bad writers. Hemingway and Faulkner, for instance, would not have been in the same group.

³Macrorie calls papers that follow this format, "I-Search" papers. I have gone back to calling them research papers. The problem I had with the "pure" I-Search format was getting students to eliminate irrelevant details from section three, the search. Narrative asides about "leg-work" like how many times a student called a particular source, and so on, detract from the overall readability of the finished paper.

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