We Are All Sometimes Illiterate, We Are All Authors

How to make students the process, not their writing

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In the first-year writing classroom and beyond, student knowledge is built upon by entering into research "conversations," writing in academic language and genres, using sources correctly to avoid plagiarism, and recognizing that contingent literacy issues cannot be separated. Through minor assignments and mini-lessons, we may attempt to help students negotiate these precipitous terrains. Even so, personalized reading and writing tasks cannot prepare them for the interdependent, multiple macro- and micro-goals that comprise short- or long-term projects in college writing and research.

It has been several decades since David Bartholomae suggested that writing requires students to "invent the university," a process in which students who have neither sufficient knowledge of the subject nor control of scholarly language are forced to "mimic" the language, genres, and knowledge of academic writing (590). In my courses, I try early in the semester to demonstrate the challenges of "inventing the university" by including discussion of the limits of human knowledge and memory, as well as the acquisition of academic languages and genres. Because I personally utilize the science of literacy as much as I do socially and psychologically based theories of learning, I begin the semester by discussing with my students the challenges of "inventing the university" and the equally complex cognitive demands of everyday reading and writing. I explain the cognitive challenges of literacy from the evolutionary psychological viewpoint and from cognitive schema theory, with the aim of helping students understand that writing requires knowledge of a subject that they have not yet mastered. I have found most students enjoy the introduction to the complexity of literacy. I have also observed that such knowledge eases students into the idea that their development as writers is a process that continues for life. This approach challenges the popular misconception that education's purpose is to produce a completed product in a measly four years. It also defeats the common belief that people are born with the ability to write, and that reading and writing are natural human cognitive tasks that should therefore be easy.

I have been returning to an assignment I call the "48-hour expert" to produce writing that demonstrates—for in-class dissection—the difficulty of arranging personal knowledge with research, avoiding irrelevant information, and choosing controlling ideas. This assignment requires students to read related essays from our textbook (in this case, essays on the history of work written in the United States during the 20th century) and short narrative histories of their choice from the internet, academic search engines, or traditional texts. Students then produce a "history" of approximately 1000-1200 words. I choose
history because it allows for a chronological structure (although it is not necessary), which potentially limits organizational problems by reducing the complexity of dialogic or comparative/contrastive forms of arrangement. This inherent organizational principle in historical narrative easily leads to a discussion of the organizational methods of particular genres, followed by the decision to employ or omit them. This historical narrative assignment still allows for a focus on the integration of personal knowledge and research, invention/prewriting, and avoidance of plagiarism. Also, writing a “history” exposes students to their own political power of authorship by exposing them to the inclusion/exclusion that exists in all narratives and providing powerful classroom lessons that utilize social constructionist pedagogy.

The purpose of the assignment is to reiterate how knowledge is accumulated as well as its importance in producing targeted, successful writing. Although the assignment parameters are, ironically, not constrained enough to obviate easy plagiarism, I believe that freeing students from worrying about plagiarism in an early-semester assignment encourages them to take intellectual risks. The prompt is loaded with statements reinforcing the meta-awareness of our all-too-human struggle with reading and writing. I try to include my learning goals in the assignment prompt as often as possible. This approach facilitates not only rhetorical and writing skill transference to past or future assignments; it also facilitates the understanding of literacy processes, which is the major goal of this assignment.

When I was an undergrad, I felt I could become an expert in anything in 48 hours. Naturally, I was in no way a bona fide expert; expertise requires years of study, but I could begin to understand how a field of study was organized and what researchers in the field found important and worth debating. This "expertise" entailed not leaving the house for a weekend, but I could master anything quickly as long as I had five to ten recent books on the general subject and/or more specific concerns and questions the field was asking.

This assignment revolves around you being a "48 hour expert," something you'll have to do often in college and in your career. You needn't cite sources in this four to five-page paper. You need to read the textbook essays on pages 1-3 and 30-42. Also reread "Value-Free," pages 6-13. (Please do reread. My hope is that you will see how understanding improves upon reading, discussing, and rereading.) In addition to your book readings, you need to read many web pages and select at least ten to twelve webpage hits on the history of work in America. You will use these to extend your understanding of the history of work in America. (Make sure these research sources are fairly substantial and in depth.) After you've read these things to the point where you feel comfortable writing a history that reads as good as any of the pieces you've read, write that piece in your own voice with your own language. No citation is required, but you cannot copy, word for word, any of your sources. Please choose one or two sources and include them with your assignment. These sources will become part of our class discussion on changing reading into writing.
To begin writing: Shut off your internet connection. Put away your book. Write the history of work in America in your own voice with the major ideas you find pertinent. This is, ultimately, an exercise in choosing goals. As you read the essays and web pages on work, you must know what you are reading for. What type of history does each article focus on and makes each a unique history? What questions are you hoping to answer when you write your own "history of work"? What themes do you see overlapping or wish to make overlap? This is an exercise in priority setting, memory, and keeping or discarding information. Remember, no plagiarism. NO CUTTING AND PASTING. If you plagiarize, you’ll undermine our opportunity to discuss the challenges of learning and writing we all face when integrating personal knowledge and research knowledge.

Also, you’ll notice you have more than 48 hours for the assignment. However, I suggest several small, intense reading and writing periods for this unique assignment to experiment with how your brain works--how it absorbs information, how having stronger reading/writing goals helps you absorb the information, etc. Afterward, we’ll look at each other’s work as a group. (The writers shall remain anonymous, unless they choose otherwise.) We’ll discuss where writers struggled to integrate their own knowledge and research knowledge and why that is. We’ll also discuss how fears of plagiarism and my need to "patrol" for it affects our learning exchange and your language and thought process and writing goals. Although you needn’t cite sources, please create a works cited page of the sources you read so we can retrace our creative process during class.

In completing, collecting, and discussing the assignment, there is not enough class time to retrace everyone’s integration of research with personal knowledge. In the past, I had students present their analyses, but have come to find that group discussions function better. In these discussions, I keep the writers’ identity anonymous. We evaluate all papers on criteria for a good historical narrative essay. However, students are encouraged to speak on any chosen paper’s perceived difficulties. Papers showing the hallmarks of a struggle to organize historical research—major ideas, minor ideas, facts, and trivia—from sources that contain controlling ideas or integrated evidence, but have become discursive ideas and facts that need to be re-integrated by the students into their own historical essays.

I suggest collecting the papers, discovering the basic strengths and weaknesses of the class, then "norming" one or two papers with the class. In terms of successful student writing, norming this genre assignment can be comprised of looking at organizational strategies, information relevance, changes in language, the consistent use of a subject/heuristic, the inclusion of similar narrative concerns, and the consistent depth of ideas and supporting info. Instructors and students should compile criteria of this genre’s basic requirements as discussion ensues. Student papers I have collected in the past typically include the following errors: irrelevant facts related only to historical period, not historical subject; relevant facts not integrated or related to the paragraph’s controlling idea; students switching subjects when moving from decade to decade based upon the
research they find, regardless of its relationship to previous paragraphs' controlling ideas.

The literacy issues that can be raised when discussing a single student's writing as a group are related to the writing process, a text's values, or the meta-level knowledge of learning I discuss in class. The discussion of each topic acts as its own lesson. Obviously, this assignment can function as a conversation sustained over a number of weeks. The following ideas include evaluating a piece of writing as a draft in process and as a political act, but the overarching theme to connect these points should be how the student's need to invent the university problematizes the connection between ideas and language.

1. "Inventing the university": Students are asked to identify their lack of knowledge in invention/prewriting, and, if an instructor chooses, to discuss these sympathetically in anonymous in-class examples. The key here is "sympathetically," and a conversation based not on product or error, but on the demands of the university learning environment. Many articles exist on this subject. Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" is a good introduction to these issues. Flower and Hayes (1981) is the original cognitive-era discussion of memory and learning in college composition. Flower (1994) includes the influence of writing as a social process and discussion on how learning environments change writing goals based upon student's self-imposed expectations.

2. Exploring the nature of text, representation, and ideology: Students are exposed to the social-epistemic nature of historical narrative and the problem of "meaning and representation" (Tosh 134) in not only historical writing, but communication in general. With a clearer understanding of the power of communication, "literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society" (Street 433) can be discussed. I recommend focusing this discussion not only on what students read in school and daily life, but also on their own writing.

3. Extending point number two, in this assignment students author not only for practice in writing, but to understand social construction. As Susan Lytle suggests, "For adult learners, then, literacy may involve posing as well as solving problems" with the "more deliberate use of social, cultural, economic, and political lenses to decode the world" (382-83). To write a historical narrative is to pose a problem, and students can be made aware of this during discussion. Discussing which lenses the students have chosen, how well they've continued them throughout the essay, and what values are attached to these lenses leads to students identifying and choosing what social or political values are attached to their writing, whether intended or unintended. Moreover, commending students when their history fills a "gap" in standard textbook histories allows students to see how narratives function as devices of exclusion as much as inclusion.

4. Discussing the Ideology and Rhetoric of Genre: This assignment can create discussion on the social purposes inherent in a genre's recurring rhetorical actions (Miller 1984). As Elizabeth Wardle suggests, "genre analysis in FYC should do what all good analysis does: take stock of the genre, how it works and does not work, whom it serves and does not serve, and so forth" (Wardle 783). This assignment can serve as a prototype for continuing discussions of how a genre (in this case, historical narrative) constructs its politics. I find historical narratives a good prototype due to the too-easy exclusion of minority voices that history involves, as well as student familiarity with this genre from K-12 education.
5. Choosing and Maintaining a Heuristic or Subject: This assignment allows students to choose information from amongst various sources, typically from the internet, and integrate this information into a historical narrative of their own. Students must choose from among the multiple narratives regarding women and work, men and work, industry and work, education and work, and other historical narratives they encounter during their research. In extension, critical thinking also exists through a critique of absent voices in sources. Students must search potential sources for the existence of information that combines with their own burgeoning narrative construction. In short, students must read sources to see whose "story" it contains and whose story is absent.

6. Evaluating the Density of Student Writing: I believe the student paper can easily demonstrate the difficulty of choosing a research area appropriate to paper length. 1000-1200 words are not sufficient to write a history of the 20th century of any subject. Yet students often try. Assessing their peers' constructed histories, which focus upon several decades as opposed to a half-century or century, helps students understand how too large of a focus undermines the ability to elaborate and support claims or, in short, to tell a story or history that feels complete. An assignment such as the essay may conceal its logic and structure because of its exploratory purpose. Discussing adequate ideas and support can be difficult in uneven yet balanced professional essays. The historical narrative assignment lends itself to developing controlling ideas that are more or less equal in significance as well as providing the required support. Particularly thick or thin paragraphs offer opportunities for tracing the density of information by organizing principle (typically, the historical decade plus a controlling idea) and the type of information (controlling idea/topic sentence, support, irrelevant historical fact).

7. Avoiding an Autocratic Plagiarism: This assignment, which I teach with no potential prosecution for plagiarism (unless flagrant), allows students to bring in sources so we can discuss the technicalities of plagiarism and address the fear of plagiarism. The openness of the assignment—borrowing information without citation—is given to illustrate not only the complicated practice of plagiarism and citation, but also of the complicated practice of becoming a part of intellectual conversations (Graff, Birkenstock, and Durst 2009; Bruffee 1993). Instructors may also wish to discuss plagiarism as a cultural construction rather than universal law. This conversation dovetails nicely with writing and information as socially and politically constructed. Many articles discuss the challenges of plagiarism and the web, including DeVoss and Rosati (2002).

8. Evaluating Sources and Information: This assignment allows for a discussion of good sources, especially when using the internet. Discussion here can revolve around how to do research in the university (databases, dot-govs, and other academic sources). However, this assignment also allows for a discussion of the quality of web sources. Some web sources are quite good; others are quite bad. As an instructor, I choose several short sources ahead of time, and we discuss these historical narrative web pages in class, holding them to the same criteria that we hold the students own narrative writing. Asking how appropriate these sources are, or what parts of these sources are appropriate to a student narrative on the same subject, which recreates the research and information integration process. This
discussion involves multimedia and internet research. Instructors can also discuss
scanning a source for its usefulness to a student's project and reading/writing goals.

I enjoy and find beneficial the historical narrative assignment because of its ability
to slow the knowledge acquisition, prewriting, and writing phase to a crawl. Many
prewriting and revision processes often omit a detailed discussion of knowledge
acquisition. "Doing more research" is not the answer. The answer lies in how the students
process new information and utilize it in their own writing. This assignment is designed to
slow the process and thereby produce discussion of college-level literacy challenges.

Students do not become experts in 48 hours, and challenging this folk idea that one
could become an expert so quickly allows students to see how our assumptions of literacy
often times do not correspond with the facts. With this assignment, students begin to learn
how to research with goals that are project/assignment specific, how these goals and
heuristics exist in examples of the genre, how a particular genre's features can predictably
inscribe or silence historical and political voices, and how and why novice writers have
problems meeting these goals. To adequately discuss each of these goals takes ample class
time. Over time, though, I've found that the elements highlighted by the assignment make it
both worthwhile and comforting to the students, who come to see themselves as learners in
the process of being shaped, not defective products continually producing errors. Although
it is impossible to become an expert in 48 hours, teaching students the problem(s) of
"inventing the university," a problem continuing during and beyond their first-year of
college, may be the best form of expertise we can provide them.

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