

Making Research Real (fun)

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How do I get students to care about the research that they are required to do in English class? Of course, this question has existed forever. Some teachers do a better job of inspiring their students towards meaningful research. My attempts have had no real consistency. What might work for one class will not work for another. So I want to find a way to create an environment of inquiry and thoughtful analysis on topics that students care most about.

This idea was sparked by an episode on NPR where essayist Anne Fadiman, whom I had never heard of, was speaking about her newly published collection. She told the interviewer (Terri Gross, probably) that while she was writing about the things she knew and loved, she also spent time researching those things in order to learn more so that she could relay a clearer picture to the reader.

“AHA!” I said to myself. “Kids know a lot more than they give themselves credit for.” This could work. In voicing my ideas to Keri, she also suggested that I read Ken Macrorie’s book *The I-Search Paper* and Tom Romano’s *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multi-genre Papers*. Despite doubts about the MLA requirements that I must teach, I decided to explore this new (to me) idea in my classroom.

Hypothesis:

By asking students to create a working list of topics and concerns through brainstorming and reading (on their own and with their classmates) that are directly related to their own lives and by offering them a variety of genres to work with, their research will be more appealing and more significant.

- Gregory Shafer, in a 1999 issue of *The English Journal* quotes Donald Graves on the fact that while “all writing is experimental and ‘unfinished’” this idea is “woefully lost when schools get around to teaching research.” Shafer continues “the research paper should be connected to the lives and interests of the writers we teach.”
Shafer, Gregory. “Re-envisioning Research.” *The English Journal*. 1999 Sept. 45-55.
- Ken Macrorie writes in *The I-Search Paper*, “Teachers and I have given so many instructions to students about form and length of papers that we’ve destroyed their natural curiosity” (55). He goes on to explain the value of the I-Search paper, “In I-Search classes they (students) were asked to write papers that counted for them, and in such a way that they would count for others in the class also, including the teacher” (56).
- Tom Romano’s *Blending Genre Altering Style*
- On a June 13, 2007 broadcasting of NPR, essayist Anne Fadiman, author of a collection of familiar essays, *At Large and At Small*, said this about her writing, “The hallmark of a familiar essay is that it is autobiographical, but also about the world.” She cites early 19th Century writers such as Charles Lamb and William Hazlett as early “familiar essayists.” Their topics were centered on things that they were personally familiar with, but they also knew that their readers would be as equally familiar with.
- Bruce Pirie wrote in a chapter entitled “Mind-Forged Manacles”:
The Academic Essay: “for successful writers in secondary school, real ‘authority’ comes from moving between the narrative of that (personal) experience and more ‘argumentative’ writing” (93).

The Lessons

The Familiar Essay:

The first challenge here is to get students away from thinking about their own lives specifically. Instead, they must look towards more general ideas that they are familiar with. To do this the students will brainstorm a list of familiar people, places, things, experiences, and ideas. However, they must also consider whether these ideas are also familiar to their classmates and even their teacher. Who can relate to the same things? They will need to avoid specifics. Your Aunt Ethel is probably not someone who your teacher can relate to, but he/she may have had that crazy aunt that smelled funny and had to be kissed every time she visited. Another example: in Branson we can all relate to driving behind tourists on the strip. That is a familiar experience.

I will get students to generate this list through brainstorming, first on their own and then with a partner or two. I imagine that they will have a number of things that they are familiar with that are similar, and also many that one or the other hadn't yet thought of. They should not only talk about the list, but also explain and question the list. This exercise will not only generate ideas, but also open up dialogue and build trust between students, which is so important in the writing classroom. Once the groups have combined their lists, the class as a whole will create a new list through classroom discussion. This list will be posted on butcher paper so that the class can glean writing topics from it.

Now the students are ready to start writing. This will begin with a free write about the topic of their choice. They should ask themselves as many questions about the topic as they can think of and look at the topic from as many angles as possible. What issues do you have about the topic? What do you like or dislike? What did your classmates think about this

topic? How might others feel about the topic? If they find themselves unable to write for the required length of time about one particular topic, they should choose a new one and start over.

As you may have noticed, no research has happened yet. I think this is going to be key to easing my students into the task of research. The next step is to write a personal narrative on the familiar topic of their choice. They may look at their topic in anyway that they feel comfortable. Their tone may be humorous, serious, sarcastic, angry, etc... This will hopefully encourage voice and personality in the essay.

Finally and as the students are polishing this essay, they can begin research. They will need to find at least two articles from credible sources that are related in some way to their topic. If they wrote about crazy Aunt Jane, they may want to look up the importance of extended families or maybe eccentricities or maybe genetics. If they wrote about tourists, they may research how many accidents in Branson are direct results of tourists' bad driving or the high cost of health care for tourists or how they impact the economy. They should let the direction of their original essay direct the research. Once they have found the research and taken notes, then they can work to smoothly incorporate it into their original piece.

The I-Search Paper:

The I-Search paper is a research paper that requires the student to deal with topics and ideas that directly affect his/her life in the moment or in the immediate future. This genre of paper is based on the following assumptions:

- ✓ The writer/student and the experts and teacher are all equal human beings
- ✓ They are all experts at something, are all learning—alone and from each other.

- ✓ They all make mistakes; therefore, the student must sift out the truth from what he reads and hears, and write as he discovers it.

An important key to the I-Search paper is to let the topic find the student. If you have been having the students journal/free write, they may already have a topic and not know it. Or they might consider some thing that they really, really want to know about. It might be what kind of job they need to buy the car they want, or what kind of prerequisites they will need for college, or it could be as simple as acquiring a pet. It may involve an experience that they have had previously that they want to learn more about. You may have them answer a series of questions in their journal, writing on each for 2-3 minutes. Again Rich Gibson has provided some writing prompts:

What place would you like to visit? (some place where you've never been)
What would you like to own?
What would you like to know that you've never had a chance to learn?

COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS.

What if...
I've always wondered...
I've always wanted to...
If I had the money, I would...
The fantasy vacation I've dreamed of is...
I would like to train...
I would like to be...
I would like to make...
I would like to operate...

BE SURE THAT THE ANSWER TO THE ABOVE WILL GIVE YOU THE INFORMATION NECESSARY TO MAKE A DECISION IN THE NEAR FUTURE (two years, approx.)

Following the discovery of a topic the student needs to make a list of five topics that he/she is curious about researching. Before any research is done, the student free writes about that topic. And then develops three questions that arise from the free write. Here's a rule for the I/search that

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differs from the traditional research paper: the questions must be formed using the personal pronoun "I."

The organization for the I-search paper is quite simple and non-intimidating for students. Again Gibson provides a brief outline based on Ken Macrorie's book:

- A. What I knew (and didn't know about my topic when I started.)
- B. Why I'm writing this paper. (Here's where a real need should show up; the writer demonstrates that the search may make a difference in his life.)
- C. The search (the STORY of the hunt): a detective story
- D. What I learned (or didn't learn. A search that failed can be as exciting and valuable as one that succeeded). (Macrorie 64)

Incorporating the student's research:

From this point on in both types of papers, I feel that the teacher can take this in any direction that he/she would like to. In fact, you may have district or curriculum or even philosophical guidelines that you must abide by. You can be a stickler for MLA format in the research or you can just require that they acknowledge their sources in bibliography. You can still teach in-text parenthetical citations and the use of signal phrases.

Responsible research is always a necessary lesson. I hope to use this as a starting point, making the students comfortable with their own voices and topics that they have ownership in. The point of this is to pull students toward the research by making it relevant and appropriate to their lives. Ken Macrorie spends a significant part of his book on revising and editing, style and mechanics. He even has his own list of "Bad Words."

*****Another influence in my writing classroom since my original presentation:**

Since the Summer Institute of 2007, my exploration of research in the classroom has taken on a whole new image in the form of the multi-genre research project. Heavily influenced by Tom Romano, I began to explore the variety of ways in which a student can present his/her research to the

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teacher and to the class. I start with a lesson right out of Romano's book by looking at two different genres that explore the same topic: Count Basie.

The students are surprised at the fact that each reveals the basically same picture in very different ways. We talk about how many ways information is presented to us on a daily basis, which ones we find appealing, which ones capture our attention. While I am still learning what really works and what still needs tweaked, I truly enjoy the teaching and the grading of these projects.

Why I am drawn to this kind of student writing:

I may be repeating myself at this point, but I struggle in my classroom or in my easy chair when I sit down to grade research papers every year. The papers are boring and artificial. Students too often choose topics based on the ease of finding information or because it seems controversial or they are interested in oh...serial killers for example. I went through a period where the mafia reigned as topic number one, along with the deaths of Kurt Cobain or Tupac. The legalization of marijuana or prostitution, the abolishment of the speed limit or the drinking age were all topics that had been overdone in my classroom.

I want to know what my students are interested in, what concerns they have, what they really care about.