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What Can a Novice Contribute? Undergraduate Researchers in First-Year Composition

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Writing teachers are familiar with the many complaints about and characterizations of first-year students' research papers: they are shallow, regurgitative, "grave robbing" (Russell 2002). If we listen to Stanley Fish (2002), this is perhaps all that first-years are capable of producing:

[Students] have been allowed to believe that their opinions—formed by nothing, supported by even less—are interesting. [...] The instructor who hears them coming from the mouths of his or her students should immediately tell them, "Check your opinions, your ideas, your views at the door; they are not fungible currency here." [...] Every dean should forthwith insist that all composition courses teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else. (par. 13, 14, 16)

But the 1998 Boyer Commission report, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education*, rejects such passive absorption for undergraduates in general: "The ideal embodied in this report would turn the prevailing undergraduate culture of receivers into a culture of inquirers, a culture in which faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates share an adventure of discovery" (16). The Council for Undergraduate Research (CUR) has long argued that undergraduates can do much more than regurgitate

of student writing” at several institutions nationwide. Finally, the past year has seen the emergence of a new venue for first-year students’ work on writing and literacy: the National Conversation on Writing, a project of the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ Network for Media Action, which offers a Web 2.0 clearinghouse for writers researching and talking with others about writing nationwide. When students research on writing and literacy, they can upload their work to the site for review and posting.

In our own writing-about-writing research classes, we ask that students begin by reading articles that might relate to or contrast with their own experiences with writing. As they review Sondra Perl’s (1979) research on “Tony” or Nancy Sommers’s (1980) research on students’ understanding of revision, we ask them to explore their own experiences with writing or their own understandings of revision. Out of such reading and reflection come questions that serve as the basis for research projects, questions that are meaningful to the student and have generally not been answered in published literature. For example, our students have looked at how sports impact boys’ reading habits and attitudes, how various kinds of music affect reading and writing, how students at a particular university understand plagiarism, and so on. These projects tend to take up most of a fifteen-week semester, in close imitation of the way professional scholars conduct research, with at least some opportunity to collect data, reflect, analyze, write, revise, and consult with others. We also have students conduct shorter research projects that, again, begin with their own experiences and questions: students keep logs of the kinds of writing they do over several weeks, or the technologies that mediate their writing, and then compare their processes and purposes for the various texts and technologies. They keep logs of the writing they do in different classrooms, and then compare conventions and purposes across disciplines. They also conduct mini-discourse community ethnographies of groups with which they are familiar (say, church or sorority or workplace); later they conduct mini-discourse community ethnographies of language use in their desired majors. All of this work emerges from genuine questions and requires some grounding in published research and in fieldwork.

Published examples of student papers about writing and rhetoric are available to offer concrete examples of genuine inquiry at the first-year level. The inaugural first-year feature in *Young Scholars in Writing* included a commentary on the content of first-year composition (Strasser 2008), a survey-based study on perceptions of “classic” literature (Augino 2008), an ethnography of the punk scene in mid-1980s Waco (Pleasant 2008), and an interview-based study of the effects of past praise of writing on future literacy experiences (Jackson 2008). The 2009 volume included rhetorical analyses of presidential campaign speeches by first-year students. In the 2010 volume being edited as this chapter goes to press, first-year writers are revising studies on the positive and negative effects of blogging in recovery from eating disorders; on a “rhetoric of magic” in environmental discourse, on the effects of direct grammar instruction in second-language instruction, and on other equally intriguing subjects. In every case, these papers say something that hasn’t been said before. They were researched and drafted during a semester in a first-year composition course. They use professional methods. They were never conceived as library research papers, regurgitation of sources to “take a stand.” Rather, they respond to assignments that required primary research on an open question of import to the writer and a field, and a written account of that research and its implications. The important point, neither subtle nor intuitive, to understand about this difference in purpose is that a library research paper, for all its hope of having the writer reach a new insight, is not learning based on discovery new to *other* inquirers. Such discovery is simply not expected. In stark contrast, the teachers who made the assignments that resulted in these *Young Scholars in Writing* submissions explicitly *did* expect to read something in their students’ papers that they did not already know.

What Undergraduate Research in First-Year Composition Can Offer

Clearly, first-year students cannot conduct the same sort of research that upper-division or graduate students can. They are not yet immersed in the work of a field, have not yet read broadly

on any one subject, and do not have relationships with faculty in their chosen fields to serve as apprentice researchers. Yet we believe that teaching contributive research in the first year can have important benefits even if the student does not actually end up making a contribution: it can teach habits of mind and an understanding of scholarship; it can teach students how to read and use difficult scholarly texts; it can teach writing as transactional and genres as content- and purpose-driven; and it should result in better transfer (generalization) of writing-related knowledge to other courses. While we can anticipate concerns that first-year research could lower the standard for what counts as “research,” we see these other benefits as lessening that pressure: success might be viewed as a contribution to the immediate class’s knowledge rather than to a discipline in the pursuit of these other benefits. These students, engaged in small-scale but meaningful research in the first year, gain an understanding of what research is and how it is done that can be built on in the following years.

Teach Habits of Mind

Conducting primary research in writing courses teaches writerly and scholarly habits of mind. Sarah Wyatt (2005), in an argument for the efficacy of original experimentation in inquiry-based learning, offers examples of what students can learn from contributive research that they *must* learn in college but are unlikely to learn in many other ways:

Students, and teachers, have been groomed to believe there is a single correct answer and that education is about finding that answer. With original research there is no “right” answer to find; there is only data to be collected. Students must learn to think and to evaluate that data, and trust the process of so doing. They also must be willing to be wrong. (84)

In other words, training in contributive research does teach ways of thinking that benefit not only future graduate students but also the vast majority of college students, those who won’t have research careers. Students’ research in college is worth their time and ours, even as they pursue other directions afterward.

Therefore, even when students try but don’t succeed at conducting contributive research in their first year, there is great value in the *attempt*. Failure to contribute is not synonymous with failure to learn; even failure in contribution does not diminish the value of framing undergraduate education as learning through discovery. It makes more sense to have students try to contribute and not succeed than it does to simply assume first-year students to be incapable of contribution, locking them out of the discovery culture as a whole. In arguing thus, we concur with Alan Jenkins and Mick Healey (2007) that the value of undergraduate research has to be considered more broadly than just in terms of students’ actual contributions: “To say that the student learns as a researcher, is to state that the university, particularly through its curricula, supports students in gaining new insights and opportunities to learn about research and the way knowledge is constructed” (210). Institutions that would claim a culture of undergraduate research consequently seem obligated to include first-year students on principle alone.

Teach How to Read and Use Scholarship

As most teachers can attest, undergraduate students do not come to us knowing how to read scholarly research; much less do they know what to do with it, or even that they could do something with it. Students who can successfully integrate a *Time* magazine commentary into their marijuana paper do not necessarily know how to use scholarly articles and books. Reading is no mere act of text recognition (words on a page); it’s an act of constructing representations of the writer’s meaning by integrating text *and context* with prior knowledge. As Christina Haas and Linda Flower (1988) have demonstrated, younger students tend not to read rhetorically, understanding that the meaning of the text is contingent on the writer’s motivation and the circumstances of its writing. Explicit reading instruction that demonstrates how scholars read and has students practice reading is essential to students’ abilities to conduct their own research. Teaching students the “moves” (Swales 1990) in research introductions or the types of citation practices used in different disciplines (Hyland 2002), as well as the conventions of various scholarly texts, can help them

focus on content and research questions in a way that supports their own research interests. No matter what their intended major, students who can read and use scholarly sources after completing first-year composition are better prepared to conduct research than those who cannot. And the fact that they are receiving this reading instruction in the composition classroom itself increases the likelihood that they can do unexpected contributive work.

Teach Writing as Transactional, Genres as Emerging from Purpose

It is by now axiomatic in rhetoric and composition that writing instruction must be situated—we cannot teach “writing” generally. Condemnation of “general writing skills instruction” is most focused in Joseph Petraglia’s (1995) volume *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*, where, for example, David Russell (1995) argues that imagining general writing skills is equivalent to imagining “general ball handling skills” for all sports involving a ball, from table tennis to American football (57–60). Petraglia labels unsituated writing assignments as “pseudotransactional” (92), asserting that first-year composition has specialized in such assignments rather than writing that genuinely participates in specific rhetorical situations. Gerald Graff and Andrew Hoberek (1999) echo this sentiment in their *College English* commentary “Hiding It from the Kids,” pointing out that students “who submit writing samples that are studiously pointless would never think to speak that way in real life. It took them years of education to learn to speak with no context to no one” (252).

In marked contrast, scholarly inquiry is some of the most situated writing that teachers can assign, as contributive research grounds writing firmly in tangible audiences and purposes. As Graff and Hoberek assert, students who attempt to answer the questions most basic to scholarly inquiry—“so what?” and “who cares?”—will be situating their writing realistically (1999). The field has concrete evidence that students learn tremendously from seeing actual readers attempt to *use* their writing. Literacy researcher Gert Rijlaarsdam (2008) asked elementary students to write process instructions, watch readers try to use them (but not get direct feedback from those users), and then revise. Another

group of writers did not get to watch readers but instead got additional practice writing. The group that ultimately produced the best writing was the group that wrote the least but saw readers attempting to use their document. Writers travel miles farther in the presence of genuine attempts to use their writing than in endless loops of “process” that lack any actual transaction with readers.

The connection between that finding and undergraduate research in first-year composition will be clear to teachers who have tried to publish: the attempt to create contributive writing is so genuinely recursive and interactional that writers truly get a sense of how their writing is *used* by readers, and thus where its shortcomings are. Research conducted by Downs, Heidi Estrem, and Susan Thomas (2009) on submissions to *Young Scholars in Writing* shows exactly this: the most striking aspect of students’ publishing process was the interaction between readers and writers making sense of feedback by some of their intended but heretofore imagined readers.

We also want to stress that first-year students need instructors to *show* options for dissemination in order to fully imagine them. Bringing copies of *Young Scholars in Writing* into class; asking others who have presented at conferences to present to the class on those experiences, demo-ing websites that accept student work, showing videos of previous local conferences—all are strategies instructors can use to offer their students tangible goals for dissemination of their work.

Facilitate Transfer

A major consideration for first-year composition is (or should be) transfer, or generalization, from first-year composition to other classes. Much research has demonstrated the lack of transfer from school activities generally; the minimal research on writing-related transfer from first-year composition seems even bleaker. There is little evidence on whether and how students later deploy knowledge gained in first-year composition, in part because transfer seems to depend as much on context and situation at the far end as it does on first-year composition (Wardle 2007, 82). But there are ways to better encourage and facilitate transfer, and some of those methods are natural to research-based writing. For example,

teaching researched writing as transactional, and genres as emerging from context and purpose; can encourage the meta-awareness about writing needed for transfer. Teaching ways of reading scholarship, and ways of understanding the conventions employed in that scholarship, teaches flexible principles rather than rigid rules, again encouraging transfer to other contexts. Elizabeth Wardle's (2007) longitudinal study of students post-first-year composition does show that the writing-about-writing version of first-year composition can "help students think about writing in the university, the varied conventions of different disciplines, and their own writing strategies in light of various assignments and expectations" (82). Although undergraduate research in first-year composition is too new for clear data on transfer to have emerged, there is at least complementarity, then, between what would be required to teach for generalization beyond first-year composition and what first-year composition as undergraduate research does.

We imagine an undergraduate research experience that sees first-year composition as the entry point and researched theses in the major as final exit points. In first-year composition, students learn how to read and use scholarly texts, how to ask meaningful questions, how to seek out answers to those questions, and how to share their findings with others. These are practices and habits of mind that can set the stage for deeper research in their chosen fields. The exact methods used in first-year composition are less important than an understanding of what methods are; that the research projects are perfectly designed and carried out is less important than an understanding that research projects should have an intentional design (along with at least a plausible possibility of dissemination, though most projects may not ultimately reach that stage). Universities that want a rich undergraduate experience should look carefully at the possibilities of first-year composition as the place where expectations are set and appropriate habits of mind are taught. English departments (which usually house first-year composition programs) should thus consider how the first-year general-education courses they host and staff fit with other undergraduate research efforts in English studies and across the university.

Impediments to Contributive First-Year Research

If teaching research as genuine contribution in first-year composition were easy, it would already be common. Teachers' own attitudes (for example, as embodied by Fish) can be a clear impediment to large-scale implementation, particularly in a course like first-year composition that is taught by such a wide variety of instructors with various levels of knowledge and preparation. Other impediments include views on how writing should be assessed (that is, whether researched writing can be as "error free" as shorter, more polished papers), problems gaining human subjects' approval, views of writing that might see collaboration as plagiarism, and the limited time available for large-scale research projects.

Teacher Attitudes and Training

Solving many, if not most, teaching problems is often a matter of attitudes, expectations, and ways of thinking. We find this to be true of building undergraduate research into first-year composition courses. Perhaps the most important attitude is respect for and belief in students themselves—what they know and what they're capable of achieving. One way of demonstrating this respect is by believing that students can exceed our expectations. Very often, they will. Such respect must also be demonstrated in our willingness to mentor (not just teach). Faculty must be *present* to students who seek their guidance and perspective, just as in higher-level subject area courses. Undergraduate researcher Amber Watson's (2008) work on how undergraduates create contributive research suggests that mentors help students understand not just subject matter, but institutional and professional structures and opportunities that are otherwise invisible to undergraduates. Mentors show students aspects of conducting research that don't appear in the published results: how to get funding, how to find calls for papers, how to submit to conferences and prepare manuscripts for submission.

Writing teachers may also need to check their own conceptions of writing. They should be aware of the distinction between

recitative and contributive research, as well as the difference between writing to learn and writing to contribute. They should also be aware of the many double standards entrenched in traditional research instruction that no longer work in contributive research. For example, in traditional research instruction, students often are not allowed to include opinion unsupported by sources; in contrast, researchers use research specifically in order to think and say things that others have not. Many writing teachers have simply never compared what they themselves were taught about research writing, and thus continue to teach, to what researchers actually do. Further, the nature of contingent labor in first-year composition instruction means that many writing teachers aren't themselves actively researching. Because most do have at least MA degrees (and some others are graduate students working toward them), they would need to rely on their own graduate experiences in order to guide students' processes. They might, however, want to research along with their students, and take research classes and institutional review board (IRB) training to supplement their previous training.

Standards for Evaluating Writing

One other necessary shift in instructor attitudes pertains to evaluation of writing. Since its inception, first-year composition has been understood by most stakeholders—university administrators and faculty, writing instructors, and students—as devoted to and measured by the creation of perfect *products*—shiny, flawless documents. Just as with today's SAT writing exam, *what a writer says* is of far less concern than the fluency and correctness with which it is said. This attitude is what made David Bartholomae's (1985) essay "Inventing the University" groundbreaking: he made writing instructors ask themselves which deserves the higher grade, a perfectly written piece of fluff, or a complex piece that takes risks and stretches the writer but winds up imperfect? This was a radical idea in 1985, and is unfortunately almost as radical now—but it's an idea that teachers of contributive research in first-year composition must embrace; to ask first-years to try their hand at contributive research entails big risks and reduces time available for proofing and polishing. Teachers need to look

for the merit in students' work somewhere under the surface perfection, because even the best first-year research paper may feel rough and unfinished. Downs's experience editing submissions for the first-year feature in *Young Scholars in Writing* suggests that, more than upper-division students' submissions, first-year submissions require significant additional work. However, the published articles demonstrate what the results of that additional effort can be.

This approach to first-year composition demands that teachers carefully consider evaluation, collaboration, and research ethics. How does one evaluate "unfinished" work, or assignments that emphasize accomplishing particular thinking or research work rather than refining a perfect prose style? If evaluating refinement is important, can that evaluation be delayed—as through portfolio grading—while other evaluation, of engagement or progress, happens earlier in the semester? Ultimately, what needs deciding is, as always, (1) what is important to evaluate, and (2) how to evaluate it. The same analytical challenge applies to building community: finding points where students working on related but separate projects can contribute to one another's work; or using large-scale curricular moves, such as whole-class collaboration on a research problem by having small teams investigate particular aspects of it. The curricular question is, what assignments and uses of class time will allow students to assist and learn from each other and build on each other's work as research communities do? Expect such efforts to be met by lack of student understanding—after reading scholarship, collaboration is perhaps the biggest gap in students' grasp of how research works. Writing teachers must fight years of misconception in teaching students that professionals don't write alone.

Collaboration

Students aren't the only ones who falsely understand writing as a solitary activity; their teachers often set up course assignments that perpetuate this myth, even as those teachers do their own work with the help of others. Even in the humanities, which value "lone-genius" research, researchers form communities that share and develop their members' work. Such research communities

directly refute the myth that brilliance happens in the absence of interaction. Yet first-year composition research instruction traditionally turns students into islands working on choose-your-own-adventure problems (usually personal positions on social issues) without reference to each other. This arrangement ignores the possibilities, both for teaching how research actually works and for getting it accomplished, created when a class works on related problems, as is easily arranged in writing-about-writing courses. Building first-year composition research communities has long been advocated—see Michael Kleine's (1987) work on inviting students to research as faculty do, and James Reither's (1985) critique of the isolationist "process" instruction. However, the field has largely ignored such calls.

Time

If assigning students to work alone is one way teachers expect their students to adhere to requirements that they themselves do not face, then requiring students to complete "research" in a very short time is another such double standard. Many semester-length first-year composition courses feature a five-to-eight-week library research paper as a culminating project—a window within which most academics would not be able to produce much. Wardle has piloted linking first- and second-semester first-year composition courses so that students conduct preliminary research on their question in the first semester and primary research in the second. This pilot enabled some exceptionally underprepared students to produce thoughtful, contributive research projects. Such a system may not be an option at many schools, but the principle holds: expect that students can conduct quality research in direct relation to the amount of time they have to do it.

We should make the most of whatever time is available by ensuring that most or all assignments contribute to the project. The assignments, while teaching important functions and skills, should also scaffold the project: exploratory writing leading to research questions, research proposals, source summaries, annotated bibliographies, reviews of literature, separate paper sections (such as Methods), abstracts and presentations—all build to a "main" written project. It is important to ensure that assignments

are recognizable and teachable genres, and equally important that students can learn without perfecting such scaffolding projects. Teachers can worry less about what students can perfect than about which assignments will help them learn about writing and accomplish research.

IRB

Contributive research in first-year composition—particularly writing-about-writing classes—may present ethical challenges involving human subjects. At the least, classes need significant instruction about guidelines for ethical research. Beyond that, teachers at some institutions will need to consider arrangements for IRB approval of undergraduate, course-based human-subjects research. If a given IRB reserves to itself oversight of individual student research projects and lacks a system for turning review over to the course instructor, large-scale undergraduate research may not be feasible. But the undergraduate research movement is giving more and more IRBs cause to create systems that do let instructors oversee their students' research rather than requiring IRB review of projects. (It helps that most writing-about-writing research is relatively low risk.) In any event, teachers do need to consider how students' primary research is conducted safely and ethically.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we are arguing for undergraduate research as a vertical, comprehensive experience beginning in the first year. Our notion of first-year composition as a site of truly contributive undergraduate research makes such verticality feasible. What is required is a first-year composition class that seeks to instill scholarly habits of mind by encouraging students to ask and answer, via primary research, genuine questions that stem from their own experiences and their reading of published scholarship. Such a course, while unable to teach the methods and body of knowledge of all disciplines, can, by engaging students in its own scholarly field and research, teach them about the concept of

methods, about the necessity of research design, and about the rewards of sharing genuine research with others—from classmates all the way to a national professional audience. Students who have completed such first-year composition courses will move on to their other classes viewing research as the norm. The burden is then on those other courses to provide further research and mentoring opportunities.

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The Writing Center as a Space for Undergraduate Research

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The difference that appears when occupations are made the articulating centers of school life is not easy to describe in words; it is a difference in motive, of spirit and atmosphere. As one enters a busy kitchen in which a group of children are actively engaged in the preparation of food, the psychological difference, the change from more or less passive and inert reciprocity and restraint to one of buoyant outgoing energy, is so obvious to fairly strike one in the face. [. . .] The occupation supplies the child with a genuine motive; it gives him experience first hand; it brings him into contact with realities. It does all this, but in addition it is liberalized throughout by translation into its historic and social values and scientific equivalencies.

—JOHN DEWEY, *The School and Society* (1943, 15, 22)

The Writing Center as Dewey's Kitchen

Experiential education, at least within the humanities, is sometimes treated as a concession that liberal arts curricula (which espouse "learning for learning's sake") make to material realities—to the need to prepare students for the workplace. But neglecting the research opportunities that arise from these forms of learning neglects the richer version of pragmatism that John Dewey (1977) suggested could renew our schools. In this enlightened

Exploring
ENGLISH
STUDIES

Undergraduate Research in English Studies

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