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ABSTRACT

Assigning students to write resource papers about the library provides the instructor with the opportunity to teach about basic rhetorical methods and gives students the chance to become acquainted with resources they should know. Four different types of papers which give students a variety of writing experiences are a description of two reference books in a particular subject area, a comparison of two periodical indexes, an evaluation of the facilities pertinent to a field of interest (including physical surroundings and facilities as well as library materials), and a persuasive paper on any subject related to the library, addressed to any reader. (JM)

ASSIGNMENT: LIBRARY

The Use of Non-Research Library Topics in Composition Courses

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One of our fatalities in the recent educational revolution was the research paper course. And it did not die fighting at all: English departments had already weakened it with dull routine ("outline this week, note cards next week, rough draft due in three weeks") and had turned it over to the instructors and graduate assistants; libraries complained of overloading and of mutilations. It became then a matter of using little books of selected resources, followed by token library papers. The recent student demands for fewer real requirements and for more "relevant" courses finished it off in many universities. I see that a few college catalogs still list such courses, but the majority do not.

Now the relevance fad seems to have gone the way of goldfish-swallowing, but English teachers are left with picture-book texts, social awareness assignments, and an uncomfortable feeling that we are losing our audience to apathy again. We tried, many of us, to be up-to-date, to be involved and concerned and accommodating. Letting students "do their own thing" became an easy way to survive the revolt.

But we have been taking the easy way with composition long enough. We have spent those long hours correcting papers, to be sure, but we have chosen to assign topics based on personal opinion and on personal experience--topics requiring no extra effort on our part to prepare. We have also chosen to use class time in the ways that mean least preparation for us. With a few years of

experience under our fashionably wide belts we can go into class cold and "wing it" with impromptu talks on paper planning, outlining, thesis writing, paragraph theory, and anything else that we once saw in a rhetoric text. Extra time is easily filled with current awareness and anecdotes. The students before us take a few notes, read their chapters (which is at times more than we have done), and proceed to write what they want and however they want.

For variety, and to raise our evaluation scores, we spend one or two periods a week discussing the value of experience, the necessity of deep thought, and universal personal problems. We talk politics, books, sex, religion, sociology and self until our composition class becomes in reality a monologue titled "Our World The Way We See It."

Having seen in my mirror the teacher just described, I tried about a year ago to change the image. What I wanted, I said to my reflection, was a reputation as a teacher who could improve the students' understanding of their chosen fields and who could offer, besides assistance in writing skills, some sort of practical knowledge. Let me begin where I should end, namely by saying that the change has been successful. My approach has drawn compliments from professors in the areas of business, physical education, art, engineering, veterinary science, and pre-med. The chairman of radiation biology tries to send all his advisees my way. Others do, too; they regard me as a rather unique specimen of my species, an English teacher for advisees to "get". Student reaction, taken from post-grading anonymous evaluations runs just about 87% enthusiastic and 10% antagonistic--the rest being neutral or noncommittal.

I use library resource papers. Not papers written <u>in</u> the library, however, but papers written <u>about</u> the library. This allows me to teach a few things about basic rhetorical methods such as description, comparison, evaluation, and

persuasion. It also gets the students acquainted with resources that they need to know and, in many instances, mollifies some of the frustration that they have experienced in the library. I assign some non-library exercises of a more conventional sort, which do not need discussion here; the following four examples may illustrate how the library papers may serve the two purposes just mentioned.

1. The Descriptive Paper

Being basic to all other forms of exposition, description requires sharp observation, detailed presentation, lucid organization, and extreme clarity. It should also be interesting and, if possible, imaginative. I ask the students to describe two reference books important to their area of interest (usually their major, sometimes only a hobby); this assignment presents a clear challenge to all the requirements of description. The students first must find the reference books and study them to determine that they are of value. Then they must bear down and look harder. At first they see nothing to describe; a cover, a title, some pages. But soon they are noticing the way the books are organized, the way they are written, the illustrations, the examples, the language, the appendixes, the scope, the limitations. They check up on the author and the date and wonder if those factors matter. Some few search for reviews or other professional opinions of the references.

Having their piles of notes, the students next must choose which details to use and which to omit. Then they must decide how to organize it all. Then they must present it clearly, if they want a decent grade. And finally they must rise to the challenge of capturing my interest. This requires imagination, but it is not so difficult as I thought at first it might be. Many students "see" a reference book for the first time in this assignment, and respond with an enthusiasm that I find fascinating. In my files I have a description of the Merck Veterinary

Manual that is twice as interesting as an essay on "My Home Town" or "My favorite Personality" could ever be.

2. Comparison Assignment

Some comparison of the two reference books may take place during the descriptive assignment. But after using that possibility as the basis for a few talks about comparison, I send them out to write a critical comparison of two periodical indexes in their area of interest. This I enjoy hugely. Did you know there are juniors in business who do not know about the Business Periodicals Index? That there are students in biology who have been in college for two and three years without knowing the location of Chemical Abstracts, Biological Abstracts, or Index Medicus? After this assignment, they know of at least two indexes and, more important, they know how to use them.

Writing the comparison requires everything that the description requires; in addition, it requires continuity, balance, and discernment. This is where the assignment provides its challenge. Two indexes at first look pretty much alike, but when students set out to compare them, they find that indexes are and are not alike. So it comes down to a decision whether to show what one does that the other does not (resulting in more contrast than comparison) or to show that the two are quite alike but not quite redundant. This requires the exercise of discernment while providing a problem in continuity. Some students simply describe one and then the other, but that, as I gleefully point out, is not yet a comparison but merely two descriptions. What is wanted is one continuous description of the likeness of two resources.

This assignment provides me with a chance to make the thesis sentence look good. My victims thus far have invariably had among them one who, stumbling under a monstrous load of facts about indexes, politely asks me how in hell I expect him to compare them all. I reach into my poke of possibles and produce

the miracle of the thesis sentence. Here is my favorite:

> "While the PMLA bibliographies index more than 1500 sources of international origin, the PQ annual bibliographies offer the enormous advantage of annotation."

The young lady who wrote this one created for herself both a plan of action and a sieve for her facts. When I explain that to my students, they are impressed by its simplicity and effectiveness. They go away to write their own theses and they come back with papers that are, for the most part, very satisfactory. Other teachers in other departments have read some of these and have praised both the clear factual writing and the practicality.

3. The Evaluative Essay

With the evaluation assignment they are again gathering, sorting and comparing information in the library. The students are surprised, but not much, to hear me say that they have been evaluating all along; every time they choose one fact over another it is done on some sort of evaluative basis. The assignment now is to survey a section of the library and to make judgments as to value. They must take a hard look at the various facilities pertinent to their field of interest--at the textbooks, the shelving system, the theses and dissertations, the reference book area, the periodical collection, the microfilms, the recordings, the maps, pamphlets and government documents. They will also consider the physical surroundings and facilities.

It is endlessly interesting to me to discover how few students know why call numbers suddenly change from E77/L43 to E98/L280, for instance, how many have been frustrated by such "jumps", and how quickly they can grasp the principles behind it. Some actually learn fine points of the Library of Congress catalog system and find it worthwhile. The English major quoted earlier, for example, now knows that in our library the criticism of literature comes first in the

stack arrangement, then general anthologies by country, then particular authors categorized into countries and periods alphabetically. She knows now that browsing for Shakespeare material must be done in at least three separate places.

For their evaluation, the students first compile a list of criteria for a collection of material in their area. For instance, what documents should be on microfilm and which ones should not? Do they favor having bound documents shelved near the recent issues or with other books in the subject area? Do they mind if their reference books and periodical indexes mingle with those of other disciplines, or do they favor segregation? As with the previous assignments, there are thousands of factors to consider, everything from the card catalog system to the location of the restrooms. They have to come up with a complex answer to one simple question: how well does their part of the library work?

The next steps toward completion of the evaluation essay are to limit the scope with an appropriate thesis, and then to apply the criteria to the situation. Finally forced to put facts behind their opinions, many students discover that their portion of the library is not as confusing and worthless to them as they had previously assumed. Others find shortcomings they had not been aware of before, and indignantly point them out to me as if I were personally responsible.

4. The Persuasion Paper

The fourth and last essay of this series is a persuasive paper on any library-connected subject, addressed to any reader. Some are directed to library administrators, for instance, trying to persuade them to provide more usable and comfortable study areas. Others ask for the re-arrangement of the books and card catalogs to save steps and frustration. One student argued quite reasonably for the installation of a beer hall in the library basement. Some papers are written to department chairmen on the subject of gaps and redundancies in the collection. Some essays are even directed to me, and you may guess what they try to persuade

me to do with my assignments. I suppose, however, that the most outstanding effort was an open letter to the student body. The writer wanted the students to demand (a) a large increase in reference funds, (b) a two-credit library orientation course for freshmen and sophomores, and (c) a student vigilance committee to assure a study-like atmosphere in the building and to protect the collection from thefts and mutilation.

All things considered, the assignments I have been describing are more practical and well-received than the average type that I had previously used. Certainly there are students who will not do it, or who cannot, or who require a great deal more direction than others. But the majority of my students would not accuse me of exaggeration if I were to say that they found the library assignments definite rather than vague, challenging rather than repetitive, and enlightening rather than stupid. The library staff also approves; in fact, several librarians have willingly volunteered time in the classroom and in the library to help with the various problems that I cause. Finally, I am satisfied that I can teach just as much about rhetorical methods with the library as the subject as I can with conventional topics. I like to think that at least some students feel complimented when I ask them to tell me about their professional resources as if they were already professionals.

In conclusion, this: it may seem that I am asking English teachers to pick up a responsibility that should belong to the students' individual departments when I urge the writing of such essays as these. But I see it rather as a reassumption of a responsibility that we began to ignore when we turned away from research papers. I see it also as an opportunity to show other departments that

we have more to offer their students than grammar correction and creative writing. There can be practicality as well as method in composition.

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