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ABSTRACT

In a composition course, interview assignments have four key virtues: (1) they are interesting in themselves; (2) they ease students into the demands of working with other people's ideas; (3) they offer a rationale for improving rhetorical skills; and (4) they allow students to experience adult, responsible roles in a social context. In addition, when students choose their own interview subjects and read their write-ups in class, they are able to introduce both classmates and teacher to new sources of information. Finally, teachers who draw explicit attention to the processes involved in interviewing have a good opportunity to reinforce other elements of the writing course, as well as to demonstrate the relevance of the composition class to other facets of students' lives, in and out of school. (Author/MS)

ASKING THE "IRRESISTIBLE QUESTION": AND OTHER VIRTUES OF INTERVIEW ASSIGNMENTS

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Abstract

In a composition course, interview assignments have four key virtues: they're interesting in themselves; they ease students into the demands of working with other people's ideas; they offer a rationale for improving rhetorical skills; and they allow students to experience adult, responsible roles in a social context. In addition, when students choose their own interview subjects and read their write-ups in class, they are able to introduce both classmates and teacher to new sources of information. Finally, teachers who draw explicit attention to the processes involved in interviewing have a superb opportunity to reinforce other elements of the writing course, as well as to demonstrate the relevance of the composition class to other facets of students' lives, in and out of school.

ASKING THE "IRRESISTIBLE QUESTION": AND OTHER VIRTUES OF INTERVIEW ASSIGNMENTS

Denis Brian, a writer and interviewer who's fond of an outrageous statement, claims that "Jesus Christ is an enigma because no interviewer got to him." In a more orthodox moment, Brian notes that "These days . . . our most vivid impressions of our contemporaries [come] through interviews. Almost everything of moment reaches us through one man asking questions of another" (ix).

An interviewer, though, is not merely a "conduit from the expert to the public" (Beatrice Schapper, teacher and freelancer, qtd. in Brady 39). Instead, the interviewer is helping to create the situation by asking questions, not just serving as a pipeline through whom quotes can flow into a piece of writing. Because of that interactive quality, I make interview assignments part of all my composition classes. The course I teach most regularly, the second part of our freshman sequence, emphasizes argumentative writing and research. In my current syllabus, the interview paper comes very early in the semester. Students interview a person of their choice, focusing on a challenge the person has faced or a major decision the person has made. (The rationale for that focus is that I want the interview to feed into later discussion of factors that influence persuasiveness, persuadability, and decision-making.)

Given that context, I'm ready to focus on the advantages to be gained from interview assignments. I see four cardinal virtues: first, the task is interesting; second, the interview assignment eases freshmen into the cognitive demands of argument

.id research; third, it offers a context in which to improve rhetorical skills; and finally--both as cause and result--the interview allows students to experience adult, responsible roles in a social context. Each of these advantages is obviously linked tightly to the others; but for ease of discussion, I'll elaborate on one at a time.

Interview assignments are, to begin with, interesting in themselves. For one thing, they're a novelty to most students unless they took journalism classes or worked on the newspaper in high school. So the very newness is an asset. Still, the novelty isn't so extreme as to be overwhelming. Students have all seen dozens of interview snippets on the news, from the insensitive ("How did you feel when you saw that your brother's parachute wasn't opening?") to the insipid ("What does your team need to do to win this game tonight?") The reality, then, of what goes on in an interview is part of at least the vicarious experience of nearly every student.

Most fundamentally, though, interview assignments are interesting because they satisfy the human desire to poke around in someone else's life. In short, the interview makes it legitimate to be nosy. Nosiness, of course, is a close relative of curiosity, which in turn is a parent of cognitive development--the second of my set of cardinal virtues. In fact, according to John Brady, what counts in an interview is less the actual questions than the "spirit of questioning" (71). That inquisitive spirit, that itch to find out, is crucial. As Denis Brian observes, "an interviewer without curiosity is as useless

as a seasick sailor" (x).

Naturally, mere wide-eyed astonishment is insufficient. The interviewer does have to prepare some questions. That in turn demands thinking very precisely about what she wants to know. As Sam Donaldson notes, "You want to have a sharp edge to the question[s]. You don't want to say to someone, 'Well, tell me what's news.' They'll tell you, by God, and it will go on forever" (qtd. in Biagi 87).

Student interviewers who are seeking those sharp-edged questions can expand their ability as inquirers if they begin very early to consider their eventual readers. Who will those readers be? What will they want to know? Ted Koppel has a wonderful phrase about keeping the audience in mind: recognizing that many viewers will need clarification of a term or background on an event, Koppel stresses the need for the interviewer to become the "deliberate witless" (qtd. in Biagi 88).

On the other hand, it's prudent to avoid being the unintentional witless: the good interviewer may need to do some research in order to ask informed and purposeful questions. And after the research is done, there's still the task of arranging her questions. John Brady recommends that a "sensibly structured" interview

> begins with easy, rather mechanical questions; shifts to knottier, more thoughtful questions; moves back out with mechanical questions (. . .future projects [e.g.]) and closes with a query that offers a ring of finality. . . . If the interview has logical structure--a sense of beginning, middle and end--it will have emotional

structure as well. (72)

Such an exquisite rhythm may be more demanding than a novice interviewer can manage, but at least we can help students recognize that the order of their questions might make a difference. As sportswriter Jimmy Cannon put it, "I save the tough questions for last because I don't want an empty notebook" (qtd. in Brady 106).

Once the notebook is opened at the beginning of the actual interview session, student interviewers who come prepared with a well-planned set of questions will have a direction for their encounter. Once the session itself is underway, new cognitive challenges arise. Interviewers must listen attentively enough to be good note-takers; at the same time, they must listen critically enough to raise vital follow-up questions. Rather than leaping awkwardly from one response to the next question on the list, they can often keep the conversation moving most effectively and naturally if they respond to a response by requesting elaboration, clarification, or illustration.

If the preparation and the actual interview are the main stages for the display of Virtue Two, cognitive stimulation, then Virtue Three--rhetorical development--starts hovering in the wings as soon as the interview is over. Now the student must turn all those scribbles, those abbreviations, those hieroglyphics into a coherent piece of writing. Drawing order out of a mass of notes is similar to what happens in almost any writing project; ideally, the process of organizing should be less threatening here because the student is preparing to write

about a firsthand experience. So the cognitive challenge merges now with the rhetorical one: to tell the story of the interview, which is one's own story but which involves somebody else's ideas. The writer has to tell this story artfully, to make it, as Susan Beegel says, not a transcript but a creation.

Professor Beegel offers suggestions for pre-interview classroom activites which help students anticipate the actual composing process. Her strategies begin with having a student volunteer to be interviewed by several other students while everyone else takes notes. After the question/answer session, there's a post-mortem in which the class discusses which chunks could be discarded from the write-up, which ones would make an effective opening, and which ones cluster together. If students have gone through even one practice exercise like this, they should have a technique to fall back on when they begin to compose their original write-ups.

Besides unifying and organizing their material, student interviewers have to cope with issues of development. Development in this assignment is mostly a matter of balancing quotes with commentary--the description, background, and other means of guiding the reader toward the desired impression. I find that despite my clear and cogent advice, some inexperienced interviewers place too much weight on quotes, while others include almost no quotes at all. A couple of observations from Shirley Biagi's book Interviews That Work provide vivid reminders of the need for both sides of the equation. On one hand, Biagi says, quotes are "unfiltered talk. The writer moves out of the way and says to the reader, 'Here is my interviewee. Listen'"

(124). On the other hand--this is Biagi again--"Too many quotations, like too many doughnuts, give your reader indigestion. You detract from the good quotes when you force your reader to read through the bad ones" (128-29).

Learning when to paraphrase and when to quote, then, is obviously part of the virtue of rhetorical skill. One tiny, mechanical aspect of that virtue is skill in handling the nitty-gritties of quoting. Writing up an interview demands the use of creatures like single and double quotation marks, periods and commas inside quotation marks, ellipses and square brackets, and so on. The interview essay offers a context for instruction in these niceties, without the complications that arise in documenting most other kinds of sources.

So, whether we're talking about unified impressions, amply developed paragraphs, or correctly placed quotation marks, the interview assignment eases students into the world of academic writing. That third virtue paves the way for the fourth one: interviews not only require students to write a kind of discourse that's practiced in the "real world"; such assignments also demand that students participate in that real world. Arranging and conducting an interview is in its own small way an acceptance of a responsible, more-or-less equal role in the world of adulthood. Students have to take the initiative in setting up the appointment and planning the questions; they must also continue to exercise responsibility throughout the interview. They are the ones in charge, wielding--benevolently, I hope--the power of the question and the notebook. But the interviewer is

not a totalitarian authority; instead, she is engaged with the interviewee in a subtle dance of negotiation. As in any instance of discourse, the two partners are collaborating--we almost might say conspiring--to make the whole thing work.

Unfortunately, I suspect that not all my students are asking "irresistible questions." I fear, too, that some of them still lack cognitive depth, rhetorical finesse, and social maturity. However, through interview essays, my students have introduced their classmates and me to people like a local poet and bookstore owner, a ghostwriter (or writing consultant, as he calls himself), and several teenaged mothers who are attending college (one essay on that last topic had the apt title, "Nineteen and Exhausted"). In addition, I've gotten fresh glimpses of people I already knew on my own campus, like our twenty-five-year-old payroll officer. I've learned about these people's backgrounds and interests, and I've been provided with reasons for talking with people I don't regularly get into conversations with. If I see them in the hallways, I thank them for taking time to help my students, I ask them if they've seen the write-up yet, and sometimes I get a spontaneous critique of the student's interviewing skills. So the assignment expands the social network in all directions. As one of my students wrote this semester, "Interviewing a person opens doors on a subject that is usually hard to understand." Maybe that's the biggest virtue of all.

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