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ABSTRACT

To incorporate Robert Pirsig's "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" into a course on writing may be to subvert the author's purpose. Pirsig meant for his book to be read aimlessly--like a Zen experience whose goal is only realized after it is achieved. Pirsig might even object to the "teaching" of "Zen and the Art" since college courses are driven by purpose and agenda. Nevertheless, the book may be fruitfully used as a tool when preparing students for the task of writing a research paper. Here are six reasons that the study of the book supports the process approach to writing of all types. One, students are interested in "Zen and the Art" for its story line, so they will read it. Two, students enjoy solving the mystery of Phaedrus's identity. To do so, they must gather facts. Three, reading a long, dense text over several weeks, students can practice and gain confidence in their ability to gather significant evidence, to cite correctly, and to combine evidence into an organized essay response. Four, students can follow one or several themes through the book. When they write more than one paper on a single topic, they can see how their perspective changes over time. Five, form follows function in "Zen and the Art," so students learn how verb tense and ordinary words can contribute to a text's success. Six, the book teaches that the Zen experience requires active engagement, so students learn that they must become actively involved in their research paper topics if they are to produce well-written papers. Contains three references. (TB)

Experiencing Research Writing through Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

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"Mountains," writes Robert Pirsig in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, "should be climbed with as little effort as possible and without desire" (183). Students writing research papers rarely have to be cautioned not to overdo in the effort category and rarely do they have any **desire** to tackle a research paper project. But Pirsig does not advocate abandoning the mountain just because the climb is steep; he suggests, rather, a more balanced approach to the climb. Pirsig goes on to say that when we climb with equilibrium "each footstep isn't just a means to an end but a unique event in itself" (183). Writing teachers who emphasize the process of writing--especially the process of writing a research paper--want to convince their students that the process of writing the research paper can be a "unique" and an enjoyable "event," like Pirsig's approach to mountain climbing. "To live for some future goal is shallow," he cautions. "It's the sides of the mountain that sustain the top" (183). Writing teachers understand that the preliminary work of writing not only sustains the product of the research project but that the preliminary work generates the product.

The metaphor of a research project as a mountain is apt. Most students, when faced with a research paper deadline, feel as if they

have been asked to climb a mountain--when they have done all of their training exercises on foot hills. The relatively brief, controlled three, to four, to five page essay assignments they have been doing, prior to the research project fail to provide them with the experience of writing a ten to twelve page, or even an eight to ten page, research paper on a topic they must explore on their own. Pirsig's book, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, provides not only a metaphor for writing a research paper, but it also provides a model for the kind of sustained inquiry that produces interesting and well-written research papers.

The first time I read Zen and the Art, I had no goal, no agenda prescribed for me. And I believe Pirsig meant for Zen and the Art to be read aimlessly--like a Zen experience whose goal is only realized after it is achieved. Pirsig might even object to our "teaching" Zen and the Art because traditional college classes are certainly goal oriented--toward, the final writing project, the end of the semester, the grade. So, for starters, when we incorporate this book into our writing research classes, we may be subverting the book's Zen philosophy. Yet, I believe that a greater good comes when we bring our novice writers and Zen and the Art together in the same time and place, especially in a course which focuses on research techniques.

Today, I am going to give you six reasons that Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance makes sense as a primary text in a research paper course and why and how the book supports the process approach to writing of all types.

1. **Students are interested in Zen and the Art for its story line. So, they will read it.**

Zen and the Art describes a motorcycle trip taken by a father and his son (the narrator in the book and his son, Chris) and their friends, John and Sylvia. Physically, they travel from Minneapolis to the Rocky Mountains, where John and Sylvia begin their return trip. The narrator and Chris travel on to the California coast. Students recognize the journey theme. They can usually recall long, road trips they have taken with their own families and they empathize with Chris's irritability when the goal--the destination--seems illusive. Nevertheless, they like the idea of the journey and of traveling along with Chris and the narrator from day to day. On this level, the book is linear and chronological.

2. **Students enjoy solving the mystery of Phaedrus's identity. To do so, they must learn to gather facts.**

Students usually begin Zen and the Art enthusiastically and with many questions. Initially, their questions center around "who is Phaedrus?" Sometimes, they debate this point for weeks. Gradually they build up a list of facts, or evidence, to support their opinions. Some students come to the conclusion early in the book--sometimes on a hunch, sometimes on evidence--that Phaedrus and the narrator are one. Others, because they have so many facts about Phaedrus that establish him as a separate individual, are slow to admit that Phaedrus is an alter personality for the narrator. However, readers of Zen and the Art learn that they cannot trust the first person narrator and so, sooner or later, they must question the facts he supplies. Much like the process of gathering data for a research

paper, students learn to question facts and to consider the counter-facts. Pirsig observes that one must develop the ability to "select the good facts from the bad ones on the basis of quality" (Pirsig 253). The book itself becomes a research project in which students hypothesize, search for clues or facts, and finally question their facts before marshalling the evidence that will support their theses.

3. **Reading a long, dense text over several weeks, students can practice and gain confidence in their ability to gather significant evidence, to cite correctly, and to combine evidence into an organized essay response, before they branch out into their own research paper projects.**

Working with Zen and the Art, a controlled text, teachers introduce the idea of documenting evidence and citing sources. Short citation exercises in the classroom, like the sample documentation quiz you will find in our packet of material, prepare students to find and use correctly, significant textual evidence from the book. Furthermore, being familiar with the entire text students are using, the teacher can recognize inappropriate paraphrasing, misinterpretation or misrepresentation of text, or inadvertent plagiarism in student papers. But, because Zen and the Art contains so much detail, students can choose an approach and support it with evidence that they discover for themselves.

No one can create the experience of discovery for students. Teachers must avoid the temptation to package Zen and the Art--and student research paper projects--too neatly, for to do so will destroy

them. Because the teacher does not explain every question at every turn in Zen and the Art, students become comfortable with not having all the answers. Pirsig says "As soon as you put a border on it [whether "it" is the landscape, knowledge, or research projects], it's gone" (42). The literal cross-country journey, from east to west, the reading journey from page one to page 380, the research project create a learning from experience with no prescribed borders.

4. **Students can follow one or several themes through the book. When they write more than one paper on a single topic, they can see how their perspective changes over time.**

Throughout the six or so weeks we take to read the book, students can watch a theme grow and change. Students often choose to explore the theme of the classic/romantic split. The narrator is a classicist; he is compelled to understand the underlying form of the motorcycle. John, the narrator's friend and companion, enjoys a romantic attachment to his motorcycle. He rides for the pure pleasure of riding and cares nothing for the mechanical intricacies of his machine. Students usually identify with John OR the narrator, and, initially, believe their way is the best way. And they usually believe that the classic and romantic approaches are mutually exclusive. Because the theme is developed throughout the text, students can write an early paper and then a later paper on the same topic. They can see how experience with an idea matures--and sometimes changes--an idea. As they reread earlier sections of Zen and the Art with knowledge and experience gained later in the book,

they bring a new awareness to their understanding, sharpen or change their theses, and discover that a sustained inquiry yields substantial dividends. Often they discover, along with the narrator in Zen and the Art, that neither the classic nor the romantic, by itself, works as a philosophy of living. They learn about balance, as--over time--they experience the development of this idea in the book.

5. **Form follows function in Zen and the Art. So, students learn how verb tense and ordinary words, arranged with care, can contribute to a text's success.**

An experience with words, the sound of words, is one of Pirsig's goals for his readers. Throughout the book there is a division between the actual journey and the narrator's mind journey. There is a parallel division in the language of the book. Dividing the book between experience and thought (Cawelti qtd. in Disanto and Steele 278), Pirsig uses present tense verbs in the actual journey and past tense verbs in the mind journey. Pointing out to students the rhetorical purposes for verb tense shift in Zen and the Art grounds a discussion of their own use of verb tense. To help students experience the sound of the language in Zen and the Art and to demonstrate how stylistic decisions like sentence length and uses of series create a particular effect, we can use sections of the text--like the sample excerpts I've included in the packet.

6. **The book teaches us that the Zen experience requires active engagement. So (we hope) students learn that they must become actively engaged in their research paper topics if they are to produce well-written papers.**

The metaphor of the trip in Zen and the Art reinforces the idea that it is better to travel than to arrive (Pirsig 4). Students learn gradually, through the Zen experience, that the best research projects are not going to be the four-lane highway projects, where the destination is never in doubt. The best, research projects are going to be like the winding, back roads traveled by the narrator and Chris and John and Sylvia where the trip itself is worth the effort. Zen and the Art teaches the reader that the side roads, the detours students take in their research paper quest, can often teach them more than the destination/information they think they are seeking

According to one critic, Scott Consigny, it is through the "paradigm of motorcycle maintenance, [that] Pirsig reveals that emotional engagement, and particularly enthusiastic caring, is the precondition of perception as well as of excellent performance" (Consigny 23). That is, to perceive or understand our topic and to produce an excellent product, we must be emotionally engaged in our work. In order to be actively engaged, writers must be active--not reactive--in the writing process. Furthermore, because Zen Buddhism stresses active engagement in experience, the Zen Buddhist eschews second hand experience. According to the tenets of Zen Buddhism, television's "Wild Kingdom" and Jacque Cousteau's "Odyssey" distract us from our real purpose in life, which is to experience life first hand--not through the eyes or hands of another. Similarly, we try to teach our students in the research paper course that they must discover a unique, individual approach to information gathering and opinion forming. In many cases, we can recommend original research in the form of interviews, observations, or surveys.

According to the Zen philosophy promoted in Zen and the Art, it is the experience of the book, the climb, the writing of an essay which is significant, not merely the accomplishment of the task.

One semester recently, I conferenced with a student who was having difficulty with her second paper on Zen and the Art. The student came in for a conference on a paper that she had already presented one time for evaluation. In my comments, I had said that she had used "well-chosen" support, but that she'd also included some evidence which did nothing to advance her argument. I had noted that the writing was better than average, but that the thoughts--at times more insightful than average--were disconnected.

When I asked her what she thought about the paper, she said that she hated the paper, that she had never had so much trouble writing a paper before (in Writing I). I suggested that she had two options: scrap the entire paper and start with a different topic or work with this topic and see what could be done to improve the paper.

She elected to work with the current topic, which was the idea of a pilgrimage in Zen and the Art. We brainstormed for about two minutes about the word pilgrim and she came up with several, substantive ideas (hardship, means of transportation, purpose, activities on the pilgrimage), most of which already existed--in disguise--in her paper Then she became very excited. It was like a light came on. I saw it.

She said something like, "In Writing I, I always knew where I was going with my papers. I had them all figured out even before I started writing. That's why this paper frustrated me so much. I

loved the book (Zen and the Art), until I had to write a paper about it. I didn't know where to start. I was totally at a loss. But now, I can see this BIG IDEA as it was developed in the book. Thinking about it now, I can see it. The book really made me work at writing and thinking, for the first time."

This conversation took about 15 minutes. Then I said, "Are you ok with this approach to the paper now, or do we need to talk some more?" But that was it. She left very happy and excited about writing the paper. It was a little miracle.

If we think reading 380 pages of text in a second semester composition course while also learning MLA documentation and research techniques seems like a mountain too high for freshmen to climb, we should think again, and more, about the tenets of Zen Buddhism. Our goal in assigning the book should not be to race to the conclusion and with a great flourish assign THE paper on Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. To read the book right and to let it guide the research process, we must practice the art of Zen Buddhism. We must create an environment of patient learning where students are comfortable taking small steps and winding side roads and pausing along the way so that they can appreciate the process of their own journey.

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