

Composition Forum 34, Summer 2016

The Real/Ideal Research Project: Fostering Students' Emotional Literacy



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Abstract: The Real/Ideal Research Project is comprised of three components, ordered in purposeful succession, designed to emphasize the interconnectedness of emotion, reason, and action. In the first component, students compose a personal narrative focused on a specific inequity they (have) experience(d) or witnessed. Here, students are encouraged to spotlight their personal connections and emotional ties to the inequity. In the second component, students continue exploring the inequity from component one; however, they supplement their emotional reflections with researched claims, researching the specific ideologies that allow the inequity to persist. Finally, in the third component, students reflect on the first two components of the research project — what we can think of as the “Real” components — in order to identify at least one tangible action they could take to construct a more “Ideal” space.

This assignment takes as its starting point Shari Stenberg's call for us to see emotion “as one feature of meaning making equal to other features, and thereby deserving of a legitimate role in pedagogical settings” (360). Although I am not the first to answer Stenberg's invitation, our field as a whole has been slow to respond. Within most college writing classrooms, reason “rather than emotion, the mind rather than the heart” occupies a position of privilege (Bump 5). While I am not advocating that we promote emotion *over* reason, I am suggesting that we conceptualize the two as equally important. More specifically, my point is that by highlighting the interconnectedness of emotion and reason within the composition classroom, we can better support our students' development as emotionally literate writers — that is, as writers capable of using their emotional experiences to discursively interact with the world around them. To offer a step in this direction, I present the following assignment: the Real/Ideal Research Project (see [Appendix](#)). Laura Micciche's observation that both *emotion* and *reason* are “necessary to incite and achieve *action*” (164; added emphasis) offers a useful lens through which to conceptualize this tripartite research project. The Real/Ideal Research Project is comprised of three components, ordered in purposeful succession, designed to move students from emotion to reason, and finally, to action.^{1}

In the first component, students compose a personal narrative focused on a specific inequity/injustice they (have) experience(d) or witnessed.^{2} The inequities may stem from a variety of personal factors, including gender, race, religion, family, class, and/or physical appearance/ability. In this component of the project, students are encouraged to spotlight their personal connections and emotional ties to the inequity, writing honestly about their experience and its emotional impact in their lives. In an effort to approach emotional literacy “in ways that value individual students' agency and awareness” (Winans 152), this first component invites students to give their emotional experiences written presence and thus interact with these experiences from a place of increased mindfulness.

Barbara Kamler's discussion of “writing as a representation” (61) helps us better appreciate this aspect of the project. As Kamler makes clear, students are never simply putting personal experiences into words. Rather, writing is always an interpretative endeavor; thus, in asking students to narrate their personal experiences with an inequity, we are inviting students to (re)present and (re)see these experiences. The goal is that, in the act of putting the experience into words, students will visualize and understand their experience in a new way, and the (re)presented experience will become “productively useable in ways in which it was not prior to it being written down” (Kamler 54).^{3}

The second component of this assignment sequence takes advantage of this (re)presentation by inviting students to explicitly bring reason into the equation. More specifically, students continue exploring the inequity from component

one; however, they supplement their emotional reflections with researched claims, researching the specific ideologies that allow the inequity to persist. Ideologies consist of “ideas, knowledge, thought, and discourse normaliz[ing] the workings of power” (Weisser 96). Therefore, in analyzing the ideologies at play within a specific inequity, students gain a more nuanced understanding of the factors that legitimize and propel this unjust practice, one that situates their emotional experiences as more than familiar and personal. That is, they come to understand their emotions “in social, cultural, and historical terms” (Winans 154), recognizing the ways in which emotional experiences are never solely personal.

Understanding the ways in which emotions are intimately tied to “social contexts and power relations” (Stenberg 354) is crucial for cultivating emotional literacy. It is not enough to narrate one’s emotions; the emotionally literate individual must also rhetorically situate her emotions, recognizing the ways in which emotions are reciprocally entwined with current and past cultural norms, subjectivities, systems of belief, and power hierarchies. Thus, the second component of the Real/Ideal Research Project aims to help students understand their emotional experiences within a larger rhetorical framework and thus promote their development as emotionally literate writers.

Finally, in the third component, students are invited to translate this understanding into action. Students reflect on the first two components of the research project — what we can think of as the “Real” components — in order to identify at least one tangible action they could take to construct a more “Ideal” space. They consider what conventions, relationships, expectations, beliefs, and/or practices might need to be reconfigured in order to respond to and challenge the inequity they are exploring. They ask, who are the people/groups that would be involved in/impacted by this reconfiguration? Students should also use this component to reflect on the potential implications of the action they propose — both for themselves emotionally and for the social context in which the action is situated. In short, component three invites students to use their personal narrative and corresponding research as springboards from which to conceptualize the potential for rhetorical action in their own lives.

This third component is a crucial step in avoiding the emotion/reason dichotomy wherein emotion is an experience we start with only to leave behind as we work towards more “serious,” reason-guided writing. The “Ideal” component invites students to put the first two components in conversation with one another, to call upon both emotion and reason in tandem as a means of challenging an inequity. More specifically, this component asks students to consider the group(s) of people who might be involved in or impacted by this reconfiguration, as well as the specific rhetorical maneuvers necessary to effectively challenge this inequity. For instance, within component three, students may choose to reference facts from component two as a form of *logos*, use pathetic appeals to target the emotions of a specific group, and/or construct their *ethos* by spotlighting the emotional experiences shared within the narrative. [\[4\]](#)

There is great potential for our students in an act such as this. In discursively imagining an ideal situation different from the real one in which they find themselves, students tap into their potential to use language to construct a different reality. They experience one way they can use written discourse to both “invite ... their pasts and their imagined futures into the classroom” (Gallegos). Through this act of writing, students come to understand that emotion, reason, and action are reciprocally entwined, an understanding that ultimately gives life to the claim that “emotion is central to rhetorical action” (Micciche 169). In making material this connection between emotion, reason, and action, the Real/Ideal Research Project offers an avenue for fostering students’ emotional literacy within the composition classroom. Although the three components to this project could be used in isolation, the strength of this project is in its sequence. By narrating and rhetorically situating emotion, students experience one way in which their emotional experiences are relevant to and valuable within a larger rhetorical framework. Then, by translating this situatedness into potential action, students gain practice moving the ideal from abstract to tangible. As a result, the ideal becomes a real possibility.

Appendix

The Appendix is available in two formats:

1. [Assignment Sheet: The Real/Ideal Research Project](#) (modifiable Word-compatible .doc)
2. [Assignment Sheet: The Real/Ideal Research Project](#) (.pdf)

Notes

1. Within this assignment, I present emotion, reason, and action in sequential order; however, my intention is not to promote a hierarchical order that elevates any one element over the others. Rather, I conceptualize

emotion, reason, and action to be three equally integral components in our students' emotional literacy. ([Return to text.](#))

2. Although promoting the “critical analysis of emotions [via] students' own personal narratives” (Winans 152) can be pedagogically effective, we must heed Micciche's warning to not “conflate the personal and the emotional” (166). Still, my experiences testify to the potential for personal narratives — especially ones that stem from experiences with injustice — to lend themselves productively to emotional expression and recognition. ([Return to text.](#))
3. When responding to and evaluating the personal narrative, it is important that we avoid grading the students' emotional experiences. Rather, we should approach the narrative as a rhetorical text and respond accordingly, focusing our feedback on aspects such as the ways in which the writer organizes and develops the narrative, attends to audience, and employs detail. ([Return to text.](#))
4. To fully promote the interconnectedness of emotion, reason, and action, we must be careful that our grading practices do not denigrate emotion and/or privilege reason. For practical purposes, I find it useful to collect each component individually throughout the semester and to assign each component a separate grade. This practice not only allows me to keep a pulse on students' progress and offer guidance as needed, but it also holds students accountable by forwarding due dates throughout the semester. Still, even when collecting each component separately, we can maintain the integrity of the assignment by weighting the components according to word requirement. For instance, because components one and three have a minimum word count of 750 words each, they could each be weighted at 25%, while component two (with a minimum word count of 1500 words) could be weighted at 50%. ([Return to text.](#))

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Return to [Composition Forum 34 table of contents](#).