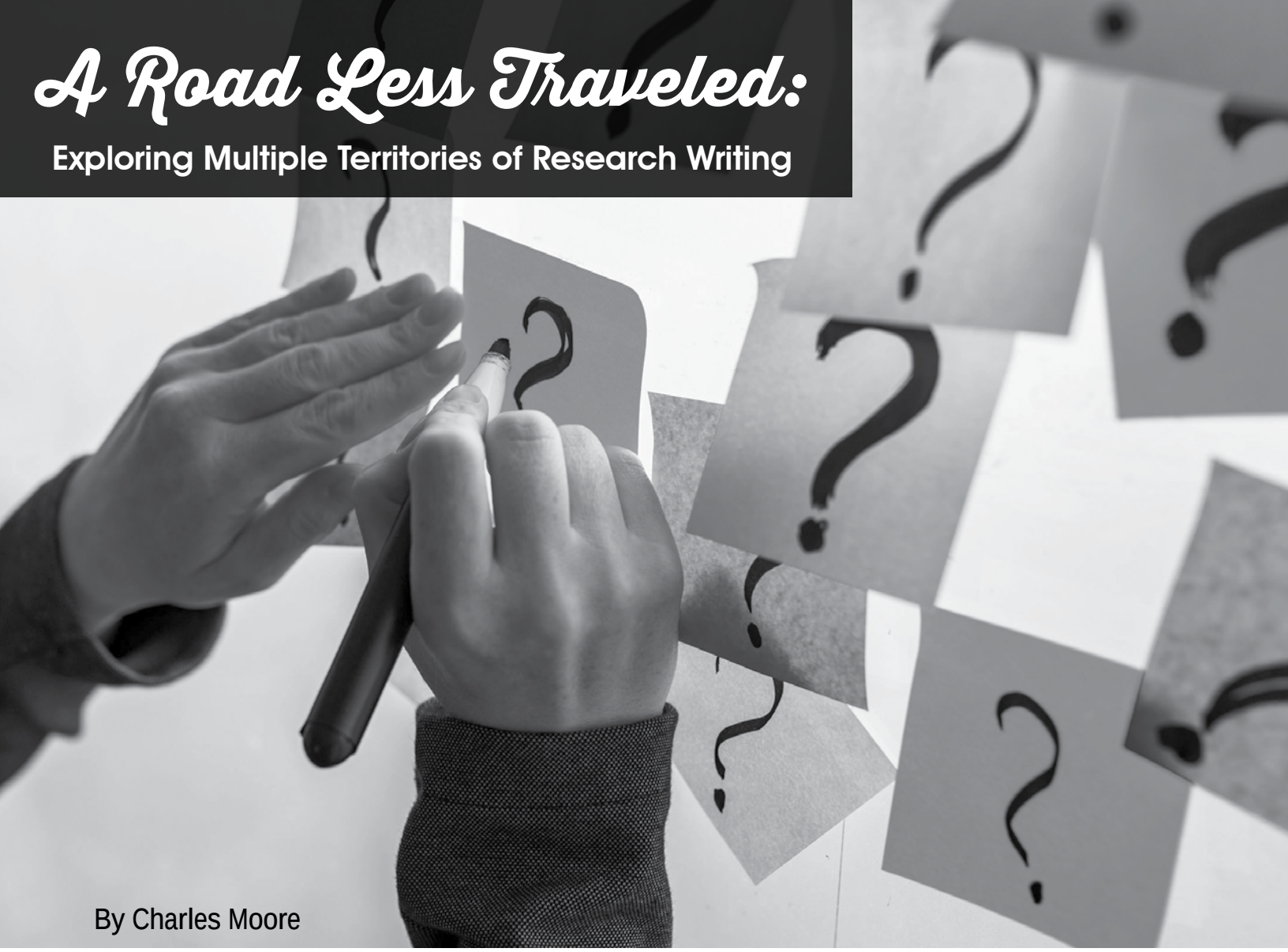
A Road Less Traveled:

Exploring Multiple Territories of Research Writing



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Abstract: This article seeks to provide a research-based argument in favor of encouraging teachers to seek authentic writing territories when asking students to conduct and disseminate research. At some point, research writing moved towards formulaic, inauthentically structured essays that lacked authentic audiences and thus failed to provide the space to encourage students to stretch their writing practice and grow in their understanding of their writing and themselves. Furthermore, research writing provides for choice and relevance, two important factors when planning writing tasks for a writer's workshop. A writer's workshop should encourage students to explore their place in our world and they should approach that task through the connections that can be made by addressing authentic writing scenarios that require the writer to consider the audience in addition to the subject and purpose. Freeing students from the shackles of formula writing will promote growth and opportunities for real writing growth.

Keywords: research, authentic writing, writer's workshop, college readiness, high school

For many years, I worked with high school seniors to move their reading and writing skills towards those reflected in students who are considered "college ready." The first few years, following the model of our team lead and the directives laid out in our course documents distributed by our school district, the students and I used the entire third quarter of the school year to develop a research paper. I guided the students through the entire process, starting with picking a "controversial" topic from a list created by the teachers. The students and I followed a prescribed process of creating a claim about our topics, seeking evidence to support it, outlining a meticulously structured outline, and developing various drafts of an essay. By year three, it was clear that this process was painful for everyone involved. We were failing to internalize necessary research skills that were important to making connections between the students and their world. For students to internalize critical research skills so that they can use them for their postsecondary lives, I needed to expand my understanding of authentic writing and learn ways to foster it in the classroom.

This shift in my understanding coincided with a shift happening in English language arts classrooms across our district. English teachers were being asked to move towards a reader's/writer's workshop model into our classrooms. As I moved forward in the implementation of my workshop, I realized that authentic writing experiences were crucial. I realized that there were many tasks I

asked the students to perform that were inauthentic and focused more on the writing task than the writer. I also learned that writers write from places that are deeply personal and that held true for research writing as well. Thus, I began to brainstorm different writing territories that could allow students to explore specific research skills, while allowing students to see how their writing can help them learn more about their place in the world.

Research in a Writer's Workshop

A writer's workshop is designed to invite students into writing territories that are deeply personal. Research writing does not have to be clinical, and I found the need to extend the invitation to students so that they could take control of their learning. Moreover, it is important that students begin to identify their place in our world. Styslinger (2006), when considering research as a form, asks the question, "But how were students to represent their learning about self and society through writing?" (p. 54). The answer for the writers in my classroom is that they should explore their understanding of themselves within the context of their society and in doing so, begin to shape their definition of themselves. Instead of looking outward for clues that would help us shape our identity, we looked inward. I asked the students to consider issues that engaged their desire to learn more. I asked them to think about ideas that challenged their beliefs and forced them to define themselves. Furthermore, as students move towards high school graduation, they need to examine how their understanding of the world shifts and evolves because the exit from public school and the entrance into the next station of their lives requires them to be able to. Additionally, Styslinger (2006) ponders, "How could students transform their consciousness into a written form that others could understand?" (p. 54). This question sparks a conversation into which students and teachers should enter. They should consider how the process of recording their thinking on the page reflects the process of revising and polishing their beliefs. Furthermore, a reader's/writer's workshop encourages teachers to shift the power dynamic of learning from themselves to the students, inviting them to seek their own learning path, encouraging a growth mindset that exists within lifelong learners. Research writing when "personal and organic" is the perfect opportunity for students to draw upon their personal experience as a means of gaining insight into themselves and their "roles in society" (Styslinger, 2006, p. 54). Those roles differ on a person by person basis and an effective writing environment attempts to nurture each writer according to their specific needs. My work has proven that asking thirty students in one class to write identically organized, developed, and researched papers, even when the topics vary, is not only impossible, but potentially damaging to the writing lives of the learners. One size does not fit all. When I restrict their creativity and take away their efficacy, I strip them of ownership and drive them away from identifying as writers. Building a writing identity serves learners beyond the tasks of academia because the skills of inquiry and the skills writers learn about how to most effectively express themselves extend beyond gradebooks and report cards. Moreover, the workshop model is driven by the idea that formative assessment informs future instruction throughout the writing process, and therefore, many questions must be asked about how students are acquiring and utilizing workshop skills. Styslinger (2006) suggests, "To answer these queries, [he] relied on the information revealed by students' writing" (p. 54). This is a foundational part of the writer's workshop.

Research Writing Skills

The skills required of research writing lend themselves perfectly to being learned through a writer's workshop. These skills include creating a defensible claim, taking notes, citing sourced material,

creating a bibliography or references page, integrating sources into text with commentary, and planning for writing. Thus, I discovered, the instructional progression must be designed with specific skills in mind. However, Farrison (1945) argues, "Confusion begins with the term *research* itself" (p. 484). I found that within a team of four teachers who planned a research unit together, the goals and skills that each teacher intended to cover varied a great deal. Moreover, the purpose of research writing, and its inclusion in our curriculum, was often debated within my teaching team and among teachers across the district. We lacked clarity and that lack of clarity transferred to the students, robbing them of the time and space to which they are entitled. I agreed with the idea that "the reason for writing a research paper is to interpret and analyze data and to deduce logical conclusions" (Szentkiralyi, 1996, p. 76). Many teachers clung to the belief that research writing was, for the most part, an opportunity to teach students how to cite sources and write thesis sentences. For me, I began to finally realize that research is about discovery. Styslinger (2006) remarks, "I embrace the process of seeking, of not knowing" (p. 53). The results of that investigative process will not fit into a predesigned outline or five paragraph essay for every student. Instead, research is an opportunity to discover different forms and organizational skills that allow writers to experiment with new patterns and modes. Stylslinger (2006) further argues that when we remove limitations on the elements of research, such as length, number of citations, or form and format, "students are no longer constrained by the singularity of an idea" (p. 56). When writers are invited to learn new skills and then experiment with those skills using their own unique voice, they can create new ideas that reach beyond any prescriptive writing style. Broskoske (2007) likens the search for evidence, that supports a claim, to the ways that lawyers build their cases before entering court rooms (p. 32). The search for evidence "forced the students to

reason and to open their procedure to critical inquiry; they must be able to justify their choices" (Szentkiralyi, 1996, p. 76). Moreover, Farrison (1945) points out how "accuracy and conciseness of expression are of paramount importance" (p. 485). The skills of research go far beyond incorporating material from quality sources using commas, parenthesis, and quotation marks.

Authentic Writing

Writers struggle to connect to writing tasks when they cannot find relevance to their own specific needs and interests. Asking high school seniors to inquire about and conduct research on topics with which they do not have a deeply personal connection is opening them up to an opportunity for failure. However, if we ask students to engage with authentic writing tasks that are addressed to authentic audiences, and with topics to which they can create deep personal connections, we discover an opportunity for connections otherwise ignored. Szentkiralyi (1996) suggests that "the first key to writing effective research papers is personal relevance" (p. 75). Not only that, but purpose, sometimes driven by audience, is paramount and asking "the answerable question . . . is important since so many research papers crash and burn because of initial lack of focus" (p. 75). Without an authentic direction, students fail to find a specific focus. Clearly, when students fail to understand the purpose, "they also lack an understanding of how to proceed in preparing the paper" (Broskoske, 2007, p. 31). Writers cannot even begin the process of research writing if they do not understand what they are writing about and to whom they are writing. A writer cannot even begin to construct an argument without deciding on their subject and their audience.

Potential Territories

I believe that research is more than information, it is advocacy. Multitudes of writing territories, types, and modes of writing exist that encourage writers to explore ideas for which they can advocate. Writers deserve the opportunity to seek topics that enflame an exigence that demands they explore and share their understanding of the forces that shape their world. Thus, I sought to discover authentic writing territories that provided clear audiences and purposes so that students could create deeper connections to their own voices. We shifted from beginning with someone else's idea and instead thought about what provokes passion within us. Any question that began with "Can I . . . " was interrupted with a "Yes." Some of the writers explored the threat of school shooters whose horrific acts robbed them of their feelings of safety and then wrote to lawmakers so that they would consider changing the law or to their superintendent of schools so that he would bring forth safety measures on their campus that could save their lives. Others learned about how climate changed affected their safety as residents of the Gulf Coast of Texas. Some appealed to their principal to address what they felt were draconian rules regarding electronic devices and the dress code. No matter their subject, when they were given the space and the place within which to research and write, they sought out their own understanding instead of relying on the wisdom of the adult in the room. The weight of learning shifted from me to them and they grew exponentially. For the most part, they stopped focusing on the research paper defined in the curriculum documents and began learning about themselves. They sought to inform an awareness of their world by seeking information and insight. Szentkiralyi (1996) found that the writing "became more focused and relevant, for their purpose in writing the paper was to communicate their results, not merely to fulfill form requirements as would have been the case in the mythical research paper" (p. 77). Additionally, he asserts that when teachers "provide them with circumstances in which bibliographic forms and conventions are in the foreground, then they will concentrate on these forms at the expense of the thinking and analysis that should go into

the writing of a research paper" (Szentkiralyi, 1996, p. 75). The least effective writing I have ever had turned in as research papers came as a result of the students lacking direction in their research and writing. Styslinger (2006) suggests that teachers focus too much on "product" and "argument" and that misplaced focus "has left many students feeling silenced" (p. 54). I found several specific writing territories that allowed the students to target a specific audience with their writing and drove their research further than ever before. We looked at letters to editors, letters to lawmakers, and opinion pieces as we looked for the most effective means to share what we learned through research. Instead of writing a research paper, we wrote research. The results were incredible and students who were staring graduation in the face, engaged in their writing and their exploration of themselves. As Whitney et al. (2011) suggest, we should be helping students "write more effectively but also to take ownership of their writing as a tool for social life" (p. 533). When students begin to see writing as a tool for change, they realize its importance and its relevance in their world.

Conclusion

Ultimately, my understanding of writing instruction evolved in a way that honored the writer above all. The process of moving towards more authentic writing territories not only helped my students gain clarity in how they viewed themselves within the context of their world but also empowered our teaching team to become teacher leaders in our move towards readers'/writers' workshop. While we were able to explore multiple authentic writing territories, there are many resources left untapped. We must wonder what the next step might be. Where else might we go in search of authentic writing territories? As always, the interests of the students must be placed at the center of the learning. What part of themselves do they want to learn more about? As our world shifts towards digital modalities, new territories beg to be explored. With more research and practice, we might find territories that we never knew existed.

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