Meeting the New College Composition II Course Goals Through Original Research

By Patrick Tompkins

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Abstract
In 2005, the VCCS revised the course description, goals, and objectives for College Composition II (ENG 112) to place a clear emphasis on the development of students' information-literacy skills (research, critical analysis, synthesis, documentation, etc.). This article describes the Metro Richmond Supermarket Price Comparison, an original team-research project designed to achieve ENG 112 course goals.

The traditional pedagogical approach to research asks each student to engage in a project that leads to the production of an extended report. Common, salient features of this assignment include

- individual student research and writing, and
- research on a topic about which information has already been collected, analyzed, and disseminated by others.

In a College Composition II (ENG 112) class offered during the spring of 2005 at John Tyler Community College, I implemented an information-literacy curriculum whose salient features are the obverse of those above: students collaborated on a semester-long, original-research project.

The benefits of collaborative writing assignments have been well documented, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, in response to changes in workplace organizational structures. For me, a crystallizing moment occurred at a 1994 Virginia Works conference hosted by JTCC where business leaders complained that our intelligent graduates nevertheless often lack the collaborative skills and experience necessary for effective employment in business, industry, and government. Also, during the 1980s and 1990s in academia, social constructivist theory emerged as an important referent for pedagogical practice.

The theory behind the use of purposeful writing assignments is even older and more fully documented. My instructional assumption is that students are more likely to achieve course goals and that their learning will be richer if they engage in original research, rather than develop reports or arguments that rely almost wholly upon information generated by others.

Recently, we have seen a movement to develop original research skills of undergraduates and even high school students in other areas of the curriculum. Thus, for example, instead of a traditional science lab that repeats experiments conducted by countless others and whose results are well known, political and educational leaders are recognizing the critical importance to our society for students to engage in original research, both to enhance their own discipline-specific and general-academic skills and to contribute to the development of humanity's knowledge base.

Conception

I thought it best to engage students in an original research project whose design had been fairly well thought out before the semester began, as this particular ENG 112 pedagogy is relatively unfamiliar to me as an instructor, and because the class would not have to spend weeks developing and planning a project *ex nihilo*.

The Metro Richmond Supermarket Price Comparison provided a focused, achievable project relevant to JTCC's service area. No published price comparison had been conducted to compare local supermarkets since a 1998 *Richmond Times-Dispatch* report, despite significant changes in the composition of the local retail grocery market. The ENG 112 supermarket research project, then, would investigate a topic that had plenty of background research, that required original primary research (most especially in gathering data for a current price comparison), and that would be of interest and service to the community.

Project Organization

In my original presentation of the project to students, I laid out four general tasks (shown in detail in Appendix 1):

- background researching,
- data gathering,
- analyzing and synthesizing research, and
- reporting.

The project focused exclusively on Metro Richmond supermarkets with more than one location. This specific focus ensured that our research project would be manageable, as we limited our study to only four supermarket chains.

We first looked at the trade and scholarly literature on national grocery market share and retail trends, local grocery market share and retail trends, the pricing of groceries, and the food component of the consumer price index to provide a foundation for our understanding of our project, for developing a meaningful methodology, and for interpreting our findings.

In the data-gathering phase, we identified the major categories of supermarket products (e.g., produce, seafood, dry goods, and frozen food) and then visited stores to develop a list of specific products to compare. Our original list of goods to price check ran to over 400 items. Students then conducted price checks during the weeks of March 7-12 and March 21-26, 2005 at each of four supermarkets, carefully noting product name, quantity, and price (including regular and sale prices, if applicable). Because of inconsistency in product availability or in our data, our starting list of 400 plus items yielded only 122 products that could be directly compared across all four stores, a comparison set which was more than three times larger than the 1998 *Richmond Times-Dispatch* study.

We analyzed regular prices, sale prices, and what we called "shopping basket" prices – that is, the price a consumer would most likely pay if they took advantage of all sale prices and used customer discount cards.

Our report included sections on the project's purpose and focus, methodology, the aforementioned review of literature and price analyses, a conclusion, and several appendices, including an extensive list of sources and Excel spreadsheets recording well over 1,000 grocery prices. Additionally, students wrote an article for the JTCC newsletter, sent out a press release to local media, presented copies of the final report to the managers of the four supermarkets, and submitted the final report for publication to the Educational Resource Index Clearinghouse (ERIC).

Class Organization

After introducing our research project to students on the first day of class, I asked each student to write me a letter in which he or she detailed experience and skills in the following areas: writing, research, information technology, and collaboration. Based upon students' self-reporting in these areas, I assigned them to one of four groups, with each group containing members who had strengths in each of the areas noted above. This method increased the likelihood that the membership of the four groups would be balanced, each having members with a range of skills.

Assigned to one of the four supermarkets in our study, each group was responsible for conducting the two price checks at their stores, as well as undertaking other project tasks, from investigating a particular aspect of our background research to writing certain sections of the final report. One group served as general editors and another as Blackboard administrators for the project. (See Appendix 2.)

Individual Writing and Evaluation

Each student submitted five individual writing assignments upon which their course grade was based:

- introduction letter to the instructor,
- project log,
- abstracts,
- notes, and
- metacognitive essay.

The introduction letter provided the foundation for both the project and course writing expectations.

The second assignment took place over the entire semester. Students were required to keep a project log in which

they recorded specific information about class, group, and student progress, as well as reflections on these and plans for future work.

Also at the start of the semester, students began locating several sources for the background research that their group had been assigned. For the third individual writing assignment, students submitted to the class abstracts of the materials they had reviewed. We used these abstracts to decide which sources were most relevant and useful for our final report.

The fourth writing assignment required each student to use one or more of the sources from the abstract assignment and to take detailed notes, complete with visual and logical organization, context information, and in-text citations. The collation and dissemination of these notes enabled other students easily to apply this information as they composed sections of the final report.

The class culminated with the fifth writing assignment, a metacognitive essay in which students reflected upon the experience and skills they developed while working on the project in the four areas they discussed in their introduction letter: writing, research, information technology, and collaboration.

The course-evaluation policy based final student grades solely upon students' individual performance on the writing and homework assignments and on class attendance. No grades were given for the group work. I found that peer pressure – the desire not to let the whole class down or to look incompetent when presenting one's research or writing – provided sufficient motivation to ensure acceptable participation from students in their groups. Additionally, I regularly met with groups and/or the group facilitators and provided support for groups experiencing difficulties in communication, organization, and other areas. Ultimately, students conscientiously participated in their group work because they were motivated to do so. While very few students possessed much awareness of grocery retailing before the class began and very few of them were regular grocery shoppers themselves, the substance and pertinence of the research project engaged students intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, and pragmatically.

Benefits to Learning

It is my premise that when students are actively engaged in meaningful information literacy, they have a richer educational experience than if they are educated through assignments that hold little relevance to the student, the instructor, or society.

I have three primary sources of evidence for this assertion in relation to the Metro Richmond Supermarket Price Comparison. First, students discussed their perceptions of the worth of the project and the curriculum with me in the classroom, my office, and the hallways. Second, the metacognitive essays directly addressed students' own perceptions of their personal growth in ENG 112. Of course, these sources must be viewed with some suspicion, for while students claimed that they enjoyed the class, learned a great deal, and were much more capable at the end of the semester than at the start, they were also acutely aware of their audience for these comments and were no doubt reluctant to harshly critique the project or the course. Still, students' writing performance during the semester provided a measure of their abilities and growth in this area.

The third source of information about student learning and satisfaction comes from anonymous end-of-the-semester course evaluations. Before students completed this questionnaire, I reviewed the VCCS ENG 112 course goals and asked them carefully to consider the extent to which these were achieved. I further asked them to provide specific feedback on their learning and on their satisfaction with various aspects of the course, from the division of labor to the evaluation policy. What pleased me most in these overwhelmingly positive numeric and comment-based evaluations was that the student remarks – which were numerous and detailed – almost always focused upon what they learned about information literacy, not on what they learned about Richmond area grocery prices. In fact, students made explicit distinctions between the two – "The project was a great means for a loose but effective class structure . . . also a great prerequisite for my professional writing program" – which demonstrates that students' newly developed abilities had been generalized to other information-literacy contexts.

I must note the clear value to students' self-concepts and to their résumés that accrued as a result of them becoming published authors of the final report.

I also envisioned a benefit from this project to the community, which after all comprises part of JTCC's name and the focus of our mission. While the students' press release to the local media did not lead to media coverage of the students' original research findings, many people along goes way were engaged by us and engaged us in turn. Most significant was the involvement of students' families and friends, many of whom actively tracked our progress and some of whom provided support in the form of ideas, sounding boards, and material assistance. Even people not directly involved with the students or me have requested a copy of the final report because they were genuinely interested in learning what our rigorous study of area grocery prices revealed.

Pragmatic Justification

I was motivated to use the whole class approach in ENG 112 in part as a measure to ensure quality instruction to all my students while also managing the typically heavy community college writing instruction workload.

Most of us have instructed information-literacy courses in which we feel we gave it our all and our students did, too. We believe students learned and developed personally. This is no doubt always the case, to some extent anyway, with any educational experience.

But if we are to be honest, the typical research writing class more often yields projects in which no one outside the classroom, sometimes not even the researcher/writer, has any real stake. And while some students may vigorously engage in their research project and its attendant processes, a good many have only a passing engagement.

And I find it impossible to provide quality information-literacy support to 25 research projects in just one class. Consider that some ENG 112 instructors may be responsible for 100 or more research projects in a semester. Few of us have the professional background, much less the stamina, to engage each of these projects fully. Many of my colleagues spent the last weeks of the spring semester carting home heavy boxes filled with large folders containing a menagerie of research reports and ancillary materials (notes, drafts, outlines, sources, etc.). In contrast, I could hold in one hand a single research report. Moreover, I had firsthand experience of all the ancillaries developed along the way. In short, quality control is easier to manage with a single research project than with 25 researchers working on different projects, some of which no doubt exceed the ken of the instructor's own experience, knowledge, or understanding. While there are many aspects of my leadership and quality-control performance in this research project that I would like to improve upon, I was intimately involved enough to know of key sources that students had overlooked or information that was inaccurate or incorrect.

My workload was made more manageable while increasing student learning because it was much easier to generalize theory and skills when we were all working on a single project. Instead of either canned lessons on issues – source reliability or nonsexist language, for example – that may or may not resonate with individual students at a particular point in the semester, we discussed these issues *in situ*, in a context in which we all shared and were invested.

Pragmatic Difficulties

Although I found this whole-class, original-research project to be engaging, manageable, and beneficial, several points require special caution:

- instructor qualifications as a research supervisor,
- quality control,
- appropriateness to the English curriculum,
- public relations implications for the college, and
- ethics.

I cannot address each of these in the depth they require, but let me briefly highlight the major points as I see them.

While I have completed two master's programs and have published research, I do not have any formal certification as a research supervisor. For some research projects, my academic and professional training adequately prepare me. But for others, say those requiring extensive knowledge of statistics or an arcane area of inquiry, I would not be qualified to lead.

Indeed, the issue of quality control is one I believe we've neglected in traditional research assignments, but perhaps this is because we do not usually directly suffer the consequences of our neglect. For example, if a student writes a research report that contains an erroneous claim about the pathology of an obscure disease, an instructor would likely not notice and no one would directly suffer. But in a published report, particularly one that evaluates competing businesses, such mistakes could lead not only to embarrassment but also to legal liability. If instructors intend to engage students in such public researching and reporting, they will have to devise rigorous quality-control methods. In this particular case, my professional background as a former grocery store manager and my ongoing interest in grocery retailing (I am one of an estimated 20 percent of people who view grocery shopping as a leisure activity) stood me well. But that is not enough. I had to carefully check each quote and paraphrase for accuracy, and I had to develop control systems to ensure that the prices we recorded were accurate.

Furthermore, researching grocery store prices raises the question of the appropriateness of an arguably business-focused project to an English class. At the 2004 VCCS English Peer Conference, where we reviewed the new ENG 112 course description with its broader information-literacy focus (as opposed to literary analysis) before final adoption by the VCCS, this issue was directly voiced by one participant but became obscured by other arguments. As I see it, in the English profession we are still struggling with the purpose of the second semester composition requirement and the appropriate roles of research and literature in these courses. In some ways, this reflects an even older tension between freshman composition as a discipline-specific course versus a general-academic-skills course.

This tension had implications for college relations, as well. JTCC President Marshall Smith has always supported my academic freedom; nevertheless, he expressed concerns about the consequences of publishing the final report to the community. He wondered how he was to respond to queries from a reporter or one of the participating supermarkets about what business an English class has in researching supermarkets. I did not then and as yet do not have a wholly satisfactory response to this important question. My hope and faith is that our profession will continue to explore the issue.

I was also confronted, quite unexpectedly, with the ethics of the level of my participation in this project. Should my role as project supervisor include hands-on direction and participation as is common in other professional research projects? To put it more concretely, when one group worked through several drafts of the purpose and focus section of our report, the whole class – including me – commented and suggested revisions. After several workshops, the draft was nearly complete, yet still needed fine-tuning before it was ready for publication. It would have been impractically inefficient to workshop the draft until every word was precise and every mark of punctuation was appropriate. I met with the student, and together he and I combed through, edited, and polished this section. Instead of being either a "sage on the stage" or a "guide on the side," in the two common descriptions of instructional roles, I served as a co-worker with the writer. In places in the final report, it would be difficult for any of us in that class to delineate clearly the work of any individual, including me.

 Our profession has been replete with warnings about instructors undermining student "author-ity" by taking over student drafts or directing the writing to produce a text the instructor envisions instead of what the student intends. My experience working with students on this project largely settled the question for me. My hands-on involvement, including as a co-writer, engaged me deeply. More importantly, students found it extremely valuable. An anonymous course-evaluation comment demonstrates this point: "[The most valuable learning experience I have had in this class is…] probably learning how an instructor writes. Patrick and I had a chance to collaborate and it was essential in my learning process."

The comment above specifically underscores a broader point noted by literally every student in the anonymous course evaluations. In the words of one, "We learned things in this class that we would only have been able to learn by doing a hands-on 'real world' study."

Patrick Tompkins teaches at John Tyler Community College, served on the VCCS ENG 111-112 Course Description Revision Committee, and chairs the Mid-Central Regional Center for Teaching Excellence. He shops mostly at Kroger.

Appendix 1

Metro Richmond Grocery Retailers Price Comparison

Laying Out the Project

The class is divided into four groups, each responsible for surveying grocery retailers and writing parts of the final report. Below I have listed group responsibilities and a very tentative schedule. As we move along, we will no doubt have to adjust group and individual responsibilities, our timetable, and even our planned research and writing activities, but if we remain both flexible and focused, we can create a reliable and valid final report. Our ultimate goal is to report our findings in a regional publication.

Class Projects

The Background

1) Grocery market trends and market share: national

2) Grocery market trends and market share: local

3) How groceries are priced

4) U.S. government definition of "breadbasket" and current prices

The Study

1) Develop permission script and store visitation procedures

2) Develop price lists (regular, sale, and generic) for each retailer

3) Conduct 2-3 visits to each grocery retailer

The Report

1) Title page

2) Acknowledgements

3) Table of Contents

4) Introduction

   a) Report purpose and focus

   b) Retail grocery trends: national and local

   c) U.S. government "breadbasket"

4) Methodology

5) Findings

   a) Regular price lists and comparative analysis

   b) Sale price lists and comparative analysis

   c) Generic price lists and comparative analysis

5) Conclusions

6) Grocery retailers and project contributors participant lists

7) Write and send out press release

Appendix 2

Group Responsibilities

Group Name: Ukrops'

- Research

    ✓Grocery market trends and market share: national

    ✓Dairy list

    ✓Snack & beverage list

    ✓Cleaning supplies

- Writing

    ✓Report Focus and Purpose

    ✓Grocery trends and market share: national

    ✓Generic price lists and comparative analysis

    ✓Grocery retailers and project participants lists

- Other Projects: Clean-up crew

Group Name: Kroger

- Research

    ✓Grocery market trends and market share: local

    ✓Can/box goods list

    ✓Paper products

- Writing

    ✓Title page

    ✓Table of Contents

    ✓Methodology

    ✓Grocery market trends and market share: local

- Other Projects: Class editors

Group Name: Food Lion

- Research

  - ✓How groceries are priced

  - ✓Frozen foods list

  - ✓Meat list

- Writing

  - ✓Sale price lists and comparative analysis

  - ✓Press release

- Other Projects: Blackboard organization and upkeep

Group Name: Wal-Mart

- Research

  - ✓U.S. government definition of "breadbasket" and current price

  - ✓Produce list

  - ✓Health and Beauty Aids list

  - ✓Cigarette list

- Writing

  - ✓Acknowledgements

  - ✓Permission script and store visitation procedures

  - ✓U.S. government definition of "breadbasket" and current prices

  - ✓Regular price lists and comparative analysis

  - ✓Conclusions

- Other Projects: Class Recorder

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