



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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A COMMUNITY RESEARCH PROJECT

After teaching English Composition I for two semesters, I realized that, like every other writing professor, I have problems with my students plagiarizing their essays, especially their research papers. It upset me that my students would take the easy way out, get caught, and then receive F's for their papers. Over one summer, I read books on the subject, which didn't help at all. I knew that many of these students likely had used such web sites as freeessays.com or turnitin.com to find papers they could submit in their high school English classes. I wondered if they would do otherwise in mine. Then, just before the fall term began, I had an idea that I believed would work. And it did! The results were astounding, not so much that the project ended plagiarism in my class, but that it was a great learning experience. The high levels of enthusiasm for the project were remarkable.

This is how the project progressed. Students received instructions for the project, titled a Community Research Project, during the second class period. They were instructed to choose a structure in their hometown—e.g., a statue, bridge, or major historic building. During the course of the assignment, they would have to visit the structure at least twice, formulate some questions about it, and then interview someone in the town who could answer those questions.

Although English Composition I students must write research papers of at least eight to ten pages, I decided to require two essays, Part I and Part II, which together should total no fewer than eight pages. Part I would include the research methods used to get information, questions students needed to ask, how they would find answers, and how they decided on the person they should interview. Students were to interview in person, but phone or e-mail interviews were permissible if there was absolutely no way to conduct the interview face-to-face (and, in that case, they were to explain, in detail, the entire process of their attempts to get an in-person interview).

Students needed a push to get started. I asked for a one-page paper describing their impressions of their topic after their first visit and a list of questions they needed to be answered. They were to visit their site either the second or third weekend of the semester, and this paper was due at the beginning of the fourth week of class. Many of the students forgot that they were to include questions and only included the impressions of their site. I spent considerable time with these papers, sometimes adding questions and suggestions for additional research. For example, one student chose the Deady Bridge in Chicopee that was currently being replaced. She had included some obvious questions in her paper, and I added the following: "For the old bridge: who built it? Who designed it? What weight was it designed to carry? What was its life expectancy when it was built? For the new bridge: ask the same questions. In addition, ask when it will be completed. What will it cost the city? How much will it cost the state? How will traffic be rerouted since the new bridge will be built adjacent to the old one? Will buildings need to be torn down?" These efforts on my part were time well spent because students were able to get on the right track quickly, and it was obvious that their enthusiasm for their projects had increased significantly.

They were allowed to incorporate this first paper into Part I of their essay, due at the end of the eighth week of classes. I was impressed with the students' work and the potential end of the plagiarism problem. One essay included this introduction: "It's amazing! You can find anything on the Internet until you are looking for it. Yahoo can come up with 3462 results on a topic that nobody has heard about before; and yet, when you absolutely need to dig up information for a last-second report, nothing is found." That's what I wanted to hear!

The required interview was definitely one of the most valuable parts of this assignment. Most students were nervous about interviewing a stranger and thought they would have problems. As I had told them, most students discovered that part of public employees' jobs is answering questions and that they enjoyed responding to students' questions. One persistent student, however, found that finding the right person at her city hall left



her running around; finally, she spoke with the mayor who gave her the phone number of the person she needed to interview—the president of the Springfield Historical Society. This woman met my student at her home where they visited for about two hours.

There were many different stories about how the students found their interviewees. Ultimately, they learned about how to get the information they needed and enjoyed “playing detective” as they searched their towns for bits of information to use for Part II of their projects. Requiring Part I let me know that students were actually on the right track. When we discussed the results of Part I, I discovered that they had not realized how they had learned about conducting research. Because the purpose of assigning a research paper in English Composition I is to teach students how to conduct research, Part I of my assignment allowed me to determine that this objective had been completed successfully.

By the time each student had written Part I, each had almost enough information to write Part II. At this point, I realized that because Part II was not due for another four weeks, students would likely procrastinate. I could add more requirements halfway through, but I could not think of any other ways to keep interest levels high during all of this time. So, I just continued to ask questions about how the process was going and to mention the project sometime during each class period as we continued other assignments. My worries were unfounded, for as I read their Part II papers, I discovered that almost every student had done an exceptional, thoughtful job of putting together the information that had been collected. Many students included several attachments—e.g., pictures of their topics and maps to their sites.

One student wrote: “I realize that City Hall keeps the city moving. It also allows those with opinions to express them, sometimes with powerful and life-changing effects. This being my first time ever paying any attention to this building, I was shown, firsthand, that there is somebody who cares about what happens.” Even though this student’s topic was the building, she also became interested in attending a town meeting and indicated that she intended to attend others. She was impressed with the way in which her town was being governed.

In several cases, students digressed, as did this student. As long as students discovered their topic, however, I discovered that these digressions added to their knowledge of these towns, demonstrated their interest in the project, and were welcome additions. A few students continued researching their topics long after they had sufficient information to write their

papers. I could not have been happier when I read their papers.

There were a few web sites included on students’ Works Cited pages, but only for limited amounts of information. A large portion of the research was conducted “in the field,” and some information came from primary sources. Our college library was used sparingly, an issue I will address next semester. However, most students used their local libraries at least once.

I am certain that this project is not the only way to discourage students from plagiarizing their research, and it may not even be the best way. I plan to continue considering a variety of other projects. But for now, I am going to use this one; it has proved to be a successful effort.

By the way, this was not an honor’s English Composition I class. All of these students were enrolled in this course after being selected randomly by computer. Moreover, it was an 8:00 a.m., Monday, Wednesday, Friday class that began the term with 29 students and ended with 24—quite a feat, actually, given the time the class met and the overwhelming schedules and personal responsibilities that many of these students had to juggle outside of class. I attribute this above-average retention rate to the interest my students had in their Community Research Project.

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