

The Suspension of Judgement: Making Research a Process in Introductory Composition.

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Step 1: What is the bottleneck?

While everyone pays lip service to research and writing as a process, the truth is that most of us would much prefer that research and writing happen once, and quickly. While I have become a very effective instructor in terms of guiding students through the writing of the basic skeleton of an Anglo-American academic essay, and while I have become quite adept at guiding students through reading articles, novels, poems, and plays, I have always felt completely inadequate in the face of teaching students to become truly independent researchers. In the mid 2000's, when I first began teaching research to literature students at the introductory levels, I simply gave up. I was unable to respond to the multiplicity of misreadings that proliferated. To suddenly have to track down 30 articles in JStor to find where the student had gone wrong was a daunting task that both exhausted and embarrassed me. The final straw was a student's misreading of an article about *Othello*. The article had argued that Desdemona's singing of the willow song at the end of Act IV allows her to find a natural metaphor for her sorrow—giving her a brief respite from the binary options of virgin/whore that Othello has imposed on her. The student summarized the article as arguing that Desdemona presents herself as a whore.

My options seemed to be to give students a range of curated articles, such that I would know the arguments well enough to see when students were misunderstanding the material, or to stop asking them to do any research at all. I chose the second course of action, and in order to introduce them to literary theory, I brought in a page from Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* that had been extremely influential to my own thinking. We worked through that page

together as a class, and I was satisfied that by the end, they understood the argument. I felt that I had shown them the value (as well as the difficulty) of literary theory, but I knew that I was capitulating any obligation to teach them how to become researchers, because I simply didn't have the time or resources to truly guide their investigations.

At a certain point at BMCC, it became mandatory for me to teach research in the freshman composition course, and I was initially quite hesitant. I tend to think that most students are already fairly adept researchers in their own minds, and I would have to help them unlearn certain habits, while making an argument for research databases that I feared would be unconvincing.¹ I also think that close reading is a much more important skill for the course, and I didn't want to take away time from that time. I also feared the kind of misreadings I had encountered all those years ago.

I was deeply frustrated by my first few attempts at research paper assignments, and at a certain point, looking over my own morning newspaper, I realized that there were controversies over which I had real questions, and I realized that I could use those to create research assignments for my students that would be both engaging and accessible—that I could give students access to discourse that they could master while beginning to consider larger questions that would lead to life-long attention to a particular concern.

While I was able to bring in contemporary controversies and give students, I found that students still tended to write once. They read articles, and then began writing, starting at the beginning and ending at the end. The first pages of their essays are often throat clearing, question

¹ Many years ago, when I was required to teach library research skills to a group of fifth and sixth graders, I created a research question that I knew would be unanswerable by google. Once I had let the students fail using their preferred search engine, I was able to show the value of the library. At this point, google is much better, and I don't think that I could construct a question that google would fail at answering. It is also the case that almost all databases (notably Jstor, Academic OneFile, Nexis Uni) have reinvented themselves to look more like google's interface.

asking, or rambling data dumps, with engaged argument only appearing in the final pages or paragraphs as the page requirement has been met and students now feel free to stop fill space and to actually explore their own ideas. Research and writing became a static, rather than an iterative, process, and this is the bottleneck I chose to address.

Step 2: Expert Responses

The most wide-spread expert response has been Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say* (in its 4th edition as of June 2018), which offers students models for finding their own voice within academic discourse. While the book offers a series of templates for students to include in their own writing, I find it tends to reproduce the static nature of my bottleneck. I do often give my students Graff's and Birkenstein's templates because the templates push the students to offer their own thinking and to treat summary as an adjunct (rather than a substitute) for their own thought. Still, the templates are necessarily static, rather than dynamic. To get to the point where a student can write, "I am of two minds about X's argument. On one hand, X is correct that _____, but on the other hand X is wrong about _____," is no small feat. But once the student has completed the template, it becomes an "island of safety" as surely as a sentence that has been grammatically corrected by an authority. The templates are useful, but retain the sense of a static or non-iterative writing process that *is* my bottleneck.

While "scaffolding" has become the preferred jargon for walking students through a process, its original meaning has been diluted (van de Pol 272). Van de Pol explains that true scaffolding needs to be "a dynamic intervention finely tuned to learner's ongoing progress" (272). Scaffolding is often used to refer to any stages of an assignment, which may or may not

be dynamic steps. I often tell my own students that I couldn't understand why, as a high school student, I had to write outlines that were then turned into papers. My frustration was that no thinking or discovery occurred between the outline and the paper. Bulletpoints are easier to manage, and unless the writing process has the chance to lead to discovery, I'm not interested in simply turning bulleted support into a paragraph. I'm wary of making my students go through steps that don't leave open room for reconsideration or discovery. Scaffolding is a clear expert response, but it doesn't necessarily address my bottleneck. Often scaffolding simply means drawing out (or slowing down) a static writing process, not making the process iterative or dynamic. There is also a mountain of personal accounts of frustration with students who write data dumps or refuse engagement. Carmen Kynard represents this genre quite well: "the "research paper" as a genre had always been presented to them, from high school on up into even freshman composition, was so consistent that now all they had to do was churn out a standard, stagnant form" (128). These accounts might make me feel less alone, but they don't really offer much in the way of forward pedagogical motion for me.

I found a rather odd little article by James Hoffman from 1992 about i-charts, which I did find quite interesting. In the article, he is frustrated by his daughter's fury over Columbus's abuse of indigenous people, and based on new evidence about Columbus's cruelties, she immediately declares him a villain, rather than a hero. From 2018, it looks more like a generational conflict between the emotional distance valued by Boomers, and the social justice focus of millennials. But his recommendation is to create a giant chart that lays out the questions that the student brings to the essay, and then breaks down the knowledge that the student brings to the question alongside the facts and expert opinions introduced in the various readings. While I'm not sure that this is the best approach for my own students, I like that it demands a step that

can't simply be cut and paste into a final paper. It reminded me of the way that I was taught to take note on index cards—that the gathering stage was isolated from the processing stage. This may not be realistic (As hard as I've tried, I've never really managed to keep my notes on index cards), but I liked that it required stages that prevent writing from happening once.

I ended up returning to Mark Gaipa's 2004 "Breaking into the Conversation: How Students Can Acquire Authority for Their Writing." In this article, he describes teaching Harvard freshmen *The Sun Also Rises* and twenty-five scholarly articles about the novel. He uses cartoons to draw the relationships that students can establish between themselves and their sources. I had remembered the article as being about the cartoons that had been drawn by the student, but in fact, Gaipa had made the cartoons himself. I showed my class the cartoons that Gaipa had created, as a way of showing them—as Gaipa does—possible relationships between themselves and their sources. In a certain way, these cartoons act the same way as the templates from Graff and Birkenstein. My preference for the cartoons, however, is that they require a contemplative step that leads to writing, rather than the filling out a form that can then settle into the paper undigested.

Step 3: Explicit Modeling

In STEM fields, problems are relatively easy to come by, in comparison to the fields of composition or literary study. A quadratic equation is easily changed out for another one, and while engineering problems in real life are quite intractable and individuated, word problems are easily changed in dimensions, units, or materials. Or at least my experience of measuring the heights of trees based on the angles of the shadow in Calculus, and the finding the co-efficient of friction as various objects slid down various sloped surfaces would lead me to believe.

In English, modeling a problem solving technique is necessary, but it “uses up” the problem. When discussing the distinction between man and monster in *Frankenstein*, for instance, it’s hard not to reveal my own position (it’s purely based on appearance), and once I’ve given that position—I’m lecturing, I’m not guiding. Students are aware that asking for modeling is a way to get to the mysterious and opaque answer in the professor’s head, which when regurgitated and parroted, is the royal road to an A. In the first paper assignment, I often have students share ideas. They work in groups to develop thesis statements, topic sentences, and find evidence for their arguments. This means that in the first paper, I often see what would be plagiarism in other classes, but since they have developed their ideas together, I expect the overlap in their thinking and writing. I will often have students develop a thesis, and then write the working thesis on the board so that we can work through it together, discussing its strengths and weaknesses, and considering it against the rubric. However this also means that students can bring these workshopped thesis statement into their own paper—making the process productive because participatory, but not necessarily independent.

In other words, I don’t necessarily model the steps within the paper, but rather use each paper to model the requirements of the next paper. In considering how to integrate sources, develop a thesis, and construct a paragraph, I am modeling the tasks very explicitly in the first essay, and then trying to encourage students to be increasingly independent as the course progresses. By research paper, my hope is that they have reached full independence, though clearly they have not, and the question of dynamic writing process is the clearest indication of where the bottleneck is located.

In trying to come up with a metaphor for the dynamic process I’m requesting, I initially tried static metaphors, in which a process had not been completed. Serving uncooked pasta (you

did open the box, but you didn't boil it in water!) or giving a date seeds instead of flowers (you have to grow the flowers!) were some metaphors I tried. But these metaphors enforce ideas of failure, while assuming that the exact steps that should have been followed are already known. Then I recalled a moment when I was working in a writing center in which a student had come in for help writing the introduction to a group paper. The group had split the paper into sections, and while she was supposed to write the introduction, she had no thesis, and no idea of what was in the body or conclusion of the paper. Unable to make her see why she couldn't write an introduction to a paper that she had never seen, I finally asked her if my brother should get divorced. She looked at me blankly, before saying she had no idea since she had never even met him. We were able to use that starting point to help her see why she couldn't write an introduction to a topic she knew nothing about.

When I started using the metaphor of couples counseling in my freshman composition class, it did not go quite the way I expected. When students asked what position they should take on the research topic, I asked them the question that had worked in the Writing Center. "Should my brother get divorced?" I asked the class, letting the silence settle as they realized they were supposed to respond. "Yes!" a small group of students suddenly responded. I looked at them incredulously. "You think my brother should get divorced?" I repeated. "No!" they said, switching their answer to see if my face would indicate that they had reached the right conclusion this time. "Why?" I asked. "Why do you think he should get divorced?" Now they were really confused—and I seemed to them to be asking a trick question (no right answer!)—rather than asking a real question.

I then explained that they couldn't possibly answer the question unless they got to know my brother and his wife. I asked them what they would need to know in order to decide if he

should get divorced, and then they began to offer real questions that would lead to actually getting to a real decision. I explained to them that in the same way that they would have to get to know my brother and his wife before they could offer any sort of marital advice, they need to research their topic and integrate new evidence and arguments before they could come to a legitimate conclusion (or thesis). I tried to explain that in the same way that couples counseling is a dynamic process—there is new information all the time—research requires an ongoing assessment that while open ended, does result in clear decisions.

Step 4. Practice and Feedback

In part, my bottleneck has been exacerbated by changes in technology, or by my slow adaptation to those changes. My strategy for making writing and research dynamic has long been to allow as many revisions as the student is willing to do. I use a response form for papers that concludes with a box to check for “revision suggested” or “revision not suggested” and then “Next steps for revising your paper.” I never give more than three steps, but those steps can change from draft to draft.

However, once I started giving feedback online, the students seemed unable to process the fact that I’m asking for revisions. Despite writing “Before you turn in your next draft of this paper,” and offering numbered instructions in the imperative mood, students routinely suggest shock that they can revise. Somehow the move to grading on Blackboard has made students more resistant to revision, not less.

I have long used quizzes as a way to get students to class on time, and as a way to reward them for having done the reading. It does achieve my goals—the students feel like they get “credit” for being punctual and reading—but it’s a giant hassle. I hate grading those quizzes, and

often don't—giving completion grades rather than actual assessments. But now that I am on blackboard, it is much easier to use the quizzes as a way to slow the process or intervene throughout the writing process.

This year, for the first time, I asked for an annotated bibliography. While working in a Writing Center, I had grown to hate annotated bibliographies. I was used to looking at five or six sources and summaries, thinking that the student had done excellent research, only to find that the sources were really only superficially connected, and that the summaries were barely coherent. The students rarely actually read the articles—they had gone into the research databases, and while they had produced the appearance of research, they were baffled by the articles, and were now locked into using sources that were unconnected and confusing to them. Still, this semester, I decided that since I was asking for mostly popular sources, the summaries would give me a clear sense of whether or not the students understood what they were reading. I asked for annotated bibliographies as a “quiz” in blackboard and I responded by giving a brief assessment of where I thought their paper was going. If the sources seemed weak, partisan, or disconnected, I could warn the student and encourage the resubmission of an improved bibliography. This ultimately proved much less onerous than I had expected. I did not resent reading the annotated bibliographies the way I resented grading and entering scores for the pro-forma quizzes.

I also asked students to submit their thesis for a quiz grade. Again, blackboard made this quite simple, and I liked seeing the direction of the paper. For years, when students have asked me to look at a paper in advance, I have asked them to e-mail me their thesis and a brief summary of how they support their thesis. I explain that I don't like to grade a paper twice, but if

you talk to me *about* the paper, I can be helpful. Very few students take me up on that offer, but I realized I can use blackboard to make students talk to me about the paper before they turn it in.

My feedback was fairly limited, but to the point. I felt good about being able to guide the students in the process, and when students were **not** dynamic in their writing, I could point out that I had given them direction that they had not taken into consideration.

Step 5. Student Motivation

The best motivation is intrinsic. When the students discover that there is a controversy playing out that they had never encountered, it can be eye opening or it can feel disconnected to themselves. Students who are excited about college as an experience that is designed to connect them to the larger world often become passionate about their position, discovering that the fights that had been happening outside of their view are conflicts they are eager to join or mediate.

I do not have an answer for how to motivate a truly unmotivated student—though I do respect their position in a way that I'm not sure I would have ten years ago. For example, when choosing between prompts from the world of law, art, and politics, one of my students expressed an inability to choose. I asked him which interested him. Does he like art? Does he follow politics? Is he interested in legal questions? He told me that he tried not to follow the news because when he does, he finds it upsetting. I asked him if he really preferred just not to know what was happening around him, he said yes. The more he learns, the more upset he gets. I said that this was not a great position for someone who wants to succeed in college, and I did not choose for him, though I told him which question would likely carry the least emotional baggage. But I also find myself consumed with anger by the news at times, and I often feel impotent and inadequate in the face of current events. Tuning out might indeed make me

happier, and during especially turbulent moments, I avoid all news sources and social media after 5pm, because otherwise I can't sleep (checking David Duke's twitter account is never advisable... but before bed and I'm sure to lie awake in a panic). Can I motivate him? I think I cannot. He'll go through motions because that is his choice, and I don't know that I would take that form of peace away from him.

Still, he is in the minority, and the students who do engage their controversies can become passionate, and at least in this case, their passion tends to translate into strong, nuanced arguments.

Step 6. Mastering Mastery

How does one measure mastery? According to the rubric, the students are doing better, though I haven't counted the number of A papers from the previous semester and the number of As from this semester, nor do I plan to. I also know that as I adjust the assignment, I'll adjust the grades—that as I try not to penalize the students for my own efforts and errors, the grades may be a measure of student mastery, but they not be a clear measure of whether or not my interventions have increased their mastery.

I actually measure mastery in two ways—both of which are perhaps narcissistic, but I hope they reflect my disciplinary mastery and expert thinking. The first is whether or not I enjoy reading the papers. If I am reading through twenty-five versions of the same paper, or three to five variants, which differ in fairly superficial ways, then I am stunningly bored, and find the process of reading in order to grade to be a superficial process... ticking a few mental boxes in my head as I power through banality. The second is whether I can respond to the ideas in the paper, or if I can only respond to the structure and the checked boxes. If I am giving each student

mostly structural responses (i.e., use topic sentences, develop a thesis that addresses the complexity of prompt, use support from multiple sources in each paragraph), then again, I am bored, and do not consider the assignment a success.

However, if the papers actually grapple with the controversy and reflect critical thought, the papers come to me as individual papers. I see unique and personal arguments that draw different lines in different places, and focus on different aspects of the controversy. I find myself engaged, and able to respond to the student about their ideas—which is the point of the structure—to make your ideas clear and persuasive.

In giving an assignment about whether or not leggings are pants this semester, I was being a bit cavalier or sarcastic. I was throwing up my hands that the question of leggings being pants has actually become a topic of serious debate, and daring my students to find something of value in that debate. What stands out in my mind is the opposite direction my students' research took. An orthodox Jewish student—who did not consider pants appropriate attire for women, let alone leggings-- found a sociological study showing that both women and men trust women who dress modestly and are suspicious of women who dress provocatively. Other students found articles showing that dress codes are used to disadvantage or dismiss people of color. A tapestry of well-founded and clearly argued papers met my challenge—in taking my prompt seriously, they brought me back to seriousness. I consider this a success.

Mastery is a moving target. Ideally, it's an asymptote that's rising.

Works Cited

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