The Research Paper: A "Rhetoric of Doing" or a "Rhetoric of the Finished Word"?

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The research paper remains one of the most institutionalized forms of college student writing, and a review of the kinds of goals and values educators attribute to the research paper assignment reveals why. Toby Fulwiler argues that the research paper has earned a prominent place in courses across the curriculum because, as students perform research and write research papers, they become "better investigators, conceptualizers, critics, writers. In short, they become better thinkers and communicators" (87). He claims that "when teachers and curricula work as they are supposed to [in higher education], students learn higher-order thinking skills that will color the way they receive, process, formulate and communicate ideas the rest of their lives. And at the heart of this process rests the research assignment" (87). After interviewing college instructors from a variety of disciplines, Schwegler and Shamoan found that teachers view the research paper as a "means to accomplish one of the primary goals of college instruction: to get students to think in the same critical, analytical, inquiring mode as instructors do—like a literary critic, a sociologist, an art historian, or a chemist" (821). According to Sandra Stotsky, a Research Associate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education,

[T]he research assignment [is] probably the most important vehicle teachers at all educational levels have for fostering independent thinking and responsible writing....[S]tudents can learn as part of doing research and writing research papers that responsible writers seek information on all points of view about a question, evaluate the quality of the information that is gathered, support their generalizations with reasonable evidence, and present the results of their research clearly (99, 101).

While in theory these important claims for the value of the research paper assignment justify its status as one of the most common writing assignments college students can expect to encounter in their undergraduate careers, in practice (and I'm talking about both teacher and student practice), the research paper is problematic at best—indeed, Ken
Macrorie may not be exaggerating when he argues that "there is nothing more scandalous in schools and colleges than what we call 'writing a research paper'" (qtd. in Olson 130).

In theory, the research paper represents a "rhetoric of doing" (Witte, Nakadate, Cherry), requiring active inquiry, thoughtful analysis and evaluation, and the presentation of new knowledge to an interested community of readers. As Donovan and Carr explain, "the research paper would seem potentially the single most extended instance of doing, making, and meaning in an educational setting" (213). In practice, however, the research paper often represents the "rhetoric of the finished word" (Rohman qtd. in Young 1), in which students recover and transcribe other authors' research and ideas. Interviews with students reveal that they commonly view writing a research paper as a simple process of collection and transcription. For example, one college freshman participating in a study that examined students' research paper practices described the research paper as "dumb busy work" because "it's coming from some book and all [you're] doing is regurgitating information that the teacher already knows" (Nelson and Hayes 16). Similarly, when asked by researchers why research papers are assigned in college, several students revealed that they view the research paper "as an exercise in information gathering, not an act of discovery; the audience is assumed to be a professor who already knows about the subject and is testing the student's knowledge and information-gathering ability" (Schwegler and Shamon 819). Clearly, if most students view the research paper assignment as an exercise in reproducing information for the teacher-as-examiner, then it cannot promote independent thinking, critical analysis, or responsible writing. In addition, a "rhetoric of the finished word" maintains students' status as passive spectators, placing them "outside the official discourse of the academic community, where they are expected to admire and report on what we do, rather than inside that discourse, where they can do its work and participate in a common enterprise" (Bartholomae 144). As teachers we need to learn more about how widespread these limited perceptions about the research paper assignment are among our students, how wide the gap is between our theories and students' practices.

My aim in the following discussion is to explore the disparity between theory and practice concerning the research paper assignment by focusing on the following questions: How do college freshmen describe the process of researching a topic for writing? What are the implications of students' conceptions about the research paper, given educators' beliefs that the research assignment can help students to learn more about the issues and intellectual activities of a discipline, and that it should foster independent thinking, critical analysis, and responsible
writing? What can instructors do to change students’ limited perceptions about the research paper assignment?

Students’ Descriptions of Their Research Paper Processes

In an effort to learn more about students’ goals and processes for writing research papers at the large state university where I was teaching, I conducted a survey: early in the Fall semester, 1992, I asked students in fifteen randomly selected sections of freshman composition, 238 in all, to describe their process for writing a research paper by writing and explaining the sequence of steps they follow on a blank timeline. Two researchers working independently compared and categorized the surveys, identifying four major approaches for completing research paper assignments, as described in students’ timelines. All 238 survey responses were then analyzed and categorized according to the following four research paper approaches:

1) The Compile Information Approach: 175 students (approximately 74%) described a simple linear process involving choosing or getting a topic, collecting information, taking notes and/or writing an outline (these two steps were optional for many students), and writing the paper. At no point in the process did students describe the need to identify questions or to formulate a thesis, focus, or controlling idea for their research papers; rather they described their main tasks as compiling and presenting information.

2) The Premature Thesis Approach: 26 students (approximately 11%) described how they would develop a thesis or controlling idea for their papers before doing any research. They described their research paper process as linear, involving picking a topic, developing a thesis and sometimes an outline, doing research, and writing the paper.

3) The Linear Research Approach: 25 students (approximately 10%) described forming a thesis or controlling idea on a topic after completing their research and before they began writing. Students described a linear process in which they picked a topic, gathered information, identified a focus or issue, took notes and/or wrote an outline, and wrote the paper.

4) The Recursive Research Approach: 12 students (5%) described their research process as recursive, involving exploratory research and reading on a topic, formulating a tentative focus, and completing additional research to refine and extend their focus or thesis prior to writing a draft. These students’ descriptions of their research paper processes included researching a topic, identifying a preliminary focus, going to the library to find out more, formulating a thesis or controlling idea, conducting more research to support the thesis, then outlining and writing the paper.

The majority of students taking part in the survey did not characterize the research assignment as a recursive, learning process involving
what Stotsky describes as the "four most crucial tasks in an open-ended research assignment": "selecting a topic of interest, generating questions to pursue about the topic, locating seemingly relevant information, and then generating a working hypothesis, controlling idea, or point of view to govern the rest of the search and the final organization of information" (103). In fact, 74% of the students described their research paper process as a linear set of steps involving compiling and reporting information on a topic; they did not include the development of a thesis or controlling idea as part of their process. These survey results corroborate the findings of Carol Kuhlthau and her colleagues who questioned 385 library users and found that 50% of the participants did not make focused statements or describe developing a personal perspective on their topic at any point during the search process (27); instead, the majority of library users viewed the search task as narrowly limited to gathering information and did not consider exploring material or formulating a focus as appropriate tasks at any point in the search process (23).

The Compile Information Approach used by the majority of students in my survey epitomizes a "rhetoric of the finished word," with students acting like a "messenger service" whose task is to go to the library, collect some information, and present it "to the customer neatly wrapped in footnotes and bibliography" (Larson 816); in addition, the "customer" who receives student research, in most cases, has no genuine need for or interest in the information students have collected.

This kind of arhetorical research report appears to be simply an extended version of the early content-area reports students often are expected to write in elementary school; as one first-grader describes the process, "first you copy some stuff from a book. . . . And then you draw some pictures and maps" (Giacobbe 133). Unfortunately, it appears that some students' research paper processes do not change much from first grade to college: one college freshman taking part in a naturalistic study of students' approaches to writing research papers explained, "since it's a research paper, I will barely write anything of my own so it is basically an organization process"; first you simply transcribe information from several sources and then you use your handbook to find the "correct way to write a term paper (bibliography, spacing, etc.)." She described how she wrote her paper the night before it was due, producing a coherent, organized 1300-word paper in which 1100 words were documented as direct quotes from her sources (Nelson 108-109). If your goal is to demonstrate that you can retrieve and package information, then there is no need to generate questions or to develop a thesis, controlling idea, or personal perspective on your topic. This approach precludes thoughtful analysis of source material, and it may not promote learning either. In their study of the role that writing plays in shaping learning, Langer and
Applebee found that the more content is manipulated through writing, the more likely it is to be understood and remembered. Thus, when students approach research paper assignments in this way, by piecing together chunks of undigested information, they may not understand or learn much about their topics, undermining yet another goal attributed to the research paper: helping students to learn about the issues and research in a particular discipline.

The Premature Thesis Approach for writing research papers, described by approximately 11% of the survey students, is equally disturbing and antithetical to the stated goals for assigning research papers. Stotsky argues that students who formulate a thesis prematurely, before "they have engaged in any genuine inquiry"

...turn the research paper into a sterile academic exercise, "proving" what they already believe....Students who do not undertake an initial open-ended exploration of a topic bypass the intellectually crucial process of sifting through unorganized and frequently conflicting ideas. (109)

In addition, they do not learn to be responsible writers by seeking information on all points of view about a question or topic.

While the Linear Research Approach, as described by approximately 10% of the students, involves researching a topic before formulating a thesis or controlling idea, the nonrecursive nature of the process is problematic. If students see researching a topic as a one-step, linear process, then they are apt to perform a limited, close-ended search, foregoing genuine inquiry and turning the research process into a simple exercise in one-stop information-gathering. Case study students who described their processes for writing research papers in a naturalistic study explain their streamlined, linear approach as a sort of researchers' "scrabble" game in which the writer collects a limited number of sources and then creates a paper from whatever these sources contain (Nelson and Hayes 8-9). For example, during a single trip to the library one student described how he located several articles on his topic, wrote brief summaries of each article, and then "sat back and said, 'This is what I know; what can I write with it?'" He based all subsequent decisions about his paper's content, focus, and organization on what his sources contained, and his paper was written in sections, each section corresponding to a source text. Another student described how she chose the topic for her paper by skimming the indexes of six books she located by looking up the call number for her general research area and browsing the shelves for a few minutes; she rejected a topic that caught her interest because it was mentioned in only one of the six books she had haphazardly pulled off the
shelf, and, instead of searching for other possible sources, concluded "Oh well, I guess I can't do him." After she noticed a large section on a topic in one book and corresponding information in four of the other books she had chosen, she declared "Bingo, I found my topic." Her choice of topic, as well as the paper's focus and organization, were all based on this limited, one-shot search (8-9).

The Linear Research or "scrabble game" approach to researching a topic for writing undermines several of the educational goals for the research paper; students using this approach do not set out to examine a topic from multiple perspectives or to evaluate the quality of the information that is gathered. In fact, one freshman described how she would write an outline for her paper directly from her sources, recording the page numbers for information on the outline, and then type her paper straight onto the computer (skipping notetaking and drafting) by referring to the pages in the sources as she wrote; she found this method especially efficient because "you wouldn't hardly have to read the books" but could just skim individual pages and extract information (Nelson and Hayes 3). Clearly, the Linear Research Approach does not promote responsible writing, for, as Micheal Kleine argues, "it is the absence of a direct and linear route through the research/writing process that is most characteristic of solid, and honest, work" (160).

Only 5% of the students taking part in my survey described their approach to writing research papers as a recursive research and writing process in which they would actively construct a perspective on a topic. Twelve of the 238 students described their research process as nonlinear, involving exploratory research and reading on a topic, the formulation of a preliminary focus or thesis, and completion of additional research and reading to refine and support the focus. One student described his process this way:

Read about the topic to get a basic idea and pick out important points; go to the library and find out more. Once I'm well read and have a good knowledge of what I want to stress, then plan out the thesis and then research the major points.

Case studies of student writers who use this approach reveal that the research paper assignment serves as a vehicle for engaging in genuine inquiry and for extending and integrating new learning. For example, a student who was required to write a research paper and give a lecture on the topic to her introductory physics class described how she made several trips to the library in order to gain a working knowledge of her topic, the detection of invisible light and inaudible sound (Nelson and Hayes 11-15). As she read and refined her understanding of her topic, she
added information to her notes that were divided into subtopics such as "detection" and "uses"; in addition, she explained that "a lot of the really technical, 'inner workings' stuff, I read so I'd understand it, but didn't take notes on." (12). She wrote her paper from her lecture notes, explaining that "having had to talk and sound intelligent for twenty minutes with just [the notes] in front of me, I had most of the [information] lodged firmly in the mind." Her teacher gave her high marks for "knowledge of sources and literature, understanding basic concepts, extensive treatment of subject, and originality of ideas," (15), indicating that through this assignment, the student was able to extend her understanding of the concepts and research involved in the field of physics and to share what she had learned with an interested audience.

The results of this survey, though limited to a percentage of students at one major state university, support the misgivings of many educators who argue that the research paper assignment should be deemphasized or reconceptualized because it does not foster independent thinking or responsible writing. Many teachers appear to agree with Doug Brent's characterization of his own early attempts to teach students to write research papers as "fraught with a profound sense of failure":

My students learned how to use quotations, more or less: that is, they learned how many spaces to indent and on which side of the quotation marks to place the period. They learned how to find information in the library and how to document it when they used it. But their research papers, by and large, remained hollow imitations of research, collections of information gleaned from sources with little evaluation, synthesis, or original thought. (xiii)

Other educators describe students' responses to research paper assignments in similar terms: Kleine speculates that students writing research papers see "their purpose as one of lifting and transporting textual substance from one location, the library, to another, their teachers' briefcases" (151). Timothy Donovan and Janet Carr claim that "professors often despair that so many [research papers] are just a rehash, cut 'n paste jobs, virtually plagiarized" (212); they have the "veneer of scholarship but not much of its deeper grain" (214). These discouraging descriptions are not surprising, given students' own definitions of the process: the majority of the students taking part in my survey described writing a research paper as a simple, linear process involving collecting, extracting, and reproducing information from sources—a hollow imitation of genuine research at best, revealing that students conceive of the research paper as a "rhetoric of the finished word."
Transforming the Research Paper Assignment into a Rhetoric of Doing

Critics of the research paper, as it is currently taught, argue that students' superficial approaches to research paper assignments are inevitable, given the way such assignments are presented. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg point out that most often we define student research as "research-as-recovery," meaning that students are expected to "go to the library to extract information from books.... Research-as-recovery seems to justify writing a paper by copying others' accounts of what they have discovered" (303). Brent argues that research paper instruction focuses nearly exclusively on "the nuts and bolts of research—how to take notes, how to write a footnote" rather than on the purpose of research (108).

I believe that the primary source of students' limited conceptions about the research paper is our own failure to distinguish between the skills of information management, that is, demonstrating that you have retrieval skills and can package information correctly, and the ability to engage in genuine inquiry in which your goal is to do something with your research, to make information meaningful in some context. If we want students to conceive of and approach research papers as a "rhetoric of doing" rather than as a "rhetoric of the finished word," then we will need to look closely at the rhetorical situations in which research paper assignments are embedded. As Brent argues, "the goal of [research paper] instruction must be to help students get research back inside the rhetorical act" (105). To meet this goal, we need to identify rhetorical situations that encourage students to approach research as a purposeful, recursive process in which they actively construct a perspective on a topic.

There are a number of ways to create writing situations that invite students to approach research paper assignments as a "rhetoric of doing" rather than as a "rhetoric of the finished word." Clearly, one way is to take advantage of what Lucy McCormick Calkins calls "the transforming power of teaching" (271). Calkins argues that when we enfranchise students as teachers they will become active learners themselves: "When I know I will be teaching a class on a topic, I become a powerful learner. Everywhere, I see related anecdotes, ideas, and quotations. Because I teach, I learn" (271).

This was clearly the case for the student writing a research paper for her physics class, described earlier, who was expected to be the class expert on her topic and to present a twenty minute lecture. Woven throughout her descriptions of her recursive research processes are references to her audience and their needs: she explained that she decided to use examples from a specialized medical journal as "color" for her speech; she described how she explained everything she had learned about her topic so far to her mother, saying it was like a preliminary
practice for the speech, and helped reassure me that I can indeed speak ‘physics-eze’ without notes or an outline and still have it make sense”; she considered looking up information on the topic of the student scheduled to speak before her, explaining that I “thought of the potential for boredom if the two talks overlapped and decided I ought to try to find him so we could... try to coordinate things” (Nelson and Hayes 11-13).

This student approached her research assignment as an opportunity to learn more about a new topic in physics and to share her new knowledge with an interested community of fellow researchers because her teacher created a writing situation that called for genuine inquiry. He purposely selected topics for students to research that he did not know very much about, and he expected the class to take notes and ask questions during student lectures. He revealed his own interest in learning from students’ research when he told the case study student that he had learned something new from her lecture and asked her to be sure to document the information carefully so that he could read more about it. As a result she reported spending more time documenting her sources, explaining: I’m honored that I...told him something new, but—drat—now I’m going to footnote this paper into the ground and I usually take a casual approach to such endeavors” (Nelson and Hayes 14). Because she was speaking and writing to an audience who had the potential to be genuinely informed by her research, this student felt the need to research her topic thoroughly, to understand and present concepts clearly and engagingly, and to document her sources carefully, activities that educators hope the research paper will foster. Teachers can encourage students to engage in genuine inquiry and to view the research paper assignment as a vehicle for extending their own and others’ knowledge about an issue or topic by providing “an audience comprised of learners, rather than the learned” (Donovan and Carr 217).

While the classroom offers an effective and convenient forum for student research, other situations can promote genuine inquiry, as well. Jennie C. Cooper describes the success of a “client-centered approach” to teaching the research paper in which “real people—journalists, government officials, millionaires, business leaders, faculty members, and local citizens—[are invited] to become ‘clients’ for... student researchers” (386) by submitting topics or questions they wish to have researched. Students’ completed research papers are delivered to the clients, and, Cooper reports, several students’ projects have been published in area newspapers or used in other ways. Such assignments clearly transform the research paper into a “rhetoric of doing.” In addition, when students have the opportunity to research issues or problems that matter to them personally, the research paper can serve a real purpose; for example, Donovan and Carr describe one student’s investigation of her own
debilitating back injury: “Her paper was both an informative work and a personal catharsis” (216). They argue that “students such as [this one] can go at their research with an authentic curiosity, authentic perhaps with a meaning close to that of an author as an originator. Their topic originates with them as individuals, as students, as workers; their papers are ones that they author and in which they have a personal stake” (216). Whether students themselves or other individuals select the research topic, there must be a reason for engaging in and presenting research.

If the majority of students approach the research paper as a “rhetoric of the finished word”—whether they define their task as simply compiling and presenting chunks of information or as “proving” what they already believe or what a handful of sources dictate—then the research paper fails to serve any real educational purpose. In fact, it undermines educators’ stated goals for the assignment, for it does not foster critical inquiry or independent thinking, and it fails to promote disciplinary learning and responsible writing. By situating research paper assignments in educational, social, or personal sites that invite students to approach the research paper as a “rhetoric of doing” rather than as a “rhetoric of the finished word,” we can begin to close the gap between educators’ theories and students’ practices in writing research papers.

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