THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR WRITES THE NEW "RESEARCH" ESSAY

Jackie Grutsch McKinney

"I believe that by giving students their autonomy we win our own. We expect our students to 'change' in the course of a semester. If we ourselves are not changing, I suspect we are not permitting ourselves to be put at risk by our students" (O'Reilley 30).

Potted plants. I have a small piece of the outside world—a balcony that stands ten feet above the ground. The nature I live with grows from potted plants that I bought from the grocery story in black plastic containers, roots already climbing out of the bottom hole. From the window above my desk, I watch nervously as bees swarm around the impatiens and wonder: *how can I keep them away?*

How many thoughts do I keep out, too? Emerson tells us about the American Scholar: "So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess" (Emerson 39). Here I am halfway between starting and finishing a Ph.D. thinking about how the system I'm becoming more a part of each day is in the same state that Emerson was critical of nearly two hundred years ago. Recently when I read through Emerson's "American Scholar" speech, I became enraged, on fire, thirsty. On my desk I see my two-foot receipt from the University Bookstore. Item count: 41. Cost $346.82. Are books for the scholar's idle times like Emerson says? *Ha! Idle time!* I scribble sarcastically in the margins.

Midway through teaching my next class, I find myself hot under the collar again. I hear myself: "I want you each to learn something that no one else knows. Build on what we know and

move it a step further..." The eyes looking back at me are freshman and sophomore eyes, but they still know enough to be apathetic yet nervous about what I'm suggesting. They're students, but like me, they're not yet the American Scholars Emerson wanted.

In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered what came to be known as "The American Scholar" speech to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge[1]. That day in front of the prominent (male) scholars of the day, Emerson described how American society has created the designated intellectual, Man Thinking. He lamented that colleges are turning these men into "the parrot of other men's thinking" (Emerson 38). What's required of true intellectuals, Emerson charges in expected Romantic/Pragmatic fashion, is that they know the knowledge of the past and that they blend it with their own experiences in nature and work. He reprimanded the scholars in front of him for being bookworms—sequestered from the world in libraries.

I've been teaching college writing for five years now, and I've often felt when I try to teach the "research" essay like Emerson must have felt when he wrote this piece: my students want to mimic back to me what's already known. My students trust what is written in a book, magazine, or web page over their own experience. My students are very comfortable writing reports, transcribing research from one source into their papers. It's striking that as a field we have some of the same concerns that Emerson had. He wanted scholars who integrated their experience with their scholarship; we have ethnography. He wanted scholars who interacted with the world; we have service learning.

Even at a time when the traditional "research" essay (e.g. write ten pages on censorship using ten sources) is fizzling out—thank goodness—those of us who teach composition still acknowledge that research skills are important. The skills are compromised of the actually "researching," finding information, but also include the ability to process, analyze, and write up findings. So we're struggling as a field to find (and teach) different assignments that

require these skills and that mate better with our postmodern, post-current traditional sensibilities.

To give research writing a greater purpose, many composition teachers ask students to write arguments using research. In their article "The Aims and Process of the Research Paper," Robert Schwegler and Linda Shamoon write about how students have a tough time finding and managing research. They write that teachers often complain that "students seem overwhelmed by what they find in outside sources and are incapable of weaving the information they have gathered into an argument that presents and defends their point of view" (Schwegler and Shamoon 19). They say that teachers have tried unsuccessfully to address this problem in one of three ways: (1) providing better training in gathering and arranging information, (2) putting more emphasis on the argument aspect of the paper, or (3) giving up (Schwegler and Shamoon 19-20). In my own experience with this type of assignment, my students did not struggle with finding and incorporating texts. My frustration came from finding that students wrote from their own established opinions (e.g. why there should not be ROTC on campus) and found sources to support them. Their writing reinforced what they already "knew:" it became just another report. They didn't analyze or blend their findings with their own lived experience or with others' perspectives.

Critical pedagogues would probably blame this phenomenon on the continuing practice of banking education. That is, students are so accustomed to collecting information that they do not know how to process it—they've never been asked to question the information or, as Emerson would suggest, how to check it against their own experiences. Paulo Freire writes, "Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between human being and the world: a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others: the individual is spectator not re-creator" (56). James McDonald agrees that the banking method of education makes students passive, but also puts part of the fault with current-traditional composition pedagogy. He writes,

"Current-traditional pedagogy has encouraged a dangerous uncritical acceptance of the authority of [texts]" (McDonald 106). McDonald is torn because he wants to do the research paper, but isn't sure how:

> Given the extent of its institutionalization, the research paper is not an assignment that we can simply abandon, yet the assumptions behind this genre and the ways it is normally taught are now untenable. I believe that we can work out pedagogies informed by postmodernism that can transform, if not explode, the genre of the research paper. (107)

I find myself among those, like McDonald, who want to see the research essay evolve, but we're not sure how that will look. We sense that the answer is not in the banking model, current-traditionalism, modernism, or polemic argument. A few alternatives have surfaced in the past years that seem promising. The older is called a process-oriented approach by Bernadette Glaze, although it is a reworking of Ken Macrorie's I-Search technique. It asks that students complete four steps: (1) write what they know, (2) write what they want to find out or the reason why they're writing the paper, (3) write the story of the search, and (4) write about what they learned (McDonald 83). It's based on the idea that research should take place because someone wants to find something out; the student has to need or want the information (McDonald 77). Intrinsic in this process-oriented approach is lots of meta-writing, meta-researching. It starts with the students—what do you know? And then asks them to consider what they want to find out and to narrate their research process and their findings[2]. Thus, this type of assignment builds in reflective writing, making the researching and learning visible for both students and teacher.

Other new forms have been described by Robert Davis and Mark Shadle in their recent article, "'Building a Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking."

They suggest different projects that explode what they call the "modern" research paper: those same linear reports that regurgitate others' thinking that Emerson opposed and those reports that present findings as some objective Truth separate from the author. The most radical of the assignments Davis and Shadle suggest is the multi-genre/media/disciplinary/cultural research project. The student completing this assignment is free to find sources in many forms (poems, photographs, political cartoons) and present the research in many forms by merging genres, media, or languages. What results is a more open-ended project such as a portfolio of diverse writing on a common topic (Davis and Shadle 433). These research projects "often resist, suspend, and/or decenter the master consciousness or central perspective inscribed in the essay as a unifying voice" (Davis and Shadle 431). Likewise, teachers who are assigning hypertext essays, websites, or web portfolios are crafting assignments which challenge the linear research report. This research writing becomes less about composing some sort of master narrative on a topic and more about allowing for heteroglossia.

   Many composition teachers are also incorporating qualitative or primary research with more traditional secondary research. The use of ethnography in writing classes has become quite popular in the last decade with textbooks such as Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Sustein's *Fieldworking* leading the way. Implicit in this type of writing is the belief that students can do more than arrange research that has already been written; they can be researchers in the field—collecting data, reading it, and writing about it. This sort of project does get students active; they have to leave the library and go into the world. Working with ethnographies, students also learn about subjectivity and perspective because they triangulate their own interpretation of data with others'.

   Drawing on these theorists/teachers, I adopted a technique for the research essay that aimed to get closer to being Wo/men Thinking. Instead of wanting students to find enough sources so that they can sufficiently argue their side, I asked my students to consider a wide perspective of sources, to consider many sides to

a topic. They do both library research and primary research, so they are involved in reading, action, and observation—all things that Emerson calls for in "The American Scholar." But even so, my students find this difficult, and I'm occasionally frustrated or baffled. What I encounter is a struggle that occurs when they find information—a text or a person—that conflicts with another text or what they "know." I watch how the student reconciles this new information.   What can a student do when she's been schooled to trust what she reads? When he's been told to stand up for what he believes? I've found that despite our new approaches, students still work to make coherent, linear narratives.

My Class

"Authentic liberation—the process of humanization—is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (Freire 60).

This semester I taught a second semester composition course on the theme of subcultures. The class looked at four subcultures: hackers, ravers, Latina gang members, and pro-athletes.   In addition, students picked a different subculture for their own investigation in a research paper and an oral presentation.   I especially wanted us to puzzle through how cultures are represented, how representations of any given culture may not give the complete picture, and, therefore, how it takes a wide variety of perspectives to get a somewhat accurate account of any culture.

As the semester progressed, I drew this crazy diagram that the students began to think of as "the doughnut." This "doughnut" represented how cultures are often represented. Most cultures (subcultures and even some counter-cultures) in America have the majority of members in what could be considered "middle" America. Each culture also seems to have its extremes—radical or conservative, rich or poor, popular or separatist, and so on.

For example, we talked about the hip-hop culture in this context. The students quickly isolated the "poster boy" of hip hop as Will Smith and placed him in the center circle. Then they identified rappers who have gang or crime associations and put them on the outer edge of the culture.
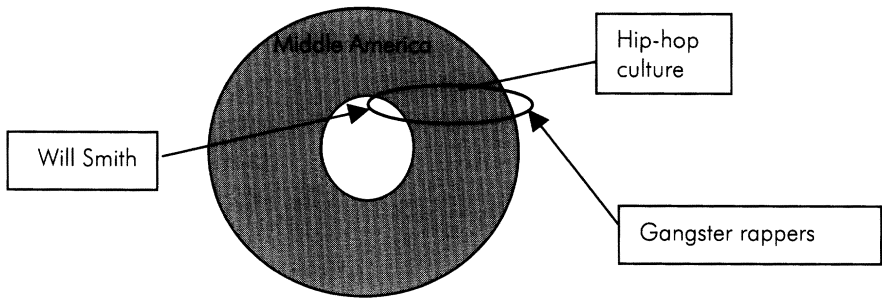
We recognized, through this diagram and discussion, that the media and people in general often want to talk about the extremes—the good or the bad. We have no time for the middle. And because of this, we may often misunderstand what the majority of a culture is really like: what they value, who they are, and so forth. Later in the course we talked about this again when we discussed Latina gang members as one of our cultures. I told them that it was easy to find information about Latina gangs or Latina superstars—but no middle stories. My class, mostly native North Carolinians, admitted to not knowing anything about Latino/a culture except the bad they'd seen in the media (illegal immigrants or crime) or the music superstars, like Ricky Martin and Jennifer Lopez, who have become media darlings.

All this was to prepare them for their big project for the semester: a research paper and presentation on a subculture or group of their choosing. To complete the assignment, they had to do both hands-on research and library research. And, they had to find a variety of perspectives on the culture—they had to look at the whole of the culture. I reminded them of our doughnut and of how they needed to try to find a variety of perspectives so they weren't just stuck in one of the pockets.

Even after my stressing the importance of their own research through our readings, discussions, and the assignment itself, my students in general wanted to use their library research almost to the exclusion of their primary research. Their writing, which was funny and poetic in their first essays, turned stiff and academic. Only two students used first person even when talking about their primary research. Most of the papers became data dumps. The interpretations and critical inquiries about the sources we read earlier in the semester did not seem to carry over to their research and writing. They merely quoted sources as the authority on their cultures. Three of my students, discussed below, are representative of the major struggles in my class.

Ryan[3]

"We settle on a story we can live with, not only because it's hard to be honest but also because our minds keep trying to create order" (O'Reilley 10).

Ryan did his research on the local Police Department. He knew some of the officers before beginning the project because he used to work with the Escort Service the Police Department runs. When we first conferenced, Ryan was interested in delving into the current controversies surrounding police officers—we talked extensively about police brutality and the problem of the public distrust of police. Ryan ended up interviewing three different police officers and joining one on a ride. From his animated presentation, I could tell that Ryan—usually a student difficult to engage—really got into this project. But I was surprised when his conclusion said that the most important thing his reader should understand from his research is that the local police department is there to help. He either didn't ask, or didn't include any talk from his interviewees, about the public's distrust of police. In fact, he ends up not using any sources for his paper that are about the police in general—they're all site-specific.

I figure that he got so personally involved with his sources that he couldn't see another side to the issue any more. But then Ryan included an interesting unassigned reflective piece in his end–of-the-term-portfolio. In it, he wrote, "I'm having trouble writing my paper. She wants us to have place, rituals, behavior, language, etc.; how do I tie that in with the issues I have to talk about: police brutality, profiling, racism, saving lives, looking out for the general public." He then wrote a few questions, and ended with this note: "I've tried writing and I end up writing a different paper for each one. I'm kind of lost in how to write it. I want to show that not all cops are like what you see in the news. There are plenty of good cops and there are a few bad ones." This showed the real struggle that Ryan was having. He was recognizing the strata of the culture, but felt that most cops were now seen as "bad." But instead of finding a way to reconcile this in his paper, he just did PR for the police department—he made an argument. He didn't know how to write "different papers" into one.

Angel

"Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles" (Emerson 40).

Angel came to a conference and told me that she could only find one source on her culture, emergency rooms. We did a quick library search of an online article database and found over one thousand hits. She then told me that she found this one web page—she had it printed out and showed it to me—that gave her "enough" information to do her project. Why did she need to get other sources? I reminded her that a good variety in sources alone would give her a better perspective on her culture, but she should also look for various views on ERs. Although she said "OK" as she left the conference, I was pretty sure she didn't think it was necessary. When she handed in her paper, she had included some other sources on her Works Cited page, but she still mainly

summed up the web page she had told me about before. Although she included a page of her own observation of an ER and her interview with someone who had been in an ER, her paper didn't really speak to any complexities or controversies.

In her final course reflective essay, Angel wrote, "My research paper took the most time to do. I was not sure at first how to approach my research paper. I had to think for about a week on what I wanted to include in my paper. I was unable to find books to use in my research. My main source was articles off the Internet." Angel's impulse is the one we all have: this has got to be easier than it seems. Researching is hard—and even harder when the instructor wants plurality instead of phony objectivity.

Later in the same essay, she reflected, "I should have given more artifacts and rituals instead of explaining what doctors and nurses do. One web site that I used as part of my research had some major artifacts of the emergency room. I have included those artifacts in my revised copy of my research paper." And, her revision of her paper did include more "information," but all presented as neutral. She didn't question any of her sources or have any ripples of tension in her paper.

Reshonda

"When you tinker with one little part of a vast system, you soon find that all your assumptions are called into question, not only about your discipline, but about your culture and how the universe is put together in its private parts" (O'Reilley 22).

Reshonda did her project on people with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Although she didn't tell me at first, she originally felt that ADHD kids were just bad kids who needed discipline—or in her words "a good spanking." After her research, which included an interview with an ADHD parent, she had changed her mind. I think Reshonda did a pragmatic turn—she had a theory about ADHD kids, but once she uncovered new information about the culture, she had to reformulate her theory.

It reminds me of what Charles Sanders Peirce wrote, "It is conceivable that what you cannot help believing today, you might find you thoroughly disbelieve tomorrow" (190).

I think she was really moved by the mother she interviewed. She concluded her presentation and paper acknowledging that she once felt that ADHD kids just needed a spanking, but now she sees ADHD as a real disorder. Even though she chose a side to agree with, Reshonda's project spoke to several of the complexities in the culture: real or imagined, to drug or not to drug. Unlike Ryan and perhaps Angel who left complexities and plurality outside the confines of the paper, Reshonda put hers in. The complexities are personal too—they have to do with her beliefs.

Having an educated perspective means you're like the pragmatists: always willing to change your mind and your beliefs when you're faced with new information. It also means with postmodern sensibilities that you're willing to be unsettled, to be squishy, not firm—you allow meaning to be deferred. It means not putting things into order and places when that's exactly what so much of American education asks you to do. It's leaving your toys out; it's messy.

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"Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote those books" (Emerson 40).

Mid-semester, I have a conference with one of my professors. I'm taking a theory course and writing a paper about postmodern feminist theory's relationship with composition research. I've given him a draft, which he liked—which made me feel like it must be "good." I tell him of my plans for a revision—what theorists I hope to add, what conversation I think I need to frame it in. I tell him, "I feel like I'm creating a problem to solve in this paper."

He shakes his head. "What this paper needs, Jackie, is your experience. You've set up an argument and now you need to give proof, give evidence from your own teaching or from your colleagues' teaching."

I think about this. I disagree, but nod. I don't know how that will fit. This is a theory course—how can my paper be too theoretical? In the end, I add little snippets of my experience and add about ten new sources. I tell my friend on the phone, "He's not going to like this. He said what my paper needed was experience, and I've just added more research."

When I got the paper back, my professor encouraged me to push it further in a revision towards an article for publication, but I've never returned to this piece. As I page through it now, I see in it a desperation to do smart and safe research writing. The safest way of all for me to write is not to include any original ideas, to play one theorist off another in a pathetic sort of composition grudge match keeping my own authorship on the side of the ring as if it's inconsequential to the piece. Safe writing does not show seams, misgivings, or failures. Further, as a beginner into the topic, I didn't have lived experience with it. Frankly, I was still trying to tease out what poststructuralist feminism is or could be; I didn't know first-hand what difference this would make to the field or how it influenced my classroom. Instead of trying to write the "seminar paper" that I handed in, I should have written an essay —in the truest sense of that word: my attempts, my trials to figure out poststructuralist feminism. Although writing an essay as such would have been acceptable to my professor, I felt uneasy about it because I wanted him to see in my writing not what I was trying to work through, but what I had learned. Even so, the reason why I never did return to this piece was precisely because I was never in it in the first place. Staying on the sidelines, I never felt as if it were my place to return and push it any further.

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"The most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing. Time and space, cause and effect, nature and history, and one's own biography remain untouched. New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity" (James 45).

"They [books, colleges, institutes] look backwards and not forward. But genius looks forward" (Emerson 41).

I used to think that I wasn't the kind of teacher who wanted "academic" writing—meaning the kinds of writing those other disciplines expected. Now I'm realizing that I want the kind of writing that our discipline wants. No, I'm not having students write literary analysis, but I am having them write in the academic format that I'm trained in: composition. This juxtaposition of my own emerging academic writing with my students' has made me see how tightly bound our own ideas about what makes good research writing in our field are with what makes good student research writing. Previously, I had thought of my research assignments for students as subversive, somewhat anti-academic in the good way—in a way that Emerson would approve. What I've come to see from both being a teacher and a scholar is that I am expecting my students to write for a discipline—my discipline. The personal, heartfelt, nonlinear, heteroglossic writing that I enjoy reading—like in Mary Rose O'Reilley, bell hooks, or Mike Rose—is what I want my students to write. It's hard for them to do this not only because they're being asked to figure out discourse conventions for a group to which they don't yet belong, but also because we're still changing these conventions. We're asking them to forge new territory with us: we don't know what this sort of writing will look like, but perhaps we'll know it if we see it[4]. We seem to be teetering on a tradition that respects the personal, but is disdainful of "lore." A tradition that values teaching, yet has a history of wearing ill-fitting suits of other disciplines in an effort to win respect as a scholarly field. We're at

a sort of coming-of-age moment, and we're getting closer to having our own style. In the meantime, we've been dragging our students down some of these same troubled roads without acknowledging the difficulty for them.

What's comforting about the old style of research for both teachers and students is that, when it works, it makes a point, comes to an end, and has a conclusion. What's difficult about our new ways of researching is that we know conclusions don't come that easily. I am hopeful about our new ways of "exploding" the research paper. Perhaps, instead of getting easier, the work has become harder—less exacting, but truly less trivial. I think we're getting closer to creating spaces where students can become Wo/men Thinking; where they're active, grounded, and interested in the world.

Still, it's a struggle to get them (and us) to complicate the picture. It must truly seem antithetical not to come to simple conclusions, to admit in the paper the struggles they had in doing the research, to have the research be a story of their encounters, their attempts. Many of their teachers still want them to swallow knowledge and disgorge it at the appropriate time. Teachers might even grade them down if they didn't give a viewpoint that the teacher holds. It will take some time for the students to believe that what they know is of value, that the research they unearth—their primary work—is of value, and that their reading of past knowledge is, too, of value. But the more we say this, the better the chance that they'll trust us.

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Emerson ends "The American Scholar" listing the duties of a Wo/man Thinking. He writes that "In self-trust, all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be, free and brave" (47). Tonight, at the end of a long semester, I'm focused on the should. I began here frustrated with my teaching, and I end frustrated at a system that still doesn't always allow us to become Emerson's ideal American Scholars. We all try to lay flat to fit into the mold of the past. When someone asks us to stand up, when someone frees us, we can hardly take it.

I have a feisty, ex-stray calico, Maya, who sticks out her tongue when she stretches. When she has to go to the vet, I have to try to shove her into her cat carrier, and she sprawls her four legs out like an open umbrella to make herself too big to fit through the tiny square opening. I'm bigger than she, obviously, so I can manage to squeeze her through the door hole without her shredding my arms too badly. Even after this big circus when we're back home and I open the door and set the carrier on the floor, she hesitates before she takes to her freedom. As I draw this essay to an end, I'm feeling anxious about leaving my writing here untied. I still feel like I should have given more research, less of me. I still would feel better if it was a straight progression from A to Z, an easier story to tell.

Even when the scholar is free, she isn't always brave.

Notes

[1] Later Oliver Wendell Holmes dubbed this speech the "National Intellectual Declaration of Independence" (West 12).

[2] A similar approach to research is also proposed in Bruce Ballenger's textbook *The Curious Researcher*.

[3] All student names have been changed.

[4] I'm also curious how our changing paradigms will and should be represented on the page. I'm in the midst of research that questions academic format as the standard for student writing.

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