Rethinking Research Writing: Public Literacy in the Composition Classroom

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During the first half of 2002, it seemed impossible to escape stories about "plagiarism" in the news. From stories about authors like Doris Kearns Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose, conceding that that they did not properly document their sources in their best-sellers, to discussions about "student cheating" in various college (and high school) courses, research, writing, and documentation were front and center. Of course, these discussions were not new—they had appeared before, and they continue to appear.

In the midst of this public discussion of plagiarism, there was (and still is) the day to day work of the WPA. Much of this work deals with research writing: developing curricula in our research writing courses, working with instructors as they teach these courses, teaching them ourselves. Whereas stories about Goodwin, Ambrose, or students in high school who "plagiarized" as part of a school project (the list goes on . . .) focus on a few (albeit prominent) writers, we work with hundreds, if not thousands, of writers in our courses every semester. In point of fact, through sheer numbers, we probably have more exposure to and experience with researched writing than do most of the professors or prominent authors featured in these stories; we may have also devoted more thought to how to develop as researchers than they have. Yet, in these very public discussions about researched writing—whether misuse of sources by best-selling authors, or what many stories call "cheating"—our voices are only occasionally included.

Meanwhile, in our private corners of the world, in places like the WPA-L discussion list, sometimes we are equally disparaging of students and the research writing process. WPA-L has seen many discussions about what constitutes plagiarism, certainly. But it has seen many more about struggles of instructors who are "required" to assign research papers seeking advice

about how to manage the process, how to make research writing meaningful for students, how to work with the conventions associated with researched essays.

At first glance, there seems a conflict here. On the one hand, we are asserting that the voices of those who work with researchers and writing frequently are absent from public discussions of researched writing practices. On the other, we are suggesting that sometimes, instructors who work with researched writing struggle with the very practices associated with that work. But at Eastern Michigan University (EMU), we have designed an approach to research writing used for our second semester course that we think addresses these issues (and this potential conflict). First, our approach is intended to assert a more public presence *for* college writing; second, it is intended to address the struggles some writing instructors describe in their discussions of research writing. Operating within the structural exigencies surrounding our program, we have attempted to address public perceptions (of research writing and of students), issues of status and control surrounding the work of instructors, and students' perceptions of research by defining and extensively supporting a curriculum that is grounded in local sites and driven by specific purposes. We also have developed and extensively supported three models for researched writing, and created an event honoring and celebrating student writing at semester's end. Here, we'll describe the basis for this course and sketch its broad outlines. The goal of this work—in pedagogical workshops, with students on their own research, and in campus outreach efforts—is to change the tide of the conversation about student writing. First-year writing courses, the frameworks for them, and the public moments that come along with them encourage different kinds of public conversations about student literacy.

Course Beginnings: Theoretical Foundations, Institutional Realities

Although we were hired separately, we both arrived at EMU in Fall 2001 knowing that we would shift the focus of our two writing courses fairly dramatically. And while we hadn't known one another before we were hired, we shared a common vision for this shift originating in research projects that convinced us of the necessity for grounding the work of literacy development in specific contexts. For Linda, this realization came after studying perceptions of "basic writing" in a variety of sites and the ways that students placed in basic writing classes thought about writing and reading. From this work, Linda became convinced that to mitigate against the view of "autonomous" literacy shared among these students, sources, and sites—that is, the view that literacy is a set of practices entirely distinct

from any context (Street)— courses should help students develop their own understandings of the connections between literacy practices and context.

Heidi arrived at EMU having just finished a long-term case study project in which she observed and interviewed three students throughout their senior years of high school English and their first semesters of college composition. These students, while successful at "studenting"—that is, at figuring out "what the teacher wanted" and then doing it—could point to very few moments in this year and a half of English courses when they had either felt a sense of personal engagement or imagined an audience beyond the classroom instructor. School, for them, was adding up course credits and grade points. Consequently, Heidi was interested in rethinking the focus for first-year writing courses so that students and instructors alike could re-imagine writing as a living, engaged response to the world around them.

Coming in, we inherited what seemed at the time (and still does) a complex set of institutional structures surrounding our first-semester courses. EMU is a comprehensive university of about 25,000. While we are not open-admissions, we are not far from it. Our students cover the range of educational experiences, from the most to the least successful, and bring a range of experience with writing to our first-year courses. As an institution, EMU faces the same challenges that many comprehensive, regional universities do—we are chronically under-funded and a good part of our annual budget comes from enrollment. Thus, the pressure to admit and retain students is omnipresent.

Our situation in first-year writing is also complicated. As we describe above, we admit a range of students; some of them have relatively little experience with extended writing or reading. However, as a result of strategic decisions made in the English department many years ago, we offer no so-called "developmental" writing courses. We have two writing courses—English 120 (Composition I) and English 121 (Composition II). English 120 is nominally a first-semester course; however, when students are admitted, they can place out of English 120 with an ACT verbal score over 19.[1] As a result, about 600 of our entering 1400 or so writers need to take only English 121. Additionally, each semester there are 5-8 sections of English 120/121 set aside for students who elect to enroll in the "PASS" program, a program which provides additional support for students who may not be traditionally prepared for college. One or two sections of Honors 121 are also offered each semester. Courses are taught by three primary groups: between 18 and 23 graduate instructors, 20 and 25 part-time lecturers, and about 15 full-time lecturers. A few faculty members (4-6 beyond the two of us) also regularly teach these courses). We work closely with graduate instructors, who receive intensive mentoring and guidance during the two years they spend in our MA programs in the teaching of writing, imagina-

tive writing, literature, children's literature, or linguistics. Full-time lecturers unionized in Fall 2001; their new contract stipulates that they must participate in professional development and mentoring/evaluation programs to be promoted through three lecturer ranks. Even before this new contract, we worked closely with some of them; this year, we have begun to work more closely with others. Professional development is less consistent among part-time lecturers. Although they have no job security, many are regular fixtures in the department and in the first-year writing program.

The diversity of experience with writing among students and the range of teaching experience that instructors brought to our program reinforced our commitment to curricula (in both courses) that asked students to explore intersections between ideas about literacy and different contexts where those definitions were shaped. Such a curriculum would create opportunities for students to understand that components of "literacy" are *always* grounded in a context. Thus, if one were labeled "less literate" (for instance, by their placement in a particular course), they might consider how the definition of "literacy" shaping that label reflected a particular, "academic" context; alternatively, if they were to consider another context, they might be highly literate in ways that others in the academy were not. Similarly, instructors might begin to reflect on their own ideas of "good" and "bad" literacy and consider how to work with those in a course.

We also knew we had to design a curricular framework for, through, and around these themes that would support a meaningful, thoughtful curriculum for all students, yet be flexible enough to encourage instructors to bring their particular strengths to their courses. While we can never ensure that every first-year writing student has exactly the same experience, we do want to have a shared language for talking about first-year writing and a sense that we're all working with the same goals in mind. We've come to adopt the metaphor of a baseball stadium for this approach—we wanted everyone to be in the same ballpark, even one as big as Yankee Stadium.

Engaging Researched Writing

A central goal of English 121 is to make researched writing a meaningful experience for students *and* instructors, rather than a hoop-jumping activity. Discussing researched writing with students on the first day of class, students often identify it as the kind of "autonomous" practice mentioned earlier. One student used the image of a "Ferris wheel of index cards" to describe her previous experiences with the practice: She took notes on those cards, set them in an order, and (metaphorically) spun them around to complete the essay. Her experience echoes those recorded by Bruce Ballenger in *Beyond Notecards*; one student interviewed described research as "tiresome studies on a subject that a person does not like" (4). Ballenger

also relates the frustration experienced by a student who wanted to move beyond this approach. The student remembered research writing as "going to the library after school for about two hours, reading things by other people and then making notecards," but said that "the teachers would always be angry at me because . . . I 'thought too much while writing the paper.' What did a teacher mean by thinking too much?" she wondered (4). These are the kinds of research that we did not want students to experience in English 121.

In reconceptualizing the course, we faced two challenges. First, we wanted students to experience research writing as a meaningful process of inquiry and to think of writing as a more public act. Second, we wanted to help TAs, instructors, and faculty rethink their pedagogical models for teaching research writing. While we have not *mandated* adoption of the approaches we have designed, we have found that these changes (and the ones we continue to make) have encouraged conversations among instructors and faculty about student writing and research that we are told did not occur before. Public documents (course outcomes, course baseline standards, curriculum guides), public conversations (departmental listservs, hallway talk, shared assignments), and public moments (specifically, the Celebration of Student Writing, discussed later in this article), all have contributed to new discussion of student writing among those who teach it, among students, and on the campus as a whole.

The first step in shifting discussion was to rethink models for researched writing and develop curricular support for them. Initially, we developed three models for researched essays that reflected the general outcomes for English 121 (which we revised, in collaboration with other instructors, during our first year with the program). We also defined specific strategies that instructors would need to incorporate in each essay, and embedded these in three models for researched writing, each based on innovative composition/writing pedagogy. Our curriculum guide provides instructors with a description of each approach, along with an explanation of the writing strategies practiced in them, a "generic" assignment, classroom sketches illustrating what several class days might look like with each model, and a list of resources for students and instructors for the model. The models include:

- An inquiry-based researched essay (rooted in the work of Bruce Ballenger; some instructors also look to Ken Macrorie's "I-Search" model for this).

In our curriculum guide, we write that:

> The core of the researched essay is the belief that research should begin with genuine interest and inquiry, and the shape of the essay should grow out of the development of

that inquiry. As Ballenger describes it, "the essay is less an opportunity to prove something than an attempt to find out." Thus, research essays often proceed from a question that an author has about a particular topic, through what she or he has learned about that topic and its relevance for an audience (defined by the student and/or the instructor).

- An ethnographic researched essay (something like the work of Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, as outlined in their textbook *FieldWorking*).

Here, the curriculum guide explains that

Ethnographic research is time- and labor-intensive, and yet it can be a valuable undertaking for students because they become experts in a specific area and can then relate their findings to the rest of the class. Students choose communities or cultures that they will conduct fieldwork in by becoming a participant-observer, conducting interviews, and collecting written and spoken documents. They listen to what stories are told and valued by community members, what rituals are observed, what the community's rituals and traditions are. In doing so, they work to make the "familiar strange and the strange familiar," the most famous tenet of traditional anthropological ethnographic work.

- A multi-genre researched essay (based on Tom Romano's work, also Davis and Shadle, "Building a Mystery").

The guide describes this essay as one that asks students to see, understand, interpret, and know a subject through multiple genres. In employing genres as both a lens and a rhetorical tool, the multi-genre research paper asks students to be explicitly creative and scholarly, to pay close attention to matters of style as well as matters of research.

Additionally, we urged instructors (and required graduate instructors) to adopt a common process leading into these researched essays. First, students identify a community of interest to them. Then, students spend an hour a week observing that community for the first four to six weeks of the semester, compiling their observations in double-entry journals. About halfway through their observations, students identify a question, an issue, a topic that has captured their attention in this research—often, we steer them to the "question/comment" side of their double-entry journal for this. This then becomes the basis for a research question that students pursue through multiple means: library research, interviews, analysis of artifacts, and (of course) additional observation.

In practice, through these models, students work through a carefully staged process of research writing. Typically, about three weeks into the term, students encounter their first research writing assignment; in most courses, they actually create two researched papers. Often, this first one is based on the inquiry model, above, and students work through it over a period of three to four weeks. Instructors adopting this model stress to students that, particularly in this initial version, it is a *process* essay—the idea is to work through what research the writer has located, how the sources connect to one another and to a central question (or, in some cases, do not), and what is the relevance of the work (and for whom). Writers are urged *not* to resolve issues in this assignment, but instead to explore what they've learned. They also learn that if they revise this researched essay for their portfolio at the end of the term, they *will* need to shape it into a more directed researched product. Once students work through their research, many instructors move to some version of the multi-genre essay described above. Students write on the same topic, and use much (if not all) of the same research. This time, though, the focus shifts away from process and on to synthesis, rhetorical/audience analysis, identification and use of genre conventions, creation of a product, and reflections. As our curriculum guide and sample assignments explain, successful multi-genre essays begin from clearly defined questions or theses. It is essential that the authors know what they want to explore; that's why students work through their process in the earlier research project, and then consider what has emerged from the project that is relevant for a particular audience.

The evidence we have gathered thus far on English 121 demonstrates to us that we are on the right track. Students' end-of-class comments, as well as reflective statements (often accompanying multi-genre essays) indicate that many understand researched writing differently by the end of the course. Typical are comments like these, written by students in lecturer Clarinda (Rin) Flannery's class, about their multi-genre papers:

> From a reader's standpoint, the impact of the paper is much more dramatic than a standard paper. [. . .] From a writer's standpoint [. . .] it requires more in-depth research and studying. It also allows the creativity of the author into the paper, making it more interesting for reader and writer alike.

> The difference (between a multi-genre essay and a traditional research essay) is amazing! I feel like I am actually using my brain. Not that I wouldn't use my brain on a traditional research paper, but in this case the information [. . .] is incredibly thought-provoking and sustaining. Because we have so

> much creative freedom, while at the same time following very
> specific guidelines, my mind is more free to wander. It is in
> that wandering that I capture and develop my deepest and
> most profound thoughts on my topic.

In fact, Rin points to the only negative comment she collected on multi-genre essays as additional evidence of the approach's success:

> To tell you the truth, I didn't really like the MGE paper. [. . .]
> It let me be creative and I had to think. [. . .] [But] I couldn't
> do it in one sitting; I had to really think about it piece by
> piece. There was no way I could do it at the last minute.

In addition to anecdotal comments like these, we are also involved in a study that asks students to gauge how effectively English 121 achieves the outcomes established for the course. While we do not yet have complete data, the results from a pilot study administered to 128 students during Fall 2002 are encouraging. Over 80% of the respondents said that they believed the writing strategies emphasized in the course would help them in later courses. In prompts asking students to rate how confident they felt using specific strategies emphasized in the course, several key criteria emerged as highly significant positive changes: using a variety of research strategies, using evidence and ideas from other sources in writing, using writing to discover and develop ideas, identifying "rules" surrounding the form and language of writing, understanding and using conventions of written English expected in writing at the university, knowing where to find resources if unsure of conventions, and using academic citation systems.

While we would like to say that all of the writing instructors have moved to these approaches and achieved the same effects, we can't. Graduate instructors, faculty, and some lecturers teaching the course have contributed significantly to the changes; the multi-genre research assignment came from Rin, who adopted it the semester before we arrived, and many of the heuristic assignments included in the curriculum guides are from graduate instructors and lecturers. Through occasional workshops on researched writing, as well as the visibility of the Celebration of Student Writing, other instructors are moving toward participating in the models above. And, those instructors who are involved in rethinking how they teach research and who have moved away from the monolithic "research paper" see their work with student research writing as meaningful and purposeful. Again, the hallway conversations slowly affect others.

ALTERING PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT AND OF WRITING: THE CELEBRATION OF STUDENT WRITING

The second goal that we brought with us to EMU's writing program was a desire to change public perceptions of students and of student writing. These discussions abound in mainstream public sites, in the composition literature, and on campuses. In discussions of "cheating" in mainstream media, for example, there is abundant evidence to support a profile of students' intellectual work and student abilities that is less than flattering. This kind of talk is sometimes evident in the professional literature, as well. Mike Rose includes numerous such characterizations in *Lives on the Boundary*, beginning with a comment on basic writing students from a UCLA administrator — that "these are the truly illiterate among us" (*Lives* 10; see also "The Language of Exclusion"). Marguerite Helmers's study of "Staffroom Interchange" submissions to *CCC* reveals that instructors frequently characterize students as lacking, deviants, or beginners (45). And who among us has not heard colleagues (and/or administrators) invoke the mantra, "my students just can't write"?

As we rethought English 121, we were mindful of these perceptions. At the same time, we were equally cognizant of statements like those by Joseph Harris, who has noted that composition instructors are not very practiced at participating in public discussions about writing and literacy (*A Teaching Subject*) and Peter Mortenson, who admonishes that if we do not learn to participate in public discussions of literacy—like those about plagiarism and cheating so prevalent in mainstream media during the first part of 2002—"we consign ourselves to mere spectatorship in national, regional, and . . . local struggles over what counts as literacy and who should have opportunities to attain it" (183). For us, affecting the local conversations has been and continues to be our most important goal.

Our attempt to address these issues has been to create the Celebration of Student Writing, held near the end of each semester and featuring the work of students in first-year writing. The Celebration, as it is known, is a sensation. It takes place near the end of every semester, for sixty to ninety minutes, in the ballroom and several rooms adjoining it in EMU's student union. For the Celebration, English 121 students create, display, and discuss with the hundreds of Celebration attendees products that represent the research work they have done throughout the semester. Participating students comprise a large part of the audience for the event; they are joined by faculty, administrators, staff, and teachers and students from surrounding colleges and high schools, as well as prospective students and parents. The first Celebration, during the winter 2000 semester, featured the work of 550 students. The Celebration at the end of winter 2003 will feature the work of almost 900. At the event, spectators mill around in a crowd of people and

displays, talking with students and spectators about the work on display. VCRs are scattered around the room, showing videos created by students based on their work—one in which students interview people about their perceptions of race at EMU, another on time management in the dorms, a third on participants in the AmericaReads program. In the middle of the room stands a twelve foot cardboard tower covered with representations of men and women from popular magazines read by college students. Directly in front of the entrance doors is a four by three foot pegboard display of fishing lures, artifacts representing the authors' ethnography of a fishing boat; next to it a display features newspapers and artifacts from another author's ethnographic work in a Nation of Islam temple. On another table are several "magazines" on EMU campus life, with articles written by students based on their research: dorm rituals, music preferences, nutritional practices, leisure activities, study habits, and so on. Circulating through the room are two "living presentations," students who have covered themselves with conflicting gender representations (one representation on their fronts, another on their backs). The room is boisterous, bright, active, crowded, hot. And most important for our purposes, it is *loud*—loud with the sounds of people talking *with* writers, *about* writing, not *about* writers (without writing).

As the capstone event for English 121, we wanted the Celebration both to highlight students' increased investment in and engagement with research writing, and to create a forum where students, faculty, administrators, and visitors could engage in public discussions about what students *could*, not *could not*, do. To this end, we had three related goals for the event: to help students see themselves as writers; to make the concept of audience more real; and to change those discussions about writing on our campus. While we have yet to empirically demonstrate that the last of these is occurring, we have anecdotal evidence to attest that it is—ever-increasing numbers of administrators attend the Celebration and discussions about writing are more nuanced than they have been in previous years.

We *can*, however, be more confident that our approach to English 121 is shifting students' perceptions of writing, and that the Celebration is contributing to those changes. Students' comments after the Celebration, for instance, attest to a shift in their perceptions of themselves as writers and as students:

- I got to rub shoulders with some bigwigs on campus. I gained confidence in my writing that I felt was very important.

- The experience at the Celebration was very valuable because I have never experienced anything like this before. It was neat to write about a certain topic and be able to share it with other people.

- Being a part of this university is fun. It doesn't always have to be about sports or clubs, but it is good to know that there are other ways to be involved.

Each semester, then, hundreds of students—many of whom are highly reluctant to see themselves as writers, some of whom are still struggling to see how they fit in at college—display their work.

With the Celebration, we also wanted to make sure that students at EMU began to see themselves, from their first year on campus, writing for real audiences in ways that mattered—having a voice in a way that *mattered* to the rest of campus. We wanted them to believe that what they said would be heard by their peers, other faculty members, and the campus at large. At a large, commuter-heavy campus like ours, this is no small feat. We also wanted students to gain flexibility as writers (our program outcomes, modeled on the WPA Outcome Statement, state that students in English 121 will "become aware of expectations of different audiences" and "employ genres that achieve the purpose of their writing and that reach their audiences"), and we envisioned the Celebration as a way that students (and the faculty, instructors, and TAs that work with them) might write toward a particular audience, one far beyond the confines of their individual classrooms. Their evaluations illustrate the differences that students noticed when writing for this broader audience:

- I thought it was a good way of showing all the different ways people use writing.
- I learned that you have to go into detail or in depth because everyone does not know what you're talking about.
- You have to catch the eye of your audience; maybe your project is very interesting but if your audience doesn't know that, you don't have one.
- I definitely had to be more careful in case I accidentally offended someone. I wrote for an audience and by being an audience myself, I know we had to pick and choose our choice of words.
- I learned to have my work reach a larger audience, not just have something that the teacher would want to see, but something everyone wanted to look at too.
- It helped me to realize that writing is not limited to novels and essay papers. There are many forms of expressions.

Thus, students also seem to have realized the ways that writing extends to others through the Celebration.

Instigating Conversations

The Celebration encourages conversations among those who teach first-year writing. Graduate instructors are required to participate, and each semester

more and more instructors and faculty have participated as well. Because lecturers are extremely busy and overwhelmed with teaching, they often have less time to talk about writing with colleagues or to imagine changes in their own curriculum. Several instructors have simply attended the Celebration for several semesters. The Celebration gives them a space to talk to other instructors who have used innovative kinds of research projects and to begin imagining alternatives within their own classes. Further, it gives all instructors of first-year composition a sense of being members of a writing *program*, where we all gather together to talk to students and among ourselves about student writing.

As the Celebration becomes a part of EMU's institutional fabric, campus administrators have also gone out of their way to attend—a significant achievement. We have watched the president talk with students about their display on nutritional content of campus food and its link to students' health and body image, the provost talk about a project on campus safety with a group of students, other English department faculty discuss multi-genre projects with instructors, and students talk to other students about what they discovered during their research processes. Nowhere is there a conversation about plagiarism, or about the poor quality of students' writing and thinking; instead, the focus is on what students have done and what they have produced.

Of course, as our earlier renditions of the realities of work at this institution make clear, the situation is far from perfect here. We have tremendously overburdened full- and part-time instructors, and we struggle with the ethical issues inherent in the highly stratified, hierarchical staffing issues that confront us daily. We know, too, that these realities are not unique. As we have continued to work together (and with lecturers, faculty, and teaching assistants), we also revise our own models for what it means to be WPAs. We see our program, as Tom Recchio does, as "relational and receptive, a series of sites organized to sustain ethical conversation," and the metaphor of *conversation* drives our work with each other, with colleagues, and with students (150). However, as we work on both small and long-term goals, it is our belief that changing the atmosphere that surrounds talk of student writing and research will, ultimately, slowly lead to changes in the talk that surrounds the teaching of writing.

As writing program administrators, we realize that these conversations are never done. We look forward to the new turns that may be ahead for our writing program because of input and observations by students, instructors, and campus community members—conversations that lie ahead, we're sure, and that we cannot predict. And, we are hopeful enough to think that perhaps, someday in the future, these students' experiences will affect how they in turn conceive of and talk about the work of writing and research. While tales of professionals and students turning to plagiarism will no

doubt continue to surface with regularity, we believe that providing alternative ways to work with and talk about students, writing, and research is an imperative for WPAs, and one way that we can affect the public discourse surrounding this area of writing instruction.

Note

[1] In a forum like this one, we need not rehash the problems with using a standardized test score to measure writing competence. However, EMU does not now have the money to fund a reliable and valid placement program (and even if funds that could be used for such a program were to appear, we would argue that they should be used elsewhere, e.g., to fund instructors and classroom space enough to require all students to take English 120 and 121). We don't believe that this placement system is more flawed than a number of others, and we happily live with the consequences —like all first-year programs, we have a range of writers in our courses. The difference is that in many other institutions, such placements tend to land writers out of basic writing courses; here, writers are placed out of our first-semester course.

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