Introduction
Teaching the obligatory unit on the research paper can be a daunting task for English teachers. Students often groan upon hearing the introduction of the assignment, dreading the fact-gathering, outlines, and pages of writing that are in their futures. Even when students get to select their own research topics, they are frequently not invested in the research. Too regularly the students’ finished research papers are simply rewordings of facts and statements they have found in various sources. This can cause students to feel disconnected from the process and unable to see research as an opportunity to make a contribution with their own ideas and findings (Donham, Heinrich, & Bostwick, 2010). Because research papers often become compilations of facts from other sources, teaching the research paper can inadvertently turn into an entire unit focused on how to avoid plagiarism. This can become tedious to teach, and teachers often dread dealing with papers that have been plagiarized. Keeping students “on task” during research time in the computer lab and off unrelated websites becomes a concern of many. Sometimes grading research papers can seem like a chore, reading through facts and statistics. But maybe we can rethink the traditional research paper.

What is Authentic Research?
Authentic research can help students become more engaged in the process. Authentic research calls for students to answer questions they are curious about—questions that they truly want to know more about. Having each student pick a different country and researching the population, geography, and imports/exports is not authentic research. As Burkhardt (2003) explains, “real writing” is when a student...

- Writes an article for the school newspaper knowing that everyone will read it.
- Composes a memoir celebrating a race in which he and his father competed, then gives the memoir to his father.
- Reads aloud to the class her personal essay about a family tradition. (p. xi)

Although Burkhardt’s (2003) examples include personal narratives and memoirs, and do not focus solely on research pieces, his advice about giving students opportunities to do real writing for real audiences is worth noting. When students write about real topics (that are important to their lives) that have real audiences, they are more invested in their pieces.

In addition to giving students opportunities to do research that is about important topics and providing students with chances to share their findings with real audiences, we can encourage students to...
conduct primary research. Research can entail more than finding print and electronic sources and citing the information. Students can go beyond looking up information and summarizing it—they can do their own research and report findings by interviewing local experts, conducting their own observations, or designing their own experiments. These types of activities “place students in an active role of collecting data and constructing meaning” (Gordon, 1999). Smagorinsky (2008) encourages students to use both primary and secondary sources in their research reports, in addition to asking students to explore topics that are of international significance (“e.g., apartheid in South Africa”) or topics of local interest (“e.g., skateboarding restriction on community sidewalks”) (p. 82).

### Classroom Activities for Active Exploration

Doing authentic research that includes primary source materials (in addition to secondary source materials) is a departure from the norm of typical English research reports. As teachers we can make research more relevant to students’ lives by making it an activity that is done outside, in the community, by exploring students’ environments. The book, *How to Be an Explorer of the World*, by Keri Smith, is a good resource for teachers aiming to incorporate more exploration and primary research into their course assignments. In the book, Smith (2008) provides numerous activities for investigating the world and documenting and writing about those findings. Activities in this book encourage students to explore and research their local environments.

In her book, Smith (2008) gives a list of guidelines for how to be an explorer of the world. Below are five of the thirteen recommendations:

- **Always be looking.** (Notice the ground beneath your feet.)
- **Everything is interesting.** Look closer.
- **Notice patterns.** Make connections.
- **Document** your findings (field notes) in a variety of ways.
- **Trace things back to their origins.** (p. 5)

This list can be a starting point for a discussion of what research is and how students might go about finding answers to their research questions.

The book also contains 59 “explorations” that encourage the reader to try out creative exploratory activities. Exploration #24 in the book, called “Combinations,” calls for taking two different objects and creating as many connections between them as possible. Try this out—take some time to experience this activity right now. And then consider using the activity in the classroom with students.

Adaptation of Smith’s (2008) “Combinations” activity:

1. Find two nearby random objects. They can be anything—a pen, a package of gum, a paperclip.
2. Take four minutes to list connections between your two objects. Now draw a line under that list.
3. Try for two more minutes—see if you can list as many more connections as you listed above the line.
4. Now, what connections did you make between your objects? What was it like to be pushed to really explore these objects? What does this activity say about research?

This activity might be conducted in the beginning of a research unit to start a conversation about what research is. Or this activity might be used in the middle of a research unit to encourage students to look closer and dig deeper into the research they have collected so far.

Additional explorations in Smith’s (2008) book could be used as brainstorming activities to help students discover research questions. Students might pick an exploration or two to try, and the documentation of their notes might be used in small groups to generate
Writing as an Exploration: Rethinking the Research Paper

potential research questions. For example, the following explorations might be used:

- Exploration #15 Consumer: Record everything that you consume or everything you purchase in one day/week. (Smith, 2008, p. 59)
- Exploration #21 Your Favorite Street: Go to your favorite street....Map it out on a piece of paper. Then [document] everything in detail: the shops, houses, street signs, trees, etc. (Smith, 2008, p. 70-71)

Other explorations, such as Exploration #42 Local Lore, which calls for “[documenting] a place by interviewing people about it” (Smith, 2008, p. 113), could be used as a method of research to answer already brainstormed questions.

Products beyond Traditional Papers

Smith (2008) points out that artists and scientists (and I would add, writers) all “analyze the world around them in surprisingly similar ways” (p. 6). They “observe, collect, analyze, compare, [and] notice patterns” (Smith, p. 7). Research is something that is done across disciplines, and it is presented in a variety of formats. We might encourage students to share their research findings as student-created documentaries (Smagorinsky, 2008), other types of digital media pieces (perhaps a short Radiolab-style radio program or podcast), or as multigenre projects, which are “composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic” (Romano, 2000, x-xi). As Romano (2000) concedes, multigenre projects make more sense once examples are viewed, and many examples can be seen in his book or found online.

Rethinking the Research Paper

Let’s rethink the traditional research paper. Research can be more than rephrasing information found from sources on the Internet. We should encourage students to do primary research (in addition to secondary research) via activities such as observations, mini-experiments, picture taking, and interviews. When teaching the research unit, we should ask our students to do authentic research; we should remind ourselves and our students that research is something that happens across disciplines to answer genuine questions; and we should consider that research is often presented in various formats.

References


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