
Research: The Private Pursuit of a Better Way

by *Gerald Zinfon and Amy Warena*

In two parts:

- I. by Gerald Zinfon
- II. by Amy Warena

The research paper comes on quickly in our fifteen week composition courses. Since the term paper will bring together and demonstrate the students' accumulated writing skills, I emphasize the need for the learners to begin phasing in their independence from me at the beginning of our work together. I announce the concept of student independence in my course description/syllabus the first time I meet in the classroom with them. My belief is that early on learners tend to hear more, though I repeat the idea throughout the semester. At first, some need lots of response, encouragement, and attention; they get it. As the course progresses and their practice of composing strategies (Prewriting-Writing-Rewriting-Editing) takes hold, their skills increase, their pride in their growing control becomes evident; student writers grin more and ask me to look less and less at a paper in process (before a completed rough draft). I begin to become happily obsolete to most. When that happens in a course, I feel that I've done my job.

Amy Warena's paper could have been written in any of our composition courses. She wrote the piece in my section, so I'll comment upon a few of the instructional strategies and attitudes that I believe can bring about writing competence and independence in our students a lot of the time. All of my first year composition classes become language communities, by degrees, accepting and

subscribing to two complementary notions: (1) language is at the center of all class activities, and (2) writing is a process of discovering meaning in experience and ideas through engagement in language: reading, speaking, listening, thinking and composing. Writing, engaged in as a process of discovery, enables a learner to explore personal, autobiographical experience, to reflect on that experience, and to place life's experiences into new perspectives. This in itself seems like a worthwhile writing and reflective activity. Socrates is my source. The strategies and competencies gained by the learner apply as well to explorations of the world of ideas. By the time our students arrive in our first year writing classes, they have lived at least eighteen years, and when they're given the opportunity and encouraged to examine those experiences in writing, the results are very often engaging, lively, encouraging, and rich with the details of felt experiences. The subject matter to be mined in the lives of the young through the writing process has produced some of the world's great literature. Some writing instructors are uncomfortable about the value of this, but I think it is the subject with which to begin. Joyce, Dickens, Capote, are just a few of my sources.

In our 90s environment, however, since more than the written expression of life's reflections is expected of individuals in the adult world of "getting and spending," we (students and/or instructors) cannot dwell too long on writing based exclusively on our students' personal pasts, as interesting and fruitful as those reflections may be. Felt experience, remembered, engaged in as a process of discovering, understanding, and of writing one's personal history, begins the semester-long practice of the learner moving out from him or herself as the center. The process that student-writers move through, as they explore some experience from their personal histories, provides the practice in the skills of composing, and it prepares them to move outward increasingly in each subsequent paper. At

the other end of the teaching-learning process of a semester in a composition class, the term paper (or research paper) provides the opportunity for students to strut their accumulated skills.

Amy Warendt's paper is an example of the independence, the quality of mind, and the originality that become evident when the strategies--students' and my own--work. Amy came to my composition section well-prepared, and her work on the bi-weekly, four-page papers, from very early on, needed just little encouraging, editing and rewriting nudges. Based on responses to her process drafts, Amy turned in carefully rewritten, edited, polished, final drafts. By the time I saw her draft-in-process of her term paper, I began seeing it as a potentially fine paper for the WAC Journal. Amy's writing was not only quite competent, but the topic is scholarly, intriguing, fresh and timely: in short, her paper was more than a first year student's well-prepared paper fulfilling a course requirement. Amy had discovered a subject through her research in which she became fully involved. She had begun her research on "Sexism in the English Language," and reflects:

I began researching this topic, and it quickly became evident that the topic was far too broad. The more reading I did, the more narrow my field became. I eventually ended up with "the use of the singular in the English Language." Even this was far larger than I imagined, and I found myself having to cut out a lot of the information I had collected. (From Amy's "Final" writing exercise in which students describe their research processes.)

Amy's written product of her research, along with her mature, writer's attitude, reveals how the procedure is

supposed to work! From the first class assignment to the assignment of the term paper, the drafting of each paper repeats the practice of students' Prewriting-Writing-Rewriting-Editing as stages in the writing process. The emphasis in each new four-page piece encourages a student to develop increased awareness of his or her most efficient engagement in the process (some need more time in the prewriting or rewriting stage, while others may need more time writing or editing). The bi-weekly deadline for drafts is a class standard. While the student piece is in process in and outside of class, moreover, a widely diverse variety of student-composing processes becomes evident. The writers have the process strategy in mind now, but they work within it in their own way at varied paces. The need for instructor flexibility becomes part of that process. The instructor becomes the writing coach! The writing coach looks at a piece and encourages the further development of the positive parts in a paper while it is in process.

The term paper process offers additional practice in developing competencies, and following the excellent, two-session library instruction, provided by our library staff, the students and the instructor discuss the steps in preparing their research papers. We negotiate reasonable time frames and deadlines for each step based upon the degree of complexity and the estimated amount of time that seems required for carrying out the specific step successfully. We begin the term paper process around week eight of the semester. Armed with a calendar, we talk about each stage and the amount of time it will require, and we set a deadline date for the submission of each completed task. For example, an item on the list, such as Preliminary Reading Completed and Topic Declared should require much less time than a task such as Notetaking Completed and Tentative Thesis Declared, so we agree on the amount of time for these and all other steps. All students have a copy of the term paper process schedule of tasks, and all fill in the

deadline dates that we have agreed upon. During the process, I begin each class by asking for questions from the students on any problems they're having, and I instruct them in methods for preparing the currently pertinent task or the one to follow. The work of the researchers is mostly carried on outside of class time, so while the steps are being worked upon, we continue writing, but now the papers are two-page pieces that feature various competencies of organizing or presenting information. For example, this is a perfect time to discuss and have students practice papers that develop by process analysis or are arranged in an inductive or deductive order, comparison-contrast, definition. The papers are short, the subject is still language, and as mentioned, students can--and often do--incorporate the work of these papers into their research papers! From the exploratory reading in the library (Prewriting) to the final touches on the draft (Rewriting and Editing), the instructor responds with suggestions through each stage that is assigned to the students.

Once again, the process-writing instructor is not unlike the athletic coach running drills on the ice rink or the baseball field. The coach insists upon and assists in the practice that will bring about the polished performance. If this coach concept offends, however, try thinking of yourself as a great classical conductor interpreting symphonic musical charts, and, as you respond to the emerging, diverse efforts of the individual instrumentalists in each section of the orchestra as they attempt to perform well on the instrument, remember that your conducting need only facilitate and guide the artist's effort to express his or her part in the piece. The paper is the individual's concerto.

Those concerti are the playing out of the students' chosen topics; the term paper is a long way intellectually from those early, autobiographical topics, though not more important--simply different. The writing process is the same, though students are encouraged to move outward

through the research process and to express increased perceptions and written expression of their emerging view of their inherited world. The topics, as mentioned, always evolve out of language dynamics as the center and informing wisdom of all things thought and expressed in the semester! Following are some of the subjects that other members of Amy's section chose to explore, to think about, and to write about in their final, ten page papers:

Sexism in the English Language
Slang: Beginnings, Motives, Place
The Language of Prejudice
The Aims and Nature of Propaganda
Sign Language
Motivational Language

The students choose their topics based upon their semester's engagement with allied topics in our reader and language texts, *Language Awareness*, Eschholz and others, and *Language in Thought and Action*, Hayakawa. For manuscript form, style, and MLA documentation, we use Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*. Our discussions focus on the incredibly varied involvement of the English language in all we do as thinking--and acting--individuals in a human community. The topics from the Eschholz reader, in the section titled, "Language Awareness" in chapter 1, begin with an excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and go to an essay on the history of English (Paul Roberts), an Edwin Newman complaint about misuse of our language, to the *noise* of much contemporary language (Hall & Hall). In addition, there is a grouping of essays on the language of advertising, almost all about how not to get taken (defensive analysis of tricky ad language). Other chapters include the essays "Media and Language;" "Jargon, Jargon, Jargon;" "What's In a Name?;" "Prejudice and Language;" "Using Language Responsibly." We also read and discuss the sections from the Hayakawa text, *Language in Thought and Action* as the material becomes pertinent: for

example, we talk about the distinctions among the language of *reports*, *inferences* and *judgments* during the first few writing assignments. The section on various kinds and intentions of *euphemisms* or a discussion of *snarl* words and *purr* words comes a bit later. This text describes and illustrates, as it promises in the book's title, language as we think and act with it. Some sections in Hayakawa's fine book require little or no class discussion or any commentary from me, so I assign those chapters at various times in the semester simply as background, informative reading in language.

Throughout the semester, as we move toward the research paper, I encourage students to take note of topics that are especially interesting as we read and discuss and write about them. A topic that is special to a writer, I suggest, is more likely to involve the writer in the process of further discoveries about the subject, and more likely to produce a stronger piece. Most students find a subject that is especially interesting to them, and by the time we get to the research paper, a student has already written at least one four-page paper on the topic. That paper is not researched, but it is a two-week response-based essay expressing the student's view on the subject. The paper may also be the short, two-page "rhetorical" exercise papers that students write as practice pieces using some organizing or other strategy of composition. The bonus for the student who manages early to choose a subject from the reading or writing or discussions is that I encourage the revised use of that material as part of the assigned term paper. Many take advantage of this. Again, in so doing, some discover new insights in the process: the topic is too broad; the topic needs more; the original thesis needs narrowing, or broadening, or total revision--in short, the writer continues to make discoveries concerning his or her subject and continues to find compositional strategies that help to express it competently. Before we begin to follow the steps in the

preparation of reports on research, I insist that we begin the research process with what I hope is a valid and sensible point of mutual departure. Many first-year students view the term paper as an instructor-devised method of making their lives miserable, and of doing so when there is precious little time left in a semester to study for finals in other courses. I try to address this problem in two ways: the first is by discussing the concept of progress through research; the second is to establish a time schedule, agreed upon by both my students and myself. The discussion of the value of research is my effort to convince students that there is value to be gained for the time spent upon careful, well-motivated exploration of a topic: in science, in medicine, in aerodynamics, in space, and for them, in language! I try to come up with anecdotes that reflect research breakthroughs, the forward march in our human efforts to live our lives in pure, pain-free pleasure. The point is to reveal value received for effort expended. At this point in the semester, I repeat, for instance, that the only difference between any student in this class and a published writer may be that the published writer explores a subject and refines his or her discoveries into a careful, polished, valid, professional expression of the topic. I tell them that they can do as well if they are willing to go to the lengths necessary, and I say it because I believe it!* I tell the students before they embark upon the voyage, that any past padded, vague, puffy platitudes on research projects can be forgiven but cannot be repeated, at least not this semester! But I search for the words that will convince them and motivate the students to try their own breakthroughs! Some do.

At the beginning of this semester, I was going up the stairwell in Hyde, headed for the Computer Center. I heard my name called, quietly. It was Amy, and she was working on a few changes for the proposed publication of her paper. After we greeted each other, Amy smiled and asked, "Are you going to look at this final editing, or, am I

on my own?" I smiled and told her that if she needed me that she could call me. I repeated my number twice. She didn't write it down on anything. And she never called.

***Ken Preston, now a PSC senior, began publishing articles in his first year during the Composition 120 class. During Winterim '93 Poetry Workshop, Ken told us (our class) that his articles on hunting and other interests have helped him with expenses during his college years!**