Carlin Borsheim and Robert Petrone

Teaching the Research Paper for Local Action

Carlin Borsheim and Robert Petrone describe a research paper unit that focuses on social action at the local level. High school sophomores begin by critically examining their school and community to develop topics of real interest to them and then create a document usable for promoting positive change.

Researchers don't just research to research. They do it to make a difference, a change in the world.

—*Response from a student, end-of-semester anonymous survey*

With the sun shining in their eyes and a slight spring breeze hitting their faces, the students form a semicircle—some sitting, others standing—on a small patch of grass between their tenth-grade English classroom and the student parking lot. They each have their black-and-white marble research notebooks in their hands; some are writing notes as the rest scan the parking lot, athletic fields, and the exterior of their high school. It is the first day of the research paper unit, and the students have been prompted to make "meaningful observations" of their school. After a few moments of silence, one student mentions the new performing arts center and that a lot of money was spent to build it. The students turn to look at the performing arts center and, as they do, Gloria responds immediately, arguing that it took the district a long time to get it because money was first spent on sports and sports stadiums. The new football stadium sits in view on the other side of the parking lot, and several students turn their gazes toward it as Gloria speaks. Stacy says that too much money in the district is spent on sports. Derrick agrees, saying, "Look at our books!" Larry says, "Maybe our school is focused on sports rather than other things."

Shifting the conversation, April points out the greenhouse, and the rest of the class turns their attention to it. Another student notes that the school has a large agricultural program, and I (Carlin) mention how last semester a student in my class researched the impact corporate farms have had on small, local farmers. Someone notices graffiti on a wall, and Stacy says that maybe the students are bored. The students talk for a few minutes about the lack of activities in town for teens until I tell the students that it is time for them to make meaningful observations of the rest of the school, asking them before they head out: "Can I trust you to be mature, professional researchers?" With a unified response of "Yes," the students leave to begin their inquiry of the school and community, an investigation that will continue for six weeks.

Our Values as Educators

The unit's first lesson served several purposes. Attitudinally, it helped to cultivate positive dispositions toward the research unit—a unit that is often feared and even loathed by many students—by immediately rooting their work in everyday context and engaging the students in an authentic, rather than decontextualized, process of inquiry and research. Logistically, this lesson began the process of generating potential school- and community-based research topics. Finally, this lesson began the process of the students' viewing and reading of their school and community as "texts," pushing

them to bring to light and call into question aspects of these "texts" that normally remain invisible and go unquestioned or unchallenged.

Drawing on the work of critical literacy theorists (Freire; Giroux; hooks), New Literacy Studies theorists (Street; New London Group), and scholars on teaching the research paper and process (Ballenger; Macrorie; Morrell; Shafer), our approach to the research paper unit is designed to foster in students not only traditional academic literacies, such as reading, writing, organizing, and presenting, but also *critical literacies.* By *critical literacies* we mean the skills, strategies, dispositions, and habits of mind to understand, question, challenge, and transform the status quo (that which seems commonsensical or natural). In this sense, to be "critical" means to take a stance of inquiry toward that which is presented as "normal," fixed, or ahistorical. We framed the learning experiences throughout this assignment by considering how students might be engaged in critical literacies through the consumption (i.e., reading, viewing, listening), production (i.e., writing, speaking, designing), and distribution of print and nonprint texts. In short, our aim in fostering the critical literacies in students is to help them learn, in the words of Paulo Freire, to read the "word *and* the world" (italics added), pushing them to become active participants and interveners in the world.

We created and implemented a research paper unit in which students accomplished the following:

- *developed* school- or community-based topics they wanted to learn more about or change
- *conducted* primary as well as secondary research, including interviews, observations, and surveys
- *wrote* a traditional research paper
- *produced* a "real" research text (e.g., documentary, newspaper article, PowerPoint presentation, brochure)
- *distributed* their texts to real audiences to help raise awareness about or change some aspect of their school or community

A far cry from our previous attempts at teaching the research paper—attempts characterized by our overall sense of discontentment and frustration with an artificial process that produces generic papers lacking voice, purpose, or even an audience—this unit has proven to be a much more positive experience. Although our past experiences teaching the research paper were "successful" in that students produced the expected kinds of research papers, everything about the process and products felt inconsistent with what we know and value about good teaching and learning.

Therefore, we (Carlin, a current high school English teacher and MA student, and Robert, a former high school English teacher and current English education PhD student) partnered to develop a research paper unit more consistent with our beliefs about students and the power and possibilities of the high school English classroom. The remainder of this article offers a detailed account of our process.

Dispositions, Topics, Skills, and Planning

From the beginning of the unit, we worked hard at engaging the students with the research process, knowing that for the process to work well the students would need commitment, sincere curiosity, and intrinsic motivation. It would be important for the students to see themselves as *researchers* who have the ability and opportunity to make real differences in their school and community contexts and not just as students doing a required research assignment, jumping through yet another hoop.

On the unit's first day, we gave a pep talk about the project and distributed research notebooks, deputizing the students as "Official Critical Researchers." This initial ceremony set the tone for six weeks of serious research. The remainder of the first day of the unit was spent practicing the research skill of observation by turning the school into a text to be observed and interrogated. After a brief introduction to becoming observers of their school outside of the classroom, the students were sent to roam the school, noting in their new notebooks what they, as critical researchers, saw. As they examined their school as researchers for the first time, they began to see things differently. In the cafeteria and hallways that had seemed familiar and ordinary, they detected areas of curiosity, points of unease, and potential research questions. For example, a small group passing through the hallway outside the guidance office noted the number and nature of military posters targeted at young men and women. They later wondered about the military's methods of recruitment and the school's policies regarding that issue. Students who visited a

rather dank area of the lower level of the school were bothered that this was the area that housed many of the special-education classrooms. They saw possibilities for exploring issues related to that often-hidden population of the school. Two girls in the cafeteria began to generate questions about nutrition, health, obesity, and school lunches. The connections between the students' observations and their emerging research questions did not come easily for all of them; at that point it was our job to help those struggling students identify meaningful and engaging research topics.

The unit's next phase illustrated the critical research process for students. We studied examples of people who were critical in their lives and who were using research to effect change. We watched the documentary *Super Size Me* and discussed the impetus for Morgan Spurlock's research—how he identified an issue affecting people in the United States and set out to find answers through research. We also read excerpts from Eric Schlosser's exposé *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* to examine critical research in another genre. In addition, we used these texts as examples for designing our research questions and plans for data collection. Some students researched topics affecting the community as a whole, including the effects of large corporations on our small-town economy or the legacy of racism and the history of the KKK in our area. Other students focused on issues facing the school, such as the controversy of advertising through Channel One or the quality of the district's sex education curriculum. And some students chose topics as the result of personal experience and curiosity, including healthy versus unhealthy relationships among teen couples.

Once students had generated topics, but before they began gathering information, they wrote research proposals outlining their questions and plans for research, including reasons for selecting the topic, plans to gather information, and the audience and means for distributing their findings. This phase of the research process culminated in "press conferences" (Ballenger) in which each research team presented its proposal and answered any questions from classmates. In fact, the press conferences offered a great opportunity for collaboration, where students asked challenging questions, offered suggestions, and exchanged potential contacts. They critiqued each other's topics, arguments, sources, questions, and products.

Data Collection

Research questions, purposes, and potential forms for products drove the research methods. More authentic research questions required more authentic research methods. Some of the methods of data collection the students employed follow:

- interviews with students, teachers, and community experts (e.g., mayor, members of Alcoholics Anonymous, physicians)
- surveys of students and community members
- archival, primary-source research at the local historical society
- text-based research (book and Internet)
- participant observations
- analysis of various institutional or mass media texts (e.g., teen magazines, brochures, Web pages, advertisements)

The group interested in juvenile crime in our community interviewed local law enforcement professionals, surveyed students, and checked Internet databases for state and national statistics. The group investigating the legacy of the Ku Klux Klan and racism in the community interviewed local historians, did archival work at the local historical society, and surveyed people in the community.

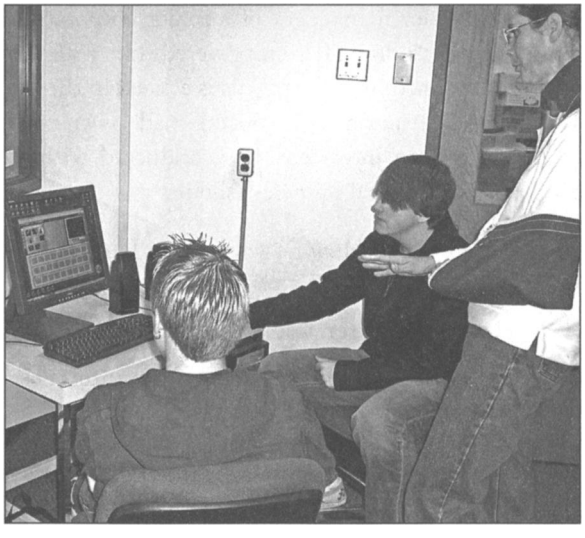
This approach to the research process dramatically changed the look of the classroom and the role of the teacher; in fact, the class felt a little messy at times. On one day, Mallory, David, and Larry were meeting with a psychologist in the library to ask questions about depression; Mitch's mom picked up his group to take them to an interview with the manager of a regional chain supermarket about the impact of big business on local, small businesses; Anna and Carrie were in the computer lab putting the finishing touches on their interview report; Mary and Katherine were conducting a survey in a ninth-grade classroom to gather information about teenagers' eating habits; the teen pregnancy and Channel One groups were in the classroom preparing their protocol for their next day's interviews and poring through printed Web sites and other print sources they had collected; and the two girls researching the media's influences on teen girls were in the computer lab crafting an email to MTV. While the need for students to be in different places at the same time meant some tricky classroom man-

agement, it was exciting to see students venturing into the community as critical researchers obtaining information and doing credible research. As a result of the shifting nature of the students' research processes, our job as teachers shifted and we became facilitators of their process. For example, I (Carlin) contacted the head custodian to arrange an interview with a student interested in investigating the school's recycling program.

During the three weeks that students conducted research, we split class time between group work and direct instruction. To maintain structure, we reserved two workdays per week during which students were free to work in the computer lab, in the library, or in the community. One or two days per week, we taught explicit research skills and concepts, including interviewing, surveys, database and print-source research, note taking, credibility, and MLA style. Other days, we looked at other research texts, evaluating rhetoric, research methods, and credibility.

Textual Production and Distribution

To maintain consistency with the English department's requirements and our interest in preparing students for subsequent engagement in academic discourse, we had *each* student write a traditional research paper in addition to his or her "real research texts." Not only did this exercise prove useful in helping the students understand and develop traditional expectations of and skills to write an "academically oriented" research paper, but it also helped them to analyze and synthesize their data prior to creating a distributable text.



Photograph by Robert Petrone.

Students were expected to produce real research texts and distribute them to an audience outside the classroom. In the weeks leading up to the production of these real texts, we discussed rhetorical elements and examined examples of other research and the ways researchers have published their findings to communicate to wider audiences. We used these texts to discuss the following rhetorical strategies: What point is the author making? How might this person have gone about accumulating sources? Is the argument effective? Why? How? What is the tone? How is the genre or method of distribution effective? How does the genre enhance the argument or make it more accessible? Is the research credible? Analysis of other research texts helped students better understand their production and distribution processes.

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Early on, students were asked to identify an audience that would benefit from their research. Then we discussed which "forms" or genres of writing would most effectively reach this identified audience. We used the equation "Form = Audience + Purpose" as a way to facilitate their thinking. While their research products took various forms, the following list offers some examples of the students' textual production:

- letters to the editor of the local newspaper
- articles for the school and local newspaper
- PowerPoint presentations for school and community organizations or classes at the high school
- documentary films for Channel One
- letters to organizations such as MTV and Channel One
- brochures for health or counseling offices

One group wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper to encourage citizens of the community to support local businesses by shopping locally. Another group worked on a short documentary film to be

shown on television with the morning announcements to educate other teens about making choices related to healthy dating and relationships. The group researching racism and the KKK wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper inspiring citizens to be good representatives of the community; a group that explored teen smoking distributed informational pamphlets in the school guidance office and a doctor's office; the group focused on advertising and Channel One sent an email encouraging the organization to change the nature of the advertisements; and a student who studied media influence on teen girls wrote a persuasive and articulate article for our school newspaper. In all cases, students were expected to look for opportunities to publish. While not every product made it through the distribution phase, some students did, in fact, distribute impressive products to make a difference in our community.

Challenges and Considerations

Even as we began exciting plans for improving the research paper unit—in ways that were preferable to traditional methods—we were somewhat reluctant. Letting go of the traditional process felt like a small act of treason. We were not sure how other teachers in the department—teachers invested in and committed to the traditional research process—would react. We were concerned about criticism or lack of support. In the end, although our colleagues asked questions and expressed concerns about logistics and potential controversies, many showed interest in learning more about implementing elements of our process.

Because of the nature of critical research, students are likely to ask questions that some people prefer they not ask about topics that some people prefer they not address. The possibility of negative reactions to controversial research made us anxious, but we were motivated by the belief that this approach is more authentic, worthwhile, and relevant to students' lives.

It is important to note that this unit was not completed in isolation. Shortly after our collaboration began, we realized that a revision of the research unit necessitated revisiting the other units in the curriculum as well. We designed the units that preceded the research paper unit to scaffold the skills of critical thinking and questioning, to push the students toward social action, and to empower them to become critical citizens. The unit in which they read Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* became a unit on how producers of texts work to raise awareness of social issues and transform oppressive conditions; the students listened to, read, and discussed Woody Guthrie's protest songs of the 1930s as well as Langston Hughes's "Let America Be America Again," a scathing critique of racial injustice in America during the 1930s. The unit in which the students read Lois Lowry's *The Giver* became a unit on satire in which the students viewed the film *The Truman Show* and the TV show *The Simpsons* not only to develop better understandings of satire but also to discuss and critique aspects of contemporary American society. With this preparation, then, as the research paper unit began, the students turned their emerging "critical lenses" onto their community and school, and, as they embarked on their research process, their community and school became their primary texts.

What Did They Learn?

Many of the positive results of the process were ones that we didn't anticipate. Changes in attitudes, ownership, community involvement, and oral and written communication were surprising and refreshing. These results are not easily measured, but they will have lasting effects on the students. Kenny, a rather shy boy, wrote out a script for a phone call requesting an interview with a member of a Native American tribe. After the call, Kenny was excited about his accomplishment, admitting that he had never made a phone call like that before. Securing appointments with local officials, including the mayor, the fire chief, the regional manager of a major corporation, and so forth, students felt empowered, like real citizens whose concerns matter. This is echoed in the following conversation I (Robert) had with two students after an interview they conducted with an employee at the local homeless shelter:

> **Mr. Petrone:** How do you normally do research . . . before this project?
>
> **Stacy:** Computer, books, paper. (She laughs.)
>
> **Alison:** Yep. You'd look up on the Internet for your topic, find a site, print it off, and rewrite it. That's pretty much it . . . open a book or two. This is like . . . go out, experience it, go out and do it. Get more involved. This is so much better.

The most dramatic and important difference that we observed—and that the students reported—was their level of engagement with the process. Students were overwhelmingly more positive about their experience with this process, claiming it to be one of the most important learning experiences of their educational careers. Nearly all students interviewed at the conclusion of the class remarked that the research project was their favorite activity of the curriculum, and more than half of the students said they would register for an elective research class if one was offered.

Their enthusiasm about their work was remarkable and rewarding. One group, on returning from an interview with the mayor, was excited about what it found and eager to follow up on new leads. Two young men, concerned that a lack of entertainment options in the community was leading teens to trouble, approached the city planner about opening a music venue or teen club where kids could meet to hang out and where their bands could play. A few weeks later, an article in the local paper indicated that the city planner was putting together a committee to discuss adding attractions to the community, including the possibility of a teen center. When we discussed the article in class, the students began to see how change in a community is made. Students were impressed by this group's contribution and excited about the possibility of enacting change themselves. Experiences with this project helped students to realize their voice, as well as their role, in their community.

A Beginning

While this article could never fully do justice to the intellectual and emotional work and courage of the students, we offer it as an invitation to reimagine what is possible in (and outside of) high school classrooms by conceptualizing and realizing pedagogies that push us, schools, students, and communities to participate in the sometimes difficult process of turning the critical lens inward—a process necessary to create new ways of thinking about and acting in our world.

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