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# Rethinking the Research Paper in the Writing Center<sup>1</sup>

*James C. McDonald*

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“The magical aura of ‘the classroom,’” Gerald Graff writes in *Beyond the Culture Wars*, “lies in the illusion that it is not part of a system at all, that it is an island somehow exempt from the incursions of bureaucracy,” inhabited only by a few students and their presiding “great teacher” (115). Teachers, Graff claims, hold a “sentimental” (116) pastoral image of the classroom as “a garden occupying a redemptive space inside the bureaucratic and professional machine. It is a realm of unity and presence in a world otherwise given over to endless difference, conflict, competition, and factionalism” (117). He argues that making the course the central site of learning in the modern university disconnects and isolates the learning in each course from students’ learning and experiences outside that classroom and discourages students from relating what they learn in the course to other areas of knowledge and from critically evaluating what they learn.

For writing centers, this ideology of the course is especially problematic. At best, the writing center occupies a place in a hierarchy of instruction below the course; at worst, it represents a threat to the course’s autonomy. This hierarchy is most apparent with the writing assignment. The teacher of the course assigns the paper; the tutor and student in the writing center must interpret and work within the assignment. The most institutionalized writing assignment of the university, the research paper often presents difficult problems to the writing center that stem from the institutional, theoretical, and pedagogical conflicts between it and the classroom.

Interestingly, when Graff discusses alternatives to the traditional classroom as sites of learning, he does not consider writing centers or learning centers. Writing centers are not immune from imagery of refuge and removal

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from the strife of the world and the university. Ed Lotto has described the tendency in writing center literature to speak of the writing center as home or refuge. But however friendly and pleasant we make our writing centers and however marginalized they are in our institutions, we are unable to conceive of writing centers as islands or gardens very easily. No writing center director I know believes she is working in a haven safe from the administration and bureaucracy. Writing consultants and students cannot pretend that they are in a garden isolated from the workaday world as they discuss writing being composed for audiences, classrooms, and other contexts outside the writing center (classrooms about which students are seldom very sentimental, come to think of it).

Articles on writing centers typically discuss theories and practices considering the institutional contexts in which they are situated. Important articles defining writing centers, their missions, practices, and theories (for example, Harris, North, Lunsford, Warnock and Warnock) usually offer their definitions in opposition to the definitions and assumptions of administrators, teachers, and students, implying that writing center faculty do not or cannot pretend to act as totally free agents but define and carry out their work consciously within the institutional contexts of writing programs, English departments, and universities. Considering how writing centers have developed amidst competing educational theories and interests, Christina Murphy concludes, “On most college and university campuses, writing centers are instructional hybrids composed of a balance between administrative aims and the traditional practices of writing instruction that reflect writing centers’ early alliance with English departments directly and indirectly with the humanities” (284). In the midst of all the gardens, the writing center, then, is a “hybrid” that, Murphy argues, works within “limitations” of its “educational settings,” yet offers its own “transformative possibilities” (284). Not surprisingly, some teachers holding an autonomous, pastoral ideal of the classroom perceive this hybrid as a weed threatening to take over the garden and resist and resent any substantial contribution a writing center offers to students in the class as intrusive.

One limitation to their autonomy that writing center faculty deal with every day is that they must work with writing assignments that others have designed. When we discuss these assignments, we are usually most concerned about poor design and unclear directions and how to help the student understand and grapple with the teacher’s expectations. We seldom directly consider the assumptions that shape the genres of teacher-assigned writing, assumptions that frequently conflict with those that inform our teaching. Recently, for my classes, I have been trying to rethink the research paper and the often tacit theories that define the genre, its pedagogies, and its place in the university—trying to make instruction in writing about research more than instruction on conventions of documentation and avoidance of plagiarism. As a classroom teacher, I have a lot of freedom (though far from total

freedom) to redefine the research paper when I design the assignment and work with students. In the writing center, however, I must help students who come for help with research paper assignments that I find problematic at best.

The first-year research paper is a creation of current-traditional rhetoric—"the paradigm expository assignment," according to Sharon Crowley in *The Methodical Memory: Invention in Current-Traditional Rhetoric* (164). As James Berlin writes, "the research paper represented the insistence in current-traditional rhetoric on finding meaning outside the composing act, with writing itself serving as a simple transcription process" (70). Dozens of textbook definitions of the research paper dating back to the 1940s express this view. Laurence Barrett, for example, in *Writing for College*, wrote, "Like most of the other writing we do in college," the research paper "is, of course, exposition. . . . Its distinctive purpose is to present the reader with an objective synthesis of the most important facts available on a chosen subject" (430). The research paper emerged as a dominant genre of student writing under the assumptions that knowledge is a commodity, that the stuff of knowledge is facts (which are incontestable), that language is a transparent window to thought, that reading is a simple process of translating words into information, and that evaluation of sources is mainly a matter of eliminating dated and biased material (70).<sup>2</sup> Meaning is to be found not only "outside the composing process," as Berlin writes, but outside the life experiences of students. One textbook advised students to learn the "research attitude" by acquiring

the important attitudes of the open mind, a desire to handle material impartially, and the desire to pursue a free search for truth wherever it may lead. You ought to start your investigation without any preconceived prejudices. It is the purpose of your research to find evidence leading to an answer or to a solution. . . . To pursue truth freely, you must be objective and scientific, as unprejudiced and unbiased as possible. (Wilson and Locke 379)

The research paper glorifies what the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* call "separate knowing" at the expense of "connected knowing"—knowledge that is impersonal, objective, and autonomous from the self as opposed to knowledge that connects to people's experiences and relationships.

Writing this research paper is mainly a process of taking accurate notes, assembling this information into some coherent whole, properly acknowledging and documenting sources, and avoiding plagiarism. The obsession of traditional research paper instruction with avoiding plagiarism reflects the genre's deep commitment to the concepts of authorship and intellectual property rights, concepts that Lisa Ede has argued are opposed to the commitment to collaborative learning that is central to writing centers. If plagiarism, as Sheridan Baker wrote, amounts to "a kidnapping of someone else's brainchild" (299), is it prudent to encourage students to work

collaboratively in a writing center, a playground where brainchildren may be running around unsupervised? Ironically, the current-traditional rhetoric that informs the research paper grants authorship only to the students' sources, not to the students themselves, whose voices are typically silenced amidst the competing voices of "experts." What students have to say, what they might want to say, is not at issue in an expository research paper. The research paper encourages students, in Nancy Sommers' words, to "disappear behind the weight and permanence of their borrowed words, moving their pens, mouthing the words of others, allowing sources to speak through them unquestioned, unexamined" (425).

The last twenty-five years, however, have seen a shift in textbook definitions of the research paper away from the expository definition. With an array of terms, textbooks began distinguishing between two or three types of research papers. Some types express the writer's opinions and others do not, textbooks told students, clearly privileging those papers that do express opinion.<sup>3</sup> Robert Hamilton Moore's 1965 edition of *Effective Writing*, for example, distinguished a "report" from a "judgment," "a paper in which you can reach conclusions of your own after thoughtfully evaluating all the evidence" (283). "To get the greatest good from the assignment" (283), Moore recommended the judgment paper:

A report . . . is well worth doing, but it can never be brilliant. It deals with a purely factual topic and consists of a clear presentation of all the facts, offering no opinion because the facts do not admit opinion; they are either true or false. (284)

Before long, textbooks were condemning the expository research paper, Sheridan Baker dismissing it as "scavenging," not real research in a 1976 textbook (297). The research paper today typically must be an argument. It must reach a conclusion, express an opinion, say something original, and not merely repeat what others have written.

The problem is that this shift was not accompanied by a change in pedagogy in composition textbooks, which have continued to teach a process of writing research papers that has changed little since the 1920s, a process developed for writing exposition. The steps for composing a research paper that most textbooks provide even today echo the steps James M. Chalfant provided in the first article *English Journal* published on the research paper in 1930—choose a subject and narrow it, compile a bibliography, take notes, write an outline, and finally compose the theme. Textbooks now add the step of rewriting and may not require an outline, but like textbooks of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, textbooks today seem concerned primarily with how to incorporate and document quotations and paraphrases to avoid plagiarism and usually give short shrift to the process of reading and evaluating sources.

The problem with redefining the research paper as argument is that current-traditional rhetoric never successfully accounted for persuasive dis-

course because of its scientific faith in empiricism. As Sharon Crowley has written, in current-traditional textbooks, “disagreement revolves around the lack of empirical knowledge.” If the writer has supported his position with enough facts, a “respectable” reader will always accept it as truth, “despite any vagrant opinions she might previously have held.” Modern textbooks, Crowley writes, have “preferred facts to opinions as a means of assembling evidence, since opinions lack empirical verifiability and are only ‘held’ by people” (112). Current-traditional rhetoric does regard some opinions as fact, but only the opinions expressed by authorities (Crowley 110). Crowley ties current-traditional rhetoric’s problem with persuasion to its “effort to kill off individual voices” (151) and substitute “the voice of the institution for those of writers” (14).

It is interesting to see how current-traditional textbooks have struggled to instruct students to say something original and state an opinion while teaching a procedure for writing a research paper that provides no room for the student’s voice and experience and grants no authority to the student’s opinion.<sup>4</sup> Several textbooks recommend that students record their own “personal comments” on the four-by-six notecards, so that they can shuffle their ideas in with the facts and opinions of experts and work these comments into their papers. More typically, as many of the model research papers in textbooks display, students are encouraged to add their opinions and conclusions at the end of their papers, after they have summarized and organized the research from their notes. Other textbooks hold that the students’ contribution lies in how they arrange the information from their research. In 1973 James McCrimmon explained, employing a metaphor of constructing

the research assignment has its special problem—the relationship between borrowed material and the use that is made of it. The research paper is admittedly and necessarily written from information derived from various sources. But that information has to be woven into an essay which is essentially the student’s own work. A student who has worked purposefully will not have much difficulty reconciling these two conditions, for he will have selected his material with a view to using it in support of a purpose he has been forming as he reads. In a sense he is like a man who is building a house with bricks obtained from others. The bricks are not of his making, but the design and construction of the house are. *Writing a research paper, then, is not just stringing together statements from books and magazines. It is a complete reorganization and reworking of the source material into an original composition.* (276; emphasis in original)

Following this advice, a student can conceivably write an “original” paper without making a single statement of his own.

Obviously, many teachers, writing programs, and textbooks in the last twenty-five years have also developed assignments and pedagogies for students writing research papers that reflect the richness of recent composition theories and research.<sup>5</sup> These approaches often take into account cognitive research and poststructuralist theories on reading and writing processes; research about writing and doing research in academic disciplines; and collaborative, cognitive, expressivist, and other theories of rhetoric and composition. But current-traditional assumptions about reading, writing, and researching remain powerful in many writing classes and other classes that assign research papers. The research paper instruction in most of the popular textbooks today continues to teach the same current-traditional process, with minor revisions, as the textbooks of the 1940s.

The current-traditional research paper is a problem for writing centers that privilege conversation, collaborative learning, and students' voices, that encourage students to see themselves as constructors of knowledge doing more than building tract houses with other people's bricks, and that privilege knowing "connected" to their experiences rather than "separated" from them. It is sometimes difficult to take a student-centered approach in helping a student with a genre that all but removes the student writer from her own paper. The typical student that I see coming to the writing center for help with a research paper does not want help writing the paper but wants help figuring out the complicated conventions of bibliography pages, internal documentation, title pages, and paraphrasing and doing all the things necessary to signal to the teacher that she is not stealing or kidnapping ideas, but merely "borrowing" them. I sometimes worry at research paper time that my writing center has become a fix-it shop specializing in repairing the cigarette lighters in Corvairs.

Computers, however, have begun to make most lessons and repair work on bibliography format obsolete and to allow tutors to become more involved with students' research, invention, and drafting. Programs that create bibliography pages should soon make lessons and exercises on bibliography entries superfluous (thank God). With computers on line, tutors can work with students as they search the library catalog and investigate databases, helping students to shape and revise their search strategies and to make preliminary evaluations of possible sources. As Irene Lurkis Clark shows in "The Writing Center and the Research Paper: Computers and Collaboration," with information retrieval systems, writing center faculty can aid students more easily and readily in the middle of their research, helping students to comprehend and question what they read and to discuss the implications of a source in their search and writing. Earlier and more intensive involvement in students' processes of searching, reading, and writing for research papers should present opportunities for writing center faculty to provide alternatives to the rigid, often unproductive current-traditional writing process for the research paper.

Many students come to the writing center when that process breaks down, loaded down with notecards and quotations but unable to find something of their own to write. Ironically, the inadequacy of current-traditional rhetoric in defining and teaching the argumentative research paper opens up possibilities for writing centers to transform the research paper into a meaning-making activity. Unable to resolve the central contradiction of writing an argument using a process for writing exposition, often dissatisfied with the assignment's impersonal approach and bureaucratic record-keeping, mystified by lectures on the *MLA Style Manual* but tired of having writing reduced to note-taking, paraphrasing, and writing bibliography pages, students seek out dialogue about what they have discovered and what they are writing. Tutors are often outside the discourse communities and conversations that have formed around the myriad of subjects that students write about, and a writing center, at best, usually has limited immediate access to sources. But tutors are able to use these limitations as advantages, acknowledging the student as insider and expert, providing the student with an attentive (and ignorant) audience, encouraging students to come out from under their mounds of notes to explain what they think and what they have learned. Acknowledging the authority of the student as writer and researcher, tutors can encourage students to take a holistic approach to their research, to express opinions, and to think of themselves as authorities with something to say to an interested reader. Tutors are able to help a student with their knowledge of and experience with the conventions of research papers (not just documentation conventions) and strategies for questioning, evaluating, and connecting texts.

The tutor's purpose should be to help the student construct knowledge, not just passively accept and repeat the knowledge of others. Students sometimes feel comfortable enough to discuss how writing the research paper connects to their lives—the experiences and plans that led them to read and write about their topics, the questions and uncertainties that have developed as they came across unexpected and sometimes upsetting information, opinions, questions, and problems about their subjects. And the tutor can explore with the writer whether it is appropriate to bring these personal connections into the paper. Often the best place for students to learn to become active, critical thinkers, researchers, and writers is outside the garden of the classroom listening to the great teacher—in a writing center with someone skilled at questioning and listening and willing to learn from a student.

But can writing center faculty effect changes in the teachers' and institutions' teaching of research writing, or must they continue to work with and adapt current-traditional research paper assignments, often accommodating opposing theories of writing? The autonomous, pastoral nature of the course makes any reform slow and difficult. Writing centers work at the edges of courses and institutions to effect changes in assumptions about

writing in their student conferences, tutor training, and workshops. Where every course is an island and every teacher a monarch, the one-on-one and small-group collaborative strategies of writing centers may be the best suited for bringing about change. But the process is slow and uncertain. If we hope to change writing instruction in the university, we must resist thinking of writing centers in terms of island and safe haven metaphors if that means we help and influence only those who make it to our shores. Writing center directors, Christina Murphy, Thom Hawkins, and others have argued, should go out into the university and, in Hawkins' words, "ally themselves with faculty who are redefining what it means to teach writing" (xiii). The important place writing centers have in many writing-across-the-curriculum programs is providing opportunities for forging these alliances, and we need to find and make other opportunities as well. Many faculty, especially those who are rethinking the teaching of writing, are particularly unhappy with the traditional research paper, which is the deserving subject of a long tradition of complaint. They may be particularly open to discussing other ways of conceiving and teaching research writing. This might be a good place to start.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 1993 Conference of the South Central Writing Centers Association in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

<sup>2</sup>Michael G. Moran discusses some of these assumptions in "Lockean Epistemology and the Freshman Research Paper."

<sup>3</sup>Some teachers had taught the research paper as argument before this time, but few textbooks encouraged this approach until the 1960s.

<sup>4</sup>These generalizations are based on an examination of about twenty-five textbooks, in addition to my experience teaching with a number of other textbooks since 1976.

<sup>5</sup>Some of the textbooks that teach other paradigms for research writing include *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfactuals* by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky; *The Informed Writer* by Charles Bazerman; *The Right Handbook* by Pat Belanoff, Betsy Rorschach, and Mia Oberlink; *A Short Course in Writing* by Kenneth Bruffee; *The I-Search Paper* by Ken Macrorie; and *Writing for the Twenty-first Century: Computers and Research Writing* by William Wresch, Donald Pattow, and James Gifford.

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