



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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RETHINKING RESEARCH

Why do I have to learn this? Where will I ever use what you are teaching me today? These are questions most teachers hear repeatedly. They reinforce (1) the need and importance of helping students make connections between school, work, and life; and (2) the need to make what we teach relevant and personal.

For years, I have struggled with and dreaded teaching and grading the proverbial research paper. I have given the obligatory lectures on avoiding the horrors of plagiarism, keeping bibliography cards (including a working bibliography), citing sources, outlining, reading critically, paraphrasing and summarizing, developing the thesis, using quotations, citing sources, designing documents, and on and on. Once I got through the preliminary instructions, samples, demonstrations, and a trip to the library for orientation, I still felt that most of my students were going to turn in the same old plagiarized papers with little or no documentation and with weak and questionable sources. I even tried having dates for students to turn in a portion of their papers for me to grade and return so they could see if they were on the right track. All that did was create more papers for me to grade throughout the semester. Yes, a few conscientious students took advantage of the opportunity to see how they were doing, but most did not.

The Project

My idea for a Personal Development Research Paper arose out of sheer anger and frustration because my students and I were just bored with the tired old topics they had been writing about for years and because I was tired of grading their intentionally or unintentionally plagiarized papers. They were not taking it seriously, and worse, they were not learning anything! One morning, on my way to work, as I was “checking in” with my daughters on the phone, I mentioned my dilemma. They both said, “Why don’t you have students research how to buy a house and health insurance?” Both of my girls were newly married and in the process of purchasing homes for the first time and having to purchase individual health insurance for the first time. They both said

how they wished someone had made them more aware of issues like these before they were confronted with them. My first reaction to their comments was guilt! Should I have prepared my own daughters to handle issues like buying a home or health insurance better? Who would have ever thought of it? When my girls were in high school, I was more occupied with work schedules, school schedules, cheerleading, grades, car insurance, and their dates! The thought of my children buying a house or health insurance did not even occur to me at that time.

I started thinking about what other areas might be useful for my students to research. I would ask them often throughout the year if they had started to make plans for college or for a job, and I was not shocked when many had not thought beyond the weekend, let alone what they would do after graduation. That got me thinking about where my current college students live, what kinds of jobs they might be interested in, and for some, what college, if any, they might like to attend after community college. The more I thought about how I could relate some of these things to research, the more I knew that these personal, educational, and professional issues could be integrated into a documented research paper. As I started planning the assignment, I knew that my presentation of the topic would either get the students interested and excited or it would “turn them off” completely, so I was very careful to begin with my reasons for choosing the topic, how it came about, and how their research might help them in the future. They were happy to hear that I was going to allow them to write their paper in first person, except for the research part. The hardest part was explaining how they could integrate their personal story with documented research. Once they started writing, we were all surprised at how well they did it.

Assignment Options

Making connections between school, work, and life is essential for success. This research assignment helps students see this relevance; adds to the student’s personal, educational, and professional development; and provides the opportunity to learn the Modern Language



Association (MLA) documentation for research papers. Students receive these instructions:

- The student is required to complete a 10- to 15-page (or more) research paper with a title page and a works cited page.
- The student will use MLA parenthetical documentation format.
- The student must write a clear introduction to the paper with a clear thesis statement.
- The student will write a clear conclusion and summarize the findings of the research and the implications the research may have on future plans and/or choices.
- The student will use a minimum of six sources.
- The student will research the following topics and write a minimum of 2-3 pages on each:
 1. If I were going to move to another city, it would be... (Consider location, population, weather, income, cost of living, entertainment, school system, job market, traffic, crime rate, etc.)
 2. If I were going to choose a job or career, it would be... (Consider preparation, education, potential earnings, negatives and positives, needs analysis, etc.) Or research opening and owning your own business.
 3. If I were going to choose a four-year college to attend, it would be ... (Consider location, cost, entrance requirements, programs of study, reputation, student housing, parking, etc.) If not planning to attend a four-year college, choose a specific company and research it.
 4. If I were going to purchase a house for the first time, I would need to know... (Consider location, market value, new structure, old structure, appliances, warranties, liens, mortgages, interest rates, buying power, monthly payments, taxes, insurance, re-sale value, etc.)
 5. If I were going to purchase individual health insurance, I would need to research... (Consider coverage, deductibles, cost, restrictions, etc.)

After considering their options, students spent a class period discussing questions and another going to the library for an orientation. I had discussed my new approach with the librarian, and she liked the idea. When we arrived, she had created a hand-out specifically for my students. Her presentation of suggested resources matched my assignment perfectly and gave my students an excellent guide for their research.

I spent several class periods discussing documentation form, coaching students on how to paraphrase and summarize information, and providing them with samples of parenthetical documentation, works cited, and introductions. I would begin class by asking if

anyone had any questions about research, asking how they were doing, and encouraging students to show me some of what they were writing. I kept in touch with the librarians to see if students were asking for help there.

Learning Outcomes

I was surprised when I began grading my first set of papers, particularly as I began reading the comments my students had included in their conclusions about their experiences. I had asked them to include a synthesis of their research, what they had learned, and what the implications of their research might mean for them in the future.

Results

I created a survey for students to complete anonymously—their initial reaction to the paper, interesting topics, difficult topics, instructions, and general comments. I asked: Tell me one thing you learned about doing academic research. Was this paper a positive or negative experience, and did you learn anything about yourself or your future plans? Many students commented that they learned how to cite sources, use MLA format, be more organized, and better manage time.

One drawback to this assignment is the papers take a long time to grade. Did all students make A's? Of course not. But I know my students did something worthwhile, that the majority of them did learn something, and that they made a connection on some level between school, work, and their lives. For the ones who made an honest attempt, I know they did not waste their time just copying and plagiarizing, and so do they. This paper gave them information that meant something on a personal, educational, and professional level, and I know it made them feel good about their efforts.

Judy Nolasco, *Professor, English*

For further information, contact the author at Hillsborough Community College-Ybor City Campus, 2112 N. 15th Street, Tampa, FL 33605. e-mail: jnolasco@hccfl.edu

