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ARGUING FROM FIRST-HAND EVIDENCE

ABSTRACT: *The assignment described here introduces students to argument through a collaborative process of data collection and problem solving. The project has four components: 1) to keep a project log, 2) to summarize collected data, 3) to draw conclusions from the data, and 4) to propose change or approve the status quo. The goal for this assignment is to build students' confidence in their ability to apply the kinds of thinking and writing strategies they will need to succeed in college, such as using descriptive detail and precise language, summarizing, critically analyzing and synthesizing information to draw conclusions, and arguing a position to a specific audience.*

Students often have difficulty appreciating how reaching conclusions is a process that begins with observed data collection, their own or others'. At the same time, they may lack self-confidence in their ability to draw conclusions from data and to select relevant evidence to support an argument. Yet most college-level writing requires these skills.

The project described here introduces students to argument through a collaborative process of data collection and problem solving. The methodology has been borrowed from the social sciences where, according to Ingrid Daemmrich interpreting a quote by Mike Rose, "an individual's reflections on personal events are considered legitimate evidence" (343). Such an approach would also seem to fit what Peter Elbow calls "sensible" writing and "the

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admirable larger intellectual tasks like giving good reasons and evidence yet doing so in a rhetorical fashion which acknowledges an interested position and tries to acknowledge and understand the position of others" (148).

The project has four components which ask students to: 1) keep a project log, 2) summarize collected data, 3) draw conclusions from the data, and 4) propose change or approve the status quo. The entire project requires, on average, four weeks to complete. To begin, the class is divided into teams of five to six students who begin with interviews, questionnaires, and unstructured observations of a campus facility, such as the dining hall, a dormitory, or the library. Each team then analyzes its own data and considers if the facility is being used optimally for the purposes for which it was designed. The final component of the assignment asks students to write individual proposals to an appropriate college administrator.

Project Logs

Students keep a project log throughout the assignment, following written guidelines provided by the instructor. The purpose of the log is: 1) to provide a space for students to keep the various parts of the assignment together for quick reference or detailed analysis; 2) to provide students with insights into their own learning and collaboration processes (which should form part of at least one class discussion); and 3) to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the assignment to the instructor (such as how the groups shared responsibilities or if students had sufficient time to complete each segment of the assignment). Students should be instructed to write in their logs at regular intervals (say, twice a week) or at strategic points (after a group meeting, a class discussion, or the completion of an interview). It is helpful to collect and comment on the logs halfway through the project without assigning a grade. The completed logs are graded at the end of the project.

Data Collection (2 weeks)

Each student group is assigned or selects a campus facility to investigate. The groups meet initially to divide and assign the responsibilities which are listed on the assignment sheet: to obtain questionnaire responses, conduct interviews, and make observations. Many handbooks provide instruction on field research, for example, the chapter on field research in *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, 3rd edition (Axelrod 490-502).

Next, the class discusses the purpose of questionnaires, in this case to provide information on how a sample of the students' peers "think" they behave as compared to observed behavior. The

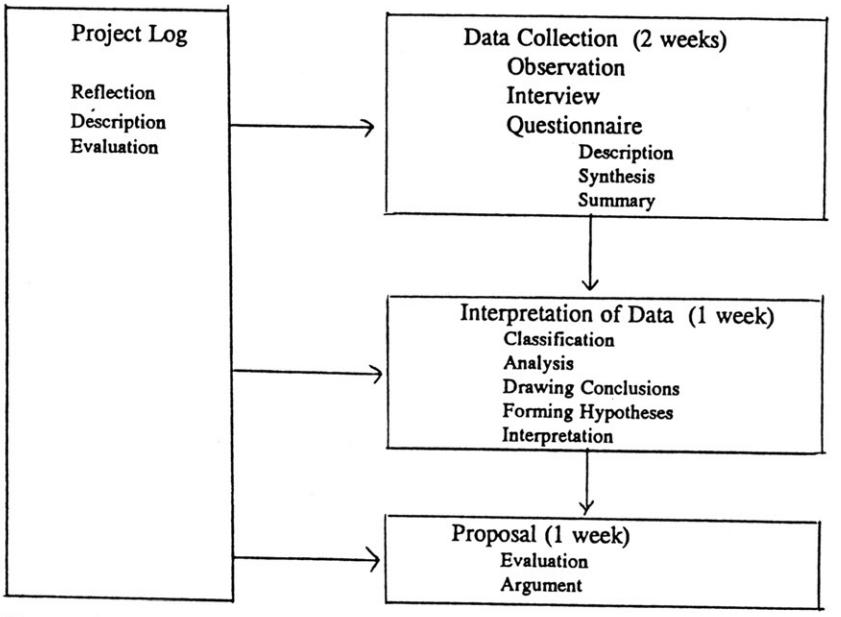

Figure 1

discussion should also cover criteria for sampling and how the wording of a question and where it appears on the list can influence the answers it will elicit. Each group composes questions and decides how, when, where, and to whom to distribute the questionnaires.

After each group has finalized their questions, they submit the questionnaire to the other groups for comments and "scaling," the listing of questions in both a logical order as well as the order of their importance. These lists are compared and a final format agreed to. If a simple yes/no format is appropriate, each response can be assigned a number to enable a statistical analysis of the responses. For example, here is a questionnaire designed for students using the library:

1. Do you use the computerized card catalog to locate materials?
2. Is there usually a computer free when you need it?
3. Can you find the material you need without assistance from library personnel?

4. Do library personnel give you help when you ask for it?
5. Are they friendly?
6. If there is no seat available in the section you want to be, are you willing to sit anywhere?
7. When you sit with a friend or friends, do you talk *only* about the work at hand?
8. Should there be individual study carrels in addition to the long tables?
9. Do you spend at least 50% of your time in the library concentrating on academic assignments?
10. Do you usually ignore people who are being too noisy?

Similarly, the whole class discuses the purpose of interviews and compiles a list of potential interviewees which may include students, staff, and faculty. Each group determines who will be interviewed and proceeds to write questions and then scale questions from other groups.

For example, the group investigating the dorms included the following interview questions for students:

> What time do the dorms get quiet in the evening? Is it earlier or later than you would like? Are the bathrooms convenient to your room? How often do you use the kitchen? What do you like or dislike about your room? How do you get along with your roommate? Do you feel security is adequate? How often do you use the lounge and for what purposes?

Questions addressed to the Director of Residential Life included:

> What are the major infractions of dormitory rules? What happens to first-time offenders? On average, how many students per year request change of roommates? Is vandalism a problem? What is the most frequent student complaint?

In a 1988 Study of Written Composition by The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, Pietro Lucisano posits that "the description in words of an object, a process, or a feeling is a very complex activity that involves perceiving, elaborating, and conveying information. Its rhetorical antecedents go back to Aristotle" (Gorman 128). Thus, to prepare for the unstructured observations, we discuss in detail what the students should be looking for and how to balance their objective and subjective responses to what they see. For example: What kinds of interactions do they expect to observe and how important are the frequency and direction of the interactions? What kinds of behavior produce conflict vs. cooperation? What is considered normal

behavior in the observed areas and is this what the observers expect to see? This list can be made more specific depending on the areas to be studied. Groups should determine when, how long, and how often observations should be conducted for the broadest possible coverage.

For example, guidelines from the group observing the dining hall included:

> How do people dress? Are the food lines orderly and fast-moving? What kind of table manners are used? How many people eat alone, eat with one other person, or eat with a group of three or more? Do people eat balanced meals? Do people at one table talk to others at a different table, and do they mingle after they've eaten?

At the end of the data collection period, each student writes an objective summary of the data he or she has collected and distributes copies to each group member as well as the instructor. Guidelines should stipulate what kinds of information are to be included in the report, how the information should be organized (the format), and any length and style requirements. Most rhetorics and writing handbooks include a segment on objective reporting which can be useful for this assignment. However, students should be assured that their subjective responses, recorded in their project logs, will have relevance in their interpretation of the objective summaries.

Group Interpretation of Data (1 week)

Each group meets in-class (and out-of-class if necessary) to accomplish the following tasks:

1. Classifying the data by identifying trends and relationships, using whichever of the original questions has proved useful, and adding categories as they have been revealed by the data. Further data collection might be necessary to fill in any gaps or inconsistencies.
2. Drawing conclusions from the data by comparing responses summarized from the observations, interviews, and questionnaires regarding individual behavior, interaction with others, and interaction with the environment. The analysis should focus on what is normal or expected behavior vs. the absence of expected behavior, which might include eccentric or even deviant behavior.
3. Formulating hypotheses, based on the conclusions drawn and any personal experiences prior to the study, about *why* people behave in a particular manner in a particular place.
4. Collaborating on a group interpretation of data which

identifies the most important and interesting information revealed by the observations, interviews, and questionnaires, and interpreting those findings to suggest how and why people behave in particular ways in the area studied. At this point we discuss Pulitzer Prize winner Barbara Tuchman's advice, "Select among your facts and details—selection is the basis of 'art.' To discard the unnecessary requires courage and . . . extra work." (Steward 18). Only one interpretation of data is handed in and each group member receives the same grade.

5. Designating a group member to orally present the interpretation to the whole class and providing copies to group members to use as a basis for writing an individual proposal.

During this process of synthesis, analysis, and interpretation—both in-class and out-of-class—the instructor visits each group to comment on, support, and move forward their deliberations. She may also wish to review early drafts of the group interpretations and make suggestions. My objectives here reflect Peter Elbow's rationale for a nonacademic approach to academic writing tasks:

> Finally, I suspect students can learn the surface features of academic style better if they have first made good progress with the underlying intellectual practices. When students are really succeeding in doing a meaty academic task, then the surface stylistic features are more likely to be integral and organic rather than merely an empty game or mimicry. (150)

And like Elbow, I strive to apply his theory to an assignment that asks students to revise a summary "so that the material is not just summarized but rather interpreted and transformed and used in the process of creating a sustained piece of thinking of their own—and for a real human audience."

Here are excerpts from the group interpretation of data gathered on 1) the dorms and 2) the library:

> (1) Because the kitchens are inconveniently located in the basement, students often prefer to order pizza for a late night snack. Deliveries can be disruptive to those studying or trying to sleep; in addition, security is compromised when delivery persons are allowed to roam the halls. . . . Most of the students in the dorm get along well with each other. They seem to have re-created a family atmosphere and relax by playing group games and listening to music together. There are rarely fights or disagreements. . . . On a scale of one to ten, 40% rate the dorm as a 7, 40% rate it as an 8, and 20% rate it as a 9.

(2) Many students feel that the areas set aside for private study are too few. The library is often overcrowded and it is difficult to move about without disturbing others in the same work space. This leads to loss of concentration for those disturbed, so that they begin to talk to their neighbors or waste time daydreaming. As a result, those who wish to study alone without the noise of large groups are forced to work in their dorms away from the resources of the library.

Proposals (1 week)

Using the interpretation provided by their group, class members draft individual proposals. It is important that before students begin to draft their proposals, they understand the implications of a limited study and acknowledge in the written proposal how the limitations affect their conclusions. It should be reemphasized that they have collected data from only a sample of the student body and are generalizing their findings based on the representative character of that sample.

Early drafts of the proposals are read and critiqued by peer groups. Through this process of multiple drafting, many students become increasingly perceptive and realistic, such as in this proposal for the library:

> I propose we resolve these problems so that students can receive the most out of their education. One solution is to solicit alumni support, such as donations of money, materials, or even time. Monetary donations can be used for buying equipment, such as copiers and computers, or materials to spruce up the study areas, such as paint and brushes. Students and alumni volunteering together can make an important difference by creating a more comfortable and attractive study environment conducive to learning.

On the other hand, some students do support the status quo, such as the following letter to the Provost:

> This letter is in support of the library because it is run very well. Critics may argue for minor adjustments to the schedule or floor plan; however, I don't think it is necessary to make any changes to the library.

In conclusion, my goal for this assignment is to build students' confidence in their ability to apply the kinds of thinking and writing strategies they will need to succeed in college, such as using descriptive detail and precise language, summarizing, critically analyzing and synthesizing information to draw conclusions, and

arguing a position to a specific audience (some of the proposals have been sent to an appropriate administrator, and several have been published in the college newspaper; the rest have been acknowledged and shared with peers). Moreover, I am pleased to report that I have watched many freshman writers, through this assignment, develop the assurance to claim ownership of their ideas and confidently defend them in writing.

While it is not necessary to adopt every aspect of the project, one can see the overall usefulness of the general plan, and easily adapt it to fit one's particular classroom situation. However, the two essential points to include are: 1) that the research project involve some real-life situation, and 2) that small groups of students collaborate in gathering and assessing the data.

According to Joy Ritchie, whose concern is the development of individual identity within the larger community beyond academia, "our students will be most valuable as members of our communities not by merely 'fitting in,' or acquiescing to the requirements of the institution, but by making some unique contribution to the evolving dialogue" (173). I believe this assignment encourages students to begin that dialogue by providing them access to an issue relevant to both their own and the institution's well-being. Engaging in that dialogue then becomes as challenging and interesting for the instructor as for the students—and rewarding for both.

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