

Teaching the Journey: English 101 as a Site for Making Meaning

Diane Henningfeld

Diane Andrews Henningfeld has been a professor of English at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan, since 1989, teaching a wide range of both composition and literature classes. After working in Adult and Community Education for ten years, and completing an MA in Educational Leadership, she earned a doctorate in Medieval Literature from Michigan State University. In 1998, she helped write a grant to establish a Faculty Development Program at Adrian, and she subsequently served as Faculty Development Director until 2004. Over the past ten years, Dr. Henningfeld has presented many workshops and led study groups on effective teaching. Her research interests are eclectic and (as her family says) eccentric; in addition to pedagogical essays, she writes frequently on Vietnam War literature, Jorge Luis Borges, and the 1918 influenza pandemic. Her recent article "Putting the Heart Before the Course: The Paradox of Passion and Planning" appeared in the Summer, 2004, issue of Thought & Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal.

"But *somewhere* there is a great mystery that wants to come live in your house and change everything."

Mary Rose O'Reilly, *Radical Presence*

Because I love my students; because I love to teach; because I believe that there is more to life and to learning than multiple choice tests designed to find out if the student has done the reading, not if the student has made the meaning; because education must be transformed to account for the whole teacher, and the whole student; because we are all connected and the sooner we lead our students to this understanding, the sooner the earth will be a healthier, more vibrant place for all of us; because writing allows us into spaces that we can reach in no other way; because the first year composition classroom can be a place of magic and wonder, not drudgery and red ink; because intuition is an important way of knowing; because we need to include all our students on the journey; for these reasons, and so many more, I very humbly offer this essay on teaching the journey in the composition classroom.

I teach at a small, liberal arts college of about 1000 students in Michigan. Our students are largely residential, and largely traditionally aged. On the surface, it might appear that my task as a teacher of first year students might be very different from that of a technical college teacher in Texas. I would argue, however, that there are more similarities than might at first be obvious. I teach a group of students who are by and large the first members of their families to go to college. They are here at Adrian

because they and their families want them to have the best possible opportunity to make something of their lives. Most of my students hold jobs off campus. Most of them are not from affluent families and coming to college represents a huge commitment of family resources. All of them want to do well. Most of them are terrified they won't. They come from high schools large and small where they have had a wide variety of experiences in writing. Some have never written a paper. Some are very talented

writers. All of them are trying to figure out why they are here, not just at Adrian, but here, alive. They all need resources and tools to prepare them for their other classes, and more importantly for the rest of their lives.

As strange as it may seem, I began my own journey to the heart of English 101 when I lost my father to cancer. I was forty-seven years old, old enough to know that all life leads inexorably toward death, old enough to be grateful that my father's suffering lasted only a short time, old enough to be thankful that I had forty-seven years of my father's presence. The indescribable pain of my grief in the dark months following his death, however, opened an abyss. Even time itself was cleft by the crevasse: everything that happened before 1:27 pm, Tuesday, October 19, 1999, on one side, and

everything that happened after on the other. And into this bottomless gulf tumbled my surefooted and strong headed ideas about parenting, about teaching, about life.

I somehow stumbled through the rest of the semester. I was team teaching two classes at that time, thank heavens, and my colleagues uncomplainingly carried the burden of our students and my grief. Over the winter, I pondered the imponderables: what is the value of life if it only and always leads to death? Do I choose the path leading to cynicism, hedonism, and denial? Or the path that toward making meaning in the here and how? As I emerged into spring, I knew that my teaching must change to account for this journey I was on, and the journey I came to suspect my students were only dimly sensing. I decided to focus my efforts on English 101, a first year composition class where, although I had obligations to the rest of college for teaching a particular skill set to my students, I still had a great deal of flexibility in content.

In redesigning my class, I naturally considered what was most important for the students. In the first place, I wanted them to have ample opportunity to practice their writing at many levels; that is, I wanted them to have lots of practice at free informal writing, at revised writing, and at finished, polished writing stages. I also wanted them to learn how to use outside research to answer questions for themselves. I wanted them to be good consumers of research. Finally, I wanted them to be aware of their audience so that they could practice using a variety of voices and styles appropriate for whatever rhetorical situation they found themselves in. In short, I wanted them to learn how to write in the real world.

*As I emerged into
spring, I knew that my
teaching must change
to account for this
journey I was on . . .*

(A side note: non-English department colleagues always make it very clear what English 101 *ought* to be. It's the place where we fix our students: fix their grammar, their punctuation, their spelling, their organizational skills, and turn them into model students for their other classes. Years of well-conducted research consistently tell us, however, that teaching students traditional grammar or "mechanics" makes no difference in either the quality or correctness of their writing. You might want to check out the classic study by Finlay McQuade, 1980, in *English Journal* 69: 26-30 for his description of his study and findings. Issues of correctness are very important; but only in the context of real life writing.)

I welcomed students to the course by talking about actual and metaphoric journeys we are all on. Surprisingly, after fifteen years of teaching, I felt naked and vulnerable as I described what I hoped would happen over the course of the semester. In the syllabus, I included this statement of what they could expect from the class, and from me:

Please read this. I want you to know a little bit about me and about my ideas before we start working together. First, I've been teaching writing for years and years, and I know what a joy and what a source of frustration writing can be for all of us. My goal this semester is to maximize the joy and minimize the frustration. Second, I believe that each of us is on an immense journey, moving from immaturity to maturity, from ignorance to wisdom, from where we've been to where we're going. We don't know for sure where our journey will take us. Third, I believe that each of us must dig deeply within ourselves to discern our true paths. What better place to start the exploration than here?

And, along the way, you'll learn the skills you need to be a successful college writer. We will read lots of articles, and write lots of papers. You will be asked to think carefully about difficult questions, and you will be asked to go places you've never gone before. Your success in the class largely depends on your willingness to engage the material, and to do the work. Growth isn't always easy, but it's necessary. I promise you this: you will not be the same person at the end of the class that you are now. After this statement, I provided them with the course objectives and my description of the kinds of writing they would do.

I welcomed students to the course by talking about actual and metaphoric journeys we are all on.

By the end of the semester, you will demonstrate your ability to:

- develop a piece of writing from informal free writing to final polished draft;
- address different rhetorical situations;
- effectively use a variety of research strategies, including but not limited to, texts, web resources, interviews, and observations;
- formulate a controlling idea and/or research question for a paper;
- focus and develop papers through relevant evidence, examples, illustrations, research, and reasoning;
- construct organizational plans for your papers; and
- use appropriate sources effectively;
- write in appropriate style and voice for different audiences and rhetorical situations;
- consistently and correctly use MLA guidelines to format papers;
- edit your writing for correctness.

At the heart of the class, I placed a form of writing called the “research essay.” These essays are very different from the kinds of writing that students would have been likely to do in high school, but they are the kind of essays that all of us enjoy reading. The research essay also bridges the gap between personal, memoir writing, and more formal, academic writing. A proponent of this genre, Bruce Ballenger, offers an excellent description of this kind of writing in his book, *Beyond Note Cards: Rethinking the Freshman Research Paper* (1999):

1. It may incorporate personal experience as evidence.
2. It is frequently written in first person; the writer-researcher is at the center of the discourse.
3. The writer’s situation, especially the reasons for his or her interest in the topic, is often explicit.
4. It may use narrative structure as a central organizing principle.
5. The tone is conversational; the writer’s voice dominates.
6. It is driven by questions.
7. The thesis may appear later rather than earlier in the text, and the writer’s conclusions may be tentative rather than certain.
8. Source material may be more embedded in the writer’s own prose than in separate paragraphs or passages.

9. Information may be used not just to support claims, but also to complicate them; sources are not used exclusively as examples but as a means to think something through.
10. It is likely to feature multiple sources of information, including memory or experience, observation, interviews, as well as reading.
11. It represents an “amateur’s raid” on the work of specialists. Through familiar anecdote, example, and observation, the research essay may attempt to exploit the common ground between the topic and the general reader’s experience with it (116).

In a moment of madness, I also decided to do all of the assignments with them.

Over the course of the semester, students completed five units centering on different kinds of journeys: The Journey to Self; The Journey to Memory; The Journey to Place; The Journey to the Ordinary; and the Journey to Activism. In each unit, I provided the students with a list of readings, a description of the essay they were to write, a description of their audience, length and formatting requirements, and suggestions for the types of research they might include. (I have appended one unit plan to the end of this essay.) Students also scheduled an individual conference with me on each unit.

I designed each unit to produce a seven- to ten-page research essay. In addition, students included in each unit portfolio a two-page introduction to each essay, talking about the process of writing and the growth of their own thinking as they wrote; all homework assignments for the unit; all in-class writing; photocopies of materials from outside sources; rough drafts; a final draft; and a self-assessment worksheet.

In a moment of madness, I also decided to do all of the assignments with them. This was a big commitment of time and energy, but I finally decided that I had better try to write what I wanted my students to write to see if the assignments worked. I don’t think there was anything I did during the whole semester that made a bigger impression on the students than the fact that I was struggling with the same assignments they were. I shared, with much trepidation, my rough drafts with them, so that I would have to endure the same kind of scrutiny from them that they received from me. In addition, since some of the essays were fairly personal, I had to be willing to share something of myself with them. It was grueling, but at the end of the semester, I was just as proud of my portfolio of research essays as any first year student.

What has this experiment produced in the three years I’ve been using this approach? Better writing, according to both my departmental and personal assessment models based on departmentally developed rubrics. More important, it produced

students who had a sense of who they were, and why they were here. Students who are not English majors continue to stop by my office, and a large group of them decided to have a reunion at my house this past winter.

Teaching the journey requires us to confront ourselves as teachers and as people before we ever step a foot in the classroom. It demands that we be our best selves for our students. And at its best, teaching the journey allows us to walk with our students, if only briefly, as we traverse the rocky ground beneath our feet together.

Appendix

English 101: Unit I
The Journey to Self

Readings:

Columbo, Gary, ed. *Mind Readings: An Anthology for Writers*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. "What is the Self?" Columbo 264-282.

Housden, Roger. "The Only Life You Can Save." 11-20.

---. *Ten Poems to Change Your Life*. New York: Harmony Books, 2001.

Oliver, Mary. "The Journey." Housden 9-10.

Sapolsky, Robert. "Ego Boundaries, or the Fit of My Father's Shirt." Columbo 254-263.

Unit Essay: The Journey to Self

In this essay, you will explore who you are right now. Here are some questions (not in any particular order) to get you started. The answers to these may or may not appear in your final essay, but they will provide material for your double entry journal, and may, in turn, give you some ideas about what you want to put in your essay.

What's important in you life right now?

Where are you headed in your life?

If you could change something about yourself, what would it be?

What people/places/events have been influential in your life?

What do your friends think about you?

How do your family's ideas about you differ from your ideas about yourself?

What stories do your family members and friends tell about you? What do these stories reveal?

What books, movies, television shows have influenced you?

Who are your heroes?

Research:

Research is simply finding, reading (or listening to or watching), and using the materials that help us answer important questions. For the purposes of this essay, you might use the following:

- Books you've read that have meaning for you
- Papers you wrote in high school
- Your high school yearbook
- Interviews with family members and friends
- Diaries, journals
- Home videos
- Photographs
- The assigned readings for this class
- Homework exercises and in-class writing
- Discussions with your classmates and friends
- Stories that reveal something important about you
- Letters or e-mails to you or from you
- Your Web site

Audience: Other young people in the process of finding themselves

Length: About seven printed pages.

Format: 12 pt. New Times Roman font
1 inch margins
First page formatted to look like page 371 in *A Writer's Reference*
Any outside sources you quote, paraphrase, summarize, or use should have a parenthetical citation and appear in the list of works cited at the end of the essay. (Again, check the sample paper that begins on p. 371 in *A Writer's Reference*.)

Additional: Check your syllabus for what should be included in your Unit I Folder.

© 2005 by Diane Henningfeld