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Road Trip

Self-Directed Field Work as a Learning Journey

When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about.

—German saying¹

Back when I taught the mandatory research paper in freshman composition class, I would start by asking students to take out a piece of paper and write some answers to the following question: *What do you want to know?* This exercise, which I'd read about in a book on teaching composition, had two purposes.² First, it got students to generate some material out of which a promising research question might eventually be developed. Second, it sent the message that while the research paper might appear to be a tedious, time-consuming academic exercise, it was really an opportunity to use research techniques and expository writing to explore a subject that had piqued their curiosity. Despite the laudable intentions and tactical cleverness of this approach, I don't recall that it generated a great deal of intellectual ferment among my students or paved the way to many memorable essays.

The students and I shared the blame for these disappointing results. Most of the freshmen coming into George Mason University, a state school in Virginia, hadn't arrived with well-developed intellectual lives. As a result, their answers to the question *What do you want to know?* rarely translated easily into promising research questions. Probably another instructor, more skilled and motivated than I, could have helped students uncover the hidden potential in their answers. I don't doubt that the author who'd invented the idea I borrowed, an experienced and committed teacher, got good results with this approach. Part of what prevented me from helping students do better work was my lack of excitement about the whole enterprise. As a graduate student in the university's creative

writing program, I had serious doubts about the conventional research essay, wondering if students could really use this format to produce interesting and rewarding written work. I sometimes felt less like a teacher than a writing cop charged with the job of leaning on students to form passable topic sentences and use their sources responsibly.

Now I'm a full-time teacher at George Mason, where I've joined the faculty of New Century College, an integrative-studies program with a strong commitment to alternative pedagogies and experiential education. Students in my writing-intensive classes still do research projects. Instead of asking them what they want to know, I now ask them where they want to go. I'm much more satisfied with the results.

In this essay I will discuss Road Trip, a semester-long research and writing project that centers upon a self-directed journey. Students complete the Road Trip project to earn one of the two experiential learning credits in a six-credit, co-taught literature and history course called Roads and Rivers: American Landscapes in Fiction, Film, and History. This project showcases some of the challenges and many of the rewards that independent field work projects create for students and teachers alike. As a teacher I have been intrigued and heartened to see how "road work" promotes intellectual growth and overall maturity in students by intensifying their engagement with course materials, blurring the often too-rigid boundary between the classroom and the "real" world and helping to redefine the student-teacher relationship. As a *writing* teacher I am particularly interested in the ways the project helps students develop as writers by increasing their investment in what they write, by reinforcing the process-oriented approach to writing, and by highlighting various ways writing can be used as a powerful way of knowing.

I will begin by briefly describing the Road Trip assignment, which opens with a question and a promise. The assignment sheet asks students where they want to go and tells them they will create a piece of writing that could end up on the Roads and Rivers syllabus, which is dedicated to American journey-based narratives and historical studies of important American waterways and roadways. Early in the semester students submit a brief proposal in which they describe the trip they wish to take, articulate at least three learning objectives, and discuss their plans for research they will do before, during, and after the trip. A note on the assignment sheet reminds students that research can take many forms, depending on the nature of the project. In addition to tracking down books, articles, and web sites that deal with their topics, many will want to visit local

museums and information centers, view films, interview people, and consider searching for archival materials such as photographs and maps.

After receiving feedback and final approval of proposals from faculty, students undertake the journeys they proposed. The next writing they submit is a follow-up report in which they give a narrative account of the trip, evaluate their learning in light of the objectives they spelled out in the proposal, report on research completed so far, and comment on plans for additional research yet to be done. The last piece of the follow-up report is a proposal for the piece of research-based writing to be submitted at the end of the semester. While this piece must be rooted in solid, well-documented research, and must relate clearly to major themes and topics of the course, students choose the genre that best suits their material and their writing interests. Conventional research essays are welcome, as are personal essays, travelogues, short stories, narrative poems, film scripts, and anything else for which they can make a compelling case. Faculty respond to the follow-up reports with comments, questions, and suggestions. The class conducts a workshop on early drafts a couple of weeks before the end of the semester. On the last day of class students hand in the drafts that will be graded and then swap stories about their travels in brief, informal presentations.

I like to begin by asking students where they want to go because the question foregrounds choice and adumbrates a journey, a departure from familiar places and the old routine, a chance for liberation, for new sights, new people, new experiences. The road trip functions as a concrete experience with active, independent learning and, in many cases, as a metaphor for learning itself. Learning ought to be something we choose to do, not something others impose upon us. In this assignment students choose their destinations, their routes, their means of travel, and the company (if any) they will take along. They define their learning objectives and decide how best to relate these objectives to course texts and themes. They choose the kinds of research that best suit their individual learning enterprises. While on the road, they choose how disciplined they will be about executing their learning plans in the face of the distractions and complications that inevitably arise. They also decide which genre best fits their material when the time comes to transform it into a formal piece of writing.

With all of this freedom comes an equal amount of responsibility. This, to me, is a main point of the assignment. For many people, college can act as the critical stage in the transition from the highly structured classrooms and curricula of elementary and secondary school to the much more fluid

learning situations of adulthood. The New Century College motto is "Connecting the classroom to the world." Road Trip promotes this connection not only by sending students out of the classroom and into the "world" but also by helping prepare students to make the most of the independent, "lifelong" learning opportunities that await them after graduation. A crucial part of this preparation is adopting the notion that close observation, thoughtful reflection, and in-depth analysis are activities one can and should do off campus and after hours, outside the usual school settings. No teacher accompanies students on the road to make sure they do the observation, inquiry, and information gathering that will assist them later when they sit down to write. Faculty are available to give feedback on proposals and drafts, ask questions, make suggestions, and offer encouragement. We try our best to avoid (or at least limit) the looming and handholding typical of many well-intentioned teachers, since such behaviors tend to undermine students' sense of autonomy and responsibility.

Road Trip creates a context in which students can see faculty as sounding boards as well as grade givers, as writing coaches as well as writing judges. There are other ways the assignment promotes important shifts in the teacher-student relationship and the learning environment. Roads and Rivers is a carefully orchestrated class developed by a teaching team with a clear agenda regarding course content. Like most teachers, my partner and I have strong opinions about materials that must be covered and concepts we want students to take away from our course. Throughout the semester we model approaches to course materials that become very familiar to students. Road Trip gives students an opportunity to develop their own ways of engaging course content and allows them to model their approaches for each other. Students come to value writing workshops not just for the feedback they receive on their own work but also for the chance to see how others are handling the assignment. Students frequently propose projects and adopt research and writing strategies faculty haven't imagined before. In more traditional courses, instruction tends to flow one way, from teachers to students. Road Trip helps complicate and improve upon this pattern by opening alternative channels.

We all know how much better we learn and perform when we're invested in the work we're doing. I have observed that students quickly become invested in their Road Trip projects. In part this reflects their eagerness to get away and explore. But I believe they also take seriously the task of justifying all the choices they make, explaining how the trips they propose will provide valuable learning experiences and enrich their

engagement of course content. Students in Roads and Rivers often see a clear connection between their work on the Road Trip project and their involvement with the course as a whole. One student used her family's annual Rosh Hashanah trip from northern Virginia to New York as an occasion to explore the history of Jewish New Year observances in her family and in Jewish culture generally. She later commented in her self-evaluation that "Road Trip helped me to better understand the focus of the class." A student who wrote on the bridges of Pittsburgh noticed that "after completing my trip I found it easier to relate with characters from our course texts."

The possibility of writing something that future Roads and Rivers students will read may also help spark students' enthusiasm. But a bigger reason for the faculty's pledge to include selected student works on next year's syllabus is to situate the writing they do through this project in the long history of journey-based writing in and about America. Through their writing, students jump into a conversation that began in the fifteenth century. They can't simply eavesdrop from the margins. Thus the context in which they write goes well beyond the boundaries of our class, which helps to reduce the arbitrary (or "fake," as one of my colleagues bluntly puts it) quality that tarnishes so many assignments students do. Also, while class discussions and weekly essay assignments promote close analytical reading of course texts, the Road Trip assignment spurs students to read *as writers*. They look to course readings to model research tactics, genres, and writing styles, as well as styles and philosophies of travel.

No successful piece of writing is born overnight. This is why writing teachers around the country have come to embrace the process-oriented approach to writing instruction, which requires students to build a piece of writing in distinct stages and allows faculty to respond to one or more pieces of preliminary work before students submit the draft that receives a grade. Obviously, the Road Trip assignment's structure and extended time frame reflect strong faculty investment in the process-oriented approach to writing instruction. Two years of Roads and Rivers students have voiced unanimous support for the assignment's basic structure, echoing one peer's view that "the stages of the project were beneficial. They kept us working on the project through the semester." Also, many students have reported benefits that speak more directly to writing issues. "My original ideas changed so much from start to end," reported a student who studied the displacement of families during the creation of Shenandoah National Park, "that my essay would have been much less thought-out and evaluated if it weren't in stages." As another succinctly

put it, "the stages helped me to figure out what the final paper was going to be about."

The Road Trip assignment underscores the value of the process-oriented approach even for students in New Century College, many of whom are well acquainted with it already. Having a journey at the heart of the project helps to sharpen the outlines of each stage in the research and writing process. The proposal, a standard component of any research assignment, takes on special concreteness when it centers on a journey. For many students, planning a research project can seem far less intimidating and exotic when it is mostly a matter of planning a trip. As the trip takes shape, it gives a student a sturdy peg on which to hang her learning objectives and research plans. A student who investigated the geographical reasons for Richmond's selection as the Confederate capital put it this way: "The proposal gave my trip a focus before I left." Of course, not all travelers stay entirely wedded to their proposals. The student who traced cultural currents along a West Virginia stretch of the New River ended up seeing her proposal as the expendable scaffolding she used in climbing to where the real work was: "It was very interesting to see the differences between what I planned and what I did." No matter how they use the proposal, students can apply their insights about this stage of the writing process to their future research projects.

Research is always an active mode of learning, no matter what form it takes. Students may overlook this while parked at the library table or in front of the computer. On the road, however, they vividly experience research as action. They commonly show great enthusiasm for this "hands-on" work and claim a strong preference for it. Road Trip veterans typically report that going to a place they've read about makes it "come alive," makes it "real." In some cases the journey ignites a burning interest in a topic or piece of territory. For example, a student who researched the C&O Canal had only a lukewarm interest in the topic before she traveled the length of the canal, stopping at various information centers to speak with knowledgeable rangers, one of whom suggested she check out the Paw Paw tunnel. Walking almost two miles of tunnel without the aid of a light was—pardon the pun—a rite of passage that changed this student's whole orientation to her project. The C&O Canal, and the Paw Paw Tunnel in particular, became obsessions for her. She made multiple trips back to the canal, tracked down leads at museums and historical sites around the region, and read everything she could find about the canal. At the end of the semester she wrote, "I know more about the C&O Canal than my grandfather does. That has got to say something!"

What I like most about this student's story is that her time on the canal inspired her to pursue other lines of inquiry. As engaging as field work can be, it's important for students to keep in mind that experiential research is neither an end in itself nor a mere matter of confirming the truth of what they've read. Field work is one among many kinds of research. In teaching the Road Trip assignment, faculty must work to assure that several different kinds of research play into projects so that students have a chance to see how material from different sources can help inform a robust and complicated understanding of a topic. This assignment creates opportunities for students to experience research as a dynamic and often dialogic process of critical engagement with multiple modes of inquiry. Information from one kind of source may confirm, clarify, amplify, question, discredit, or otherwise affect one's understanding of information from another kind of source. When reading students' self-evaluations, I'm always on the lookout for evidence that this is happening. Thus I was encouraged when the student who wrote an amusing and well-researched personal essay on the commercialization of the Amish country reported that his time in the field caused him "to see the information in books differently." I was also heartened to hear from a student who wanted to know when and why Baltimore supplanted Annapolis as Maryland's premier city. He admitted that he "really didn't know what I needed to read until I'd gone on the trip." Finally, I was intrigued by the reflections of the student who researched the people displaced by Shenandoah National Park. She had hiked into several active excavation sites as a way of "creating a connection with my subject." This connection ultimately amounted to a moral obligation to investigate her topic carefully, a charge she expressed in a much better pun than mine: "After my trip I couldn't take the superficial approach to library research. It caused me to dig."

The follow-up report due after conclusion of the trip basically serves the same purpose as an evaluation of research, a crucial thing to do before one begins drafting a research-based piece of writing. In this case, students mainly look upon the follow-up report as a chance to tell their stories, refining their "front-line" journal entries into coherent accounts of where they went, what they saw, what they learned. This recounting creates a natural context in which to report on their success (or lack of it) in meeting learning objectives, to identify new lines of inquiry their trips have suggested to them, to evaluate the research they have done to date, and to discuss any follow-up work that awaits them. All of this sifting through the material prepares students to do some productive thinking about what genre suits the material best. It also gives faculty an excellent

chance to check students' progress and review their work in detail at a stage when students still have plenty of time to respond productively to clarifying questions and suggestions about research or writing strategies.

As we have seen, some students will repeat their trips to do follow-up research. But in most cases they have finished traveling once they begin drafting the more formal piece of writing the assignment requires. Still, I try to ensure that travel continues to figure into what they write, not only at the level of content but also through analogy to the writing process. The Road Trip project creates all kinds of natural opportunities to bring up the analogy between writing and travel. What I like most about this analogy is that it helps to characterize writing as an *activity*, a means by which we can explore, investigate, wander, seek, tour, survey, roam, and discover without having to leave our chairs. I doubt I'm the only writer who sometimes daydreams about skipping over what some composition specialists call the "discovery" process, wishing I could arrive at the end product without going through the false starts, treacherous turns, alluring cul de sacs, bewildering intersections, hard hills, lazy interludes, and other familiar features that lengthen the writer's road. Those who share my affliction tend to be more patient (or accepting, at least) when they can relate writing to a semi-improvisational mode of travel in which the traveler maps out a basic itinerary, has a destination in mind, but remains open to promising side-paths, unexpected events, new company, and surprising discoveries. Like many writing teachers, I wish far more of my students had a realistic grasp of the time it takes to develop a successful piece of writing. Students tend to better hear my claims about the time writing takes when travel is involved. One can no more produce a rich piece of writing in a couple of hours, I tell them, than one can expect to reach Okracoke Island in the blink of an eye. Writing projects, like journeys, unfold in stages. Students can profit from thinking of their projects as things with legs.

The Road Trip project also helps students to see the integral role writing often plays in the thinking process and creates excellent opportunities for students to experience writing as a powerful and versatile way of knowing. In their proposals students use writing to frame and structure a learning experience, creating a preliminary map for themselves before departure. On the road they do extensive "front-line" work, using their travel journals to capture observations, record lived experience, answer the questions they came with, and form new questions triggered by unfolding events. The follow-up report requires that they use writing to narrate and evaluate their trips, which means they must pore back through

and refine the raw material in their journals. Writing is also the means by which students revise learning objectives and research strategies based on their findings so far.

To me some of the most intriguing thinking and writing students do in the follow-up report revolves around selecting a genre for the more formal piece of writing they will produce next. Genre selection really highlights writing's versatility as a way of knowing. How is a short story different from a research paper? What can I do in a personal essay that I can't do in a short story? What is a travelogue, anyway? Which of these genres best fits the research I've done, my writing interests, my intellectual goals? Many students have never confronted such questions. While they probably have some experience writing in multiple genres, past teachers have always told them what they are going to write. Leaving the genre open thus lifts the veil from a part of writing that many students have never seen or considered before. This can be an empowering experience, or a bewildering one. As I like to say, independence has two faces.

Student reactions to having a choice of genres have ranged from indifference to strong enthusiasm. A significant portion of the class typically decides early on to do a conventional research paper. They explain this choice as a matter of doing what's already familiar or, more persuasively, of choosing the genre they see as most suitable for conveying their material. "A research paper was the best way to communicate all the history," explained a student who wrote an exceptional essay on the Cumberland Gap's role in United States history. Not surprisingly, a main challenge facing the people who opt to try another genre is working researched material into a piece of writing they think of as "creative" and "personal." One of our fiction writers made masterful use of an early colonist's voice (and spelling) to recount an exploratory trip up the James River. He struggled to cover his own tracks, allowing that "the most difficult part of the assignment was deciding how to incorporate so much history and factual information into the journal entries of a fictional character without sounding too fake." Several students who attempted personal essays encountered similar difficulties. "I have never written a personal essay that contained research," said the student who wrote about a trip to Harper's Ferry. "It was hard tying in my research." The student who wrote on the New River reported wanting "to provide history and a personal account. I changed the order a million times."

My reaction to news of such struggles is mostly proud and positive. When a writer is changing the order a "million" times, she is deeply involved in what she's doing. Moreover, this writer's struggle to find the

best way to present "personal" with "historical" material demonstrates how a problem in the writing process can mirror a stage in the process of intellectual development. The challenge of effectively weaving "academic" research into a "personal" story causes many students in our course to work against and perhaps question the restrictive compartments that have traditionally shaped their learning habits and defined their capacities. Sometimes this struggle makes for awkward patches in the writing, but these are easy to forgive when one considers what's at stake.

Forgiveness is of course good, but faculty would better serve student writers by providing more concrete help at an earlier stage in the process. Probably the biggest change we need to make in Road Trip is the way we teach the past student writing we include in the syllabus. It's not enough to refer students to these writings as models of the kinds of work they might strive to produce. We need to spend substantial class time discussing diverse examples of student work. This would help students start the project with a better feel for what the assignment is asking them to do and some basic familiarity with the various genres available to them. They ought to have a good idea of the challenges one faces while writing in a particular genre, as well as the potential rewards. This will help reduce the stress-level and probably improve the writing of those trying something new. It should also reduce the number of students who choose to do the conventional research paper only because it's the safest option.

There are other matters we should foreground better as well. Without dampening students' excitement about doing their own trips, we need to warn them about the potential dangers of self-directed field research. While many students do their very best work on Road Trip, a small but significant number have done their poorest work on this assignment. Apparently these students have a hard time functioning productively without the structure that more conventional assignments and courses provide. In some cases this can't be avoided; but I think certain students who are at risk of getting tangled in the slack Road Trip offers might be able to respond if greater attention were paid in class to practical matters such as the importance of planning and choice of travel company, along with more abstract matters such as the "two faces" of independent field work. Some students get so swept away by the attractions of self-directed travel that they never consider the responsibilities that come with their freedom—until it's too late. With all the readings and films we have to discuss in class, it's easy to let the experiential part of the course remain "off-stage." We need to make more effort to ensure that students' experiences with Road Trip become a visible thread in the week-to-week fabric of the course. We let

students down if we don't capitalize on the opportunities Road Trip creates for discussing the nuts and bolts of travel as well as the values, challenges, and potential pitfalls of independent experiential learning.

Thus far, the only formal opportunities Roads and Rivers students have had to learn about their peers' travels are when they workshop early drafts and when they give their brief presentations on their trips the last day of class. These events provide strong evidence in favor of increasing the amount of class time devoted to student road trips. Students delight in sharing their adventures and misadventures with peers, and they like hearing about the kinds of trips others are taking and seeing the kinds of writing that classmates are doing. Here we see a surprising and somewhat paradoxical benefit of incorporating an independent project like Road Trip into a college course: the research and travel students do for this project ends up making us more of a community than we would be otherwise. Like denizens of a small town or village, students return from their journeys with news about what's happening elsewhere, about places to avoid and places that mustn't be missed. They offer advice on how—and how not—to travel. They teach each other and learn from each other. They laugh. They commiserate. They are what members of every college course probably ought to be—a community of travelers.

Notes

1. Quoted in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 84.

2. Bruce Ballenger, "Teaching the Research Paper," *Nuts and Bolts*, ed. Thomas Newkirk (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1993), 129–50.

PART III: Field Considerations

Issues to Consider in Planning and Execution