The Ethnographic Research Paper:
Helping First-Year Students Develop Authority and Rhetorical Understanding of Sources

By Karla Knutson

Preface: This article describes an ethnographic research assignment created to help first-year college students practice rhetorical source use and develop expertise necessary to argue for a thesis with confidence. However, this study may be interesting to educators of other levels of education, particularly those teaching middle and high school who introduce the research process to students long before they enter college and who often assign ethnographies. It also may be useful to readers who teach upper-level college writing courses requiring research, as I have found it helpful to employ some of these techniques when teaching ethnographic research in a higher-level course.

The traditional research paper, a lengthy, formal, written document employing evidence from multiple scholarly sources to support an arguable thesis or explain an issue, often is a dreaded task for both students enrolled in and instructors of first-year college composition courses. James C. McDonald calls this common assignment "the 400-pound gorilla in the first-year composition course, probably the most institutionalized undergraduate writing assignment in higher education" (137-38). In a presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1992, Bruce Ballenger also used a vivid metaphor to describe it: "The research paper, a fixture in most college composition courses and many secondary school English classes, is for many instructors and students like the annoying uncle who shows up at the wedding. He had to be invited, but you really wish he had stayed home. With what seems rare

exception, the assignment elicits groans from students and sighs from their teachers, or worse." Ballenger offered an historical overview of attitudes toward the research paper, concluding that in journal articles published between approximately 1930 and 1992, scholars write of the research paper in "a fairly consistent tone, one of apology and complaint," though their reactions pale in comparison to the "venom many students summon when reflecting on their experiences writing research papers."

Through interviews with both parties, Robert A. Schwegler and Linda K. Shamoon identified a significant discrepancy between students' and instructors' perception of the purpose of the research paper: "Students view the research paper as a close-ended, informative, skills-oriented exercise written for an expert audience by novices pretending to be experts. . . . Academics, on the other hand, view the research paper as open-ended and interpretive, written for an audience of fellow inquirers" (820). Further scholarship has noted reasons for this discrepancy. For example, in Jennie Nelson's study of twenty-one students assigned varying process requirements during research paper projects at Carnegie Mellon University, a student describes the assignment as essentially constructive: "'Since it's a research paper, I will barely write anything of my own so it is basically an organization process'" (11). A 2009 Project Information Literacy report also offers a partial explanation of student dissatisfaction, confirming what Schwegler and Shamoon assert about how students see information literacy as a skill, as a "competency learned by rote" (Head and Eisenberg 1). Students may conceptualize a research project more simply than their instructors wish, as a skill-based task rather than a process of inquiry driven by genuine curiosity about a topic, because in Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz's terms, they are "required to become master builders while they are still apprentices . . . They are asked to develop expertise in new subjects and methodologies, while still learning how to handle

the tools of these disciplines and decipher their user's manuals" (132). As a result, they often rely on sources to provide evidence because they do not feel they have developed enough expertise to argue for an original claim about the paper topic, as a student in Sommers and Saltz's study of writing's role in the education of first-year college students notes: "'I feel it is safer to use authorities who know what they are talking about'" (133). This article outlines my strategy to address these common student preconceptions about the research paper and help them understand the pedagogical purpose and advantages of integrating research in their writing.

Despite the frustrations of both instructors and students, the traditional research paper has been a staple of the first-year college composition course since the early twentieth century (Ballenger). Several national studies support the assignment's ubiquity in first-year writing programs. Ambrose N. Manning's 1961 article, "The Present Status of the Research Paper in Freshman English: A National Survey," details the results of his survey suggesting that 83% of American colleges and universities required a research paper in their first-year composition courses (73). James E. Ford and Dennis R. Perry conducted a subsequent study approximately twenty years later, indicating in an article published in 1982 that "research paper instruction is currently being offered in 84.09% of freshman composition programs and in 40.03% of advanced composition programs" (827).

However, Carra Leah Hood's 2010 article advocates for assigning alternative research assignments rather than the traditional research paper, which she defines as "an informal or explanatory piece of writing that reviews a prescribed number of sources." Her survey, designed to continue and expand the work of Manning and Ford and Perry, gauges the types of research assignments used in composition programs across the nation, and the results "reveal an overwhelming shift" to alternative research assignments, which, she notes, is commensurate with

trends in scholarship since 1990. As I will discuss below, it also resonates with my teaching experience and subsequent pedagogical choices. Most significantly, this shift attempts to addresses the problem Richard L. Larson articulates in "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing." Larson questions the label "the research paper," calling it "generic" and "meaningless" because research pervades all forms of writing, "but it is itself the subject—the substance—of no distinctively identifiable kind of writing" (813). If instructors teach it as a discrete form of writing, students may assume some genres of writing require research and others do not (Larson 814), rather than learning to view research as an essential way of "gathering, interpreting, drawing upon, and acknowledging data from outside themselves" (Larson 815).

Alternative research assignments provide opportunities to alter the preconceived ideas about the purpose of research that students often bring to a first-year composition course. I use an ethnographic alternative research assignment to help students engage in research as a process of inquiry through which they discover answers to their questions and develop further questions about a particular group of people in the community. My alternative research assignment is designed to combat two primary struggles students have with researched writing. One is the issue of expertise and authority. Research papers become overwhelming to a student when the writer does not have or feel she or he has enough expertise to draw upon to craft a cogent argument. The second, related difficulty is students' conceptualization of source use as a skill to be demonstrated. I am interested in expanding how my students use sources, in helping them see how each source a writer selects fulfills a rhetorical purpose in her paper. In this article, I will outline my ethnographic research assignment, instructional methods, and rationale for how my methods address these two common struggles.

At Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, first-year students enroll in a one-semester composition course called Inquiry Written Communication or IWC during either first or second semester. In IWC, students must write three papers, two of which must be primarily comprised of field research and library research, respectively. In my class, these two papers are linked. Students first write an ethnography using only field research, called the field research essay, in which they argue for an interpretive claim about how a community group thinks about an aspect of their cultural knowledge or behavior and use the vivid narrative accounts of participant observation and information gathered through interviews as evidence. Students then analyze the data they have presented, reflecting, for example, on why they focused on the claim they chose or what parts of their field research demonstrate limitations. In the second of the two linked assignments, students revise their field research essay into a longer and more detailed ethnography, offering a chance for sustained engagement in a transferable revision process. The expanded ethnography also incorporates library research, allowing for practice in selecting and integrating academically-authorized sources.

The field research students conduct for these linked assignments provides the students with the chance to develop significant authority over their topic and the confidence to compose their eventual argument. Sommers and Saltz identify students' recognition of the intrinsic benefits and purpose of writing for themselves and their audience as the "most significant paradigm shift of the freshman year" (139). They also assert that faculty can facilitate this paradigm shift by crafting "real intellectual tasks" that draw upon students' interests (140). In the field research essay, my students write about a group interesting to them in the wider Fargo-Moorhead-West Fargo community. These groups, called microcultures, include groups with a shared identity, like Goths, occupations, organizations, and people bounded by shared space, for

example, at a coffeehouse or a public park. To facilitate the process of selecting a microculture, I offer examples of microcultures studied by previous students, point them to community websites and resources to get ideas about the possibilities of microcultures existing in the area, and have students engage in a variety of in-class invention activities. These include a guided brainstorming activity, during which students list current trends, activities people do in groups, spaces in which people use the space similarly, existing microcultures in any community, and the microcultures to which each student already belongs. In the class session following this activity, students meet with a librarian to help them use the library's resources to generate possible microcultures. Some of the most useful resources include contemporary encyclopedias such as *American Pop: Popular Culture Decade by Decade*, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures*, *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia***,** and *American Countercultures: An Encyclopedia of Nonconformists, Alternative Lifestyles, and Radical Ideas in U.S. History*. The session in the library also helps students combat preconceived ideas about library research only providing material to use in support of their argument.

I emphasize to my students that their interest in the group is paramount and can help them conduct research that is relevant to themselves and others, as Sommers and Saltz assert is important for first-year writers to learn (139). Ethnography offers a chance for students to follow their passions, whether burgeoning or long-term, to explore a professional field they are considering pursuing, or to satisfy curiosity about a group about which they have always or recently wondered. Students take this advice seriously. For example, one student studied the local Kiwanis club because his father and grandfather had been members for years, and the student always wondered what type of organization could make them commit to weekly 6:30 a.m. meetings for so many years. A student flummoxed by the pervasive popularity of the

Twilight series attended the midnight premiere and several subsequent screenings of one of the *Twilight* films in order to study the fans' behavior. Another student wanted to study journalists in accordance with her major, but finding the permission process too lengthy, shifted directions to study cellists, as she herself recently take begun taking cello lessons. Other students have studied people in the students' prospective future professions, such as physical therapists, special education teachers, and youth ministers. Even groups of people bounded by physical space are selected because of personal interest; one student's grandfather spent each morning at a diner with several friends and welcomed the student researcher to join them, while another student from a rural area found himself fascinated by the culture of coffeehouses in Fargo-Moorhead and learned more about the role of these gathering spaces in larger cities.

Students' personal interest also leads to increased engagement in their process of conducting field research. After I approve their written proposal and teach the field research techniques of interview and participant observation, they have several weeks to spend collecting data by asking questions of their own design during a minimum of four interviews and at least five hours of participant observation. Field research helps students practice sundry transferable skills, including analyzing their audience in order to approach unknown people, politely requesting those people's time and effort, engaging with them in ethical ways, composing questions designed to elicit useful information about the microculture's way of life, observing tacit and explicit cultural knowledge present in group interaction and nonverbal contexts, and interpreting meanings of seemingly ordinary things. Concordia's Institutional Review Board does not require these student ethnographies to go through a formal IRB review because the projects are not going to be published. During class, however, we read about and discuss IRB policies, ethical considerations essential to conducting ethnographic research with human

informants, and how written ethnographies present their interpretive claims about a group in ways that represent the group positively. Our course textbook, *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society* by David W. McCurdy, James P. Spradley, and Dianna J. Shandy, provides an excellent, accessible description of the history of ethnography and the ethnographer's ethical responsibilities when approaching, requesting permission, interacting with, and writing about a microculture.

Most importantly, conducting field research helps students develop expertise through their ownership of their data. They draft questions, do the field research independently, and interact with the group members regularly. Spending time with a group of people about whom students are curious helps them become invested in and knowledgeable about the lives of the group members and able to speak confidently about the group's concerns and values. During individual conferences and class periods, I ask questions about what students are discovering about their groups and designate time during class for students to share with their peers what they are learning. During these conversations, students can be heard using phrases such as "This fascinating thing happened in my group the other day," "There's this really cool guy in my group. He said…," "They've invited me to this event," and "They offered me a job for next semester." Though it is anecdotal evidence, I can attest that I hear these last two statements frequently, as students who have heeded the advice to pursue an interest actively engage with the group studied and often join it in some fashion after their work ends. My purpose for these sharing sessions is to remind students that what they have discovered about their groups is relevant data that will be interesting and important to their readers, just as it is to their immediate audience of peers.

The ownership students feel when collecting their own field data also assists them in developing a thesis. Writing an ethnographic field research paper requires students to practice critical thinking habits essential to any research-based and thesis-driven writing; the researcher must employ a discovery-oriented model of research, suspending judgment about his or her conclusions about the group until the research has been conducted. Because the thesis of an ethnography is a description of what a piece of cultural knowledge or behavior means to the particular group studied, it only can be developed after collecting and analyzing field research. Students learn to recognize themselves as authorities about their microculture by sharing with others during class sessions, during workshops helping them analyze their notes to identify possible cultural themes that could be the foundation for thesis statements, and through conferences on their thesis with me. During these conferences, I ask students to bring a tentative thesis and ask them questions about how they identified this thesis, what evidence they have collected in support of it, and how the group would react to that particular interpretation. Asking questions of the students reminds them that they are the experts on this group and have something to teach their readers, something that does not exist anywhere but in their experiences and notes.

The thesis of the ethnographic field research paper thus provides students with an opportunity to develop the competency to argue for an original claim. This assignment also addresses the long-standing student concern about the research paper that it is difficult to draft an original argument without enough expertise in a topic. This refrain has echoed since at least 1941, when Harry N. Rivlin reported the results of a survey of students assigned to write on specific topics, who "condemned the ridiculous attempt at being original when they knew so little about the subject that they were not entitled to an original opinion" (318). Instead of being

overwhelmed by a lack of knowledge, my students actively create it themselves, crafting the instruments for collecting their data, conducting their own research, composing an original thesis, and arguing authoritatively for this claim using the narrative descriptions and quotations from interviews collected in their field notes as evidence.

The second of the two linked ethnographic papers is a revision assignment, called the revised ethnography using library research. Students revise their field research paper with four changes to the rhetorical situation: this paper is three to four pages longer, written for an audience of college professors instead of their classmates, refutes and possibly concedes at least one counterargument, and incorporates at least four written, scholarly sources accessed through the college's library. Adding library research during the revision process rather than during the original composition of the ethnographic field research paper benefits students by helping them learn to draw on their expertise and to think rhetorically about using sources. Students who conceptualize a research paper as a review of what others have written about a topic or who feel unable to add to a scholarly conversation without reaching a threshold of expertise are empowered by collecting their own data. They are able to compose a paper using content they created from their increased expertise, avoiding the reliance on sources that is a hallmark of the inability to produce an "extensive generation of content [. . .] if the writer does not have relevant knowledge to draw on" (Spivey 280). Instead, the students' field research supplies the content of their paper and the support for their thesis. As Kerry Dirk notes, many students' previous use of sources has been limited to harnessing support for their thesis; however, this is an unlikely use of academic sources in ethnographic writing because the students' claims are about the particular microcultures they studied personally. This assignment therefore requires

students to use library research in different ways, helping them understand that sources serve varying rhetorical purposes in an argument.

To facilitate this recognition, I dedicate a class period to discussing library research with special attention to comparing and contrasting it with field research. We discuss how primary and secondary sources are defined differently in different contexts and fields, and how the rhetorical situation determines the use of sources in any assignment incorporating research. To begin thinking about library research's role in an ethnography, I offer a handout designed to be transferable to research students do in other classes and contexts, but with advice specifically tailored to help them conceptualize this assignment as well. It begins with a description of the various purposes sources serve in a written text:

> Ways to use library sources in your writing:
> 1) As evidence to support your claims
> 2) To provide a position that conflicts with your point, against which you then argue
> 3) To provide background information (for example, of historical situations or cultural contexts; i.e. explaining the history of the Eucharist to a Catholic microculture about which you argued that community was a central value)
> 4) To provide theoretical underpinning of ideas (like the theories about the definition of home in the ethnography of RVing seniors)

I emphasize that because their field research provides the primary support for their original thesis about a group no one else has studied, the last three ways to use sources are more likely issues they will need to address in their papers. In addition, we discuss how library material may possibly provide support for their claims, primarily if it offers corroboration of the ethnographer's findings as being true in other manifestations of this group, possibly in ethnographies, newspaper profiles, news stories, or feature articles about related groups, or other research about the ideology of the group. For example, published research on Starbucks often confirms the value of customer service many students have observed in a local Starbucks. The

handout also gives students examples of how four sources would fulfill four different rhetorical purposes in hypothetical papers we have used as examples throughout the course:

> For example, if you were writing an ethnography on the Goth subculture, you might use a source to explain the types and meaning of the clothing they wear, another on the history of this group, a third on attitudes toward the Goth subculture, and a fourth on current events that have influenced the group. Or if you were writing about first-year college students and arguing that computers are the microculture's most important artifact, you might use a source offering statistics about computer usage in US colleges, another on computer usage among students on other continents, a third on other types of electronic devices important to college students (maybe as a concession to advocates of the cellular phone's importance), and a fourth explaining a computer application commonly used by the group but with which you and/or your audience are not familiar (Excel, a program for film editing, a video-messaging service, etc.).

To further reinforce these types of source use, we read a sample paper from a former student, and in the class discussion, students are required to identify what type of rhetorical purpose each piece of source material fulfills in that paper.

The next class session is in the library, facilitated by both me and our librarian, and we require that students leave that period with at least two potential sources. During the last ten minutes of the class period, the students complete a generative writing activity during which they reflect on how they initially intend to use these sources in their paper, identifying what rhetorical purpose they see it fulfilling. When they submit an annotated bibliography to me, their annotations address the source's purpose as well, and my grading rubric (which they have prior

to completing the assignment) and feedback are designed to help students satisfy the various purposes necessary for making their paper's argument. My graded comments on their field research essay also frequently identify ideas and locations in their essay that would benefit from context, background information, or theoretical explanation during the revision assignment.

Through these activities, steps in the writing process, and personalized feedback, this linked ethnographic assignment strives to help first-year students reconceptualize source use, as Margaret Kantz advocates in her 1990 article, "Helping Students Use Textual Sources Persuasively." Kantz asserts, "Students need to read source texts as arguments and to think about the rhetorical contexts in which they were written rather than to read them merely as a set of facts to be learned" (78). My students not only practice reading source texts to identify their rhetorical contexts but also engage as writers, identifying the needs of their audience and addressing their rhetorical needs.

Of course, not all students immediately embrace this way of using sources. Some remain incredulous, for example, that they can use a source about safety on train-based public transit systems in a paper on bus culture in Fargo-Moorhead. But encouraging diversity in their library source use and incorporating it with their field research helps students begin to understand the wide ways in which people offer support for their ideas and helps them begin to be more flexible rhetorical thinkers. My hope is that my students are equipped to move into subsequent research assignments in a variety of contexts, having had the experience of confidently conducting research, arguing for an original claim, and finding scholarship that fleshes out that claim without burying it. I am encouraged to continue this method by both anecdotal experiences with my students, as well as verifiable ones, including two presentations by my first-year students during Concordia's Celebration of Student Scholarship, an all-day event sponsored by the Office

of Undergraduate Research. Ethnography provides students not only an alternative way to complete a research paper, but also an alternative, and more fruitful and transferable, way to think about the role of research in their lives and the world.

Works Cited

Ballenger, Bruce. "Rethinking the Research Paper." Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Cincinnati, OH. 19-21 March 1992. Address.

Dirk, Kerry. "The 'Research Paper' Prompt: A Dialogic Opportunity for Transfer." *Composition Forum* 25 (2012): n. pag. Web. 28 May 2014.

Ford, James E. and Dennis R. Perry. "Research Paper Instruction in the Undergraduate Writing Program." *College English* 44.8 (1982): 825-31. Print.

Head, Alison J. and Michael B. Eisenberg. "Lessons Learned: How College Students Seek Information in the Digital Age." *Project Information Literacy Progress Report: University of Washington Information School*. 1 Dec. 2009. Web. 25 June 2014.

Hood, Carra Leah. "Ways of Research: The Status of the Traditional Research Paper Assignment in First-year Writing/Composition Courses." *Composition Forum* 22 (2010): n. pag. Web. 25 June 2014.

Kantz, Margaret. "Helping Students Use Textual Sources Persuasively." *College English* 52.1 (1990): 74-91. Print.

Larson, Richard L. "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing." *College English* 44.8 (1982): 811-16. Print.

Manning, Ambrose N. "The Present Status of the Research Paper in Freshman English: A National Survey." *College Composition and Communication* 12 (1961): 73-78. Print.

McDonald, James C. "Coming to Terms with the Freshman Term Paper." *Reforming College Composition: Writing the Wrongs*. Ed. Ray Wallace, Alan Jackson, and Susan Lewis Wallace. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2000. 137-47. Print.

Nelson, Jennie. *Constructing a Research Paper: A Study of Students' Goals and Approaches.* Berkeley, CA: National Center for the Study of Writing at the University of California, Berkeley and Carnegie Mellon University, 1992. Print.

Rivlin, Harry N. "The Writing of Term Papers." *Journal of Higher Education* 13 (1942): 314-20. Print.

Schwegler, Robert A. and Linda K. Shamoon. "The Aims and Process of the Research Paper." *College English* 44.8 (1982): 817-24. Print.

Sommers, Nancy and Laura Saltz. "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year." *College Composition and Communication* 56.1 (2004): 124-49. Print.

Spivey, Nancy Nelson. "Transforming Texts: Constructive Processes in Reading and Writing." *Written Communication* 7.2 (1990): 256-87. Print.