LEARNING TO SURF THE SEA OF CONVERSATION: A WAY INTO MEANINGFUL RESEARCH

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Liven Up the Stack

When I teach composition courses, at least at first, I try as much as I can to avoid actually speaking the phrase, "research paper." As you've likely experienced, the students don't usually have much good to say on the matter of research projects. Take, for example, this excerpt from a collaboratively written paper by some of my students: "English Composition is a commonly dreaded class because it is generally thought of as the class that will provide the most work for a student. English Composition courses are notorious for long papers and lots of research."

As teachers, we're not always so excited about reading papers either. I imagine most of us have experienced the dread that can wash over us when faced with the chore of wading into a pool of ill-assigned student writing. We finish reading our tenth essay with maybe seventy–if we're lucky–to go, and we realize that because of the nature of our assignment, because of what we have or have not done, these essays, no matter how many of them there are, will read in very much the same way. Rather than complain to our colleagues about our students' lack of imagination, all of us–if we haven't already–should take our part of the responsibility for that fat stack of not-so-interesting papers that we have collected. I don't mean to say we own our students' writing, and I'm certainly not advocating tight structures and topic assignments that inundate our students in guidelines, but I believe as teachers we are stakeholders, probably majority stakeholders, in the environment which leads up to our students' writing.

A former professor of mine, Dr. Samuel Watson, shared a metaphor that drives my writing, teaching, and learning: "Writing floats on a sea of conversation." For me, in my late-twenties, beginning the second half of my first decade in education, it was a mysterious phrase which I have been unpacking ever since I first heard it. I note that when I am asked a question, I often have little to say. This experience, I imagine, is not so different from students who are asked what they are interested in. I talk with my students, I listen to my colleagues, and I put my thinking into contact with many voices, especially the voices that appear in texts written by other writers and teachers. As I read, I begin to find my thoughts. I realize my words are often more buoyant when they are in the company of the voices of others thinking upon related subjects. Suddenly, I find that I have a lot to say. My challenge is to figure out how to give my students some shade of that experience.

When it comes to this notion of writing and the metaphor of water, I now see that my professor Sam was speaking into a conversation that had been going on for a long while. I find this metaphor present in Kenneth Burke's *Philosophy of Literary Form* first published in 1941. Burke writes that "you listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar" (110). In my classroom, Burke's listening takes the form of reading, and I find that the reading is often a step that the students want to skip. In "Step by Step through the Scholarly Conversation," Anne-Marie Deitering and Sara Jameson explain that "to help our students understand the need to research before taking a position or narrowing a focus, both the FYC (First-Year Composition) faculty and the instruction librarians use the metaphor of conversation to demonstrate research and writing as recursive learning processes" (62). I invoke Sam's "sea of conversation" metaphor on the first day of class, and I take steps to insure that students read extensively as they begin to write.

I began to think hard about my students' writing when I was forced to read a lot of it. In Charlotte, North Carolina, it was a

graduation requirement for students to write a research paper of approximately eight pages, create a project–often coming in the form of a hastily prepared poster board–and give a presentation to a panel of teachers and community members. I taught four sections of seniors, over thirty students per class. This meant that I had 120 research papers to read, and read more than once if I had any conscience at all about empowering my students to do their work. I assigned the paper, taught a few lessons on MLA format, and in poured the results.

In that first stack of papers I collected, I read a lot of thinly researched projects about abortion, capital punishment, and violence in the media. I even read papers that came in late about procrastination, a clever idea if you're a student, but not so clever to the teacher who's seen it before. This lack of savvy on my students' part when it came to choosing a topic is not only a lesson in writing; it is also a lesson for reading. For the writer who doesn't read, it's a difficult proposition (practically impossible) to measure the originality or competence of what he or she has written. I share James Berlin's "[interest] in resisting the hierarchy of specialization that has separated the teaching of writing from the teaching of reading" (115). What is it that you have your students reading? What do those texts have to do with their writing? Is there a way your students can read a variety of successful texts written by your previous students? Although most of my students' projects back in Charlotte were fairly unoriginal–probably more my responsibility than theirs–I do remember a few for their excellence.

My student "Vicki" succeeded for reasons that didn't have much to do with me except perhaps that I tried to stay out of her way. Vicki, a softball player, had garnered for herself an athletic scholarship to attend college. Somehow, perhaps with the aid of a knowing parent, a helpful reference librarian, or a former teacher, Vicki found her way into her own story of playing sports and wove into that story the history of the United States law Title IX, which allowed women equal opportunity when it comes to collegiate athletics. Reading Vicki's paper, I was beginning to

form my own notions of what I valued in the writing of the students. The topic was organic to her intellectual interests and her writing was relevant to the life she was planning for herself.

In the classes I teach today, I introduce the notion that there ought to be a reward for the students' writing, such as the writer learns something, navigates a complex situation logically or emotionally, or experiences some satisfaction from trying something he or she has not done before. This seems to me to be an issue of relevance that my students' work ought to have some sort of influence on their lives. I want the writing that my students do in class to change their next Saturday night, their next year, or perhaps even the arc of the rest of their lives.

As I work to liven up the stacks of writing that come in for the length of each semester, let me admit to a bit of selfishness when it comes to my reading. If I were at home reading a text of my choice and began to find myself losing interest, I would abandon that text and move on to what I planned to read next. (Apologies to my mother, who seems to finish everything she starts.) Of course as the professor giving grades–so far, a fairly inescapable role for me–I can't very well toss off each text that doesn't interest me, and after all, isn't it one of my primary jobs to help students find their way into interesting and meaningful work? In addition to the course objectives that ask students to consider the rhetorical situation and work toward intellectual ambition, I ask the students to consider the following goals I have for my own reading of their work: (1) each time I turn a page of their text, I would like to have learned something, and (2) I want to read about a variety of topics. I see this variety described in "Transforming the One Shot Library Session into Pedagogical Collaboration" when Heidi and Dale Jacobs write that the subjects of their students' work "ranged from tattoos to mercury levels in fish, from steroid use in baseball to doctor shortages in Ontario, from Sudoku to MP3s, and from extreme sports to phytoestrogens" (78). Rather than read whole course sections of students working on literacy autobiographies, I prefer to read the

literacy autobiographies of the students who really want to write one.

Looking back to my student Vicki's work in Charlotte, I'm impressed that she was able to survey her own life, locate an area rich with her own story, and then conduct scholarly research. Many of our students can't do this without help, and while teaching in Charlotte, I had done little to enable the students who couldn't imagine this sort of assignment for themselves. Vicki's research enriched the personal nature of her story, and her paper was among the most pleasurable for me to read. Without research, Vicki couldn't have told me much that I didn't already know, but with it, she became an expert in the field, at least in comparison to her readers: myself, the faculty and staff of the high school, and her fellow students. As I've noted, one of the most rewarding and pleasurable features of reading can be the sensation that one is learning something, and it was Vicki's research that allowed her writing to have this particular payoff. Many students don't realize that they are only 30-50 pages of scholarly reading away from knowing much more about any given topic than most of the people around them.

Conversation Yes, But About What?

Today, when I begin to try and get my students to consider what they might write, we make lists in what Donald Murray calls "The Daybook" (10). As a high school and undergraduate student I was often bored with what I was assigned to read, and so I felt enlivened by Murray's conversational writing voice. He notes in *Write to Learn* that our daybooks should not be like his. He describes his daybook as "anything that will stimulate or record my thinking, anything that will move toward writing . . ." (10). Certainly one of the goals of my course is to stimulate thinking. What the daybook did for me was to make use of pen and paper to capture the many thoughts that would have otherwise zipped in and out of my consciousness like a billboard on the freeway. The daybook helps me record my thinking so it will be there, ready for use, when I sit down to read or write.

The starting place for the lists students and I make together in our daybooks begins with each of our lives and interests. Part of my desire to begin the research paper by asking the students questions about themselves and having them make lists in their daybooks comes from what I noticed about my student Vicki's paper, that she had a strong personal connection to her area of research, Title IX. Following the year Vicki was a student in my class, I took part in a National Writing Project summer institute, during which I was introduced to Ken Macrorie's 1988 *The I-Search Paper: Revised Edition of Searching Writing.* Certainly when I read that Macrorie believed students should "allow something to choose you that you want intensely to know about," I found much in common with what I was beginning to notice in work such as the piece Vicki had written in my class (62). I can trace my own affections for beginning with personal interests to the work of John Dewey, who wrote in "My Pedagogic Creed," that "the child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education" (n.p.). While Dewey and Macrorie's thoughts may be old news to many who read this text, the "raw materials" each potential writer brings to the classroom change with each decade, each school year, and each day of the week. What are you doing to stay in conversation with these fluid raw materials?

For the writers I share classrooms with, the key to a successful beginning to the research project is the creation of the self-inventory list. Nancy Atwell, author of *In the Middle,* describes her lists as "writing territories" (120). She writes that these are "subjects I've written about or might like to, genres I've written in or would like to try, and audiences for whom I write or would like to. The list of territories represents my self-portrait as a writer" (ibid). Like Atwell, my students and I keep our territories in list form and these lists prove invaluable to me the first time I sit down and talk to students about what they might like to research. I use the lists to ask questions, questions that go beyond the obvious ones I might think to ask about hobbies or each student's chosen major. Deitering and Jameson, in their "Step by

Step Through the Scholarly Conversation," make a similar observation when they note that "without specific guidance through the exploratory phase of research, students will attempt to skip this phase altogether and create their argument before gathering any information at all" (64). For a writer in my classroom, the exploratory phase begins when a student responds to my version of Atwell's writing territories in Murray's daybook.

What follows in bold is a list of the writing-territory prompts I use in class. My own personal answers are shown in italics. The lists created in answer to the prompts should be thought of as a pile of material to be used for writing. Obviously, each writer's response would vary a good deal from mine, and what is here represents the start of an activity that–if need be–could carry on for pages and pages, for hours and hours, until an intellectual thread has been identified for tracking. As students encounter future writing projects in my class and others, I encourage them to return to their list in order to mine it for ideas.

- **What do you know a lot about?** *purchasing a home, three-year olds that act out, eighties romantic comedies, responding to writing, contemporary fiction, lifting and running, commuting*
- **What are some of your identities?** *father, teacher, toll payer, believer, reader, exerciser*
- **Make a list of places you know well:** *Interstate 95 north of New York City; Winamac, Indiana; classrooms; the 6.5 mile loop I run near my home*
- **Make a list of topics that you wish you knew more about:** *auto repair, novels that have won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Montessori Education, Viking lore, how my daughters best learn*
- **What does a schedule of your day look like?** *To save space, I'll give you the start of a work-day schedule: buy gas, eat breakfast in car during commute,*

drink coffee, write, teach, use high-tech lectern, take attendance, meet with students, work out

- **What are some social/political issues relevant to your life?** *school loans, commuter taxes, my trash, the gasoline I buy*

There's something that happens in the construction of the above list that you can't see while reading it. After writers in the classroom jot down their initial thoughts, we pause to share those thoughts with the expectation that conversation will allow us to gain additional ideas for writing. Perhaps one student notes that he modifies his car as a hobby and upon hearing that, another student notes that she didn't put down in her initial list that she spends a lot of time "living" in a virtual world called Second Life. By sharing our lists, my students and I are stirring the waves on which our ideas will eventually surf.

Once the lists are formed, rather than discuss possible thesis statements–something that many of the writers in the room want to do right away–the students and I try to "convert" these lists into possible research questions. Returning to Murray, I remember him noting that "good research is usually the product of a well-focused question" (231). I see similar observations noted in *College Teaching* when I read "Mental Models of Research: Generating Authentic Questions," and find that "students understand the research process to be one of reporting rather than querying as they transfer information from sources to their own paper" (Donham, Heinrich, and Bostwick 8). Our challenge as teachers is probably not to remember this lesson for ourselves, but to continue to think about and assess if we think this guideline for writing is making it into the thinking of our students. Anne Berthoff, in her article "The Teacher as Researcher," shares one of my favorite lines on this matter of authentic questions in the classroom: "Nothing can kill a class sooner than to ask a question to which there is a prefabricated answer" (33). Looking back to my own condensed self-inventory list, here are two possible "authentic" research questions I'm able to draft: (1) What

strategies could I employ to help my oldest daughter adapt to the birth of her younger sister? and, (2) for each penny I spend on gasoline, in whose bank fund does it end up? Depending on what class I'm in–history or botany–or what sort of publication I'm aiming for–scholarly journal in composition or the education section of a local newspaper–I can tailor what goes into my generative lists or within what genre boundaries I'll ask my questions. In other words, the more familiar I become with this process of making lists and asking questions, the more I'll be able to make the activity work for me. In order to show how diverse the questions can become, here are a few from my students over the past several semesters:

- **What if I don't want to assimilate?** *The student tells the story of her arrival to Queens from the country of Jamaica for a college education.*
- **How can I practice my Muslim faith in the Western World?** *The student writes about whether or not he should date and about the possibility of some day having a bank loan.*
- **Is tanning safe?** *The student sought to prove that tanning beds were safe but eventually decided that they were not.*
- **How is my favorite brand of tennis shoes made?** *The student considered himself socially conscious and a sneakerhead (a collector of shoes). He wondered if given his personal belief system, he could continue to claim both of these identities.*

I ask the writers in my classes to think of their questions as fluid and evolving because as they research, they may make discoveries that cause their interests to shift, evolve, or expand. In fact, I believe this is what *should* happen. My student Miyu begins by asking, "What was it like to move from China to New York?" and she finishes the course by turning in a text that answers, "Why do

so many people in my home village have cancer?" When it comes to the resources my students will explore to answer their research questions, of course there are many possibilities: personal observations recorded on site, personal interviews arranged for and conducted, books, *YouTube* interviews with experts in the field, and various other locations on the internet. I encourage all of these sorts of sources, but I begin in our university library's scholarly databases because I want to make sure that the students are introduced to the sheer volume of journals that are devoted to the different parts of their lives.

Talking with the Journal Databases

Too often, when students are introduced to the possibilities within a database, a teacher plans this activity when the students have no particular project in mind. The presenter–often a reference librarian–calls out for some interests of the students and the question is usually met with either silence or something such as–the Yankees!–after which there might be some stumbling around for some articles. Dale Jacobs, an English professor at the University of Windsor, says that he now sees his own one-stop visits with the reference librarian as a way he was asking "the library to inoculate *his* students against bad research habits, much as others on campus were asking him to inoculate *their* students against bad writing habits" (H. Jacobs and D. Jacobs 75). Research, like writing, should be thought of as a highly personalized and fluid process.

Armed with their daybooks and writing-territory lists, students are amazed at the publications they discover, journals which seem to be just about who they are or what they are interested in. How many of them could have imagined publications such as *CyberPsychology & Behavior, Education and Urban Society, Food Chemistry, Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health,* and *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*? These are all examples of journals recently cited within my students' research papers. In many of the states I taught, I didn't have access to a university library system, but I was able to enter scholarly databases through the state's library

web pages. In Charlotte, I had to work to get each of my students a library card.

It's not always the research questions that lead to the best results in the scholarly databases. Sometimes it's the key words listed on our writing territories (rather than the complete question) that lead to the most interesting discoveries for possible research projects. For example, returning again to the writing territories I created for this article, I find the phrase *three-year-old.* My experience typing words into database search engines tells me to use the word *toddler,* or perhaps I should try *child*. This is a move the students need to see, something I show them both on a projection screen in the classroom and during one-on-one research conferences. To be a good researcher sometimes means to persevere, to continue in the process of doing searches, reading, and coming up with more accurate words for the search. During the research conferences in my office, students navigate on their computers from Google to our university library databases. The conference ends when the student has found at least one scholarly article that is partly the result of a search that was begun because of something they wrote on their writing-territory list. The student's assignment for our next class is what I call an "annotation," which means the student converses with the writer of the article by underlining sentences, noting observations in the margins, or asking questions. My student "Li" explains how the annotations proved useful to his research writing:

> The little sentences on the side served not only as a way to open up more possibilities in my reading and research, but also as a guideline or mini-summary which helped me order my priorities as I referred back for citing. As I did the annotations, I often asked questions that I had but the author did not answer in his/her piece of writing. If the question was related to my own writing, I would do some more research pertaining to the question and in the process lead myself to even more information and insights about my research topic.

Li went on to explain how he used the annotating method in his Perspectives on Christianity course as he read an argument in a theological journal:

> My first two attempts in reading the journal ended in a not so successful manner when I was completely baffled by what the authors were trying to get across to me. Each sub-division in their writing seemed to pertain to some other aspect of theological evolution which did not seem to fit together at first, but later made sense when I annotated each sub-division. After piecing each little summary together, I was able to understand how each sub-division related to the thesis.

Returning to my own example of a search in the scholarly databases, I decide to add the word *tantrum* to my *toddler* search. As a researcher, I know that *tantrum* has a good chance to deliver some useful articles. One of my students, after a conference with me, reports, "If one just writes anything in the search engine the possibility of finding an article pertinent to one's topic may be very low. One has to use different words in order to narrow one's search." As writers, we know this, but it might be hard to remember that many of our students don't.

The very first article in my own list of results contains as a part of its title "Stress Index For Fathers." Even as an experienced researcher, I am surprised at what I find. It hadn't occurred to me to consider my fatherhood stress level or that it would be the subject of a study. I've just re-taught myself the lesson I seek to teach. As one of my students observed early in a semester about her reading, "there are so many books about so many topics." It's exciting to think that my students may have come to me imagining a little bay of thinking off the shore of their intellectual existence–possibly a body of knowledge that wasn't even on their radar–but as they come to the end of the course, they have an understanding that there are oceans of ideas out there in life for exploration.

As a writer who has discovered "Stress Index For Fathers," I have a choice to make: should I rethink my research question to include the mental well-being of fathers, or will I lay aside that new line of inquiry and read on within the results until I locate texts which might work with my original research question? Here's an example of the sorts of discoveries students make when they take their writing territories into a scholarly database. In this particular passage, Ahmed shares his own Muslim faith, his belief that his faith directs him to not become involved in bank interest, and his concern that he might never own his own home.

> Relating to the words of ancient prophets in the religion, Erhan Kula, an Islamic scholar, states, "According to some sources the Prophet declared war on usury and those who deal in it; he pointed out its dangers to society, saying, when usury and fornication appear in a community the people of that community render themselves deserving of the punishment of God" (49). According to the Quran, people are supposed to stay away from interest, but in times like buying a house, most Muslims frown upon that interpretation and still involve themselves in interest because it's the only way to pay off a house. When I graduate from (name of university removed), how will I be able to pay off my house without involving myself in loans?

What I find particularly rewarding about that passage is that Ahmed was able to use his time in class to become a student of something he wanted to know. I remember his excitement when he found articles with titles such as "Is Contemporary Interest Rate in Conflict with Islamic Ethics?" and "Veils and Sales: Muslims and the Spaces of Postcolonial Fashion Retail." Ahmed and I nodded knowingly to one another that the "Interest Rate" title was a question. Before the course, Ahmed had felt isolated in his internal conflict about what his life would be, and he was thrilled to realize that not only were there other young people like him, but that there were scholars writing about the very situation

that troubled him. On a smaller word-by-word level, Ahmed went from someone who didn't know what a signal phrase was to someone who used the phrases in his writing. He began to include parenthetical citations in his work and his paper ended with a works cited page, something he said he had never heard of before our class. That page included citations from journals such as *Kyklos* and the *Journal of Religion and Health*. More importantly, he forced himself to stretch intellectually; he proved himself a worthy researcher and began to arrive at new questions that he wanted to answer. As the reader, I was rewarded because Ahmed wrote within a subject of which I knew very little, and I appreciated all that Ahmed had learned for himself and what he was teaching me. His classmates were drawn to the intellectual and emotional openness of his paper, and his work paved the way for many of my students who came after him to explore issues of their faith, whatever that faith might be. When one of my current students writes about why he observes the Jewish Sabbath, I can point to Ahmed's previous work and use those texts as examples of how there is a scholarly conversation surrounding the ways that people try and practice their faith within the world they live in.

When students in my courses struggle to have anything to say, often it is because they have skimped on the research. They have not allowed themselves to ride on the sea of conversation that swells in the databases, that back and forth conversation that takes place from article to article, works cited page to works cited page, all swirling like a whirlpool in the mind of the reader. I offer this general guideline: for each three pages of double-texted research writing the student wishes to do, he or she should read between 30-50 pages of research. This amount of reading is a very new idea to most of my students who often tend toward skimming a couple pages of an article looking for a quote they can jam into their work. Often the quote they use is a quote that they don't understand or one which contains an idea that they cannot or do not connect to what they were saying in their paper.

Other times when students commonly struggle, it is because they have tried to ride a mountain of water that is for them too

steep rhetorically. This is a problem I relish, a problem I am glad to see because it demonstrates to me that the students have taken a mental risk, that they have tried to do what they have not done before, and that they are entering into a topic which for them is complex. For example, some of my students who are majoring in pharmacy or attending the physician's assistant school attempt to read articles written for doctors, and while it is possible for them to glean quite a bit of information from their reading, it can be impossible for them to write a text that might begin to be publishable in such a journal. Obviously, my first year writing students majoring in pharmacy have more than fifty pages worth of content knowledge to gain before they will publish in a journal within their field.

For students who find themselves facing what for them is an academic tsunami, I offer two suggestions. First, I tell them I appreciate the intellectual stretch of wanting to write for a publication such as *The New England Journal of Medicine*, and when it comes to grading, I will reward the intellectual ambition of the writing rather than whether it fulfills its lofty intentions. The student will likely begin to learn to read such a text, and often for the first time the writer will experiment and attempt the abstracts that often appear at the beginning of scholarly articles, or the writer will mimic a prominent feature of the text such as the use of bolded headings. Generally, students don't choose to write as if their article will actually appear in the medical journal, and instead they decide that they will identify an area of interest–say, Nano Technology or Spectroscopy (I know, right?)–and attempt to tell a more general audience about this "cutting edge" area of their field of interest. As examples of this sort of work, I offer Robin Marantz Henig's "Our Silver-Coated Future" or Walter Kirn's "The Autumn of the Multitaskers," both of which were published in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing of 2008*. Reading these texts, my students can see how each writer tried to construct an intellectual bridge between the world of the specialist and a more general audience. Seeing this, students explore texts within their field of interest, begin to think about how those texts

work, but then write to their audience using a rhetorical style that represents for them what might be a more appropriate intellectual stretch.

Implications for Students Who Learn to Surf the Sea of Conversation

One of the most convincing alternatives to the sort of writing I am advocating comes from Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle in their *College Composition and Communication* (*CCC)* article entitled "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)-Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" This article advocates students writing about writing and conducting investigations across a range of topics such as one might find in *CCC*. Downs and Wardle would likely oppose that I allow my students to investigate topics ranging from Second Life to their Muslim faith. Certainly, there are times that my questions regarding a topic such as Second Life cause a student to make connections between their project and the field of writing studies. Downs and Wardle note the following:

> The first of our shared beliefs corresponds with James Reither's assertion that writing cannot be taught independent of content. It follows that the more an instructor can say about a writing's content, the more she can say about the writing itself; this is another way of saying that writing instructors should be expert readers. When the course content is writing studies, writing instructors are concretely enabled to fill that expert reader role. (559)

In reading the totality of Downs and Wardle's argument, I am admittedly attracted to the notion of an undergraduate major in writing studies, especially when it would include aspects of creative and digital writing, but I am unwilling to devote the entirety of my class to forcing students to read and write ONLY about writing. One of the major objectives of my course is to rekindle the joy many students have previously known reading

texts of their choice. At the moment, I acknowledge Downs and Wardle's argument by having my students write about their writing in a paper we call, "A Writer on Writing." Students also address what they've learned within the field of writing studies in their introductions to their final portfolios.

By allowing my students to use their writing territories and database searches to write within fields of their choice, I notice that often my students see something in their lists that was invisible to them at the start of the semester. When conferencing with my student "Melvin," a self-described sneakerhead, I notice a potential gap between how he sees himself as socially conscious and that he possesses a large name-brand sneaker collection. It's what James Berlin describes as "the moment of denial that the role of the teacher as problem poser is crucial, providing methods for questioning that locate the points of conflict and contradiction" (102). As I listen to students talk about their work, I often find myself asking, "What about this? Or this? Have you heard this?" These are some of the same questions I would need from those who read my own writing, and so when I take on the role of reader as problem poser, I give students an impression of the professional conversation that surrounds the area within which they are writing. By the end of the course, Melvin has not only learned to wonder how it was that the shoes were made and brought to the United States, he has also learned how to follow his intellectual curiosity and find some answers that may or may not lead to social action. Possibly, Melvin will stop buying the shoes, or perhaps he will do something else to help hold companies accountable for the ways in which they produce their consumer goods. In addition, when my time writing with Melvin ends, he will identify new intellectual curiosities on his own, and when that time arrives, he will have a better understanding for how he might pursue those new intellectual investigations.

Not only have the student writers in my classes learned to question the topics on their inventory lists, but they also start to arrive at these questions on their own. This is not because of any explicit instructions from me, but because of habits we have built

together in the course. For the length of one semester, we have practiced asking critical questions about what is in front of us. I must be careful using that word "critical." Too often, my students think they hear me saying I want them to be negative or tear down everything they can see in front of them. It's not that I hope the students will go out to the vending machine in the hall and complain about the brand of water that is available for purchase; instead, I want my students to wonder why they don't drink water out of the tap. I hope they wonder if there isn't another way to stay hydrated without leaving thousands of plastic bottles in their wake. When students who used to sit in class and say they didn't have any interests begin to ask questions and get curious enough to start looking for answers–which invariably leads to the next set of questions–there begins to rise up a tidal wave of ideas for writing, thinking, and exploring.

Now that the students are up and wobbling a bit on their boards, surfing various waves of ideas, they also have a sense of how they might stay upright, writing and thinking as they go. Because of the way that the tide of conversation has come into their minds, they have more to read, write, and think about than they can ever possibly get to. Now, rather than choosing a topic because it will work to satisfy their desire for a passable grade, the writers in my courses have the luxury of many choices from which to choose. The writers can't investigate everything, and so they sift through all the possibilities and choose something meaningful, something they see as worth doing. Suddenly, my student Aditri, whose father was left behind by an Indian ship in Mobile, Alabama, has new questions about his father's life history. I've experienced this myself, while reading about Viking traditions for a novel I was writing. After years of not even thinking about my ancestors, suddenly I had new questions about my father's grandfather, a man who immigrated to the United States from Norway. Kevin, who used to feel isolated in his story of moving back and forth from Korea to the United States, is excited to learn that his back-and-forth story is one of thousands, that there have been many young people with experiences such as his, and that he

can read these stories and the thinking that surrounds them in scholarly journals.

The students begin to prowl the virtual and literal aisles of the library searching for information. They write about their intellectual pursuits, and they ask me how to cite websites where there is no known author, and no known organization that has compiled the information. This they begin to see as a problem. The students' writing comes back to me in the form of texts they upload onto our course website or post on blogs, and as I dive down into their work, a new virtual stack of writing to be read, I read from one student the story of her Christian mother and her Muslim father. Sang teaches me about the phenomena of an internet meme; Phillip explains how he began observing the Jewish Sabbath when his parents did not; Sally writes of her work at a summer camp for children battling cancer; Sandra shows me her apartment building in Jackson Heights, and finally, at the bottom of the stack, is an essay which uses a recipe for Asian Hot Wings as its guiding structure to write about family. My experience of reading student work has been transformed. If my stack of virtual reading to be completed is indeed a sea, a sea which was once lilting and murky on the edge of death, it has now become a body of water full of life.

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