The Consultant

A Newsletter for Faculty

Authentic Inquiry—Beyond the Conventional Senior Paper

by Jean Donham

Capstone courses often require a summative research paper and/or seminar presentation. Gordon (1999) describes the typical research assignment as an “external exercise,” and goes on to suggest that too many research projects engage students in information gathering rather than opportunities for creativity or authentic inquiry. Dispositions of learners play a major role as students undertake writing a “research paper.” In his analysis of dispositions of learners, Ritchhart (2001) posits that in order for students to engage in authentic learning and extend beyond reporting what has been stated by others, we must help them develop the following dispositions: be open-minded; be curious; be metacognitive; be strategic; be investigative; reason; and use evidence. In re-designing the Education Senior seminar paper assignment, we set the following goals for students:

• To see research as an opportunity to pose authentic questions generated by their own classroom observations and interactions with students
• To construct new meaning and insights by integrating their personal first-hand observations and experiences with findings in the professional literature
• To personalize research by focusing their inquiry on questions arising from close observation of and interaction with individual students whom they came to know during their student teaching experiences

Papers generated in response to the new approach indicate authentic interest, show original insight, and extend beyond reporting. Students generate their research questions based on field notes they have taken during their student teaching experience. These may be observations of an individual student, a classroom, teacher behaviors, school culture—whatever piques their curiosity. These papers cause students to investigate the literature to see what research has to say about the aspects of teaching and learning about which they have become curious. They examine their observations and write their papers to integrate theory and practice. Titles of papers evidence the variety of questions that arise and the insight that students discover in their work. For example:

“She Looks Like English Only”
“Socio-Political Dimensions and Classroom Life: Is There Need for Both Student – and Teacher-Centered Learning?”
“Childhood Innocence: The Newest War Casualty”

One particular outcome is students developing their scholarly voice and seeing themselves become participants in the scholarly community—a transition for which the seminar was designed.


Traditionally, writing centers and studios have been seen primarily as places where students get help in responding to academic writing assignments. Although this is certainly a primary focus in Cornell College’s Writing Studio, we want to emphasize that our mission is to help students become better writers. To that end, we have a wide scope in the types of writing we are willing to discuss with students.

For example, this year, we have worked with students writing personal statements, filling out graduate school applications, and preparing materials for submission to internship programs. Our aim is to help these students in all aspects of writing, from organizing ideas intentionally to evaluating clarity of expression. In many cases, students working on such materials set up multiple appointments as they move through the writing process.

If you have a student or advisee who is applying for an internship or other type of program, please consider suggesting that he/she stop by the Writing Studio, as we’d be happy to help that student articulate ideas and work toward preparing a polished submission.

by Nicole Jackson