

# Promoting Undergraduate Research in the Humanities: Three Collaborative Approaches

**Todd McDorman**  
Department of Speech  
Wabash College

How to effectively involve undergraduates in the production of academic research in the humanities is an issue that has vexed teacher-scholars. Research and reflections on the topic highlight a variety of obstacles ranging from questions about the abilities of undergraduate students to the worth of the enterprise. David DeVries (2001) has lamented the lack of participation by humanities faculty members in the production of undergraduate research while Mitch Malachowski (2003) has sounded a call to action, encouraging “a full-fledged Undergraduate Research Across the Curriculum movement . . . in all academic areas”. As a teacher-scholar in the area of rhetorical studies I embrace their desire for the expansion of collaborative research in the humanities while also understanding the reluctance of scholars in fields such as my own to partner with undergraduate students. When I first considered undertaking collaborative research I confronted three concerns that were particularly germane in my area of study.

First, it is difficult for me to divide my research program into segments or supporting projects that students can easily handle or assist with. The nature of most of my research — as is often the case in the humanities — is personal, solitary, and individual, representing an initial barrier to involving students. Second, the more advanced theoretical elements of the rhetorical studies literature is generally challenging for students to productively grasp in a short period of time. Often the learning curve is steep enough that once a student has acquired enough understanding to be of assistance on a project it is time for he or she to graduate. Finally, even after a student successfully navigates the supporting literature, it is quite possible that they will be unprepared or unable to meet the expectations of academic writing in refereed journals. With challenges such as these in mind, over the past three years I have developed a set of projects to better engage and involve students in academic research. In contributing to the ongoing dialogue on this topic, I share these efforts and report on some of the still evolving outcomes. In distinguishing amongst the projects I offer three representative, although perhaps somewhat clumsy, identifications — faculty-driven collaboration, faculty modeling, and student-driven collaboration.

## Faculty-Driven Collaboration

The approach to engaging students in the production of scholarship that I have termed faculty-driven collaboration is premised upon a top-down model familiar to most educators.

Under this model, the faculty member takes primary responsibility for designing and leading the project while also relying upon students to supply meaningful contributions in the construction of the final product.

I first began considering the subject matter that would form the basis of this project while I was designing a freshman tutorial (a seminar style course required of all freshmen at Wabash College) addressing the social implications of sports. While planning the course I noted a general thematic consistency to the way that sport is represented in film. Intrigued by alternate tellings of a melodramatic storyline that features the fall of a hero and that character’s subsequent efforts to transcend his or her faults while achieving personal redemption and restoring the larger culture’s faith in the spirit of sport, I decided to include a film critique in the class. Student observations on films ranging from *Hoosiers* to *The Natural* to *Varsity Blues* prompted further reflection as did the release of two new sport-themed films — *For Love of the Game* and *Any Given Sunday*. I scribbled a few notes on these films but I filed them away because I did not have a specific occasion to pursue the ideas and they were outside the scope of my primary research agenda.

However the following fall presented an interesting opportunity when two junior Speech majors approached me about an independent study project focusing on sport. While I nixed their initial idea, I presented them with an alternative project focusing upon the relationship of sport, film, and culture while using the production of a co-authored essay on *Jerry Maguire*, *For Love of the Game*, and *Any Given Sunday* as the goal of our independent research. They agreed to the project, a third student was added, and I was able to return to the ideas that captured my attention the year before while undertaking a film criticism with co-authors and, most importantly to me, engaging students in a different format.

As the organizer of the project I undertook the task of outlining our course of study. I began by developing a set of readings in film criticism that would serve as the starting point for our weekly discussions. As we read we discovered additional potentially relevant critiques and added them to our agenda. In becoming oriented to the rhetorical studies literature on film criticism we typically discussed four essays per meeting, with each of us providing an outline and analysis of one potentially relevant film study.

After completing this orientation each of the students wrote a

five to seven page analysis on one of the films. We shared the ideas in the analyses in our next weekly meeting, looking for common themes that would allow the films to be brought together into a single essay. I provided extensive comments on the argument, structure, and writing and each student revised his analysis. Subsequently I again provided feedback and, at that point, I wrote an introduction that we collectively edited. As the individual analyses progressed they moved from being extremely rough to pieces of a collective project with potential. Subsequently, the students made a collaborative revision of each of the individual analyses. I thoroughly edited these collaborative efforts and had the students turn to the task of writing a theoretical rationale for the piece. This is the aspect of the project with which the students most struggled. While the students were adept at identifying ways in which the theoretical principles were at play in the films, their attempts to use the literature to create a methodology and explain the theoretical importance to the project were seriously flawed. I wanted to work with them on the revision of their ideas but their struggles were such that I felt uncertain as to how to respond while I was also growing concerned that we were rapidly running out of semester with which to work. Ultimately I drafted the theory section myself before giving it to the students to edit, a task they performed competently. The next time I undertake a similar project I will attempt to find a way to more productively work with students on the development of the theory section.

About three-quarters of the way through the semester we merged the materials into a single essay and we spent our remaining time meticulously working through the writing and argument, going paragraph by paragraph (and sentence by sentence) in our weekly meetings. The semester ended before we could complete the process so, over the summer, I added a conclusion to the essay and asked two colleagues to review it. Both scholars commented favorably on the project and I began to consider possible outlets for the work.

When the students returned to campus in the fall we attempted to arrange a time to review and discuss the project, but we were unable to do so. The momentum and enthusiasm we had built the previous semester dissipated over the summer. It was difficult to get the students to see that academic writing does not adhere to a semester schedule and that even after the semester is over and a grade is assigned, there are ways to improve an essay toward a larger goal. This is not to say that the students were no longer interested in the essay, it just proved too difficult for us to work together on it. The students did subsequently present the essay on campus at Wabash College's Second Annual Celebration of Student Research, Scholarship, and Creative Work. Near the same time, I submitted "Where Have All the Heroes Gone: An Exploration of Cultural Therapy in *Jerry Maguire*, *For Love of the Game*, and *Any Given Sunday*" for review at a regional speech journal.

Approximately four months later we received a supportive editorial response. While the manuscript was not accepted for publication, the reviewers saw enough promise in the piece to provide the opportunity to revise and resubmit the essay. I felt that the reviewer responses validated the effort all of us

had put forth. I was tempted to undertake the suggested revisions but ultimately decided not to because I felt the requested changes would require alteration of the student contributions in ways that would reduce the significance of their participation. Instead I decided to make a few minor changes and again submit the essay, this time to an interdisciplinary journal specializing in social issues of sport. The reviewers again saw merit in the essay and the editor offered a conditional acceptance of the piece pending revisions. I undertook what I term a "moderate" revision of the essay — one that remained true to the substance of the student contributions while also incorporating many of the ideas from the reviews. The revision satisfied the editor of the journal and the essay has been accepted for publication.

The acceptance of the essay for publication is a much appreciated bonus to what I think proved to be an important project for several reasons. Personally, it was a unique effort to attempt to work with a co-author, let alone student co-authors, in the production of scholarship. Second, the project was rewarding because the students were more motivated by it than with other work I had seen them produce. This was most evident when, for our final meeting, they brought along fraternity brothers so that they could share the project with their peers. The student scholars seemed very proud of the essay as they explained it, and the other students seemed genuinely impressed. Feedback collected from the students reinforced these perceptions. The students exhibited an improved understanding of the academic writing process, seemed more prepared to undertake their senior projects, and they had pride in the work that we produced. Finally, by being able to talk and share our ideas as we developed a collective essay, I feel that I gained better insight into how to convey the mechanisms of academic scholarship to student writers.

## Faculty Modeling

I liked how the independent study project had worked but I wanted to find a way to conduct a similar project for an entire class. I selected my Legal Rhetoric course, a class that reflects my primary area of research, as the location of the experiment. I felt that there was more I could do in the course to emphasize the special nature and value of students' independent research projects. I worked from the belief that the more excited students were about their projects, the less the assignment would seem like "just another paper" and the more committed they would be to their successful completion. Thus I made two efforts to draw special attention to their scholarship.

First, I devoted four classes near the mid-term to what is often called a "writer's workshop" and an in-class review of their first drafts. Each member of the class read each student essay and we engaged in a twenty-minute discussion of each effort. For each essay, two students were assigned the task of providing written feedback so that everyone would have at least three written critiques (including my comments). In addition to emphasizing the importance I place on the writing process, I thought that the students could add valuable perspective through peer critiques, that they could learn about writing

from reading the work of their peers, and that they might put in more effort since their peers would read their project. Mid-term evaluations reinforced these suspicions. For instance, one student noted that while the assignment was “difficult to do . . . I wasn’t near as concerned with what you thought of the paper compared to how worried I was to turn in a paper my peers were going to read.” Another student reinforced this feeling saying, “I put more effort into the work because I was afraid of ‘looking bad’ in front of my fellow students.” And a third student volunteered: “I was comfortable having other students read my work. I think that because others beside the professor were going to read it, I tried to devote more time and effort to it. There is a sense that one would like to impress his peers through the construction of his paper.”

I was impressed with the care students took to examine the essays and I think that the effort produced better understanding of a number of rhetorical theories, gave students a broadened sense of Supreme Court rulings, and promoted more intentional examination of their writing. Moreover, I learned more about several Supreme Court decisions selected by the students, how students approach the writing process, and their efforts to make sense of advanced rhetorical theory. When it came time to discuss the drafts there was more energy in the classroom than normal. Rather than tired eyes and disengagement, common at mid-terms, students were eager to talk about questions they had, problems they were confronting, and how they might proceed with their efforts.

The second element of this approach involved *my own participation* in the project. That is, I decided to write an essay while the students were doing their own project. I had three goals in undertaking this effort. First, I wanted to clarify for my students the expectations of academic writing and research by modeling the assignment. Second, this effort would keep me engaged in scholarship during the school year — often a challenge at liberal arts colleges. Finally, the presentation of in-progress-work to students would emphasize the process of producing quality scholarship. When it came time to exchange papers near the mid-term I felt just like they did — a bit nervous that others were going to read my work. However, I felt that allowing students to see a professor work through the same process gave them a better understanding of academic writing as well as the stages and difficulties all writers go through. While class discussions of some of my completed works were helpful in allowing students to ask interesting questions about the research that I do and the writing and revision process, ultimately in those circumstances students consider completed essays. In this format they saw a rough draft and we worked through ideas together. I also felt that I personally benefited from a particularly insightful student reading of my draft essay.

While some student comments reflected trepidation at critiquing my work and questioned what they could gain from reviewing an essay that was perceived as superior to their own, overall students felt they benefited from the project. One student comment particularly captured the intended benefit of

the effort: “You attempting to do a project is awesome. It gives us a sense of association with what you are doing, that what we are doing IS academic work, and that you have some of the same problems we run into. I felt no problem in critiquing your paper because you made it obvious that you wanted us to be frank and that we were being treated as colleagues.” Another student added: “it was very helpful . . . to see how even an established professor on the subject that we are studying goes through the same growing pains when writing a paper.”

At the end of the semester students presented their completed works in class and submitted a final essay. Similarly, I completed an essay on the final case we studied — *Bush v. Gore* — and delivered it to my colleagues as a Humanities Colloquium. I was very impressed with many of the final student projects. I was more impressed with how seriously all of the students took their work and the way it made students think about scholarship as an extended process. Subsequently one student presented his work at our annual celebration of student research, scholarship and creative work while I found another audience for my completed essay at the following National Communication Association Annual Convention. I continue to have hopes that this project will at some point make its way into the review process and if it does I know that some of the credit for the project’s success will go to the development of the essay in the context of my teaching and working with undergraduate students.

## Student-Driven Collaboration

There were two final projects in the Legal Rhetoric course that I thought were particularly promising. As a result, I offered to continue to work with these students on their essays — with the proviso that they had to take the lead on the project. While they both expressed interest, only one was able to generate a highly advanced project. This student sent me a revised version of his paper at the end of the school year and during that summer I rather savagely took it apart — I re-organized it, I cut material, I worked on the writing, I made notes in the text about gaps in the argument. I think my critique might have unnerved him a bit as while the paper was improved it also was no longer a complete essay. However the student responded positively to the challenge and was still interested in pursuing the project. The following spring we arranged an independent study on academic writing for publication with our subject matter being the Supreme Court’s decision in the matter of *U.S. v. Nixon*. As with the project described in the faculty-driven approach, I participated fully in the revision of the paper but this time I was more re-active and more inclined to offer guidance — making the student take more responsibility to “fix” the paper and move it forward. For instance, while I identified some key readings in rhetorical theory and the study of legal rhetoric as a way of advancing the essay, the student reported to me how the readings might prove relevant in improving the project. He also produced at least three revisions of the theoretical section of the essay. With each revision I offered important guidance but I gave him the time and space to bring the ideas together substantially on his own.

Our general mode of operation consisted of the student doing revisions on the essay with my role being to respond with suggestions for additional changes, monitor the structure of the essay, and assist with advancing the writing. We had good, spirited conversations in the text of the paper, which was exchanged back and forth as a Word document. At one point we had a document that was almost a rainbow of color as we had inserted many highlighted notes to each other as we passed the text back and forth. The student was always responsible for taking the next step with the essay — and I felt he always took it. The refinement of the essay proved to be an extended process, longer than is typical when I work on my own—and he recognized this. There were times it might have been easier for me to revert to the “faculty-driven” approach and “just do it,” but I felt that would defeat the purpose. Our progress may also have been slowed due to another common obstacle for co-authors — we did not always see the text and argument same way. He opted for a more traditional approach to the text than I would have picked; he was also a little more politically conservative than I am, which in this case meant we did not always see the text quite the same way at first blush. Ultimately I think this helped the essay by creating better balance and more reflection by both of us.

At the end of the semester I touched up the essay — by that time there were only a couple of highlighted notes left in the text — the rest had been resolved. I properly formatted the paper and “Maintaining Institutional Power and Constitutional Principles: A Rhetorical Analysis of *United States v. Nixon*” was submitted to a journal devoted to issues of forensics and public address scholarship. While I was unsure how the essay would be received, I felt that it had reached a point where it deserved an external audience. Subsequently, my co-author and I were pleased to learn that the essay was accepted for publication without revision. Designing a project that features an undergraduate student as the lead author was instructive to my growing understanding of the quality of work undergraduates are capable of producing. One conclusion from the collaboration is that such partnerships take additional time and patience to produce a completed essay as this project grew over the course of almost two years rather than a single semester. However the project demonstrates that when given the opportunity many students are capable of making meaningful contributions to research in the humanities. In finding ways to overcome the recognized obstacles to undergraduate students’ participation in academic research, we as teacher-scholars may need to adjust the process of scholarship production — such as the time involved — more than adjust our expectations of quality.

Finally, however, not all students — even good ones — will always be successful in their final efforts. At the same time as this collaborative project, I undertook a second one, with the other student from Legal Rhetoric with whom I had discussed continuing his work. This student did not as successfully grasp the goal of our work and did not do as well at responding to feedback. While we ended the semester with a re-written essay, it was not significantly advanced from its starting point. The gaps in the essay that I exposed were sometimes

refilled with similar material. And while the project still intrigues me, it did not ultimately come together.

Why it did not is a question that I am still working out, but some possible explanations have presented themselves. For one, the student was over-committed in his campus responsibilities while at the same time his work ethic may have been diminishing as a second semester senior. Second, the student did not immediately adjust to our altered roles. He was not as effective at taking the initiative and seemed to want to rely on me to lead, as is the more common practice. The student driven model was not as conducive for him. Finally, in a reflection of what we often fear as teacher-scholars in the humanities, in this instance the student did not seem to fully grasp the complexity of the theory or the nuances of the text. He made very intriguing observations at the surface level but he also struggled to move deeper. The struggle reinforces to me the need for flexibility in how collaborative research is approached. I have no doubt that the student would have been a good partner in a faculty-driven project but he was not prepared to lead a project at this particular point in time.

## Conclusions

While my experiences in collaborative research have not been without their challenges, I have been pleased with each of these approaches and efforts. The experiences lead me to echo the sentiments of my colleague, V. Daniel Rogers (2003), who argued that humanities scholars “would do well to foster collaborative situations . . . that increase faculty-student as well as student-student contact”. Students, more often than not, have demonstrated to me that under favorable circumstances they are capable of making meaningful contributions to our work — and that they are frequently interested in doing so when we can devise appropriate projects and approaches. Moreover, engaging students in the production and understanding of academic research has been an enriching experience for me. It has helped me as a teacher and the rewards of seeing students achieve new levels of interest and ability have been very satisfying.

## References

- Devries, David. 2001. “Undergraduate Research in the Humanities: An Oxymoron?” *CUR Quarterly* 21: 153-155.
- Malachowski, Mitch. 2003. “Research Across the Curriculum.” *CUR Quarterly* 23: 152.
- Rogers, V. Daniel. 2003. “Surviving the ‘Cultural Shock’ of Undergraduate Research in the Humanities.” *CUR Quarterly* 23: 132-135.
- Todd F. McDorman is an assistant professor in the Speech Department at Wabash College. His primary research interest is the study of legal discourse and the ways various discourse communities (such as right-to-die advocates) engage the law in hopes of achieving social and political change. He has also explored issues of sport and society through analyses of media artifacts and the rhetoric of Pete Rose.*