

Affirming the Independent Researcher Model: Undergraduate Research in the Humanities



As many contributors to the *CUR Quarterly* have pointed out, undergraduate research is “the pedagogy for the twenty-first century,” but “Humanities departments have been the slowest to participate” (Dotterer, 2002). In this article, I hope to add another perspective to those teacher-scholars who in the pages of the *CUR Quarterly* and elsewhere have encouraged humanities faculty to participate in this significant pedagogical

movement. Specifically, I want to affirm the value of independent research as a model for undergraduate research in the humanities in order to increase humanities students’ participation in this important pedagogical movement. I suggest that as humanities students partake in undergraduate research in greater numbers, we as teachers will learn more about how to facilitate it. As a result, we can create new opportunities for our students, including re-thinking the nature of the humanities “research paper” and expanding opportunities for advanced undergraduate research.

The Independent Researcher: A Model that Works

As I have read the academic writing on humanities undergraduate research in the *CUR Quarterly* and elsewhere, I have been struck by the emphasis on student-faculty collaborations as the model to which humanities faculty should aspire. Several scholar-teachers have pointed out that one major obstacle to undergraduate research in the humanities is that, unlike research in the sciences, the “kind [of] scholarship for which [humanities scholars] are rewarded” is “essentially non-collaborative” and “trivializes student involvement” (Rogers, 2003). Thus, Todd McDorman, an assistant professor of speech, suggests three different models of involving humanities undergraduates in faculty research: faculty-driven collaboration, which is top-down; faculty mentoring, a reciprocal process whereby the instructor engages in her research project alongside students doing theirs; and student-driven collaboration, in which the student is the lead author, and the instructor, as the secondary author, guides, critiques, and suggests (McDorman, 2004). Daniel Rogers, a professor of Spanish, has



Several Penn State Berks Young Scholars in Writing Volume 5 Peer Reviewers

From left, clockwise around table:
Susan Huber
Ryan Gibson
Robert Wright
Peter Lampasona
Jessica Brenner
Greg King
Tia Seier
Nicholas Dautrich
Nicole Krause

Not pictured (from Penn State Berks):
Christopher Bisaccia
Ebony Cobb
Angela Eckhart
Jonathan Ellis
Katelyn Lamm
Jonathan Mette
Mark Morton
Michelle Rambo
Darren Sellers
Mary Ann Watts

Not pictured (from other institutions)
Brooke Baker
Heather Bastian
Patrick Belanger
Alicia Brazeau
Heather Byland
Jenifer Diers
David Elder
Lindsey Harkness
Ryan Hoover
Kelly Jakes
Andrea McMunn
Lauren Pettillo
Catherine Sacchi
Kate Stuart
Megan M. Trexler
Olga Zaytseva

become a co-researcher with his students, not someone “simply telling them how to conduct research and to write” (Rogers, 2003). David Lancy, an anthropologist, employs undergraduates as research assistants; asserts, “Even a humanist, normally the most solitary of scholars, can redefine work in ways that allow for collaboration” (Lancy, 2003). Larry Uffelman, a professor of English, describes his successful collaborative research project with undergraduates in Victorian literature (Uffelman, 1995). According to McDorman, “Students, more often than not, have demonstrated . . . that under favorable circumstances they are capable of making meaningful contributions to [faculty] work” (McDorman, 2004).

I applaud those who encourage and provide models for student-faculty collaborative research in the humanities, offering new kinds of research and pedagogical opportunities for faculty and students. Likewise, though, I suggest that students in the humanities are capable of producing scholarly work independently or with one another, with faculty as mentors and guides, but not as co-researchers. As

Toufic M. Hakim states, in undergraduate research, “students embark upon journeys of discovery which may occur in a research laboratory or in the library, on the Internet or in faculty offices, or in the quiet solitude of a study carrel” (Hakim, 2000). Undergraduate research in the humanities should not be limited to models that replicate undergraduate research in the sciences.

I want students in my and other humanities fields to feel confident that they can produce scholarship similar to the work of their humanities faculty. While I recognize that no writing or knowledge-making occurs in complete isolation, my research is generally single-authored, although I have also co-authored several pieces and co-edited a published volume. Thus, given the nature and value of the work many of us do, humanities faculty should not feel pressured to become collaborators with students; these faculty can instead work with students as mentors so students produce their own research. Not surprisingly, then, I disagree with Malachowski, who argues that in predominately undergraduate institutions, faculty research “that does not include students or that does not directly affect one’s teaching is of secondary importance . . . and can even be detrimental to student learning and institutional quality” (Malachowski, 2001). Faculty and students should be encouraged to conduct independent research which derives its value by contributing knowledge to humanities disciplines.

In large part, my perspectives on the independent researcher model for undergraduate humanities students emanate from my experiences as co-founder (with the late Candace Spigelman) and current editor of *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*, an international, undergraduate research journal written for and by undergraduate students involved in rhetoric and composition.¹ Together, Volumes 1, 2, and 3 (published in 2003, 2004, and 2005 respectively) include 34 research articles by students from higher education institutions around the country and in Denmark. These articles attest to the excellent scholarly work undergraduates in writing, rhetoric, and related fields can produce and disseminate if given the opportunity and the means. These manuscripts integrate secondary sources from the areas under investigation, offer primary research conducted by the writers, and ground inquiry in a defined theoretical framework. That is, *Young Scholars in Writing* publishes articles that make an intellectual contribution to their respective fields.

The scholarship published in *Young Scholars in Writing* generally adheres to the model of the independent researcher. Most articles are

single-authored, although a handful are co-authored by students. The same is true for two other well-established journals publishing humanities research. *The Oswald Review: Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*, a refereed undergraduate journal of criticism and research in the discipline of English and published since 1999, includes articles that are researched and written by undergraduates and are not co-authored with faculty. The *Pittsburgh Undergraduate Review (PUR)*, a multidisciplinary, international undergraduate journal founded in the early 1980s, publishes research articles written by students, the majority in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. According to Steven Danna, assistant editor-in-chief, only one article published by the journal has included a faculty co-author, and this occurrence caused controversy among *PUR* staff (Danna, 2006).² As independent researchers or peer co-researchers, student contributors to these journals are immersed in the kinds of scholarship their humanities faculty generally do.

Independent student researchers can collaborate with faculty in several ways, as is the case with *Young Scholars in Writing*, *The Oswald Review* and *Pittsburgh Undergraduate Review*. Although the mechanisms of review for these journals vary somewhat, all include close contributor-faculty contact while students revise their essays. *Young Scholars in Writing* uses a peer review process that mirrors in many ways the kinds of processes used in scholarly journals. Students who submit have usually written their submissions for a class, independent study, or senior seminar. They have worked closely with a faculty member at their own undergraduate institution. After they submit their manuscript, students receive reports from one to three reviewers who are seniors in the professional writing program at Penn State Berks or former contributors to *Young Scholars in Writing*. Submitters also receive a letter from the editor or other faculty mentors associated with the journal synthesizing reviewer comments and providing detailed guidelines for revision. Contributors go through a rigorous revision process, working closely with the faculty editor or a faculty mentor. All but one of the 34 contributors whose articles were published in the journal substantially revised their articles based on reviewers’ and editors’ feedback. Most manuscripts went through two or more revision cycles; every writer consulted with student copyeditors at Penn State Berks.

This process is extraordinarily time-consuming and labor-intensive for the students, but it also addresses another issue frequently cited as a

hindrance to undergraduate research in the humanities: that students are generally unprepared for sophisticated research. The processes involved in publication in a scholarly journal such as *Young Scholars in Writing*, *The Oswald Review*, and *Pittsburgh Undergraduate Review* have fostered students' research, writing, and intellectual development to a degree perhaps more than any humanities faculty can achieve with students in our own classes, at least as most are currently structured. *Young Scholars in Writing's* editor and faculty mentors push students to revise and re-think their work until their essays are ready for publication, and we have the time and mechanisms to do so. Contributors to *Young Scholars in Writing* have the opportunity to immerse themselves in theoretical, challenging discourses, especially since they began this work in their courses. To put it in Uffelman's terms, these students have time to "catch up" on the relevant research, not so they can become "genuine partners" with faculty collaborators, as in his research with undergraduates (Uffelman, 1995), but so they can produce their own significant scholarship. Recognizing that students become scholars as they confront, engage, and scrutinize the discourses of their discipline, the "young scholars" in the journal's title is a marker of a student's experience with such discursive inquiry.

The quality of student work in *Young Scholars in Writing*, *The Oswald Review*, and *Pittsburgh Undergraduate Review* attests to humanities undergraduates' potential as scholars. Silas Kulkarni's application of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's media filtration theories to mainstream print media's inattention to the voter purge in Florida during the 2000 Presidential election provides an insightful perspective on this crucial matter (Kulkarni, 2004). Emily Groves' application of theories of Michel Foucault to the Away Message, a trademark part of America Online's Instant Messenger (AIM), is a significant investigation of this pervasive new discourse among teenagers and young adults that is crucial for adults to begin to understand (Groves, 2005). John Easterbrook analyzes fathers in William Faulkner's early novels against the backdrop of the elimination of the slaveholding father's power base after the abolition of slavery (Easterbrook, 2004). Ashvin Kamath investigates the private and public correspondences of Benjamin Rush while Rush attempted in the late 18th century to replace Pennsylvania's unicameral government with a bicameral structure, concluding that Rush privately associated republican virtue with wealth but publicly associated it with civic involvement and morality (Kamath, 2006).

Although just a short list of the scholarly contributions in these journals, the range and depth of students' work suggests its scholarly significance.

The Impact of Undergraduate Research in the Humanities on Undergraduate Research in the Humanities

As David DeVries claims, humanities teacher-scholars need to find ways to "persuade all of our colleagues and peers that research is just as vital, just as sustaining, for the humanities and their students as it is for the natural and social sciences" (DeVries, 2001). My experiences with humanities undergraduate research have convinced me that as teachers provide increasing opportunities for undergraduate research in the humanities, our colleagues recognize the value of this work. In turn, this recognition leads to curricular innovation and change that offers to students further scholarly opportunities.

(Re)Envisioning the Humanities Research Paper

Affirming independent research as a model for humanities undergraduate research and furthering the humanities' participation in the undergraduate research movement necessitates a reconsideration of what humanities faculty generally refer to as the "research paper" or "term paper." As Joyce Kinkead notes, undergraduate research must "produce some original research" (Kinkead, 2003). Many teacher-scholars have addressed the inadequacies of the "term paper" model. Robert Davis and Mark Shadle argue that college research papers are often "apprentice work, not making knowledge as much as reporting the known" (Davis & Shadle, 2000). This is especially true of humanities research. Even upper-level students typically view research as "a simple linear exercise in collecting information and passing it on to the instructor" (Profozich, 1997) and view themselves as "repositories of information" (Shafer, 1999); students are themselves peripheral to knowledge-making. Teachers tend to focus on "instructions on conventions of documentation and avoidance of plagiarism" (McDonald, 1994), the "painstakingly detailed mechanical directions on using the card catalog, taking notes on sources, accessing online catalogs, revising sentences and paragraphs, making an outline, and quoting and documenting sources" (McCormick, 1994). Too often, the research paper "produces little more than mindless paraphrasing from reference works put together by bored students" (Blakey, 1997).

I suggest, however, that if we change the “research paper” or “term paper” mindset in the humanities, we will better prepare our students for significant undergraduate research in their junior and senior years. We have to introduce students to the joys (and frustrations) of scholarly investigation and discovery early in their college careers, in first-year composition courses and other humanities courses, not because this early work will likely produce original results to be disseminated but because it will prepare them for the kinds of work they might accomplish in their junior and senior years. Many teacher-scholars have shared their ideas for new kinds of research assignments. Davis and Shadle, for example, propose the “multi-genre/media/disciplinary/cultural research project” (or “multi-writing”), in which “the trail of a question or questions leads through a range of connected material” (Davis & Shadle, 2000); students experiment with genres, media, subjects, forms, etc. to explore a topic from multiple perspectives. Brian Sutton has students participate in field research, and Tom Reigstad advocates the “I-Search paper,” one that uses a first-person voice to tell the story of one’s research process and results (Reigstad, 1997). Michael Galgano turns students into historians using primary research rather than relying only on secondary source materials (Galgano, 1999).

These and other humanities teacher-scholars’ experimentation with new kinds of research assignments illustrate that students in the humanities can and should be exposed to challenging, interesting, and exciting forms of research. Given what we know about undergraduate research, we have to admit that the “term paper” as it has long been conceived and taught has lost its educational function. As Matthew Allen, a contributor to Volume 2 of *Young Scholars in Writing*, explains,

I often wondered if undergraduates could do original research, and if so, how. I wrote many research papers myself and worked as a writing tutor with other students’ research papers. For nearly all of these papers, “research” consisted of reviewing and synthesizing the published work of others—people who had done original research themselves. . . . In one of my classes (the semester before I submitted my paper) the professor encouraged us to create and carry out an original research project. . . . Working with [*Young Scholars in Writing*] helped me learn how to move beyond synthesis of others’ research, using it as a stepping-stone into performing my own original research. Knowing how to synthesize others’ research is a critical skill, but in some sense it is a preliminary one.

Performing original research, in the context of past research, seems to be the next step. (Allen, 2005)

With creative thinking, humanities teachers can continue to offer new kinds of research opportunities for students at all levels, preparing them for significant scholarly investigation later in their undergraduate careers.

New Opportunities in Undergraduate Humanities Research

Pedagogical changes, whether at the level of curricula or an individual classroom, are necessary to facilitate genuine undergraduate research in the humanities. Mike Tannenbaum’s “research-across-the-curriculum” proposal is a potentially strong prospect (Tannenbaum, 2006). Rogers modified the senior seminar at his university from a “topics course” to a “research workshop” (2003), and DeVries, a literary scholar, critic, and teacher and Director of the Undergraduate Research Program in the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell University, promotes cross-disciplinary undergraduate research projects so that humanities students work with one another and with students in the sciences (DeVries, 2001). As a teacher, I have also changed my approach to research at all levels of undergraduate education. For example, in first-year composition, I construct the class as a disciplinary community, with each member investigating the same topic from varying perspectives. I combine service-learning with literary study in my women’s and multicultural literature classes, combining undergraduate research with community involvement. In an American Ethnicity class, my students conducted primary research on local African American history in collaboration with the NAACP, Reading, PA branch.

David Bost asserts that the availability of undergraduate research journals has encouraged more faculty to become involved. Indeed, when four of my students published their co-written work in *The Oswald Review* in 2001, Candace Spigelman and I were inspired to establish *Young Scholars in Writing*. At Bost’s institution, the *Furman Humanities Review* has become an important outlet for students’ investigative work and “gives Furman faculty members a chance to work closely in a tutorial relationship with the brightest students in the humanities” (Bost, 1992-93). Not surprisingly, then, given the favorable climate for undergraduate research at Furman, several students in Sean O’Rourke’s communication classes at Furman have published their research in *Young Scholars in Writing*.

Young Scholars in Writing has been embraced by compositionists and rhetoricians. My colleagues across the nation and overseas recognize the value of the journal for undergraduates and for the discipline. Journal editors are publishing “Calls for Submissions.” Instructors are assigning fascinating research projects and encouraging their students to submit these essays to the journal, and many continue to work with these student authors during the revision process. Some faculty are using *Young Scholars in Writing* as class texts. In a recent article published in *College English*, one of the premier refereed journals in English studies, Amy Robillard suggests that *Young Scholars in Writing* has forced the discipline to re-see itself. She writes, “*Young Scholars in Writing* functions as evidence that students are able and willing to contribute to composition studies’ disciplinary knowledge about writing and rhetoric” (Robillard, 2006). Robillard’s published research on the value of *Young Scholars in Writing* will likely promote increased faculty involvement with undergraduate research.

Clearly, then, as undergraduate research continues to impact undergraduate education, humanities students must not be left behind. We must, as DeVries suggests, recognize “the inestimable value of independent research in the intellectual and professional growth of young scholars” (DeVries, 2001). In so doing, we will continue to construct new pedagogies and reinvent humanities education.

Notes

¹ *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* is a print journal published annually in the fall. Information about the journal and archives of back issues can be found at <http://www.bk.psu.edu/Academics/Degrees/26432.htm?cn21>.

² This article, “The Role of Integrin Receptors in Human Prostate Tumor Cell Adhesion and Migration to ECM Protein and Peptides,” was written by Jodie Jia Yin, Brian A. Maldonado, MD, and Leo T. Furcht, PhD and published in 1996 (9.2: 31-46). The Editor’s preface states, “The staff of *The Pittsburgh Undergraduate Review* were faced with an interesting dilemma this year when we received a paper with the multiple authorship that is standard in the sciences...the problem lay in the fact that, although the primary author was indeed an undergraduate, the remaining two authors were not. . . . Because an undergraduate is the primary author, we decided to accept [the paper]” (Danna, 2006). Danna also states that humanities submissions “vastly outweigh” submissions in the Physical and Natural Sciences, and he explains that the collective opinion among *PUR* staff is that this occurrence is due to the fact that many undergraduates in science co-author research with faculty (Danna, 2006).

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