Highly structured research essay. Research has been taught this way in classrooms for many years, and teachers and students alike steel themselves for the intense work process that accompanies “the research unit.” As English teachers, we have been there; we have taught research writing in the same way. However, the future of research writing instruction does not have to look like the traditional research unit. Instead, we envision research as everyday, ongoing inquiry that builds students’ capacities as researchers of their worlds and lives.

In his book Testing Is Not Teaching: What Should Count in Education, Donald Graves (2002) details the characteristics of what he calls “long thinkers,” those people who get lost in a topic and follow their curiosities to learn more about their interests. He says:

- They are problem finders.
- They formulate their own questions about the world and then search for answers.
- They enjoy their own company.
- They have a sense of play.
- They are highly focused.
- They have been apprenticed to other long thinkers. (pp. 54–55)

His characteristics of long thinkers describe a vision of students who find their curiosities and follow them where they lead. Graves is, in essence, asking teachers to make room in their curricula for students to explore and to be researchers. He also discusses this idea of cultivating long thinkers as the antidote to the hurried, standardized curriculum required in today’s schools. This view of students as long thinkers calls to mind a curriculum that allows students to see their world as a place ripe with possibilities for exploration.

Creating a classroom in which inquiry is an everyday part of the curriculum is one way to encourage long thinkers. Teachers who value long thinkers see research and inquiry as a natural process for following students’ own curiosities rather than being a separate unit in which students conduct research. For example,
when students raise questions that emerge from their lives and worlds, teachers who take an inquiry-centered approach encourage students to seek resources and research to help answer those questions. While research units might provide opportunities for students to practice specific research skills, approaching curriculum as inquiry helps students see those skills as practical for their whole lives. It becomes a more authentic approach to understanding research skills.

Teachers who approach research as ongoing inquiry center students’ curiosities and methods of research. In Upstanders: How to Engage Middle School Hearts and Minds with Inquiry (2015), Sara Ahmed tells the story of bringing a sea urchin into her middle school classroom and allowing her students to examine it without providing any guidance or research questions other than chart paper for students to note their wonderings about the sea urchin. She simply awakens their curiosity and watches as they develop questions on their own. Then, with their curiosities piqued, she explains how her own mini-inquiry process led her to try eating sea urchin for the first time (Daniels & Ahmed, 2015, pp. 104–106). Rather than Ahmed directing what the students will learn and study, she provides rich opportunities for them to discover their own interests. This kind of approach helps students see that the questions that arise in their daily lives are potential topics of study and opportunities for long thinking.

As teachers of writing, we have successfully engaged students in inquiry through Keri Smith’s (2008) book How to Be an Explorer of the World: Portable Art Life Museum. Smith provides a series of thought experiments, art projects, and other “explorations” that urge readers to be inquirers of their own lives. Smith’s book creates opportunities for students to see writing as a way of thinking about and making sense of the world around them. This approach to research differs from the traditional research unit approach. Although the traditional approach allows students to practice research skills that are new to them in many cases, it also represents research as an isolated, highly structured, highly regulated genre. Infusing inquiry throughout the curriculum takes a much more natural and holistic view of research. Students are always in the process of researching topics that are important to them and reporting their results informally and formally to friends, family, and teachers. When curriculum is designed with inquiry in mind, students practice all of the skills of a traditional research unit, but they do so throughout the school year. The skills and strategies become integrated with other content or ideas.

Content That Centers Students’ Lives and Experiences

In addition to making research and inquiry an ongoing component of a writing classroom rather than an isolated unit, the future of research writing involves research that arises from students’ lives and communities. One way to do this is through place-based research. Research writing that is place-based encourages students to draw on their everyday experiences in their lives to inform their knowledge of that place (G. A. Smith, 2002). By centering the writing curriculum on students’ interests and curiosities about their lives and what is happening in their worlds, we encourage students to be everyday researchers.

Another benefit of place-based research is that it values all students’ experiences as sources of knowledge. Barbara Comber (2016) explains:

A key affordance of making place [. . .] the object of study is that it provides rich material for all students. All students have experiences of places; all students have prior knowledge; therefore, all students are in a position of “knowing,” of having something to say. (p. 59)

We envision place-based research as an opportunity for students to find answers to real questions they have about their world.

One example of place-based research comes from a preservice teacher in one of our university classes called Teaching Writing. For her final project, she has chosen to explore Reno, the city where she grew up and to which she has returned after a number of years away. In her writing, this student has developed a question, “How has the city changed, and what evidence of these changes does the city bear?” She uses a mix of narrative writing, data collection of artifacts from around the city, interviews with lifelong residents and those who have returned to the city, and her own reflections.
and observations to tell the story of how the city has grown and changed. This writing project has allowed her to explore the community that felt both familiar and strange to her at the same time. Through this place-based research and writing, she sees the city through multiple lenses: looking backward in time to remember the city she knew as a child, noticing the city as it currently stands, and imagining the future of Reno as it might someday be. In this project, the community itself is the object of study and presents an opportunity for this beginning teacher to notice what is and to imagine possibilities for her community.

In Keri Smith’s (2008) How to Be an Explorer of the World: Portable Art Life Museum, one exploration asks readers to “Document a place by interviewing people about it” (p. 113). Another suggests, “Go to your favorite street. (If you can’t go there physically, then you can go there in your mind.) Map it out on a piece of paper. Then describe (or otherwise document) everything in detail: the shops, houses, street signs, trees, etc.” (p. 70). These explorations inspire students to be curious about their communities and to document what they notice in a systematic way using forms provided in the book. As students explore their lives and worlds using the book’s suggested activities, they engage in inquiry about the meanings they make about their own surroundings. After completing several explorations from the book, students collect their artifacts and writings and artfully present their work in a binder or bound book to create their own portable life museums to be shared with their peers, families, and communities. How to Be an Explorer of the World invites constant, ongoing exploration of students’ worlds.

In addition to research that is place-based, the content of research writing can shift to encourage students to think critically about their worlds too. Linda Christensen’s (2017) book Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word includes examples from Christensen’s own teaching in a predominantly black school in Portland, Oregon. In addition to her focus on teaching for social justice, much of her work centers her students’ lives in their community. Throughout the book, Christensen shares examples of curricula that engage students in exploring the history and current state of their neighborhoods and lives as starting points for understanding local, national, and global issues. For example, in her chapter called “Rethinking Research: Reading and Writing about the Roots of Gentrification,” Christensen describes how she guides students to read and write about how their city has changed over time and to what ends. She says:

Students read research about the history of their city, gathering notes about the mechanics of dismantling a community through the examination of photographs, primary source documents, newspaper accounts, and a walking tour. [. . .] Students’ writing was more passionate and lively and they worked harder to make sense of difficult reading and on revising their writing because they were studying something that felt both urgent and personal. (p. 157)

This kind of research provides opportunities for students to create source-based questions about their communities, and their questions lead them to examine their world and their places within it. When we design research opportunities that students feel connected to, we give students a chance to see research as more than just a school requirement, and we value students’ experiences as sources of knowledge.

**Action- and Justice-Oriented Research**

Another important element of the future of research writing in schools is the increased focus on authentic projects for real audiences that produce tangible outcomes. While writing teachers have shifted many writing projects to be more authentic in recent years, that same shift hasn’t always extended to research writing. But research provides a rich opportunity for students to share their work beyond the classroom, especially when students are working to fight injustice that they have studied in their lives and communities.

Middle and high school students are often at an age when they are developing a strong sense of justice; they notice the injustices around them and want to exert their independence and authority by speaking out against that injustice. Teachers can build on that sense of justice as a starting point for action-oriented research. When students notice aspects of their worlds that feel unfair to them, research and writing can provide a means for students to explore those questions, seek answers, and share their work with an authentic audience. Comber (2016) explains, “Young people can and should learn to work for justice from the outset of schooling and they can best begin this work by considering the everyday micro-politics of the classroom and the playground, the school and the neighborhood” (p. 26). Action-oriented research and writing piques student curiosity and positions students as everyday activists in their communities.

As we work to redesign and reenvision writing instruction, we can begin to think more strategically about how to support students to be active participants in their communities. Research projects that invite students to share their work beyond the classroom reinforces the idea that literacy skills are relevant, real, and necessary for students’ lives after they have finished school. Furthermore, action-oriented projects that produce tangible outcomes increase student civic engagement and encourage
students’ deeper consideration of the impact of their work (Buckley-Marudas, 2018).

There are many ways to engage in action-oriented projects. The Greater Madison Writing Project’s Rise Up & Write youth camps “bring together high school students interested in issue advocacy through writing” (Greater Madison Writing Project, 2019). In the camps, which are supported by a grant from the National Writing Project, youth writers “work together and with professional teachers of writing to read, research, and write for awareness and change around issues that matter.” (2019). The Rise Up & Write camps have encouraged students to create change-making campaigns in their schools and communities too. Zoë Wyse’s “#IFeelSaferWhen” button campaign was designed to increase conversations about safety, especially for people who identify as LGBTQI+ (Wyse, 2018). With her experience in Rise Up & Write and her continuing work with the #IFeelSaferWhen campaign, Wyse says, “I realized that I am an activist and have the power to make a difference” (p. 58). While the Greater Madison Writing Project’s Rise Up & Write program occurs in a summer camp setting, the model could be implemented in classrooms too.

In Upstanders, Daniels and Ahmed (2015) encourage an action-oriented approach to research. By sharing news articles with her students about current events in the world that spark students’ curiosities, interests, and, in many cases, senses of injustice, Ahmed encourages students to become more involved with their own communities and other communities around the world. She describes her students’ fundraising efforts for Syrian refugee children after connecting with the director of an aid organization in Syria. Her students wanted to do something to support the children just like them, who they had read about and studied in the news. They created a get one-give one program to sell handmade bracelets. Ahmed’s students sent both the money they raised and the bracelets to children in the refugee camp (Daniels & Ahmed, 2015).

We have also seen similar forms of action-oriented research in the classrooms of the teachers we have worked with. We have talked with teachers whose students have investigated issues in their schools and communities. In one school, students created an advocacy campaign for a new track for the high school. In another school, many students didn’t have adequate winter coats, which resulted in lower school attendance on cold days. Students petitioned the school board to add busing to improve attendance. These examples of action-oriented research projects move beyond simply studying students’ experiences toward a more active vision of research. Through their research, students can become active members of their schools, their communities, and the world.

Conclusion
Research writing can do so much more than it has done in the past. With a redesigned approach to research that encourages continuous inquiry about topics that students care about and act upon, we create important opportunities for students to see themselves as everyday researchers and change-makers. Enacting this vision of research requires a shift away from a traditional view of research as an occasional activity toward research as an ongoing, necessary aspect of ELA instruction. The important distinction is to see research writing as both a way to meet expectations of rigorous, source-based research and a path for students to discover new ideas about topics that interest them. By making research an everyday practice in which students study their lives and communities, inquire into problems or questions they encounter, and act critically to inspire change, teachers provide fertile ground for students to see themselves as researchers and to see writing as integral to their understandings of the world.

References


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