

The Empirical Strikes Back: A RAD Research Methods Class for Undergraduate English Students

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Over the eleven years that I directed a university undergraduate research program, I encountered students passionate about their projects: Karlie, the opera student, who wanted to investigate how sound is produced by the human body and asked for a directed study in the anatomy lab; Shannon, committed to bioremediation of toxic soils through strategic planting; and Jason, who was fascinated by the nesting habits of wood ducks.

Rarely did I see a student from my own department, English. One exception was Carlos. He and his mentor visited me about presenting his research project at our annual State Capitol event that showcases selected undergraduate projects from our institution. He spoke with excitement about his research study. During a class tour of Special Collections, he found artifacts from the tribal school in his hometown. Although not even born at the time—the 1970s—Carlos became intensely interested in what the newspapers called “riots” at the school. His thorough analysis led to a poster on the rhetoric and reality of these riots, and, yes, it was presented at Research on Capitol Hill. From that initial project, he proceeded to develop related research, eventually presenting three more posters at professional meetings.



Figure 1: Carlos J. Guadarrama at Resesarch Day at the State Capitol.

Carlos was a lone English major among a sea of STEM students at the State Capitol event. In some years, not a single English student presents in this venue. Why aren't students in English like Carlos, who conduct meaningful, authentic research, more common? It is my intention in this article to note signs that indicate the culture of undergraduate research in English studies is improving, demonstrate why undergraduate research is an important curricular innovation, and make suggestions for continued work to enhance opportunities for students to engage in this transformative process. In brief, my goal is to provide a big picture of how undergraduate research in our discipline is part of a larger, ongoing national trend and should become a disciplinary priority. In doing so, I'll draw particularly from a course I've taught over the last few years that enrolls students majoring in English across its several fields and features an empirical approach to research that is also replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD).

To be clear, by *undergraduate research*, I mean “an inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate that makes an original, intellectual, or creative contribution to the field,” the definition advanced by the Council of Undergraduate Research (CUR). *Research* is an inclusive term that encompasses research, creative activity, and scholarly products and cuts across all fields of study.

The National Landscape in Undergraduate Research

To begin, let me offer a brief history of the undergraduate research movement in the United States. Later, I will situate English Studies within that framework. David Russell has demonstrated in his curricular history of writing in the U.S. that institutions gravitated to the German approach to research and the research paper. Wilhelm von Humboldt, who founded the University of Berlin in 1810, where a good many Americans would undertake graduate work, is credited with stressing an approach to education that unified teaching and research, coupled with “an unceasing process of inquiry.” In doing so, he was enacting the philosophy of his teacher, Fredrich August Wolf, who made “research and discovery, not initiation into a closed body of knowledge, the primary goal of an academic philologist” (Diehl 147-148).

As early as 1912, the term *undergraduate research* appeared in the U.S. in the context of student prizes awarded at the University of Chicago (Kinhead, “What’s in a Name?” 22). Fast forward six decades. The establishment of the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) in 1978 began to institutionalize student research when a group of chemists from private liberal arts institutions came together with a focus on faculty development. Within five years, members from

public institutions were allowed to join. CUR has a rather unusual governance structure with councilors elected to discipline-specific divisions such as Arts and Humanities. The focus on faculty in CUR is an important distinction as the National Conferences on Undergraduate Research (NCUR), established in 1987, provides a venue for students to present their research. Annually, 4,000 students gather in the spring to share poster sessions, oral presentations, and performances. A major change in the national scene of undergraduate research occurred in 2010 when these two major organizations—CUR and NCUR—merged. This unification brought together the faculty and student advocacy arms of undergraduate research, increasing the power to support and promote high-quality undergraduate student-faculty collaborative research and scholarship.

CUR has a vibrant publishing arm that launched with helpful “How-to” guides and has matured into offering a wealth of books on best practices and models. Of particular note to English Studies are *How to Get Started in Arts and Humanities Research with Undergraduates* (Crawford, Orel, Shanahan); *How to Start an Undergraduate Research Journal* (Hart); *Creative Inquiry in the Arts & Humanities: Models of Undergraduate Research* (Klos, Shanahan, and Young); and *Reading, Writing & Research: Undergraduate Students as Scholars in Literary Studies* (Behling). In addition to books, CUR also issues a quarterly journal, *Scholarship and Practice of Undergraduate Research (SPUR)*.

The publication that most likely had the broadest impact on undergraduate research in the United States is the Boyer Report *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities*. When published in 1998, it took research universities to task

for not paying sufficient attention to undergraduates. These institutions were perceived to privilege faculty research and graduate student education. The *Blueprint* laid out ten goals for improving undergraduate education, including “to make research-based learning the standard.” This was, in effect, a mobilization to put undergraduate education and the forefront, and research was the means to do so. Although directed at research universities, the Boyer Report has affected every institutional type.

The response to the recommendation to “make research-based learning the standard” was immediate. In *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: Three Years After the Boyer Report*, assessment of the impact described the rise of offices devoted to undergraduate research: “Centralized structures are developing to extend research-based learning to more students; approximately 60% of all research universities have established these structures to promote and organize undergraduate research opportunities” (16). Many institutions, not just research universities, developed what Carolyn Ash Merkel calls a “culture of undergraduate research” (42): it’s embedded in the educational experience; faculty know about it and encourage it; administration supports it with resources; and students know the opportunities exist and how to take advantage.

Within five years of the initial Boyer Report, *Valuing and Supporting Undergraduate Research* (Kinhead), the first book to appear by a publisher in higher education other than CUR, set out foundational principles in its “Learning through Inquiry” chapter. The work included information on the practice at research universities but, importantly, spotlighted undergraduate research at two-year colleges. CUR initiated a Community College Undergraduate Research

Initiative early in this century and published a volume on the subject in 2009. Kinkead's volume also called for a "research across the curriculum movement."

Undergraduate Research and English Studies

The first mention of undergraduate research in the humanities appeared in the *CUR Quarterly*, beginning in 1992 (Bost). It was not until 2006 that voices from the field began appearing in discipline-specific journals. Amy Robillard's article in *College English* suggested that undergraduate research has the potential to transform how compositionists conduct research. The following year, Grobman argued in a *CCC* article, "The Student Scholar: (Re)Negotiating Authorship and Authority," that by viewing undergraduate research production and authorship along a continuum of scholarly authority, student scholars obtain *authorship* and *authority* through participation in research, and she addressed several implications of this continuum for the discipline. *Undergraduate Research in English Studies* (Grobman and Kinkead), which appeared in 2010 in the National Council of Teachers of English's Refiguring English Studies series, includes descriptions of undergraduate research projects across English fields as models and has been called trailblazing. This duo also published the first article on undergraduate research in an MLA journal, *Profession*, in 2011 (Kinkead and Grobman). The trail for instances and study of undergraduate research was certainly ablaze. Lauren Fitzgerald addressed the important and historical role of writing center tutors in research. Jane Greer drew on her considerable experience in working with undergraduates in archival research. Likewise, Wendy Hayden detailed the pedagogical possibilities of incorporating archival research assignments in

undergraduate rhetoric and composition courses in “‘Gifts’ of the Archives: A Pedagogy for Undergraduate Research.” In 2020, *The Naylor Report on Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies*, edited by DelliCarpini, Fishman, and Greer, offered scholarly research as well as practical advice. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) released a set of “Best Practices for Undergraduate Research.” A solid foundation of research and scholarship and increasing attention to the role of the humanities in organizations such as CUR have laid a base on which English studies can build.

The Empirical Strikes Back: A RAD Class

English Studies is not one monolithic discipline but a series of fields: literature; rhetoric and composition; creative writing; technical and professional writing; English education; folklore, and linguistics. The frame for research varies among them. Technical communicators conduct usability studies, literature students undertake criticism of texts, and English Education students engage in teacher action research conducting case studies. Even though we are all “English,” our modes of inquiry can vary dramatically. We share, though, a common interest in text. I use this common interest in teaching a research methods course to English majors that not only introduces them to empirical research with qualitative and quantitative tools but also engages them in conducting authentic research that results in a research report, poster, and lightning talk. They undertake research that is *replicable*, *aggregable*, and *data-supported* (RAD), as defined by Richard Haswell.

Approaches to Research in English Studies (ENGL 3470) meets the Quantitative Intensive (QI) graduation requirement for the university. Much like writing intensive (WI) courses that introduce students to discourse convention in the disciplines, QI courses are designed to demonstrate to students how numbers apply to their major fields of study. English majors are notorious for shying away from using quantitative data. Yes, the stereotype that English majors “don’t do math,” for the most part, holds true. Hudson’s helpful “Numbers and Words: Quantitative Methods for Scholars of Texts” argues that “literary studies are impoverished by the continued avoidance of quantification” (133) and explains how statistical techniques can illuminate issues of production and consumption of books. Students are also unfamiliar with research that involves people—unless they are characters on a page. The students enrolled in this research methods course complete Collaborative Institution Training Initiative (CITI) certification in order to work with human subjects. All become versed in ethical guidelines of conducting research, and proposals comply with Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards and policies.

The course is structured so that students engage in a whole-class project before embarking on independent projects (see Kinhead, “An Empirical Research Project” for a description of the whole-class assignment). During one semester, the focus was on the blue book, the long-standing format used for essay examinations. This topic enabled them to practice several methods and use various research tools: historical research; literature review; interviews; surveys; and infographics. When working with archival research, they found gems like this from Harvard in 1857: “Burning his blue books unread, Greek Professor Evangelinus Apostolides

Sophocles later refuses on principle to downgrade the student who has done well in daily recitations but poorly in the written final. And if a student should show significant improvement on the written, chalk it up to cheating, he says” (“This Month”). The end report of the whole-class research project was published in *Young Scholars in Writing*, a distinguished journal for undergraduate researchers (Duersch).

In another semester’s whole-course project, students analyzed 300+ writing intensive (WI) syllabus and delivered a report to the campus’ General Education Committee.¹ In yet another whole-class project, they developed a history of writing instruction at our institution beginning with the founding in 1890, reading and coding annual college catalogs for data; this report was submitted to University Archives.

Let me describe a recent whole-class project in more detail, one that focused on “The Writing Lives of English Majors.” The project began with autoethnography, a type of qualitative inquiry that can help construct and analyze identity through both process and product. Although students who major in English write consistently, often the writing behaviors are taken for granted, particularly their long-term writing lives. Students interrogated how they developed as writers, what strategies they established to be successful, their preferred material culture, and cultural influences.

To begin, students tracked their writing for one week in a log, noting each instance of text, tweet, journal entries, notes, and lists. This tracking offered the opportunity to discuss how researchers measure data: volume? Time? Instances? Although the types of writing can be apples and oranges, the students decided on a simple tally. Individually, they created spreadsheets, and

then these were compiled for a whole-class portrait. Depicting information graphically is an important part of the QI requirement. Many of them had never used a spreadsheet nor turned numbers into charts or graphs (Figure 2). Based on their writing logs, the three most common forms of writing they completed over the week were text messages (2615), browser searches (808), and Snapchats (617).

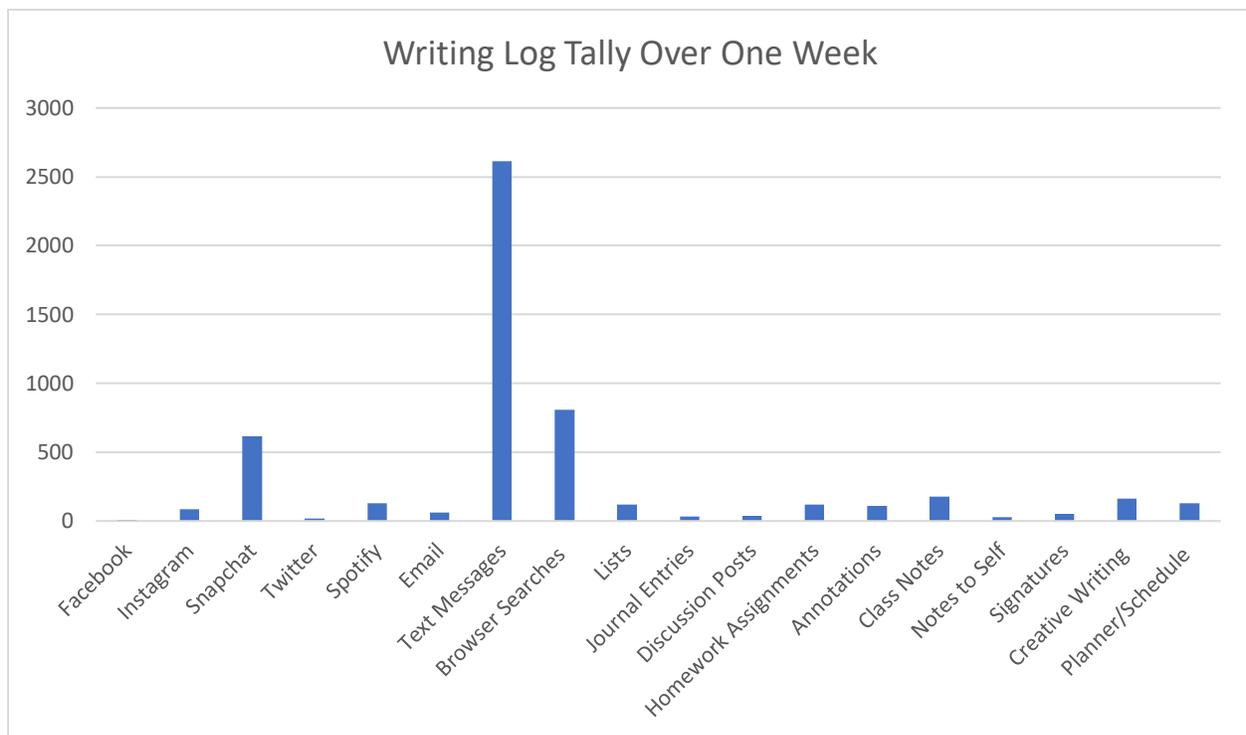


Figure 1. Tally of Week’s Worth of Writing.

The researchers also composed their own autoethnographies in which they outlined their writing histories, perceptions of writing, writing processes, and preferred material culture. These

were then reviewed and coded for patterns and themes chronologically, beginning with early childhood and extending through schooling. A theme in early childhood, for instance, was the pivotal role of parental figures in the development of writing abilities. Likewise, teachers were influential—mostly positively but some negatively—for novice writers. In terms of material culture, some place pen and paper on a pedestal for its “romantic status” and resonate to the “smooth strokes of a ballpoint pen,” even to writing only with a particular instrument such as the .05 mm Pilot G-2. They looked at environmental aspects of writing: is background music essential? Do they need to be alone or in a study room? Do they have rituals to perform before beginning to write?

In concluding this introspective study, which also involved interviews and surveys of other English majors, the student-researchers found that writing is an integral part of their lives and worth valuing and improving. They added suggestions for future research and pointed out limitations of the study. Overall, they noted that although their report included nearly two dozen references, “little investigation has been done into how English majors have developed as writers and forged their identities. Their writing lives are diverse and rich with memories. Writing is foundational.”

The components of the whole-class project are scheduled so as to be completed just ahead of the individual research project work. Thus, when the students complete the research proposal for the group project, they move on to writing their individual proposals. (A brief overview of the individual research project is provided in the [Appendix](#).) Their research questions are formulated in consultation with me. They arrive at individual conferences with

three topics in mind, which I've reviewed in advance on our course management system.

Generally, one has potential, and within about 15-30 minutes, we can settle on a question to investigate. The diversity of their interests never fails to amaze me. A student in creative writing who aspires to write faith-based children's books conducted a bookstore shelf analysis of titles and interviewed parents of three- to five-year olds to uncover themes they'd like to see in the literature. A pre-service teacher investigated the outcomes of a new one-on-one laptop program at a high school to determine if quality and quantity of writing improve (see [Figure 3](#) for her research poster). A student in literature traced the types of fantasy books written for young readers over a century, decade by decade. Another student analyzed English major and faculty preferences for print and digital books.

An important part of this methods course is dissemination, essential to the maturation process of a researcher. Each student completed a research report, prepared a poster, and developed a lightning talk. Every product included the graphic depiction of data; consequently, they developed quantification skills not often taught in English classes. Effective visual rhetoric is yet another skill emphasized. The poster has rhetorical and visual conventions that must be learned and understood: the preferred amount of white space, the generous use of graphs and illustrations, and the size of font. The delivery of the poster offers opportunities for the researcher to engage one-on-one with an audience but also requires what are generally known as elevator talks—quick presentations that can be extended if the listener wants to know more. In some settings, dissemination is through Ignite or Lightning Talks that require the researcher to quickly—and entertainingly—summarize the research.

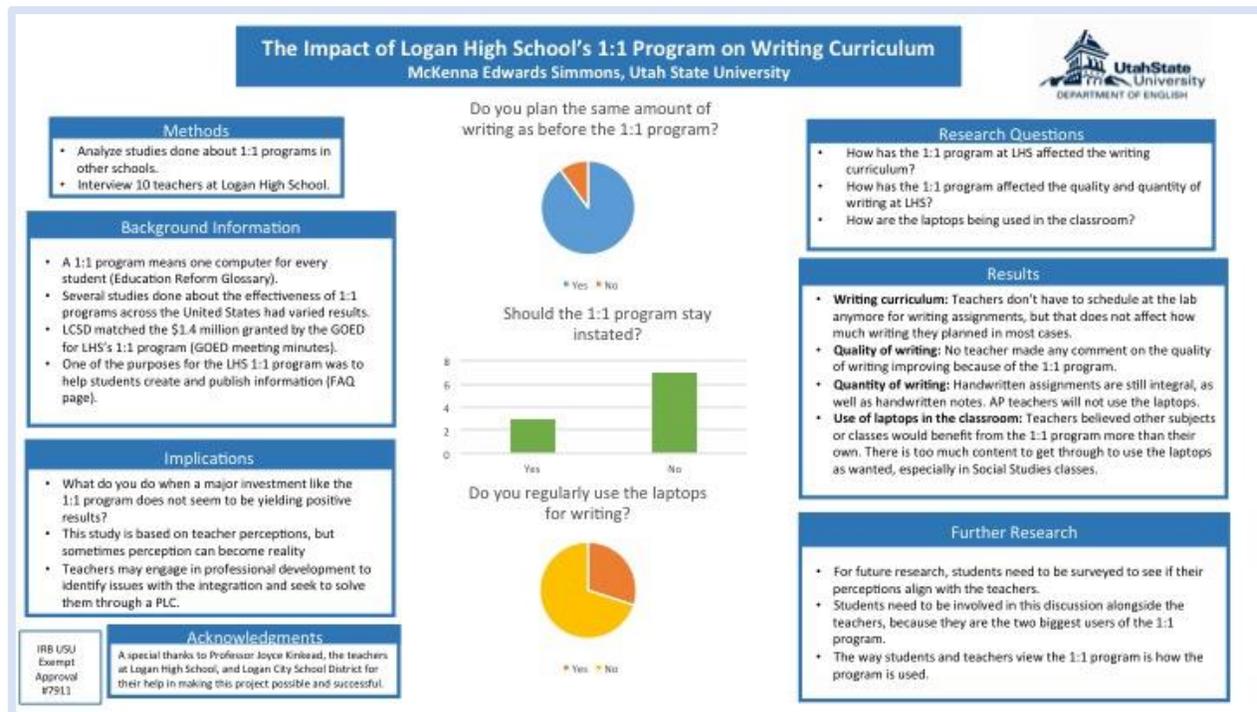


Figure 2. Research Poster by McKenna Edwards Simmons, 2016.

When I queried the students in my research methods course about which format they preferred—the research report, the poster, or the lightning talk—they responded that each made them think about their research projects in different ways. They are accustomed to writing research papers but less so in communicating their ideas in other mediums. They said that putting the same report into different formats had a recursive effect that influenced how they structured and re-structured each one. Students present at on-campus venues and often at state or national undergraduate research events. Some students' work is published in an on-campus publication (e.g., Grant) or in one of many undergraduate journals that exist nationally or even in professional journals in the discipline.² Other students are asked to serve as research assistants to

faculty as a result of their excellent work in the course.³ These experiences of presentation and publication make more transparent our own professional lives as scholars and researchers.

Some might argue that the best that can be hoped for in a methods class is for students to read and understand research reports. Some might put formulating a research question as an end goal. Others might hope to get the students to the proposal stage, on the verge of submitting an IRB request. I contend that unless the students engage in an authentic project that leads from formulating a research question through conducting and presenting the work, they have not been initiated into research procedures. It's only by going through the entire research process that a student can say, "I've done it." Aiken, Bear, McClure, and Nickoson make this same argument for graduate students: "How do we learn to research writing? . . . we learn how to conduct writing research by 'doing' it" (127). Kuh says, "The goal is to involve students with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions" (9). Truly, not all products will be worthy of dissemination beyond a classroom presentation, but some certainly will be, and it is the *doing* that matters. It is an essential step on the pathway to a becoming a competent researcher—what Grobman called making progress on the continuum of becoming a scholar (177).

Undergraduate Research and Its Benefits

To cement my argument that teaching empirical research methods to students in English Studies is important, I offer the following assessments. Inquiry undertaken by students meets two

different but complementary goals—an engaging pedagogical approach and the potential to contribute to the discipline—one of the reasons why it has been adopted widely nationally and internationally across disciplines. Called “the pedagogy of the twenty-first century” (CUR/NCUR, “Joint Statement”), undergraduate research has been documented as a “high-impact educational practice” through the work of George D. Kuh, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). It is considered an important way for students to engage in inquiry that can lead to dissemination. To be clear, undergraduate research is not the traditional research paper; its intention is to make a meaningful contribution to the field. In sum, the Council on Undergraduate Research, coupled with influential publications, has led to a sea change in how undergraduates are viewed as *knowledge makers*.

The effects on students themselves for engaging in meaningful inquiry have also been documented. Assessment of students, undertaken in two different studies, one by David Lopatto and one by Elaine Seymour, et al., identified just what those impacts are for students:

- Experiencing the rewards of designing a project, making discoveries, and sharing findings.
- Understanding some of the ways in which research differs across disciplines.
- Increasing ability to think, learn, and work independently.
- Strengthening oral and written communication skills.
- Sharpening critical thinking skills.
- Developing close relationships with faculty mentors.

- Preparing for graduate school.
- Getting work published.
- Traveling to conferences and working with people who share your interests.
- Enhancing a resume.
- Participating in and contributing to the life of your chosen field.

Involvement in research has the capability to increase students' sense of responsibility and independence, yet it provides experience in learning to work as members of a team when a project is done collaboratively with other students or with faculty mentors. And even if the subject matter differs from the post-graduation job, research skills may be transferable to other settings. Employers consistently cite good communication skills, problem solving, facility with technology, and the ability to work with others as highly valued attributes. Students who major in English often have these traits in spades.

In addition to skill development, undergraduate research can be central to the exploration and mastery of a field of study. Timothy E. Elgren and Nancy Hensel report that programs that include undergraduate research “promote greater exposure to the primary literature; create opportunities to articulate and test hypotheses and intellectual models; and encourage students to contextualize and communicate objectives, approaches, analyses, and conclusions” (7). Students who continue on to graduate school will find that they have an advantage if they have engaged already in meaningful research and understand the methods of the field.

Benefits are not limited to students. Faculty scholars and researchers may derive immediate advantages from having assistance on projects. More intangible gains come from the

satisfaction of mentoring student researchers (see Shanahan, et al.). These collaborative working conditions have the potential to result in lifelong relationships. Connecting students with faculty is, indeed, according to Kuh, the single biggest predictor of success. Many faculty members are excited to share research methods appropriate to their field. As Heidi Estrem put it in discussing the faculty's goals for the new Writing Studies major at Boise State University, "They could emphasize the disciplinary traditions and research practices of composition and rhetoric [that had] remained underemphasized for students" (11). Financial awards may also be possible. With the increasing prominence of undergraduate research at all institutional types, honors for faculty mentorship are increasingly common. At my own institution, departments select Undergraduate Research Mentors of the Year, who then vie for the college-level and university awards, which carry an honorarium.

The case is clear: student research—undertaken collaboratively or independently—may take many forms and produce new insights. Our field can be strengthened by student research that adds to the scholarly knowledge base. Students can be “makers of knowledge.” And, the rewards for faculty mentors can also be considerable.

Appendix: The Individual Research Project in English 3470, Approaches to Research in English Studies, Utah State University

Introducing the Individual Research Project

Our projects must be 1) doable within the framework of the semester; 2) measurable; 3) and fill a gap in the scholarly knowledge base. In other words, it cannot have been done already. One other consideration: the researcher must be able to maintain an objective stance; the purpose of researcher is to “discover.” Our focus is on some aspect of “English Studies.” Within the various fields of English, text is often a common factor, but we are not limited to text.

Developing the Research Question

We will begin with listing three research questions that you might like to investigate over the course of the semester. Rank them in order one through three. Consider a research question that could be useful in a future job interview. I tend to ask, "What are your career aspirations" and help us think about topics that would be appropriate to your trajectory. For instance, if you are already working in a place/field that is your career goal, then perhaps you could perform a service for the company with a research project. Another: you are thinking about a career in library sciences and would like to integrate Special Collections & Archives, perhaps investigating primary documents. Another: you are an English major but wish to be a physician-- how are physicians (say, women physicians) depicted (or not) in literature). If you are a future teacher, then you might investigate the role of mentors and professional learning communities (PLC) in novice teachers' lives/careers. Perhaps you are interested in social media; you might

investigate over-use of social media and the increasing emphasis on digital detox. Or, maybe you wish to investigate the phenomenon of the Bullet Journal. I'll make comments on these questions, and then we'll meet one-on-one to discuss and finalize a research question.

Please know that the world of writing is more than just school writing. It also includes writing and work, material culture (the physical objects we use to write or read), social media, rites (or writes) of passage, and writing across the lifespan—among other topics.

Conducting the Research

Our individual research projects parallel and trail the whole-class research project, which provides a scaffold. Recall the words of Zora Neale Hurston, “Research is formalized curiosity.” Your project will draw on your interest and inquisitiveness about a topic that can be investigated by collecting evidence through analysis of artifacts, surveys, and interviews. We will develop infographics from this evidence as graphic depictions can help tell the research story.

In general, these are the phases of research that we will follow, although research—like writing in general—is iterative and recursive.

Research Project Checklist

Order	Task	Projected Date of Completion	Actual Date of Completion	Notes
1	Completion of IRB Certification	9.12		
2	Annotated Bibliography	9.18		
3	Research Proposal Draft	9.22		
4	Research Proposal Final with Review of Literature	10.1		
5	Qualtrics Survey, Recruitment Script & Letter of Information	10.2 10.5 10.13		
6	Interview Questions, Recruitment Script & Informed Consent Letter	10.10 10.10 10.16		

7	Draft of Research Project	11.9		
8	Abstract	11.12		
9	Final Research Project	11.30		
10	Research Poster	12.4		
11	Prezi or PowerPoint for Oral Presentation	12.7		

Please note that in authentic research, we cannot always control the process or timeline. These are target dates. If you need more time for a particular part of the process, do let me know. And, definitely communicate any challenges so that I may help.

Notes

¹ Described in Kinkead 2018.

² See Bresee and Kinkead; Kinkead and Haney.

³ Morgan Wykstra, a technical communication major, was hired on a faculty-student grant project to design a website that mapped sites in the history of writing (<https://geographyofwriting.wordpress.com/>). She also presented a research poster, “Mapping Important Sites in the History of Writing across Time and Cultures: Issues in Design and Technical Communication,” at the 2018 USU Student Research Symposium.

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