

# TEACHING WRITING ABOUT WORK.

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## A HUMANISTIC PEDAGOGY

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About seven years ago I found myself faced with every English teacher's perennial challenge—the need to do something new in my composition course—and was struck by several polarized approaches among college composition courses. These polarities in pedagogy have not disappeared in the years since then. First, an old school of teachers still felt that Literature-with-a-capital-L was the proper domain of the composition course and that good writing was to be based on imitation of the Great Models; at an opposite extreme, new teachers of technical writing sought to teach their

we've written. Why should our students be prevented from doing

since they may be able to interview someone they can't see while at school. I encourage them to seek out specifically expert strangers rather than friends or relatives who may work in the career but not be knowledgeable about the particular issue or development chosen by the student. The interview is held after quite a bit of reading in Studs Terkel's book *Working*, discussion of interviewing strategies, and preparation of questions about both the interviewee and the career.

(4) The course culminates in a final paper: in basic courses, a "What Did I Learn?" essay; in more advanced courses, a formal research paper. In every case, the focus is on using the stu-

explaining their conclusions about the career and their own future direction—whether to pursue or not to pursue it. They present their conclusions both in this final essay and in the form of an

careers project has succeeded well with the considerably varied kinds of students I've known, as it has with those of several of my colleagues who have taught it at these and other schools. And it has been effective in a variety of different courses: Basic Writing, English 101 and 102, a Freshman Honors Seminar, and Intermediate Composition. I believe that a version of my project would succeed well in a high-school course, too, serving for example as an excellent senior-year preparation for a decision about a college major. The teacher needs to change only the emphasis

course—but this assumes that my readers agree with me that basic

My students have written on everything from accountancy to

and always the emphasis is on the student not only for the student but for

the teacher who instead of being faced with an exhausting series

My mother gave me only one directive for my life: be a writer. Her conviction came from the flood of letters I wrote

funny letters! As long as there was a pen in my hand, I was God. All the world was translated into the sound of my own voice, which I thought had the loveliest sound. Even when life grew dark and complex as I sank into adolescence, writing remained useful. Camp was over; the funny letters stopped. I started to keep a journal which my mother would never read. No longer was it her approval I was after but rather a definition of myself. By luck my adolescence coincided with the second wave of feminism and I was exposed to the novels of Virginia Woolf. Like other feminists, I too considered myself

her great-granddaughter and had her poster on my wall to prove it. I wanted to be a great woman writer who wrote great feminist novels. Of course I was aware that this is not exactly what my mother had in mind.

have to figure out how to get some of the interviewee's speech on paper, observing written conventions (putting in all those commas and thus learning what a comma is all about) but also remaining faithful to the interviewee's speech (changing syntax or diction is not permitted). Yet the bulk of the report has to be the student's own writing, not quotation, and so they learn how to introduce, effectively incorporate, and often paraphrase quotations

And they learn description again not as an isolated imposed mode

of discourse, but as part of communicating the whole interview experience to the reader. Barbara Fiola, for example, who became so interested in her project that she interviewed *two* travel agents (and now works as a travel agent herself), began her report like this:

The offices of the two different travel agents were strikingly similar. Both were small offices located near a shopping district, and both had at least two desks and two other agents in the office. Racks of brightly colored pamphlets lined

kept ringing. There the similarity ended.

I feel that writing like this works not only because Barbara

Assignments such as the ones outlined above are not unique to my courses, not do I wish to appear to be claiming the origin or monopoly of them. I was heartened to read Philip Snyder's "Working 100-2: A Theme Course for Freshman Composition," in which he outlines a project informed by much the same spirit but taking quite a different shape, in *College Composition and Communication*, 33, no. 3 (October 1982), 315-17. And Lea Masiello's text *Writing in Action*, forthcoming from Bobbs-Merrill in Indianapolis, contains a section on writing about work. Although