



CHAPTER 28*

Ten-Minute Brainstorm in a First-Year English One-Off

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Introduction

All Barnard College students take an English literature and writing class in one semester of their first year (alternating with a seminar in the other semester). No one tests out or is allowed to use a high school Advanced Placement class in lieu of First Year English (FYE). Barnard is a selective, Ivy-affiliated college, but our students come to us with a large range of academic experience and preparedness. Of the class of 2019, 25 percent expect to be among the first in their family to graduate from college,¹ 7 percent are from countries other than the United States,² and 12 percent took part in one of our Academic Success and Enrichment Programs (ASEP) in the summer of 2015.³ That is to say that students have different levels of familiarity with library resources—our ILS, databases, and so on. Some have a *lot*, and these students will fall in instant hate with you if you utter a word about Boolean logic or “introduce” them to a database they’ve been using since ninth grade. Others might feel anger and shame if you go too fast or they can’t keep up with their classmates.

Therefore, I like to start my seventy-five-minute one-shot with an activity for which all students who have been keeping up with class readings should be prepared. I attempt to consult with faculty, and despite the fact that most FYE

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professors are adjuncts and have less time on campus than full-time faculty, I'm generally successful arranging a short meeting to discuss their goals for the session. In the best collaborations, the professor and librarian agree on goals, and the librarian is trusted to develop tactics for achieving them.

This lesson plan was inspired by and borrows heavily from an exercise devised by my colleague Vani Natarajan and FYE instructor Patrick Luhan that was specific to the professor's work with Frankenstein.

Learning Outcomes

- Examine how an author's identities affect their work
- Reflect on how an author's identities affect their ability to be published
- Analyze publishing and translation issues
- Evaluate themes of race, gender, sexuality, class, abilities, etc. in works even when those themes are not obvious
- Engage with the library and librarians beyond seeing us as a physical space or a keeper of resources
- Feel empowered in the classroom and in the library
- **Bonus:** Professor regards the librarian as a critical partner.

It's nice when you can dazzle a professor with the magic of the truncation symbol or an instant Zotero bibliography, but it's even better when they see that you are invested in students' critical-thinking skills, as well.

Materials

- Whiteboard or chalkboard
- Chalk or pens that haven't dried out or disappeared altogether—or you can take notes online and project them onto a screen

Session Instructions

1. Before the exercise gets underway, as you're introducing yourself and the library, ask the students to consider their diverse experience and academic approaches they've been exposed to. Ask them to be patient when you go over something that is already familiar to them or if they have a hard time keeping up. Encourage reticent students to speak, but do not put anyone on the spot.
2. Rather than adding a library-session-specific reading, survey the class to see which of the texts they've read so far that they'd like to work with. (You

can consult with the professor before the class, and if they want to choose, that's fine.) Perhaps your students will select the *Inferno* cantos of *The Divine Comedy* by Dante.

3. On one side of a dry-erase board write “Dante,” and on the other “Inferno,” and together with the students, brainstorm keywords and concepts, either about the author (demographics, time period, location, influences, etc.) or the title (themes, characters, theorists to apply). What differentiates this approach from a straight-up flipped classroom and/or active learning exercise is your subtle (maybe not so subtle) prompts to consider race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as meta-elements like the translation and the publisher.
4. At the end, decide together with the students which topic from the board to craft into a search strategy for the rest of the session.

Assessment

I assess the whole seventy-five-minute session with a short questionnaire administered via a Google form. The questions are:

1. Please tell me something(s) that you learned in this session, or that were useful.
2. Please tell me something(s) that you have questions about after this session.
3. How did this session make you feel?
4. Is there anything else you want me to know?

The group brainstorming exercise rarely comes up directly in the short responses, but since adopting this strategy I haven't had any comments about still needing help refining a topic in the “still have questions about” section.

Reflections

Even with our comparatively lengthy seventy-five-minute one-shot library research session in the Barnard College FYE program, we still have far more that we want to cover than we can. “What about plagiarism, the zine collection, and Library of Congress subject headings?!?” you may ask. Despite my personal obsessions with zines and LCSH, I talk about them in FYE only if they come up organically. I sacrifice content the students need in favor of engaging their heads and hearts. This group exercise can position the librarian as a partner and build community with the students. The librarian also participates in the activity, building on what the students contribute, and vice versa. The brainstorming process exercise stays with students longer than work that doesn't require their participation, even if they don't contribute vocally. The active

listening process in an exercise like this one reaches students who don't talk, as well as those that do; at least that's been my experience in critical pedagogy practice.

My feeling is that our students will seek help at their point of need for the services I don't cover in the one-shot, and in fact are more likely to do so if two-way communication is established from our first encounter. We have a Personal Librarian program at Barnard that emphasizes one-on-one engagement between students (and faculty) and their own librarian. This exercise, while not a standard implementation among the four librarians currently teaching FYE library research, is an expression of our library and librarians' commitment to helping our students learn critical-thinking skills informed by the intersectional feminism that underpins much of the pedagogy at Barnard.

Final Questions

How would you frame the exercise in the context of your institution? Might you get pushback from faculty and students if you openly address how race, class, gender, and sexuality inform authorship and publishing? And if so, would that be a bad thing?

Notes

1. Tracey Wang, "First and Foremost," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, September 18, 2014, <http://columbiaspectator.com/eye/2014/09/18/first-and-foremost>. "First to graduate" because this number includes students with one or both parents with some college experience.
2. Barnard Admissions, "Barnard at a Glance: Admissions," accessed October 19, 2015, <https://admissions.barnard.edu/about/at-a-glance>.
3. The class of 2019 has 639 students, with 55, or 11.6%, in ASEP programs.

Bibliography

- Barnard Admissions. "Barnard at a Glance: Admissions." Accessed October 19, 2015. <https://admissions.barnard.edu/about/at-a-glance>.
- Wang, Tracey, "First and Foremost." *Columbia Daily Spectator*. September 18, 2014. <http://columbiaspectator.com/eye/2014/09/18/first-and-foremost>.