

Teaching Cohort Report for 2017-18
Hilary E. Wyss, Department of English

My move to Trinity has provided me with an excellent opportunity think more carefully about the writing assignments I have used in the past and how I might adapt them to the learning environment at Trinity. I am grateful to have had the support of an interdisciplinary cohort as we think about the role of writing in the classroom and also more generally in the intellectual lives of our students. While I had initially proposed a specific project to reimagine the research assignment for one advanced class, over the course of our meetings and our discussions this year I found that what I benefited most from was not the restructuring of a specific assignment but rather a broader understanding of the role of writing and writing instruction in the learning experience of Trinity students. In our discussions I realized that the assumptions I held about writing college-level assignments and how my colleagues think about writing were not always clearly in alignment, and that perhaps the best service I could provide for my students was making explicit my expectations around writing in my discipline.

More specifically, over the course of this year I developed and refined my ideas about research writing in the English Department. I asked myself how we might breathe life into the traditional research paper by using multimodal elements to help students think creatively about research and alternative forms of presentation to help students develop their ideas. As others have noted before me, the college research paper is a product that has few analogues beyond academia, although the skills it helps students develop are significant. My challenge, then, was to develop an assignment that would support students in their research and along the way would provide them with an opportunity to showcase that research in a form that might be useful in other contexts beyond the classroom. This involved figuring out a way to mark the research process in a way that students can translate into a product they can share, develop, alter long after class is over while still asking them to produce a traditional research paper.

The assignment that I developed is extremely flexible around format, but requires students to fold in multiple genres, visual elements, creative research, analysis of sources, and reflection into product (potentially a website) that marks out the research as a distinct element

of the final product. The grade folds into the final paper but pushes students beyond an annotated bibliography. Only some students may be inspired to get inventive with it and so the goal is to give those students with the time and inclination the opportunity to develop something while also NOT penalizing students for not finding my course transformative. To accomplish this I established clear criteria for what minimally needed to be included and then let students develop this project as they chose.

While I found several articles we discussed very relevant to my concerns (in particular Robert Davis and Mark Shadle article: “‘Building a Mystery’: Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking”), I found the discussions with the Writing Fellows cohort and their thoughtful engagements with student writing here at Trinity most helpful to me as I developed my ideas. I look forward to staying in touch with my cohort, and I am grateful to them for the stimulating discussions we had this year. By working with a cohort of faculty invested in the same questions about how to think about writing and how to create assignments that best speak to Trinity students my transition to Trinity was immeasurably smoother and I was able to support student learning in the best way possible.