Research Writing Revisited

A SOURCEBOOK FOR TEACHERS

Edited by
PAVEL ZEMLIANSKY
WENDY BISHOP
Contents

Acknowledgments  v
Introduction vii

I. Research as Empowerment 1

1 Developing “Interesting Thoughts”: Reading for Research
   Janette Martin  3

2 Rhetorically Writing and Reading Researched Arguments
   Maureen Daly Goggin and Duane Roen 15

II. Research as Art and Self-Expression 27

3 Creative Research for All Writers
   Wendy Bishop 29

4 Scratching a “Marvelously Itchy” Itch: Teaching the I-Search Paper
   Tom Reigstad 37

5 Researching Like a Writer: The Personal Essay as Research Paper
   Paul Heitker, Sarah Allen, and Emily L. Sewall 49

III. Research Across Genres, Disciplines, and Settings 57

6 More Than Just Writing About Me? Linking Self and Other in the Ethnographic Essay
   Bonnie Sanstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater 59

7 A Phâta of Theory and Autobiography: Research Writing Breaks Open Academe
   Mark Shadle and Robert Davis 79
Agents of Change
Catherine Gabor and Carrie Leverenz

The real learning and teaching with this kind of project cannot be duplicated in the classroom—I can tell students over and over again that employees who work full time and earn minimum wage barely scrape by, and I can point out the various class, race, and gender dynamics, which complicate students’ notions that people who work for minimum wage should “go back to school” or work harder to qualify for a better, higher paying job; but my descriptions cannot compare to a face-to-face conversation with a 62-year-old black male, who served in the armed forces, has a wife and two grown sons, has held at least one and often two jobs from the day he was old enough to work, has been sweeping the floor of the student center in a prestigious, private university for over 20 years, and is worth nine dollars/hour to our university’s “ethical leaders.”
—Teacher of primary-research assignment

Why Conduct Primary Research?
We begin with this comment from a graduate instructor in our composition program (Carrie is director of composition; Cathy is assistant director) because it reflects one of the principal reasons we advocate the inclusion of primary-research assignments in writing classes. When students are asked to plan a research project that requires the systematic gathering and interpretation of data that has not previously been interpreted, they learn in a powerful way that research is rhetorical and that it has the capacity to effect change. Primary research that involves human participants (the kind of primary research we will be focusing on here) teaches other important lessons about both the potential and limits of human agency and the degree to which writing enacts that agency.

Whether teachers view composition courses as the place to prepare students for future academic writing, as a preprofessional training ground, or as a
Research as Collaboration and Service to the Community

liberal arts, primary research can contribute to those aims. For example, honing the ability to collect and analyze data can support future assignments for biology, chemistry, and anthropology as well as other social sciences. In addition, many students will be asked to do more than simply fulfill their job—professional consultants survey and interview their client’s employees, gather corporate documents, and inductively reason about better business practices. It is not just the hard and social sciences that emphasize primary research skills; with the popularity of service-learning courses, many students conduct community-based primary research in liberal arts courses as well. Regardless of which of these aims composition courses pursue, what is important is that students experience research as a means of knowledge-making.

If the publication of textbooks such as Elizabeth Chisler-Stratton and Bonnie Sutstein’s FieldWorking, Thomas Deans’ Writing and Community Action, and John Trimbura’s Call to Write are any indication, primary-research assignments are becoming increasingly popular in composition courses. This should not be a surprise, since primary research methods have long been key to knowledge-making in the field of composition. From experimental research in the 1960s to protocol analysis in the 1980s to teacher research and community ethnographies in the 1990s, researchers in composition have relied not only on the analysis of secondary sources but also on the systematic collection and interpretation of primary data in order to come to new understandings of writers and writing. Perhaps because for too long composition courses have been seen as a service to other university courses that demand thesis-driven essays based on library sources, only recently have compositionists begun teaching research methods that more closely represent those they themselves use. For example, in FieldWorking, Chisler-Stratton and Sutstein, both authors of ethnographic studies, teach students to “step out” of the classroom and conduct field research by offering chapters on different kinds of data-gathering activities that fall under the primary research umbrella: archival research, observation, oral histories and interviews, and so on. Also interesting in fostering a sense of how language shapes our world outside the classroom, Deans, the author of several important scholarly works on service learning, arranges his textbook around ways of interacting with communities—both local and academic. He helps students see how data can be gathered (and put to use) whether one is writing about a community, writing for a community, or writing with a community. Trimbura, who has long advocated expanding the purview of composition studies to include all kinds of public discourse, focuses his textbook, The Call to Write, on various rhetorical exigencies that might lead someone to take action through writing. His textbook features chapters on analyzing public documents with substantive attention to fieldwork practices. Informed by current research methods in composition studies, all three of these textbooks ask students to do research in the context of some larger knowledge-making enterprise rather than as an end in itself.

A number of recent scholarly articles have also argued that student research can have important material consequences. Linda Flower has published extensively about her work with Carnegie Mellon students and the Pittsburgh Community Literacy Center, where students from both groups work together to write documents and prepare presentations that elicit community discussion about contentious issues. In “Sacked to Collect and Analyze Sources as a Component of a Secondary Education Project,” Linda Flower insists that for service-learning research to benefit the community as well as students, teacher/scholars and their students should engage in primary research side by side, “studying similar kinds of problems and issues” (55). She persuasively points out that “when the service-learning researcher is on site with students, the teaching, methodology, and research all contribute to collaborative inquiry and problem solving with community members” (50). Seth Kahn, who prefers that students conduct ethnographic research that is not part of a service or volunteer arrangement, insists that such research can be a form of action. As Kahn describes it, his approach to student research is “drawn from radical anthropology, one that emphasizes the material implications of engaging in processes of producing and circulating texts, and offers students, teachers, and participants in ethnographic research some powerful options for engaging in processes of grassroots democratic action” (63). Although it may be unrealistic to expect all primary research conducted by students in required composition classes to produce change, we believe that such research can lead students to a stronger sense of agency as researchers and writers and that such agency can lead students to take action.

**Material Conditions**

For primary-research assignments to be successful, the material conditions of teachers and students need to be considered. Unlike research based on library sources, where library holdings and access to academic databases are the main material concerns, primary research often requires different distributions of time and different kinds of research expertise, as well as access to an appropriate research site or participants. While Cushman’s argument for teacher-student research is inspiring, Cushman acknowledges that the material conditions of many composition teachers—graduate students, adjuncts, two-year college instructors with 5-5 loads—prevent them from conducting primary research themselves. Even if the bulk of practitioners had the resources to engage in primary research projects, many do not have the training to do so. Similarly, students who enroll in composition courses while also juggling work and family responsibilities may find it more difficult to schedule interviews, do field research, or distribute surveys than to do Internet searches and write a traditional research paper. However, we contend that primary research is so beneficial to composition pedagogy that it is worth trying even if material conditions are less than ideal. Our goal in this chapter, then, is to give practitioners some ideas for how to teach primary research even if in measured doses, a sense of the benefits that accrue, and the confidence to give it a try.

Doing primary research in a composition class has to make sense in the context of your writing program objectives, your specific pedagogical commitments,
and your students. We are aware that at our institution we benefit from several material conditions that help make possible our inclusion of primary research as part of our required sophomore-level course in argument. First, we are both researchers who have conducted primary research, and as such, our definitions of "research" have naturally expanded beyond traditional library and Internet texts to include observation, surveys, the gathering of primary materials, and interviews. Because we have this experience, we can help guide other teachers who are asking their students to do primary research for the first time. For teachers who are themselves new to primary research methods, having sources of information and advice can be crucial to feeling confident about teaching these research methods to students. We offer more specific advice about tapping such resources here.

Although it seems obvious that the research method ought to be determined by the knowledge-making goals of a project, too often students are made to do certain kinds of research only so that they will learn a particular research skill (like how to use microfilm or academic journals). In our view, requiring students to do primary research just so they will learn to do primary research is not likely to lead to student engagement. Instead, the widespread use of primary research in our writing program is tied to a specific assignment, one that asks students to work in groups to research a local problem and propose a solution targeted to a specific audience. The proposal is then presented to the class in a collaboratively authored ten-page written document and also in an oral presentation. This assignment meets several course objectives: that students learn to research and write collaboratively, that they gain experience with oral and visual as well as print rhetorics, and that they engage with what we call "real" rhetoric—rhetoric that is situated in real-life circumstances where effective argument can have material consequences. (See the assignment and course objectives in Chapter 11 of the companion website.) As such, the assignment functions as the culmination of the course, following assignments where students write arguments using both personal experience and library research, analyze argumentative websites, and produce a rhetorical case study of a current controversy.

The use of primary research is especially appropriate to the proposal project, as students explore local problems about which there is little if any secondary material. Although students are encouraged to find library sources that inform them about their subject (especially about alternate proposals), increase their ethos, and help them situate their local problem in a broader context, typically few authorities beyond the student newspaper have written on their specific subjects (such as lack of racial diversity on our campus, wheelchair access issues, food service monopoly, need for campus recycling, a problem with stray cats, or problems faced by local community partners with whom some students are collaborating). Secondary sources alone would not be enough to convince the local audiences for these proposals that there is a problem that should be addressed. The need for primary research is determined by real audience considerations. For example, one student group, who wrote a proposal addressed to the university chancellor arguing for improved wheelchair access on campus, found their most persuasive evidence came not from research on the Americans with Disabilities Act but from videotaping their own attempts to navigate campus in a wheelchair and interviewing others who use a wheelchair.

Another factor that makes primary research a good choice is that it is particularly amenable to collaboration, which we require of students in the sophomore class. We know from experience and from scholarship that for collaboration to be successful, students must see it as contributing to rather than inhibiting their personal success. If the research project is one that could (more) easily be completed by individuals, then students will resist the requirement to collaborate. In the proposal assignment, students clearly see the benefit of having four or five people distributing surveys, doing interviews, and observing, rather than having to do all of the research themselves. Because primary research is time consuming and can be challenging for students who are new to this kind of work or are naturally shy, there have to be clear benefits that make it worthwhile to endure discomfort and likely frustration of depending on people to participate in one's research. In the case of our assignment, students are typically invested in trying to solve problems that affect them, and they see that gathering information from other students, faculty, administrators, and community leaders is crucial to making a case for their proposed solution. The means of research is determined by the purpose of the project.

There are also some material conditions specific to our students and campus that make primary research a good option. Our campus is predominantly residential. Students live and socialize together and although many of them work at least part time, they are used to a high level of engagement with each other. Many of our students also own cars, so asking them to do community-based primary research is not a particular hardship. Students with very constrained lives (full-time jobs, families, commuting) may find that the challenges of primary research outweigh the benefits, unless you can help them find ways to do primary research where they live and work—interviewing family members, doing surveys at work (with their employer's permission), and so on. Even though our full-time students may not have the time-management issues described above, when we surveyed teachers about the challenges of teaching primary research, "time to adequately design and complete primary research projects" came up most often. Primary research is most successful when teachers design syllabi that take account of these time demands. Notably, time to (figure out how to) teach primary research also came up frequently in the surveys.

Learning—and Teaching—Primary Research Methods

Many writing teachers new to assigning primary research express anxiety about how to do so effectively. Most instructors surveyed worried that students would not collect adequate data and/or would not collect it properly. This worry is exacerbated by teachers' confusion about what to expect when students are asked to do primary research. For example, if teachers are
predominantly literature scholars, their understanding of primary research is text-based rather than people-based. One instructor, who was concurrently doing archival research for her dissertation, expressed exasperation at needing to help her students “find the original document that started it all”—a mirror for the kind of primary research work the students were called upon to do. Even those instructors who understood that the proposal assignment involved researching people, not texts, expressed concern that students’ research might go astray despite their best efforts to teach ethical data collection or that they would not be able to teach primary research adequately. And teachers who have experience with human participant research may still be anxious about managing (and minimizing) the difficulties students will likely face.

Based on our experience as researchers and as administrators who have helped others teach primary research methods to their students, as well as on the surveys we conducted with teachers in our composition program, we want to recommend three ways that teachers can prepare themselves and their students to do primary research: 1) by understanding similarities and differences between primary research and library research, 2) by understanding key tenets of Institutional Review Board guidelines for human subjects research, and 3) by pooling knowledge through collaboration with other teachers and students.

**Comparing Primary Research to Library Research**

One obvious difference between primary research and secondary research is that teachers and students typically have experience doing library research and documenting the kinds of evidence found in libraries, whereas they may have little experience writing survey questions, planning interviews, taking field notes, and writing up their findings. Teachers must build in time to teach students the research skills they need to perform these tasks and also set aside time to intervene in the research process. Asking students to bring in their research experience from other classes can also help bridge the gap between students’ expectations regarding research papers in English classes and the primary research we are recommending. Obviously, explicitly teaching students how to do the research we ask them to do and then making sure they know how to do it are key to successful research assignments of any kind. But because some teachers expect students to know how to do library and Internet searches, they do not spend time on such matters in class. Taking a similar stance toward primary research can be especially problematic since mishandling human sources has arguably greater consequences than mishandling texts.

Another important difference is that library research is often deductive (thesis-driven) while primary research is often inductive (question-driven). Though more traditional, library-based research can be inductive when a writer gathers sources to explore a topic without having a thesis or conclusion in mind, many assignments based on library research are still thesis-driven—they begin with a thesis (rather than a question) which the writer uses research to prove. With primary research, the writer cannot begin with a thesis or conclusion since the writer can’t possibly know what kind of argument to make prior to doing the research. A writer might believe that there is a problem with inadequate parking or too many students on campus or that a local nonprofit agency needs better computer equipment, but the writer who relies on primary research cannot move from that belief to gather sources that support only that claim. Instead, the writer designs a survey to find out what other students, faculty, and staff think of the lack of racial diversity on campus, and, if one finds (as some of our students did) that the majority of students at this predominantly white university are happy to go to college with others who are just like them, then the writer has an ethical responsibility to report those findings. (Of course, a good researcher would also interview students from underrepresented groups in order to get a different point of view.) Similarly, arguing for better computer equipment means researching what such equipment would cost and how it might be paid for; if students cannot come up with a feasible means of paying for the new equipment, they have to alter their proposal. Although researchers set out to answer a question rather than prove a point, they do draw conclusions from their data that they hope will be persuasive.

All research is time-intensive, but primary research demands a different kind of time management. Unlike traditional library research, where students are constrained only by the library’s hours and the time frame required for interlibrary loan (and Internet searching has lessened both of those constraints), primary research requires that researchers plan surveys, interviews, and observations according to others’ schedules, not just their own. This has to be true even to have survey questions vetted, printed, and distributed in time to conduct additional surveys if needed. Interviews have to be scheduled and sometimes rescheduled. The time needed for observation varies depending on what happens at each observation. Once students have gathered this kind of data, it takes time for them to assess what they have. A survey that took days to produce, distribute, and analyze might be boiled down into a single chart or list of percentages, not all of which are relevant. Students cannot wait to analyze data until right before a draft is due because then it will be too hard to collect additional data. It is not unusual for students to find in the midst of their research that their ideas about the causes of a problem or their tentative plans for a solution are disproven by their data, necessitating either a change in their ideas about what kind of problem they’re looking at or what kind of solution is feasible. As teachers, we see these moments when primary research leads students to change their minds about local problems as the point of doing research—to learn something new—but changing one’s mind in the middle of a research project costs students time, and teachers need to plan the schedule with enough time to allow for such changes to occur.

Perhaps most obviously, the evidence students collect in primary research projects differs from library research. Although students may make use of some kinds of traditional print sources, most of the evidence that students
privacy and confidentiality of research participants. Surveys should be anonymous; interview participants should be assigned pseudonyms or represented very generally (e.g., “one junior business major commented . . .”).

Though arguably little harm is done when students fail to acknowledge that a survey is part of a class project or use the real names of students in their research reports, learning that there are specific conventions for conducting and presenting human participant research helps students see that all research is subject to disciplinary guidelines.

Pooling Resources

If thinking about implementing primary-research assignments in light of these unfamiliar guidelines is a bit daunting, our best advice is to pool your resources. Most obviously, contact your office for research and find out who chairs the IRB at your institution. Although students do not need to get formal permission from the IRB, knowing that such a committee exists helps sensitize students to the ethics of research involving people, especially if IRB members are willing to speak to your class about the importance of the NIH Guidelines for Human Subjects Research. IRB members can also point you to other helpful resources as well as identifying people on campus who conduct primary research. If you are interested in having your students conduct research off-campus, find out if your university has an office or person in charge of service learning who might be able to recommend groups to work with. (Doing research with people whom you are presumably serving has special ethical considerations, such as making sure the research benefits the community, not just the students who need to complete a research assignment.) A community of teachers is another invaluable resource to instructors teaching primary research–based assignments, especially for the first time. If no one in your composition program has asked students to do this kind of research, find someone adventurous who is willing to try primary research–based assignments along with you. Plan to meet regularly to develop handouts and activities and to discuss your students’ work. You might even decide to study the experiences you and your students have had with primary research and to share your reflections with a larger group of teachers or a professional organization. (Keep in mind that if you want to be able to publish your research, you will need to submit your project to your campus IRB for approval.) Students, too, can be an important resource. We’re happy to report that the teacher we described earlier who didn’t want to know how her students were collecting their research data now invites students from previous classes to co-teach with her when she introduces the proposal assignment. By asking students to reflect on research processes, we teachers can learn a lot about the ins and outs of conducting primary research. Sharing those reflections with subsequent classes can help to familiarize wary students with what are often new research activities and gives them the chance to question students who have done what they are being asked to do.

Understanding IRB Guidelines

One way to help students understand the special responsibilities entailed when doing research that involves people is by discussing Institutional Review Boards and the National Institutes of Health Guidelines for Human Subjects Research. Although these NIH guidelines were created especially to protect participants in medical and psychological research, researchers who depend on human participants must show that their research complies with these guidelines. All organizations that receive research funding from the federal government (including colleges and universities) must have Institutional Review Boards that review research proposals to ensure that they meet these guidelines. Although students who do not plan to publish their research do not need to submit their research proposals to IRB committees, teachers who ask their students to conduct human participant research should be aware of these guidelines and should ask students to comply with them. Discussing these guidelines helps to educate students about ethical issues in research, and not having these discussions can lead to unpleasant consequences for both teachers and students. For example, one teacher new to primary research told her students that collecting the data was out-of-class homework and that she did not need to know the details. When students went to the student center to distribute a survey regarding campus diversity, they were stopped by a member of the student life staff, who demanded to know who had approved their survey and for what purpose. Although these students were not doing anything illegal, the teacher bore some responsibility for not having the survey approved, including telling students to identify their purpose on the survey form. Teaching students to follow IRB guidelines even when student research does not need to be formally approved by an IRB committee gives teachers and students solid ground to stand on when their research is questioned.

So what guidelines for human subjects research should teachers consider? Perhaps the most important principle is that of informed consent. Researchers are responsible for making sure that participants understand what is being conducted the research and why. They must also be sure that participants choose to participate freely, having been made aware of both the risks and the benefits. (See the website for sample permission forms and survey introductions that make this principal clear.) Additionally, researchers should take measures to protect the
Challenges and Benefits

In light of these special responsibilities of human participant research, students must be made to feel accountable for their research methods and teachers should expect to intervene regularly during the research process—vetting interview and survey questions, reviewing transcripts and field notes—as well as asking students to write reflections of their research experience and share reports of their research-in-process with the rest of the class. During such discussions, teachers may find out that students have naively planned to interview Ku Klux Klan members or that the questions they wish to ask at the local mosque about the position of women could be seen as inappropriate. These are extreme but real examples that illustrate how new such research procedures are for students but also how exciting it can be for them to see the world rather than just the library as a source of knowledge about important issues.

Students are not the only ones who come to see the power of research based on local knowledge and real-world evidence. Even if students abide by all the appropriate procedures for doing primary research, administrators or others in power may be critical of assignments that ask students to investigate the workings of the university or other local sites. For example, during Carrie's first year at her present institution, one group of students wrote a proposal calling for a boycott of the campus food service to protest what they felt were high prices and poor quality. Imagine her surprise when she showed up on campus to find signs everywhere asking students to boycott food services that day. The boycott made the front page of the student newspaper (whose reporters students had contacted), and Carrie had calls from the English department chair, the dean, and the vice provost for student affairs, asking for copies of the assignment and advising her to consider having students research solutions to international problems instead. She assured everyone that actually implementing the proposal was not a requirement and that students had gone forward with the boycott without her knowledge.

This kind of conflict with authority can be especially threatening for teachers who are not tenured or in tenure-track positions and thus more likely to have their authority and autonomy questioned. Just the fear of such a confrontation might be enough to dissuade teachers from initiating a primary research project. To be honest, there is no way to guarantee that teachers and students doing this kind of research can avoid such conflicts (though out of the fifty or sixty sections of this course offered each year, maybe one or two groups encounter conflicts). Clearly, what makes primary research intellectually stimulating—the immediacy of the process and the uncertainty of the outcome—can also make it feel threatening. But if teachers are willing to keep in close contact with students as they conduct their research and to advise students and to intervene if necessary (but only if necessary—students should feel responsible for their data-gathering), the learning that can result is worth the risk, at least in our experience.

For example, one of the most dedicated graduate instructors in our department (and winner of an annual teaching award given to graduate students) emphasized to her students the ethics of data collection, such as stipulating that all surveys and interviews are voluntary. Nevertheless, a group of her students still encountered a challenge from an authority figure. One collaborative group was gathering data to support the writing of a proposal that would argue for an increase in university staff wages. In the beginning of the data-collection process, the two female members of this group went into the university cafeteria and saw a group of cafeteria employees eating together. The students approached them, explained that they were researching staff wages and asked if they were on a break and would be willing to fill out anonymous surveys; all agreed. Five minutes later a man who the students described as ‘‘the cafeteria supervisor’’ walked up to the table, grabbed a survey out of an employee’s hand, demanded the rest of the surveys, told the students to leave, and warned that the cafeteria employees could be punished for participating in the research.

Even though the students followed proper protocol, they faced a reality of primary research: external conditions impinge. Their methods were ‘‘right,’’ but the kudos was wrong. Following the confrontation, the teacher commented that she ‘‘wanted to use the situation to impress upon them how important their topic was.’’ So, I told the students that although this incident was perhaps embarrassing and uncomfortable, it was not useless. I asked them how this incident could be used as evidence in their proposal. They decided that they could use the incident as evidence that a problem existed. Some of the students in the class suggested that perhaps the group could still survey the staff on and off-site.

In spite of the special challenges associated with assigning primary research involving human participants in composition classes, we believe that there are important benefits for students, teachers, programs, and institutions. By teaching students to do primary research, we help them see the power of writing as social action, not simply as academic exercise. A well-crafted primary-research assignment can help students see and use rhetoric for problem posing and problem solving. With primary research, students must engage with their sources, for they are the only ones with access to them: they are compiling the survey data or transcribing the interview or conducting the observation or writing the field journal. This relationship to the data often leads to strong evidence of engagement among students in both the gathering and presentation of the data. For example, two of Cathy’s students working on a research project complained that they could not find any sources in the library about their topic. When Cathy told them that they would need to make phone calls and interview people, they responded by enthusiastically stating: ‘‘When we can’t find the sources in the library, we can make them ourselves!’’ While we might quibble about students ‘‘making sources,’’ this vignette exemplifies the student-as-agent role that primary-research assignments promote.
Instead of impeding the students’ understanding of primary research and how to conduct it, the incident with the cafeteria workers pushed students’ knowledge even further. Their instructor describes the most significant benefit to the students: “I think that the students who encountered problems in conducting interviews/surveys/observations due to ‘permission’ issues learned that research is important, and that knowledge is powerful and at times threatening.” One student states that through “incorporating primary research” she learned that writing a proposal “was to be taken seriously and not just as a part of an English course.” In primary research projects, which are so heavily dependent upon local conditions, the classroom environment needs to be flexible enough that students and teachers can learn from arising situations and from each other.

Perhaps not surprisingly, students in Carrie’s class identified the food service boycott as one of the most important learning experiences in her class—students saw other students take action to solve a problem. We’ll never know whether the boycott would have happened without the primary research students did—the surveys that showed widespread student discontent and willingness to participate in a boycott, the interviews with local restaurants that indicated a willingness to offer student discounts if students could use their meal plan cards there (as students learned happens at other universities). But another student in the group told Carrie how proud she felt when she interviewed the vice provost of student affairs who, expecting an annoying meeting with a disgruntled student, was impressed with how much research the student had done prior to the interview.

What do teachers gain from asking students to do primary research? Because for many students these proposals are the first project where they have to make use of primary data and also write collaboratively, students’ negotiations of these complex demands don’t always lead to the high-quality polished drafts that we would like to see at the end of the semester. However, because the proposals are also presented orally with a visual component, there is often more bang for the buck than a regular ten-page research paper would provide. Obviously, teachers benefit when students are engaged with their work and write papers that teachers actually learn something from.

We also believe that our writing program has benefited from having primary research on a local problem be a visible part of the second-year course curriculum, arguing that such work is closely tied to our institution’s mission: “To educate individuals to think and act as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community.” In fact, we’ve been so impressed by the quality of thinking that grows out of students’ use of primary research to argue for solutions to local problems that we’re looking for ways to enable a more public distribution of the best proposals, perhaps through our composition program’s website or even through a public forum where students do poster presentations; display videos; and distribute print copies of their proposals to students, faculty, administrators, and community leaders. Making the proposals even more public will raise new concerns about the reliability of survey and interview data, feasibility, and so on, but making the audience for this project more real and making the proposals even more consequential, we believe, will only improve engagement. And teachers will also learn as they negotiate the ethics of sharing their students’ research more publicly. Ultimately, students will learn not just how to do primary research but how to use this research to persuade those in power to make changes. In doing so, they themselves will be acting as agents of change.

Works Cited


