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Not Only for the Sciences: Undergraduate Research in the Humanities

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I confess at the outset that for years I resisted the notion that a professor of English, or any other discipline in the humanities, for that matter, could have a student join in a collaborative scholarly endeavor. At the time, I was Chair of my department, and our Dean, a biologist, was adamant that all academic units needed to develop more undergraduate research opportunities. I listed the usual reasons why we could not: lack of training in collaboration across the discipline in general, the long scope of much research that would make a student's activity over a semester or two essentially moot, the aggregate nature of on-going research and the impossibility of students reading enough secondary material to be able to actually join a project. On each count, I was essentially correct, but on each count I was also blinkered by tradition and habit more than actual intellectual or physical limitations.

Since then I have invited students to join me in various projects. The first was a project understanding a poet that had come to me as a consequence of teaching his works. And while that successful endeavor ended with a joint presentation of a paper at a regional conference, it was simply an experiment to see if I could do it. At the time, I had no deep understanding of how to make it a meaningful experience for the student or of the pedagogy of undergraduate research.

In the last academic year, I set out again on a quest to collaborate with a student, this time informed by methodology drawn from my colleagues in biology and with a clearer sense of the pedagogy and goals of undergraduate research thanks to publications by the Council on Undergraduate Research. Though we are still working on the final stages of editing the article, my experiences in working with students have allowed me to distill some of the essential and critical elements that will more likely lead to a successful project for both faculty and student. At the same time, I hope my story will address some of the myths that humanities professors tend to have about undergraduate research, both as it occurs in the sciences and in the humanities.

Find the Right Student

One of the misunderstandings that we in the humanities have about undergraduate research in the sciences is that most students get the opportunity. The truth is quite the opposite, though. Often only the very best, most capable and most ambitious students are asked to join a lab or a research project. The same is true in English; the student who appears bound for graduate school is the most likely candidate for a successful collaboration. In my case, the young woman, Enid, whom I asked to join me, was the best student in a course I had taught a year before and was someone whom I was aiding in thinking about post-graduate fellowships. She is the student we have all taught who simply

works at a different level than her peers and makes it look easy. I wanted her to get some serious research experience as a way to prepare her for graduate school and/or major fellowships, but no one in my department was able to have her join in a project. So I decided to take on the challenge.

A second myth that we sometimes have about the sciences is that students already possess all of the skill sets necessary to join a research team, when in fact the professor must devote significant energies to bring the students up to speed on the specific experiment. The learning curve is always steep for students, but it may be no steeper for the student studying the humanities. I say that because most of our students have already been performing research that is consistent with the types of scholarly endeavors that their professors undertake. When my students construct a 15-page research paper, they are joining in the same critical literary conversation that I do in my scholarly life, albeit in an abbreviated form. I had read Enid's papers and talked to her about her research skills, so I was confident that she possessed the essential ability to undertake a more professional approach to literary research. Just as the students in biology have learned essential techniques necessary for joining in a professor's research by taking labs along with their classes, so also the humanities students have written many argumentative research papers that provide them with essential research and writing skills.

However, a key distinction between the sciences and the humanities relates to the number of students who can join a project at any one time. Unlike the sciences, where having several students working in the lab might increase overall productivity, collaboration in literary studies involves sitting in an office huddled in front of a computer screen. Both parties need to read the same primary and secondary materials, and both parties need to work in conjunction on the actual drafting and revising of the written document. Thus, the nature of the project demands careful consideration if the collaborative effort is to succeed. Realistically for me, one student collaborator will be the limit for any given project, due to the writing-intensive nature of the undertaking.

Find the Right Project

The scientist may be constrained in pursuing her research by a number of factors that do not directly relate to the humanities professor: money to conduct the research, lab space, and equipment, to name the most obvious. The English professor needs only a computer and access to a library, but nonetheless, there are constraints placed upon us, most notably the above-mentioned inability to bring a student into a long-term project. In my research activities that involved student researchers, the projects were discrete investigations that could be easily undertaken. The first one arose from my teaching and involved a relatively minor poet, Countee Cullen, whose life and works I had never researched deeply. The most recent derived from a conference paper that I had previously worked on, again about a minor fiction writer. I agree with Joyce Kinkead and Laurie Grobman (2011) who point out that the best projects for undergraduates to join are ones that treat "modern or historically neglected authors" (p. 220). The sheer amount of secondary material on major canonical figures may mean that having students join in research involving those writers is overly challenging.

Finding suitable projects can take many forms. Like many of my colleagues, I have several papers that I delivered at conferences that I never revised into a publishable article. Most were sound research, but once they were placed neatly in a folder in a filing cabinet, they tended to die a slow death. So when I invited Enid to join me in this project, I had her read several of the conference papers and then talk to me about which one she wanted to pursue and why. We came to an agreement about the appropriate project to work on, and I sent her off with the novel and a stack of articles that I had previously read.

Our project investigates the only known correspondence of Mourning Dove, a Native American women who collaborated with a

Caucasian mentor to produce a couple of books, most famously the novel *Cogewea*, published in 1927. While there is consistent scholarly interest in Mourning Dove, the amount of secondary material is such that at this point Enid and I have read the vast majority of it. And the number of extant letters is several dozen, making the process of deciphering them manageable. I used department travel money to work in the archives at Washington State University where the letters are housed, and when I could not decipher a handwritten word, I photographed it so that Enid and I could attempt to understand it when I returned to Portland.

Cede or Share Control

As a young teacher, I remember struggling to find the time to work into a class lecture all of the material that I had been reading and thinking about. The teaching was about me and the amazing array of information that I had amassed. At some point, I was shown that allowing the students to participate in the day-to-day work done in the classroom might actually mean that they learned more, but it required that I give up some control of the classroom. The same is true when researching with a student, no matter whether the research is in the sciences or the humanities. I have heard scientists remark that they could do the work in the lab faster and more expertly than could their students; the same is certainly true for the humanities professor.

But I have learned that allowing someone else into the inner sanctum of my writing comes with benefits. The first is perspective. The original paper that I offered to Enid had a thesis that worked well for a twenty-minute talk, but when we began to think about how to develop it, Enid early on identified that she was uncertain whether it could be revised into a fully realized article. And she was right. So that meant tearing down the material to its root and starting over. In this instance that process involved returning to my notes on the letters and rethinking the narrative that existed across them. That was beneficial for both of us because our stake was more equal and the subsequent paper belonged to both of us. Laura Behling (2009) correctly notes that research in literary studies often begins “with an idea or argument and the process of gathering evidence and investigating often changes that argument or thesis” (p. 4). My contention is that having a student join in that process of fine-tuning an argument is something to be embraced.

But what about the actual writing? Literature conferences are certainly one of the few remaining bastions of the presentation of the written word; scholars actually read their papers to an audience. While that is certainly not the most effective manner of disseminating information, the logic behind it should be obvious: we so value the precise expression of an idea that once we have it in its proper form we would rather risk not totally communicating our idea to an immediate audience than potentially misstating it. How, then, can a student be expected to join us in our scholarly writing?

The first point I would make here is that each of us can benefit from having an editor, and having Enid read over my writing made me more conscious of places where I could improve a sentence or the expression of an idea. We found that breaking up sections of the article and each writing a few paragraphs worked the best. It gave each of us specific tasks to work on with discrete chunks of material, and it offered each of us a chance to assist in revising the other’s work. At some point in the process, we took larger pieces of the article and revised them. This method too allowed each of us the chance to weave the different parts together and work on making the prose consistent across the different pieces of the quilted text.

The final product is ultimately a quilted fabric of each of our writing. As a result, each of us had to be willing to allow a sentence or passage to be tweaked in order to fit the flow of the overall article. Inevitably, there were times when I preferred my way of expressing an idea, so I tried to make those instances a teachable moment. Toufic Hakim (2000) reminds us that, in any undergraduate research project, “the faculty member is at once the chief researcher and the lead

teacher” (p. 2). This situation exactly mirrors what happens with a scientist and his student assistants. In in my project with Enid, a part of her learning process was seeing the need for exhaustive revision, something that she—a very skilled undergraduate writer—was not particularly experienced in doing.

The problem that I continue to wrestle with, though, is that I still like the way I write and think that I’m a better writer that Enid is at this point in her career. So I suppose it finally boils down to this: I am the lead author on the article, so I get the last say in how the document should be expressed. Toufic Hakim (2000) reminds us that, in any undergraduate research project, “the faculty member is at once the chief researcher and the lead teacher” (p. 2). This situation exactly mirrors what happens with a scientist and his student assistants. The ultimate revision will be mine, with input from Enid.

Use Time Wisely

Perhaps the most important lesson that Enid learned is that, for a professor, research does not operate on a semester system. The biggest surprise she faced was that we did not complete the project in a couple of months. Coming into the collaboration, she thought that it would be a more extended version of the kinds of papers she writes each semester, and while she never expressed frustration with the pace, she did tell me that she expected the process to take less time than it has. Part of the slower pace resulted from the many other demands on my time, but part of it resulted simply from the difference between doing selective research and doing exhaustive research. I was intent upon tracking down all articles that we could find, and once Enid grasped what that process involved, she quickly adapted to the pace of the project.

But the difference between being a professor and being a student is that I steal time away from teaching, committees, and, in my situation, administrative work. Enid is a student who has a couple of part-time jobs, so reading and researching are her primary occupations. Research is often my tertiary concern and at times my quaternary concern. Given the other demands on my time, writing about Mourning Dove absorbed a relatively small proportion of my work week. That it absorbed even a few hours, however, is precisely the point for engaging a student in research. Quite frankly, knowing that I was meeting with Enid for an hour each week meant that I made time to do the necessary research and writing and actually got work done during very busy times of the year.

Closing Thoughts

Perhaps one can read this article and leave with the idea that a number of different forces must converge in order for a humanities faculty member to engage an undergraduate in a research project. To a certain extent that is true. But I know that the benefits to the students far exceed what they could learn from me in the classroom, and the benefits to me far surpass the initial cost involved in getting the students up to speed on a project. I am a better, more consistent, and generally more efficient researcher when I am working with a student, and the process allows me to bridge the gap between research and pedagogy.

As a faculty member in a small university that has no graduate students, I do not teach seminars on my research projects; most remain ancillary to the day to day work of teaching undergraduate classes. My experience with Enid allowed me the opportunity to see both research and teaching come together in one project. I believe that Enid better understands what her life as an academic will consist of in the future, and I know that I have a new appreciation for the ways in which we can learn from our students through collaboration with them.

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