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What's Wrong with Writing Essays

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As a professor invested in critical thinking—that is, in *difficult thinking*—I have become increasingly disillusioned with the traditional student paper. Just as the only thing a standardized test measures is how well a student can take a standardized test, the only thing an essay measures is how well a student can conform to the rigid thesis/defense model that, in the hands of novice scholars, eliminates complexity, ambiguity, and most traces of critical thinking.

I don't believe that my mission as a professor is to turn my students into miniature versions of myself or of any other professor. Yet that is the chief function that the traditional student essay serves. And even if I *did* want to churn out copycat professors, the essay fails exceedingly well at this. Somehow the student essay has come to stand in for all the research, dialogue, revision, and work that professional scholars engage in.

It doesn't.

The student essay is a twitch in a void, a compressed outpouring of energy (if we're lucky) that means nothing to no one. Randy Bass, a longtime collaborator of mine at Georgetown University, has said that nowhere but school would we ask somebody to write something that nobody will ever read.

This is the primary reason I've integrated more and more *public* writing into my classes. I strive to instill in my students the sense that what they think and what they say and what they write matters—to me; to them; to their classmates; and, through open access blogs and wikis, to the world.

In addition to making student writing public, I've also begun taking the words out of writing. Why must writing, especially writing that captures critical thinking, be composed of words? Why not images? Why not sound? Why not objects? The word *text*, after all, derives from the Latin *textus*, meaning "that which is woven," strands of different material intertwined together. Let the warp be words and the weft be something else entirely.

With this in mind, I am moving away from asking students to write, toward asking them instead to *weave*—to build, to fabricate, to design. I don't want my

students to become miniature scholars. I want them to be aspiring Rauschenbergs, assembling mixed media combines, all the while through their engagement with seemingly incongruous materials developing a critical thinking practice about the process and the product. I call this type of critical thinking *creative analysis*.

In my video game studies class, I asked students to design an abstract visualization of a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) video game, a kind of model that would capture some of the game's complexity and reveal underlying patterns to the way actions, space, and time unfold in the game. One student "mapped" *Sid Meier's Pirates!* (1991) onto a piece of driftwood. This "captain's log," covered with screenshots and overlaid with axes measuring time and action, evokes the static nature of the game more than words ever can. Like Meier's *Civilization*, much of *Pirates!* is given over to configurations, selecting from menus and other nondiegetic actions. Pitched battles on the high seas, what would seem to be the highlight of any game about pirates, are rare; and, though a flat photograph (see Notes) of the log doesn't do justice to the actual object in all its physicality, you can see some of that absence of action here, where the top of the log is full of blank wood.

The wood says what words cannot.

NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as "What's Wrong with Writing Essays" (http://www.samplereality.com/2009/03/12/whats-wrong-with-writing-essays/). A photograph of the "captain's log" may be found there.