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“I Didn’t Know I Could Research That!”: Using Objects for Research Topic Invention

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“I Didn’t Know I Could Research That!”: Using Objects for Research Topic Invention

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Overview

Objects matter. As material rhetoricians (Barnett & Boyle; Gries & Brooke), cultural materialists (Bennett), and compositionists (Rule) have recently noted, objects play an important role in our lives and composing processes. An excellent example of the cultural significance of objects and what they mean to their respective audiences can be seen in Zak Penn’s 2014 documentary *Atari: Game Over*. This film chronicles the filmmaker’s search for the surviving video game cartridges of E.T., rumored to be located in a landfill in Alamogordo, New Mexico (*Atari*). The game, as an object/artifact, is believed to have triggered the North American Video Game Crash of 1983 (ultimately bankrupting the Atari video game company). As Penn’s documentary highlights, quite often an object’s value or worth is subjective; what was once literally trash becomes an important artifact that sparks Penn’s research and documentary process.

Building on the scholarly and popular interest of objects, this activity uses objects for research topic inspiration and invention. I currently teach an advanced college writing course at a private university in South Florida. In the course, students are expected to conduct a semester-long research project on a topic of their choosing within a community they inhabit. Each subsequent assignment in the class (e.g., annotated bibliography, observation report, interview/survey report, research paper, Ignite presentation) grants students an opportunity to look at their chosen topics from different vantage points. While students are empowered in the class to choose topics that matter to them,

such agency generates certain writerly challenges. Specifically, students find it difficult to locate searchable questions in the communities that they are a part of. It is my belief that having students write about objects connected to their hobbies/interests remedies these challenges.

This activity provides solutions to common problems with generating research topics (Gaillet & Eble), beginning by inviting students to bring meaningful objects into the classroom and write about them. Pulling examples from former students, this activity shows students that the scope of items they can write about is vast and deep, provided the items carry some kind of meaningful significance to them as writers (e.g., a rare pair of Air Jordan sneakers, an Xbox controller, and a yoga mat can serve as entry points into communities and vehicles for potential research topics). This activity also shows that research questions are all around us and are oftentimes linked to their specific communities or hobbies/interests (as evidenced by the aforementioned student example and Penn's documentary).

Time Commitment

Two 80-minute class sessions or three 50-minute sessions

Materials

Necessary materials include the Mirabelli; Gaillet & Eble; and *Atari: Game Over* resources, as well as an institutional course management system with discussion thread capabilities (e.g. Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle, etc.), a computer, tablet, or phone, and students' objects.

Activity Process

Class 1

- For the first class, students are asked to read Tony Mirabelli's "Learning to Serve: The Language and Literacy of Food Service Workers," with a keen focus on the

community that Mirabelli investigates and how his analysis can relate to everyday communities that students are a part of.

- Instructor discusses the article in-class with the students. Specifically, the instructor asks students to think about their first job and the skills required to perform that job at a high level. In addition to this prompt, the instructor also asks students to think about the kinds of texts and literacies connected to that job (for example, in the case of Mirabelli, some texts/literacies connected to the restaurant community include: menus, customer interactions, dishes and ingredients, emotional performances, etc.).
- Students complete an in-class freewrite where they brainstorm 4-5 additional communities they belong to and outline the kinds of texts and literacies required by those communities.
- Conclude the first half of class by discussing the salient aspects of Mirabelli's article, noting specifically for students that research questions are all around us. Like Mirabelli, a student's potential research question/topic can come from challenging someone's view about your community of study.
- Begin the second half of class by playing the trailer to Zak Penn's documentary film *Atari: Game Over*.
- Using the trailer as a guide, lead a discussion on material objects.
- Explain to students that archival materials are oftentimes useful for investigating a research topic. An artifact or object can provide inspiration for choosing a research topic (as evidenced by Penn's research process). Students could add to their freewrite some possible artifacts they associate with their communities.
- Finally, conclude the first class by reminding students to bring an object with them to their next meeting. The object should be connected to their potential community of study.

Class 2

- Begin the second class with an adapted series of writing prompts from Gaillet and Eble's text *Primary Research and Writing* (e.g., "Selecting and Describing an Artifact," pp. 110-111).
- In class, ask students to place their objects in front of them. Set a timer to five (5) minutes and deliver each prompt in succession, allotting five minutes of writing time for each individual prompt:
 - Prompt 1: Describe your object in as much detail as possible. Include details like shape, size, weight, etc.
 - Prompt 2: Explain why you chose this object. What memories or stories are connected to the object?
 - Prompt 3: Describe the object's place within the community. How is it used in the community? What value does it serve for community members? If the community were to lose the object, what impact would that have on the community?
 - Prompt 4: Brainstorm a list of questions about the object and the community it is connected to.
- These prompts, taken together, work well for students struggling to locate a research topic/question. For instance, a former student of mine once self-identified as a "sneaker-head" (i.e., an individual who was excessively interested in sneakers and "sneaker-culture"), and brought to class a rare pair of Jordan-brand sneakers. As the student engaged with the writing prompts, she moved from the superficial qualities of the object (the color of the shoes; any identifying markers such as their frayed laces; the color of the cushion within the insole; etc.), to specific memories connected to the object (many of which were firmly rooted in the personal/familial). It was through this writing exercise, and the student's engagement with the object's personal

and familial memories, that she ultimately settled on her research topic for the course (e.g., to investigate the correlation between gun violence and sneaker culture in the US, specifically upstate New York where the student was from).

- Once the writing prompts are complete, ask students to post their responses to a discussion thread on your institution's course management system.
- Finally, conclude the session by having each student present their object, as well as their writings on that object to the class.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Gain an understanding of the research process
- Think critically about objects and the research topics they represent
- Use effective strategies for conducting research
- Produce critical reflections on inquiry-based research
- Produce critical reflections on one's writing

Learning Accommodations

- Materials should be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, virtual delivery.

Works Cited

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