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Susan Arpajian Jolley

In Search of a Hero, in Search of Self

High school teacher Susan Arpajian Jolley vitalizes her British literature course by asking seniors to investigate, through an I-Search paper, the concept of heroism. Students research a historic or contemporary individual, drawing on their understanding of heroic literary figures previously studied, and interview family, community members, and others connected to their research. On their journey, the students continually revisit the question, What truly makes a person a hero?

Transformations come in small steps. Most of us who have taught for a long time are faced with rethinking and reworking assignments that were once successful with students but no longer seem relevant. One example for me has been the research paper traditionally done in a college-preparatory senior English class. Should it be a literary research paper? Maybe not, since most high school seniors don't need to do research on literary criticism. The senior paper could be straight literary analysis, but then where does the research come in? Should it be a paper on a controversial topic? Probably not, since such a paper might fit more successfully into a social studies class. I wanted a fresh approach to the research project but wasn't sure in which direction to go.

I did have some qualifications in mind, however. I knew that I wanted the project to be meaningful to students and academically challenging. I wanted to promote certain qualities in my seniors before I sent them off to college, such as flexibility, independent thinking, contemplation, sound decision-making, and willingness to interact with the larger world. I still wanted my students to engage with the literature we read in class. I envisioned a paper for my British literature course that would be rigorous and engaging, far-reaching and personal.

After mulling over the dilemma for months, reading, talking to other teachers, talking to students, thinking back over all the papers and projects I had assigned throughout my career, my answer came when I revisited an old friend, *The I-Search*

Paper, and decided to transform Ken Macrorie's vision a bit by connecting his methods to a motif we encountered in our syllabus—the concept of a hero. It seemed to me that this could work since we spent the first part of our year studying Beowulf, King Arthur, and Macbeth, classic literary heroes who are prototypes of real and fictional characters in our modern world.

I called this project In Search of a Hero. Not particularly original, but what it turned into was something remarkable. As students investigated a person of their choice, I-Search style, they found their voices. They thought about the literature we had read, researched a hero, conducted interviews, and made judgments. More important, however, they told their stories and made some discoveries about themselves.

Why an I-Search?

These college-prep classes encompassed a wide variety of abilities, interests, and temperaments. Some students planned to go to a four-year school, some to community college, others to work. They were an intriguing and sometimes maddening mixture of enthusiasm and boredom, reliability and irresponsibility, and cooperation and rebellion. To soothe the senioritis, I try my best to make British literature somehow relevant to them. That's why an I-Search seemed to be the answer.

I had worked with Macrorie's process before, using both the generic I-Search on topics such as careers, colleges, family histories, and even purchases

and the more closely defined I-Search a Word, which I came across years ago in *English Journal*.¹ I-Searching appeals to me for many reasons. Because students choose the topics to investigate, they remain interested. Because students write in first person, the papers become stories with authentic voice and compelling narrative. And because the I-Search paper is so personal, it is usually free from plagiarism. Instead of investigating a general topic of interest, each student would choose a contemporary figure; contemplate heroic paradigms we encountered in our readings; conduct an in-depth investigation, including interviews; and conclude whether or not the chosen figure is indeed a hero. There would be opportunity for practicing MLA style and including citations. Having already studied *Beowulf* and various King Arthur legends, we were ready to begin.

Establishing a Context

I quickly discovered that students hadn't given much thought to the concept of heroism, except to regard firefighters and other emergency workers, especially those who were involved in the 9/11 rescue mission, as heroes. To truly study the concept of heroism, we had to move beyond any narrow or preconceived ideas and begin the process of searching, a process that I introduced by modeling.

I began with the literature. What made *Beowulf* a hero? Certainly he was brave and strong

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and self-sacrificing, but students soon discovered that, according to the *Beowulf* poet, heroism reaches further than a few courageous episodes. Fifty years after his initial exploits, the elderly *Beowulf* continues to bear burdens for his people and willingly fights his most fearsome foe, a fire dragon, knowing that he will die. The poignant words of the poet express both the hero's determination to protect his people and his willingness to tolerate the outcome:

... My heart is firm,
My hands calm: I need no hot
Words. . . .
... No one else could do

What I mean to, here, no man but me
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one
Could try. (55)

We examined the King Arthur legends as well, reading of Sir Gawain, who stood up to defend his king and was willing to take a surely fatal blow to keep his word. We watched John Boorman's film *Excalibur* and saw the best and bravest knight, Sir Lancelot, exiled from the Round Table because of his affair with the Queen, an example of a flawed man who was nevertheless heroic in many ways. Students learned that most knights, though brave and honorable, failed in their quest to find the Holy Grail because of their moral imperfections.

Next we turned our search to some contemporary thinking. I shared with students the ideas of John McCain, whose book *Why Courage Matters: The Way to a Braver Life* raises some interesting questions. McCain laments what he calls our society's "profligate misidentification of the virtue of courage" (14). McCain gives examples of what he considers real courage, both physical and moral, as well as examples of lesser acts that we too often label as courageous or heroic. I gave students an excerpt of a Bill Moyers interview with historian Barbara Tuchman, in which Tuchman, like McCain, worries that we use the word *hero* too freely. She recalls attending a seminar at which people identified Elvis Presley or the Mayflower Madam as heroes, confusing celebrity and notoriety with true heroism, which must entail "nobility of purpose" (7). Finally, we looked to excerpts from Joseph Campbell's writings and interviews, which examine the archetype of the hero and the hero's journey.

Every day I searched newspapers, magazines, and the Internet; I asked students to do so as well. Tuned in to the word *hero*, we were shocked at how often we came across it. Particularly striking was the story of Wesley Autrey, who early this year jumped onto the New York City subway tracks to save a man who was having a seizure. The wide press coverage of this incident brought students' attention to some hard questions: Should Autrey have risked his life for a stranger? Should he have acted while his small children were standing on the subway platform? Would we have done the same?² Can one be considered a hero based on an act committed without



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premeditation? Such an immediate, real-life example of courage at great risk helped students realize that life is full of unexpected possibilities for bravery and, perhaps, heroism.

Searching

Individual research began with a trip to the library, where students found Web sites that would help them choose someone they were interested in investigating. Particularly helpful were the Web sites of PBS, *Time*, and The Heroism Project. I suggested that students think outside the box. For instance, in the realm of civil rights, everyone knows Rosa Parks, but most people don't know a woman named Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, who was one of the masterminds behind the Montgomery bus boycott. Everyone knows a great deal about Martin Luther King Jr., but many young people have forgotten about Medgar Evers, the Mississippi activist assassinated in 1963 as the civil rights movement was gaining recognition from mainstream America.

I also told students to open their minds to unconventional types, those who may not necessarily be acknowledged as heroes; it would be their job to investigate and come to a conclusion about whether or not the figure they chose did indeed meet the qualifications for heroism. Was Marilyn Monroe a hero? Was Coco Chanel? Several girls in my class were delighted to find these names on *Time's* list of the twentieth-century's most important people. The girls wanted to know more about these figures and to see if they could be considered heroic. One of the most interesting investigations centered on an unlikely figure: Pablo Escobar. Zack began reading about the Colombian drug lord who was killed in 1993 and discovered that Escobar, loathed and vilified around the world, was also worshipped by many fellow Colombians for his acts of charity. Zack wondered how anyone could consider such a man heroic. Could his good deeds ever outweigh his crimes? These were the kinds of questions students began to ask.

Many chose more conventional figures, such as Pope John Paul II, John Lennon, Bono, Nelson Mandela, and Princess Diana. The search turned personal for some. Ashley and Carly, interested in finding out more about their Jewish heritage and the Holocaust, searched Elie Wiesel and Oscar Schindler. Eugenia decided to investigate Kwame Nkrumah, a hero in her parents' native Ghana. Topics demonstrated a range of personal interests. Andy, wanting to know more about international politics, investigated Václav Havel; Marissa, who will be going to college to study animal behavior, worked on Jane Goodall; Megan, who knew she wanted to investigate a woman, found out about a little-known Revolutionary War soldier, a woman named Deborah Sampson, who disguised herself as a man in order to fight. I had almost sixty students in three classes working on this project, and only a few names, such as Pat Tillman and Princess Diana, were duplicated. I never imagined that my students would come up with such diverse and interesting topics.

Interviewing

After the preliminary work in the library—brainstorming, making choices, finding out basic information—it was time to do two things: first,

dig deeper into books, magazines, newspapers, and Web sites; and second, find people to interview, people who could help give some varying perspectives on heroism and on the figures in question. Interviewing is essential to Macrorie's concept of I-Searching. To prepare to conduct interviews, we practiced on each other, first writing appropriate questions, then pairing up and interviewing each other. We discussed what makes a television or radio interview successful and watched an excerpt of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to see how a good interviewer can elicit interesting and meaningful responses from his or her subject. Macrorie's book was also helpful in providing us with models of different ways to write up an interview (133–49).

Structuring the Paper

Finally we were ready to begin. After several days in the library, with topics chosen, and with lists of potential sources—print, media, and personal—I knew that students were ready to investigate on

their own. I gave them a suggested organization for the paper, a variation on the structure propounded by Macrorie, whose I-Searches always follow the same pattern—What I Know; What I Want to Find Out; What I Learned. This paper would be written in chapters. My structure, a bit more detailed, is shown in Figure 1.

Timetable

We worked on the In Search of a Hero project from December to March, while we continued the required readings in British literature. A paper this extensive needs to be done in phases so that students don't fall behind or become overwhelmed. During the months we worked on the project, I asked for four shorter papers, all of which would eventually be incorporated into the final draft.

1. Preliminary Thoughts on Heroes and Heroism (due after the first visits to the library)
2. Interview (in narrative form, due several weeks later)

FIGURE 1. Structure of In Search of a Hero Paper

I. How I Chose My Subject

Explain whom you considered investigating and how you made your final choice. Tell why you are interested in this person.

II. What I Knew

There are many things you could cover here. (This section could be several paragraphs. Let your content determine how many paragraphs you need.) You could tell what you knew about heroes, and what you knew about the person you chose. You could briefly discuss whom you looked up to when you were young—a child's view of heroism. You could tell about heroes from movies, fairy tales, real life, history, your family. Also discuss what you learned from the literature we read this year—concepts of heroism from stories such as *Beowulf* and the King Arthur legends are part of what you knew before you began research for this paper. (Make sure that you do discuss the literature; even though you will determine most of the content for your paper, discussing the literature is a requirement.)

III. The Search

Explain how you went about finding information for your paper—where and when you looked, how you chose people to interview, what was easy, what was hard, where your search succeeded, and where it failed. This part and the next should make up the bulk of your paper.

IV. What I Learned

This is the section of the paper where you will present the information you found—from written sources and from your interviews. What have you learned about heroism and its definition? Is John McCain right that we use the word too freely? What new information did you learn about your person? What did you find out that was surprising or unusual? How has your view of the person changed? Be sure to document all your information.

V. Is _____ a Hero?

Present your conclusions. Explain whether you think the person you chose to investigate qualifies as a hero. (You can say no and still have an excellent paper.)

VI. Final Thoughts

Write a concluding paragraph or two of your thoughts on the person you investigated and on the process of searching itself. What did you learn about yourself in this process? Were you pleased with your results? What would you change if you could do something differently? Don't forget that you will include a Works Cited list at the end of your paper.

3. Parts I and II of the paper (introductory material, due a month after starting)
4. Parts III and IV of the paper (the body, due two months after starting)

I graded each phase and made suggestions, the most common being to dig deeper, find out more, do more research. I wanted students to be investigative reporters, to find out as much as they could before making a judgment about the status of the person they were investigating. Students who met these phase deadlines had little trouble putting the final draft together.

The Results

My pleasant surprises came far before the final drafts were turned in. The interview phase of the project revealed much. Students felt empowered by the interview process, some even making unexpected connections with family members and teachers. For example, Jessica's grandmother, in an interview about Rose Kennedy, said that women of the early and middle twentieth century, to exert control, had to pretend to be subservient. Jessica was quite surprised to hear her grandmother say that women of that time "knew how to make their ideas seem like their husbands', for if a husband knew your idea was credited, it was rejected." Nickkie discussed Medgar Evers with a history teacher, who told her that their discussion reminded him to put more emphasis on Evers in his American history classes. Perhaps most moving of all was Ashley's interview with her grandmother, whose own grandmother was in the same concentration camp as Elie Wiesel. Ashley, who wrote that she had never paid much attention to her Jewish heritage because of the pain involved, found this connection transformative, realizing that she wanted to know more. Jaclyn interviewed her father, a great admirer of Pope John Paul II, as well as a priest from a neighboring community, who was able to give her more of an insider's perspective on the pope. Mike, who was investigating Michael J. Fox, spoke to his mother, a nurse, who, having worked with Parkinson's patients, was able to explain the difficulties of that disease as well as her views on stem-cell research. Using email, Shane conducted several interviews with comedians who told him about the profound effect Richard Pryor

had on their life and work. In all, I was excited that so many family members, people from the community, and even strangers were drawn into this project. Everyone was learning from each other.

As students handed in their final papers, I was eager to see where their investigations led. A few students found, after much searching and contemplation, that they no longer looked on the subject of their search as heroic. Matt concluded that Bob Dylan, although a groundbreaker, does not qualify as a hero. He wrote, "I think being a hero is more than being yourself. I don't think that following your dreams is that great for the world. The only person who really wins in that situation is you." Lindsey drew similar conclusions, after finding a great deal of information and many varied opinions from people of different generations, that John Lennon is not a hero, but she acknowledges that if she had lived when he did she might feel differently. Likewise, Zack ended up saying no about Pablo Escobar. I considered these thoughtful searches and conclusions every bit as successful as those of the majority of students, who ended up believing that the subjects of their searches were heroic.

I was most interested, however, as I read the final papers, which ranged in length from six to about fifteen double-spaced pages, in how the searches affected the students. I had tried to direct students inward as well as outward, knowing that a project like this could lead them to discoveries about themselves—their interests, their motivations, and their values. I was not disappointed, as many of the papers ended with such realizations.

Most students acknowledged that researching and writing this paper made them think about things they had not considered before. Some realized that they agreed with John McCain that we use the terms *hero* and *courage* too loosely. Others conceded that they had never before given much thought to those words, except as they applied to superheroes and celebrities. The students' words speak louder than mine can and show how a project like this can transform and awaken important feelings and attitudes. For instance, of Walter Reuther, Jeremy writes the following: "He affected millions of lives and paved the way for future generations. I learned a great deal about an amazing person whom I had never even heard of before this report. Researching Mr. Reuther taught me that you have to speak up for

what you believe in and never stop fighting, even if you're an underdog." Writing about Oprah Winfrey, Kim recalls the words of her own grandfather, who once told her, "If you lived on the earth and never made a difference, shame on you!" She writes in her paper, "I may never become rich or famous like Oprah, but I will make a difference in life. I will be the best teacher I can. I will help and listen to children and try to become someone they look up to. I'll try to always be fair, patient, and kind."

Finally, in an incredibly moving and detailed paper on Bob Marley, Raquel writes about the power of words and the importance of doing good for others, not just yourself. She acknowledges that Marley had flaws, as did King Arthur's knights, but writes that learning about Marley made her think about her life and about life in general. Heroes are particularly important for children, Raquel believes, because "without heroes, children won't know what and what not to do." Her meditation on heroism led her to the conclusion that, like Marley, she would like to live her life using words to help others.

Conclusion

This project was not easy for my students to do. How could it be? It was unlike anything they had done before, as it required the synthesis of many different types of skills: reading, researching, interviewing, explaining, narrating, analyzing, and evaluating. The process also required students to think about the literature in our course and about the world around them. It required them to live with uncertainties for a while, creating questions and conclusions. In the end, most were glad for the

experience and thought they had learned a great deal. For me, these papers were exciting to read and much more interesting than the traditional research paper. They were, as Ken Macrorie characterizes I-Searches, "alive, not borrowedly inert" (v). There were rewards from this writing project for all of us.

Notes

1. This type of I-Search, explained in a 1990 article by Gaylyn Karle Anderson, still works well with freshmen and sophomores. The approach in the article can be updated a bit to make use of Internet sources.

2. This issue received much coverage. See in particular Cara Buckley's op-ed piece in the January 7, 2007, *New York Times* Week in Review section.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

Jolley presents a research project where students determine if their "hero" is truly a hero. Several model texts are listed, including *Beowulf*. "Literary Guide: *Beowulf*" provides an overview of the poem, details on its language and poetics, and an exploration of the translation of the work. In addition, there are two ReadWriteThink lesson plans that provide ideas for using *Beowulf* in the classroom. <http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/beowulf/>