

By Tom MacLean

What follows is a description of an oral-derived, multiple-source exercise I have recently given in an English 101 class that students seem to enjoy. Its purpose is to de-mystify the process of writing coherently and with unity from multiple sources. I'd love to hear any ideas you have on improvement and utilization.

I start by suggesting to them that we have been doing this very thing in speech most of our lives—likely starting with toddlerhood—and by now are quite expert at combining oral-derived sources to produce response or thesis-based, fluid, fluent narratives, virtually without apparent, conscious thought or even much effort. Any number of examples should suffice to test the “theory.” In this case, I like hypothetical scenarios from early life. I suggest one such case: a pre-K or Kindergarten student reporting at the dinner table on an event that happened in class that day. It has a topic (“Johnny”), a thesis (“he got into trouble”), supporting detail (“let me tell you how he did it”) and even a conclusion (“I’m never going to do *that* in class”). And of course, it contains the essential ingredients of source-based writing: summary, paraphrase, quotation and synthesis. Not only has she entertained and enlightened her family with the kind of masterful presentation she is already so good at she doesn’t need to rehearse, she has done so without even cracking *The Penguin Handbook*, much less downloading something far less colorful from the web.

Here’s the recipe:

Ask students to form groups of 3 in a circle with their desks, so as to be able to converse face to face. Explain that there are to be among each group three 2-way conversations, one after the other, on the same topic, in each case with the non-speaking students taking notes. The conversation could be on almost anything, but of course if it’s class or reading-based, that’s two birds, one stone. (My next try at this will be a discussion of their responses to a story character’s choices.) Before they start, each is to have on hand a pen, and a sheet of notebook paper divided into three equally sized columns, denoted by two parallel, vertical lines, top to bottom. At the top of the left-hand column should appear the name of the peer to the left in the circle, at the top of the right-hand column the name of the peer to the right, and at the top of the middle column the name of the note-taker/author. The idea of course is for each note-taker to end up with brief notations, preferably with a few choice quotes (words and phrases being fine) on the tenor of the conversation—ghost notes really--including their own fleeting responses to the conversation, recorded in the middle column. At the end of the session each student has notes on one specific conversation.

The next step is for each student to write up a thesis-based account of the conversation, following the general principles of research-based writing, including introducing sources/authors, introducing quotations and commenting on them, integrating sources

(ideas/responses from all 3 participants—the author is a source), providing in-text citations, and unifying the language. Sound reasonable? But *is* it? Field-testing is barely underway. Stay tuned. Please let me know your ideas—and if you try it, your luck.