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**USING POLITICAL CARTOONS AS THE BASIS
FOR A FRESHMAN COMP RESEARCH PAPER:
DELINEATING THE REASONS FOR THE FAILURE
OF YET ANOTHER CLEVER IDEA**

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At the Lake Campus of Wright State University, students are required to complete two courses in English composition. In the second, English 102, the focal assignment is an eight- to ten-page research essay, typically with either an argumentative slant or a topic that requires some sort of interpretive analysis. When the department selected an anthology of political essays as the reader for this course, I was uncomfortable with the choice, for both personal and pedagogical reasons.

Although I have a great many political opinions, they are, in combination, rather—no, very—idiosyncratic. I balk, even, at describing myself as a libertarian. So, although I very much enjoy talking about politics with family, friends, and colleagues, I knew that I would have difficulty doing so in a class of freshman composition students who would expect some sort of readily recognizable coherence in my opinions. And most of them would probably take considerable pride in describing themselves as Democrats or Republicans, Conservatives or Liberals—all with capital letters.

But I had been amassing collections of political cartoons and of newspaper editorials on political topics; and, after some brainstorming, I believed that I had conceived an imaginative research topic: the students would focus on some of the 300 or so cartoons that had to do with Clinton's various policies and problems, and, working from the premise that it was now the year 2025, they would explain the cartoons to people who were “now” only passingly familiar with the Clinton presidency—if they had any knowledge of its particulars at all.

The treatment would require them to do three things: (1) describe each cartoon, (2) explain its political context, and (3) analyze the cartoonist's or cartoonists' bias. They could choose the number of cartoons, the number and variety of topics addressed, and the number of cartoonists represented. These choices would then determine the choices available to them in terms of the essay's structure, pacing, and scope of development. And the humor inherent in the material, in combination with the need to analyze the cartoonists' biases would force students to consider tone very carefully.

Moreover, the timeliness of the topic (along with the binders of editorials that I had gathered and sorted) would minimize the limitations of our small library's sometimes eclectic collection. (This was just before much material became available in full-text through OhioLINK and just before we had full Internet access in all of our computer labs. And both of these circumstances would seem, in theory, to make the topic all the more workable and attractive.)

Every time I have described this topic and approach to another teacher, the response has been extremely enthusiastic, even admiring.

Unfortunately, with the exception of several non-traditional students, the majority of the students in five English 102 classes over two quarters pretty much hated the topic. To put it as bluntly as they no doubt did, and may still be doing, it sucked and sucked big time. This essay will explain why—as far as I have been able to determine—this topic was such an abysmal failure, despite my careful conception of it and my stubborn enthusiasm about its possibilities. (Even after it had not worked the first quarter, I felt that it was too good an idea *not* to work—that all it needed was a little tinkering. About two weeks into the second quarter, I realized that the tinkering had not been enough—that I was stuck with a loser for another eight weeks and, worse, that my students were catching on to that fact almost as quickly as I was.)

The reasons for the failure of this research topic include, I think, the following misconceptions and/or misperceptions on my part, which may, taken together, illuminate some, more limited problem that you may have had with an assignment:

1. I gave the students too many choices. What I saw as a series of choices that branched into other choices much like the directory trees in Windows Explorer, they saw as a Rubix's Cube, in which every choice simply led to another set of choices until they weren't sure what choices they had already made and/or eliminated. They could not grasp the idea that the choices had to be made in a certain sequence or they would have to be made over. If I were to try this approach again, I would limit the choices and take students step-by-step through the process much more painstakingly. Whereas I had originally been afraid of patronizing them, I now know that most of them will not see clarity as condescension.

2. I very much underestimated how difficult it is to describe a cartoon. Because it is an extremely compressed medium, with much meaning conveyed in literally a very few strokes of a pen, it is hard to decide how to frame a discussion of the complexities of its message. The basic point can usually be stated in a declarative sentence,

but where does one go from there? There are fewer natural markers for the writer to follow—fewer inherent structures for the writing to be modeled on.

3. I very much underestimated the topicality of most political cartoons. Whereas cartoons are drawn in response to day-to-day events, periodical articles and even newspaper editorials are written in response to events that have developed over a broader timeframe. So, the students had some difficulty in matching their research materials to some of the specific details of an issue or event being addressed in a cartoon. Although I suggested that they replace problematic cartoons with others on much the same topic, most students were reluctant to do so. Initially I thought they did not wish to “lose” anything that they had already written, regardless of how imperfect it was. But I began to suspect that they saw the same problem lurking in almost every cartoon—that replacing one cartoon with another was tantamount to replacing one ambiguity with another.

4. I very much underestimated the difficulty students would have in analyzing the cartoonists' biases. For them, *bias* is a synonym for *prejudice* or *bigotry*. An element of criticism is implicit in the term and its application. If they agree with a certain political view, they cannot see bias in it. And, conversely, if they disagree with a certain view, they cannot see *any* reason whatsoever why someone might hold it—except perhaps that that person is somehow morally flawed or intellectually limited. I am, of course, generalizing here, but I was continually “re-amazed”—and I am coining the word to describe this phenomenon—at how often this stereotype proved true among my students.

5. I very much overestimated my students' awareness of and interest in current events. There must be no more isolated soul than a college undergraduate. According to some of my students, they are kept much too busy writing English papers. Some (too many) have opinions that are as shallow as they are fixed. And I'm not making a point about just their preferences here. I got to a point with this assignment that I would have been happy with *any* opinion that showed some depth of awareness and complexity of thought and feeling. Moreover, for some, there is too little difference between a fact and a bald assertion. So when an assignment asks them to distinguish between the two and to analyze the specific implications of a specific example of this distinction at any length, they are genuinely stymied. And an instructor who reflexively distinguishes between a fact and an assertion will have great difficulty explaining the difference when the ready explanation is not sufficient. It is a more complex version of trying to explain how to use a fork. This politically focused assignment exposed the most basic deficiencies both in my students and in myself as an instructor, making it very difficult for me to correct their deficiencies and to conceal my own.

6. I very much overestimated my students' senses' of humor. I tried to keep reminding them that they were working with cartoons. Perhaps I sometimes mistook boredom for dead seriousness. Moreover, I was never able to convince many of them that even a cartoon with which one disagrees can be funny. Some of the most viciously partisan cartoons contained outrageous caricatures of Clinton, making him all nose and chin like some sort of cross between W.C. Fields and Jay Leno. I had to laugh even if I disagreed with the premise of the cartoon. Most of my students seemed to lack the same flexibility. (I admit this reticence may to be their credit, for I am still a sucker for ethnic jokes, even some that are politically incorrect. My students, to their moral credit and emotional cost, seem actually to *think* before they laugh at anything with a political or social edge.) To make matters more difficult for me, they were sometimes extraordinarily literal-minded. To give just one illustration, a cartoon appearing at about the time of the Winter Olympics pictured Clinton careening on skis among trees marked *Whitewater*, *Paula Jones*, *Filegate*, *Vince Foster*, etc. One student remarked that he didn't understand the cartoon; although he knew Clinton was an avid golfer and jogger, he could not find any references to his

skiing. My explanation that the skiing was simply a topical connection to the Olympics did not satisfy this student, who very much seemed to want to be reassured that there was a record somewhere of Clinton's having taken to the slopes at least once.

7. I had anticipated that my students would try to label me as a Clinton-lover or a Clinton-hater, but I had not anticipated how quickly they would come to a conclusion on the matter and how fixed their opinions would remain no matter what I said later that might reasonably have been expected to modify their first impressions. I never could figure out how I could talk about the cartoons without making myself part of the issue—without my opinions distracting the students from the real issues. I had initially been worried about “imposing” my opinions on the students; I had been afraid that they would parrot what I said in class when I have absolutely no special credentials for addressing political issues. But the opposite actually proved to be the problem. More than a few students too quickly defined my political biases and then let that become an issue—let that become a rationalization for not trying to address pointed problems with focus, structure, and development that I might highlight in their approaches as I reviewed brainstorming, outlines, and partial drafts.

8. Most of the cartoons I collected had been published in the *Lima News*, which is a very conservative newspaper. I hadn't foreseen that this apparent one-sidedness would be a major problem because I thought that the alternative or “liberal” view would be implicit in what the cartoonists were attempting to ridicule. In fact, I thought having cartoons that reflected one political view might serve two paradoxical purposes: first, it would force students to focus thoughtfully on the one political view and not allow them simply to sort the cartoons into “liberal” and “conservative” piles; second, I thought it might force them to see the considerable range of views to which the term “conservative” is often attached (and, in this respect, the exercise would have been just as effective if the cartoons had originated in a very liberal newspaper). Instead, the liberal students tended simply to dismiss the cartoons as something akin to propaganda, and the conservative students embraced them as if they were straightforward statements of truth. Neither group seemed to be able to infer—to “reconstruct,” as it were—both the strengths and weaknesses of the views targeted in the cartoons.

9. Finally, I had not anticipated that my students would be unable to synthesize the three major parts of the writing task. To me, there seemed such a natural progression from describing the cartoon to explaining its point to analyzing the cartoonist's bias that I was very much surprised when I received papers in which very brief descriptions of the cartoons were followed by lengthy and loosely focused discussions of the historical background and then extremely perfunctory comments on the cartoonists' biases. If I were to try this topic again (but why would I want to?), I would place more emphasis on the students' completing successive evaluated drafts—perhaps one ungraded but thoroughly commented on draft, a second graded and thoroughly commented on preliminary draft, and then the final graded draft. In this manner, I could lead at least some of them toward a workable synthesis of their analytic purposes and their research materials.

Interestingly, when I mentioned to students in my 300-level advanced composition class that I was writing about this experience, some of the students who had been in my 102 classes audibly groaned at the memory but seemed surprised that I recognized just how unsuccessful the assignment had been. It suddenly struck me that the chasm between us and our students is sometimes much broader than the space between our desk and theirs. No matter how much they hate the approach taken in a particular class and no matter how much they question its pedagogical validity, many students seem to assume that the teacher is satisfied with it. They don't seem to recognize that we are often as deeply troubled by our failures as we are by theirs or as they are by their own. Everything that I have remarked on in here was at least touched on in some student evaluations—except

for the fact that I was very self-conscious about the almost total failure of an approach into which I had invested a great deal of time, thought, imagination, and energy. The students did comment on how hard I seemed to be trying to get my points across, but they never seemed to equate the effort with the thrashing of a drowning man who is hastening his drowning with the effort in his thrashing.

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