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What Would Freud Say to Voltaire? The Use of Dialogues in Survey Courses

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By Linda Simmons

When reading traditional student essays, a professor often “hears” her own voice speak once again, transformed from the lecture to the page. How unexciting! How uninspiring! What else might we professors do that would still require students to conduct research, convey information, and meet academic conventions while avoiding the “from the mouth to the page” syndrome? One alternative assignment requires students to write dialogues.

Dialogues bear a long and distinguished history. To today’s students, they may be unfamiliar, especially within the context of a college assignment. Yet professors can easily introduce dialogues and assess student responses to them by asking two male students (following the Greek custom) to read aloud an excerpt from Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*. One excerpt appears in *Western Civilization*, a course textbook by Jackson Spielvogel:

Lampito: All of you women: come, touch the bowl, and repeat after me:
I will have nothing to do with my husband or my lover.
Kalonike: I will have nothing to do with my husband or my lover.
Lysistrata: Though he come to me in pitiful condition (Oh, Lysistrata!
This is killing me!)
Lysistrata: I will stay in my house untouchable
Kalonike: I will stay in my house untouchable
Lysistrata: In my thinnest saffron silk.
Kalonike: In my thinnest saffron silk.
Lysistrata: And make him long for me.
Kalonike: And make him long for me.
Lysistrata: I will not give myself.
Kalonike: I will not give myself.
Lysistrata: And if he constrains me
Kalonike: And if he constrains me
Lysistrata: I will be as cold as ice and never move.

Kalonike: I will be as cold as ice and never move.
Lysistrata: I will not lift my slippers toward the ceiling
Kalonike: I will not lift my slippers toward the ceiling
Lysistrata: Or crouch on all fours like the lioness in the carving.
Kalonike: Or crouch on all fours like the lioness in the carving.
Lysistrata: And if I keep this oath let me drink from the bowl.
Kalonike: And if I keep this oath let me drink from the bowl.
Lysistrata: If not, let my own bowl be filled with water.
Kalonike: If not, let my own bowl be filled with water
Lysistrata: You have all sworn?
Myrrhine: We have. (74)

As they hear this, students first shyly chuckle, then loudly guffaw, revealing that a classical Greek anti-war play's dialogue reaches across the centuries. This quick reading produces a show-stopping way to introduce students in the course to classical dialogues. What then is required for students to write contemporary dialogues in survey classes?

The Value of Dialogues

An assignment to write a dialogue differs little from that of writing a traditional essay. Writing a dialogue requires students to combine traditional academic requirements – such as information literacy, writing competency, and critical thinking – with a healthy dose of imagination, creativity, and individuality. In practice, assignments to write dialogues can fit into informal, in-class writing assignments or out-of-class assignments such as a traditional documented essay or research paper. More specifically, assigning dialogues can substitute for the often-dreaded research paper. Survey courses in multiple academic disciplines can incorporate dialogue assignments to the delight of both students and professors.

In *A Student's Guide to History*, Jules Benjamin identifies five stages in preparing a traditional research paper: choosing a topic and developing a thesis, finding the best sources of information; determining what to record from these sources, organizing research, and writing the research paper (79). Assigning a dialogue need not change these requirements. Rather, it simply replaces the end product of a research paper (traditionally understood to be in essay format) with a dialogue format. The characters who “speak” in the dialogue must discuss a topic, with each developing a thesis or discussing a common thesis – the same first step Benjamin describes for writing a research paper. For example, Western civilization

students could write a dialogue in which Alexander the Great and Caesar Augustus discuss concepts and use of power. Alexander the Great might begin with the thesis:

I loved military power. I loved the power to inspire power. I loved the power of a bureaucracy. I used all those to create the Hellenistic World, marked by the “clash and fusion of different cultures” (Spielvogel 89).

And, Caesar might reply:

You sound like me! But I cleverly disguised my power calling myself princeps, first among equals, so that I appeared to be a constitutional monarch sharing power with the Roman Senate. But really I exercised most of the power (Spielvogel 138).

As Benjamin points out, identifying the most useful sources of information is a major stage in preparing a traditional research paper, just as it is for a dialogue. The excerpt printed above presents information only from the course textbook, but professors can certainly require students to write dialogues using additional research. The following excerpt from a student dialogue shows how one student blended evidence from the course text with research from traditional print sources:

Octavian: I came to power through an opportunity that presented itself with my father’s assassination, albeit my adoptive father. After Julius Caesar was murdered, the Roman republic was thrown into civil war. I restored peace to the nation (Spielvogel 139). The military is the way to power, but the way to stay in power is through political means. However, my major power was the control of the army, and keeping peace in Roman territories (*True Story of Alexander the Great*).

Alexander: And that is always the hardest part. Conquering the land was not a problem; I was always a great military commander. Conquering the people is much more difficult. I find a division of power to suit for most cases. I do not want my time to be wasted with all the trifles each village has; I do not have care or patience for it. The local officials take care of that. The more pressing matters of state and imperial nature are overseen and decided upon by me (Spielvogel 140). It is also crucial to mesh these lands one conquers so as to ensure peace between them. I had many of my soldiers take native wives to help unify my land.

The research requirement can also include the use of web sources and traditional print sources, many of which can be accessed with electronic databases.

After combining research from a book source and a website, one student submitted a dialogue in which two speakers answered the question “Who killed King Tut?”:

Patches: Though the treasurer is a suspect, I do not believe he is the killer. First, Maya had nothing to gain from killing the King, such as rank. He was in no position to become pharaoh or even move to a superior rank in any other field of work. Second, Maya protected the tomb of King Tut after his death and worked to have it restored after it was robbed. “A gift [to aid in the rebirth process left] in Tut's tomb bears Maya's name which could be a sign that he genuinely grieved for the youth” (Kluger and Dorfman). I believe these acts show that Maya cared for the King and are good reasons to rule him out as a suspect.

Bereta: Yes...I agree with you on that one. I further feel you would agree when I say Horemheb, the strongly ranked Army General, can be dropped as a suspect as well. He is said to have been a very “patriotic” man towards his country (King and Cooper 183). A man so devoted to his kingdom would have made certain that the mummification process was done correctly and not rushed as it was. However, he could not fulfill this un-written duty because he was away on a military campaign at the time of Tut’s murder. Before he could get back the mummification process was already complete (“King Tutankhamen”).

Two other students, collaborating in writing the same assignment, created imagined speakers “Reid” and “Books” who discussed information gathered from multiple sources, including information from the transcript of a broadcast from a *60 Minutes* segment. They included the scholar’s views in the dialogue to demonstrate the use of modern technology to answer the question of who killed King Tut. They wrote:

Reid: If [Tut’s wife] wasn’t the murderess though, she would have plenty of reasons to be afraid. One of them could have been Ay [Tut’s minister]. Ay was the one who gained the most from the death of Tutankhamen (Kluger and Dorfman). The fact that Ay assumed the throne while he raised the young boy only to relinquish it back to Tutankhamen as he grew older is a huge motivation possibility. When you look at the walls of Tutankhamen’s tomb you see Ay performing the “opening of the mouth ceremony” which was reserved for the throne’s heir (Kluger and Dorfman). When Ankhenamun was compelled to “marry a servant” (King and Cooper 194), it was Ay she was forced to marry (King and Cooper 195). When she later disappeared from history, it was Ay who remained the reigning Pharaoh (King and Cooper 196).

Books: This is all true. However, you still have to consider other possibilities. One, being that it might have been a conspiracy of several people. Ay and Horemheb, for instance. Some archeologists have suggested that Ay and Horemhab might have shared the guilt (Dunn and InterCity). While it is true that Tutankhamen was young when he died, and did not wield much authority, he was growing older and would eventually take the reins of power, reducing the status of his two regents. Ay and Horemhab gained the most from Tutankhamen's death (Kluger and Dorfman).

Reid : Of course, this could all be nonsense given the CT scan done on Tutankhamen in 2005. In a little over one-half hour, the Egyptian team that performed the CT collected over 1700 3-D images, which allowed them to examine the mummy inside and out. They established that he was about 18 years old, did not suffer from any diseases or infirmities, and was in overall good health ("Transcript").

As these excerpts demonstrate, dialogues can indeed require students to find what Benjamin refers to as the best sources of information, and the professors can set the requirements for either a narrow band of research or a broader stretch.

Drafting Dialogues

Drafting dialogues parallels creating a traditional research paper in that both require developing a thesis, researching information, recording information, organizing the research, and writing. Though Benjamin argues that a research paper is "one of the most creative tasks you will do as a history student; the paper you write is uniquely your own" (78), too often Benjamin's hope does not match the student's submission. As some of us know all too well, traditional research papers often lack any unique aspect or touch of creativity. In contrast, the dialogue often exhibits these.

First, students create settings and introductions, either imagined or based in fact, as background for the dialogue itself. For example, in setting up a dialogue in which Henry IV of the Holy Roman Empire and Gregory VII of the Holy Roman Church discuss the investiture controversy, a rousing power struggle in the 11th century, students have placed the two men together in various settings, such as heaven (or hell), a Medieval palace (or Gregory inside the palace and Henry groveling in the snow), or in a 21st-century television studio where the men have been transported across time and space. Here are three examples of how college freshmen introduced their dialogues.

For an introduction to a dialogue between Henry IV and Gregory VII as they compete for power in the 11th century, a student wrote:

Scene: It is January in the year 1077; Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII agree to meet at Canossa, a castle belonging to Countess Matilda of Tuscany. King Henry and Pope Gregory have been quarreling with each other for quite some time about the investiture controversy. Pope Gregory VII makes Henry IV wait outside in the snow for three days before allowing him to come and speak with him inside of the castle. On the third day the Pope allowed the King in to hear what he had to say and discuss the issues.

Next, for an introduction to a dialogue in which two historians discuss the question of whether Richard III murdered his nephews, a student wrote:

The director cues “Action!” as classical music plays and numerous TV cameras focus on Siskel, Jr. and Ebert, Jr. Both men are sons of the legendary movie critics but they have decided to forgo the careers of their fathers for the incredibly glamorous lifestyle of historians. Currently, they are discussing the guilt of Richard III for a show on the *History Channel* called “Richard III: Nice Guy or Hunch-backed Infanticidal Freak?”

Here is an introduction for a dialogue between Isaac Newton as a representative of the Scientific Revolution and Voltaire as a representative of the Enlightenment:

The Scene: Paris, France during the year 1723. Isaac Newton is touring Paris, walking through a town market behind a man with locks of curly hair down to his shoulders. Unbeknownst to Newton, this man is Voltaire who was age 29 at the time. Little did Voltaire know that the sign on the upcoming post is teetering on its hinges and about to break free. As he walks under the sign the last scrap of metal gives way, and the block of wood smacks Voltaire right in the head.

Student creativity is often woven in and out of the dialogue itself. For example the Newton and Voltaire dialogue, whose setting is cited above, continues as follows:

Voltaire: Yowch, darn gravity.

Isaac Newton: Did I hear someone say gravity?

Voltaire: (*Turning around to greet the man who just spoke*) Yes, this stupid sign... Wait a second?! Are you Isaac Newton?

And in setting the scene for a dialogue between Voltaire as a representative of the rational world of the Enlightenment and Freud as a representative of the irrational world of World War I, students seem to favor coffee shops and couches!

Also, students show great creativity in writing stage directions within the dialogue, as the above illustration demonstrates with Voltaire turning around. Students add directions such as “she glowered,” “she sobbed,” or “he said sneeringly” to communicate an understanding of the point of view of the character or the emotional state of the character. Such tinges of creativity demonstrate critical thinking and add originality to the dialogues.

Writing the dialogue does require the presentation of voices of different characters, but limiting the number of speakers to two carries some advantages. It provides two voices who can speak in opposition or in support without becoming so “busy” that following the dialogue is confusing. Even when limited to two, the speakers can include ideas from other people. For example, Voltaire can describe his correspondence with Russian Tsarina Catherine the Great, his work with Dennis Diderot, and his background in the Enlightenment, such as we see here:

*Voltaire: How I admire the ideas of Diderot in his *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*, in which he criticized the European defense of sexual morality and its intolerance of sexual mores that did not conform to the European model. I too opposed religious superstition and advocated toleration. I wrote about this extensively in my *Treatise on Toleration*, noting that “all men are brothers under God.” (Spielvogel 480)*

Faculty who make visual images part of their assignments or class activities can do the same with dialogues. For history professors, dialogues offer a way to encourage students to examine visual primary sources as well as textual primary sources. A popular assignment for a “History of Western Civilization” course asks students to write a dialogue in which two historians discuss Raphael’s painting “The School of Athens” and his incorporation of classical Greek, classical Roman, and Renaissance elements. An art history professor could easily use the same assignment. Films, whether documentary or feature, also work well with dialogues. For example, students who view *America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference* (one program from the American Experience series) can produce a dialogue in which two speakers discuss contemporary public reactions to the Holocaust. Or, given the current popularity of *The DaVinci Code*, students could read the novel or watch the film and view *Beyond the DaVinci Code* (one program from the History Channel). Then students could write a dialogue in which the speakers assess the historical accuracy of the novel.

Powerful Collaboration

Dialogues also can be an avenue for collaboration. For instance, two Western civilization students collaborated to write the dialogue between Reid and Books excerpted earlier in this paper.

Collaboration, even on a small scale, demonstrates both the pleasures and the difficulties of working together, an essential lesson for people who live in a democracy. Learning to research and write collaboratively provides a small laboratory of democracy. Given this, political science faculty could design dialogue assignments that embrace collaboration and result in student's gaining discipline-based knowledge and discipline-based skills. For example, students in political science survey courses often study political ideologies, and professors expect that students will identify various political ideologies and be able to determine whether liberal, conservative, or communitarian best fits a student's current thinking. Along these lines, one "Introduction to American Government" course included an assignment that required students to access the website that Prentice Hall, the textbook publisher, had created. Students, working in collaborative pairs, used this site and its links to determine each student's political ideology. The paired students then wrote one dialogue, in which each discussed her or his political ideology. In completing this assignment, students followed the same expectations of research that the professor found appropriate for the class. In survey courses in political science, these could include current media coverage in electronic sources or extend to serious publications such as those of the American Political Science Association or *Congressional Quarterly*. In completing this assignment, students not only learn about their own political ideologies, but also they learn the process of collaborating, which mirrors the efforts needed to take or block action in a democratic society.

Many academic disciplines can employ dialogues to encourage research, improve writing, and build critical thinking. One English professor, introduced to the idea of dialogue assignments by a colleague, designed a dialogue tailored to a "Survey of American Literature" course. For the final exam, the professor required students to select two characters from literary works of different eras and to write a dialogue in which those characters engaged with each other. Pulling characters from different literary movements encouraged students to see the characters in the context of the work and the movement, as well in contrast to the other character and his or her later movement. Whether the professor is designing a course for history, art history, political science, American literature, psychology or any other academic discipline, creating such assignments requires little additional

preparation time for faculty but generates often delightful results, even from students whose writing lacks a sophisticated structure.

Real Learning

But do students learn from writing dialogues? One freshman student, at the end of “History of Western Civilization I,” wrote the following:

When you are writing a dialogue you have to read the information over and over again so that you have an understanding of it. Without an understanding of the information, you cannot write a dialogue or any other paper; research is essential. When you use primary sources and secondary sources and not just your textbooks you get the chance to learn about the topic in more depth, and not just the basics of it. Something else I learned when writing the dialogue is that different historians have different views and ideas [about] what may or may not have happened. When history is explained in a book, it is one way; you do not think that it could have been seen another way then [sic] the way it was explained to you by one source but really that is wrong. History is something that historians are studying and, it’s not like it is written in stone.

For this student the dialogues had produced not only a body of fact but also an understanding of historiography, which is quite a feat for a college freshman.

In a political science survey course, a student concluded:

I took on ... the dialogue between Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. I probably took the most joy out of this assignment. It directly related with our class work in the sense of understanding the different ideologies of different parties. I also found it to be enjoyable comparing the different policies of each president from foreign to domestic. It also made me use a little creativity in the sense that I had to stage a debate that has never taken place. Again this assignment made me go that extra step in critical thinking....

As we can see, the dialogues that students write provide a means by which they can create both their own voices and the voices of people they study – and the “professor voice” has disappeared. What a joyful disappearance!

Linda Simmons, associate professor at Northern Virginia Community College, enjoys reading dialogues her students write for her Western civilization and political science courses.

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