Teaching a Science-Focus ENGL 1020

You just never know what you'll get into with a science focus 1020 class; that's the fun of it, so keep your sense of humor close and be prepared for anything. Like the music major who proposed his own solution after I suggested looking into techniques for dealing with performance anxiety (and added legalization of controlled substances to the NOT list). Or the business major who wrote about marketing ancient astronauts as science (he had one source—Von Daniken—and added pseudo-science to the list). Or the student athlete who wrote about evolution of the point guard (sorry, evolution sounds academic, but *Hoops Journal* is not). Needless to say, it took me a couple of semesters to establish my own standards for the course.

Regardless of the focus, freshman composition problems are all pretty much the same, so I'll use my space here to discuss what seems to be the difficulty specific to students in a science focus 1020—namely, choosing a marginally original research topic. I think about the class as three groups of students: hard and soft science majors who are already committed to a career goal; students who lean toward the humanities, business, or education; and those who are undeclared, uncommitted, and without a clue.

The choice of a topic is relatively easy for the science students, whose interests can range from physics and medicine at one extreme to kinesthetics and dental hygiene at the other; they probably already have a pet project within their field, so my job as instructor, as in all focuses, is to help them narrow the broad topic to a sliver, identify the issues, and utilize academic sources. There are a couple of topics these students like that I don't allow: the student's own theory of anything, no matter how brilliant (save it for your Ph.D.); treatment options for any disease (too simple); stem cell research, teaching evolution in schools, designer babies, and physician assisted suicide (internet is swarming with canned arguments). I have received good papers from a nursing student who argued that blood doping is an effective treatment for bone fractures; from a public health major who proposed a healthcare delivery plan for rural Appalachia; and from a digital media student who discussed the ethics of image manipulation.

I try to steer the second group of students, those in humanities/education/business, toward technology in the classroom, the intangible price of privatization of NASA, the politics of outer space exploration, that sort of thing. Avoid global warming in general; instead, debate one of the radical correction plans. Avoid video games (development of eye-hand coordination is the only redeeming value); avoid healthcare reform (huge and boring); avoid animal testing in general, and instead look at the effectiveness of computer modeling. I did receive a good paper that argued *for* animal testing, though. A studio art major critiqued green spaces on the ETSU campus; one student who should have been at Warren Wilson evaluated ETSU's recycling program; a business major debated with some success environmental regulations for the mining industry; and a Suzuki-trained, banjo-picking bluegrass major appraised the Mozart effect.

It's the last without-a-clue group of students that causes me the most concern, and with these kids I try to get close to home and snag something in their personal lives. They all use a cell phone: can you develop a psychological dependence? Someone close has probably had to negotiate the healthcare system: what problems were encountered? Could you eat like a caveman? Try a paleo diet for a week and evaluate. Do you love our mountains? Find out what can be done to stop the destruction. Are there places you feel

uncomfortable? Look into the notion of biased spaces and intentional discrimination by design.

I've yet to receive a paper that addresses the lack of non-European scientific though in the science timeline, that explores the conflict between academia and corporate-sponsored research, or that asserts the hard sciences are not objective at all, but are in fact gendered, classed and raced; but I keep hoping. In the meantime, I must remind myself that these students are very young, that some have only recently heard of Von Daniken and his ancient astronauts, and that it's my job to listen and to take whatever enthusiasm the exhibit and help them find the issues.