

**Sakina Laksimi-Morrow**  
**Essay Developer Project Proposal**

**Project Overview**

My tool is a website that scaffolds writing the research paper into a series of manageable tasks. The Essay Developer guides, structures and supports the student in creating a developed and well-organized research essay. The tool provides four modules that represent distinct phases in doing a research paper. Each phase allows the student to complete three sequential tasks in the module. The tasks within each module guide the student through a particular approach to writing a research paper. The tool is not a mode of instruction and does not give direct instruction on how to write a research paper. It also does not intervene at the level of content or the mechanics of writing. Rather, it is a process that guides students through small manageable tasks that scaffold up to a research paper. The Essay Developer is a supplemental resource for faculty teaching in a range of disciplinary subjects who need additional support in supporting and guiding students through doing a research paper. The tool does not allow for picking different types of research methodologies, which is why it is geared towards undergraduate students. It is suitable for courses that require students to answer a research question or craft a thesis statement which can be answered by existing primary or secondary sources.

## **Use Case and Audience:**

In order to gain a sustainable audience, this tool will cater to Professors teaching undergraduate courses who require a research paper but do not have adequate time to give instruction or support on how to write one. Often, instructors are expected to cover a certain amount of content-area material, where tests, papers and presentations are usually the standard final artifact of learning. Many courses from Psychology to Criminal Justice will utilize one or more of these tools to assess student learning in the course. For those who require a research paper, this is a really useful supplementary resource that can be used in a variety of ways. The professor can provide the tool for students to use however they need or can require it as homework assignment where the artifact produced in each step can be graded. The tool can be open so that instructors may change, edit or remove tasks in the modules so as to customize the tool for their specific course needs.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Writing a research essay can be an extremely daunting task for undergraduate students. However it is often a major requirement. Some courses provide instructions on *how* to write a research paper, but many will expect the student to have some prior experience. Often, in a tortuous process of stretching an essay farther and father, the only real feedback a student gets is in the form of a grade. It usually gets easier over the years, though not always, especially as standards get higher into senior year. Schooling is just

not easy for everybody, and in these institutions, there are often so many things to navigate (student services, admissions, registrar, financial aid etc) that education gets a bit lost in the mix. Because other imperatives such as assessment and fund raising take precedence, little emphasis (backed by funding) is placed on innovative teaching strategies or critical pedagogies.

While places like CUNY do fulfill the public education promise to a degree, resources are often scarce when it comes to remediation. Often faculty is untrained in teaching strategies and at best are learning on the job, specifically when dealing with ESL students and students with disabilities. College education is propelled to the forefront by public discourse and policy as the black box answer to social inequality. Yet, higher education institutions are barely prepared to answer to the “non-traditional” student, often shifting responsibility back to students seeking a college degree to navigate these spaces for themselves. Therefore, criticism about student writing (which goes on a lot in “urban” institutions) has to be taken with a grain of salt considering the landscape of expectations and pressures from K-12 into college. Such inadequate preparation is in place, specifically for those who have attended the wrong end of segregated schools, that for many writing in such a specific genre can be a challenge.

The research paper draws on three distinct sets of skills: doing critical research (or informational literacy), reading for understanding, and structuring a paper in a very specific format with a specific type of voice (formal, organized, clean-cut etc). Even for

folks who like writing, the research essay poses a particular challenge because it isn't necessarily even about writing. These skills are not always addressed in the classroom. English composition courses do not always have a lasting effect when an inexperienced instructor is faced with a spectrum of skill level, and the timing of semesters cuts the project of learning short. As students proceed into coursework and have more material to draw from (as well as a better articulated need for certain types of support), writing instruction becomes more and more scarce. So while the research paper is a pervasive tool of assessment and final artifact of learning, it is equally an anxiety ridden experiences where students frequently face challenges with one or more components of the paper.

### **Pedagogical Background**

I developed these steps through my experience as an instructor teaching in colleges with large ESL students, low-income students, racially marginalized students, first-generation students, and students with cognitive disabilities (of which there was little guidance by which to instruct, assess or accommodate these student). Frequently, faculty complained about students being unprepared, and students complained about faculty being strict and uncaring. This brings into question issues of access that speak against discourse around serving diverse student populations. How does a college address these basic commitments of offering a good college education in face of the realities such as a

“lack of preparedness”, lack of resources for remediation, underprepared instructors (which can be attributed in part though not entirely to adjunctification) and curricular that is designed around a student that no longer exists, the “traditional” college student. Just entering college, many discover, does not necessarily or entirely provide for access. The conditions necessary to bring that access into fruition was laid a while before. In context of writing, this is particularly significant. In reality writing is a craft that has to be developed, nurtured and supported over a long period of time. In this process, growth is slow and sometimes unpleasant. As such, teaching writing is a very different project. Teaching writing in a way is also teaching critical thinking because it inspires not only technical advancements, but advancements in engaging in discourse, analysis and argumentation. The Essay Developer addresses one component of this larger project of teaching writing. It is a tool that simulates for the student an efficient and effective method of doing a research project that culminates with a formal paper. It is important to re-emphasize that this is not a replacement for writing instruction, or supporting students through research projects. It is a useful supplementary tool that instructors can provide their students in the course.

Teaching the research essay became an empowering thing for me because it put me in a position to confront some of the anxieties and insecurities these young people had. I could more acutely see how these institutions enact things upon them. When writing in a graduate program with my fellow scholars, I take for granted our place of

privilege. Understanding my students put me in a better place to develop my teaching strategies around moves that are responsive and relevant to them. I developed my pedagogy around a gentle rigor. I found that I moved through doing the research paper with the students, holding them to standards while also championing their efforts. Their homework assignments and some of their class time became about personal attention on their work. It was not always easily or evenly distributed. I frequently battled with more effective ways of facilitating and moving between students so that each may get equitable attention. It simply was not always possible. This tool addresses this issue as well for faculty who are able to dedicate some time to personal attention on student essays, but find that there are merely too many students and too little time to provide adequate structure and guidance.

I changed and tweaked the assignments and tasks all the time. I could afford to- I was teaching between 6 and 7 classes every semester, and I was using it as an opportunity to become really good. I studied books, I listened, I asked questions. I even took notice of teaching strategies in the gym and at meditation. I never thought of developing my steps into anything. ITP has pushed me to the opportunity to revisit work I began years ago, and challenge myself both pedagogically and technically.

## **Project Timeline**

*July-August:* Refine the content (modules and task guidelines) and solicit feedback from instructors who have taught the research paper in order to further build on existing content. (I will use a non-interactive version of this in my hybrid summer course Global Media)

*September-October:* Experiment with several tools and platforms (solicit the assistance of the Digital Fellows to pick a tool- I may have to strip down some of the tasks/steps to accommodate the tool I decide best serves the most useful aspect of the Essay Developer)

*November-December:* Develop the website, with a focus on building the interactive component of the tool.

### **Tools and Platform**

I am currently using Wordpress to visualize the project. However, there are many limitations to building interactivity to this site. I will need a platform and tools that enables input from students, the capacity to save work, to retrieve it and to export it as an editable document.

### **Anticipated Challenges:**

The most daunting aspect of this project is learning new tools and adapting the content to the capacity of the tool/platform. I plan on tapping into resources within and outside the GC to gain better technical expertise to execute this idea. Specifically, the most challenging component is the multiple tools I will need to enable students to write in responses, save the responses and retrieve them.