Open Roads, Open Topics: The Virtues of Open-Ended Final Assignments in Contemporary American Travel Literature Courses
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Abstract: In this article, I discuss a course I recently taught, "American Routes: Travel in the American Literary Imagination," before turning my attention toward my procedures for final assessment. In lieu of requiring a traditional seminar paper, I encouraged students to pursue any project that they felt would best demonstrate their familiarity with and understanding of the texts. After providing my justification behind this decision, I showcase several examples of exemplary student projects, and, finally, point toward areas for improvement.
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Introduction
In perhaps the second-most famous line from perhaps the most revered piece of American literature, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the eponymous hero explains that rather than experiencing adolescence in Aunt Sally's comfortable home he would rather become a vagabond exploring new frontiers. "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest," Huck tells us, "Because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there" (265). As I pondered these words one evening, I was struck by the similarity between Huck's feelings and the ideas I had seen expressed by students in my composition and literature classrooms, most of whom are freshmen or sophomores. In many ways, my students had come to see themselves as explorers. Whether they are first-generation college students probing new and challenging fields of inquiry, or simply attempting to navigate an unfamiliar part of campus, my students are accustomed to, whether they recognize it or not, couching their experiences within the context of exploration. Indeed, so prevalent is this motif that our required textbook for all freshmen-level composition and research courses here at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, The Freshman Guide to Writing, goes so far as to include an assignment entitled "Mission: Possible" which prompts students to form teams of "stealthy researchers" who "locate a secure computer [...] to access the library's databases [and] go to the Microforms Department," to "find and print the first page of any newspaper in microform format from the day you were born" and various other activities (9). From their earliest experiences in English classrooms, then, our students, and I imagine students at any number of universities and colleges experience something similar, come to view themselves within the context of exploration and discovery.
With the idea of exploration in mind, I recently devised a sophomore-level literature and film course entitled "American Routes: Travel in the American Literary Imagination." My course covered American literature and film that dealt with travel since the invention of the automobile. As a result, my course was colloquially dubbed "The Road Trips Course." At the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, sophomore-level literature courses are required for completion of almost every major. Therefore, the reading list I devised was, in my personal opinion, wide-reaching and engaging; it needed to appeal to students from fields as disparate as nursing, computer science, kinesiology, and political science (all of these majors, in fact, were represented in the class). To facilitate this, I chose several texts whose surprising and sometimes shocking subject matter would surely appeal to college students: Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*, Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home," Denis Johnson's "Emergency" and "Car Crash While Hitchhiking" and Luis Urrea's "Borderland Blues: Six Impressions" all made appearances in our class. These texts joined the more usual suspects of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, and John Krakauer's "Death of an Innocent" (the article that would later be expanded into the heart-wrenching book *Into the Wild*). A complete course reading-list is included at the conclusion of this essay.

**The Open-Ended Final Assignment**

My course had several forms of assessment to ensure that students were developing familiarity and understanding of the texts. In line with the Conference on College Composition and Communication's Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing that students "practice with a variety of genres" and understand "writing as a social act," students were asked to compose two reviews, each consisting of between 750-1000 words. One review focused on a text from class, the other on a film (either shown in class or chosen by the student). In preparation for writing these assignments, we reviewed the basic principles of review writing and studied several examples in class. In addition to these two reviews, students also had several in-class individual and group writing assignments that allowed them to hone their composition skills. In addition to these writing assignments, I administered short quizzes to test students' familiarity with the texts at the beginning of almost every class. These five-question multiple choice tests were quite easy and tested the most basic familiarity with our readings. Students tended to perform very well on these. The
final assessment in this course was an exam consisting of definition, short answer, and essay questions.

As I considered how to best assess my students' understandings of the material, I became increasingly disinterested with the idea of requiring a final seminar paper. No doubt that synthesizing ideas through writing would be an important aspect of the course, but I felt writing goals would be adequately achieved through other assignments. As the idea of freedom continued to resonate when I thought about my class, I ultimately decided that in the spirit of our readings, students should be given the opportunity to pursue whatever project they felt best represented their understanding of the course materials. My, admittedly grandiose project description from the syllabus follows:

As we will discuss several times throughout the semester, travel and road trips, in particular, are associated with freedom. Given this theme, I am providing you with unprecedented freedom for your final class assignment. For your final assignment, I would like you to pursue any project that you feel best encapsulates the spirit of the writings from our class, while also demonstrating your mastery of the subject. This can take any number of forms: write a travel blog in the manic, stream-of-consciousness style of Jack Kerouac; dress as characters from *Thelma and Louise* and reenact a few important scenes; create an annotated mixtape on Spotify or Tidal with songs that remind you of the text we've read; or, if you're musically inclined, write a song or two inspired by your journeys or those we've taken in class. If, however, you would prefer to write a traditional seminar paper, you are welcome to do so. We will discuss possibilities for the project as the semester progresses. Feel free to contact me at any point with your ideas. A formal proposal for your project will be due toward the end of the semester.

This capacious description allowed for virtually any project that the student deemed appropriate. Because I was sure that there would be at least a few students who would be intimidated by such an open assignment, I also allowed for traditional seminar papers. A separate assignment sheet for this seminar paper was available online. In the end, however, only one student of 33 opted to write an essay rather than pursue a self-designed project.
The general nature of the final assignment was noted on the syllabus, but roughly halfway through the semester I encouraged students to begin seriously considering what they wanted to pursue for their projects. At the beginning of the eighth week of class (just over the halfway point), students were asked to submit a proposal in which they addressed some key issues related to their projects. I asked them to fully detail

1. The project itself – What type of project did you want to pursue? What, if any, technology will be necessary for this project? Briefly demonstrate that this project is rigorous enough to replace a seminar paper.

2. Rationale – Why do you wish to pursue this project as opposed to others? How will incorporate knowledge acquired throughout our readings and discussions into this project? What pieces of literature or film inspired this project, and how will you speak to those influences in your project?

I encouraged students to think broadly and to be aware that their proposals did not necessarily cement their projects; that is, if they decided later to change an aspect or two of the project, that was acceptable. The overall framework, however, needed to remain in place.

One of my errors in administering this project involved the proposals. Although they were extremely useful for my understanding of students' projects and also for students to be able to stay on track, they were not sufficient for providing a thorough set of expectations for the project. While students knew that they would receive a good grade (defined as either an A or B) by closely following their proposals, they were never issued a rubric, a mistake I do not anticipate repeating. As I discuss in my conclusion, in the future I will also provide students with a rubric that will help them self-assess their projects as they work on them. I would now like to turn my attention to some of the standout projects that I received. Ideally, these projects will help instructors of American literature to consider how students can sufficiently demonstrate mastery of the subject beyond writing a traditional seminar paper.

Case Studies

The quality of assignments I received varied wildly. While there were only a couple projects that failed to meet the minimum threshold for a passing grade, there were a
number of projects at the other end of the spectrum – projects that evinced insight, curiosity, familiarity, and, above all, a passion for the text. In this section, I would like to focus on some of the exceptional projects that I received, so as to provide examples for the types of projects that you might choose to have your students work. All images of projects and use of student names are done with their permission; on the final day of our class, I asked roughly ten students if I might use their projects in an article I was considering writing. All enthusiastically agreed.

**Brigitte's Project**

One of the first texts we read in class was Jon Krakauer's 1993 essay "Death of an Innocent." This essay documents the story of Christopher McCandless, "the product of a happy family from an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C." (Krakauer 41), who becomes disillusioned with the American culture of consumption and leaves all of his worldly belongings behind, adopting the name Alexander Supertramp, and vagabonding across the United States for several years until he meets an untimely end in the Alaskan wilderness. McCandless' story has grown increasingly visible over the past several years, and Krakauer eventually expanded his article into the book *Into the Wild*, which was subsequently adapted into a film of the same name directed by Sean Penn.

As the majority of my students were of a similar age to McCandless when he began his journeys, many were enraptured by this story. While many college students who read about McCandless decide that they too will journey into the wild, a problem documented in Diana Saverin's "The Chris McCandless Obsession Problem," my students chose instead to respond creatively to Krakauer's writing. I found the work of one student, Brigitte, particularly enthralling.

While the scenes of outdoor majesty in "Death of an Innocent" intrigued Brigitte, more interesting to her was the family drama, particularly that between McCandless and his sister, Carine. Brigitte chose to create a scrapbook in which she recreated facsimiles of some of the correspondence that Carine and Chris mailed to each other, while also manufacturing speculative pieces of mail that could have been sent, including a very-well written and heart-wrenching imagined letter from Carine to McCandless written in the present, in which Brigitte assumed the role of Carine and wrote about her feelings of loss. In
addition, she also re-imagined sections of McCandless’ journal and included feathers, seeds, and other pieces of detritus that McCandless would have found interesting.

Figure 1 An image of Brigitte’s project. These pages contained images of McCandless and one of his postcards, in addition to a button and feather.

Figure 2 An image from Brigitte’s interpretation of McCandless’ journals.
Dnai’s and Alaina’s Projects

Richard Wright's short story of violence and fear in the Jim Crow South, "Big Boy Leaves Home," was another story that many students chose to focus on for their final project. In this story, Big Boy, a young African American male living in rural Mississippi, and some of his friends trespass on land owned by a violent and racist white man in order to swim in a pond. What follows is an explosion of violence and fear, until Big Boy, the sole survivor among his friends, is spirited away to Chicago in the holding area of a delivery truck.

Perhaps because this was one of the few texts that dealt with the South, a region with which my students are intimately familiar, I received a number of successful creative projects involving Wright's story. One of my students, Dnai, believed Wright's story was not quite as successful as it could have been, because it lacked closure; readers never discover what happens to Big Boy. Dnai took it upon herself to conduct research on the Great Migration and Chicago in the early 1940s, and with this research continued Wright's story, and plotted out Big Boy's eventual resettlement in Chicago. Dnai's story was beautifully written. She matched the general uneasy tone of Wright's story, while also peppering characters' dialogue with regional dialects – one of the elements of the story that many of my students found interesting. Through this project, Dnai was able to engage with Wright's narrative in an intimate way, and her research into the cultural histories of Mississippi and Chicago better familiarized her with the context in which Wright composed his story.

One of the most unexpected projects I received based on "Big Boy Leaves Home" came from a student, Alaina, who chose to turn Wright's story into a board game. Designed to mimic the rules and gameplay of Chutes and Ladders, Alaina's game cast players as Big Boy, or one of his three friends, as they attempt to navigate the threat of racism, bodily harm, and financial ruin. In order to determine how many movements a player makes, players roll a die. For such a gravely serious story, I was initially taken aback with Alaina's proposal. Had she proposed to create a board game from On the Road or Thelma and Louise that would be one thing, but "Big Boy Leaves Home" was so...serious. Therefore, her proposal was not immediately accepted. I asked her to stay briefly after class so that she could justify that her project would match the somber tone of the text. In one of the most artful displays of persuasion I've encountered from a student, she convinced me. Alaina
revealed that, while basing a board game on such a turbulent period in American history might seem flippant, what, ultimately, could be more appropriate? Indeed, for African Americans living in the Jim Crow South, what was life if not a game—a game of chance when their existences were constantly threatened and violence could erupt as quickly as the flip of a coin or roll of dice? Needless to say, Alaina’s line of reasoning won me over and I allowed her to continue with the project. By having a space to explore her ideas, Alaina was able to transcend the rote analysis of a seminar paper and instead create something truly unique and engaging.

Figure 3 An image of Alaina’s board game, which follows the narrative of Richard Wright’s "Big Boy Leaves Home"

Figure 4 The instruction sheet for Alaina’s board game.

Cameron’s Project

While the majority of our course readings were well-received, one, above all others, was met with apathy at best, and disdain at worst – Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Considering the thematic framework of the course, I was quite surprised to find that my students evinced such strong distaste for Kerouac’s novel. While the plot does become rather repetitive and the language has a bit of a learning curve, I figured that students would
thrill to Dean and Sal's romps across a country still attempting to find an identity. I was wrong.

For all of the aversion that the majority of my class experienced, a few students did connect with Kerouac's writing. One of these students was Cameron. Interestingly, though, when it came time to pursue a final project, Cameron was less interested in what happens in *On the Road* than in what *could have* happened. Roughly midway through the novel, Sal and Dean contemplate their cross-country treks and decide that they have effectively worn out what the United States has to offer. They propose instead taking their vagabond ethic to another country: "Let's go to New York," Sal suggests, "and after that let's go to Italy" (Kerouac 189). Unfortunately for the characters and readers, Dean and Sal's international journey never materializes. That doesn't mean, however, that we cannot consider what the pair might have experienced had they decided to make the trip, and that is precisely what Cameron decided to do.

Cameron acted as travel agent for Dean and Sal, and conducted a thorough research project in which she attempted to locate reasonable fare across the Atlantic Ocean, a route to travel in Italy, and the names of several hotels and restaurants that the two might haunt. Because Kerouac's novel takes place in the late-1940s, Cameron dug through archives and databases in order to find establishments that would have been open during the novel's timeframe. Her project consisted of two portions. The first was a brief essay detailing her research methods, rationale for choosing particular locations, and hypothesizing about what might have changed within the novel's narrative in Sal and Dean had, in fact, made the cross-Atlantic journey. The second portion of Cameron's project was a travel brochure. In this brochure, she presented much of the same information found in her essay, but presented it so that it would appeal to two young men bound on tramping across the globe. To make her brochure as realistic as possible, she visited local travel agencies to acquire samples on which she could base her brochure. Cameron's project allowed her to engage with Kerouac's writing on several levels. The foundation of the project is a creative reimagining of a chunk of the story, while the research involved in creating these elements allowed her to better understand the circumstances of Kerouac's timeframe and the inherent difficulties in world travel in the years immediately succeeding World War II.
Conclusion

Allowing students the space to envision and create final projects that reflected their interests and understanding of our readings was ultimately quite successful. I was impressed by the wide-reaching ideas and forms of presentation, as well as by my students' technological savvy. I don't believe that I was the only one who felt this way either, as I overheard several enthusiastic conversations before class of students exchanging comments and questions about their projects.

The aspect I would without hesitation alter when assigning this project in the future would be to create a rubric with which students can follow and self-assess their work. While I believe that having students design and craft a proposal before they begin their projects was immeasurably useful for their designing of projects, it simply could not take the place of a well-designed rubric when it came to grading. In the end, I awarded the majority of my students A's on this project, and, although many deserved that grade, several were able to achieve this high mark because I was not clear enough on my expectations and they performed precisely the actions they wrote on their proposal.
Course Reading and Viewing List:
Sherman Alexie – Reservation Blues
Joan Didion – "Notes Toward a Dreampolitik"
Dennis Hopper (dir.) – Easy Rider
Denis Johnson – "Car Crash While Hitchhiking" and "Emergency"
Jack Kerouac – On the Road
John Krakauer – "Death of an Innocent"
Jessica Lehrman – "A Family Hits the Road"
Mary Miller – The Last Days of California
Ridley Scott (dir.) – Thelma and Louise
Hunter S. Thompson – Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga
Luis Alberto Urrea – "Borderland Blues: Six Impressions"
Richard Wright – "Big Boy Leaves Home"
Works Cited


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