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If *They* Build It, They Will Learn: Creating Purpose and a Renaissance in Research

Editor's note: In the March 2006 issue of *English Journal*, Ruth R. Caillouet wrote about her medieval and Renaissance research project, which culminated in a schoolwide Renaissance Festival. In this extension, she describes in detail how the festival was organized and how the students' research led to a successful event.

Any good English teacher knows about process writing and is quite familiar with the steps that have become second nature in teaching composition, but I am convinced that teachers often forget those steps when guiding students through the research paper. In particular, the step that is often overlooked is *publication*.

As a high school department chair for twelve years and public school veteran teacher of twenty years, I had the opportunity to observe my colleagues and work together on a variety of projects, including our answer to pointless research papers. Now, as a university professor and trainer of future English teachers, I try to emphasize the importance of that final stage of writing and even suggest an addition to the process—*purpose*. Yes, purpose should be understood and essential to anything we attempt in teaching, and although teachers have content standards and curriculum guides to remind us of our purpose, students often cannot see any purpose beyond a passing grade. In most other types of writing, teachers have learned to use the publication stage to help students find a sense of purpose in composing essays, oral histories, short stories, poetry, and other types of writing through classroom magazines, literary journals, and newspapers. But perhaps because of their length or uninspiring content, research papers rarely find their way to a publication.

So, with many years of trial and error, my colleagues, students, and I found an answer to the problem of purpose and ownership in research by creating a schoolwide Renaissance Festival. Through this Web resource, I hope to give a road map—a description of how and why we created our festival, from paper to

presentation to purpose, and some helpful hints for teachers, including future educators, who may want to produce a similar project.

History of Our Festival—Why Build It?

Our Renaissance Festival grew from many seeds, and I cannot even pretend that I had a true vision of the garden we were planting—how large or small it would be, whether it would flower, whether it would grow at all, or if it were just shrubbery. The first seed was planted when my son was very small and he and I began traveling to the Texas Renaissance Festival each November. It fed my love of knights, swords, jousting, and Shakespeare and his love of fantasy and play. As the years passed, I began taking small groups of students—usually a twelfth-grade advanced placement class—to the festival as the culmination of our Renaissance unit. Students loved the feeling of entering a different world and time, and I found that the characters, food, and fun of the festival brought our studies to life.

The next seeds were sewn in an attempt to bring life from death. One of my colleagues, a gifted English teacher, died very suddenly at age thirty-three. The school was in mourning. The department struggled with the loss of a great friend, and in our need to give tribute to Gay Wilkerson's service, we began making plans to establish a scholarship in her name. Funding the memorial became a dilemma once we determined that selling candy and doughnuts in Gay's name was not a fitting tribute. Within a few months of Gay's death, my beloved Renaissance professor from Louisiana State University and a world-renowned scholar, Dr. Josephine Roberts, died in a car accident. Once again,

I struggled with the loss. The world somehow seemed less than it was before.

The final seed grew from my struggles with the yearly research paper. In facing the increasing demands of content standards, technology initiatives, and standardized testing, I began to realize the futility of a research project that went nowhere, and I noticed that Homecoming festivities seemed much more important to my students than anything in the classroom. All of these seeds came together to create the garden of our renaissance. The English faculty along with some enthusiastic seniors decided to create our own Renaissance Festival as a fundraiser for the Wilkerson Scholarship, and I took comfort in celebrating the lives of two wonderful educators through a research-based project that grew even bigger—and certainly more educational—than Homecoming.

Planning for Success

Each year I asked for volunteers from the senior class to serve on the planning committee. We met once each week before school or at lunch to discuss the plans for the year's festival. At that point all seniors had studied Renaissance literature, many had attended the Texas Renaissance Festival, and all had begun work on the research paper (see [fig. 1](#)). The first few meetings were always brainstorming sessions: dreams of how wonderful that year's festival could be. With seniors as the primary organizers and workers, a new group had to be trained every year. The student planning committee made all decisions on the types of games, prizes, and contests as well as the schedule of events. They helped decide the layout of the festival and planned the auditorium performances.

FIGURE 1. Research Project Topics for Study: Medieval/Renaissance Europe (1400–1660)

Education

Castiglione; Renaissance and Medieval education; Oxford University

Heads of State

Elizabeth I; Oliver Cromwell; Henry VIII; James I; Mary, Queen of Scots

Artists

Leonardo da Vinci; Michelangelo

Thinkers and Scientists

Erasmus; Copernicus; Galileo; Castiglione

Writers

Shakespeare; Jonson; Marlowe; Spenser; Raleigh; Milton

Women of the Renaissance

Elizabeth I; Joan of Arc; Isabella; Mary; Mary, Queen of Scots; Catherine de Medici; wives of Henry VIII; women's lifestyles

How People Lived

cities; castle construction; crimes and punishments; customs; homes of the poor; London; marriage ceremonies

Health and Medicine

folk medicine; bubonic plague; bleeding; Andreas Vesalius; Benvenuto Cellini; superstitions

What People Wore

women's clothing; men's clothing; class differences in fashion; production of silk and wool

What People Ate

food preparation; feast foods; serving techniques; table manners; recipes; eating habits; cookbooks

Games and Entertainment

bear baiting; cards and board games; cock fighting; festivals; jousting; falconry; fishing

Instruments and Music

dances; lute; recorder; madrigals; ballads

Books, Printing, and Libraries

Johannes Gutenberg, Ferdinand Columbus; Aldus Manutius; book construction

Exploration

Columbus; Sebastian and John Cabot; Marco Polo; Francis Drake

Theaters and Plays

Globe Theater; Rose Theater; Lord Chamberlain's Men; Richard Burbage; actors and acting; Black actors

Church and Religion

Bloody Mary; Henry VIII; Church of England; Puritan Revolution

Weapons and Warfare

armor; fencing; black powder; archery; jousting; catapults; siege weapons

Since one of my goals was to create a community-building activity that was as big as Homecoming, I knew that involving faculty members outside of the English department would be key, so a teacher planning committee was formed. The faculty committee helped make the festival a schoolwide function by coordinating activities outside of the English department as well as recruiting community volunteers. These other teachers also helped students see the prominence of multiple disciplines during the Renaissance and opened their minds to new dimensions. One reason why the Renaissance worked so well for us as a theme is that it allowed for so many directions of study. The art classes, for instance, studied Renaissance artists, including those from the Italian Renaissance. The art teacher also helped coordinate the T-shirt design competition. Students competed to see who could create the best original drawing that could be used on T-shirts sold to be worn during Renaissance week. The T-shirt sales were, in fact, always one of the best sources of income for the entire festival.

The food science teacher coordinated a birthday cake decorating competition since the festival celebrated Shakespeare's birthday. Students enjoyed the chance to show off their creative energies in the culinary arts. After the cakes were judged, the cakes were sold by the slice on the festival grounds. The NJROTC program sponsored a tug-of-war competition where students and faculty members competed in teams for coveted trophies. The chorus instructor taught students authentic ballads and madrigals to be sung for entertainment on festival day, and the drama teacher coordinated skits written and performed by students. Both authentic Shakespearean scenes as well as parodies of his plays were presented during the auditorium performances. The English department sponsored monologue and sonnet competitions as well as Shakespearean rap contests. Students in our special needs program made garlands and hats to be sold on festival day. The physics teacher developed a catapult competition in which students created model catapults with authentic materials and competed to see which device catapulted objects farthest. Even the softball team got into the action by sponsoring the tomato toss where students got the chance to throw "rotten" tomatoes at their favorite teachers.

Other clubs helped with decorating the school for Renaissance week. Teachers decorated their doors and hallways to compete for the most creative twist on the theme. We also enlisted the help of community vol-

unteers to serve as judges for the various competitions and to help with everything from making costumes to braiding hair and grilling sausages. We also invited the Society for Creative Anachronism and a university fencing club to provide demonstrations on festival day.

Even with the work of these enthusiastic educators, I still believe that the success of our festivals was due to the commitment and energy of each senior class. Over the years I developed a point system for the festival grade with many choices available to students. Each student was required to choose a committee, and each student had to contribute to some kind of performance, but the rest of the points were student choice. They could spend their energies by helping to run the games or by entering the costume contest or even by baking a cake. Some chose to make cloth banners or wooden shields while others designed costumes. With so many choices, students could truly tap into their own interests (see [fig. 2](#)).

Creating Purpose on Festival Day

When festival week came, the school bustled with the excitement of decorating hallways with banners and shields, gathering teams for the many competitions, and practicing skits and monologues. Each of my students designed a coat of arms using large sheets of colorful construction paper, choosing symbols to represent different aspects of their lives. These were added to the hall decorations. Concessions were ordered and T-shirts distributed while final preparations were made for the various games and booths. The cake decorating contest was held on the day before the festival so that there would be time for the judging and cutting the cakes for sale. English teachers were in charge of viewing skits, monologues, and raps to make certain they were suitable for the school audience. A schedule of events was also distributed to the faculty (see [fig. 3](#)).

Each student who wished to attend the festival paid one dollar. On festival morning, those students entering the costume competition were released from class after roll call for the judging. Other students remained in class, usually with some entertaining films broadcast over the school's video system. After the costumes were judged, the other students were taken to the auditorium to view the skit, monologue, and rap competition. Seniors provided a few PowerPoint slides with Renaissance facts.

When the auditorium program was completed, students moved to the football field for the actual

FIGURE 2. Renaissance Festival Projects

100-point grade and 30 possible bonus points

Requirements:

Each student is required to participate in the Renaissance Festival through a 100-point graded project. Students must choose one project from Category I, one project from Category II, and one project from Category III. In addition, you may earn up to 30 bonus points by participating in other areas. You are not limited to this list; discuss other ideas with me for approval. Anything that you are doing for another class or club **may not** count for your grade or bonus points.

Category I (30 points)

Theater Performances

- > Perform a scene from a Shakespearean play.
- > Memorize and recite a Shakespearean soliloquy.
- > Memorize and recite a Shakespearean sonnet.
- > Write and perform an original skit based on a Shakespearean play.
- > Write and perform an original Shakespearean rap.
- > Write and perform a puppet show based on a literary classic.

Category II (50 points)

Choose one of the following committees. Perform all necessary duties as assigned by the committee chair.

Set Up/Take Down Committee

- > Set up tents, displays, signs, and banners; move materials from school to stadium; set up souvenir and ticket booth.
- > Place garbage cans in appropriate locations.
- > Design festival map for setting up games and activities.
- > Pick up trash; clean grounds.
- > Mandatory attendance the day before the festival, 2:30.
- > Clean up and store all materials; move materials back to school.
- > Mandatory attendance on the day of the festival, 2:30.

Games Committee

Organize and set up the following games.

- > Giant Slingshot—create target, get hose, fill balloons.
- > Dunking Booth—pick up booth; get volunteer dunkees.
- > Jousting—design safe, challenging event.

- > Horseshoes—design game to create enthusiasm.
- > Ring Toss—design game around theme.
- > Lawn Bowling—possibly create teams; make a challenging event.
- > Spanish Armada—design game.
- > Crossbows—digital pictures for targets; design backdrop.
- > Longbows—get hay for target backstop; blow up balloons for targets.
- > Arm Wrestling—get table and chairs; get volunteers to arm wrestle.
- > Create and design other authentic games—golf, croquet, bocci ball, chess?
- > Organize sack races, three-legged races.

Performers Committee

- > Knights—organize sword fighting and battle reenactments. You must design armor or costumes. Use authentic terms and moves.
- > Queen's guards—dress as the Knights Templar or soldiers; guide traffic flow.
- > Musicians—traveling musicians playing throughout festival.
- > Town crier—announce events throughout the festival.
- > Maypole dancers—set up and perform several times during the festival.
- > Other dancers—coordinated with dance teacher.
- > Jesters—perform juggling routines, acrobatics, stilt walking, and antics throughout the day.
- > Executioners—set up mock executions.
- > Schedule performances and locations with set-up committee.

Food Committee

- > Funnel cakes—mix ingredients; set up and run funnel cake booth.
- > Authentic foods—investigate recipes; bake and sell.
- > Set up two concession stands and a drink stand.
- > Help make concession stand list.
- > Make certain concession stands are clean.
- > Help pick up, deliver, and unload concessions (Wednesday through Friday).
- > Help with Cake Decorating Contest (fliers, judging, cutting cake).
- > Help with table set up and food court area.
- > Provide food for volunteers.
- > Organize a feast (tables, decorations, food, plates); sell tickets.

FIGURE 2. Continued

Publicity Committee

- > Make posters and fliers advertising events.
- > Video advertising—create video to promote festival.
- > Videotape this year's festival.
- > Write articles for the newspaper.
- > Pamphlets (create, copy, and distribute).
- > Have announcements made for upcoming events.

Auditorium Committee

- > Help plan program of events.
- > Create program.
- > Write script.
- > Organize workers (lights, PA, video, MC).
- > Coordinate with other teachers.
- > Create PowerPoint show.
- > Organize costume contest.

Decorating Committee

- > Decorate auditorium.
- > Decorate cafeteria.
- > Decorate halls and doors.
- > Get other clubs and organizations to participate.
- > Decorate stadium.
- > Decorate bulletin boards.
- > Help create signs for games.

Awards Committee and Crafts/Souvenirs Committee

- > Create certificates for different contests.
- > Order trophies and medals.
- > Create and distribute sign-up sheets for different contests.
- > Design jewelry and other sale items.
- > Make garlands.
- > Determine prices.
- > Create display board.
- > Set up and run souvenir booth.

Category III (20 points)

- > Cake decorating (10 pts.).
- > Costume contest (10 pts.).
- > Knight School—compete in team competition (10 pts.).
- > Theater contests—must perform before student body in auditorium (20 pts.).
- > Make garlands to sell in souvenir booth (10 pts.).
- > Banners—design and make two cloth banners (20 pts.).
- > Shields—design and make two shields using authentic design and materials (20 pts.).
- > Work a thirty-minute shift at the festival (10 pts.).

festival. There, participants could try their skills at archery, jousting, and arm wrestling, or they could enjoy funnel cakes and sausage on a stick. Demonstrations, Renaissance dances, and a Maypole entertained the crowd while students had their favorite teachers thrown into the dungeon or dunked in a pool. Students could have their hair braided or faces painted or they could watch battle demonstrations and fencing. Teams competed in the Knight School competition throughout the day (see [fig. 4](#)). The chorus sang madrigals while the tug-of-war teams pulled and catapults fired. After two hours of entertainment, students were gathered and taken back to the school building for lunch and afternoon classes. The senior class remained on the field to run the event for a visit from middle school students in the afternoon. At the end of the day, prearranged crews quickly cleaned up and dismantled the booths.

Building a Community

While the success of each year's festival depended on the energy and dedication of the senior class, the

FIGURE 3. Renaissance Festival Schedule

7:25	All students report to homeroom
7:30	Costume contest participants report to auditorium Film festival begins in classrooms
8:30	Auditorium program
10:00	Senior workers move to stadium (bag lunches) Grades nine and ten to cafeteria Grades eleven and twelve to auditorium for quiz bowl
10:30	Grades eleven and twelve to cafeteria Grades nine and ten to auditorium for quiz bowl
11:00	All high school students to stadium
12:30	Closing ceremony in stadium seats
1:00	All high school students move back to school
1:15	Middle school arrives at stadium High school chess tournament; film festival continues
2:25	Middle school leaves

tremendous help and support of the faculty, administration, and community were also crucial. This was truly a schoolwide project that built community spirit while serving two purposes—education and civic duty.

FIGURE 4. Knight School Guidelines

Hear Ye! Hear Ye! In honor of Master Shakespeare's birthday, the queen has ordered that a special tournament be held to add to the festivities of this year's Renaissance Festival. The rules of the competition are listed below. Knight School is a team competition that will be held in tournament format on the day of the Renaissance Festival. Teams must consist of six males or six females. Teams must sign up during lunch at the doors to the cafeteria. The cost for the event is \$2 per team member. Following are the guidelines for the competition. Teams must sign up by Monday of festival week.

Eligibility

- > Competitors must be students.
- > Each team member will participate in one individual competition as well as the tug-of-war and foil competitions.
- > Men and women will compete on separate teams.

Competitions

Tug-of-War

All six members will compete in the tug-of-war. Tournament brackets will be used to organize the event. No gloves or cleats may be worn.

Foil Competition

All team members will participate in this event, which requires creativity.

Longbows

One member of the team will compete for the longbow event. Archers will shoot three arrows at a multicolored target at approximately twenty yards. The archer with the highest three-arrow total will be the winner.

Jousting

One member of the team will compete in the jousting event. Knights will ride a bike and use a lance to capture the ring before a competitor captures it. Speed and accuracy are crucial for winning.

Slingshot

Three members of the team (two for holding the slingshot and one for pulling) will use a giant slingshot to toss a water balloon down the length of the football field.

Pie Eating

One member of the team will compete by eating a pie in the fastest time.

Theater

One member of the team must compete in the theater competition by entering the skit, soliloquy, or rap events.

Sack Race

One member of the team will compete by racing approximately thirty yards in a large sack.

Points

- > Each team will receive three thousand points for first place, two thousand for second place, and one thousand for third place in each event.
- > For tug-of-war, first place will receive five thousand points, second place will receive three thousand, and third place will receive one thousand points.
- > Fabulous prizes will be awarded at the end of the day.

Students and faculty saw the festival as a worthy cause and great fun. By the time I retired from the system, we had deposited \$10,000 in the scholarship fund and had already given approximately \$4,000 to graduating seniors. Although there are probably easier ways to generate funds with students, I believe that few other fundraisers could generate the same sense of community while also addressing educational standards. For

my seniors, it became the capstone event—the culmination of their studies and a chance to outdo the last senior class. We all need purpose in life. Our Renaissance Festival not only gave my students focus in their research, an audience for their efforts, and a goal for senior year, but it also gave them the gift of community and the pleasure that can only come from a job well done for a worthy cause.

After twenty years of teaching grades 7–12 in Louisiana public schools and three years in universities in Ohio and Tennessee, **Ruth R. Caillouet** has returned home as assistant professor of English at Southeastern Louisiana University, where she trains future English teachers. email: ruth.caillouet@selu.edu.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Scholars of the Renaissance will have no difficulty in finding resources. Countless books and Web sites as well as films and movies added to our studies. I used clips from movies such as *Elizabeth*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *Excalibur*, and *A Knight's Tale* to enrich our discussions. *Renaissance Magazine* is also a useful source on many topics.

Among the books and Web sites that we used, some of the more useful are listed below. The department also applied for grants to help with equipment and materials, so any educator planning to undertake such a massive project should investigate local funding agencies.

Books

Black, Maggie. *The Medieval Cookbook*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992.

Brooke, Iris. *English Costume from the Early Middle Ages through the Sixteenth Century*. Mineola: Dover, 2000.

Cosman, Madeleine Pelter. *Fabulous Feasts: Medieval Cookery and Ceremony*. New York: Braziller, 1976.

Gies, Frances. *Life in a Medieval Village*. New York: Harper, 1990.

Gies, Frances, and Joseph Gies. *Women in the Middle Ages*. New York: Crowell, 1978.

Gies, Joseph, and Frances Gies. *Life in a Medieval Castle*. 1974. New York: Harper, 1979.

Hieatt, Constance B. *Pleyn Delit: Medieval Cookery for Modern Cooks*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1976.

Houston, Mary G. *Medieval Costume in England and France: The 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries*. 1939. New York: Dover, 1996.

Newman, Paul B. *Daily Life in the Middle Ages*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2001.

Redon, Odile, Françoise Sabban, and Silvano Serventi. *The Medieval Kitchen: Recipes from France and Italy*. Trans. Edward Schneider. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.

Weir, Alison. *The Life of Elizabeth I*. New York: Ballantine, 1998.

———. *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992.

Web Sites

Folger Shakespeare Library
<http://www.folger.edu>

Literary Periods: Renaissance
<http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/litlinks/periods/renaissance.htm>

Luminarium
<http://www.luminarium.org/lumina.htm>

Medieval and Renaissance Food Homepage
<http://pbm.com/~lindahl/food.html>

Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet
<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/>

Renaissance: The Elizabethan World
<http://renaissance.dm.net/>

Renaissance: What Inspired This Age of Balance and Order?
<http://www.learner.org/exhibits/renaissance/>

TudorHistory.org
<http://tudorhistory.org/>