Chimes
December 2006
The ARC Library’s faculty newsletter
www.arc.losrios.edu/~library

The ARC Library: it’s not just for students any more!
Reading Recommendations from ARC Faculty

Have a concern, question, or suggestion about the library?
Please let us know!

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**Michael Maddox**
Chemistry

*Our Inner Ape* by Frans de Waal.

*Our Inner Ape* examines the origins of human behavior through the study of our closest relatives, the chimpanzee and the less familiar bonobo (once known as the “pygmy chimpanzee”). Much has been made of the fairly recent discoveries of ‘bad boy’ behavior amongst the chimps – they can be mean, aggressive, and murderous, to each other and to any other animal in the vicinity (including humans, who have, on occasion, been killed by chimpanzees). Such behavior seems to mirror the worst traits of humanity and has led to the idea that humans are basically chimps moderated by a higher moral and ethical code, which some even view as evidence for the human soul. When the moral and ethical code breaks down, we revert to “animal barbarism”. In this book, Frans de Waal challenges that notion by introducing us to our equally close relative, the bonobo.

Bonobos look like slender, smaller chimps, but that is where the similarity ends. Unlike the aggressive chimp, the bonobo is all about peace and love, man. Yes, the bonobo is the hippie of the animal kingdom, indulging in free love (and lots of it) with males and females alike. They are less aggressive and far more communal than chimps – in fact they almost seem to be the Dr. Jekyll to the chimp’s Mr. Hyde. Perhaps the “human traits” of cooperation, community spirit, and love for one’s fellow man are not uniquely human after all.

You’ll laugh, you’ll cry (at least men will, when they hear how one pair of chimps got revenge on a competitor), and you’ll never look at the human animal the same way again.

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Alternative Research Assignments

You want your students to be successful lifelong learners who can locate, evaluate, use, and communicate information, but perhaps you don’t have time to grade papers, or your heart sinks at the thought of dealing with plagiarism or reading uninspired papers. Your librarian can suggest alternative research assignments that can help meet student learning outcomes (SLO’s) for your course and help your students succeed without the time-consuming headaches associated with the traditional college paper.

Here, Will Davis, MESA Director, shares a creative research assignment from his BIO 300 class:

So, you learned something. Now what? For students in my Foundations of Biology class, hopefully the “now what” is they are going to change the world. Realistically, they can at least voice their opinion to someone who may make a change.

Throughout much of the semester, students individually investigate a biological topic of interest to them, and then apply their knowledge by writing a convincing and knowledgeable letter to a decision maker. Who receives the letter depends upon the issue, but common choices are local or regional elected officials, government agency representatives, an advocacy organization such as the American Cancer Society or Sierra Club, or a private organization such as Procter and Gamble or Exxon Oil Co.

The assignment has three parts. First they gather the information and compile it into a draft report that addresses the biological topic only and does not include personal opinion or recommendations for action. As a class we attend a library orientation in which the reference librarian focuses specifically on this project, so they have knowledge of the library and its resources. They receive feedback from fellow students and from me on their report draft, then they revise the draft to produce a final report. Finally, based on the expertise developed while producing the report, they craft a persuasive letter. The letter provides a reasoned and accurate explanation of the biology involved and includes their personal position and specific recommendation(s) for action. A response to their letter is requested.

When students turn in a copy for me to grade, they also turn in a signed original in an addressed envelope. I tell them that it will be mailed, but when I return the graded letter, I leave the stack of envelopes on my desk and announce that if they do not want it mailed, just take back their letter. Seldom do students not want their letter mailed.

Many students have reported to me about a received response. Most are simple acknowledgement letters, but there have been a good number of students who have contacted me, amazed that they received substantive responses. One student was invited to attend a conference, another promised a copy of a soon to be issued report, and several have been told their comments would be considered in the development of future reports.

The November/December issue of the Journal of College Science Teaching landed in my mail this morning, and it includes an article titled “Civic Engagement in the Science Classroom”. Letter writing, voting, and volunteering with civic organizations are identified as ways students can engage. Margaret Mead is quoted as saying “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” Too many student assignments eventually end up in the student’s trash can. Why not have them end up as a letter in someone else’s trash can? Or, just maybe, they end up changing the world.

Will Davis
MESA Director

To get more info on alternative research assignments, talk with your librarian!
www.arc.losrios.edu/~library