
Student Writers Sometimes Perish Before They Publish

Bonnie Auslander

"Nice!" says Lee as he scans the cover and then flips to the contents page. He's looking at the third issue of the just-published class magazine. "I'm glad that James put in that piece about the rooster."

I tell him the assignment for the week, which is to read through the magazine, decide which three essays have the best beginnings, and explain the criteria used to make that decision.

"Catchy beginnings are tough to come up with," Lee says thoughtfully. He sits down at his desk and starts reading.

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To emulate real-world writers, many professors have their students do pre-writing, free-writing, post-writing, informal writing, journals, and multiple-drafts essays.

But the real-world writers aren't content with ending the process with the last revision. Real-world writers rip the pages out of the typewriter or tear the computer perforation and try to get the beast published.

Like Lee, students are usually engrossed in the class magazine before I've finished handing out the copies. It's because of this enthusiasm, in part, that Charles Moran, director of the freshman composition program I taught in for four years at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst, encourages his instructors to collect final drafts of student writing four or five times a semester. These are then photocopied back to back, given a fancy cover—sometimes designed by a student—and stapled down the side. Back in the dorms, students informally swap magazines with roommates enrolled in different classes.

In the next class we discuss the magazine. The students praise each other freely, but they're also candid about what was boring. Over the course of the semester I see a sharp decline in dull essays. And students with messy, error-plagued final drafts often improve their proofreading without my urging after one embarrassing error appears in the class magazine.

I have found that students become more interested in communicating their ideas when they realize that someone other than just the professor is reading their papers. They produce higher quality work because they wish to impress their classmates; suddenly they are writing for a community, not just for a professor.

We have numerous examples of student publications already in operation here at Plymouth. In the Natural Science department, Larry Spencer publishes *The Inveterate Invertebrate Reporter*. Peg Eaton's information systems students produce manuals that advise novices as well as pros. Sally Boland's technical writing students write, design, and print pamphlets and brochures for organizations on-campus and off. Jerry Zinfon publishes poems and stories from his summer and winter creative writing workshops in *The Literary Review* and from his I-course, "Philosophy and Poetry," co-taught with Herb Otto. Once a year, the English Department publishes the best essays from freshman composition in *PROBES* magazine.

How could we further build on this tradition of publishing student work? Here are some possibilities to consider:

Contests. The Writing Across the Curriculum Task Force sponsors an annual “Writing Within Your Major” contest. Each department chooses the two best papers submitted, which in turn are read by a committee that includes representatives from all the disciplines. The top essayists are published and receive a \$25 honorarium.

Tutorials. A more ambitious program imitates Boise State University’s series of journals called *Soundings*. There, each department puts out its own version of the magazine—for example, *Soundings in Business*, *Soundings in Psychology*, etc. Each semester, faculty select papers from two or three student writers whose work is considered especially promising. During the spring semester, these students enroll in an independent study with the *Soundings* editorial board and spend the semester intensively revising their papers, drawing on the expertise of faculty mentors. The semester culminates with publication. The journals are then distributed to the students in the following semester’s seminar class to serve as inspirational models. Student writers often go on to submit their papers to professional journals.

Library Reserve. Henry Abelove, a history professor of mine at Wesleyan University, uses a less showy method of publication. About a month before the end of the spring semester of European Intellectual History, students hand in two copies of their final project. Abelove keeps one copy and puts the other on reserve in the library. One of the assignments is to read each other’s papers, all 25 of them; one of the five final exam questions refers to one of the papers. I enjoyed seeing what my classmates had researched and was impressed that my professor considered our work important enough to be included on the final.

Collaborative Conferences. Instead of completing a formal research paper, students in the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth Program develop a collaborative presentation. At the end of the semester the “thinktank,” as it is called, is delivered in front of the assembled writing students, whose classes have been canceled for the day. The summer I taught for the program, my students created a talkshow set one year in the future to look

at the impact of the Supreme Court ruling on abortion.

I suspect the thinktank works because it imitates the hoopla, tension, and drama of professional conferences. My thinktank students learned as much about conducting research as my freshman composition students who have been taught a more traditional unit on "Writing the Research Paper." But the thinktank students were a lot less bored.

Videos. Richard Chisholm's Communications students produce entertaining and creative collaborative videos on word derivations with the help of Media Service's Bruce Ritchie. These videos could be shown to other English classes to prompt discussion and lead to further videos; eventually the department could create in a department student-produced video library.

Some might argue that such videos do not constitute publication. While certainly there are important differences between writing and film, producing these videos requires writing a clever script and conducting serious research—two aspects of good writing that I try hard to teach.

Teleconferencing. The writer Steward Brand believes that electronic mail and teleconferencing virtually creates writers. He says in *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT*:

I've seen dozens of professional writing careers begin with total inadvertance by people chatting away online, being encouraged by their friends, then being quoted in print somewhere, then getting paid for it, then they're hooked. Because their writing began as conversation, it's good writing. The magic ingredient is instant reinforcement by peers. (258)

If you set up a teleconference for your course, not only can students pass in homework and you hand out assignments without exchanging sheets of paper, you can publish a fine student paper over the network for all

your students to read. Or you can publish a student paper—with the student's permission, of course—showing your comments and suggestions at the bottom (one from a past semester is a good idea).

Furthermore, students can contribute to an on-going, on-line discussion that is limited only by accessible computer clusters. Such discussions will enhance the students' preparedness when they write research papers. You may get messages from the quieter students in the class who find the computer screen is a safer place than the classroom to express their thoughts. Anonymous contributions to on-line discussions can even be set up, as campus minister Phil Hart does with his students when teaching his Sexual Ethics class.

Each of these methods has its advantages. But regardless of the medium you choose, let me offer these publishing ideals.

Publish student work quickly. As Brand points out, quick turn-around generates excitement for the writers and provides instant positive reinforcement. Surveys reveal that journalists at daily papers have higher job satisfaction levels than magazine freelancers, who often have to wait months before seeing their work appear.

Publish student work attractively. Invest in a quality desktop publishing program and find someone who knows how to use it. Here at PSC, the Faculty Resource Center owns the software and laser printers needed for quick and attractive quality publications. (Both *PROBES* and *Good ReWriting*—the Newsletter of the Reading/Writing Center are produced using PageMaker.)

Pay to publish student work. This may be the hardest pill for some to swallow, but I believe an honorarium of \$25 or more shows students their work is valued. An alternative form of remuneration is to convince local businesses to donate prizes in exchange for a modest advertisement at the end of the magazine. Also, levying lab fees can defray copying costs.

Publish the work of all students. From time to time, students can learn from unsuccessful examples as well as successful ones, as did my freshman composition students when confronted with boring beginnings. And student assessment of what constitutes good writing may vary (in healthy ways) from yours.

Whether you turn to the networked computer or the ditto machine, students will thank you for publishing their work. Mary-Lou Hinman describes one jaded freshman composition student who was told that one of her essays might be published in *PROBES*. The transformation was dramatic; she became a serious student strongly interested in writing.

"Publishing student work," as Mary-Lou puts it, "is the ultimate compliment."

Bonnie Auslander worked full time in the Reading/Writing Center before she took a tenure-track position at Converse College teaching writing and directing the Writing Center. She was a member of the Writing Task Force and an editor of this journal.