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A Professor and Her Student Respond to Academic Journals

Mary-Lou Hinman and Beth A. Loring

The professor begins.

Several years ago students in my Introduction to Literature class were debating spiritedly about a Robert Frost sonnet when one student turned to me, seeking arbitration. “What is the tone?” she asked. I shrugged, wanting the class to work through their own understanding of the poem. “Well,” the student demanded in exasperation, “look it up in the Teacher’s Manual.”

I remember the incident with both amusement and sadness because it clearly shows how often the American education system emphasizes “the right answer” over the process that teaches students to find their own answers. In the interest of helping students find that process, I began using academic journals in my literature courses five years ago.

The journals were a substitute for the essay quizzes I had given for years in an attempt to force students to read the assigned material. But quizzes (at least ones I gave) had built-in problems. Students didn’t like to take risks with material that would be graded. Instead of reading the literature, they tried to read my mind, to write on the quiz what they thought I wanted to read.

As I thought about incorporating journals into my classes, I could see that they, too, might have built-in problems. What would keep students from writing fifteen entries all at once instead of writing individual entries after each reading assignment? What would the quality of the writing and thinking be if I didn't grade each entry? Would the students consider the journals busy work rather than a legitimate academic endeavor? I knew I didn't want to read "diary entries"; could I convince students to go beyond gut-feeling to serious and reflective critical thought? I assigned the first journals with some real doubts.

Five years later I view journal writing as one of the most important and challenging aspects of my courses. I know journals are not universally loved by students; some of them are quite blunt about their feelings on course evaluations. But over eighty percent of my students endorse the concept of journal writing—some begrudgingly, most enthusiastically. All students view journals as more work, but most see the work as productive, pertinent, and helpful. I wondered, however, what a student who had written academic journals for a variety of professors in a variety of modes might say about the benefits and pitfalls of this kind of writing. I approached one of my ex-students, Beth Loring, who agreed to collaborate with me on an article assessing journals as a pedagogical tool.

Professor and student find areas of agreement.

Beth and I were able to agree on a list of positive benefits derived from the use of academic journals in classes I had taught and she had taken:

- First of all, students learn the important thing is to think, not necessarily to be right. They are able to explore ideas in their journals without being penalized and are there-

fore more apt to take risks.

- Second, because students are more often right than wrong in their assessments of what they read, their confidence increases when they understand that they can read critically. When they begin to believe in their own abilities to read and think, students are more apt to challenge their teachers' assumptions. Therefore, classes are livelier and more productive for students and professor.
- Third, student retention of material increases dramatically. If journal entries connect with class discussions, other assignments, and examinations, students understand more and retain material more effectively. Students seldom forget material they have worked through on their own and become increasingly adept at separating the important from the unimportant.
- Fourth, students have to think about the material before they come to class, for it is impossible to write a good journal entry without some thought. Beth insists that education is most successful when students react to what they learn; an academic journal provides an opportunity for expressing such reactions. She also sees the journal as a place for students to express ideas that they cannot comfortably state in class. In this case, the journal becomes not only an intellectual and creative outlet but also an agent for fostering more productive and fulfilling student-teacher relationships.
- Finally, in spite of the emphasis in journal writing on content rather than mechanics, the student writing in journals is often far superior to their work in revised essays. Beth and I noted that the quality of writing in student journals improves as the semester progresses,

and that improvement is often mirrored in the professor's comments. In one of Beth's own journals, the professor's comments changed from "Okay, but . . ." to "A wonderful entry!—a fine reading of the story." Beth had a written record of her improved ability to analyze literature and her improved writing skill.

Professor and student find areas of disagreement.

Beth and I agree that academic journals, for the most part, effectively push students to greater understanding. But some of the aspects of journal writing I find most positive, Beth questions. I have felt that because students know they have to write about what they read, they are less apt to give up on difficult material. I always cite a classic student entry from one of my American Literature classes:

Emerson says on page 898 that the essence of life is spontaneity or instinct. I'm not quite sure what he is getting at. Are spontaneity and instinct the same thing? Wait a minute, I think I can answer my own question now that I've thought about it. Is he saying that if we acted out of instinct, that is, truly act the way we feel is right to act, then we would inevitably be acting virtuously or correctly—?

I am fairly confident that in prejournal days, this same student's thought processes would have stopped with "I'm not quite sure what he is getting at." Beth responds that she and other students are still apt to give up on particularly difficult assignments. Instead of confronting such difficulties, Beth says, students mostly find a way to avoid them. She suggests more faculty guidance for particularly difficult reading assignments.

I had anticipated another problem which I have encountered in a few student journals. My goal is to have students write journal entries after they complete their reading but before class discussion. Some students, however, inevitably write their entries after discussion. I have not been particularly concerned, for I have felt the students were at least synthesizing class discussion and therefore writing useful entries. In my discussion with Beth, however, I discovered that other students are angry at these “leeches,” and she reminded me that students must react to assignments on their own if they are ever going to move from passive to active learning. Although she agrees that synthesis is useful, she believes that academic journals are most successful when the professor insists on independent thought and work. She reminded me of my own statement that journals allow instructors to work with students at their own level of understanding and sophistication.

Journals help the professor.

I assign academic journals because I believe they benefit students, but student journals help me in ways I never anticipated:

- Students show me in their entries which assignments work and which ones do not. I now give more careful preliminary comments and instructions to assignments that have proven in the past to be unclear or challenging
- I immediately discover when students have misconceptions about their reading or about comments I have made in class. I can respond to individual misconceptions in the journals themselves, or I can take class time to return to material that has troubled the group as a whole. I find problem areas *before* examinations.

- Often students force me to look at material in new ways. Sometimes they amaze me with their attention to detail or with their fresh observations.
- I play a different role when I read student journals. Since *how* students write is beside the point, I concentrate on *what* they write. I respond to their ideas as a peer—which means I can agree or disagree with their comments and explain why. I find the activity a pleasure, not the drudgery that “grading” exams and papers can be; therefore, I do not begrudge the time I spend reading journal entries. And, as Beth reminds me, this role makes the professor less intimidating. Students react more positively, she insists, and work harder.
- Finally, I can see intellectual growth from the beginning to the end of the term. In a profession where tangibles are few, I am delighted to have a written record of a student’s intellectual progress in the course.

The student offers suggestions for better journal assignments.

Academic journals are used in a myriad of ways across the disciplines at Plymouth State College. Of necessity differences in course objectives dictate the guidelines established for the use of journals. Keeping those facts in mind, I offer the following suggestions to the faculty for their consideration:

- Students generally participate in more than one course where academic journals are assigned. Since each professor has a slightly different concept of what a journal should be, faculty

should give students *written instructions* to clarify their expectations for students and to avoid misunderstandings.

- Assigning specific topics for journal entries may make more difficult pieces seem less threatening. Furthermore, helping students focus on certain themes and issues will encourage them to read and think more critically, eventually on their own.
- Professors should collect journals early in the term and frequently after that. This way, any questions or misconceptions about the journal itself or reading assignments will surface, and the professor can deal with them immediately.
- Even though debate is healthy, professors should avoid imposing personal interpretations on students. Instead they should try to work with students at their own level of understanding. The fastest way for faculty to destroy student enthusiasm is to smother students' ideas with their own.
- When possible, faculty should connect journal entries with class discussion, examinations, and assignments. Through this connection of material, students gain more understanding and retain material better.
- Finally, teachers and students alike should do their best to keep the lines of communication open. Students should look to professors for guidance, and professors should look to students for their insights.

As always, the professor gets the last word.

I will continue to use academic journals. I think students learn by writing journal entries, and I learn from reading them. Two years ago Beth enrolled in her first course with required academic journals. Since she had never encountered journals before, she was apprehensive about the experience. Looking back, however, she says, “I realize that those journal entries encouraged my growth as a student, not to mention my growth as an individual.” If that is the case, the experiment I began five years ago has succeeded beyond my expectations.

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Academic Journals Revisited: Or Why the Professor Hasn't Changed Her Mind

Mary-Lou Hinman

“I really despise journals,” Christine writes early in spring term. “Students are asked to write down opinions and ideas so that they can be graded—so it can be marked down in a book that we actually have ideas and opinions.” She is adopting the voice of Daniel from Doctorow’s *Book of Daniel*, the novel under discussion in my Twentieth Century American Literature class. “There,” she continues, and I see the smile in the words, “That was my take on Daniel. That was my little rebellious impression of the kind of tone I got from the book so far.”

Christine is playing, but she voices the sentiments of students who fail to see the point of journals. Mostly, they would rather take quizzes and tests or write short essays on assigned topics, because then it is clear what I think is important, the slant I want to take on the literature under discussion, and students are more

comfortable that way. But I don't want my students "comfortable"; I want them to read and think and attempt to come to terms *on their own* with difficult material. Journals help students with that struggle.

Another entry from Christine's journal is a case in point. This time we are reading Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. In her entry, Christine is working through one section of the mythic poetry at the center of the novel. At first she writes methodically, concentrating on simple paraphrase. Then she notices color, traditional emblems, the use of the four points of the compass. She begins to sketch directions, then sees how myth and direction pertain to the main character of the novel. She writes in the margins, draws diagrams, and makes notes to herself. In her excitement, she goes to the internet to look at some criticism. She comes to class full of information, a better understanding of the novel, and a paper topic for her major essay—all because she was required to write a journal entry.

For every Christine, however, there are students who write almost nothing in their journals for me. These students are bright and interested in the literature they read. They simply do not like the regimen of writing in a journal. Mostly, their reticence on paper is balanced by their vocalness in class. I know they've read the material because they discuss it openly. But for those quiet others—the ones for whom participating in class is downright painful—the journal becomes a voice. I have one student this term who has typed over a hundred single-spaced pages in his journal. All of it is excellent, thoughtful work. Most entries relate to the reading for class, but some focus on literature in general, on defining what makes a piece of literature great. Sometimes he writes poetry in the style of the poet under discussion. I always save his journal for last: it is pure pleasure to read.

Or take the case of Jenn, who writes cogent and intelligent journal entries, but cannot take my exams. I ask her why, and she answers in her next entry, “. . .you asked me what happened to me on my exams, since my journal entries are good. I think the answer to that question is that in my journals, I am never forced to answer one specific question, whereas on an exam I am. In a journal I can comment on any aspect of a poem or story that I wish, and I can do it informally. . . . Exams always make me nervous. . . .” I remind myself as I read her explanation how much I like to read journals and how much I hate grading exams.

I have heard colleagues say they don't use journals because they don't want to read bad, unedited prose. I insisted in our article seven years ago, “. . .student writing in journals is far superior to their work in revised essays.” I haven't changed my mind. I think back to the first novel we read in my Twentieth Century American Literature class spring term, John Updike's *Rabbit Run*. Students were eloquent in voicing their distaste for the protagonist and their reluctance to see him as a good man. To broaden discussion, I gave them criticism that made references to Rabbit as a recipient of Grace. The journal responses were far-ranging and passionate. I give you one entry here, not because it was the best, but because it shows the level of thought and involvement in the assignment.

Journal Entry:

***Rabbit, Run* by John Updike with reference to the handout**

I am not going to try to explain the Jesus Christ references. Nor do the ideas of Rabbit as a mystic interest me. I can not think of this book as deeply as (it seems) I am expected to because I could not feel for the characters, and therefore I was not interested. But I do find the reasoning behind Rabbit's cruel accusation to Janice regarding the death of Rebecca interesting. I

think it is something we have all done at sometime in our lives to get out of a sticky situation.

The handout says that Rabbit points the finger at Janice to free everyone from the common guilt of death. I do not agree with this statement. I believe he is attempting to free himself from the circumstances that involved the death of his child. Placing the blame on the person who did the actual act of killing, no matter how accidental, frees him from all blame of the wrong he did Janice by leaving her.

So why is what Rabbit says so bad? Because it was cruel, by *any* standpoint. Cruel to Janice, the mourners, and to himself. I believe that part of the reason he left the graveyard is because he was also fleeing from his own guilt that was brought to light by his accusation. By placing the blame of the actual death on Janice in front of everyone, he clears himself of that wrongdoing. But then the question is, “why did she do it?” All eyes turn to Rabbit, the husband who left his pregnant wife, who drove her to drink, who lived with a prostitute, and who still does not want to be where he is in life.

In spite of the frustrations of using journals—students who won’t do entries; students who copy class discussion and try to palm it off as their own work; the extra time I spend reading—the kind of lively exchange you see above makes me assign them semester after semester. Journals are a showcase for bright students and a voice for quiet ones. In their entries, students try out ideas, voice reservations or complaints, or return to class discussion long after it has ended. And I get to read lively and interesting prose. What more could I desire?