

READING STUDENT PUBLICATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM: AN INTER- DISCIPLINARY ENDEAVOR

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Our interests in encouraging student writers' authority, in reading and writing across the disciplines, and in working collaboratively inside and outside of the writing course have many of us producing and publishing student texts in the classroom. Teacher-writers such as Rosemary Parmigiani, Nancie Atwell, and Anne Hamilton discuss the excitement these publications engender, the methods of production, the pitfalls inherent in such productions, and the theoretical basis for attending to the public work of writers. Many agree that these publications and the means by which they are produced are welcome alternatives to the distant textbooks and directed teaching found in our less successful classes. This essay discusses student publications from writing classes that I have taught over the last few years—what they are, where they come from—and pays particular attention to what we do with them in the classroom and what this tells us about interdisciplinary teaching.

Allow me to focus this discussion by telling a story that will illustrate the two claims I want this essay to make about interdisciplinary teaching. I was speaking with my brother, Steven, on the phone a short time ago. He is taking an English 101 course at a local community college and enjoying it very much. He particularly enjoys discussing the ideas that turn up in the readings and in his writing, though some other students do not. Just before the start of a class the other day, he tells me, a student put the complaint this way, "This is an English class, **not** political science." I imagine many of us have heard similar complaints about our own classes: "This is an English class, not philosophy or sociology or women's studies or physical education," and so on. But the writing class is those things, and—this is my first claim—teachers of English are already teaching across the disciplines by virtue of being writing teachers. The strength of writing classes is that on any given day they can look and act like classes in political science, philosophy, academic survival, linguistics, and self-improvement. Also—and this is my second claim—the classroom is a very big place, bigger than a room full of desks and chalkboards, active outside of the hours of 8:00 to 3:00 or 5:00 to 9:00. We learn as writers, students and teachers, on the edges of classes, in pre-class conversations or complaints, on walks back to the parking lot, in rereading class publications, in libraries, in letters to and from peers and teachers years later, in phone conversations with family and friends, and in the productions of, and responses to, student publications.

What Student Publications Are

Student publications are collections of student essays, commentaries, stories, poems, comments, journals, and for everything I do not have a category for, miscellany, and they range in topic, genre, and perspective across the disciplines. Some, such as one we produced in a college honors English course in 1990, entitled "Eighteen Documented Essays that Have Something to do With Religion," are collections of research essays all on the same subject. The topics under that subject range from discussions of Hinduism to interpretations of gothic cathedrals, from research into stigmata to individual speculation on good and evil. The various disciplines represented in that packet

include economics, history, psychology, women's studies, biology, and philosophy. As a class, we voted on the book topic early in the semester, and then students began research in their own areas of interest under that topic. This particular publication was edited by four students, it has a cover drawing, and most of the writers included author's comments on their essays. Our title comes from an early experience we had with reading and writing about Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The cover has a banner at the top and bottom within which alternate eight different symbols meant to illustrate the variety of the essays and of religious experience: Star of David, Eastern Orthodox Cross, Yin and Yang, Torii, Islamic Crescent, Tree of Life, Buddha, and Ankh.

Other collections are a hodgepodge of student work. A second semester first-year English class I taught in the spring of 1991 spent time talking and writing about art, what it is, who does it, and what responsibilities we have in the production and consumption of it. Our semester's publication was a compilation of the students' own attempts at art. Students often complain about lack of a venue for what they call "creative writing." This publication gave us the opportunity to examine our assumptions about what is and is not creative in writing. We discovered the need for creativity across writing genres and topics. Included are essays students wrote for class assignments as well as photographs, poems, drawings that photocopy well, experimental, self-reflective, and shock fiction, journal entries, science fiction, letters and poems on the same subject a' la Coleridge, riddles, and engineering designs. I also contributed two letters with the students' approval. Again, we examined the subjects addressed in this packet from a variety of perspectives and disciplines, particularly regarding the dialogue between popular and high culture. We supplemented that discussion with a paired reading of Stephen Mitchell's translation of *The Book of Job* and the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.

Other collections combine required contributions on a particular theme or subject and also allow students to contribute other writing. The collection "If I'm in the Fast Lane, Why is Everyone Passing But Me?," produced in an English 100 course in Basic Writing, includes essays on education (I chose the topic this time), as well as song lyrics, quotations from the students,

and a horror story on education that the students asked me to write. We also included short biographies in a "List of Contributors." On the first day of class, we all wrote biographies of each other and stuck them away. Later in the semester we brought them back to our subjects and collected more information. These were the bases for our "List of Contributors." In our discussions of these essays on education, we were each able to address the issues from our particular educational interests and expertise. The architecture students, for example, read the essays on grades, individual programs, and alternative educational opportunities for insight into how to manage the agonistic jury system of their program.

There are other types of collections. In fact, they are different with each class. One collection from incoming college students is primarily a collection of professional essays put together before the days of increased attention to copyright law. At the front, though, are commentaries from the students and me on working. We had read Studs Terkel's *Working* that session and decided to put together our own version. In addition to the planning that goes into the syllabus and the desire I have for each class to be different, I try to let the collective unconscious and conscious of the class decide some of the direction of the publications. It is not new to point out that each of our classes is a cross-disciplinary laboratory, with students from across the campus and, at least lately, across cultures. I would suggest that all of us teachers both follow our lights and listen to our students for each class.

I have contributed to most of the collections that we have produced because the students have asked me to. It is important for classes to have some say over their productions and their education, and the ten minutes they take to decide whether and what a teacher should contribute allows for practice in that authority. Some of those contributions include introductions and essays about teaching, versions of conference papers I happen to be working on that semester, letters, journal entries, a poem in first year Italian, and a horror story that the students of one class assigned for me. Lately I have begun to include arguments about publishing and reading student texts. In fact, students got the chance to read and question me over a shorter version of this article. I do, though, think that it is important that some of our writing come from outside of the classroom and the profession. The letters I contributed were to family and helped illustrate

the personal connection we all have to writing; the horror story was the first I had ever written and reminded us that writing and sharing that writing can be fun; the journal entries and in-class writings let students see what I think when I put pen to paper. What we get in these contributions from students and teachers is the chance to see each other as writers and as human beings.

Where Student Publications Come From

The students know we are writing for publication from the get-go. I mention student publications the first day of class, and I mention them in the syllabus. Here is the description from my current syllabus for sophomore composition:

We will also collect an essay from everyone in class in order to produce a class book at about the two-thirds mark in the course. Our purpose in producing such a book is two-fold. First, I would like each of us to have an artifact from the class to reflect upon. Second, I would like to spend two weeks near the end of the semester reading the work of, and interviewing, each of us as guest authors.

I bring previous publications into class and encourage discussion about what we would like to see from the class book—something like the discussion above. Other writers also provide discussion of the hows and whys of student publication, and they include a number of commentators on the Foxfire project (see Wigginton; Jones; Gertzman; “Foxfire;” and Ensminger and Dangel) as well as commentators about WAC journals from small colleges (Polanski) and the concerns for authority in the classroom (Langston). My experience suggests that we begin with grandiose plans for the book and scale them back as it nears completion. At the beginning we are certain to run everything through desktop publishing software and have a pop up Pieta in the middle, but near the end I have found myself haggling with the copy center or, during the summer programs, working out paper jams into the evening. I have also done my share of typing, but I do not think it is essential.

The students’ struggles in writing for publication are similar to those they bump into in writing any essays: purpose, focus,

organization, development, and audience. They work through drafts. They workshop those drafts in class. We conference on their research topics and revisions, and we all struggle with deadlines. What gets added to the equation with in-class publication is a connection to an audience of peers, the chance to choose what to submit to evaluation without grades, and the opportunity to collaborate in producing and editing the publication. Also, the small group workshops prepare the students for the varied perspectives they will face in their guest author session. They are likely to field questions from budding economists, philosophers, scientists, and politicians. The workshop provides a comfortable place to entertain those questions and perspective. It also allows for the transmission of what Stephen North calls "practitioner lore," for invariably the students talk about their other classes and methods for achieving success in them.

If we are all writing on the same subject or theme, I ask students to freewrite about possible topics in their journals and we discuss and vote on those topics during class. If it looks like the book can be profitably edited by three or four students, I ask for volunteers early in the semester. But if we have time, we edit the collection together as a class. We might, for example, divide the class into editing groups if we have a number of genres or themes represented. Each group then is responsible for putting its section in order and adding introductions, illustrations, and commentary as it sees fit. Often the editing groups perceive a need for more material from a particular writer or in a particular genre, and so they solicit additional contributions. Or, as a whole class, we might list every contribution we have on the chalkboard, decide if we need more of any thing, and set the order together. Either way, what we are doing is composing, deciding what to put where and for what purpose.

Once we have the book together it is simply a matter of how to reproduce it. Everyone in the class should get a copy whether your program provides it, as mine does in the summer, or the students have to buy one themselves, as ours do during the academic year. If you have the money somewhere in the department budget, let a print shop with a nice big copier do the job or contact a publisher. If some of your students are computer whizzes and are willing to collect the book on disk,

see if you can't play around with desk top publishing. And for those of you who don't have extra money and don't already know, you'll find that if you put the paper back in the copying tray upside down and backward you can copy the next page on the previous page. That's what my teaching assistant and I did this summer.

The relatively short time my classes have together has precluded our publishing for distribution and/or sales outside of the classroom, though the University of Arizona's Composition program does publish a *Students' Guide to First Year Composition*, and that does contain student essays. Whether you find the time and support to publish outside of the classroom or not, I would encourage you to use the packets as P.R. tools. Give them to administrators, deans, colleagues, the media, anyone or group you want to remind that student writers work hard and write well. Write about your actions for peers and colleagues. This P.R. work would be especially true for those of us who work with students who get labelled remedial and uninterested.

What to Do with Student Publications: Guest Authors

What I am most interested in, though, and what I would like to draw your attention to with in-class publications, is what we can do with them in the class. What we do is read them. Yes, a student publication is nice for P.R. and something for the students to hold on to, but I believe it is most important as a text that deserves the class' attention. We read it, not as student writing to workshop, edit, or grade, but as a collection of essays over which to argue, wonder, and talk; and the class becomes not a narrowly defined English course but a place where we write and talk about political science, philosophy, oral history, sociology, art, and so on.

The amount of class time you might devote to responding to the class book is up to you and depends on what time you have and what effect you want. I have settled on the concept of "guest authors." I let the students know early in the class that they are responsible for leading us in discussion on their contributions for fifteen to twenty minutes—though we can profitably discuss the book and the connections the students notice on reading it as a whole class over a few class periods. I might, for example, give the students a list of questions—What do you

notice about the ideas we all touch on in this collection? What do you notice about how these authors approach various concerns we have faced as writers this semester? What have you learned from reading this text? What's your favorite section and why? What would you like to argue with in this collection? and so on—and have the students write responses prior to discussion in class.

There are also a variety of ways for writers and readers to prepare for these discussions. My ideal is have the authors lead discussion on their writing for the fifteen to twenty minutes when they have the class' ear and have all of us, writer and readers, think and talk about writing, reading, ideas, and ourselves. It does not always work that way, or as well as it might—some students stumble, others are unprepared—but as a teacher I am more interested in what we learn from the effort to treat ourselves and each other as authors. As teachers we can get intimidated by the fervency of, say, the Foxfire proponents or our colleagues newly born again to dialogue journals or collaborative papers and social construction. We need not be intimidated, though: our class publications do not have to go to second printings or look perfect, and our class discussions wherein a student writer becomes a guest author do not have to be brilliant for all of us in the class to benefit.

I vary the kinds of questions and directions I give to authors and readers—often asking the students to contribute directions for reading—but here's what they generally sound like. I ask the author to prepare to reread their contributions and write about what they notice on that rereading: What kind of a writer are they? What ideas struck them over the distance between conception and publication? What most impresses them about their writing? What still sticks out or troubles them? What might they do in another draft? What other kinds of writing do they do? Where do they come from as a writer and where are they going? I ask that particular question both because I like the *Phaedrus* and because I want the discussion to move away from simple responses to the text to discussions of writing in society and in the future for this author. If we were lucky enough to have Alice Walker visit our classes, we would probably want to talk about how she sees the world, when she decided to be a writer, what responsibilities she sees for intellectuals in our soci-

ety, what music she likes, etc., not which sentences we found confusing. I also ask the authors to bring in questions that they would like to ask their readers, and we use those to begin discussion.

For the readers, I turn the questions around: What do you notice in reading this contribution? What most impresses you? What confuses you? What ideas would you take from here for beginning an essay of your own? What does this selection argue about what kinds of writers we are? What questions do you have for the writer? and so on. Often I will ask the readers to put their response in the form of a letter to the author. Sometimes in a class where authors are nervous or readers are quiet, I will ask for volunteers from the class to act as ringers or plants in a particular author's audience, asking questions, responding to the writer's questions. Here again, I should like our responses and discussion to move beyond simple reaction to texts and into speculation on the social and personal construction of writers. How did we get here? What happens when a group of people with varied experiences and interests read what we write? I also think that the opportunity to ask and answer these questions is invaluable in our efforts to get students to see themselves as writers and thinkers across disciplines.

What This Tells Us About Interdisciplinary Teaching

As teachers we are concerned with how to get into and out of the way of student writers so that they might have purposeful practice in the authority necessary for them to become writers both inside and outside of our crowded classrooms. We write narratives about that concern, books like Peter Elbow's *Embracing Contraries* and short articles like Susan Langston's "The Fear of Utter Chaos . . . in a Student-Centered Classroom." With concerns about social construction, poststructuralist challenges to human agency, and the perceived apathy and bureaucracy that seem to keep us from doing what we had hoped to do well, we teachers of writing are still, perhaps even more, concerned with helping other writers understand and affect their thinking, writing, and living. And we get nervous about that help, not because we lack courage or are not professionals, but because we maintain an energetic interest in the relationship between reading and writing, composing and cognition, teaching

and learning, and because we have the curiosity to ask continually after the sorts of classrooms, programs, institutions, and philosophies we might have and practice. Call that, perhaps, our philosophy of faithful doubt.

Let's briefly take *Writing Across the Curriculum* as an example of that philosophy in action. In a 1984 article in the *Journal of Advanced Composition*, Charles A. Bergman discusses how a group of faculty from various disciplines engaged in a writing workshop in which they both expressed their doubts and experienced an interdisciplinary conversion in their attitudes towards writing and the teaching of writing that takes place in their varied classrooms. Bergman described the conversion this way:

The shift in consciousness that I have described in our workshop was not a radical transformation of teachers into something new. Rather, it was a reminder: academics are writers. Our disciplines are defined by the kinds of writing we do—by the questions we agree are appropriate to write about and by the ways we agree to write about them. (80)

Other writers have observed similar responses (see, for example, Freisinger; Hamilton; Raimes; Rose; Scheffler; Weiss and Peich), but my point here is that while we share doubt about how much WAC and in-class publishing can do, a similar shift in consciousness is possible with student writers reading student publications. A key phrase in Bergman's description of the workshops reads, "We went through the entire writing process, publicly and collaboratively" (80). Our guest authors are publicly celebrated as just that, authors, and our class collaborates on our publication. At some level, whether the teacher and institution are overly intrusive or not, the collection of writers who produce and respond to a student publication are defining the kinds of writing they do, agreeing as to appropriate questions, and making themselves aware of how we reach those definitions and agreements.

More recently we have expressed our curiosity and doubt regarding social construction. At a dinner party some years ago, a visiting writer told the assembled students and teachers that she did not even want to hear about deconstruction. The word itself was enough to scare her off. While "social construction" has a more comforting ring, many teachers of writing show

some hesitance to learn about it. This hesitance may be due to a resistance to what is often perceived as top down theory-making rather than a resistance to philosophical inquiry, since many writing teachers would readily admit that knowledge is socially constructed, often right in their classrooms. In a *Journal of Teaching Writing* article from 1989, Diana George has articulated the concerns that teachers have this way: "We ought to ask ourselves what it is we are creating when we create an interpretive community in the classroom" (6). Indeed we ought if we hope to do more, as George encourages us, than simply teach students one more set of rules from an ever-increasing superset. George argues that attention to social construction can offer us more, and she concludes her essay with a rejection of William Bennett's curriculum and the exhortation for us to converse across the disciplines and with our students.

Producing and reading student publications in composition classrooms are an attempt at those sorts of conversations. I label that endeavor interdisciplinary because we cross and mix disciplines in the conception, production, and evaluation of the publications. A random combination of various schedule conflicts, personal decisions, and battles with the registration system bring writers with concerns in business, art, and science together to meet in a classroom and talk and move across their various disciplines. A publication which incorporates something from each of us allows all of us, the 18 to 40 members of a class, to be co-conspirators in our plots to see and write across the disciplines. No one of us can individually embody all the values and interests of the multicultural, decentered, socially constructed classroom, but each of us can seek help from our co-authors.

That collaboration shows up every time guest authors get up in front of a class full of peers who have read their work to talk about what their intellectual interests are, where they hope to take themselves as a writer, and how we might go about reading their particular contributions to the class publication. That help appears every time these authors' peers begin asking questions about their work, offering observations about connections to the work of others, and celebrating the perspective of the writer sitting in front of them. The endeavor becomes an interdisciplinary one when we find ourselves talking about the language of music after one guest author begins a session by playing Beethoven's *Fur Elise* on the saxophone, when we

discuss the place for folklore in science after reading one guest author on kombucha mushrooms, and when we listen to a guest author read to us from a pork bellies chart and then discuss various takes on what it means to be rich.

Conclusion

I would like to return to the story I began this essay with, the tale of the student who said “This is an English class, **not** political science.” Indeed, English courses should follow some truth in advertising guidelines. If all I plan to do in a course is tell students how I feel about current political issues, then I should tell them up front. But I would like to suggest to this student that English courses can take up the discourse of the political science course, the biology course, and the philosophy course, and I would like to offer her these conclusions about in-class publications. First, in-class publications allow us to see ourselves crossing the disciplines. Our classes do not and should not begin and end discreetly and exclusive of each other. A sociology essay can sit next to an historical discussion, a personal essay on the environment can be read in light of an argument on medical attention in particular religions, and an engineering student can ask a fine arts student why she or he wrote about the media and what he or she thinks about government spending on space travel. Second, in-class publications encourage us to collaborate across the disciplines. Deciding on our topic, order, ideas, questions, and so on demands some attention to our varied perspectives and agenda. Third, in-class publications allow us to engage in cross and multidisciplinary discussions. Our guest authors both challenge us to see the world through their eyes and encourage us to share our varied perspectives with them. If everyone reading their essays is a business major or a education major or premed student working in micro-biology, then the students will learn how to talk to that community. But if, in the English class, these majors come together over their own work, then the students have the opportunity to talk across those communities. When I ask students to comment on the production, readings, and discussion of in-class publications, they offer insightful perceptions. One anonymous student summed it up this way: “We all came to a better understanding of each

other. I realized that we weren't just a class. We are a group of teachers." That quotation and this essay can serve to remind us that our work as writing teachers is interdisciplinary, and that the classrooms we do that work in are big.

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