

# TEACHING LITERATURE THROUGH WRITING: AN INFORMAL PUBLICATION PROJECT

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## INTRODUCTION: PUBLISHING STUDENT WRITING

Publishing student writing offers teachers more than the joy of watching satisfied looks on authors' faces and the mild chagrin of being unable to keep noses out of the pages of the just-published anthology. There are substantive pedagogical reasons for publishing student writing. Foremost among these is *motivation*. Students who know their writing will eventually be offered publicly will make sure they find something interesting to say and say it as well as they can. Publishing projects also serve to introduce students to something they generally get little experience with in the schools—writing as real *communication*. As writers prepare their work for reading aloud or for the class anthology, they grapple with the problems of content, audience, and language much more intensely than when they crank out another book report or another theme on “What I Did Over Christmas Vacation.” In addition, publishing projects familiarize students with the complete *composing process* and the benefits of *collaboration*. Publishing projects stage writing so students understand and experience prewriting, drafting, revis-

ing, and editing. Publishing projects use deadlines, and students learn to deal with them. Since publishing projects generally use editing groups and editorial boards and require revising, students understand that writing does not take place in isolation, that there are times when ideas can and must be shared, that there are problems writers need help solving—that good writing is often a collaborative effort.

Publishing projects also serve to give students accessible *models* for their writing. While student-writers balk when they are asked to write a poem after the class has studied Shakespeare's sonnets, they are less reluctant to try writing a poem after the class has read from last year's anthology where Fred's older brother's poem on the glory of his grandmother's peach pie appears. Not merely models, these anthologies introduce a degree of healthy competition between classes—and within classes themselves. "If Fred can write a poem, I can write a better one." And he can!

Publishing projects can also establish the value of student experience and opinion. Students spend long hours in classrooms each day learning what they do not know. Not enough time, however, is allowed students for letting them discover how much they already know—how smart they are. Learning theorists insist that facts and concepts are meaningless until they are connected with experience from everyday life. Learning takes place when new information integrates with existing knowledge and experience. Such integration occurs more easily and frequently when students are aware of and confident in their existing knowledge and experience. Publishing projects sanction student knowledge. Through publishing projects students can present themselves as expert athletes or craftsfolk and thereby establish the self-confidence that fosters learning. Publishing projects give students *integrity*.

Publishing projects can range from the most elaborate whole-semester class anthology to more informal and easily managed exercises like oral publication, in which teachers or students read work aloud, posting student work in conspicuous places where it can be read by whoever chooses, and inexpensive and immediate duplicating procedures like dittoing and xeroxing sets of student writing for distribution to the class. In all the forms publishing projects take, they send the clear message that writing is important both as an instrument of learning and as a tool of communication.

The value of publishing projects, however, does not change

our everyday reality as teachers. Our days are characterized by having too little time to teach too many students more than we could manage under the best of circumstances. And publishing projects generally create more work. As a consequence, they often fall into that large category of teaching strategems which we should but can't use. We file them in the drawer labeled "frustration."

But the value of publishing projects remains. Students need to read each other's writing, and we as teachers need to encourage this by publishing student writing cheaply and frequently. I have developed such a technique and use it regularly as part of my teaching. I teach literature and writing in college and use informal publishing most often in literature courses. I use writing to teach literature, and the Daily Writing, my informal publishing project, is the center of my pedagogy. I find it an effective way to introduce more writing into my literature courses without increasing my workload unreasonably. The writing/learning connection at work in the Daily Writing help me teach literature more successfully than I had previously. Specifically, the writing exercise and informal publication project

- motivate class preparation and participation,
- foster close reading and critical interpretation,
- provide practice, models, and reinforcement for critical thinking and analytic skills,
- structure each class as a cycle including reading, reflection, writing, and response and discussion resulting in the collection and combination of relevant ideas to be used in the next cycle, and
- develop a collaborative atmosphere in the course, thereby helping to establish a community of learners.

The benefits of the procedure are evident in improved teacher/student interaction, improved quality of learning as reported in student evaluations, and improved student performance on exams and formal papers. I view the Daily Writing as a writing/publishing exercise that can be used effectively in any content area and have advertised it as a workable writing-across-the-curriculum technique for junior and senior high school teachers and college teachers. The balance of this paper will elaborate the procedure and the benefits derived from the Daily Writing publishing project.

### **PROCEDURE: FORMULATING TOPICS**

The Daily Writing is just what the name suggests. I begin most

of my classes with a twenty-minute expressive writing exercise designed to make students deal with material important to the course. Expressive writing, as it has been developed by James Britton in *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*, is writing in which the primary audience is the writer him/herself. It is discovery writing, an opportunity for students to find an idea by thinking about a text or concept through writing.

The Daily Writing, as expressive writing, is not formal finished writing. The writer is not responsible for communicating an idea to a general audience; rather, his/her task is to find an idea which might then be shaped and communicated to an audience. Expressive writing is a stage within the composing process, and the Daily Writing is a first step that many students can use to begin to understand material. This understanding can eventually be shaped for communication to others.

Explaining the procedure and describing some examples may make the Daily Writing more clear. Students know they will begin the class hour by writing. First, I distribute a dittoed sheet with a one-paragraph topic and plenty of white space for them to fill with writing. The topic is related to what we have read for the day. In addition, the topic asks students to apply some concept discussed in the previous class to the new reading for the day. Most importantly, the topic must have no obviously correct response. Encouraging a range of appropriate responses forces students to deal with issues rather than write an empty plot summary or regurgitate yesterday's concept definition.

Three elements interact in each Daily Writing. First, students must *write regularly*, which causes them to be more industrious when preparing the readings for each class. Second, students must reflect and understand what is happening that day in the light of all that happened before. Such *conscious reflection* helps students see the course as a developmental sequence in which an idea is introduced, discussed, applied, and elaborated through time rather than as a set of unconnected readings (It's Tuesday of week six so this must be Transcendentalism). Third, each topic functions as an elaborate *riddle* causing students to understand that correct answers are not as important as discovering approaches that will ultimately lead to relevant statements and a solution to the puzzle which is American literature.

Since these three elements interact in each writing, the im-

portance of framing good questions cannot be overstated. Skill in developing good questions comes quickly with experience. Skimming through responses after class reveals whether students found the elements necessary to make their explorations fruitful.

An example of a “good” question in terms of the three elements noted above follows:

I want you to spend some time today thinking and writing about the various purposes of literature. Writers write for reasons ranging from self-gratification to political subversion. Already you’ve confronted two quite different writers—Winthrop and Bradstreet. Compare them in terms of purpose. You may either compare two poems by Bradstreet which have seemingly different purposes (“The Flesh and the Spirit” and “A Letter To Her Husband”) or compare Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” to a Bradstreet poem which seems to have a similar purpose (“Contemplations”). If you do the latter, suggest how the difference in forms—a sermon/essay vs. poem—helps the writer accomplish his or her purpose.

This question came in the third week of a sophomore American literature survey. It was the most ambitious writing they had yet encountered. Students had already been writing regularly in the class. The reading assignment was a continuation of selections from Bradstreet’s poetry with her personal lyrics constituting the new material. To deal with the writing, students had to be familiar with those poems. Reflection works in the question in two ways. First, an appropriate response requires a comparison of newly read poems with previously read poems and essays, and, second, a consideration of author purpose, the topic of the previous class meeting. Finally, the riddle in the writing asks students to consider whether the author made the correct choice of genre to accomplish the purpose. Students at this level had yet to confront the relation between genre and purpose, and that relationship, in fact, became the substance of the class hour. We discussed how the conventions of polite poetry had constrained Bradstreet, causing the strong love and passion she felt for her husband to be expressed implicitly rather than explicitly. We ended the class rewriting Bradstreet’s poem using modern, popular love-poetry conventions. Several students wrote lyrics for a rock song. Others wrote free verse poems trying to maintain the meaning of the

Bradstreet poem but using modern language and literal rather than metaphoric imagery.

The point here is that the Daily Writing must force the interaction of the prime elements—regular writing, reflection, and the riddle. Ultimately, the writing generates the class; it contains the seed of the lecture for the day. When I use the Daily Writing, I do not prepare a lecture outline. All my time goes to framing the topic to make sure the students will discover and raise my content agenda for the day through their responses.

Not all topics need be so structured. In fact, open-ended and personal experience questions can be introduced along the way to keep both the writing and the class fresh. Regularity shouldn't dissolve into boredom or habit. I begin the American literature survey with the same question each year—"What's so American about American literature?" The question requires far more focus and background than I can expect on the first day of the class. The value of the question, however, is that it introduces students to the concept of expressive writing. Such a global question defies answering. I tell them this and explain that their job is to be able at the end of twenty-minutes to produce one idea they would like to spend more time developing or sharing with the class.

A personal experience question comes near the end of each content unit. When we are finishing Puritan poetry, I ask the class to explain the value of studying the Puritans to someone who has no reason to study them:

Using what you've learned about American literature and culture in this class as well as what you brought into the class, explain to your living-partner(s) why reading the Puritan poets is important. I'm not looking for any particular reason. Rather, I'm looking to find out what you feel is important (crucial) and where in the poems you find it. . . .

This is a difficult but rewarding writing. With such difficult questions I sometimes break the normal pattern by presenting the question at the end of class to give them as much time at home as they want to complete the writing. But they are not to spend time revising for public presentation. Not only are the responses interesting in terms of illustrating what the writers value in the literature, but also the various audiences they direct their comments to provide me wonderful insights into whom I am teaching and why they are taking the course. I have had fraternity brothers

explain to their peers that studying literature is valuable because they can use the information for name-dropping and small talk at cocktail parties when they are executives. One woman—a wife, mother, and full-time office manager—argued the importance of understanding and appreciating culture to her career-minded pre-med husband. Mothers have explained Bradstreet to their seven-year olds. Brothers have written to sisters and *vice versa*. Such personal experience questions provide me interesting and valuable reading. The Daily Writing need not be a learning exercise only for the students. I, as teacher, learn from them as well.

### **PROCEDURE: RESPONSE, EVALUATION, AND PUBLICATION**

Understanding the purpose of the writings and seeing examples of the various types of topics does not explain how the Daily Writing is an informal publishing project. The Daily Writing becomes a publishing project during evaluation. Since these exercises do not generate finished writing, they should not be evaluated as such. The Daily Writings require reading and response rather than evaluation. Since students know that I will be reading the writings, they do not produce expressive writing which can be understood only by themselves. Their responses have me as an audience as well as themselves. Thus, I can read and make sense of them—most of them.

I read the Daily Writings quickly and holistically. I read only to find a good idea, something they might return to and develop. Any response which seems an honest attempt at dealing with the topic receives credit. The Daily Writing is how students document attendance in my class and 80% attendance is required to pass the course. To make sure students keep their responses vital, I write a short summary response at the end of each one referring them back to the good idea I found in the writing. Often, I find only the beginning of an idea, and I ask them to elaborate. Sometimes I summarize their main point in a sentence. Sometimes I draw the conclusion they could have drawn had they had time. Sometimes I plant an idea where none took root. Crucial is making clear that however quickly and with whatever degree of comprehension, I've read their writing and can respond positively. My purpose in responding is to keep the gates of expressive language open so the ideas can find their way out. Evaluation in the school

sense goes no further than record-keeping. Holistic reading, short summary comments, and evaluation by record-keeping help make the workload manageable for me. Reading their writings becomes a normal part of class preparation.

During my reading of the responses, however, I *always* discover one or two responses which do a better job dealing with the issues raised in the writing than I imagined possible when I was framing the topic. These writers make a deep and firm connection and discover an important idea. These ideas should be shared with the whole class. Here is how the Daily Writing becomes an informal publishing project.

When I first started using the Daily Writing as a teaching technique, I would select a few notable responses and read them aloud at the beginning of the next class. This good idea soon turned into a nightmare for two reasons. First, as I read, I was trying to interpret expressive language; often I would not do the writing justice. The idea I valued failed to come through. Second, when the ideas did come through they were often so exciting that questions for the writer and responses to his/her point by other members of the class took up much of the class hour. This robbed me of important time for that day's writing and class content.

Both these problems disappeared when I began *publishing* rather than reading the writings aloud. Reviewing the last writings, I would find the two or three first-rate responses and place a checkmark in the upper right-hand corner. This check, I explained to the class, was a signal that I felt there was something in this writing that all the class should see. The checked papers should be published. That meant that the writer of the paper, if he/she wanted, could revise and slightly expand the expressive language of the response, type it up, and return it to me at my office an hour before the next class meeting. Then, while duplicating that day's Daily Writing topic, I would duplicate revised responses for distribution in class. The typed revision works best since it generally produces the most readable copy. Those who do not have access to a typewriter neatly recopy their responses. If their manuscript doesn't seem neat enough for copying, I type their response. The typing doesn't take me much time.

The cycle of one writing ends when I distribute the published responses while students are working on the next writing. At the same time I return all the previous writings. I cannot stress the



importance of returning writings at the next class. Not only does prompt return establish the rhythm needed to make the Daily Writing the center of each class, but it also provides important feedback. Students learn by comparing the published responses with their own. They review their responses, my comments, and the published responses after they have finished the day's writing but before discussion or lecture begins. They are encouraged to query me or the published writers after class or before the next class. The interest level is high as a result of publishing the Daily Writing, and students discuss their writing with animation. Thus, one of the serendipitous side-effects of the project is increasing the interaction among students beyond the classroom. Such informal outside-of-class interaction improves learning.

### **TEACHER BENEFITS**

The Daily Writing publishing project represents an increased but manageable workload for a teacher. In fact, the increased work is more than justified by the return on that labor. There are basically three benefits for the teacher. First, the regular use of the Daily Writing structures the course. The first part of the class is devoted to writing. The first minutes of class are not wasted taking attendance; rather, it becomes productive writing time. More important, the properly constructed Daily Writing directs the lecture/discussion part of the class. Beginning and maintaining discussion is easy when students have something to say and want to say it. The writing exercise assures they have something to say. And if the writing is followed by lecture, the students have already developed the focus on materials that will help them understand and apply the lecture material.

Second, the Daily Writing, as mentioned earlier, provides an instructor a familiarity with the class available through no other way. As I read the Daily Writing I get a sense of who my students are, what is important to them, and how well they are responding to the material in the course. I quickly gain a sense of their learning pace and capacity. Thus, when I see a student performing below ability I can arrange a conference to see what is the matter. Often I can provide referrals and counseling for personal problems and specific instruction in academic problems. In addition, when I discover a student consistently unprepared, i.e., his/her responses are overgeneralized or off the center of the ques-

tion, I can challenge him/her. I work hard to read and return the writings; the class members work hard to prepare and write responses—why should we tolerate intellectual sponges? When I begin a conference, the very fact that I am aware of the student's ill-preparation amazes him/her. My awareness signals a concern which is frequently interpreted as a personal invitation to join actively in the course. In addition, the Daily Writing fosters an intense semi-social relationship between student and teacher—writer and reader—which offers opportunities to have one-on-one conversations with specific rather than general reference. I can talk with a student about more than the material. I can talk about how he/she is assimilating the material. I can thus measure student learning much more effectively than a lecturer can. Routine contact serves to personalize the course, which often motivates marginal students to join actively in the class. And my responses can applaud the ideas of those constitutionally silent students whom otherwise I would know only by their performance on infrequent exams and papers.

Third, the Daily Writing helps me as instructor establish a learning dialog with the class and encourage their evolution as a community of learners. The dialog can be both personal and general. My familiarity with students allows me to challenge an individual by remarking the relative failure of one writing when compared to others by the same writer. I can also help students focus on particular ideas and have them write more about a topic in a paper or journal entry. I encourage students to develop their formal papers from Daily Writings in which they have discovered good ideas. In this sense, the Daily Writing serves as extended prewriting, resulting in better conceived and written formal papers. In a more general sense I can respond to the whole group's needs by constructing a writing to answer questions or address common problems in the responses to the last writing. There is little sense moving on to the next concept when the performance on the Daily Writing indicates general misconception. Another, more focused writing might solve the problem. I can also use the writings to change the pace of the course either by simplifying the questions or making them more challenging. Through the Daily Writings I am able to more effectively measure the progress of my students and meet their learning needs.

## STUDENT BENEFITS

The Daily Writing publishing project provides a multitude of rewards for students. Though the project is an informal one demanding less of the instructor than formal projects like class anthologies, it provides all the rewards formal publishing projects provide. As mentioned earlier, these include motivation, interaction/communication, composing process awareness, models for writing, and the integrity of students.

Each time I've used the Daily Writing publishing project through a complete semester I've asked students to formally evaluate the class, especially the Daily Writing component. Student evaluation has for four years now been positive enough to have me continue the project. The area students specifically address most often is *motivation*. Students see the Daily Writing as a powerful tool causing them to prepare for class and then to participate in class. They know they will write, and the writing will provide the basis for class discussion. They do not want to embarrass themselves before me or their peers. Students also remark that publishing selected responses motivates them to do well. Almost everyone wants to be published and by careful reading and record-keeping I am generally able to publish at least one writing by every student. Having to spread publishing opportunities throughout the class also prevents overly vocal students from earning "authority" and dominating the class in discussion. Since I also use the Daily Writing questions, slightly revised, as essay exam questions, students can use the writings to prepare for exams. All the students have their initial responses as well as the several published responses for each writing to use to prepare for exams. This motivates students to save and read the published Daily Writings. Students evaluate the use of Daily Writings as the basis for essay exams very positively. I have also discovered that students perform better on the exams developed from Daily Writing topics than on the impromptu essay questions I had used previously.

These same evaluations mention another force motivating students to participate in the class—a sense of community. Because the Daily Writing is expressive writing—writing more personal than the pseudo-transactional writing generally required in school—and because students read one another's writing, they get to know each other personally. They develop a sense of community in the course. I see this sense of community each class when more

than the published writings are shared. Whole groups of students read and discuss their Daily Writings, passing them from student to student and talking about them. I believe such community-building is directly related to the publishing element of the project since the publishing expands the audience to include peers as well as the teacher. Having a real audience of peers fosters authentic *communication* and contributes to effective learning.

In the evaluation instrument, I ask students if they think their writing skills improved as a result of the Daily Writing publishing project. Their response is interesting. They believe they are writing more easily, but not necessarily better. In addition, they mention they enjoy the Daily Writings and are generally less apprehensive about writing. Some, however, believe the Daily Writing encourages them to form bad habits in grammar and mechanics. I attribute this to a fundamental misunderstanding of the relation between writing and learning, especially in the preliminary stages of the composing process. Moreover, my evaluation of their transactional writing contradicts their impression. Their formal papers are more interesting and better written than papers I receive when not using the Daily Writing publishing project.

The Daily Writing publishing project also provide students with a variety of *models* which they can emulate. However, the published writings do not serve as models for writing as much as they serve as models of critical thinking and analysis. By reviewing published writings students can see various successful ways of approaching and solving a problem. The published responses provide strategies and alternatives they can use in subsequent writings.

Students also remark with pride how the Daily Writing makes them aware of how much they already know and how smart they are. They emphasize that they can learn more from each other in a class than they sometimes learn in a whole course. They see themselves as responsible for their own learning. They feel involved, their contributions are valued, they feel a sense of *integrity* as learners. They have gained the requisite self-confidence from writing and reading each others' writing to become independent, self-directed learners.

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