Using Journals in the Cross-Curricular Course: Restoring Process

BRIAN A. CONNERY

The cross-curricular principles of national writing projects, universally acclaimed and successful in the primary and secondary schools, are often incarnated in "preprofessional" writing programs within English departments, composition programs, and writing centers at the university level. Students in such classes write reports, journal articles, letters, studies, personal statements, and résumés, along with essays related to their majors and their supposed eventual careers. In such situations, "writing in the disciplines" can quietly subvert the process-oriented approach to composition that we have cultivated over the past two decades. In pursuing cross-curricular projects, we must be wary of slavishly subordinating ourselves and our discipline to the concerns and needs of the disciplines with which we work. Most particularly, we must be wary in our classroom practice of forsaking attention to process, justifiably valued by our discipline, in favor of an emphasis on product, which is generally favored by other disciplines. This is not to say that product, in turn, should be neglected or disparaged—only that in such contexts the process orientation, which has proven its value, is in danger of being subsumed by a preoccupation with product.

The world of writing in the disciplines is filled with forms and conventions far more prescriptive than the five-paragraph essay could ever aspire to be: lab reports, lab notebooks, abstracts, journal articles, documentation formats from the APA and CBE, and so on. An emphasis upon product is insistent and difficult to avoid. Consequently, all too often, we find ourselves pressured by our colleagues from other disciplines, and by our students as well, into focusing upon the "right" way to compose in these technical genres. Every time we succumb to this pressure, we are subverting what we have learned about the processes of writing as well as the processes of learning. We once again become benevolent dictators, decreeing forms and imposing ideas upon students. Perhaps because of our relatively short acquaintance with these forms ourselves, we fail to see them for what they too often are: clichés which can stifle thinking and learning. But just as we resist clichés in our own writing, so must we learn to resist these forms and the formulaic student writing that they can generate—and so must we find occasions to subordinate these forms to other forms of writing that are potentially at least as challenging, power-
ful, significant, and worthwhile. D. Gordon Rohman and Albert O. Wlecke's manifesto is a salutary reminder:

To what end do we teach writing? If it is to program students to produce "Letters and Reports for All Occasions," it is not only ignoble but impossible.... However, if it is to enlighten them concerning the powers of creative discovery within them, then it is both a liberal discipline and a possible writing program.... What we must do is place the principle of actualizing in the minds of students and the methods of imitating it in their hands. (108)

During my own first efforts to teach writing in the disciplines, I was seduced by the promise of being part of something larger than my own program; I quickly, though unconsciously, abandoned some of my own pedagogical goals for the cause of what appeared to be the greater good. Consequently, I found myself disappointed, for instance, when a psychology instructor, who taught a course with which my course was paired, told me at quarter's end that the average scores of my students and of those students not enrolled in my class showed that my students had done somewhat better but that the difference was not statistically significant. I had been hoping for a better showing. Because the cross-curricular movement emphasizes writing primarily as a learning strategy—that is, as a means to an often narrowly defined end—and de-emphasizes writing as thinking—or writing as writing—the psychology professor had mistaken me for a psychology tutor, and I, as well, had apparently mistaken myself as such.

I had been seduced by the claims of the cross-curricular movement, by university politics, by my students, and by my ego as well. I finally realized that not only had I been co-opted by other departments throughout the university but that I had undermined my own classroom practices. Influenced by the illusion of writing instruction as a necessary but subordinate supplement to vocational instruction—whether in psychology, microbiology, race-track management, or art history—I had reverted to educational practices that twenty years of research and theoretical discussion told me were ineffective. I lectured. I punctuated my class presentations with stern warnings about the catastrophic impact of poorly worded memos and late grant proposals. I became authoritarian and didactic—and I was repeatedly thanked and praised for it.

The problem I faced was how to incorporate into these classes opportunities for students to discover and explore the pleasures of thinking and the excitement of following their thoughts—both their worst and their best—through apparent dead ends to discovery. The solution to this problem was my rediscovery of journals—a form of writing I had abandoned when I entered the realm of cross-curricular studies.

The research literature on journals is extensive, and the claims made for journals are broad and wide-ranging. Several researchers and teachers have found that journals compel students to analyze and synthesize information, and so to make imparted knowledge their own (Emig; Fulwiler;
McKinney; Platt). Others suggest that journals force students to make commitments to their ideas, thereby improving class discussions and effectively aiding in education; further, they offer students a place to explore freely without fear of correction by removing constraints and creating an appropriate context for experimentation (Cutter; Nicholl). Still others claim that journals are tools for personal as well as academic growth because they give students an opportunity to discover and develop their own voices as well as their own ideas and values (Wagner; Fulwiler). And I have found that journals also help students improve their writing without unnecessary and often futile instructor interference by providing vast quantities of writing practice without the burden of tedious correcting.

In short, journals do everything that the writing-across-the-curriculum movement has claimed for writing in general. No one, thus far, has found—or at least published—anything negative about journals. One would think that journals might be the very heart of the writing-in-the-disciplines movement, which is predicated upon the assumption that writing—not reading—is the basic stuff of active, liberal, and liberatory education. Yet journals have not, to my knowledge, been anywhere near universally adopted in the cross-curricular classroom. In my experience, more classes assign essays, more assign memos, more assign reports, and more assign résumés than they do journals.

Discussions with my colleagues have yielded a fairly narrow range of explanations for this neglect of journals; their comments may be summarized in three general points:

1) Journals are a nuisance because they're bulky, wordy, sometimes inane, frequently juvenile, and (at least potentially) time-consuming.
2) Journals are basically incompatible with my teaching style.
3) Journals are unproductive.

The third objection—that is, nonproductivity—contains in itself an emphasis on product that, I suspect, is both the basis of these objections and the answer to them. I'm convinced, in fact, that the seeming incompatibility of journal writing with other cross-curricular classroom practices is the key to its worth and justifies its inclusion in every cross-curricular composition class.

Many will claim that other practices in such classes—brainstorming sessions, clustering exercises, rough drafts, and revisions—focus upon process sufficiently enough for safely dispensing with journal writing. All provide ample "unfettered" writing without the addition of journal writing. But these assignments invariably embody implicit teacher expectations and, usually, teacher-imposed values and ideas. Further, while we, as teachers, may be aware that these assignments emphasize process rather than product, this perception is not universally shared by our students.
From our students' point of view, the field's change in focus from the written text to the composing process has been far more limited than we are often prepared to admit. Instead of offering opportunities to focus on the composing process in and of itself, what we have often done is transform process into product. When we ask students to write a draft, they, too, often see that draft as a product to be inspected and critiqued by peers and instructor rather than as a necessary stage in developing a piece of writing. Journal writing is the only activity that can successfully resist this unfortunate subversion. Only in journals can students fully exercise their freedom to experiment and to fail. Only in journals does content necessarily precede and subordinate form, liberating students to pursue their own thoughts and to watch and learn from that pursuit. In fact, the very silliness and inanity of some journal entries is evidence of their absolute honesty, sincerity, originality, and, thus, their ultimate value.

But journals can be inadvertently subverted by narrow use and application in cross-curricular classes. Even the most recent research presents journal writing in a way that overlooks its most fundamental value. Just as cross-curricular writing is often presented as a means to a vocational or institutional end, so journals are presented solely as a pedagogical tool—primarily useful in helping students process information presented in a variety of courses. Certainly, claims for journals as heuristic tools are true, as this journal entry by a student in my embryology writing class illustrates:

The really neat thing I liked about the Thursday lecture was she told us the mechanism of epiboly. I was wondering how sheets of cells move. Well, it seems that the ectodermal cells put out little pilipodia which attach to the vitelline membrane and then contract. This continues until the ectoderm completely covers the yolk.

Aha! Then one of the layers is ectoderm. Dumb-de-dumb-dumb-dumb! Okay, so what's the second layer? Possibly mesoderm? Yeah. How about endoderm? I don't think so because the endoderm is the first to form from invagination at the primitive streak. The endoderm displaces the hypoblast according to Abbott (although the book doesn't take this point of view—it says that the endoderm is formed on top of the hypoblast). Regardless, the endoderm is completely formed by the time the mesoderm is invaginated. Therefore, it's probably mesoderm and ectoderm! I need to find out for sure.

Moments of discovery like this one are exhilarating, well worthwhile, and quite common in journals—and they are the focus of much recent research on journals. However, such assignments tell students to explore primarily what we, teachers, believe rather than encourage them to explore what they themselves believe. Research articles which laud this kind of journal writing say, in effect, "See? Writing is valuable and useful—because it helps students to learn what we lecture to them about in engineering, math, embryology, and chemistry." For example, recent research at Michigan Technological University on the use of journals in other disciplines emphasizes almost exclusively student improvement in
the discipline-specific companion course with no mention whatsoever of student progress in self-knowledge, writing skills, or pleasure in composing (Selfe et al.; Selfe and Arbabi). The fact that writing facilitates learning is certainly an important message to pass on to our colleagues throughout the university; but writing, we have to remind ourselves, is valuable in and of itself. Our students need to develop ability in expressive writing as well as in social and professional writing.

My students' journals show me this repeatedly. In their journals, many of them discover the joy of the text, or, as one student said, the "fun of writing for its own darned sake." In their journals, the often illusory distinction between intellectual work and intellectual play breaks down. For example, my students use the rhetorical modes to organize passages about improbable topics, using the standard technical description format, for instance, to describe a baby's or a lover's birthmark or a piece of rigatoni. One technical writing student recorded an extraordinary vision of his entire waking life as a process analysis and wrote it out in his journal as a parody of bad technical writing.

Writing is the "liberation" in liberal education, and journals are demonstrably liberating (pace, Hirsch and Bloom). A Chinese graduate student of mine began her first journal entry anxiously and poignantly by writing: "I have not kept a journal since the Cultural Revolution." Similarly, my American students seem universally glad to be rid even momentarily of the cumbersome and stifling—though often invisible—expectations of university culture. Typical of many, one writes:

You know, this is strange... But I'm actually enjoying English. This is one of the most worthwhile classes that I've taken at Davis. I would have never believed it if I hadn't taken this class. For once, I can think about what I want to think about. I don't have to memorize some lecture on evolution or sensory systems. I can write whatever I want to write. This is kind of nice. It's almost like painting. You know, freedom.

Later in the same entry, this student, enrolled in a writing class paired with an anthropology course, uses this freedom to voice normally suppressed objections to the dominant ideology of her campus culture:

It's hard to believe that anybody can believe all that bunk about evolution. After studying how complex and intricately designed all living creatures and the universe are, it is far more convincing to believe in God. Only God could create something as efficient and elaborate as the human body. There's no way that we could have begun as little microorganisms. The funny thing is that although many professors talk fervently about evolution, most of us students don't believe it. In fact, it seems more like a science fiction story. Unfortunately, I have to study it to graduate.

"Heresy!" I muttered when I first read this journal entry. But through the journal, heresy can make its way into the composition classroom—where it belongs. This entry contains doubts, beliefs, objections, and ruminations that would never be allowed, by either the writer or her instructor, to
appear in her physical anthropology papers. However, suppressing error no doubt perpetuates error. Such ideas need to be written and explored—and the journal provides one of the few places in the curriculum where they can be probed.

Composition teachers have always tried to create this type of intellectual environment—where exploring ideas is deemed at least as important as finding correct answers. This "underlife" of the composition classroom (see Brooke)—found more often in conversations in pizza parlors, dormitory rooms, and all-night laundromats than in classrooms—is an essential component of liberal education. In the cross-curricular classroom, this underlife can be threatened by the composition teacher's own desire to provide the right answers and to mouth correct interpretations of the companion discipline. This, of course, is not our role. We're teachers of composition, of thinking and composing—not of anthropology, or experimental psychology, or embryology. Students' journals not only can remind us of this but often insist on it.

Moreover, our colleagues in other disciplines need our help in sharing with their students the sense of bewilderment at the heart of the intellectual curiosity which drives all disciplines. Lewis Thomas, in a proposal to revise American scientific education, says:

> I believe that the worst thing that has happened to science education is that the fun has gone out of it. A great many good students look at it as slogging work to be got through on the way to medical school. Others are turned off by the premedical students themselves, embattled and bleeding for grades and class standing. Very few recognize science as the high adventure it really is, the wildest of all explorations. (93)

Thomas further complains that students don't properly understand bafflement: "Baffled early on, they are misled into thinking that bafflement is simply the result of not having learned all the facts. They should be told that everyone else is baffled as well" (93). Scientists are arguably exceeded in their appreciation for bafflement only by composition teachers. Bafflement has traditionally been within our purview, for it lies at the very core of the definition and etymology of the "essay," and we need now to promote and explore it. Bafflement is important, moreover, to every discipline, for it is the necessary first product of epistemological concerns.

I no longer try to focus students' journals exclusively on the subject matter or goals of other disciplines, for students will do that elsewhere, as well as in my writing class. Instead, I frequently ask students to think and write about ways in which their respective disciplines inform composition. In response, structural engineering students have written accounts of ways in which a well-wrought piece of writing is like a sound bridge, with extensive analogical comments on materials and design. Landscape architecture students have explained the similarities between their "design process" and writing process. Anthropology students have reflected upon writing as a form of tool-making, and last week, the zoology stu-
dents discovered that writing is analogous to embryonic development.

This last example raises a crucial question, one that I raise with my students: which came first, the capacity for language, metaphor, and symbolic thought or the capacity for bridge construction and experiments on white mice and *drosophila*? As it goes with the species, so it goes with the individual: the two capacities—if they really are distinct capacities—develop simultaneously and interdependently. As a composition teacher in a cross-curricular program, I teach the capacity that I know the most about.

In their journals, my students discover, explore, and develop exactly this capacity for invention. In doing so, they are developing methods of criticism and analysis applicable both to writing and to their other disciplines. But in asking students to write journals related to non-humanities courses, our primary purpose should not be to educate them about nonhumanities courses—particularly as "education" becomes increasingly synonymous with "training"—but to help them enrich themselves, authorize themselves, startle and amaze themselves, and humanize themselves. Instructors in other disciplines have much to gain by assigning more writing and more types of writing, including journals. Composition instructors must be careful, however, about what can be lost when they move into other disciplines. The journal offers an effective way to ensure that utility and product are not overly emphasized in writing in the disciplines. As we read our students' questions, explorations, objectives, puzzlements—and as we write in our own journals—we discover our own uncertainties and bewilderments. This process is also part of our discipline. As composition instructors, we find our true subjects in uncertainty, heresy, and bewilderment—as well as, on occasion, pituitary glands and *australopithecines*.¹

University of California
Davis, California

Notes

¹An earlier version of this essay was presented in October 1987, at the Pacific Coast Writing Centers Conference, held at the University of California at Davis. I wish to thank the participants as well as my colleagues at the Campus Writing Center, U.C. Davis, for their thoughtful comments.

Works Cited


