

17 E-Journals: Writing to Learn in the Literature Classroom

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Roses and jasmine were in bloom. Hummingbirds careened past us as they made for the trumpet vine. We were dreaming in California. Suddenly my daughter Leigh took me back to the cold Wisconsin winter and the semester I was about to face back home in Milwaukee. “Don’t forget your engineers, Mom,” came her Silicon Valley voice.

“What?”

“When you start teaching your lit course this fall, don’t forget that you have students just like Torrey in your class.” Torrey is my son-in-law, an engineer. For many years, for all the years of his undergraduate and graduate training, he never read for pleasure. He never read fiction. In fact, he considered it frivolous, a waste of time. He’d only recently come to see it as a form of education and pleasure. But I was well aware that in every class I taught, there were students like Torrey, keeping quiet about it, but feeling frustrated, feeling defeated by the subject matter. I also knew that there would be students in my class who read the way I did: for pleasure, for the joy of the language, for the intensity of the involvement with plot and character. And I also knew that to be able to read for pleasure was to be able to experience, to inhale, to live with and love the prose rhythms, the rich, evocative sentences, the irony, the complexity of language, the cleverness of wit, the play of words of great writers. I felt, going into this class, that exposure to these structures and forms and genres would influence the thinking of students, make possible to them new forms, and through those forms new and increased complexity of ideas. Learn to interpret a text and you will know more about interpreting the world. Lofty goals? Yes. Aspirations; inspirations, even.

But I had other, simpler goals too, goals that were closer to the ground in a sense, but that related to those loftier ones, that made them possible. One goal for my literature class was to make it truly writing-intensive, to use as many of the writing-to-learn techniques as I could adapt from their two-semester first-year writing sequence and from writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) workshops I’d attended and conducted. I was trying to address two problems I’d encountered at Marquette: I’d found that literature teachers who assigned two

papers and gave two essay tests considered their courses writing-intensive. I'd also found through working in the writing center with students from these literature classes that a number of them, as they wrote literature papers, had lost sight of many of the heuristics they had found helpful as first-year students; they became one-draft writers in their literature courses. They attempted to fit old five-paragraph theme forms from their high school writing into the literature class. They wanted to summarize or write biographies.

This meant, though, that they had to forget our entire first-year sequence, two rigorous semesters that taught them an awareness of audience and purpose, a sense of style, sound argumentative strategies, appropriate supporting arguments, and research methods. Our first-year sequence has built into it many revisions of drafts and many invention techniques that adapt well to the literature classroom. I wanted to integrate as many of these writing elements and strategies as I could into my literature classes so that I could report back to the director of undergraduate studies about those that had worked and those that hadn't. I wanted the word to get out about how to tap into what students already knew so that they could keep their writing skills current and apply what they knew, to write to learn on their own, in all courses and for all writing, in and out of college. These sophomore-level literature survey courses, required for most majors, including engineering, are our last chance to reach some of these students with writing-to-learn strategies. I taught one section of Introduction to Fiction during the fall and again the following spring semester. The texts were six novels, all with the theme of the maturation of a young protagonist. But far from being a course in the bildungsroman, it was simply a non-major's course in fiction with a theme I hoped they could relate to.

I couldn't have predicted it, but the electronic journal turned out to be the centerpiece of the course, the one element that, more than any other, really moved my students ahead, that facilitated their learning about literature and about writing about literature. It fit into a matrix of other writing-to-learn exercises and techniques, but it outshone them. I incorporated a few of my favorite writing strategies, some my students had ranked as very helpful. One was the technique of structured in-class group brainstorming for paper topics. Another was peer critiques. Students offered feedback on drafts, as they had learned to do in their writing course the year before. Then I collected drafts and had conferences with students on the ungraded papers. Then they revised. I encouraged some of them to continue their discussion of their work with tutors at the writing center. They did proofreading workshops the day papers were due. And there was plenty of in-class freewriting. But the online or e-journal was the highlight of the course, the element that helped my students come closest to my goals for them.

My initial goal for the e-journal was to have the students learn from one another. I wanted the resistant readers to learn from those students, majors in

every discipline, who read for the joy of it and who have a sharp critical reading ability, an ability to interpret texts shrewdly. And regardless of their approaches to literature, like it or hate it, many students would come to class hoping I would give them canned interpretations they could learn and be tested on. But learning a single privileged interpretation, of course, is not the goal of a good literature course. The goal, in addition to initiating the students into the tradition and forms of literary interpretation, is to get students to venture interpretations of their own, a goal that fits into the mission of the college and of the university, to foster independent critical thought.

My colleague and friend in the math department, George Corliss, had first introduced me to e-mail by convincing me that he could extend his office hours and increase his contact with his math and computer science students by inviting them to e-mail him. He considers e-mail at least as important as lectures and office hours, especially for those students who are still intimidated by office visits. Depending on the project, he sends messages and assignments over e-mail. This, he finds, gets the students hooked on reading their mail and makes them more likely to communicate with him. His students submit their computer programs to him over e-mail so he can run them and verify their results. He also finds it useful to be able to verify from which account the programs originate. And because he is compiling a database of article summaries in his field, he collects certain assignments only electronically. He sent me my first e-mail message and has been a valuable resource for me as I find my way electronically.

I found my inspiration for the e-journal in a peer tutoring course taught by Virginia Chappell, another Marquette colleague and friend. She had her class of fifteen write an electronic class journal once a week. Each week a different student would pose the week's question about the readings or the tutoring they were observing. Each student was expected to read all the entries. She found that the e-journal fostered speculation about writing center theory and practice. (Chappell 1995).

Although my literature class had forty students rather than fifteen, I still thought they would benefit from one another's literary interpretations. My students were responsible for reading all the posts from their classmates that preceded theirs. This was a lot of reading for them and for me, but it was not overwhelming, except for those students who put it off and had to read all thirty-nine at once before they could reply. They would, I hoped, get used to the idea that there are alternative readings of texts, and that the answers do not always or only come from the instructor. I wanted them to build on the reflexive nature of the journal but to take it further. I knew, as all instructors do, that some paper journals are written the night before they are due and are done meticulously in different handwritings and different colored inks. So I wanted a weekly deadline for the e-journals. I felt that since the entries were coming to me over the

course of the week, I would find them easier to read than a stack of paper journal entries. And I felt no need to comment on them, since the other students would be responding to their entries. I sent the class a prompt during the weekend, and their responses were due by midnight of the following Thursday.

The rules were simple: it was to be freewriting, one screenful. The entry had to respond to a prompt, and it had to show me that the writer had done the reading. To be sure they understood what was expected of them, I brought in a few fine posts on overheads so they could see what features made the entries successful. In the rare case of the post being vague or general, I would send it back to the student and ask him or her to re-do it. I also sent praise, private and public, for good work.

The reward for keeping up with the e-journal was substantial: they could raise their final grade by a full letter if they met the requirements. The punishment was substantial too: since the e-journal was a course requirement, if they missed more than two they did not pass the course. (This of course led to a few frantic Friday morning phone calls, but I was lenient with them; I knew that access could be a problem and felt that students who forgot once should be forgiven.)

I wrote the prompts because I wanted to direct the week's emphasis and coordinate it with class discussion. E-mail conferences are a fine way to free the students of the tyranny of the instructor, but I wanted no pretense here: we had work to do, and I wanted to guide this discussion. We began with *Pride and Prejudice*, looking at elements of character development, then plot structure, then narrative features. Austen set a high standard. As we read such novelists as Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and James Joyce, who set innovative new standards for fiction, we had a baseline from which to move and with which to compare. As we looked at the work of contemporary writers Margaret Atwood and Bobbie Ann Mason, we would have a rich social matrix and sets of norms against which to look at current issues of coming of age.

Because many students had never used e-mail, I scheduled a session in our computer lab during the first week of class and had one of the technicians there introduce students to their accounts and to the techniques they needed to know to maintain them and mail to the class. Those who had already sent me an e-mail message were allowed to skip this class. Bob Ferguson from our computer services division set up a distribution list for me based on my class list and sent me instructions to forward to those students who did not attend the e-mail session with him, simple steps that let them access the list.

Although some students simply could not make it work at first, soon the project was off the ground. Initially, the students were acutely aware of their peers and of me as they freewrote. When they started, they used a stilted mini-essay approach in their posts, but as they began to feel comfortable with one another and with me, they switched to a free-and-easy slang and bantered briefly

with one another at the beginnings or endings of their posts, initially apologizing for clumsy e-mail use, but then wishing one another a good weekend, setting a relaxed tone. Students often started by specifying which part of the prompt they were responding to. My prompt usually included a number of questions; when one topic would start to feel “used up” to them, they would shift to another. Laura used a colloquial style as she changed the subject:

Please excuse my last failed attempt at a message. Anyway, I agree w/ basically what everyone said about Char's marriage to the idiot, so I'm going to talk about Lydia and Wick. It is pretty obvious as to why W. married Lydia. First, Darcy really gave him no choice, as no one would let him get away w/ruining L.'s life. . . .

Charlotte had become Char, Wickham became W or Wick, and the Reverend Collins was “the idiot.” Laura had started using abbreviations as well as nicknames, but though students continued to have fun with nicknames, the monogramming trend did not continue, as students seemed to find that spelling out the words worked better for them, for clarity. Laura concluded: “Well, that's that. I really liked this book, which surprised me.” Being able to speak in their student voices helped them relax with one another and risk alternative interpretations.

Students were also aware that they had to make a case for their claims. This had been one of the goals of their first-year sequence, evaluating evidence, and I'd made it clear that they would need to carry it over into the literature class. Jennifer was the first to incorporate quotations and page numbers into her posts. This was one of her early posts on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

I believe there are a couple of reasons for Dorian's initial coldness toward Sybil. First of all, she has made him out to be a liar to Basil and Lord Henry, whom Dorian so eagerly wanted to impress with this talented young woman he'd fallen in love with. Dorian brags to his friends, “. . . she is divine beyond all living things. When she acts you will forget everything” (86). This description hardly portrays the Sybil Vane on stage however, “. . . the staginess of her acting was unbearable, and grew worse as she went on. Her gestures became absurdly artificial . . . it was simply bad art” (88). Dorian was well aware of the discontent of his friends with her performance. “She seemed to them to be absolutely incompetent. They were horribly disappointed” (88). A lot of Dorian's bitterness evolved around the fact that she had embarrassed him greatly in front of his friends.

When I saw her do this on her own, I posted to the list as well, pointing out how helpful this had been.

Subj: Great post

Hi, everybody. Look again at Jennifer Metcalfe's post; if you deleted it, email me and ask me to forward it to you. It's a sort of model response to the question. It refers to specific passages in the text, and even quotes them,

with page numbers. Try to be specific, the way Jennifer is; try not to be too general. Jennifer, this is great work. PFG

Soon other students began quoting and citing, some even apologizing to the others for not having their books with them when they posted. In their desire to be clear to one another, they had stumbled upon the elements of a good literature paper: quotations from the text, page numbers, interpretation of quotations.

I knew that audience would make a difference in journal writing, but I had no idea that it would tie in so well with the goals of the course. Students began engaging with one another as well as with the texts. Early in the semester, Jeremy, who had identified himself to me as learning disabled, found it more comfortable to agree with others than to disagree. Most of his posts took the previous positions and added to them. Here is his post in October:

Pansy. When I first met Pansy I agreed with Jessica Taylor in that I too thought that Pansy was a little kid instead of a 15 year old girl. The author even refers to her as "the child" on page 188. I would also have to agree with a previous statement in someone elses response (sorry I can't remember who it is) that the auther named her Pansy to strengthen her charater of being like a "wimp or pansy."

This post shows not only the way students took seriously my request to be specific and use textual evidence, but an engagement with other students, including an apology for a forgotten name. By November, answering a question about *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Jeremy feels comfortable disagreeing, and he supports his position well:

After reading all the prompts, the majority of the people responded to why it is so hard to get to know stephen. The only problem is that it is not hard to get to know stephen at all. From the first page in the book you could tell that stephen is a child by the way he jumps from thought to thought. He would be thinking about one thing and then ramble on to another. this is extremmly typical of a child; rambling on about everything and anything.

A major point raised in the prompts was that because their is no set narrator or family to describe stephen we have a hard time getting to know who he is. Well that fact is is that Stephen doesn't even know who he is so how could the narrator know who he is. As Tara Strauss pointed out stephen is growing and maturing as we go along in the story. We are learning about stephen as stephen is learning about himself. Karen Talbot points out that stephen jumping all over the place is getting to know him. I couldn't agree more, the more I read the clearer picture I get of stephen. We are learning of stephen character thru himself which I think is a well needed change of pace then having the character hand fed to us.

I like the way that this book is written and the way that stephen think because it reminds me a lot of when I was a kid and the way that I would change my thought process every other second. Quit complaining and start enjoying the book.

Even in his disagreement, Jeremy shows respect for his classmates, mentioning them by name, showing what a thorough job he has done in his reading of their entries.

Students used the e-journals, too, as a way to communicate to me. One was confused by the Hugh Kenner introduction to our copy of *A Portrait of the Artist*. I addressed her question in class, taking issue with Kenner myself, setting a tone of respectful disagreement over interpretations. Another student wanted me to explain who Parnell was, so my class lecture/discussion on Irish politics felt to the students as if it had started with their inquiry to me. Sometimes they just vented: “Does any of this make sense? I fear I may have lost some brain cells during the celebration of halloween (smile). Jennifer”

Sometimes their engagement with the texts led to statements about their own experiences:

Getting to know Stephen is so different because I feel like I am inside of Stephen—he is more real to me than the characters in past novels and I can relate to the vacillating emotions he experiences. I am enjoying this book because I can see a lot of myself in young Stephen. When asked if he kissed his mother before going to bed, Stephen first says “I do” and when everyone laughs, he switches his answer to “I do not” and everyone laughs again. Stephen, in a state of confusion, asks himself, “What was the right answer to the question?” (26). YES—I CAN RELATE!!! I am glad to finally read a book with characters I can relate to! So many students have said that this book is confusing and hard to understand. Isn’t that the whole point of the book— LIFE IS CONFUSING, UNFAIR, AND HARD TO UNDERSTAND— ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU ARE A YOUNG ADULT OR AN OLD TEENAGER!

Sara

By the end of the semester, the posts astonished me in their sophistication. Sometimes they led students to paper topics. Sophia developed her query here into a very fine final paper on Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*:

I will be responding to the prompt about whether this book is written in a child’s voice or Elaine’s adult voice.

I have thought about this question long and hard and I’ve searched the book to find passages that are telling as far as this question is concerned and I have come to the conclusion that we are seeing both points of view at the same time. That’s why in chapter one, Atwood is explaining to us how she wrote the book. She says, “Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in TWO PLACES AT ONCE.” Later on, we get to the chronological point where Elaine gets this from her brother, but there’s a reason why she begins with this. It’s because that’s exactly what she is doing throughout this entire novel. Elaine is existing in two places at once and taking us along with her. We are in the place where the child Elaine is telling us what she is seeing and also the place where the adult Elaine is

tell us what she remembers. There is evidence throughout the novel that both of these points of view are existing simultaneously. Some of the evidence that we are listening to a child's voice has already been mentioned, the references to scabs and snot and farts and the like. But one thing I noticed is that Elaine, in these childhood memories doesn't always use these childhood words. Sometimes she says "pee" and "turds" and sounds like a child, and sometimes she says "piss" and "shit" and sounds more like an adult applying adult language to her childhood memories. Refer to these quotes. "Sometimes he writes in pee, on the thin edge of sand or on the surface of the water By the end of the summer he has done the whole solar system, three times over, in pee." (72).

Students were required to write only one screenful of text, but Sophia did not stop at that. She went on from here to detail example after example, writing the draft of a mini-essay that was to become her final paper for the class. She used an informal student voice, but was doing serious text-searching and analysis of narrative structures, the sort of work that would normally appear in a formal paper, but that students would never get to see from their peers, unless they were doing peer critiquing or editing. Students were not required to take the journal to these lengths, but many did, outstripping my simple goals for the engineers who might hate novels.

The two classes that tried this e-journal wrote very similar online posts. But the classroom carryover was striking in its differences. The first class was the most talkative I had ever taught. Everyone had ideas. Hands were up all over the room as we elaborated on issues raised in the journals. And even those students who, I feel, would have been hesitant to talk in a traditional class joined in. Class was relaxed, since the students all knew one another from their online discourse. I was feeling heady about the generalizations I could make about class discussions.

But then I tried the e-journal again for the second semester, sure that the students would respond the same way in class. I threw questions at them, just as I had in the first class. Silence. To my surprise, they were reticent, not shy with one another, but hesitant to offer answers. I had to vary my pedagogy and allow for them to try out their ideas on paper first. If I let them freewrite in response to my questions, they were as free and experimental, as unrestrained as the first class. They had, as a group, simply become reliant on writing as their means of thinking questions through. I think that it was unusual and lucky that I had two classes that sorted themselves out in this way, because I feel that the more usual class would be made up of some students who feel ready to hazard an interpretation right away while some others would need to write out an answer first and then discuss. Now I'll be more attuned to those students who prefer to write before they speak.

I ran into one technical problem that I needed to address after the first few weeks. I gave feedback to those students who were approaching the limit of the

posts they were allowed to miss. When I warned them, they claimed that they had sent posts in every week. Clearly I had to have an accounting system that would keep this from becoming a problem. Here was what I worked out. Every time I read a post, I saved it in a folder in my mainframe account (I had to get some extra memory to do this). Then every Friday morning I would bring to class the printed-out directory of the folder. Students were to check it to make sure their names were on it if they had sent a post. They were to keep a copy of their own posts so they could re-send them if necessary. Once I began circulating those lists, there were no further problems with missing entries.

Another modification I will make the next time I teach this course is to divide a class of forty into two journal groups, so there is less volume for them to read. I will bring in the best posts from both groups and show them to the class so they all have the opportunity to see these or, as the year goes on, forward posts to the other group. I will still have forty entries to read, but so far I have never found the task too demanding, even at 11:55 on a Thursday night.

I've often asked myself why reading e-journals seemed like less work than collecting and commenting on paper journals, and there are several reasons. For one thing, students comment on one another's posts. I don't have to. When I do send back written feedback to an individual, it's instantaneous and doesn't require class time to hand out. And entries come in over the course of the week. I would post the prompts on the weekend, and usually by Sunday night the first entries would appear. Sometimes there would be a rush on Thursday night, when they were due, but that would be rare. I'd often be up late, reading e-mail, and sometimes I'd get a personal note from a student racing to finish up: "Sorry this is so late: my week was so crazy." Occasionally a post would just make it in at 11:59 and then the student and I would laugh about it together online.

Earlier this year our experienced WAC enthusiasts had a series of brown bag lunches for interested Marquette faculty. We were each asked to describe our uses of WAC techniques. In a joint presentation, George Corliss and I each spoke of the way we had used online journals or e-mail class communications. We could tell from their responses and questions that faculty from all the departments present could see an application of the online journal for their own disciplines. George has set up e-mail discussion groups for his students who work as computer consultants with area businesses. These groups include him and sometimes the business contact person. The groups do much of what my e-journal did: allow ideas to become refined, allow input from everyone, keep all group members informed. He has now moved his database onto the World Wide Web. This prospect is tempting, but until my building is hard-wired, I am still confined to e-mail for my discussions. The other faculty members, especially those who use paper journals, have been very enthusiastic about picking up the ideas, and the staff at our computer service division is very cooperative and interested in seeing computers being used to advance learning.

The e-journal not only allowed students to write to learn, but it allowed them to see how others wrote to learn. I received a letter at the end of the spring semester class from a student who felt at the start of the term that he would never understand literature. He was discouraged and hostile, he said. But by the end of the semester he felt he could master any fiction, and he felt he would enjoy it. His letter took me back to that California afternoon when my child reminded me to do my job and when I resolved to use Silicon Valley technology to get the job done.

Work Cited

Chappell, Virginia A. 1995. "Theorizing in Practice: Tutor Training 'Live From the VAX Lab.'" *Computers and Composition* 12.2: 227-37.