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Teaching Concerns

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Teaching with Reading Journals

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[W]e seldom tell [students] what thinking means; we seldom tell them it is just putting this and that together; it is just saying one thing in terms of another. To tell them is to set their feet on the first rung of a ladder the top of which sticks through the sky.

— Robert Frost

Many teachers recognize the value of informal, reflective engagement with a topic. Such engagement can be a source of pleasure, insight, and authentic personal growth. Yet it has often seemed to me that our students receive little guidance in what it means to put "this and that together," to think reflectively, independently—even playfully—about their course subjects. How can we foster this reflective engagement in our students, and help them become more personally invested in their education?

To address these challenges, I now ask my students to keep a course reading journal. What is a reading journal? More reflective than a lecture notebook, a journal is a place where students can record their efforts to engage and come to terms with a course, without worrying unduly about being evaluated (though I touch on the question of evaluation below). Calling for informal, expressive writing, journals allow students to explore ideas, pursue insights, tap undiscovered interests, and experiment with unfamiliar perspectives with a freedom rarely possible in papers and exams. Moreover, journals allow students to register subjective preferences and inherited assumptions, making them available for scrutiny and revision. Above all, journals can help students develop a regular practice of listening attentively to their own thinking in a course.

There are many ways to build a journal assignment into a course. Some teachers ask students to manage their journals independently; others prefer to monitor student journals very closely. Journals can be focused exclusively on the course subject, or they can incorporate students' extracurricular experiences. I have found that some combination of these options works best. In my classes, I ask my students to write three full-page entries a week on any aspect of the week's readings, discussions, or lectures that interests them—a character, passage, theme, and so on. In addition, to suggest the possibility of resonances between our course and other parts of their lives, I invite students to connect our course to other classes, current events, and experiences beyond academics. The guiding rule is only this-that each entry should be anchored in a serious consideration of the readings.

To complement this semester-long assignment, and to encourage students to stay actively engaged in their journal writing, I make the journals a platform for a variety of short reflective exercises. Here are some activities teachers might try:

- Start a discussion by asking volunteers to read pertinent entries from their journals to the class.
- Have students write for five minutes to start a class discussion. In-class writing on a specific question can focus students' attention and give each student time to formulate substantive thoughts.
- Have students write in-class entries to summarize a discussion or lecture, respond to a classroom activity (a film or presentation), or generate questions for further exploration.

- Assign take-home journal topics designed to help students synthesize difficult material or grapple with the larger implications of an idea or text.
- Have students exchange and respond to selected journal entries. Students will see that the same material can be approached in illuminatingly diverse ways.
- Towards the end of a semester, ask students to read their journals and write entries reflecting on the development of their thinking and knowledge.

Assignments like these—they can be easily adapted to courses in many disciplines—can have valuable pedagogical benefits. By writing consistently (both in and out of class) to formulate responses to their course's materials, students can discover what they think and learn to become invested in their own ideas. Students also come to class prepared to contribute richly and substantively to discussions. Equally important, consistent journal writing throughout a semester helps students immerse themselves in a course and equips them to make increasingly complex insights and connections. An additional benefit is that journals offer teachers a privileged view of their students' interests, difficulties, and intellectual energies, which might otherwise remain hidden. Thus the journals can form the basis for meaningful intellectual exchange between student and teacher.

Because reading journals are documents of intellectual exploration, the notion of evaluating them can be daunting: to grade reflective writing can seem contradictory. But journals are more likely to succeed if students know their writing "counts" in some way, and there are ways to evaluate journals without compromising genuine student reflection. Teachers can grade journals on a pass/fail basis, passing all journals that meet basic requirements. Teachers can grade journals according to the quantity of writing they contain. Instructors inclined to evaluate the content of journals can reward exceptionally vital journals without penalizing merely adequate ones. In my classes, journals contribute to a student's participation grade; but journals may also be allotted their own percentage of a final grade. I collect the journals three times a semester and read three or four entries, spot-checking the rest. I then write brief comments offering praise, responses to students' ideas, and suggestions for how students can make their journal writing more rewarding. In order to be genuine vehicles of reflection, journals should not damage a student's grade—as long as the student does his or her best and is conscientious in fulfilling the assignment. Teachers can be more critical of content when evaluating more formal work—such as papers and exams. My rule of thumb is that students who fulfill the basic requirements of the journal assignment earn high marks. But most students do much more than the basic minimum.

Indeed, I have found that students welcome the freedom of independent reflection and engagement that journals provide. In conversations and in course evaluations, my students express surprise and satisfaction that their journal writing gave them a firmer, more individual grasp of their experience of a course. A former comparative literature student wrote, "To explain how much [the] reading journals benefited me [. . .] I will say this: I still have and often read through my journal from last fall." Students find that their journals aid them in claiming ownership of a course.

By encouraging students to explore and write about their class materials, a wellorganized journal assignment can enrich almost any course. It may also do more. Habits of attention, imagination, and reflection do not come naturally. They must be learned. In requiring regular, independent engagement with a course's subject matter, reading journals can help students begin to acquire these habits.

NOTE: Teachers interested in using reading journals in their classes may find these resources helpful, as I have: Robert Boice, *Advice for New Faculty Members: Nihil Nimus* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000) 103-202; Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973); Toby Fulwiler, *Teaching with Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986) 15-34.