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# JOURNALING AS A TEACHING AND LEARNING TOOL

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Requiring students to keep journals is a most valuable teaching and learning tool. Student writing can be more than a way that we justify the grades we give students at the end of each term. Writing is a multi-functional tool that can be used not only for evaluation but also for teaching and learning. In using writing for teaching and learning, we help our students develop analytical, critical thinking, and organizational skills that will help them be successful. Requiring students to keep journals is just such a tool. In addition, it helps achieve the SDSU Lead Forward Goal of making students communication-able. Journaling can also help achieve a second Lead Forward Goal, that of student retention. Journals open a door to a personal connection between the teacher and the student that provides opportunities both to assist students in their academic lives and to serve as mentors.

Britton et al. (1975, Chap. 6) have identified three types of writing in which students engage: transactional, expressive, and poetic. Transactional writing involves full and explicit communication. It is used to inform, persuade or instruct people. Our students usually utilize transactional writing either in essay examination questions or in term papers. The student communicates what has been learned in the course or in his or her research. I use both essay exams and term papers in my classroom to evaluate how well students have understood the content of the class.

The problem with essay examinations and term papers is in the notion that “they are used to evaluate how well students have understood the content of the class.” Both activities assume that they have understood the material. Transaction writing is the basis for final evaluation, not really a process for getting to the point of mastering the material.

Freisinger (1982, 9) says that the most serious problem with transactional writing is the student’s inability to think critically, to synthesize, to structure logical arguments. His solution is the second type of writing—expressive writing.

Expressive writing is writing involving the revelation of the student’s experiences, attitudes, and assumptions. It involves the free flow of ideas and feelings (Britton et al., 1975, 90). It is through expressive writing that writing can be transformed into a teaching and learning tool. One way to provide students with the opportunity for expressive writing is through journaling. Journaling is a most valuable teaching and learning tool. I ask students to write reactions to lectures, to assigned readings, and to class discussions. This

gives them the opportunity to think about the ideas and issues involved in the course. Britton et al. (1975, 11) say that expressive writing is a means by which new material can be tentatively explored. This is where real learning is done. It is part of the process of making the information the student's own, of making it fit into his or her thinking or adjusting his or her thinking to the new information (Freisinger 1982, 9).

Journal writing provides a window into the student's mind. Stephen BeMiller (1990, 122), a math professor who has his students keep journals, said: "I had been frustrated because I had no way of seeing student's thinking. I hoped they were, but I couldn't get at the process. What I came to realize was that writing is thinking made visible. It was the tool I had been looking for."

Journaling provides an opportunity to know what the students are thinking. If students do not understand some point in class, I recommend that they write an essay about it in their journals. The process of this writing activity may set them straight. It also provides an opportunity to correct misunderstandings and misperceptions and for them to find out if they are on the right track prior to being graded in their examinations.

Students are also encouraged anticipate examination questions in their journals. I explain to them how I tie the various sections of the course together in my examinations. For example, if they write an essay in their journal on the relationship of interest groups to the legislative process, they will already have thought through the issues involved and will be well prepared for such a question on an exam.

Journals provide more reticent students an opportunity to express their opinions without the public judgment of their peers that would take place in class discussions. It is a private means to participation. Sometimes positive reinforcement in their journals can open up these students to participation in class discussions. If not, I can at least be certain that they understand the material.

Journals provide the opportunity to understand from where my students are coming. I am able to learn about the values developed in their earlier socialization. This helps me address course content to their needs. Course material must be made to fit in with the student's earlier socialization if it is to be incorporated into the student's thinking. This is essential if the students are to assimilate materials into their image or to restructure their images to make them compatible with the new information (Freisinger 1982, 9). By knowing and understanding the student's values, I am better able to help them accomplish this task.

Journals can also help retain students, a second Lead Forward Goal. Journals can be a most personal connection between the student and the teacher. Like most instructors, I encourage my students to visit me in my office. Like most students, they do not. They do however take the time to write in their journals. Their grade depends on it. If they are trying on new ideas, it is much easier to explore those ideas in front of a piece of paper where they can have time to think through their arguments rather than to have to present them in a face to face encounter with their professor.

Sometimes, those ideas are radical ideas that may jeopardize the student's relationship with his or her classmates. They need to be explored in a non-threatening environment. This personal connection establishes positive student-teacher relationships that can result in the identification of opportunities to mentor students.

On an even more personal note, sometimes students have more important things on their minds than the content of my classes. I have never encouraged discussing personal problems in the journals but sometimes they find their way into the discussion. Sometimes, they are relevant if they impact on the student's performance in the class. Other times, problems can be accommodated to reduce the stress in student lives. With really serious problems, the student can be referred to resources on campus that can help

Student writing can be more than just a way to justify grades. It can be a tool to facilitate the teaching and learning process. It can be the means by which we accomplish all of the goals we have for our students. Writing can help our students develop organizational skills. It can help make our students become the critical and analytical thinkers that we want them to be. Our students' writing can provide us with the personally rewarding experiences that we expected when we became teachers.

Writing is also rewarding to students. I like Michael Abbott's (Abbott et al. 1992, 108-109) response to students who ask why he requires them to write. First, it can make you a better person. Writing is a skill and an art. Anyone who writes well is an artist to the rest of the world and a better person because of it. Second, it can make you feel good. Doing anything well makes one feel good. Writing is a satisfying experience. Third, it can make you famous. Good writers become well known. Finally, it can make you rich. Abbott says that writing is the only way that one can make it in corporate America.

On the more practical side, I have found E-mail journals easier to work with than paper journals. E-mail journals do not have to be carried to and from class or home to read them. Penmanship is not a problem, either for me, or for the students. In the E-mail format, there is unlimited space in which to respond. However, I do find that I do spend more time on the journals in this format because I can take advantage of the teaching opportunities which the journals provide.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Delmer Lonowski is a professor of Political Science. He was the 2003 Edward Patrick Hogan Award for Teaching Excellence.