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A Book and a Pencil

Erik Trump

My elementary school, at least as I remember it, did little to encourage students to love books. On the first day of class, my teachers would distribute the books along with the compasses, rulers, protractors, and big pieces of brown butcher paper with which we were to "protect" our books. This process of wrapping the books in paper taught several important object lessons: books were fragile, books cost money, books were important, and we couldn't be trusted to treat anything fragile, expensive, or important with respect. Or with interest. The next order of business was always the distribution of pens so that we could "personalize" our books' covers, suggesting that our primary connection to these texts would be superficial, inscribed on the cover rather than experienced through the pages. This perception was reinforced by the wealthier students who soon traded their handmade covers for glossy, store-bought ones with flashy cartoon and tv show themes that seemed infinitely more exciting than whatever might be found between the covers.

Of all the books I must have read in eight years of elementary school, I remember only one, a thin, paperback, first-grade reading workbook that followed the adventures of a rabbit named, improbably, Uncle Fuddy Duddy. Why recall this book and no others? Well, I *did* like animals. But more important, I encountered this book in a special class, a tutorial where the teacher allowed me to write in the book as I worked through challenging and fascinating stories about rabbits encountering (basically) new vocabulary words. It was heady and entertaining stuff. But, at the end of the year I made a discovery about school books: they belonged to the school, not to me. However much a book might have

continued on page 3

Two-for-One: The Advantages of Special Topic Composition Classes

Helen Raica-Klotz

Yeah, I know. It's hard enough work to teach an advanced composition class—the papers to grade, the lectures to prep, the students to conference with. To add more work to this job, particularly for us adjunct faculty, seems rather foolish, if not downright stupid. But teaching a special topics comp class does have its advantages (and no, unfortunately, one of them is not extra pay).

I have taught a Special Topics Advanced Composition Class in Gender Awareness for two semesters now. Specifically, this means all of the discussion, writing, and reading are on contemporary women's issues. This also means there are new readings for me to find, different lectures to prepare, and a need to remain relatively up-to-date in the ever-changing field of women's studies.

And I find myself discussing on more than one occasion a contemporary and growing concern in academia: that by moving toward interdisciplinary studies we are losing the integrity of each individual field. But interdisciplinary work, particularly in writing classes, has its advantages for the students and for myself, and I would argue these advantages make the experience worthwhile.

1. Most students who take special topics courses

continued on page 4

Trump, continued from page 1

moved me, it had to be left behind, a first-grade artifact, locked forever in room 11A, available nowhere else in the free world (at least, not in the library–I checked). Educational progress, it seemed, was marked on a grade sheet, and all one took from any class was a letter. We could *use* books, but we could not *keep* books. Those with poor memories quickly lost much of what we read.

Frankly, few teachers gave us much reason to take particular interest in our books. The butcher paper cover effectively cut us off from the recognition that an actual person might have written this thing in our hands, and our teachers encouraged this excision: "Class, take out your social studies book." Once out, it became, simply, "the book." Who could argue or engage such an impersonal object, a series of pages with no named author or title? Books became signifiers for subjects: math, science, health, and so on. They had no life of their own. Once the covers went on my books, I never found one that I wished I could take home. Whatever they might have had to say had been violently muffled by their covers.

High school, admittedly, marked a slight improvement. Books were still "issued" (often with stamped-in numbers), and some still required paper protectors, but in a few classes we received "real" books, often paperbacks that resisted most efforts to render them anonymous. I say "most" because some were defaced with peeling contact paper and others were rebound in plain pink hardcovers, rendering *Hard Times* indistinguishable from *Animal Farm*. But the real problem–how we thought of our books–persisted. True, our teachers now referred to "Hawthorne" and "*1984*" rather than to "the" book, but these books were still hard to love. Part of the trouble rested with their musty, beaten appearance. As one of my friends says, she finds it depressing to hold an old, yellowed paperback that smells like someone else's house. Worse though, were the terms of engagement: read in, but do not write in; read, but do not keep; if you find something of interest, hope that you can remember it, because you're leaving this copy behind. Again, I remember vividly the books I bought and read and kept on my own, but I'm hazy about what I studied in my classes.

"...read in, but do not write in; read, but do not keep; if you find something of interest, hope that you can remember it, because you're leaving this copy behind."

My experiences were not, I think, atypical. Many of my students confess (or sometimes protest) that they made it through high school without ever reading an actual book, one with an argument and no illustrations. Unfortunately, even the university continues to send mixed messages about the value of books. Consider the course packet, for example. In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay, James Shapiro lamented the demise of personal libraries and singled out course packets for teaching that "reading material is ultimately disposable." The more immediate issue, from my perspective, is that too many students come to the university with only a vague sense of *how* to read at the college level, of the radically different rules of engagement.

So, what to do? The appropriate response, I believe, involves changing students' attitudes toward the physical object of the book. Quite simply, the lesson "do not write in your book" must be unlearned. Begin, I say, as the writer did, with a pen or pencil. What we have before us is the final draft, but as Annie Dillard has written, we can't see the creator's "usual signs of struggle–blood stains, teeth marks, gashes, and burns." As readers, however, we go through similar struggles, and with our pencils we can record them in the margins, annotating the text, engaging the author, questioning her ideas, noting our Epiphanies. Don't worry, the bookstore will pay the same for a marked as an unmarked book–*if* you decide to resell it.

Aside from the practical benefits of increased comprehension, I stress that annotating a reading changes one's relationship to it. One becomes an active participant in creating meaning. A sense of property ownership elides into a sense of intellectual ownership. One begins to respond to the author. Eventually, understanding leads to criticism and, finally, to original thinking. To illustrate this transformation, I like to tell students a story about one of my undergraduate professors who lent me his copy of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. I opened it and found the margins filled with comments, many of which, to my surprise, consisted of three declarative words: "F__you,

continued on next page

Writing with Graphics

Diane Boehm

The shape and format of written documents is dependent on many factors: audience, purpose, mode of publication, conventions of a genre, and the like. Written documents today are also being shaped in dramatic ways by the possibilities that have evolved in the digital era.

One example of this dramatic change is the use of graphics—communication via visual elements. Increasingly, textbooks and manuals for writing are including chapters on graphics and document design. With the options made possible by graphing programs, spread sheets, scanners, even clip art, audiences today approach a document with different expectations than they brought a generation ago. More and more audiences in more and more arenas look for visual elements to enhance and illustrate text. No savvy presenter in today's workplace will approach an audience without charts or tables or graphs or illustrations of some sort.

Students, however, have often had little or no experience integrating graphics into their texts. They may not have learned how to marry text and graphic so that each enhances the other, to strengthen the communication of the entire piece. If students are to be prepared for the workplaces of the future, we must incorporate assignments which provide experience with graphics.

Students need to learn several basic principles for integrating graphics:
1. The purpose of graphics should be *to clarify the ideas* being presented, to

continued on page 5

Trump, continued from page 2

Arnold!" Needless to say, in the classroom these three words were translated into reasoned critical analysis, but their impression on me forever changed the way I read. The lesson for students is that even the bloodiest engagement can lead to victory.

In a more concrete sense, I teach students how to annotate their reading. First I share my books, photocopying a page or two and doing a public analysis of my own margin notes. Then I make an early assignment that requires nothing more than extensive annotations of a short reading. Throughout the semester, I comment on nicely annotated books, or ask for a voluntary reading of a margin note as the jumping-off point for a discussion.

So. Once parents sent their children off to school with books and a bookstrap. Now we send them off with backpacks, multiple binders and organizers, calculators, and, in the near future, computers.

In this age, my crusade to cultivate a love of books may seem hopelessly nostalgic, and I'm sure that more than one student has already concluded that I'm a fuddy duddy, but I persist under the conviction that with a book and a pencil some may still discover sweetness and light.

Raica-Klotz, from p. 1

(excepting the few who didn't read the special designation at registration and/or take the class simply because it fits into their schedule) are genuinely interested in the topics.

2. I'm more interested. I can only talk about thesis statement and the development of conclusions so many times a year. Don't get me wrong: I still do this, but I get to talk these aspects of writing in the framework of ideas, concepts, and issues that matter to me as well.

3. The first two points lead to the next: classroom discussion is lively and students actively debate readings and ideas. And because the topic is narrowed by definition, readings can develop six or seven contemporary issues throughout the course from different perspectives; a valuable tool for teaching persuasion and argument.

4. Students pick more narrowly focused topics in the given field. This makes their research easier and makes "borrowing" or "Buying" someone else's paper less of a concern for me. I've noticed, in general, the papers I get out of my special topics courses are some of the best-written papers out of any comp class I've taught.

5. Students enjoy the process. My evaluations for my special topics courses are significantly higher than in general comp classes. "I learned more about myself and about writing in this class than any other," wrote one student. This is not to suggest that this kind of revelation cannot happen in any writing class—simply that a special topics class may make this kind of discovery easier. And this is what every class at its best should do.

"Real World" Writing: Helping Students Become Professionals

Sally Cannon

Several years ago, the English department revised what was then Advanced Composition (English 300) into Writing in the Professions. The department felt that Advanced Composition, which focused primarily on essay writing, was not effectively meeting the needs of the English, business, education, criminal justice and other students taking the course. We felt that students still needed a solid grounding in rhetoric, that is, the study of how one's purpose, reader, and context shapes written communication. However, students needed experience in writing to get things done, transactional writing, or professional writing. Thus, Writing in the Professions was born.

What I remember most clearly about our curriculum meetings is the following goal articulated by a colleague: Writing in the Professions should help students bridge the gap from students to professionals. An ambitious goal, to be sure, but I have found that to be one of the most exciting and rewarding goals of the course.

And the best way I have found to accomplish this goal is to construct "real world" writing assignments: where students are invited to write about real problems, to real readers, in the formats appropriate for their intended purpose.

It appears to be working. Students become genuinely engaged in writing assignments that have real relevance to their lives. They become excited about the opportunity to write something for me that they can also turn in at work or as part of their application to graduate school. And it becomes much easier for me to talk about "audience," for example, when they are writing to someone other than the teacher. Stacy Sorenson, a senior majoring in Social Work, e-mailed me the other day to thank me for my help on her resume and cover letter (the first assignment of my course). She had just heard that she had been asked back for a second interview with the Midland Camping Council.

The next day I received another e-mail message from a group of students working on the grant assignment (the largest project of the course, which students work on all semester). Their group is writing a grant to purchase a new set of encyclopedias and resource material for Vassar Elementary School.

Janice Wehner, a senior history major in the group, writes "Whether or not our grant is approved by our classmates [who play the role of the granting institution, making decisions about which grants get funded], the principal is hoping [he can use]... this grant. ...We are wondering if you can help us with this project after the semester ends" (paragraph 5).

Of course, I agreed to help my students refine their grant for submission. Regardless of that outcome, my students will have taken on the persona of professionals in education, researched a real need in the community, and gained practice in gathering evidence to prove that a problem exists.

Just this week, we began another project -a problem analysis and proposal. Students are to select a real problem in their personal, school or work lives, and write to someone in a position to help solve the problem (mother, Dean, boss etc.), first analyzing the problem and then offering a solution.

Several students acknowledged that this assignment allowed them to wrestle with a real issue they faced at work, and that they fully intended to send the memo (or proposal or letter) to the appropriate person when completed. One student, Scott Williamson, a senior business major, admitted that if his company ends up implementing his suggestions, he will get a cash bonus. "One hundred dollars, a good paper, maybe an A.... What could be better?" Scott asked, with a shrug. Indeed.

Work Cited

Wehner, Janice. "Re: Grant Topic." Personal e-mail. (February 26, 1998).

Boehm, continued from page 3

convey important, relevant information that would be hard to explain with written text alone. I suggest that my students ask themselves several questions:

A. Is this the best way to present this information?

B. Who is my reader and how can I be sure he/she understands my graphics?

C. How can I design my graphics to be accurate?

D. How can I design my graphics to be easy to understand?

One graphic I use in nearly all of my classes, for instance, is the table prepared by the library, *Characteristics of Magazines and Scholarly Journals.* In a simple one-page table, it contrasts and compares these two types of publications on the basis of 10 characteristics, including author, purpose, language, tone, etc. Without the table, a writer would probably need at last 2-3 pages of text to convey the same information—and still not be able to replicate the clarity and ease of remembering which the table makes possible.

2. Graphics must be linked to the text:

A. Each graphic should be given a figure number (numbered consecutively throughout the paper).

B. Each graphic should also have a title or caption that concisely describes its content (e.g., Cost of College Degree at Michigan Universities).

C. Writers should reference the graphic within the text of the paper, at that point in the text where they wish the reader to refer to the graphic (e.g., see Figure 2).

3. Source citations must be included. Students are often surprised to find it is possible to plagiarize graphics just as it is possible to plagiarize text. Readers need to know whether a graph was constructed from primary data, taken from another publication, or created by the writer for purposes of illustration.

> *"I have discovered that as students learn to think about writing in the larger contexts which include graphics, they often become more enthusiastic writers."*

4. Graphics must be ethical. This seems apparent—until students have to decide what increments to use on the x and y axes of a graph, for example. Increments of 10 will create far larger peaks and valleys on a line graph than increments of 25. In his 1989 book *Doublespeak,* Lutz provides examples of deceptive graphics used for political purposes. He contrasts two graphs of SAT scores over a 10-year period; the scores are the same, but the graphs are scaled very differently. How dramatically have SAT scores declined over the past two decades? The reader's conclusions will be based directly on the visual image created by the way the graphic was constructed.

5. Language that accompanies a graphic must be chosen with the same precision and grace as all other language in a document. If, for example, a writer will use bullets or icons, he or she must be careful to observe parallel structure for all items in a list. Violating the expectations which the reader brings to a document virtually guarantees reader confusion.

Many kinds of assignments can be used to enable students to learn to use graphics. I have included them in research reports; progress reports; instructions and process descriptions; analyses; argumentative and persuasive essays. Having gained some experience, students in my upper level courses have created professional-quality reports, convincing arguments, and newsletters and brochures which are actually being used by area schools, non-profits and community organizations.

Graphics make a strong impression on readers. They provide a writer with many communication options not available with text alone. In fact, in the process of writing this, I found myself frustrated by the inability to incorporate graphics to demonstrate the points I have been making. How can I demonstrate deceptive graphics in point 4 above without the capacity to illustrate what I mean? I can't. I have discovered that as students learn to think about writing in the larger contexts which include graphics, they often become more enthusiastic writers, as well. When we teach students to use graphics effectively, we provide a communication tool every graduate should have learned to use while a student at SVSU.

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