THE JOURNAL AS TEACHER

I am shocked at what happen to my paper. Cut here, add here, drop here, and tie it all up into a time frame. Shock has set in. I'm shaking and wondering how all my previous work didn't amount to anything. After all I thought that no ink was going to be put on it. With all that extra ink on the paper it was hard to lift off the desk.

This journal entry from one of my students in a college developmental writing course points to the value of journal entries for both student and teacher. His expressing those feelings on paper kept them from weighing him down as he revised. In fact, his essay is one I've kept in my files as an exceptional one for that course. My awareness of his feelings through his journal gave me an opening to respond to his shock and reminded me that I need not share all my wisdom about a student's paper at once.

I have used journals more or less regularly since I began teaching eighth graders through high school students to college freshmen. However, the types of entries I've required have changed. In my early years of using journals I was inspired by Ken Macrorie's Writing to Be Read. I encouraged students to use their entries as prewriting for assignments or perhaps a means of sorting out confusion on a personal or academic level. Later, inspired by my experience with the Twin Cities Area Writing Project, I asked students to record their writing process with its meanderings and frustrations to encourage insight and perspective on that process.

Toby Fulwiler's essay, "The Personal Connection: Journal Writing Across the Curriculum," in Language Connections, published by NCTE, helped me to take journals further. He makes the case for using them as a learning tool by tying the personal to the academic. After hearing him speak at a conference last fall, I resolved to pay closer attention to my students' journal writing to see how effective this tool was. Not only did students learn through their journals, but so did I.

I used journals in two courses last year: a developmental course in writing for freshmen and a regular freshman English section. I asked for three types of entries:

1. Responses to each class period, peer group meeting, or conference with me.
2. Focused in-class entries. These were sometimes used as discussion starters on a poem or other reading. Other times I asked students to evaluate their papers before handing them in. Sometimes I used them to focus a class that was beginning to drift.
3. Students' choices from a list of topics in the remedial class, primarily personal writing, or from readings from an anthology in the regular freshman English class.

I followed the usual practice of not making any comments about spelling, sentence structure, or other editing matters since I saw the primary purpose of the journal to put them in touch with their own thoughts, not to communicate with me. I collected journals about every three weeks and commented on thoughts that interested me or prodded students to deeper thought who appeared to skate along the surface of meaning. I responded to their journals as someone looking over their shoulders, interested but rarely evaluative.

Students gave me ample evidence of their understanding of writing processes, literature, other people, and themselves. Clark commented on his struggles as a developing writer at the beginning of the semester:

September 19, 1983

You know, one thing I get frustrated about is when I can't think of anything to say, or describe something so it sounds good and runs together smoothly. The feeling is like peddling a bike without peddles, there's no place to go. Sometimes it takes me an hour to write a simple paragraph, my mind just clicks in at different times when I am writing. Anyways, I'm glad I got that out on paper.

While the image is not clear, the idea is. He feels a lack of control, not having enough strategies to prod his mind into motion. He appears to be a writer who sees the process as magic. Either it works or it doesn't.

Later, an awareness of the revision process seeps in for another student who is beginning to have some feeling of control:

October 10, 1983

What I had to work on most in my paper was my sentences. That seems to be my biggest problem in all of my papers so far. It seems like I have trouble thinkin of things to write, but when I do figure it out, I always seem to write em, just as I think of them, not in any special order. I guess that comes with revising your paper.

Sometimes the journal provides a live camera on the inside of a student's mind to capture the growth in understanding. Liz wrote at first

My introduction and conclusion need a lot of work in the area of clarification. I still can't find a way...
to jump into the topic with a real clear intro. This makes it even harder to write the conclusion. . . . My sentence structure still needs a lot of work but when I sit down and try to correct a sentence that sounds funny, it just ends up getting worse.

Later that same day she added

I just looked at my paper and read it carefully and I think I understand more of what I want to do with it. The organization is still the big thing along with sentence structure, but now that I know where I'm going with it I feel much better.

We might like to know what happened in between—perhaps just letting the paper rest. These entries clarify students' thinking so that they have sharper questions at conference or peer group critiquing. Students' journal entries can also guide instruction by giving clear evidence of student perceptions of their writing in detail that might not be possible in a fifteen minute conference. After reading Liz's entry and two or three more like it, I spent some class time reviewing methods to break down sentences and reconstruct them more clearly.

In another type of journal entry, I asked students to respond to readings both out of class and in. I suggested that they respond in terms of an idea that impressed them or that related to their lives in one way or another. I urged them toward honest engagement with the piece of writing. Some responses were quite text bound. Others were more critical:

Allport's first sentence sets the tone of the whole essay for me. "Without words we should scarcely be able to form categories at all." True, but obvious. That is my reaction to almost every aspect of this piece.

Another student made a personal response to Emily Dickinson's "After Great Pain, A Formal Feeling Comes."

(The poem) doesn't exactly leave me depressed, there is more a sense of awe, because she captures or explains the feeling of grief so well. I have been through grief and in each time I have been in shock and have seen others in my family in shock. . . . When she wrote the lines The feet, mechanical go round, it was obvious that she was talking about going on. I right away pictured my Grandma's funeral, we went through all the motions and did what had to be done.

These are certainly not responses equivalent to formal literary paper quality, but the insights in the last two cases are perhaps kernels for a formal paper.

Students also learn as they write about their families. At the end of the semester I ask students to evaluate their journals and name their favorite entry. Susan responded

My favorite entry would be the one on my father. It is my favorite because it tells a lot of secrets about my father's childhood plus it made me realize certain things about my father. I felt as though I understood some of the things he did better than I ever had.

In end-of-the-semester evaluations students tend to rate the entries they chose from my lists or from the readings as most useful to them, rating them a 3 on a scale of 1-4, although they rate the entries on conferences and peer groups nearly as high. They almost unanimously recommend requiring journals again.

Not only students learn from journal entries. Teachers get honest response to classes and class structure, see a more relaxed journal voice than the formal paper voice often used by developing writers in early papers, and become more aware of students' perceptions of themselves as writers.

We made a change in our peer group sharing of papers after I read more than one student entry suggesting the copy machine's breaking might have been fortuitous. Cary commented

I think that our group really listened and put themselves into today's class period since some didn't have copies you really had to listen and concentrate on what the reader is saying. . . . If the listener got lost, this was a sign that either the structure is off or that sentences need to be cut.

Paul's response to my initial presentation of revision was less comfortable:

Today in class was virtually boring. We met in our small groups to discuss our revision papers. I felt the assignment wasn't as valuable as the others seeing how we already have revised our papers somewhat. I would be more intent to start over really stressing on revision.

After I stopped fuming at my obvious lack of communication of the purpose of that second chance at revision, I recognized the need to continue the dialogue about revision with Paul. It also reminded me that just because I introduce and reiterate, I may not penetrate.

Another insight derived from journals that I've found useful in instruction is the sometimes painful contrast between the journal voice and the formal paper voice. In Clark's first paper, which I saw before his journal, he began with

To me, home is a sense of security, an everlasting burning in one's heart. This burning flame in my heart is definitely the beautifying outdoors. . . . The woodland surrounding my house is clustered with ripening oaks, tingling pines, huge elms and towering poplars.

This was the same writer who used the fresh imagery about being stuck in his writing as like peddling a bike without going anywhere. I could praise that while discussing the tone problems in the formal

(Continued on page 6)
THE END IS NOT THE MEANS

In my frustration as a teacher of English, particularly in writing instruction, I was lead to abandon some traditional ideas and to adopt some ideas that were, for me, revolutionary. I came out of college in the early sixties ready to change the world. I knew grammar, sentence structure, paragraph structure, and so on, and I was ready to impart all of this knowledge to my students, and to receive wonderful, insightful papers from them that were flawless. I taught them grammar, and they learned it. They knew the parts of speech, the parts of the sentence, the types of sentences, what a good paragraph should be like, oh, just all those things that I had been told would make students good writers. Of course you’re laughing at me for my idealism and my ignorance, but I was really upset that the writing of my students, no matter how well they seemed to know grammar, was not really very good. What was worse, it wasn’t improving very much. My students could tear sentences and paragraphs to pieces and reassemble them; they could even diagram sentences. But when I gave them a writing assignment, none of what I thought I had taught them appeared in the papers which they wrote.

I continued in this way for five years, fighting my frustration, living through sleepless nights, developing an ulcer, until I decided that I was not cut out to be an English teacher. To move away from English I took an advanced degree in speech and theater, but, liking small schools, I was still forced to teach English. For several more years I endured the English classroom, trying not to worry too much about my shortcomings. Then I changed schools, and my English class load became much more demanding. Something had to give.

That I was using the wrong techniques was easier for me to accept than the idea that maybe I just wasn’t a very good English teacher. If this were true, if my techniques were at fault, then I had to start over. Everything I had believed religiously about English instruction, especially about writing instruction, might have to be abandoned, but I thought I could face that challenge. My only problem was in knowing where to begin.

Then I hit on what I thought was a novel approach (I know now that it wasn’t). Why not examine my own writing; see what I actually did