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For a few academic seasons, I have been experimenting with a teaching technique in my composition classes, having the students read aloud from their journals and comment on what is read. This method is, I think, a new hybrid of several age-old techniques, and so far it has added a dimension to class. It seems to have potential.

Requiring students to keep a journal is by now a common, often quite important approach to teaching composition. Donald Hall's Writing Well, for example, urges the student to keep a daily journal, discovering his or her personal responses to the world, jotting down impressions. To enforce this praiseworthy writer's habit, it is customary for the instructor to gather in and read the journals, at term time or at random during the semester.

But gathering in or gazing at the students' journals always bothered me somehow. It changes the rhetorical situation greatly to require a journal, a private kind of writing, but then to look it over like some long out-of-class essay. Building on the good idea of requiring a journal, I add a few variations, minor but important ones, and come up with what I call the "journal-reading method." At the outset, I tell the students that I will never directly look into their journals. This lack of direct supervision by the instructor allows the journal to be more of the private form it has been for most writers. I stress its openness: they can write about anything they want in their journals, but they should write every day. But I also tell the students to prepare a section of the journal for reading aloud in class. I thus allow the students to keep most of their journals private--they choose what they wish to read aloud, and in this way only they bridge the gap between the private rhetoric of the journal and the public rhetoric of class.

After each student reads his or her journal entry-essay for that day, the class comments on what is read. I rarely do most of the talking during these sessions; by bringing the entire class in on commentary about the writing, it creates another rhetorical situation, not just another theme for the teacher to read. The results of these "journal-sessions" for the last few years have been encouraging enough to make me want to continue using this method as part of the composition class.

When I assign this semester-long project of a journal on the first day of class, invariably I get a battery of questions. "Anything? You mean we can write on anything?" "Anything," I reply. "How long does it (the entry) have to be?" "For the public presentation section, remember you are reading aloud to the class, so use that as a guide; if you want, you could mark off sections of a long piece, to be read in 'installments.' But don't do this all semester. For the 'private' section, if you write every day, for however long you take, you're doing the assignment." "How do I tell the public from the private section?" I rock back a bit; this one comes up very often, though usually later in the semester. "That choice is up to you. Keep separate pages or sections, or mark off beforehand what you want to read aloud, or just read any of it, if you

wish." For many of the students, the 'public' and 'private' distinction is irrelevant, nonexistent. But there is no problem in that.

The first day of the journal readings, like the first of anything, is another big time. I move my pen at random down a class list or the roll book, or I just go down the rows, calling on each student to read. A student reads about minding her baby sister, another about fishing with her dad, another about his annoyance at the delays in registration. After each student completes the reading, I simply ask for commentary. "Commentary, anyone?" More often than not, during the first few days I have to pick students from the class-audience to comment on what was just read. I remind them to feel free to say anything, from an overall reaction to some specific comment about a word, a line- whatever they want. Most often, the initial reactions are noncommittal, bland- "I liked it," or "I can understand," and rarely do I get strong negative commentary at this stage (or, en masse, at any stage during the semester). During all this, as at every point when using this classroom procedure, the individual instructor has a whole range of possibilities to exploit from the situation. I tend to be noncommittal, "nondirective" as the psychologists say, early on in the semester during the journal-reading times, letting the students guide each other as much as possible.

Just where those first journal readings go is only approximately predictable. As I have always done, I try to have an open, relatively free-flowing atmosphere of discussion in class, but just what happens varies from group to group. There occur many of the predictable bland responses. But sometimes the very first day will provoke a debate or lively discussion, if a student writer grabs a topic that somehow reaches the audience. When this happens so early in the semester, things can be taken quite far by term time.

As the method becomes familiar, and by midterm each student has gotten to read two or three times (I try to keep careful records, to equalize 'exposure'), the commentary tends to grow more substantive, the insights more frank and spontaneous, at least in a good group in a good semester. In general, the journal readings get better as the audience grows more critical and insightful. If worked to some optimal degree, this method can aid the student in practicing a whole progression of writing forms, from virtually random personal jottings, however interesting, to relatively lengthy and complex essays of argument and exposition.

Problems with using the method center mainly on encouraging and developing a good critical response. Perhaps weeks can go by where there seems to be no visible progress in either the class commentary or the individual journal readings, but I am not so sure that this is as bad as it seems. As with other learning situations, one can hope for growth taking place below the surface. Also, such a kind of writing workshop is terrifying to many first-year college students, and the kind of calm or placid response many of the readings initially call forth from the audience tends to build the confidence of the individual student writer. As the semester wears on, the students' own sense of the need to say something more then tends to take over. There are two stages in the way the quality of the commentary evolves: first, the students go through the noncommittal or backslapping stage; then, restless with their own lack of verbal specifics, they become more pointed

in their commentary.

The advantages to this method are plentiful. Public reading required for every class forces the student to write every day, or at least more frequently than is usual to generate the essays for a semester of composition, and this process of frequent writing is half the work of learning how to write. Also, as R. A. Lanham emphasizes, in his sprightly anti-textbook Style, one way of improving student writing is to force the student writer to read aloud. By hearing their own words delivered to the class, the students begin to police their styles. Also, by getting immediate feedback in a kind of workshop atmosphere, they accelerate the whole process of composing and having a varied audience react to their work, experiencing a briefer and more immediate version of every writer's experience in communication or the lack of it.

The kind of rapport that can develop definitely aids the student writer. One could talk about the "positive reinforcement" inherent in this approach. By sharing whatever the student chooses to share with his or her classmates, each student feels less isolated, eventually creating a relatively stimulating, non-threatening environment for writing. I have had several students cite this kind of social advantage as their favorite feature of this method. Journal reading is very good for developing a sense of audience in the student. At all stages during the semester, the student has the important check of a live audience for whom to write. Reading a particularly effective journal entry, the student can see in the pleased reactions of the audience one major reason for the very origins of writing.

While I have never built an entire semester on the journals alone, it could be done. Journal reading, especially in freshman composition, seems best as a helpful addition to the standard multi-essay semester. It adapts well to whatever is being read or covered in the course; for instance, when teaching persuasive writing I sometimes appoint a 'jury' or 'panel' of students to judge whether the journal readings persuaded them or not, and to analyze each reading for its logical strengths and weaknesses.

What makes the journal-reading method different from writing mini-themes for each class is, I think, the idea that the student is reading from his or her journal. That a student is reading from one book which is all his or her own sets up a slightly different rhetorical situation from the standard 'theme' or 'paper,' however brief. Many of the students write a good deal more in between the 'public' sections, and even if they do not there is something quite different in the whole process. Having the students read aloud has an important tactical advantage, too. Especially in a course where essays will be handed in as a major part of the semester's coursework, it avoids a lot of extra paper-shuffling. And of course there is a gain in immediacy by having the whole class listening and reacting. Journal-reading also provides a natural source of good class discussion; the teacher can shift over to reading journals whenever the other work of a class flags or is successfully done before the bell rings.

I certainly have not worked out all the angles of this teaching method, but I sense that there is good potential there for writing courses. In theory, one could teach a whole semester using the journal-reading method alone, without a reader or even a textbook, though this

is probably not for beginning students. Worked in to a more traditional composition course, it is one useful way to get the students involved and writing well. In any case, it could be considered as another tactic in teaching students how to write.