

CONTEXTUALIZING BUSINESS WRITING THROUGH REFLECTION

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Rebecca, a junior business marketing major, is asked to create in a business writing course documents ranging from resumes to memos to proposals. Early in the course, during an in-class assignment to describe herself as a writer, she states that she is very organized; she thinks about what she will write first and then sets out in a step-by-step manner to compose the document. She often outlines in her head and can usually see the document in her mind before she creates it.

During the course, Rebecca keeps a reflection journal focusing on her writing experiences and her reactions to these experiences (including texts, comments, and subsequent revisions, and understandings of her writing process). During her last entry in the journal, Rebecca reflects on a startling new conclusion about her writing:

In this journal I was analyzing my writing and myself. It was sort of entertaining. This journal actually helped me figure out my writing style. If anyone ever asked me about the way I write, I told him or her that I plan first. Well...that is not true. I cannot stick to a plan even if I had to. I would have never paid any attention to that.

In this article, I discuss how reflection can, and should, be a prominent tool in advanced composition classes, specifically those classes that connect to work-related genres like business writing, technical writing, and scientific writing. Through a discussion of

the successes and pitfalls I encountered while introducing reflection into a business writing class, I will highlight how reflection can help advanced student writers—who are about to leave the university and enter the workforce—better understand the complexity of both writing in general and their writing processes specifically.

For years now, teachers of composition have read entries like the one above from students who reflect upon their writing. Reflection, as defined by Kathleen Blake Yancey, involves “a dialectical process by which we develop and achieve, first, specific goals for learning; second, strategies for reaching those goals; and third, means of determining whether or not we have met those goals or other goals” (6). Thus, reflective writing should help students understand more about their writing processes and also assist them in setting goals for become stronger writers and in evaluating how successful or unsuccessful they are in achieving those goals. With increased interest in portfolio use and the student-centered classroom, researchers and composition teachers seek the more reflective activities that help students set and achieve goals in writing classes. Recent literature showcases popular texts devoted to the issue, including George Hillocks’ *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*, Kathleen Blake Yancey’s *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, Stephen Brookfield’s *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, and Donna Qualley’s *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry*. This interest in reflection has also led to a new generation of classroom texts, including the writer’s memo or letter, the reflective journal, reflective self-assessments, and the reflective cover letter submitted with a portfolio of a student’s (or teacher’s) work.

However, while the practice continues to increase in the first year composition course, reflection has not yet become a staple in advanced writing classes. Most examples of students using reflection show the novice (often freshman) writer using reflection as a way to better understand his or her writing process(es). Both Hillock and Yancey focus primarily on reflection in the first-year writing classroom, with most of the

case studies and sample practices geared toward that environment. In contrast, a search through popularly used textbooks in business writing and technical writing yielded no reference or discussion of reflection as a writing tool.¹ A few authors have made connections between reflection and genres or practices used in some advanced writing classes. Chris Anson discusses reflection as an important component in service learning courses, focusing on the use of class discussions and personal writing as ways of encouraging students to reflect upon their actions (1997). Brenda Landgrebe and Richard Winter explore the power behind reflective fiction and narrative writing for students in health and social work, arguing that reflecting can lead to theory-construction: “reflecting upon a practice situation can be the basis for theoretical innovation even when ‘theory’ is interpreted in a very conventional sense” (93). Glenda Love Bell has studied reflective journal writing in the natural sciences (2001). In a particularly noteworthy article, “Using Reflection in Cooperative Learning Groups to Integrate Theory and Practice,” Brenda S. Gardner and Sharon J. Koth discuss how reflection was incorporated into a group project for an MEd program in human resource development, including the use of a learning journal for reflective writing. Finally, an online search for reflective activities in advanced writing course syllabi did show the use of reflective writing in some advanced courses—including reflection reports (especially in service learning classes), reflections on the construction of business documents such as resumes or job application letters, and end of the course reflections². However, most syllabi that include the word “reflection” did so to point out that the tone of voice used in a text is a “reflection” of the writer and/or the business or that business writing requires “reflection” with no apparent discussion of how this reflection comes about or how it can be used productively by the student writer.

This limited focus appears to overlook the roots of the current interest in the topic. More specifically, contemporary interest in reflection appears to originate in two texts written, not about student writers, but about practitioners: Donald Schön’s

The Reflective Practitioner and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. In these works, Schön introduces his theories behind reflection-in-action, or the reflection that is done during the completion of a task when changes can still be made, and reflection-on-action, or the reflection done after the task is completed when one analyzes the success or failure of the task. He sees reflection as a promising alternative to technical rationality, where “professional activity consists (of) instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique” (*The Reflective Practitioner* 21). In other words, Schön argues that many professionals currently look upon their work as a step-by-step, linear process that can be replicated over and over regardless of situation or context. However, Schön finds that professionals rarely face the same, or similar, situation twice, requiring them to “think on their feet” and develop new solutions through reflecting upon their actions. These reflections offer new support and information to help in validating an action or offer possible alternatives and revisions to help make the current task more successful and ensure that future similar tasks are equally successful.

Thus, this limited focus on reflection as a tool for first year writing appears all the more puzzling since Schön’s original arguments about reflection revolved around its use in the world of the practitioner. Why, then, has reflection not gained more prominence in advanced writing courses—such as business writing, scientific writing, technical writing, and web publication—that are, arguably, more practitioner oriented? One reason relates to a larger problem in the field of composition: most research, literature, and studies conducted in the field occur in or focus on the first year classroom. Many programs offer only a handful of advanced writing classes in contrast to dozens of first year composition courses. With the lack of advanced writing courses, research leans significantly towards these early writing courses, with few researchers spending considerable time analyzing advanced writing courses.

Secondly, these advanced courses—and specifically, business and scientific/technical writing classes—often place increased emphasis on the product (i.e. texts) students produce in the class, with writing processes receiving limited focus. Of course, due to the nature of the courses, a strong focus on products ranging from memos to letters to analyses is necessary, offering limited time to introduce reflection. However, using the reflection journal offers students a way to develop strategies and discuss obstacles towards achieving more product-based goals while gaining an increased understanding of the texts they produce and developing a better understanding of the pitfalls and potentials that occur while writing these texts. The journal can ask students to reflect on their process while producing different genres (Randy Bomer offers highly useful strategies for doing this in the third and fourth chapters of his book *Time for Meaning: Crafting Literate Lives in Middle and High School*). Or, the journal can become an in-class assignment, where time is given periodically for students to reflect upon their experiences in the advanced-writing course. And, even if incorporating the reflection journal means eliminating an assignment from the current syllabus, the benefits discussed next argue for using a reflective journal in advanced writing classes.

Reflection brings new understandings and insights to the writer in the practitioner-based course. Three major benefits are:

- Assisting advanced writers in seeing how context can and often will influence the construction of the text, including such aspects as the situation, the author's feelings about the situation, related interests, and outside influences and pressures. Encouraging writers to think about their writing situations and environments through journals, in-class writings, and group projects can assist students in making this connection;
- Offering a chance for students who are unaccustomed to the rigid and dry tone of some advanced genres (specifically in business and science writing) to

experiment with more creative styles of writing, in the hopes that they can begin to see how both extremes can be used together in professional communication; and

- Creating a safe haven for students to discuss their reactions and dilemmas with different forms of advanced and professional writing or to new (and often daunting) situations.

While reflection is valuable for both novice and expert writers, more advanced writers may reflect in different ways. While novice writers in my first year composition courses tend to reflect on course materials and their previous experiences (only reflecting on their writing when asked or persuaded), advanced writers seem more able to reflect upon themselves as writers, seem to know more and understand more about what kind of a writer they are, and tend to use reflections to help plan future strategies and to begin to connect their writing to their professional, personal, and social lives. The ability to understand and extend the idea that one is a writer among writers or a writer within a larger context appears to be one of the most valuable benefits of reflective writing in advanced writing courses.

How Reflection was Incorporated into the Course

Before moving into an analysis of students' reflections, I briefly discuss how reflection was used in a business writing course. The 300-level course is designed to introduce students to different genres, strategies, and tools used in the business community. Students routinely compose different texts, including memos, letters, proposals, and progress reports, in various mediums, including print, e-mail communication, PowerPoint presentation, and hypermedia. During the first week of classes, students read "Teaching Artistry Through Reflection-in-Action," the second chapter from Donald Schön's *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. The text discusses both the ideas of reflection-in-

action and reflection-on-action and offers several examples of how these reflections occur. During a subsequent discussion, while students were initially unsure about Schön's terms and theories, some students began to gradually understand, identifying times of reflection in their education, work life, and home life. Over the next few classes, as part of a cover letter/resume assignment, students include a reflective memo with the documents; in each class we discussed goals and methods for these memos. Specifically, students were asked to do the following:

The reflection letter should discuss the choices you made in constructing the application letter and resume. Some questions you may want to consider are:

- Why did you choose to discuss the issues you did in the application letter?
- Which section did you put first, education or work experience? Why?
- What aspects of these documents do you feel are the strongest? What needs more work?
- What additional information do you need after completing this assignment?

The reflection memo offered a way for students to better understand their process in writing the cover letter and resume and enabled them to see these two texts not as step-by-step or fill-in-the-blank documents, but as highly rhetorical genres that often need to be revised for different situations. Comments from the reflective memos show that students did begin to better understand their writing processes and how the texts are more context-bound than originally thought³:

I am having trouble editing and revising my letter. This is the first detailed cover letter I have written so I am trying to make it sound as professional and businesslike as I can without making it repetitive or unclear.

I discovered that one cannot simply produce a resume and cover letter to be used for several job ads. I tried to use an old resume with this ad, but found that I had to rewrite most of it.

I tried to focus more on my past working experience than on my past educational experience. I believe that college is a nice tool but is not what really matters when it comes down to being a good professional.

I tried to show my confidence in this letter. Looking at past letters I had written, I didn't see the confidence there. I think showing your confidence through the application letter is a plus because it tells the reader that you are energetic, self motivated, and ready for whatever is thrown your way.

While the discussions on Schön's text and the reflective memo began to highlight for students the role reflection can play in their work lives (and, most importantly here, in their current writing environment), it was the reflective journal that proved most beneficial and eye-opening, both for the students and for me. The benefits of the reflective memo include:

- Understanding that business writing occurs within multiple (and often conflicting) contexts;
- Developing a forum for goal-setting and for assessing how successfully/unsuccessfully those goals were achieved;
- Discussing student experiences while writing business texts, including reactions to the process of creating the texts;
- Providing opportunities for both students and teacher to learn about themselves as writers;
- Reflecting on non-writing issues like job experience and group work; and

- Offering non-business writers a chance to talk about business writing in a more informal, non-threatening manner.

Students were asked to keep this journal throughout the semester and to use it to reflect upon different aspects of the class, including their reactions to the texts they were creating, to class readings, to responses they received to their work from both fellow students and the teacher, and to difficulties in their own writing processes, such as writer's block and choosing a topic. During the course of the semester, I periodically looked over journals, writing back comments to both individual entries and to the journal as a whole. My goals were to be evaluative, that is to make sure the journals were getting done and to see how students were writing the entries, and helpful, that is to see what problems students were having and to reflect myself on how I could better assist them. Looking at the journals periodically, I could better understand students' reaction to course assignments (which, at one point, led me to reconsider and revise a specific memo assignment that students were having trouble with) and their reactions to the idea of reflecting (which led to more in-class reflections later in the semester, as a way to help students better understand how to approach the reflection journal). At times students discussed their journal entries with each other and/or with the full class. At the end of the course, the journal was assessed based upon levels of detail, clarity, and reflection; this assessment accounted for 10% of the final grade.

By the end of the semester, a majority of the journals were quite elaborate and detailed, with a few taking up a good portion of the student's notebook. On average, the journals included about ten entries each, ranging from two journals with only four entries to one journal that contained seventeen entries spanning over 30 pages. While the journal was meant to be a forum for talking about the students' writing in the class, students often used the journal to reflect upon non-writing issues, such as group work, job experiences, and extracurricular activities. Even during

these non-writing occasions, the students appeared to be better understanding their own writing processes and the role reflection can play in a professional's life. Through writing and reflecting in the journals students began to see that business writing is highly contextual.

What Kind of Writer Am I?: Lisa and Rebecca

One noticeable characteristic of the reflections is the ways in which students talked about their experiences writing the documents for the class. Students completed five types of assignments: the resume and cover letter, memos, business letters, a business proposal, and a presentation. For Lisa, a junior accounting major, writing many of these documents came naturally, so that her finished documents were some of the best produced in the class. Yet, in her reflections, Lisa reveals that she did experience difficulties, from her negative feelings about trying to "sell" herself in the cover letter to organizational problems with the memo. However, the document that caused the most problems for Lisa was the business letter. For this assignment, students wrote the letter they always wished they had written but never had. Lisa's letter to an accounting discussed her problems with the interviewers and the interview process and offered suggestions to the firm on how to conduct stronger interviews. After a few reflective journal entries about how she chose the topic, Lisa describes the kinds and origins of problems she had writing the letter.

I have now begun a rough draft of my letter. I have chosen to write a letter to an accounting firm that I have interviewed with because I hated their interview process and one of their interviewers was a JERK. My rough draft is very rough because I was getting angry when writing it and I had to get up and pace for a while every few minutes. The letter is not very professional sounding as of right now because I pretty much just rambled on and on about the whole process...If it ends up really sounding good, I might

send it. That might be better than what I really want to do which is photocopy my butt and write “Kiss this” on it and send that. This is a good time for this assignment for me. (writer’s emphasis)

Obviously, this cannot be looked upon as “business” writing, and Lisa realizes that. But, she is also beginning to realize that business writing is very contextual, and that emotions can get in the way. For Lisa, being able to write down informally what she really wants to say appears to be therapeutic, and it allows her to “vent” before actually writing the letter. Pat D’Arcy mentions this strategy as useful to her students as well:

I also came more and more to encourage my students to use journal writing as a kind of running commentary on their other work—a way of thinking onto paper which didn’t require any particular form or shape, thus freeing the writer to express whatever feelings she chose, to recollect information piecemeal and jot it down, to confess confusion without guilt, to ask questions. (42)

In later entries, Lisa continues to discuss how the letter is difficult to write because her emotions and feelings keep “getting in the way.” She discusses different strategies, including talking to others about the letter and getting their reactions to its tone. As I read over these entries about Lisa’s experiences, I find a business writer who is beginning to see how contextual this type of writing can be and how strategies such as venting, leaving the document, and gaining peer feedback are often needed in order to write a successful document. In conferences and informal discussions with me, Lisa often mentioned that she had now learned how emotional and passionate she has become about her writing in the class and how she had begun to develop strategies to help incorporate this passion into her documents in a professional and successful manner. These reflections greatly strengthened the

letter she wrote for the class and eventually led her to send the letter to the agency after the course was over.

For Rebecca, the business marketing major whose story began this text, the documents in the class took a back seat to what she began to learn about herself as a writer. Most of Rebecca's early entries are directed toward the documents and her reactions to them, including discussing her inexperience with the cover letter and her happiness with the memo she produced. However, halfway through the journal, the focus changes from the documents she has produced to the process she is going through to produce them. At first, she begins to discuss how she is having writer's block while trying to write a document for another class and, in the course of the entry, develops a few different solutions to the problem. In the next entry, she elaborates on this experience:

Going over the paper I talked about above is not easy. I get frustrated. I do not feel like I have accomplished what I needed to say. I did not seem to stick to the original action plan I developed for myself. Maybe creating a structure of paper and then writing is not how I naturally go about writing...I write down all my thought processes, thus making the paper unstructured and crowded...In this process I get lost and forget to stick to the plan. I start thinking about something and just keep writing it down not realizing that I really do not need it. I have already lost myself in this paragraph.

While describing herself as a "step-by-step" and "organized" writer in the earlier in-class assignment, Rebecca seems to be beginning to see herself as a different type of writer and, most importantly, is beginning to see how this process affects her writing. At first, Rebecca seems to resist the more free-flowing, unstructured writing process:

I have established that I am a spontaneous writer. It is really hard for me to start but once I do, I cannot stop. I always have to delete some sentences when I review my papers. Of course, I make total sense to myself when I write. I wish I could learn to know when to stop writing.

Yet, later, Rebecca seems to be becoming more accepting of her new writing style:

Normally as soon as I start writing, I start thinking if I can say this phrase like this; if this sentence makes sense at all; if this paragraph is structured that way it should; etc. All this slows down my writing eventually makes me really frustrated and I start thinking that I cannot write this paper at all. Here is where the journal came to the rescue. Here I can write down my thoughts without worrying that sentences are structured wrong and that paragraphs are too short. I just write down what I think about the paper I am working on and try to figure out what is slowing me down. Eventually when I pickup some speed, I move on to the paper...it feels like I have already started it (because I wrote in the journal).

While not all students came to a better understanding of their process through using the journal, Rebecca's experiences show how a writer can identify problems and, through experimentation in the journal, be able to write more effectively in the future. Through reading journal reflections, I as a teacher came to a better understanding of the problems and approaches of these business writers. In addition, these journals helped me understand the importance of discussing context when teaching a business-writing or other advanced writing course.

“We Don’t ALL Have to Get Along:” Denise and Tiffany

In addition to journal reflections upon the writing in the class, other students explored their experiences working with a group of peers on completing class projects. Students placed into groups during the second half of the semester produced a business proposal and 30-minute presentation. Students located a problem affecting the university and offered possible solutions, complete with secondary and primary research. Proposals included the redesigning of the business school cafeteria, the development of an undergraduate handbook, and the creation of a website about on-campus diversity groups and organizations.

Denise, a senior accounting major, participated in the group designing an undergraduate handbook. At first, Denise is excited, yet worried about the project:

Today, we are working on our group proposals. We came up w/ the idea of making a handbook for freshman...kind of like “a how to.” This is really needed here; I remember having all kinds of problems when I first came on campus. We seem to be making the assignment much harder that it really is. We each need to begin our research and interviews. We also need to complete a rough draft/outline for class soon.

While Denise appears satisfied with the chosen topic, it also seems that she is unsure if she and her team members are making the project “harder” than it needs to be. Her next entry, seven days later, shows a student beginning to become more concerned:

I am somewhat confused about what I am supposed to be doing for my contribution to the group. I am ready to get organized and move the project along. My group members are helpful, but when we meet, not everyone wants to

participate like they should. Hopefully, soon, my group gets on the ball!

Anxiety over participation within the group is consistent in Denise journal. Yet, no possible solutions to fixing the problem appear, even though, as Denise announces later, she has taken over the position as “group leader.” With more prompting on my part perhaps Denise would have taken over more of the leadership role and gotten members to participate more.

It is this kind of step that Tiffany, a junior political science major, does take. However, for her, the step caused some personal problems. Much like Denise, Tiffany, the group leader on the diversity website project, experienced problems with fellow group members not participating, especially, not meeting deadlines. At first, Tiffany found herself doing extra work, but eventually, she contacted group members, telling them what needed to be done and giving them strict deadlines to follow. This approach appears to have worked with at least one group member, yet led to a surprising reaction from Tiffany:

Tim had the intro and methodology section e-mailed to me only two days after my asking for help. I was very appreciative, but internally it made me wonder if I wasn't yet again just asking for help on something I could have done myself. If it only took him 2 days to write what it took me this long to try to do...anyway.

Even though Tiffany has carried a large part of the workload, she begins to second-guess her work because of the speed of a fellow group member. While this group member would continue to offer assistance, the other two members appear to have contributed little to the finalizing of the project. In one of her final entries, it is a disheartened, defeated Tiffany that speaks:

It's done. The paper, the presentation. I'm taking the first grade. I don't care anymore what it is. That proposal took me eight hours to complete. I could discuss this in my sleep.

After 8 full hours of work, absent of help, I wash my hands. Jennifer [a fellow member] can fix the problems. Turn it back in if she wants. Or Tim.

I'm beat.

Even though the group received a high score on the project,⁴ for Tiffany, it was not a success. And, it was not a success for me either. If I had closely read Tiffany's entries during the group project, I could have offered more assistance. Yet, for Tiffany, the journal still appears to have offered some strong benefits:

Business writing is difficult. Unlike fiction, the voice is expected to be somewhat dry. And, nothing damages a team like conflict, right? Or silence 😊 However, a journal like this allows a person the chance to vent and scream and complain so that the finished product doesn't even carry a hint of these emotions.

For me, this statement speaks loudly about what Tiffany learned in the class. While others may see business writing as a-contextual and emotionless, Tiffany has learned the opposite. In any piece of business writing, the context and feelings of the author do come through, and keeping a journal where one can reflect upon the process of designing the documents can lead to more successful documents in the end.

“The Anti-Business Writer:” Jim

Like the previous case studies, Jim also expressed concerns over his inexperience with business writing and his reservations about the group project:

I hate memos. I really really hate memos. I'm trying to write a memo right now, and I just can't come up with a way to write it. It's not hard. It's one page making a point and you have to fill up the page making that point. It's sad, but that's all I can write about this problem, I'm just going to write whatever comes into my head and proofread.

Our group finally picked a topic in communications, but we have little time to prepare the speech. Three weeks of deciding what to do. This is good work?

However, where Jim's journal departs in fascinating ways is when he talks about issues unrelated to the class. For, it is here that I get a better understanding about why Jim is having problems with business writing and college in general. In an early entry, Jim discusses his love for creative writing, mentioning that "some of the stories in my head are pretty gory and some are just...weird to say the least." Throughout the journal Jim continues to discuss his love of creative writing (especially a book he is trying to finish), while discussing his fear and loathing for business writing. At one point, he even scolds himself, saying "I've been stopping my pet projects (my webcartooning and writing) so that I can focus more on my work, which puts my needing to be creative on a standstill." Although Jim did need to focus more to finish the assignments for the class, a bigger concern is that Jim doesn't see that his love for creativity can be used in the area of business writing. Creativity can be very important, from having to write a spur-of-the-moment memo to designing an advertising campaign to using graphics or art in proposals. More often than not, however, while focusing on the contextual nature of business writing, I forget to foreground the place of creativity, often presenting the genres as drab or bland in contrast to writing in freshman composition courses. Jim's journal caused me to reflect upon how I am teaching this class.

The other area of Jim's journal that interests and provokes me positively is his discussions of his motivation for school. Half way through the journal, Jim records the following entry:

So far, I have had to do a few papers and a presentation [in all of his classes this semester]. Spreadsheets are okay and presentations are good. It takes a little bit of preparation, since trying to do things at the last minute results in a poor grade. I really hate my sister though, her straight A's means I have to work just as hard, which I don't want to do. I have a huge project in Accounting, so I have to look at business records and get info. It seems so hard to do. I hope I pick the right stuff.

The movements here, from speaking about his procrastination to his need to compete with his sister to his fear about a future project, all strike me not just as words from a nervous and confused writer, but also from a nervous and confused student. Throughout the journal, Jim reflects upon his fear of upcoming assignments and often contrasts this with the need to do well in order to get recognition from his parents, arguing that "in everyone's eyes, I'm a slacker." Jim has taken a step in the journal that only a few other students took in the class. He is no longer writing for a person or group, but rather writing for himself in order to better understand, not only himself as a writer, but also himself as a student, a brother, and a son. In his final entry, I see the possibility that the journal may have opened up new doors for Jim:

I wanted to add one more entry for myself and say a few things that I'm going to remember for next semester.

Study more.

Work earlier.

Try harder at sucking up to teachers. (no, that's not what to do...)

Be creative.

Ask questions.

Looking back at the journal, I realize that my later entries have been more bashing being a slacker than on how my work has gone. So, I guess I didn't follow the assignment as closely as I should have. But, I did learn a thing or two.

While Jim may not have reflected as much on his writing as both he and I would have liked, his reflections go beyond writing and, I hope, proved more beneficial to Jim in the long run. As someone who professed fear about business writing, Jim appears to have found an outlet in the journal that allows him to wrestle with his feelings during the class. In future courses, I will maintain a more consistent dialogue with the student journals so that I can locate and assist students like Lisa, Rebecca, Denise, Tiffany, and Jim, better understanding how business writing can also be revised to fit the contextual needs of the class and of individual students. Offering an additional outlet for the “non” business writing students in our business writing classes is an additional benefit of the journal.

Concluding Thoughts

While the entries above point out how the journal helped some students in the course, I am hesitant to call the assignment a success. While several students wrote numerous, elaborate entries, just as many wrote five or less, consisting of little more than a few pages. Several entries also had a “written at the last minute” feel to them, and many students wrote about how they often forgot to write or found it more difficult to write in the journal during the later portions of the semester. Finally, I wish that I had taken more time to read the journals throughout the semester, both to recognize difficulties that students were having in the class and to monitor how the students were using or not using the journals. And, while it did not occur in these journals, students may enter into “perilous” territory, relating narratives and stories that may prompt instructors to take on different kinds of personas, such as therapist, counselor, or confidant, for which

they are not prepared and which may not be appropriate. Teachers who decide to use reflective journals need to be aware of these issues as they approach the assignment.

That being said, I see the reflection journal as a valuable tool with advanced writers. In the case studies, the journal enabled students to better understand their writing process(es). It gave them a place to “vent” or explain the emotions they were having, emotions that may have negatively spilled over into the documents themselves if not for this safe writing haven. And, the journal allowed me to better understand what problems students were having in the course and will assist me in better adjusting my curriculum in the future.

The individuals who can offer the most insight on the journal experience, however, are the students who completed the entries. As a final reflective assignment, students discussed what worked and did not work with the journals and how the journals affected or did not affect the students’ writing in the course. From these reflections, several issues were raised:

- Some students remarked that they were unsure of what to write about and/or if the journal was being used correctly, while others honestly mentioned that they often forgot to use it;
- Many students suggested that to make the journal stronger, I should give examples, more detailed instructions, prompts for writing, and check journals periodically throughout the semester. One student remarked that asking students to contemplate how readers may respond to their texts could provide interesting insights;
- Several students remarked that they really enjoyed the journal as a great way to express thoughts, ideas, and opinions while writing;
- Students argued that the journal allowed them to identify problems they faced when writing while also

trying out possible solutions to those problems. One student also remarked that the journal was helpful for him in other classes, as he often used the journal to “re-focus” his writing; and

- Many students remarked that the journal became a place where they could “relieve” their stress, both in this class and other classes.

Based on these remarks, I plan modifications in future advanced writing classes.

- I will provide a more elaborate, possibly structured introduction to the journal;
- I will spend more time discussing reflection through the use of examples from past students and/or developing a more structured handout on the assignment;
- I will spend more time looking at the journals during the semester enabling both students and myself to reflect on the significance of the journal;
- I will spend more time on explaining evaluation of the journal (i.e. looking at the level of detail, clarity, and content of the entries) in order to make the process less mysterious for students; and
- I will offer more time in class to write and discuss the journal entries, focusing on how the journal is helping or hindering students and on better defining the idea of reflection for students.

While the reflection journal can be a difficult assignment for students, and while using a journal may require substitute for other assignments from a current syllabus, reflecting upon the documents they have written and upon the class itself provides students with a level of critical thinking that is not often addressed fully in advanced writing courses. Moving students away from

seeing advanced writing as simply “filling in templates” to becoming more critical, analytic writers is an important goal for advanced writing instructors. The reflection journal is a practice that will assist students in becoming stronger writers, both in the advanced writing class and in their future workplace environments.

Notes

¹ Textbooks include *Writing in the Workplace* by Jo Allen (1998); *The Business Writer’s Companion* by Gerald J. Aldred et al. (2002); *Business Communication Today* by Courtland L. Bovee, John V. Thill, and Barbara E. Schatzman (1998); *Technical Communication* by Mike Markel (2001); *Strategies for Business and Technical Writing* by Kevin J. Harty (1999); *Business and Administrative Communication* by Kitty O. Locker (1997); *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace* by Linda Beamer and Iris Varner (2001); *Business Communication: Building Critical Skills* by Kitty O. Locker and Stephen Kyo Kaczmarek (2004); *Successful Writing at Work* by Philip C. Kolin (2004); and *Workplace Communication: The Basics* by George J. Searles (2003).

² A few noteworthy websites include Mindy Wright’s Rhetoric and Community Service syllabus (<http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/wright7/567sp02/English567C.htm>), Joe Moxley’s Technical Writing syllabus (<http://joemoxley.org/teaching/Uarchives/summerB/techwritingsum2001.htm>), and Sarah J. Arroyo’s Applied Composition syllabus (<http://www.csulb.edu/~sarroyo/310syll.htm>).

³ The success with the memo during the resume/cover letter assignment led me to ask students to also include a reflective memo with later assignments (including business letters and business proposals).

⁴ This high score was for the paper and presentation. Students also assessed their group members and themselves in reflective letters at the end of the project; the other members of Tiffany’s group saw decreases in their overall grades based upon these assessments and my observations.

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