

TEACHING WRITING:

*Methods, Materials,
& Measurement*



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On Not Burning the Midnight Oil:

Editing an Interdisciplinary Journal for Student Writing

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Adjunct courses, writing courses in disciplines other than English, peer tutoring, writing labs--all show that writing across the curriculum is rampant, even regnant, these days. We're prodding Johnny and Joni to write better. And in addition to prodding we may hold out carrots--to encourage them to continue perfecting their skills. One carrot, as teachers have long recognized, is publication. And it's not just a carrot: it gives students a real audience for their writing, actually helps them in the process of writing. Publishing essays from across the curriculum is but the next step.

The Wheaton College faculty started taking this next step at the interdisciplinary writing seminar I conducted in June 1979, when we brainstormed how to improve student writing. After the initial gruesome suggestions (brainstorming is supposed to free internal censors), we came up with several viable ideas. One was to publish a journal of outstanding student papers from across the curriculum.

Our immediate goal was to improve student writing. We wanted to show students that faculty throughout the college value good writing, that well-written papers are appreciated outside the English department. We also wanted to honor student academic achievement. Poets and short-story writers can have their work published, but good academic writing rarely strays out of the classroom. And we wanted to provide students with models of good writing and research. Professional writers, whose essays are anthologized in The Norton Reader and such places, usually provide unattainable models for most students, unlike the writing of peers.

A student survey in the spring of 1981 suggests that the students are in fact reaping some of these benefits. In this dining-hall survey, 94% of the 93 respondents indicated that they had heard of Midnight Oil (though a couple betrayed their ignorance when they suggested including more stories and fewer poems). Eighty percent of those who had heard of it had read some part of the journal. Of those responding to the relevant questions, 89% found the essays interesting, 86% felt they provided valuable models of writing, 82% found their content valuable, and 93% found their organizations valuable. The seniors were most likely to have heard of Midnight Oil (100%), to have read it (93%), and to have found it interesting (100% of those answering this question). Possibly they have the sophistication to appreciate the essays. Yet even a freshman could state, "It was interesting to see not only how other students write, but it is also a chance to learn." And a sophomore who admitted that she had never read any of Midnight Oil nevertheless claimed, "I think it's a great ideal--when I write papers, I have that goal in the back of my mind."

In working on the journal the faculty has discovered other benefits. One is that selecting which essays to include continues faculty dialogue on what constitutes good writing and how to foster it. Another is that the journal shows the Wheaton community what is happening in different disciplines. After reading submitted essays, members of the editorial board have mentioned how fascinating it is to find out what students are learning in other disciplines and what, in many cases, is happening in the disciplines themselves. We have

learned, for instance, about flexible working hours, robots in industry, the comedies of John Lyly, Boccaccio's perception of women, Wagner's use of Schopenhauer, Seurat's use of optics, China during the Opium Wars, the origins of Stonehenge, the philosophy behind fines for littering, how not to fall out of love, how to die, living and dying in an old age home, sleeping behavior in mammals, the work of Nobel laureate Gerty Theresa Cori.

We started in the fall of 1979 with an open organizational meeting. The editorial board soon numbered twenty, or more than twenty percent of the full-time faculty, representing not only English but also physics, not only art and philosophy but also government and biology. This breadth of faculty commitment has had important ramifications. Each member of the board makes an effort to submit a student essay. Work can be delegated: I needn't be editor all the time and, having internalized the Peace Corps philosophy of making oneself obsolescent, I haven't been. And the broad faculty support has encouraged the administration to provide financial backing. Students are enthusiastic too: this semester we're starting to add students to the board, most to be chosen by the Student Government Association.

We had two main obstacles that first semester. One was finding financial backing. We didn't want simply to mimeograph student essays but, if possible, to publish a journal that looked and felt and smelled professional. We wanted to have the journal professionally printed. The broad faculty support encouraged the provost and the dean each to contribute \$300 of contingency funds toward the first issue.

Funding for the next four issues is now coming from the school's Venture Fund, which grants sums for short-term projects that would enhance educational opportunities at Wheaton. And we have been able to limp along, even though we don't have a permanent budget allocation. To make matters worse, printing costs seem to be rising at a rate of about 20%. Financing will require further exertions. (If you'd like to help, and are willing to send \$1.50 for one issue, \$1.00 for each additional issue, I'd be happy to send copies of our first four issues.)

The second obstacle that first semester was deciding on a name. I called meetings, I polled board members through campus mail, but still we couldn't decide on a name that more than two or three could live with. An early favorite was Hipparchia (the name of a Greek philosopher, and a woman: Wheaton is a women's school). And resurrecting the name of a moribund literary society called Psyche was also a possibility. We toyed with combinations and permutations of undergraduate/liberal arts/interdisciplinary/selected and review/journal/thought/studies/writing/essays. Finally, in exasperation, a member of the French department jokingly suggested "Midnight Oil," the rest of us did a double take, and we decided we liked its cheekiness, though we also restrained it with a more mundane subtitle: "The Wheaton Undergraduate Review."

It was relatively easy, by comparison, to decide on procedures for submission and selection. Let me sketch them quickly here. The editorial board decided to publish an issue each semester and to invite each member of the Wheaton faculty to nominate student essays. Thus simply being nominated is an honor, and we encourage students to note this honor on their resumé.

Board members read each essay "blindly," without knowing the name of the student or the name of the nominating professor--we try to avoid prejudice as much as possible. But we do note the student's year and hope that readers will judge senior and freshman essays somewhat differently: if one of our goals is to provide models, and if senior research papers are not altogether accessible to freshmen, we should be publishing some freshman essays.

Board members rate each essay on a four-point scale. We try not to pay too much attention to misspelling and mispunctuation, which can easily be corrected, as they would be in a professional journal. And our criteria include not only organization, originality, research, clarity, and style--criteria common in the classroom--but also general interest.

After the initial readings, we look more closely at eight or nine finalists. Distributing copies has proved difficult--it is prohibitively expensive to xerox copies for the twenty members of the editorial board. I've tried sending packets of essays to five board members, each member to cross off his or her name after reading the set and then to pass it on--but the packets didn't circulate as quickly as I'd hoped. Distribution of finalists' essays still requires some thinking.

We make our final decision at a board meeting. I was at first prepared for an arduous series of meetings to decide which three finalists we would publish. A friend who helps edit Novel warned me to expect considerable debate in making final choices. So I prepared carefully, perhaps over-prepared. I asked each board member--and still ask them--to rank the finalists, and I tally scores for each essay. Generally, a fairly clear pattern emerges. We may discuss the relative merits of the third- and fourth-place essays: Since the fourth-ranked essay is shorter and by a sophomore, perhaps publishing it would save money and also provide a better model for underclass students? But isn't the third-place essay better? . . . Or we may debate the merits of insight and style: Yes, this essay is well written, but does it say anything? Perhaps instead it conveys its insights less directly--they're there, but less insistently pointing to themselves than they would in a more traditionally structured essay? The discussions keep us alert to what good writing entails, yet we generally can make our decisions in one meeting.

The rapidity of our decision-making has given me time to work with the authors of the essays. I generally meet with each author two or three times and we discuss ways of pruning and clarifying--editorial revisions, not substantive ones. For the first issue, one essay needed virtually no revising, and when I told the author that we wanted to publish it she said, "Oh no, you want to publish that? Then I'd better rework it." And I simply gave her free reign to make refinements. With the other two authors I spent more time, the journal providing an excuse, in effect, for some individual tutoring. One student in particular had made rather a mess of her documentation, and our editorial assistant had to track down missing sources and verify dates. (Even our best students remiss with documentation, I discover; in fact, most issues have published at least one essay requiring extensive correcting of references.) Of course, I'm not required to spend this time working with the authors on revisions. But if I am going to make some editorial changes I want the students to see the process, and occasionally I need to consult them to clarify meaning. And the meetings give some advanced writers a chance to sharpen their skills in a way they wouldn't otherwise be able to. In fact, the authors do much of the revising themselves. Last spring a senior acknowledged that she finds it relatively easy to turn out successful course papers, but she's never had to spend much time revising, compressing, clarifying: hence revising for publication was a valuable experience.

So much for procedures. The essays selected by this process have been diverse. The first issue, for instance, included essays from biology, classics, and art history: a review essay on cellular aging, exploring the limits of the span of life; a critical re-evaluation of Nietzsche's interpretation of Euripides;

the leaves are rustling, the waves rippling after a storm. In such a way has Woolf depicted time passing: through the traces left, through the changes that come with its passage. (Midnight Oil, No. 4 (1981), 5)

We have also published a book review. Irene Bagdoian judiciously discusses Leonard Mosley's Power Play: Oil in the Middle East: she admits the force of the author's theory,

Yet even to an unseasoned economist this theory has problems. First, it does not consider the potential power of an OPEC cartel. . . . Secondly, oil companies would still be interested in reaping a profit from Middle Eastern oil. They would therefore be obliged to set prices higher than those quoted by OPEC, causing still higher prices than before nationalization. (Midnight Oil, No. 3 (1981), 7-8)

But I'm even more pleased that we have published creative approaches to assignments. One history paper begins thus:

Two months before I was to take the official examination I was sent word that my father was seriously ill. His health had been gradually declining over the past few years so the news was not surprising. Of course, any thoughts concerning the upcoming exam had to be pushed aside and I made immediate arrangements to travel home.

It is Maura Mahon's "The Story of Ling Hsu," in Midnight Oil, No. 2 (1980), 12-19. And it tells of nineteenth-century China, indirectly conveying material that could have appeared in a research paper, but conveying more of the ambience of the era than a research paper could. In another paper, for an English course treating stage history, Bernyce S. Mitchell impersonates Margaret Johnson, Sarah Siddon's dresser; the diary entry for November 23, 1783, includes the following comments on Mrs. Siddon's portrayal of Lady Macbeth:

There was a terrible uproar over the sleep-walking scene. Mrs. Siddons puts down the candle and pretends to wash her hands. It seems that the other actresses before Mrs. S. always held the candle at the same time. Why, common sense would tell you that anyone washing her hands would first set down a candle! It is only natural and my Mrs. S. is always natural. ("Excerpts from the Diary of Margaret Johnson," Midnight Oil, No. 4 (1981), 16)

Not all creative efforts have been published, however. For a relatively mundane biology assignment on comparing and classifying a marsupial and a placental mammal, Cynthia J. McCormack impersonated a giant anteater and explained similarities with and differences from the numbat: for example, "I want you to take a look at this face. Remarkable, isn't it? Not only are these long, graceful, tapering snouts beautiful, but they are functional as well. Both my colleague from Australia and I have this attractive feature, which can be used as a level to pry up logs and things." This essay generated

considerable controversy among board members. Although some enjoyed the essay, finding it reminiscent "of C. S. Lewis in his more whimsical moments," many found it precious.

The board has also not been as receptive to social science writing as perhaps it should be (even though there are social scientists on the board). We haven't received as many submissions in the social sciences as in the humanities. And responses to social science submissions suggest that many members of the board do not favor the abstractions and indirections such writing seems heir to. The writing somehow seems less fine. Yet I have hopes for several submissions we've received this semester. One is from Abnormal Psychology, Janet Fletcher's paper on the mental health of married women. It opens thus:

In 1963 Betty Friedan wrote a book now considered a classic in the women's movement, The Feminine Mystique, in which she described the characteristics of what she termed "the problem that has no name", a problem that psychologists are still investigating today. Strangely enough, Friedan found that the problem affected women only, particularly married women and housewives. The following excerpts are taken from statements made by wives and mothers interviewed by Friedan and other sociologists...

Another social science submission, Nancy Saltojan's "The Green Revolution and its Effects on World Poverty," opens this way:

Throughout history, man has continually struggled to feed himself. In some places, the next meal is assured for a lifetime, while in many others, a life ends for want of that next meal. This contradiction of hunger and starvation in a world of plenty has compelled the humanitarians of the race to call for a sharing of the abundance with those who are starving for it. This is the essence of foreign aid, the haves sharing with the have-nots. There have been many types of foreign aid programs involving the transfer of funds (i.e., the Marshall Plan), of services (the Peace Corps), and of food (UNICEF, CARE). Although these aid programs have been crucial to the survival of many of the world's poor, few programs have been self-generating, that is, making for the self-sufficiency of the recipient nations in terms of food production.

The paper would benefit from some editing, but the development of ideas is sound. Perhaps this semester we'll finally publish a paper from the social sciences.

I worry too about other forms of writing that the board may not be sufficiently receptive to. We haven't published any take-home exam essays, although some have been submitted. Should we approach these with different criteria, or should they somehow "measure up" to the other essays we publish? I also worry sometimes about our criterion of general interest, which often translates into readability. Have we been unfair this semester, say, to a crisp legal analysis, finely argued, but not easy reading?

Still, general interest is important for our purposes, even though it is not a criterion we commonly use--at least not consciously--when grading papers for our own classes. We want the papers to be accessible to students, and we want students to read them. Thus we are less interested in the more specialized, scholarly works. We have not published, for instance, an impressive technical investigation of the Minoan Snake Goddess at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, nor an impressive report of biological research, whose title suggests its accessibility to the lay reader: "Correcting Cell Flow and Labelling and Mitotic Indices in Squashes of Root Apices for the Quiescent Center and Initials." But we have published a more generally accessible review essay in biology, on cellular aging, with implications for the human lifespan. The accessibility of Roberta McAfee Brown's "In Vitro Models of Cellular Aging" (Midnight Oil, No. 1 (1980), 5-11) is suggested by its first paragraph, where she provides a context for her review:

As the Biblical King David wisely observed so long ago in Psalms 90:10, "The days of our years are three-score years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be four-score years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." Though David was reputed to have reigned almost three thousand years ago, his statement is still valid. Despite the widely-held belief that the victories of modern medicine have increased human longevity, this view is supported by neither vital statistics nor biological evidence. Prevention and treatment of illness have been improved and as a result more people are reaching what appears to be an immutable, upper age limit (Hayflick 1976).

The context she provides here and throughout the essay makes it accessible to the lay reader--as does her clarity.

Because different board members have different priorities--some stress general interest, others originality, others analysis, others style--I make sure that at least three readers read each essay. I don't try to impose uniform standards. We're not, after all, aiming for the inter-reader reliability necessary for research in writing. I welcome diversity and the exchange of opinions. As a whole, the board is tolerant: one person's allergy to dashes is balanced by another's fondness. But individual members too are generally tolerant of writing done in different disciplines, in different formats, in different styles. Literary critics don't seem put off by scientific styles of documentation. Scientists tolerate the first person. After attending meetings board members become, I think, more tolerant of subtler differences as well. Social scientists learn that frequent quotation may be accepted and even necessary in literary criticism. Humanists and scientists learn to respect the repetitiousness favored by each other's disciplines: humanists try to accept the way a scientist recapitulates earlier discussion in later sections detailing results or conclusions; scientists try to accept the way a historian repeats phrases to provide transitions between paragraphs, instead of using headings. Thus serving on the board is an educational experience, alerting us to the variety of expectations that students encounter.

For our purposes, then, publishing Midnight Oil has been valuable. Of course, one could ring many changes on the procedures I have sketched, depending on one's goals. One need not aim at a professional journal. One can mimeograph

a class magazine. Or duplicate outstanding essays from freshman English classes. Or keep a file in the library of outstanding papers for a particular course. Or write letters to real people--editors, Congressmen and women, whatever. Or prepare essays for submission to local or national publications. Or start a national journal for undergraduate essays (I'm not quite ready for this one yet).

Each project has its strengths and its pitfalls. A journal like Midnight Oil requires relatively heavy commitments of time and money. We also have a few specific problems to work on. I'd like to find a more efficient way to distribute finalists' essays to the twenty-member editorial board. And we've had to work on proofreading and on making the covers of different issues distinguishable. We've also failed, so far, to publish any essays by underclass students, although these are probably the students most in need of models. Despite our problems, though, I like to think we've made a successful start.

For one thing, soon after we started I announced that I would prefer to serve as editor only every other semester. No sooner did I make this announcement than two volunteers were forthcoming, an art historian and an Italian scholar. The art historian has been our managing editor (succeeded in 1981-82 by a physicist). The Italian scholar edited the fall 1980 and 1981 issues and has ironed out a few of our procedures. I've been editor in spring 1980, 1981, and 1982, but will relinquish the position frequently: the Peace Corps would be proud of me.