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Multi-Level Benefits of Using Research Journals in Honors

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As honors curricula develop and mature at our institutions, we constantly grapple with questions of what comprises an honors education. Besides the philosophical discussion of what it means to be “broad, well-educated, informed, challenging,” there is also the practical or methodological discussion of “How do we do that?” These questions become more complex as honors programs mature, possibly as a consequence of course sequencing or developing degree plans. In my experience, one of the more difficult areas to address is differentiation between a lower-division introductory experience and a mature, sophisticated upper-division seminar. Where exactly is this boundary when building a new course? Being able to “read our students’ needs” is important in addressing concerns about students’ individual development, maturity level, and degree preparation as well as problems associated with student retention. One practical avenue that addresses methodological questions is the use of research journals.

Research journals have been beneficial in two types of classes I have taught for honors over the past three and a half years. Each of these classes is a seminar offered at the junior level: “Perspectives on the Present,” a current-events course that I have taught three times and two cultural seminars, “Progressivism and the Arts” and “Arts and Social Reform,” each of which I taught once. In order to deal with problems of late and/or sloppy final projects, plagiarism, and lack of commitment or depth, I have developed research journals as a way to address these issues early and often. Using trial and error and modifying my approach each time I taught these classes, I believe the latest version has some strong points that now make research journals broadly applicable in many different class situations and across disciplines while specifically addressing certain concerns about motivation inherent in the honors population.

PRECURSOR TO SENIOR CAPSTONE OR THESIS

Two good reasons for research journals are that they produce better final products and that instructors don’t have to provide so many remedial basics—a time-eating exercise at the senior level. In honors programs, we emphasize the full development of our students’ potential; if we only tackle serious research in their final senior-year projects, then how are we actually accomplishing this goal? We also become frustrated teaching advanced courses when

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we have to re-teach the basics constantly; explaining to students for the twenty-fourth time that quotations must be documented is not an exercise that should be taking place the week before senior papers are due. Research journals take care of such problems.

An in-depth writing project that requires extensive research and organization at the junior level may enhance students' readiness for advanced senior thesis projects; in some instances, graduating seniors who have taken such a course have communicated to me that the project actually became, in their minds, their capstone experience. In a few instances, students used these papers as writing samples for graduate school applications. One student was accepted into the University of Cambridge (UK) and used her paper both as the writing sample in her application and eventually as the basis for her Master's thesis. As degree plans or "sequencing" of honors courses develop in an institution, such earlier in-depth experiences would possibly result in more highly developed senior writing projects and thus more success for the graduates.

In honors we emphasize student/instructor interaction, extensive discussion, and projects that encourage student "ownership" of classes. Implementation of activities that fulfill these needs has added benefits for all participants. In the humanities and fine arts, students often do not have degree plans that address in-depth research before their senior year, unlike science and engineering majors. Full research experiences in seminars offered to all majors (not targeting only humanities or fine arts majors) help equalize the students' understanding that research happens in all fields and is not confined to a lab; we have found in our institution that students' knowledge of the requirements of the academic profession are minimal, and the information that everyone has to do research in order to attain tenure or promotion comes as a pleasant surprise. In fact, having both humanities and science students in the same seminar, engaged in the same research problems, has resulted in an inherently cross-disciplinary dialogue on research methodology and presentation tactics. Learning to communicate across disciplinary lines in an increasingly cross-disciplinary academic and professional environment is of immeasurable value to students. This communication has real-world worth as our students enter the professional world.

METHODOLOGY

Research journals are the repositories of all material associated with a student's research project in my course including a record of thinking process, source searches, notes from both text and internet sources, copies of printed material, bibliography, outlines, and paper drafts. The semester schedule is as follows:

Week 3	individual meetings to discuss possible topic choices
Week 4	research topics due; class discussion on topic differentiation
Week 8	research journals due for first time

Week 9	class question & answer on topics and progress reports
Week 11	research journals due second time
Week 14, 15	student oral research presentations
Week 16	research journals due final time, final paper due

Syllabus Excerpt

Each student will keep a research journal in which all research notes will be annotated and discussed. This journal must include all sources, research notes, questions and thinking process of the student pertaining to the research material or the questions/problems raised during the research process. The purpose of the journal is to accustom students to approach their research methodology in a coherent manner, to regularize their attention to their topic (as progress on their research topic must be demonstrated for each assigned due date of the journal), and to enable students to collate their research notes into outlines, rough drafts and final paper in an organized manner. Assessment: Students should be making entries in their journals on a regular basis (2–3 times/items per week) and their journal grade will be based on this regularity and the demonstrated development of their notes and information sources. *Failure to include all relevant research sources and notes in the journal will result in the disallowance of this information in the research paper: in other words, I won't believe you did the work in your paper if I don't see the research notes in your journal.*

In the current permutation of this project, the entire research experience is counted as 25% of the course grade, balanced by equally weighted class discussion, two exams, and two other papers. While the volume of work appears heavy on paper, the regularity of assignments contributes to the overall success of the course as students intertwine all experiences into a unified whole; I purposely build this integration through weaving of information and cross-assignment references. The individual research experience combines with, and builds from, a separate class research project (they all contribute to one research question) which then is also credited in exams and class discussion.

The use of research journals enhances student expertise in addressing problems inherent in the exercise and in understanding the rationale for citations and citation formats. The research project is segmented into its component parts, all of which are documented in the journal. Students first notate their internal discussion and formulation of their initial questions around which they will try to focus their efforts. All library search printouts and internet search results are notated as they involve a discussion of how to narrow sources and determine the relative importance of sources. Students have found that the initial discussion that they record in their journals should not be discarded but

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might actually become useful in their final selection of material or in the “filling holes” stage as they write their draft papers.

Students then begin the note-taking process on their selected sources. While students are required to have only two to three journal entries per week, most students include five to seven entries per week; they can be anything from simple “thought of these questions today” notations to more fully developed note-taking events. All notes, printed articles or portions of articles, and all “marginalia” discussions are recorded. This internal discussion on the relevant research information becomes visually key in the students’ understanding of their topic; they are astonished and gratified at the amount of information they themselves have compiled. Because of the triple turn-in of the research journals, this notated information has become an area of interaction where the student posts “sticky note” questions to me within her notes and I can then either answer directly (as in questions on format, etc.) or call the student in for a “research chat” if the question is more involved and the student needs guidance. I never mentioned this “sticky note” option in any of my classes, but the students developed this form of communication on their own, and it has been quite useful in determining the level of work being done by the student, spotting research or citation problems, or suggesting other source material. These notes have acted, in a way, as informal meetings (in addition to flash email questions) which augment the classroom experience.

Shortly after the initial assignment date, students are asked to discuss their topic choices with the class and mention a few of the possible directions they might take. This discussion has contributed to the “narrowing down” and focusing component of research. Each student brings her journal to class and uses it as the basis from which to report to the class and to answer her peers’ questions. Such public questioning experiences (which occur twice—the second as a “progress report”) not only focus the individual student’s efforts but draw the rest of the class into each research topic, thus giving the students ownership of the class experience; they have diversified their research topic knowledge (to include their peers’) and have actively participated in each other’s work. There have been instances when students engaged in their own topics have run across source material which could prove beneficial to someone else, and they have brought the items to class for their colleague; for example, one student returned from a trip and brought in an airline magazine article on her colleague’s topic. I have encouraged this type of “find” as in the professional environment colleagues often support each other in the same way. The class as a whole engages in pre-class mini-reports to each other on “How are you handling this? Who else is having this problem?” While there could be danger involved in the level of “sharing,” no such problems have yet occurred in my seminars; it is more likely that I will jump in with too much source “help.” Also, especially if these informal discussions sound valuable, I have taken the opportunity to modify that day’s agenda and continue the discussion once class time has begun. Hence, I can again address students’ concerns, encourage progress, and side-track anxiety.

Mandating that all research material be in one location—a binder of some type—has changed many students' research experience in another way. As students accumulate their information over the twelve-week period of the project, they become astonished by the depth and breadth of their material. Most of them have never accumulated so much material for a paper, and they become visibly concerned about organizing their research into a coherent and concise paper. Such recognition is one of the biggest benefits to using research journals, convincing students that such depth of knowledge is what is required to produce a highly developed final paper. This lesson is important to learn early since experiences of this nature will be common in the "real" world. Synthesizing a mountain of information into a molehill is required in, I would argue, most research situations. With honors students the panic over "too much information" has led to anxiety about organizing their notes into a paper, another plus. Many honors students believe they do not have to outline or draft their work before commencing their final paper, but having a mountain of notes and having to record the entire organizing and winnowing process in their journals has led to more sophisticated questioning of material than I noticed in previous research projects. Students have also been more willing, even anxious, to make appointments to chat with me and to question their own expertise in the area. Such conferences become another venue where I can "catch" problems which could have resulted in a lower grade.

The two mini-discussions of student projects have led to better final oral presentations. Each student develops ease in talking about her project through the topics and questioning stages early in the semester and the progress report after mid-way through the course. This increased feedback, coupled with the daily class discussion inherent in the seminar format, has led to confident, advanced-level oral presentations. These presentations are not "reading of their papers" but are frequently used by students to address areas outside their final paper organization but relevant to the topic. The students themselves suggested this option, and I believe it gives added value to the scope of their research; we don't throw away information simply because it does not nicely fit into a relatively short (8–12 page) paper. By placing a maximum page count, I have been able to address issues of concise writing since limits are often imposed in the professional world.

This level of research experience in a seminar format does, I believe, adhere closely to the concept of the "honors experience." While we don't advertise our program as "harder," our classes are supposed to be "challenging," with a "broader/deeper" scope than non-honors courses. Research topics become personal to the student, and their growing depth of knowledge in it is publicly recognized not just with grades but in class discussions. Pursuing this type of research project has revealed more clearly to me that students must be ready, must be mature enough in their psychological development, to take full advantage of the research and presentation opportunities. This type of seminar and fully developed research project does not work well, I have found, in

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mixed-level classes, where second-semester freshmen are mixed with graduating seniors.

COURSE LEVEL

Proper advising or instructor permission for enrollment in the course is critical. In three of the five seminars where I used the different degrees of the research journal project, there were young men who were juniors or seniors by credit hours but second-semester students by year. As Arthur Chickering and others have discussed,¹ the developmental stages between freshmen and senior years are significantly wide and cannot be skipped. These young men, in three different classes, all struggled with the concept of research journals and with the open seminar format. Third- and fourth-year students (especially the women) became impatient with the more elementary work being done as well as with the lower level of maturity in these students' comments during class discussion. Class antagonism ran rather high by semester's end with my having to mediate the frustration from both sides. The frustration of the upper classmen manifested itself in multiple comments on evaluation forms like "Please do not let freshmen into junior-level seminars!" Since the students' experiences of honors seminars are at the heart of the honors experience, we do well to listen to such vehement suggestions.

Another, potentially more serious side effect of immaturity among young students in an upper-division course is that, to my knowledge, the first-year men were the only students to attempt or commit plagiarism. It had often taken me longer to detect plagiarism than it took the student to commit it, but journals removed the online searches, book and article searches, and heartrending questioning on my part as the information was 1) in the student's research journal or 2) not in the journal, in which case they had not done the required work. The discussion then turned to citation format or whether the student had fulfilled the research requirements of the project, allowing a pro-active approach rather than reactive punishment.

Research journals address other key rationales for plagiarism. Issues of time management and adherence to assignment rules are sometimes not fully understood by first-year students still in the throes of adjustment and have resulted in penalizing students for not taking responsibility for their own actions. I tackle academic integrity, in this case plagiarism, head-on. It becomes apparent early in the journal/class discussion that certain students are procrastinating, simply copying, or not understanding the depth of material they are to address. Repeated warnings, both verbal and written, about progress in journal notations, informational questioning, etc., result in a clear documentation trail where the student has no valid grounds for appeal of a final imposed penalty.

¹ Developmental theory is being used increasingly in advising, both residential and academic. We are becoming aware of these issues in our honors faculty discussions as we discuss course sequencing and degree plans.

Most students have responded positively to these early warnings, seeing them as an opportunity to address concerns and thereafter correcting or improving their performance. Early warnings have sometimes been ignored by first-year students, resulting in low grades and subsequent loss of scholarships. These extreme cases are another good reason to enforce enrollment criteria based on years rather than credits earned.

A particular issue with young honors students is accumulation of early credits through AP or testing that leaves them at a disadvantage; though allowing them the opportunity to enroll in courses they would otherwise not take, it often places them at a developmental disadvantage alongside older students. Because they are bright and have frequently been over-involved in many activities, freshmen are sometimes immature in the lessons of life. Use of journals may allow, in lower division courses, the opportunity to create individual and positive "learning moments" with these students. Honors students (of all ages) are also well-known for procrastination, another cause of plagiarism. The regular progress reports required in the research journal project frustrate their ability to hide lack of progress.

The maturity level required of students to succeed in a well-developed research journal project works best with third- and fourth-year students who fully comprehend the honors experience. They have chosen, on their own, to remain in the program with its attendant privileges and responsibilities whereas the first-year freshmen are still in the "Do I want this?" stage. Allowing students time to adapt to college and to decide if honors is what they want becomes very important in our faster/deeper curriculum, especially given the attrition rate in the first and second years.

INTERDISCIPLINARY USES

Several types of journals have been used in the Texas Tech Honors College. Field journals and "writing process" models are used in the Natural History and Humanities (NHH) degree plan, where they incorporate drawing and writing samples. The writing process journal is similar to my research journal as it is intended to form the basis for the students' final writing projects. The NHH writing and my research journal address complementary sides of the writing experience: the personal research of drafting ideas and reworking language (in the NHH version) and the primary/secondary source processing of information (of my research version), which often then leads to the drafting of ideas.

Other honors classes have used the "reflection" type of journal where students record their experiences. These are mostly used during study abroad experiences, where students record their observations, their experiences, and their impressions of another culture. These experiential journals then provide the basis for their presentation to the Honors College of research into their host culture, a requirement for honors credit during study abroad. Currently study abroad experiences can also be recorded via an internet blog that enables interaction with our home student body. Taken as a group, the field,

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writing, reflection, and research journals form a visibly coherent methodology in our honors experience. While most likely not visible to the average student, this coherence of approach across disciplinary and methodological boundaries demonstrates the deeper knowledge and self-reflection we wish to cultivate in our honors students.

Of curricular interest to our Honors College is the new Honors Arts and Letters (HAL) degree plan; since this degree requires clear sequencing of courses within the broader Honors College requirements, we have had to address the ramifications of early seminars, those at freshman and sophomore levels. The culmination of these students' degree plans with both a capstone senior seminar and then a two-course research requirement ends with their Highest Honors thesis. Using my type of research journal project, possibly implemented in increments in the freshman and sophomore level seminars and then fully developed in the junior year, would well-prepare the HAL senior students for the challenge of their final-year research. This is a new situation in our Honors College, and guiding a degree plan will require that faculty members in HAL take into consideration the stages of training, within disciplinary boundaries, which must be covered at various levels of the degree plan. Often in honors, we guide students only through "exceptional" or "broader" experience classes, often seminars outside their major. The guiding of a degree plan requires a shift in mentoring and disciplinary guidance, to which end the research journals can be a valuable resource.

CONCLUSION

Over the series of five courses I have taught using research journals, I have made the following adjustments: raised the increments in the assignment, increased class participation and knowledge of each student's topic, maintained the paper length, and increased the class presentation component. Given the class dynamics of various combinations of individuals, I modified the course in small increments each time, but over the run of five courses between fall 2003 and spring 2006, changes have been significant and address concerns that continually arise with honors students. While our students are highly motivated, in my experience the motivation is most often external, the grade/prize, rather than the internal motivation of knowledge acquisition and ingrained curiosity that I would like to see. A positive shift in student attitude has, however, been apparent to me over the five courses; this shift is most likely a combination of modified student behavior and my pedagogic approach. I hope that other honors faculty and administrators will find my model of research journals similarly successful.

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