



*About
the
Author*

David R. Applebaum *was born in 1947 and grew up in Brooklyn. He was always able to walk to school, first to P.S. 217; then to Midwood High School, and finally to Brooklyn College. In 1967 he moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where he received his M.A. and Ph.D. and studied with Edward T. Gargan. Applebaum was an activist in the civil rights, peace and student movements of the 1960's and 70's. He was among the first to fight for educational planning—the right and responsibility of undergraduate students to shape their educational lives.*

In 1973 he joined the History Department of Glassboro State College. He has worked for and written about educational reform at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Applebaum is working on a history of the syndicat de la magistrature, a labor union of French magistrates founded in June of 1968.

Collaborative Course Journals and the Study of History



David R. Applebaum

Required journal writing became a part of the history courses I taught in 1980, after I joined the Columbia Law Project.¹ The assignments were part of an incremental sequence of reading, research and writing skills. Tasks included (a) writing about work with basic bibliographical tools, i.e., printed and computerized library catalogs, (b) citing and defining key words using the *Oxford English Dictionary*, (c) identifying key phrases from a text and placing them in an analytical sentence, and (d) paraphrasing a paragraph from a primary source text.

During the fall of 1982, I circulated a ditto to students listing seventeen required exercises. They were due before the Thanksgiving break. There was never enough time to read and respond individually to all student writing. I relied increasingly upon peer review. I wrote articles about teaching strategies and learning goals associated with specific journal work. Colleagues at Glassboro State College critiqued these efforts.²

My instructions to students evolved over time, as did students' critical skills to examine the historical subject-matter. Journals were a tool adapted and modified for different groups and multiple purposes. They were useful in teaching historical methods and helpful in enhancing the ability to explore different

levels of understanding of subject-matter.

A turning point in journal work came through my participation on a special All-College Ad-Hoc Committee on Learning Outcomes Assessment. Discussions of the ad-hoc group pushed me beyond national and local pedagogical models. Specifically, I began a search for an alternative to atomized and individualized journal work.

In the fall of 1988, we developed a new requirement for a collaborative course journal. The theoretical origins of the shift were grounded in my research on the *syndicat de la magistrature* (a labor union of French judges), as well as my readings of Pierre Bourdieu (*Homo Academicus*), Michel Foucault (*Power/Knowledge*), and a combination of feminist and critical legal studies.

Descriptions of collaborative work by three-judge panels (*équipes*—teams) searching for truth in code law justice and twelve-person juries searching for justice in common law courts inspired me to develop ways for our students to nurture collaborative writing skills. I perceived this effort as a pathway to reinvigorating the social dimensions of democratic values, processes and relationships.

In higher education, we face near total reliance upon atomized and individualized measurement of student learning. The CCJ embodied and expressed my desire to search for a mechanism that would both reflect and reinforce a social construction of knowledge and meaning. It was a logical progression from individual journals. At the same time, my aim was to avoid the construction of a false self/other dichotomy in the design of classroom work.

I wished, through the CCJ, to break with a pattern of learning in which power and submission to authority were perceived as truth. Skill work was designed to show, to quote Bourdieu, that "Symbolic domination really begins when the misrecognition implied by recognition leads those who are dominated to apply the dominant criteria of evaluation to their practices."³ I wanted to escalate the level of critical thinking through critical writing. I hoped to demonstrate the dialogic production of meaning.

The effort also reflected my understanding of what Michel De Certeau called the "secondary production of meaning." A journal entry made in reply to multiple voices would come to be regarded as the work of the group. We would have a product that could illustrate and illuminate collective learning.

That students could help to reconstruct the social relations of learning, especially using writing skill development as the vehicle for change, was particularly appealing. The method responded to a real and regular litany of concerns about lack of time to work with students. Moreover, modified skill work was also intended to improve subject-matter teaching effectiveness. I envisioned a homogeneous acceleration of heterogeneous student learning.

At first, instructions and dialogue for the CCJ were simple and limited (if not always clear). I wrote the first installment. My text included the initials of student speakers, their questions, comments and citations of related readings, and quotations from class discussion. The reduction of material from oral to written form was difficult for me and took a great deal of time. Two days after the session, I distributed copies of the entry, and we had a lively discussion.

Following my effort and with my text as an "optional model," each student "drew a number" and provided a written account for subsequent class sessions. Each class member submitted three journal entries.

Individual assignments were spaced out over a sixteen-week semester. This made it possible to monitor and reflect on the interplay between individual progress and group development.

Each person enrolled in our upper-division course on Europe Since 1945 turned in about ten typewritten pages of text. Each was responsible to distribute the account of the prior class at the start of the next class session. The expense of xeroxing was a part of the regular expense of the course.

Some students offered outlines while others produced verbatim accounts of events. Still others provided the group with synthetic essays on the class sessions. All entries concluded with two or three challenge questions.⁴ We held regular and ongoing talks

about (a) facts to be incorporated into the record of events, (b) criteria for the inclusion of problems, concepts and ideas, and (c) genres and styles to be used for journal entries. In time, Garfield cartoons and reproductions of art works were added to the common text.

The discussions about adding to notes came during the discussions of journal entries. The discussions about criteria for inclusion of subject-matter and appropriate genres/styles came before the individual put pen to paper. Each person who left the course kept a set of edited journal entries.

In time, the CCJ came to supplant the note-taking process, thereby freeing most students to speak, debate or listen while relying upon a peer to write and remember in a different way. Consequently, the daily rhythms and tempos of learning were redistributed.

In our bicentennial course on The French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, students learned about the requirement at our first class session. Almost half of the group participated in the primitive version of the collaborative work. My written instructions were as follows:

At the beginning of each class one member of the class will provide a written summary of the prior session along with one or more thought questions derived from the subject-matter under discussion. We will proceed to amend the notes—that means making additions, deletions and corrections.

You will have to prepare enough copies of your journal entry for everyone to be able to edit the text together. If you are the “designated” journal writer for the next class session, then you will be able to focus your energy on listening and writing. Any individual author of a journal entry can “check out” a comment or a quote during discussion or after class (prior to distributing copies of the journal entry to the group). Journal entries *may* include an outline of the discussion and *must include* a written report in essay form.

One of the reasons that we are using the *collaborative course journals* is to gain a fuller and deeper appreciation of *procès-verbaux*. *Procès-verbaux* are one of the most important *primary sources* of the Age of Revolution, and we need to have a critical understanding of their accuracy, strengths and weaknesses as a resource for the study of people, events, and ideas.⁵

Students knew I would take my turn in submitting a journal entry. They also knew I would not allow our work—including class tapes and journal entries—to be cited outside class without receiving individual and group permission to do so (they have read, criticized and changed this article). Our rules stressed the need for clarity and ethical professional behavior in oral historical research and also challenged the widely accepted notions of “ownership of the image” and “ownership of the idea.”⁶

The individual act of writing from a source with multiple voices negated the artificial individualization of student writing. Our CCJ was recognized as part of a social event that blurred boundaries between personal and collective meaning and understanding. The exercise resulted in new insights into problems and paradoxes of creativity, copyrights and plagiarism. Moreover, requiring social permission prior to changing the intended audience of the written and spoken words generated mutual respect. In our class the speaker and listener, the actor and audience, as well as the writer and reader shared power in both the creation and transmission of meaning and understanding. The value of focused silence in the classroom was transformed and, over time, reinforced. Individuals who had to write about a specific session redirected their energies to listening to others. Students who habitually were silent found the need to respond orally to questions about their written journal submissions to the class.

The theory as well as the practice of the CCJ provided structured experiential pluralism. There was a transformation of the power of different social roles in learning, along with an alteration of the traditional hierarchical construction of classroom

behaviors. Students accustomed to being penalized because they have a style of learning rooted in introspection and reflection discovered they were as valued as students who almost always felt compelled to speak without necessarily reflecting about what they were saying. This new division of labor stressed mutuality in learning relationships through a multiplication and redistribution of roles. In turn, individuals were able to choose roles rather than have role mind-sets limit their options. That I was a co-participant in the CCJ effort, as I had been in individual journal efforts, reduced some inequalities between "teacher" and "student." We fashioned a matrix of dialogic production which respected student privacy and personal power.

That journal entry writers could verify quotes, and that journal readers clarify the meaning of comments, established a basis for discussion. We found that dialogues offered more choices than the compulsive power of professional authority in reshaping written texts. There was a conjuncture between the desire for clarity and accuracy in the description of events, identification of key concepts and construction of an analysis on the one hand, and the need for respect for the integrity of the person(s) being cited on the other hand. The work on oral history led to discussion of problems faced by historians who cannot find living subjects and must rely upon partial and limited knowledge of the contexts that produced written primary source texts.

There are still some problems to be worked out in the effort to alter the pattern of teaching and learning. Most of the discussion of CCJ submissions focused upon editing and correcting the three to five typed pages of text generated by the previous class session. The skill component of the joint effort has varied from working on verb tenses to making decisions about paragraph breaks. This skills focus has downgraded the value of historical questions and problems derived from the prior discussion. There has also been a tendency in journal entries to cite faculty more often than students, even when the latter have been the original source of a creative question or a powerful analytical insight.

I rediscovered from the CCJ that most students believe that

differences in meaning are best understood in terms of conflict. Alternative models and constellations of fact are almost always to be understood in contradictory and adversarial ways. The CCJ makes it possible to note that "differences" in the links between memory and meaning do not have to be understood in terms of "conflict" and "truth." We have moved beyond the issues of one "correct" or "incorrect" understanding of the prior class session to understand perspectivism (not relativism). It is both possible and desirable for students and faculty to derive plural (and even opposed) readings of the meaning of classes. This in turn allows us all to experience the doubt that forces us to strengthen skeptical facilities that push the research enterprise forward and also enhance democratic tolerance.

The ultimate goal is for the skill work to help us break away from hierarchical dichotomies in disciplinary knowledges. The emphasis of the CCJ is upon refining the process of critical thinking to replace power with truth in the construction of meanings. The possibility that speech and citation have a chilling effect on individual comments has surfaced. On two occasions I suggested that we go "off the record" and found there was a burst of energy and a general opening up of discussion (multiple and simultaneous). As the person with ultimate control of the discussions, I have to devise ways to improve the "on the record" and "off the record" interplay so that the elements of creativity and spontaneity in the collaborative effort are not lost.

Because the CCJ provided a minimum level of security within the group, students willingly risked peer review of their writing. The procedures and rules are an imperfect yet necessary step if students are to take chances in their writing.

Our criteria for inclusion of material included the social processes of verification rather than an isolated, indeterminate and autonomous fabrication of truth. Needless to say, the substitution of contingent communication of meaning for absolute presentation of truth is disconcerting. Students are accustomed to a history focused upon the memorization of mountains of chronologically sequenced and "determined as significant" facts. Rather than "taking sides" in the debate over what we include

or exclude from our lexicon of cultural literacy, the CCJ provides a tool for social construction of meaningful memories. This is done without paralyzing critical analysis. The memory rooted in the power of the grade (forgotten when the coercion of the classroom is disengaged) is replaced by a thinking skill that is self-reinforcing.

The requirement of writing beyond the classroom has broken artificial temporal barriers of learning. Students have reflected upon the advantages and disadvantages of writing journal entries immediately after the session or five days later. Students discovered that disparate time frames between reflection and writing create differences rather than "pure" advantages for one or another interpretation. The strengths of primary versus secondary source materials are realized in implicit and explicit ways.

We use our new understanding of time and the criteria for inclusion or silence to critically examine our texts and the authors of primary source documents. Writing skill is, thereby, nurturing critical reading skills. The combination of skills, moreover, provides the basis for the construction of designs for term papers.

Conclusions

The pedagogy of collaborative course journals is consistent with the development of post-structuralist history.⁷ It offers us a way to "study processes by which meaning is constructed." As a written text, Roger Chartier establishes three rules essential for the CCJ:

There are three ineluctable demands on anyone who sets out to decipher the symbolic system that underlies a text...first, to take the text as a text and try to determine its intentions, its strategies and the effects produced by its discourse [the plural purposes of the CCJ cannot be overlooked or underestimated]...next, to avoid supposing a stable, full value in its lexical choices, but to take into account the semantic investment or disinvestment of its terms;...finally, to define the instance of behavior and the rituals present in the text on the basis of the specific

way in which they are assembled or produced by original invention, rather than to categorize them on the basis of remote resemblances to codified forms among the repertoire of Western folk-culture.

These rules help reveal the humor and larger meaning of "All My Bourgeois Children," the journal within the journal of the Age of Revolution. They make it possible to accept the arrival and departure of illustrations in the notes that range from Garfield cartoons to David's homage to Marat.

The CCJ is not bounded by the texts or controlled by someone in a narrowly constructed professional role. The CCJ breaks with the idea that endowed texts and discourses have either an intrinsic or finite value and unique meaning. It is no longer the sole task of the critic to live with a flat meaning of the representation of the author.

Collaborative course journals are consistent with a *new* "history...that gives meaning to the world in plural and even contradictory ways." The image and vision are consistent with views about tools and methods advanced by Lucien Febvre in 1942:

Every civilization has its own mental tools. Even more, every era of the same civilization, every advance in technology of science that gives it its character, has a revised set of tools, a little more refined for certain purposes, a little less so for others. A civilization or an era has no assurance that it will be able to transmit these mental tools in their entirety to succeeding civilizations and eras. The tools may undergo significant deterioration, regression and distortion; or on the contrary, more improvement, enrichment, and complexity. They are valuable for the civilization that succeeds in forging them, and they are valuable for the era that uses them; they are not valuable for eternity or for all humanity, nor for the whole narrow course of development within one civilization.⁸

Notes

¹ The Project for the Study and Application of Humanistic Education in Law was funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Institute for Mental Health. Jack Himmelstein directed the project, which was dedicated to transforming legal education and lawyering.

² Two years of almost daily discussion with Howard Cell of the Department of Philosophy and Religion and one year of daily discussion and team teaching with Susan Gotsch-Thomson of the Department of Sociology provided me with fundamental and critical questions that shaped this work. My work with Howard was in the team-taught introductory humanities course at Rutgers-Camden where we were both humanities fellows. My work with Susan came about through our collaboration on a New Jersey Department of Higher Education Humanities Grant: "Workplace Democracy in Social-Historical Perspective."

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire: l'économie des échanges linguistiques* (Paris, 1981), p. 34.

⁴ I am indebted to Gene Elliot of our Psychology Department for this idea. I hope that my "inversion" of the process—wherein students rather than faculty are charged with the task of constructing the questions—does not suggest that only one group or another should carry responsibility for the task of generating questions.

⁵ The *procès-verbaux* of the Provisional Government of 1848 in France, edited by Charles Pouthas for the centennial of the Revolution of 1848, lack detail about discussions. These silences were the model that regularly inspired my thinking about our CCJ.

⁶ The debate about individual and social ownership of thought and ideas—in its French version—is contained in Denis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature* (Boston: Harvard U P, 1989).

⁷ Roger Chartier, *Cultural History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U P, 1988).

⁸ Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, quoted in Roger Chartier, p. 24.