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## *Faculty Seminar on the Effective Use of Course Journals*

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Across the University, a variety of professors are using journals as part of their courses. This fall the Sheridan Center convened a number of those faculty, led by Professor Selma Moss-Ward (English), to share with other interested instructors how course journals could be integrated into their teaching. Journals encourage students to produce self-reflective writing and stimulate creative self-expression. As one teaching strategy among those used in a course, journals present a number of challenges, and the seminar helped begin to address how to use journals most effectively. The faculty panelists outlined four major considerations the faculty panelists stressed to the participants.

- Articulate clearly at the beginning of the course the relationship of the course journals to course content. Without this explicit explanation, faculty found that the quality of the journals would vary tremendously. Many students are not familiar with how to write a journal, and tying the content of the journal with the course makes the assignment more understandable. Moss-Ward used journals as a way for her students to comment on their readings in relation to the service-learning component of her course. In this way, the journal functioned as a self-reflective statement about student reactions to required readings.
- Provide students with explicit directions. Students need explicit directions as to what is expected from these journals including their format, submission, even their physical appearance. Again, without these directions, students' journals would vary in quality. For example, Professor Ann Dill's (Sociology) course on social agencies assigned journals as part of her students' field work. Some simply handed in their date books while others wrote extensive notes for each visit. In this instance, the

kinds of journals submitted varied tremendously with students' experiences differing widely.

- Remember to incorporate in your planning of the course how you, the instructor, will respond and grade the journals. Students' course journals require response by the faculty; without a committed reader, the journals may not produce the goals of the course. Response entails the reading of submitted journals by faculty and/or their teaching assistants. As such, faculty need to be aware of the increased work load course journals could mean for the course. Not only are students writing more, but faculty and/or their teaching assistants have to read and comment on that increased amount of writing. Additionally, responding and commenting on student journals requires that students hand in their working documents periodically throughout the semester. Without intermittent submission by the students and subsequent commentary by the instructor, the course journal as a semester long learning exercise may not express the increased knowledge or understanding of the course materials. Professor Jonathan Waage's (Bio-EEB) journals functioned as field notes for students' observations of animal behavior. Professor Waage and his teaching assistants read student work throughout the semester in order to refine student observation and to improve student field work.
- Articulate for the students at the beginning how you will assess the course journal as part of the course. If the journal will be graded, what will the criteria be? How do these criteria relate to the course goals and objectives? Catherine Imbriglio's (Writing Center/English) students wrote self-reflective journals in preparation toward writing their auto-biography. In this case, the journal functioned as an integral stepping-stone toward the ultimate writing exercise of the course.

Course journals may provide faculty and students with a creative way of integrating writing and critical thinking about course content. Their use in courses across the curriculum demonstrates innovative teaching strategies by a number of Brown faculty. The effective incorporation of journals into any course requires the consideration of how they relate to course goals and objectives, how they will be assessed, and how the faculty member will respond and comment to them.

The Sheridan Center would like to know how other faculty members are using journals in their courses. A potential follow-up session featuring other journals may be planned in the next two semesters. Please contact the Center if you are interested in learning more about

how other faculty is incorporating this teaching strategy in their classroom or if you have some insights to share about how you used journals in your courses.