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Transforming Students into Scholars

Using Student Journals to Encourage Student Scholarship

By Dr. Brenda Ayres

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If you are a professor, no doubt you are committed to finding ways to increase the performance of your students as writers, acquirers of knowledge, and thinkers. I would like to propose two plans of action that will help you accomplish your goal. If you are an LU professor:

- 1) Email scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu with a request that you want to create a journal for your class or other group of students, and 2) encourage your students to publish their work in student journals listed at DigitalCommons.Liberty.edu. If you are a professor with another college or university, create your own journal and/or encourage your students to publish in journals with your school or with other schools. There are some journals at LU that invite papers by students from any college or university.

Why would you want to do either one or both of these? Why would you want to transform your students into scholars? The questions can be answered simply: To enhance the learning experience of students. Like other universities, Liberty University has adopted The Quality Enhancement Plan, with one premise being that mentoring students optimizes their educational experience across the curriculum and better prepares them for careers. Helping students to publish their work in journals is an invaluable and successful way to mentor them.

Typically, we professors assign papers in our classes. Students produce said papers. Then we assess the papers in order to evaluate how well students are achieving the goals that we have set up as outcomes for our class. Most students are singularly focused on earning a grade toward

the ultimate goal of earning a degree. While tending to their assignments, they rarely perceive that what they are doing extends beyond the “four walls of their classroom.” Many of them think the only challenge is to discover what the professor wants and expects, and how he or she wants things done in order to get a desired grade.

The greatest deficiency of this perspective is that it is so insular. Many students—not all, but many—don’t appreciate how an assignment or certain assignments might specifically prepare them to be able to perform a task that will be required in their future careers. Another deficiency, and one that is particularly endemic to a Christian university, is that students are too parochial about accessing and transmitting knowledge beyond the classroom. We see this deficiency in the inadequacy of their research. Too many of them have the “drive-up window” mentality: “I’m required to have ten sources, so I’ll get on the Web and find as quickly as I can, ten published some things that may have something to do with my subject. It doesn’t matter who wrote them or how substantial, accurate, correct, current, or relevant they are.”

Students often fail their research papers before they write the first word because they fail to employ the time, care, and discrimination in doing the research first. They consider research as some mechanical exercise that does not require much more than cutting and pasting text. Research assignments are inherently designed to significantly expand the student’s access to knowledge beyond the textbook and the professor. Robert Browning’s famous statement is apropos here: “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp / Or what’s a heaven for?” And so is Shakespeare: “Ignorance is the curse of God; knowledge is the wing wherewith we fly to heaven.” What a gift we give to our students if we instill in them a delight and hunger for knowledge.

Another deficiency that dismays professors is that most students don't understand the writing process. Even if we allow or even require multiple drafts and in turn supply a plethora of comments that will direct them how to revise, they often regard us as only their word editors. They ignore our questions about logic, development, and clarity. They fix only those grammar errors that we point out and then complain if their revised papers aren't compensated with a higher grade for extra work.

We need to help them see the purpose for writing papers. We need to coach them about how to increase their critical thinking skills. We need to help them learn how to edit their own work. We need to help them see beyond classroom walls and broaden their awareness of themselves as active members of academic and professional communities. Why? Because the primary purpose of a college/university education is to prepare students for careers, and most of the careers that await them lie beyond the classroom walls.

If professors do not have the time or students don't have the time to prepare multiple drafts of the same paper to receive comments and revise, if students deliver papers that have something fresh to say or communicate information in a fresh way (and we should encourage them to do this), we can ask them to submit their papers to scholarly journals. *The Kabod*, which is LU's Honors Program journal, requires papers to go through peer review and professional review processes. Papers are not automatically published, and they are not published as is. Regardless of the journal at LU's DigitalCommons, each has its own editorial process in place, and by the time the paper has gone through a number of revisions, it should be ready for publication. The student reaps the benefits of authorship of a paper that has been collaboratively produced—as all publications are. The finished paper should be polished and therefore stronger than if the student had written it alone without the input from editors. The student author has

learned that writing for publication is a collaborative effort. What is the value in that, especially if the student does not plan to have a publishing career? The exchange of knowledge is always collaborative. Additionally, through collaboration—through mentoring—the student learns how to communicate to be understood and effective. This skill will improve performance in other classes and is an essential for success in nearly any career, even if success begins with being able to write a cover letter that results in an invitation to interview.

If you create an editorial staff of students, you engage in mentoring them as well in how to edit work. If your staff includes graphic design majors, you give them experience in creating artwork and layout for magazines. At LU, students may earn Christian Service (CSER) credit for this work, and their training may pay off in internships and jobs with publishing firms.

Publication, moreover, allows students to showcase their work to be seen by prospective employers and graduate committees and to be listed in their dossiers. Besides individual benefits to the students, publications are good press for our majors, disciplines, schools, and university. Prospective students may see what our students are publishing, perceive the academic reputation of our school, and decide to enroll at LU. The journals also add prestige to our university.

Publishing their ideas also enables them to share their ideas with the rest of the world. If these ideas are expressed through a biblical worldview, students are not just dispensing intellectual knowledge; they are obeying the biblical mandate to be light and salt.

However, the “rest of the world”—namely academe— will not give a paper the time of day if it’s poorly written, poorly researched, poorly supported, and poorly developed. Teaching students how to write clearly and effectively enough to be understood and appreciated by an audience beyond a professor or even beyond a university, will give them invaluable skills that they can use in their other classes and their careers. It will teach them how to be more effective

researchers, thinkers, and writers. If a student's focus is beyond a grade and toward publication, it makes them more aware of their presence in a larger world and therefore should motivate them to strive for a higher degree of excellence in their work.

Not only do they increase their skills in thinking and writing and increase their professional prospects, they become active members in a large community called academe. It exceeds a classroom, a major, and a university. In fact, it exceeds all universities and colleges to include independent scholars and other people driven by intellectual curiosity and perspicacity. It exceeds the erudite and intellectually hungry in the United States to include an international range of thinkers. It exceeds the present to include the past and to project into the future. It is characterized by intellectual query and directed by a universal impetus to understand our world and to improve it.

Writing research papers is the same as contributing to and benefitting from discourse with the larger academic community. This is done through the investigation of what has been published by others, followed by analysis, evaluation, synthesis, and interaction with it. Research paper writing is coproducing with other scholars in the development of a thesis.

Scholars have a passion for investigation. Converting our students into scholarly detectives and teaching them how to ask questions is an effective means of getting students excited about research, so that they no longer dread assignments as nothing but tedious efforts to appease professors. The purpose of academic journals is to publish the questions and findings of scholars. The American novelist Thomas Berger once said, "The art and science of asking questions is the source of all knowledge." The underpinning for LU's journal *The Kabod* is Proverbs 25:2, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings." Scholars excavate what is not readily apparent, and do it with the hope that revelation

will solve problems and enhance life. This is the primary purpose of academic scholarship: to improve the world. Being able to articulate theories, advance ideas, invent, create, and analyze in an environment without fear of retribution is what makes academe a privileged and necessary space. If students can embrace this mission, they will be willing to invest more of their time and energy into the research and writing that they do. They'll appreciate the purpose and value for scholarly writing.

Once published in a scholarly journal, papers will be accessible to the entire world, available in a "place" where scholars can exchange ideas. Students gain and offer, in economic terms, "academic currency": They practice in the making of investment, exchange, purchase, and expenditure of ideas. Dialectically, they offer a thesis after synthesizing other scholars' theses, and then others read their thesis and offer an antithesis. Still others synthesize from both and generate a new thesis, and thus ideas are shared, applied, and compounded. A student's assignment, designed and constructed to enhance learning and demonstrate acquisition of knowledge, will not be restricted to only a class; it will be launched into a space where its author can network with those of similar interest. Readers may want to enter into a discussion with the student author and use the work to further their own research.

Perhaps most importantly in terms of eternal coinage, if a Christian scholar is writing through a biblical worldview, and still with the rigor demanded by academe, through publication a Christian scholar is obeying the Lord's command to "bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47). Through academe, God generously gives us the gift of knowledge and excellent speech as well as faith as described in 2 Corinthians 8:7, but they are not meant just for our advantage; they are eternal treasures to be shared with others so that ultimately, others will "discover the knowledge of God" (Prov. 2).

We Christians, moreover, have a responsibility to follow God's guidance in the use of our knowledge. We can engage in debate and disagree with other scholars, but the wielding of knowledge should not produce a "philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Col. 2:8). We must not exploit knowledge to cause conflict but instead allow it to comfort hearts and to knit people together in love (Col. 2:2). We know that all understanding comes from God, and it is in Him, in Christ, and in the Holy Spirit that "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (3). That is not to say that we shouldn't read any book but the Bible, for indeed God's treasures can be found everywhere because God is everywhere. But we are warned to be discerning.

Elihu gave good advice in Job 34 that is well worth following as we Christians "hear" a cacophony of ideas proffered in scholarship: "Hear my words, you wise men," Elihu beckons, "And listen to me, you who know. For the ear tests words as the palate tastes food. Let us choose for ourselves what is right; Let us know among ourselves what is good" (2-4). As we consume knowledge, we must use the palate of the Bible and the power of discernment through the Holy Spirit, in order to distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:14). After we take in knowledge, synthesize it, and apply it, we are to look to Jesus to send us forth "as sheep in the midst of wolves," so we should be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16). Charles Spurgeon gave us a wise directive: "Wisdom is the right use of knowledge. To know is not to be wise. Many men know a great deal, and are all the greater fools for it. There is no fool so great as a fool as a knowing fool. But to know how to use knowledge is to have wisdom." This wisdom, this biblical worldview, is what makes Christian scholarship different from the scholarship in the world. We can find truth in secular scholarship, but our scholarship must be grounded in God's

truth and be promoted in God's way with a kindness and gentleness not often found in the world but is desperately needed.

Christian scholarship reveals the mysteries of God through the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that our papers are meant only for other Christians. In fact, God wants us to make available His knowledge to all people including intellectuals who are nonbelievers. So the papers that are published while reflecting God's truth, must present integrity, logic, language, and intellectual rigor that are expected of all academic journals, Christian or otherwise. We Christians can do this. After all, God is the creator of the intellect and He is the supreme scholar.

Why should we want to transform our students into scholars? We want our students to have higher goals than just grades that motivate and direct their learning experience. We believe that if they are given the opportunity to publish and are mentored through the research/writing/editing process, they will possess greater incentive to produce quality work that will result in their improvement of thinking and writing skills. If we teach them to identify their talents and knowledge as gifts from God and remind them of Christ's parable of talents, and show them how to compound those talents, we know that Jesus will say to them, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's [and teacher's] happiness!"

Why should students publish in journals that you and I create and manage? So that they can improve their writing and thinking skills, share their riches of eternal life, and glorify God.