

Student-Teacher Journals

Catherine Sadow

In 1983 I co-authored an article about student-teacher journals (Spack, Ruth and Catherine Sadow. Student-teacher working journals in ESL freshman composition. *TESOL Quarterly* 17 (4) 575-593). I never envisioned that I would continue to use a variation of those journals for twenty-five years and would miss them during the very few semesters when I let them go.

My students in grammar/writing classes at Showa Boston write letter-like journals to me every time we meet (either four times a week or twice a week) and I do the same. They write them on loose pieces of paper. I collect them, never correct them, always respond to them and return them the following class. I, in turn, write my daily journal to them, make copies and distribute them when I return their journals. More often than not, included in my journal, are excerpts from a student or students' journals.

The purpose of the journals is not to correct grammar or improve academic writing but to enable students, whether beginning, intermediate or advanced, to gain some writing fluency in a language which they may have studied but not written in very often. The journals also help to gain quick easy communication between student and teacher. In a short time students perceive that they have become more comfortable writing in English and that they are writing more quickly and I become aware that they are writing longer journals.

This is what one of my first journals looks like.

November 14, 2006

I hope you had a wonderful week in Washington and New York. I lived in Washington for two years, and that was an exciting time. My husband worked for a United States Senator so I got to meet some interesting people. My first baby was born in Washington.

Last week was a "catch up" week for me. I came in here almost every day to prepare for my new classes. I could have done some of the work at home, but there are too many distractions at home. There are things to clean, food to cook, books to read, friends to telephone, laundry to be done. I could probably list a hundred things that I could do at home instead of doing class preparation. But I did stay home one day and do some of those things. I also went to hear a concert at Symphony hall and eat at Mr. Sushi in Coolidge Corner.

What is all this about? I will write to you two days a week. You can call it a journal or a letter or anything you want to call it. It may be about me or the class or about how I feel about the war in Iraq or about a movie I saw. In return you will write to me (on a loose piece of paper) twice a week. It can be about anything. If you have a lot to say, it may be very long. If you are very tired and busy, it may be as short as "Sorry, Cathy. I'm too busy to write a real journal tonight."

If you say something that is very interesting, and if it's not too personal, I may include it in my journal and you will be published.

By the way, I don't correct journals. I just respond to them. All of your other writing will be corrected but journals are a place to work on writing quickly and comfortably in English. They're also a place to get to know each other well. However if you make the same mistakes all the time and I notice them, I'll speak to you about them.

This always works very well. Some people think they're going to hate doing this, but usually in the end they're pleased to have written about 25 journals and to have received 25 journals from me.

Your first journal is due on Friday.

I read this first journal aloud and ask if there are any questions. There are. Even though I have carefully mentioned that neither the length nor topic is prescribed, students inevitably ask me what they should write about and how long the journal should be. Once I have collected and read the students' first journals and individually responded to each, I begin my third journal where I attempt to insert several student journals. I want students to see their own or other students' work "published". My hope is that students become accustomed to immediate teacher feedback and also become motivated when they realize that their journal might also be published and have a wider audience. It also helps students have material to respond to so that they don't run out of journal ideas—a common problem for all writers.

November 19, 2006

I enjoyed your first journals. I am going to print parts of them so that everyone can read them. They are all on the same theme—volunteering. By the way, when I print peoples' journals, I make corrections as I go along. Nobody in the class writes perfectly, but I want you to read your friends' work without the mistakes.

From M: *"On November 16, I went to Hebrew Rehabilitation Center. It is located near Showa Boston. After school I went there to help make flower arrangements for Thanksgiving. These were artificial flowers but we made them very well. Through this volunteer work I noticed that communication with Americans is very difficult. After the*

volunteer work the Rehabilitation staff gave us cookies and sandwiches and we talked with them about Daisuke Matsuzaka who will come to the Boston Red Sox. I'm happy. I want to see him in Boston."

From S: *"I went to the food bank to do volunteer work. I hadn't been to the food bank so I didn't know what it was. When I entered a warehouse I was very surprised because it was so big and there were many kinds of food. For example, onions, snacks and milk. I was very excited because I love to eat. Of course I couldn't eat anything there but I was happy to see a lot of food.*

First we entered into the volunteers' room and heard a lecture by an employee. He told us that we had to divide food into groups of food. The work was so difficult for me because I didn't know what groups these foods were. I understood some foods like milk and chips but I couldn't understand some foods like protective foods and a can of tuna. So I asked employees many times. They were so kind and answered correctly. The volunteer work was so hard and difficult but I had a lot of time to talk with American people, I had a good experience, I think."

From I: *"Yesterday I went to the food bank to do volunteer work. It was the third time for me to do volunteer work. I packed food in corrugated boxes. The names of the goods were written above each box. Sometimes I couldn't understand what each of these meant, but one woman helped me so I could bring them to the correct place. It was very hard but I could do it with someone's help. Next time I want to do another kind of volunteer work because I want to have communication with people when I do my volunteer work."*

From Y: *"I like taking part in volunteer work. When I was a high school student, I took part. For example, a fund-raising campaign or cleaning the seashore. So I'm really happy because there are many volunteer activities in Boston.*

Today I went to the Rehabilitation Center for the Aged. It was the second time I took part in volunteering in Boston. The first time I went to the zoo on Hallowe'en and made Hallowe'en masks for children. It was really fun. Today I did flower arrangements. I worked with a very kind woman. She talked to me about many things. She also talked about Thanksgiving Day and taught me about how it started and how to celebrate it. And I talked to her about my family with poor English. But she heard me with her whole heart. I was very happy. I stayed there only two hours but I wanted to stay more—so I want to go there again."

These were very interesting. People went to the same places but had different experiences. Some people had great opportunities to talk. Others wished they had more opportunities to talk. But everyone helped the community in many ways. The food bank

delivers a lot of food to people who need it and they particularly deliver a lot of food at Thanksgiving to people who are poor and people who don't have families to celebrate with. Thanksgiving Day at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center will be more beautiful and more festive with the flower arrangements you made. Congratulations. You did good work.

Students are often shocked (and pleased) to see their own words printed in the teacher's journal. Because the students' journals are, of course, full of second language errors, I do simple editing as I include them in my journal. I correct spelling errors, try to modify text so that there are complete sentences and rephrase convoluted text when absolutely necessary. The only journals which receive any correction are the one or two that are printed in my journals. Do these students look at the corrections when they see their published journals? I don't know. Below is an example of an unedited student journal followed by my journal containing the edited journal.

"Americans often say that Japanese people always group together. I thought about that. Ummm. Why Japanese often group together? Actually Cooperation is important to Japanese society. We've been trained to be a member of Organization and do our best by school or Company since we were children.

The society don't need genius and fool. There is great deffirence with America that personality or Individual are considered important. I think that is one of reasons that genius rarely come in Japan. Japanese proverb say "The nail that sticks out will be pounded down." So, It's considered bad to stand out much better than others. I think that also one reason of Janese bully."

(My response at the bottom of the journal) This is very interesting, but I don't understand why it produces bullies.

October 20, 2005

Because I'm teaching Japanese students, I'm reading a lot of books about Japan and also Japanese novels. So when I read M's journal I was not surprised. However I'd be interested in your reaction to it.

From M: *"Americans often say that Japanese people always group together. I thought about that. Ummm Why do Japanese group together? Actually cooperation is important to Japanese society. We've been trained to be a member of an organization and do our best for school or company since we were children. The society doesn't need geniuses and fools. There is a great difference with America where personality and individuals are considered important. I think that is one of the reasons that genius rarely comes in Japan. A Japanese proverb says, "The nail that sticks out will be pounded down." So*

it's considered bad to stand out much better than others. I think that's also one reason for the Japanese bully."

(My response at the bottom of the journal) This is very interesting, but I don't understand why it produces bullies.

As I typed this now, I realized how much more editing I could have done. However reading student journals and responding to them two or four times a week takes time. I also need time for the detailed correction and grading of other assignments in the class. Because I make simple comments on each entry I can spend as little as twenty minutes reading through sixteen journals quickly looking for meaning only and making short responsive comments. Writing my journal may take a very short time or if I am printing student journals may take much longer. In the 1983 article, we say that writing our own journals takes very little time, ten to twenty minutes. Twenty five years later that is no longer true for me and I wonder now how true it was then.

However this particular journal resulted in another journal from "M" explaining the relationship between being a cooperative member of an organization and bullying. There were also two or three journals from other students responding to this topic. This resulted in another teacher journal containing three student journals on the topic of bullying. Eventually "M" wrote a short developed essay on the topic.

From the frequent student journals I often learn interesting things about what my Japanese students are observing, and thinking.

November 19, 2007

I've started to read the reactions to the first grade visit. They are very interesting. I won't finish them tonight because I'm going to Symphony, However I'll finish them tomorrow and then I'll write a little report about what you found interesting and unusual. So, as I was reading today's journals, I came across K's which was about difference.

From K: *"I came to Boston about two months ago. I experience many things. Through these things I could find some differences and feel some culture shock between the United States and Japan.*

When I reached the airport I was very surprised at the opening of the bathroom door it was very wide.

When I went to my CC's university, I found some differences between Japanese students and American students. During the class American students ate and drank. If we did this in Japan, we would be scolded by teachers. In Japan many students sleep during the class but in the United States I didn't find such students. I think we see the differences of culture."

I think it's really interesting. I don't care if you drink coffee in my class or even if you're quickly finishing your morning bagel. I also hope you don't mind if I have a sip of tea on days when I need some. However if you sleep in my class, I'm furious! Angry! Insulted!

With the Japanese teachers it seems to be the opposite. I'm sure that there is something culturally important about this, but I don't know what it is.

As I look back on twenty-five years of student-teacher journals, I realize how pleased I am with the practice. Students have frequent opportunities to write expressively and communicatively in addition to their grammar writing practice and some expository writing that they do in the grammar/writing class. The journals have not only given the students an audience, they have also given me an audience and opportunities to write, a good thing for a writing teacher to do. The journals help students overcome the fear of being misunderstood in a second language and help them to feel confident that they can communicate. It is easier for them to do this when they're focusing on communication rather than correctness.

There are other benefits. The teacher journal has added a dimension to the class and makes most students take the journal writing seriously. It also enables me to maintain an exchange of ideas with an entire class and at the same time provide interesting reading for students. In addition I get to know all students better particularly quieter ones. Students who have a hard time speaking up in class often have an easier time sharing interesting thoughts in their journals. Because I am writing my journal, I can empathize with my students especially on nights when it is the last thing I want to do. I don't underestimate the effort it takes to write when you are not inspired.

Would I do this if I had more than twenty students in a class? I would but probably less frequently. The one thing I would not give up is the teacher journal because I think it is what creates motivation to write, both for my students and myself.

Catherine Sadow joined Showa Boston in September 2004 after 24 years at Northeastern University. She has co-authored five listening/speaking books including *Dictations for Discussion* (Pro Lingua 2003) and *Interactive Dictations* (Pro Lingua 2006). The third book in this series will be published in early 2010. She is a past president of MATSOL, the Massachusetts state affiliate of TESOL and someday she hopes to publish a teaching memoir using student-teacher journals.