

The Polishing Cloth: A Publication to Encourage Good Student Writing

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The concept of using good student writing to inspire more good student writing is a vital process that demonstrates a two-year institution's emphasis on individual student instruction and recognition. *The Polishing Cloth* at Georgia Perimeter College is a collection of the best student essays from English composition, developmental studies, English as a Second Language, and other disciplines, complementing the required rhetorics with accessible student models. Such a writing text facilitates collaboration whereby the more able students help the less able acquire improved language skills. Another reason the publication has been successful in the classroom is that student essays are less intimidating and easier to analyze and critique than those of established authors. Furthermore, the yearly publication of the text keeps it fresh and up-to-date, and students, inspired by the prospect of publication, polish their writing and visualize their potential audience.

The History

Based on her experience of using a freshman writing magazine at the University of Illinois, Sarah Larson presented the idea of a composition publication to the English faculty at DeKalb College (now Georgia Perimeter College) in September of 1984. The project was unanimously adopted, and in October, Larson organized a Freshman Writing Committee. A "Name the Magazine Contest" was held among students, and the title of *The Polishing Cloth* was chosen from 85 entries. In March, the first copy was distributed to the bookstores, and a student evaluation of the magazine in May of the following year showed overwhelming support for the publication and a strong desire to see it used in the classroom. Since its introduction, *The Polishing Cloth* has evolved from a slim magazine into a 200-page text. In addition, faculty editors have made numerous presentations encouraging other institutions to start their own publications to accomplish the purpose of elevating and stimulating student writing and giving student writers a larger audience.

The Process

Any college can develop its own writing text by following a step-by-step procedure. The faculty members are asked to choose and submit to the editorial board of the publication the best writing from their classes. The students must then sign a release form including a statement that the work is their own. The submission form contains the home address and telephone and student identification numbers in order to provide correct information for the table of contents as well as for invitations to a reception honoring the student writers. Other information gathered can include the students' high schools and their locations, not only to provide articulation with the high schools but also to recognize the multi-cultural nature of the publication. The primary purpose of the editorial board is reading and rating the hundreds of essays submitted. Three members of the board read each essay and then rate each one by using a scale from 1 (excellent) to 4 (unacceptable). Comments can also be included to justify the numerical rating. In order to assure objectivity, the board asks faculty to refrain from placing their names on the essays they submit. This anonymity also encourages risk-taking and can provide fresh, creative ideas. The editors of the yearly publication then make the final selection from the highest rated essays and attempt to publish a balance of the best essays from each course and as wide a selection of rhetorical modes as possible.

The Classroom Use

Because students at the college have actually written the essays in this text, current students find the works more accessible than most professional writing. Therefore, teachers can maximize students' interest in these essays through a variety of classroom methods. To begin with, teachers and students can go through the book together and examine several different introductions or conclusions. Analyzing these beginnings and endings can show students different ways that they can write their own introductions and conclusions. In addition, rather than focusing on just one part of the essay, teachers may select to focus on

the entire paper. There are several possible questions to ask students about each essay: a) Is the thesis indicative of what the essay is about? b) Are there enough specific details in the body paragraphs? c) What details could be added to improve the paper? d) Does the conclusion bring the paper to an effective end? e) In what ways could the conclusion be improved? Asking such questions encourages students to focus on specific aspects of these essays and allows the transfer of such knowledge to their own writing. Another great benefit of this text for classroom use is that it provides excellent models for research papers. For example, the teacher can type up several entries from the Works Cited page of one of the research papers and then mix up the elements of the bibliographic entry. The teacher can give the pieces of information to the students so that they can use their handbooks to put the information into the correct order. Then, as a class, the students could look at the actual works cited page in *The Polishing Cloth* to check their work for accuracy. Obviously, as shown by these few examples, a book of student essays can help students in any level English course by providing realistic and accessible models.

Finding and Working with a Publisher

There are two approaches to publishing such a text: self-publishing or using a textbook publisher. Self-publishing means handling all pre-press requirements, including typesetting and artwork, contracting with a commercial printer, and distributing the books. If there are competent managing editors or other personnel experienced with commercial printing and funds to pay for the job, then self-publishing is cheaper than using a textbook publisher. The first 10 issues of *The Polishing Cloth* were self-published through the college print manager. There was no financial risk, but administrators kept cost/profit information from editors and made them uncomfortable with planning. *The Polishing Cloth* is not funded by the institution, but rather by sales to students in the college bookstores. However, several textbook publishers are interested in small-run, institution-specific books. Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company produced the first “national edition” of *The Polishing Cloth* in 1992. Both corporate profit and a risk of returned (unsold) books tend to raise costs, so it is important to negotiate carefully with prospective publishers. With thorough

planning, we have been able to keep the price to students within the range of private printing. Nevertheless, the ultimate success of such a publication depends on clear understandings with both in-house and outside entities.