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Writing Into the Curriculum: Adventures in Advanced Composition

Alys Culhane and Randy Stebbins

Introduction
by Alys Culhane

In the Fall '98 semester I taught Advanced Composition. During the course of the semester, my students and I produced a class book, the audience of which was first-year students, entitled Spirits of Change. *The focus of the completed anthology was on self-policing, as it related to campus partying. The collective message was: "Party responsibly."*

I had no idea what any of my students actually learned until one such individual, Randy Stebbins, said that he was interested in writing about his experiences as they related to this particular class. I said that this was an excellent idea and further suggested that he should submit his completed piece to The WAC Journal. *After talking with Randy, I elected to write a complementary essay, one in which I wrote about teaching a student-centered class.*

Part One: Writing to the First-Year Student by Randy Stebbins

"I feel that these girls and that guy are pretty damn stupid. This story shows how idiotic some people are. I have no idea why we read this, probally [sic] it is some alcohol awarness [sic] lesson or somthing [sic]."

"This is a good point to make about poor judgement. It is not always easy to take the easy road, meaning it doesn't always lead to the quick end."

These two different individuals are talking about the same piece of writing. The quotes are from first-year students who read an essay during an IAC class conducted by Ms. Kate Newell-Coupe of Plymouth State College's Education Department. The comments were scrawled on the back of Kate Langheim's "Two Minutes Feels Like Forever," a startling memoir about making a bad decision and getting in a car with a very drunk driver. Ms. Langheim's work appears in *Spirits of Change,* an anthology of student writing published by Dr. Alys Culhane's Advanced Composition class in the Fall semester of 1998.

Spirits of Change came about because the Advanced Composition students in Dr. Culhane's class wanted to use their writing to bring about a change in first-year students, perhaps preventing them from making mistakes that could hurt them in the years to come. Incoming students learn behaviors that may stay with them their entire first year and, in many cases, the rest of their college life. These students learn about the beauty of unsupervised living. They find out about the wild, drunken parties going on anytime of the week. They discover that women are being attacked and harassed on and off campus. Most of them learn, and the rest get at least a glimmer of the idea that the excessive use of any substance and/or excessive behavior has emotional, physical, and financial costs. With all that learning going on there was a ready, and at least semi-

willing, audience for the kind of personal writing that is in *Spirits of Change*. The writing and publishing of the anthology was the result of student efforts to make a difference.

Believing that a forty-odd-page anthology of student essays would forever change the hearts and minds of incoming freshmen is akin to believing in the Easter Bunny. That gargantuan cony doesn't really hop, hop, hop along, but he does bring some light to the lives of many children. The students involved in *Spirits of Change* didn't advocate excessive sugar consumption, but they did want to shed some light on two ugly facts of campus life, excessive drinking and its cost. The painful and frustrating story of the production of the anthology is a story that is still affecting those advanced composition students and the English Department faculty.

September was sliding toward October and Plymouth State College was about four weeks into the Fall semester when PSC President, Dr. Donald P. Wharton, fitted himself into a student desk in a Rounds Hall classroom. Student antics and muttering came to a halt as he settled in and looked around.

I said, "Good morning, Dr. Wharton, my name is Randy Stebbins and I have been volunteered to begin our discussion. You were invited here so that we could talk with you about student drinking, student violence, and the heavy-handed, disruptive police presence on and off campus." Thus began a frank, and sometimes strained discussion about issues which we as students and aspiring writers believed were affecting our education and our development as citizens.

Autumn and the resumption of school had brought increasing numbers of student arrests and confrontations with police and town residents. The ongoing friction between students and authorities seemed unavoidable. My fellow students and I wanted to do something about the problems, but we were unsure how we could help

resolve the multiple issues facing the student body and the college's administration. Continually talking about the problems in class was getting nowhere. We had the desire. We needed guidance. Our professor, Dr. Culhane, invited Dr. Wharton to our class, and that was the first step in a new direction.

The course structure changed dramatically. Drawing on her personal teaching experience and on Jane Tompluns' essay, "Pedagogy of the Distressed, " our professor decided to let us determine how we would learn. In her essay, Tompkins describes how she relinquished her role as performer in front of the classroom and gave her students control over the structure and nature of their learning. In addition to creating a student-centered classroom, Dr. Culhane suggested we publish an anthology of student writing related to the problems we had been discussing in class. This proposal, plus the novelty of directing our own learning, appealed to us and so we enthusiastically embraced the idea. After discussion and a vote, the class accepted Dr. Culhane's challenging offer. A syllabus revision committee was selected. Working with the professor, this committee presented us with a new syllabus within the week. The combination of the initial professor-centered syllabus, along with our new student-directed approach, accomplished three goals. First, we would be writing the memoir, place, and profile non-fiction pieces that were the core of the course. Second, we would find out how to write these pieces through our own efforts. Third, we would gain practical experience with group organization, leadership and the mechanics of editing and publishing.

Lest you think anarchy reigned, know that Dr. Culhane did not simply throw open the gates to Rome and invite the Visigoths to plunder at will. She exercised professorial control when we wandered off course, and gave us the benefit of her education and experience through intensive one-on-one conferencing. She also initiated and guided some in-class discussion and showed us her personal enthusiasm for our project. We were excited about using writing to accomplish a specific goal. James Joyce said that if he

could get the particulars of a story, he would have the universal We would soon discover how our individual particulars carried at least some of Joyce's universal within them. Classroom theory was meeting the real world. Language as artifact was meeting language as social construct.

The initial enthusiasm quickly waned and, as many group projects do, our effort degenerated into committee formation and shot-gunned assignments. Point that shotgun at a consensual agreement not to have an editor-in-chief and we had a plan for a boat that was not going to float. We managed to overcome the initial difficulties of organization by being persistent, but there were other problems. Just as in Tompkins' student-centered class, we experienced immediate discord and significant emotional disruption. Spending a day in endless discussion about material we had covered in a previous session frayed our nerves. This resulted in angry, sometimes personal remarks. Students failed to read assigned essays and came to class unprepared to discuss the relevance of the readings. Others failed to make a distinction between literary and personal criticism and saw all efforts at a constructive critical response as an attack upon their very selves. Time was sometimes wasted, and everyone involved had strong opinions about how class time should be used.

While preparing to write this article, some three months after the conclusion of the Advanced Composition course, I talked with several of my fellow students about their reactions and about what they had learned in the class. Not unexpectedly, given the severe emotional reactions to the structure and progression of the course, many of these students claimed they had learned nothing from the class. Their remarks were almost entirely detailed criticisms about interpersonal conflicts with other students and the professor. Little substantive criticism came out of my discussions with classmates. Most of them "hated the class," "didn't learn anything about writing" or "didn't know what they had learned." Many also complained that "everything was too personal." These comments are similar

to some made about Tompkins' student-centered class. Also, like many of Tompkins' students, many of my classmates did not function well in a non-traditional classroom. By and large, those who failed stumbled because they did not take responsibility for their own learning. The absence of a performer at the head of the room convinced many of them that nothing could be learned. This attitude was surprising given the educational level of the class. We were all juniors or seniors and most of us were English majors. I did not expect the acrimony and carping that characterized many of the class periods, but perhaps those who were unhappy did not understand that we were trying to reach a larger audience than just our professor and peers.

In contrast, the students who actively participated in class, the project work, and especially the eventual publication of *Spirits of Change,* had an entirely different take on the course. These students told me they had learned how to write non-fiction. More importantly, they said they learned as much about their fellow students and about the dynamics of group work as they did about writing. Specifically, they learned that not everything someone says is necessarily true or meaningful and that a spoken commitment to a group goal is easy, but that the actual implementation of a commitment is much harder to accomplish. However, these students were not overwhelmingly positive. They had uniformly negative reactions about in-class disruptions and outbursts. Judged against the accurate nature of hindsight, there also was overall agreement that we should not have switched learning methods during the semester. Everyone involved felt that it would have been better to have begun the student-led method at the start of the term, yet every class session gave us insight not only into the mechanics of non-fiction, but into the workings of our fellow students' minds and hearts. There was learning going on in Rounds Hall. It was painful at times, wonderful at others, unavailable some days, and difficult always. Four weeks into the semester we had reversed our concept of how learning is accomplished in college. It was

proving to be an immense challenge.

Some of our classmates, squawking about not learning anything because there was not a professor lecturing, dropped the course without testing the water. Others faded into the background and floated in the calm headwaters of what would become, at times, a vicious river sweeping its streambed clean. Still others found something buoyant and hung on, paddling hard to stay in the middle of the torrent, away from the snags. The remaining abecedarians joined forces and worked to get the unwieldy boat we had designed downstream and docked without drowning anyone. Most importantly, we wanted to deliver the vessel's cargo to its intended recipient, PSC first-year students.

The first-year student was an obvious choice for our audience. During our classroom discussions we talked of our own experiences as new students and what we had done and thought. We decided that we could do the most good by relaying our experiences and asking, through our writing, that the student body enforce its own rules for acceptable conduct. We had no illusions about changing behaviors that had become an informal norm at PSC, but we wanted our voices heard. We knew there was someone out there who would listen. To gauge first-year student opinions about our project, four of our classmates visited Dr. Culhane's introduction to literature classes. I was fortunate to be one of those visitors, and I found that the new students had strong opinions about our idea. The first-year students were initially reluctant to talk about drinking and bad behavior, but they quickly loosened up and readily gave us their ideas. They liked the concept of our project, but many were unsure about its effectiveness. When drawn out more, some of them said that they would read the stories as long as they were not preachy. Reasoning that writing that does something is worthwhile, we carried on.

It became obvious that we were not simply writing to the first-year student. We were writing across the curriculum, believing that all departments should have access to our publication. We

believed that it could be of use in any classroom, not just English or the social sciences. We had an opportunity to influence students throughout the college. Additionally, our desire to target incoming students would actually drive our writing into the curriculum through the Introduction to the Academic Community classroom.

IAC was the obvious choice to place our anthology and one of our committees contacted the IAC instructors. A few of the instructors agreed to use *Spirits of Change* in their classroom. This energized our production and gave us the audience we felt we needed, but it also brought up an entirely new set of problems for us to understand and manage.

Targeting a particular audience for a piece of writing is far different from writing for oneself or for a professor. Questions immediately arose about pedagogy, didacticism and how we might avoid a Falwellian voice in our writing, particularly in our memoir pieces. It would be easy to write a "this happened to me so don't do what I did" kind of memoir, but I knew writing of that nature did not work. Why would first-year students, flush with new freedom and hungry for experience of any kind, read and learn from our memoirs? These questions were answered through in-class discussion and especially through readings such as Norman Sim's "The Literary Journalists," his introduction to the anthology of the same name. We also read Frank Cannon's memoir "Rat Patrol: A Saga" and Lauren Salter's "Black Swans" in *Best American Essays 1997*. These two memoirs, though personal accounts of the authors' lives, touched on our individual experiences. In talking about the work we realized we could reach the first-year student by writing about ourselves. In the end, we wrote our memoir pieces for ourselves, making sense out of our particulars and finding Joyce's universal appeal at the same time. Our stories became the stones of our peers. While the names and places were different, the emotions and perspectives were familiar.

Finding a universal appeal in a non-fiction piece about a place

was a different task. How does a place have anything to do with the issues of violence, drinking, and boorish behavior? Again, our class examined these issues as a group. We read John McPhee's "Travels in Georgia" and Joan Didion's "Salvador" to see how other authors handled writing about a place. We began to see the connection between a place and humanity through their work and our discussions. The results of our learning is especially evident in Jamie Ramsey's essay from *Spirits of Change* , entitled "St. Peter Doesn't Play Beirut." Ms. Ramsey writes about the connections between the places she has been, and her awakening to a new understanding of her place in the world shows how an environment affects our lives and influences how and why we act as we do. Her discovery, while at a rowdy house party, of the contradiction between the debauchery of the party and the solemnity of the church across the street, led her to a moral epiphany that marks her to this day. She is not a Puritan, but neither is she now taking the types of risks or engaging in the boorish behavior that many first-year students do.

Shortly after writing the place essay, we were asked to compose a profile piece on a living, breathing human being. This initially presented an obvious and easy connection to our class goals. We would simply find a person directly related to our subject, such as Campus Police Chief John Clark, write a few pages about him and that would be it. Our perception of the simplicity of the task belied its true nature. Telling the biographical story of a person, even if they had intimate knowledge of our subject and were of interest to our audience, would not be sufficient. The real question was how do we tell the story of a person in such a way that he or she becomes a human being struggling with the problems of living, just as our target audience does each day. And how does the profiled person's humanity affect the job they are doing, or the behavior they are engaged in? How do we make them real and connected to our purpose? Again. we read and talked. We had

Jane Kramer's profile of a Texas cowboy from *The Literary Journalists*, and Hinton Als' piece about his mother, "Notes on my Mother," from *Best American Essays 1997.* Writing to effect change was proving to be difficult with the profile piece, and submissions to our journal dropped in response to that difficulty. That we published one piece, my profile of President Wharton, "Who Hath Woe?' in the journal is testimony, not to my prowess, but to the structure of the course and the input and criticism of the active students in the class. The acceptance and inclusion of this profile piece completed the writings that we needed to publish a thoughtful, effective anthology.

The self-discovery we experienced and the self-directed learning we struggled with could not have taken place in an ordinary, professor-centered classroom; it took the kind of student-centered pedagogy that prevailed in our advanced composition class. The technique of having students grapple with the questions of how to make a piece of writing relevant to a stated purpose was more effective than lecturing would ever be. We wrote across the curriculum, into the curriculum, and were educated in the bargain.

We had, each in our own way, navigated a tumultuous river and, except for some chafed skin and bruised feelings, we were safe on shore. It had been an exhilarating ride, but I was glad it was over. We had weathered unorthodox pedagogy, personal doubts and public criticism. It was an adventure in living. It made some of us better people, and that is what this college experience is all about. isn't it?

Part Two: Making the Underlife the Overlife
by Alys Culhane

I originally decided to write about my experiences in teaching advanced composition because I wanted to come to grips with what were some very deep-rooted feelings of ambivalence. On some days I thought that last semester's advanced composition class was the best course that I ever taught; on other days, that it was the worst. However, in the process of writing, another motive emerged: I determined that I wanted to remind my colleagues that real learning takes place when both teachers and students take risks. Last semester, I took a major risk in that I opted to use a more student-centered approach; I allowed my advanced composition students to participate in the decision-making process as this related to the day-to-day running of the class; I encouraged them to make their stories the focal point around which the class revolved; and I assisted them in making the transitional leap from private to public writing when they decided to share their work with a campus-wide audience.

Having the above in mind, I decided to write a narrative, one in which I provided readers with some nuts and bolts strategies in relation to student-centered teaching practices. And I decided to write about how teachers might deal with something that goes hand-in-hand with student-centered teaching: underlife behavior; those activities that students engage in to subvert the institutional status-quo.

At the beginning of last semester, I decided to make creative nonfiction the focal point around which advanced composition revolved. This was not a new or radical idea. Many nationally-known compositionists, including Chris Anderson, Wendy Bishop, Toby Fulwiler, and Michael Steinberg, have been doing this for some time. These writer-teachers believe that reliance upon a creative

nonfiction emphasis encourages students to develop a more writerly ethos. This is because the more open-ended characteristics of this genre gives students permission to work inductively and explore topics of self-interest. The above writer-teachers also contend that students learn the importance of implicit argumentation when creative nonfiction is used as a stylistic model.

Because I planned to forgo teaching advanced composition the way it had previously been taught (as a course in explicit argumentation) I left nothing to chance. I wrote up a detailed syllabus and put together a course reader. I decided that the focus of the course would be on defining style and alternate style, and, as well, on how writers use both to achieve their given rhetorical intent.

Student writers would begin the semester by coming up with class definitions of both. They'd next look at how other writers were defining these terms. (The stylists include E.B. White, Richard Lanhain, and Lois Johnson Rew; the alternate stylists include Tom Wolfe, Winston Weathers, and Robert Root.) They'd then come up with a more encompassing definition, one that they'd draw upon in writing their own essays. My reasoning in taking such an approach was anything but haphazard. In defining style, students would discover that the majority of creative nonfiction writers are working within the boundaries of pre-determined conventions. Furthermore, in defining alternate style, they'd discover that there are a handful who in their work are attempting to push the boundaries of these conventions to extremes. Additionally, my hope was that in writing their own pieces that they'd make the connection between theory and practice. I further deduced that having students write memoir, place, and profile essays would complement this intent. The focal point of a memoir is oneself, the focal point of a place piece is the setting, and the focal point of a profile piece is another individual. I determined that in relying upon the conventions of all three, students would learn that in order to make their experiences resonate with their readers, they'd have to rely

upon the use of particulars. They'd also learn that it isn't enough to narrate or expostulate; in order to keep your reader's attention, you have to use both. Their stories needed to support their claims and vice-versa. Writings by (among others) Charles Simic, Lauren Slater, Frank Gannon and Gay Talese would support this premise.

My first day-jitters were intensified by the fact that I was a new faculty person. But because I had a plan, I wasn't overly anxious. Emboldened by my careful syllabus preparation, I bounced into Rounds 204, took a seat, and in a very upbeat voice asked, "Does anyone have any good stories?" The course enrollees, mostly juniors and seniors, talked about courses, commuting, life in general. They listened to one another and asked sensible questions. This, I thought, is going to be my best class ever.

What may have appeared to my students to be a spontaneous gesture had been carefully contrived. I sensed having students share stories would give them (as writers) a better sense of their more immediate audience. I also reasoned that articulating their ideas to others would allow them to stockpile what I called "essay fodder." Additionally, I believed that sharing narratives would subvert underlife behavior.

As defined by Compositionist Robert Brooke in "Underlife and Writing Instruction," underlife activity includes note-passing, talking while the teacher is talking, and changing the topic of class conversation. Brooke contends that engaging in underlife behavior enables students to establish identities that are in opposition to those which are mandated by the given institution. Brooke makes his point with a rather telling example. He writes about two students who, when the subject of potatoes was brought up in class, began a conversation amongst themselves about how potatoes are used to make vodka. In talking, these students implicitly agree that it isn't the subject of potatoes which is important; what's important is what one might do with potatoes. Essentially, these two individuals are countering their academic identity by coming up

with one that is radically different. In this case they are taking on the roles of consumers and producers of alcohol.

I have always been wary of underlife behavior. For me, there's nothing more disheartening as a teacher than for students to show disinterest in subjects that I feel passionate about. I'd previously dealt with this by gritting my teeth and ignoring the underlife. But after giving the matter considerable thought, I opted to make the underlife the overlife. As I define it , the overlife is the subject that emerges when teachers make the connections between the given subject matter and the student's area of interest. For example, a writing teacher might switch gears and ask the vodka makers to do an I-search paper on the subject of alcohol production. Or an economics teacher might have students do a supply and demand study, using vodka consumption as a model.

I'd make the underlife the overlife by encouraging students to bring their stories to the forefront of class discussion. They'd then draw upon their stories in filling the course writing requirements

After a few weeks I sensed that I was on to something. In relation to my student's stories, I saw no signs of underlife behavior. I also noticed that a common theme was emerging, which was that of campus unrest. Students acknowledged that Plymouth State College is a party school. And yes, PSC has all the problems that go with this label including documented cases of sexual assault, excessive drinking, public rowdiness, and poor class attendance. What, I repeatedly asked. might be done about this? No one agreed, but everyone had answers. Students suggested that there be more and less police intervention, more and less interaction with area citizenry, and more and less focus on the underage drinking problem. No, students couldn't seem to find a common ground, but as I told them, at least the general tenor of the class was one of respect.

Yes, we were on to something. And because we were on to something. I surmised that students should be given the opportunity to share their ideas with a larger audience. This opportunity presented itself when, at a new faculty get-together, PSC President

Donald Wharton spoke to six of us newcomers about the importance of getting to know our students.

"You need to get to know each and every one of your students on a first-name basis," he said. "The one-on-one contact is what gives students a sense of belonging and commits them to remaining at this institution."

I had an idea. I'd invite President Wharton to meet with my students.

When I told my students that I'd scheduled a class visit with President Wharton, they were both astonished and skeptical. They told me that they'd never before had a PSC administrator attend one of their classes. And they seriously doubted that the One At the Top would take time off from his busy schedule to talk with them. Said one student, "Things like this don't happen around here."

After President Wharton and I agreed on a meeting time, I told my students that if they were serious about being heard, that they'd need to get their ideas on paper. Seeing them hem and haw, I added, "The President is more apt to take your claims into consideration if you present them to him in an organized fashion. Plus, taking the time to get your ideas on paper will help you to better determine what is and isn't important."

In preparation, everyone did a freewrite in which they considered the question, "What are the problems here in relation to campus unrest, and how might they be dealt with administratively?" In the weekend in between putting their thoughts on paper and the President's visit, a group of four collected and read the freewrites then wrote up a working document.

On the day of his visit, President Wharton strode into the room and took a seat. I noticed that he looked uncomfortable. So did my students. I wondered if I'd erred in asking him to visit. But my feelings of unease dissipated as my students spoke from an outline that contained a list of their concerns. All, including President

Wharton, talked, listened, took notes. President Wharton concluded the fifty-minute session by telling my students that many of their ideas made sense to him. He added that he'd meet with PSC Police Chief John Clark and talk further about one of their primary concerns, the lack of nighttime on-campus lighting. The students were pleased with this final gesture because he'd indicated to them that he was going to act upon their ideas.

I was elated because it appeared as though my students were interested in making the PSC climate more conducive to learning. Riding high on this wave of optimism, I suggested that they put together a class book, one in which they told their own stories in relation to campus unrest. This seemed to me to be most appropriate in relation to Advanced Composition, an upper-level writing course. Furthermore, the publication of a book would allow the student writers to make their ideas known to an audience that extend& beyond their teachers and peers. But providing a public forum was not my only reason for suggesting that the class put together a class book. I acted because I was seeing signs of the underlife. It was getting increasingly more difficult to make the connections between my students' stories and the subjects of style or alternate style. Any time I tried to initiate discussion in relation to the readings, they became inattentive. My students, however, seemed to be very enthusiastic about the prospect of going public with their ideas. Before putting this idea to a class vote, I warned them that such an endeavor would require a great deal of work on their part. "Think before you vote," I said. "If you decide to put out a class book, you'll end up having to put in additional time outside of class." Undaunted by my caveat, they unanimously decided to pursue this project.

My students accomplished a great deal in nine-week's time. They established editorial, copy-editing, fund-raising, and liaison committees, set up a production schedule and wrote memoir, place, and profile pieces. They also decided that the audience for *Spirits*

of Change would be incoming students. This decision had a profound effect on their work in that they immediately began talking about how they might write "to" this particular audience. All agreed that the intent was not to put out a book in which the message was that partying was bad. Rather, it was to put out a book in which the message was that it's okay to party – but for the sake of all involved, try to use some common sense.

While in the process of working on innumerable drafts, four students elected to share their work with two of my Introduction to Literature classes, which are comprised primarily of first-year students. Randy Stebbins and Abigail Hodgeman read their essays to one class. And Erik Kleinschmidt and Jen Hall read to the other class. At the onset, in both classes, the advanced composition students appeared to be uncomfortable. This was understandable. Before them, in both classes, were 30 somewhat skeptical individuals. As usual, the baseball hats were pulled down to brow level. And those who I'd dubbed the "slouchers" had slunk down low in their chairs. Moreover, the student readers were also nervous because they were going public with what were some very personal stories; Abigail had written about date rape; Erik about a rowdy dorm party; Randy about his-perceptions as a non-trad in relation to the Plymouth party scene, and Jen about her experiences as an underage drinker at a frat party. The readers, however, needn't have worried; the majority of the Introduction to Literature students listened intently to what they had to say.

The post-reading discussions were lively. In both classes, the female students were the most vocal. In one class, the discussion centered around the dangerous party scene, as this related to slipping rolfies in drinks. And in the other class discussion centered around the fears that they had in relation to campus safety.

The next day, I talked with the Advanced Composition students about what I observed when Randy and Abigail, and Erik and Jen went public with their work. My intent in talking about

the class visit was to make audience concerns seem less like an abstract concept. I noted that when the Advanced Composition students read they seemed to become aware when their audience's attention peaked and plummeted. I also pointed out that the readers became super-attentive when, in the subsequent discussions, students referred to their individual stories. I concluded by asking, how does this relate to your concerns about your audience, first-year students. They concluded that they needed to 1.Think about the vocabulary limitations of first-year students 2.Refrain from talking down to them. 3.Try to keep from sounding preachy and 4.Write their stories in such a way that incoming students might take them to heart.

In many ways, the underlife became the overlife. Although drafts were often late, students willingly shared their memoir, place, and profile pieces with one another. The majority of the time, group members were encouraging and supportive. All recognized that everyone had something important to say. This included the members of the editorial committee, who in keeping with the theme of self-policing had to reject some of the submissions.

My students and I also talked at length about how the class was and wasn't functioning. Even those who had divested themselves from the project felt no qualms about expressing their dissatisfaction in relation to how things were going. And so, by the semester's end, I felt the sense of satisfaction that comes when a teacher feels that everyone has learned something.

The above suggests that all went smoothly. For the record, it did not. At times, the underlife did rear its ugly head. The majority of our problems centered around student indifference as this related to doing the work. In most cases everyone did their jobs, but some did little more. In the words of one editorial committee member, "I've done my share of the work. I don't think I should have to do the work of the slackers."

My sense that I was riding on the underlife/overlife

rollercoaster made itself most evident during the last three weeks of the semester. Since the copy-editing committee didn't have the time to assist me in preparing the day's lesson, I planned to talk about some of the specifics of copy editing, using two essays that were going into the book as examples. When I asked students to list specific things that the copy editors should look for when copy editing, their eyes glazed over. Finally, after getting some semblance of a list together, I suggested that we look at one of the unedited pieces. Their responses went something like this:

"I think that this is just fine. This is a great piece of writing."

"This flows."

"So and so worked really hard on this essay. I see nothing wrong with it."

"This flows."

"We can't make any suggestions. That would be messing with her style."

"If we copy edit this. we'll change the voice. I don't want to change this. It's very unique."

"This flows."

I left the classroom feeling dubious about this particular project. I hoped that there would be a resurgence of interest in the copy-editing phase of production since a bad final product would negate what, on the part of many of my students, was thirteen week's hard work.

After break, the class missed three final deadlines. Finally, four students who believed in the project took charge. One of these students was Randy, who had become the unofficial Editor-In-Chief. During the course of the semester he had projected the ethos of a hard-working student. He made sure that his classmates were prepared for President Wharton's visit. And he often led class discussions. But it was during the final stages of production that his strengths as a leader became most apparent.

On the Friday before our fourth and final deadline, I announced

to the class that I didn't think that *Spirits of Change* would be done before the end of the semester.

"The manuscript needs to be carefully copy edited," I said. "And we're still lacking a preface, a table of contents page, an acknowledgements page, and a completed survey."

The response from one student (who'd missed eight classes) was that we ought to "bag the project." Much to my dismay, about a dozen of the twenty class members agreed with his informal motion. But before I could say anything, Randy spoke up:

"We committed ourselves to this project, so we should finish it," he said.

In response, eight or so students nodded their heads.

Seeing as there was some support for his idea, Randy began rallying the troops. Jumping out of his chair, he clapped his hands and shouted, "Okay, everyone, let's start copy editing."

"Where?" asked one student. "There's a class in here this afternoon. It's getting close to finals time. All the machines in the other computer clusters are being used."

"I'll ask if we can use the computers in the English Department Reading and Writing Center," I replied.

By 2 p.m. seven students had gathered in the Reed House. Their final goal was to assist Randy in making *Spirits of Change* a readable document. By Saturday, the number of writer/editors had dwindled to four. Together, Randy, Abigail, Laura Lavriviere and I worked for an additional six days, writing the preface and acknowledgement pages and doing the much-needed substance and copy editing. The students were in good spirits, but of course were frustrated because so much had to be done in a short amount of time. Additionally, they were concerned about time constraints because final exam week was two days away. Much to the relief of all, *Spirits of Change* was delivered to the printer during the middle of exam week. The class celebrated by hosting a reception. (Among others) President Wharton, Dean of Student Affairs Richard Hage,

and PSC Police Chief John Clark were in attendance.

I can only speculate as to what those enrolled in my advanced composition course thought they learned last semester. Self-evaluations are always problematic in that students, in being close to the material, aren't able to see how it might relate to other things that they've learned. The same goes for teachers. At the semester's end my students' high degree of resistance made me think that I'd been unsuccessful in making the underlife the overlife. Furthermore, I believed that their recalcitrance stemmed from the fact that the majority didn't want to do the work. I still believe this to be true. But after giving the matter even more thought, I determined that there was another reason why most hadn't put their hearts and souls into this project; the problem was that most felt uneasy about supporting what they saw as a non-drinking stance. The majority (who were primarily juniors and seniors) had forged identities as campus partiers. They were willing to admit to me and their peers that certain aspects of student behavior are problematic; however, they weren't wanting to fully commit themselves to sharing their print-based ideas with a larger, campus-wide audience.

As time passed, my perceptions in relation to the outcome of this particular class continued to change. Now, five months later, I realize that for most (including myself) that this was no ordinary class. Looking at it metaphorically, advanced composition was like a pebble dropped in a stream – the positive effects have been like concentric circles in that they have moved beyond Rounds 204. Now, five months later, I can say with some assurance that the underlife has continued to diminish while the overlife has grown. What follows are some of the signs of this:

In the process of telling his story, Randy drew upon what he learned last semester. Early in the drafting process, he situated himself in relation to what he freely admits was a stressful trip across the educational River Styx. Furthermore, he was able, in writing to PSC faculty, to make the particular universal. He also

did what Creative Nonfiction Anthologist Norman Sims notes is a characteristic of creative nonfiction – he cited other sources. Stebbins interviewed President Wharton, IAC faculty, and students. He also imitated the literary journalists in that he made sure that his source material was accurate. In writing and revising, Stebblins also relied heavily on the devices of dialogue, metaphor, and point of view.

I have kept in touch with a handful of last semester's Introduction to Literature students. A few (without prompting) have said that the best class was the one in which the juniors and seniors came and read their work. All liked the idea that the readers were trying to get across — that it's possible for students to party responsibly. Additionally, two of these individuals asked if I had extra copies of *Spirits of Change.*

This past semester, two of last semester's Advanced Composition students enrolled in my Introduction to Journalism class. I noticed this semester that both are adept at working in small groups, at critiquing one another's work, and at articulating their ideas in relation to the course material. In part, I attribute this to them having been active participants in a student-centered class.

My Advanced Composition course became a template for my Spring '99 Editing and Publishing course in that from the first day of class on, I drew upon what had worked well the previous semester. The Editing and Publishing students opted to put *Spirits of Change* on the Internet. Talking about this publication's content forced us to think about our own experiences in relation to self-policing. Those enrolled in Editing and Publishing also put out the English Department *Comp Journal*. Here, another important connection was made: in working on the *Comp Journal,* both the substance and copy editors worked closely with the first-year students on revisionary and copy-editing concerns.

Last semester, I too learned a great deal. In going into this semester, I determined that my role would be that of a facilitator,

mentor, and coach. This past semester, however, I've done a better job of asserting my authority in relation to these presumably more egalitarian roles.

The question that remains is, will I again try to make the connections between the given subject matter and student concerns? My answer is yes. What I found most successful this past year (and would like to do again) is to have upperclassmen share their works-in-progress with incoming students. And, taking this idea a step further, I'd also like for incoming students to share their works-in-progress with upperclassmen. For as I'm thinking, in connecting with peers, students are more likely to forge identities which complement rather than subvert the academic status-quo.

Note: *Spirits of Change* is available from Dr. Alys Culhane in the English Department, and on the Web through the department's home page, courtesy of her 1999 Spring semester editing and publishing class.