
Retrospective: “You Can Do This, Too”: Discovering the Value of Stylus in the Classroom

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I was not an instant fan. When introduced to *Stylus* as a new teacher in UCF’s composition program, I thought, “I’m reading *Writing about Writing*, plus the handbook, then there are assignments to write, lesson planning, and I should read this, too?” I found it overwhelming and was slow to understand its value. At the time, it seemed like the most manageable way to incorporate *Stylus* into my classes was to have students use it as their audience—to write their papers as if they planned to publish them there. In class, we spent time thinking through what the journal was and who might be reading the articles, looked at its submission guidelines, and discussed the John C. Hitt Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing. Then, looking more closely, students thought through how the articles were constructed, how secondary research was used, how evidence was incorporated, and how the editors’ values might be coming through in the writing they’re choosing to publish.

It was during one of these classes when a student asked, “If my paper gets published in *Stylus*, does that mean that President Hitt will read what I wrote?”

“Yes,” I said. (This was before President Hitt retired.)

“All of it? He’d have to read everything I said?”

The student had both family members and friends of the family who’d served prison sentences for various reasons, and she’d recently landed on the idea of researching how music programs served as a kind of literacy sponsor to those in prison. So, what captivated her wasn’t just the idea that the president of UCF might read her paper: it was that he might read about her family, her ideas, and the ways in which a “pro-criminal identity” could be transformed.

“Yes,” I said.

She smiled, and her motivation to produce a *Stylus*-worthy research project was visible and energizing. This was the moment that I truly understood *Stylus*’ value. It launched the student into a process of using activity theory to map out the goals, literacy tools, and rules of prison inmates so that she could develop research questions. It led her to interview four past inmates, which led her to conclude that prison programs such as music initiatives, aerobics classes, and GED testing acted as literacy sponsors that increased prisoners’ social literacy, confidence, and self-esteem. She learned about how community helps stigmatized individuals—the people she loved—feel “more normal.”

Curiously, by the end of the semester, she’d lost interest in submitting to *Stylus*. But I’ll never forget what an initial motivator it was for her. It represented not just a real-life audience but a myriad of other possibilities. Since then, I’ve seen *Stylus* used by students in other ways. For some, *Stylus* articles act as a genre how-to guide for lit reviews, primary research, and other assignments. For others, browsing through the titles and articles helps generate research topics, and some have picked

up the questions that other students ended with while others have taken up a different angle. I've seen it motivate students to engage with real revision—not just during the course, but after. By affording students the possibility of being a published writer, they see how their writing is valued. All of my students know that these were composition students like them. I tell them, “Look at what they did. You can do this, too.”

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