

An Open Letter on Composition

I haven't been here very long, and so my competence to address the question of the way we teach composition may be in doubt; but I don't mean to present myself as an authority on the subject. I have been teaching composition, though, since I began teaching five years ago, and during that time I have acquired certain convictions which I venture to obtrude on the Department's attention in the hope of making a useful contribution to our current debate. The proposal with which I conclude is, to be sure, provisional, and perhaps impracticable in its present form; but the question whether it should be implemented precedes, I think, questions how.

If our training as readers, critics, and scholars has meant anything at all, it has meant precisely that we have learned to discriminate between good writing and bad, and between great writing and that which is merely good. We know how powerfully language acts in shaping our conceptions of our universe and our selves, we know--or think we know--something about the means by which it does so; and we have learned, in turn, how by shaping language as best we can to our own ends, we may construe and reconstruct our selves and our world. We know, too, that the very concept of tradition which has such power for (or over) us implies that these matters are transmissible.

Literature is in one way or another central to our lives--if it weren't, none of us would be here now. I will venture to say that virtually all of us began to read before we began to write, and that writing took on significance and acquired value in our minds as a consequence of our reading--that we came to care about the quality of our own writing because we wanted to respond adequately to the quality and the challenge of the novels and plays and poems we had read. If this is the case--if it is fair for me to generalize thus from my own experience--then how can we expect our students to develop a similar sense of responsibility and obligation to their own uses of language when we deliberately and programmatically invert the structure of their experience of language?

For that is what we do. We require that our students enroll first in E306--a course in which writing is implicitly conceived as an activity conducted under laboratory conditions, with no context beyond that which it can itself provide (which isn't much of a context for people who have never thought about language)--before we will risk allowing them contact with literature; and we follow that with a course whose syllabus explicitly warns us against being "tempted to make (it) a literature course"--although its title is "Literature and Composition"--as if literature were somehow dangerous, evil, malignant.

It seems to me that the "freshman composition-and-staffing-complex," as Joe Moldenhauer has called it, has become an issue of "central" concern (Joe's word again) to the Department right now not because we have too many students who can't write--although there are too many students, and most of them don't write very well--but because as a Department we treat writing as a marginal concern, we push it into a special compartment called "composition."

We therefore create two camps, one comprised of "literature people" like myself, many of whom feel, and all too often act on the feeling, that "composition" as it is presently conceived is entirely subordinate to their own concerns, the other comprised of "composition people" who feel--often rightly--that "literature people" are not only ignorant of what they do but openly contemptuous as well. And so each group fights for control, fights to protect itself against the incursions of the other into its territory, because in distinguishing the teaching of composition, of writing, from everything else we do, we divorce it from our central concerns, which is to say that we have divorced it from ourselves. In doing that, we encourage our colleagues in other departments to continue to think of writing as an area of special concern only for the English Department, an unpleasant but unfortunately necessary adjunct to their real business which they would prefer to leave to us. What is worse, we encourage our students to think that way as well, we encourage them to believe that working hard at one's writing is something one does in one or two courses in one department. Worst of all, we encourage ourselves to think that way: we complain about teaching lower-division courses as if they weren't real courses somehow--and then we wonder why we have so few majors.

All of us, "literature people" and "composition people" alike, need to acknowledge that we teach composition all the time, although we do it in different ways; we give to the term an emphasis more or less explicit, depending upon the interests of the instructor, the intent of the course, the knowledge and abilities of the students. That is precisely as it should be, for to teach literature is to discuss the means by which some of the greatest artifacts of our culture have been produced, to show how they have been made and why, and to demonstrate in the very act of doing so--by virtue of the fact that we continue to discuss certain texts while allowing others to fall by the way--their continuing vitality and significance to our own sense of that culture as it is presently constituted. If these things have ceased to matter for us, what possible difference can it make that our students can't write?

It seems to me that the huge number of freshmen passing through our hands each semester constitutes a gold mine from which we ought to be able to fill our upper-division courses and our major easily. It seems to me, too, that we can do that if only we will stop thinking of our lower-division courses as "service courses," a term which inevitably comes to imply "service in the interest of someone else," i.e., servitude. We have allowed the University community (or our sense of it) to control and shape the content of our lower-division and especially our freshman offerings to an extent that would make the faculty of any other department on campus stage a coup. I quote from the preface to the most recent syllabus for E307:

Literature and Composition is one of two courses which will meet the requirements of a second semester of freshman English for all students in Arts and Sciences (now Liberal Arts) and for many students elsewhere in the University. The course should therefore satisfy the needs of a variety of students and the wishes of a variety of colleagues.

Given our training and interests, some of us may be tempted to make English 307C (now E307) a literature course, limiting the

writing assignments either to explication...or to records of significant encounters between the student's psyche and the literature he reads. But there is no doubt that our colleagues in other departments are less interested than we in literary essays, particularly literary essays about literature, and less concerned than some of us that the student find his own voice and discover his true self. They think of writing primarily as communication --somebody saying something that someone else will want to hear and will be able to understand. From their students they expect significant content correctly expressed, with a minimum of empty generalization and unsupported assertion. For the rest, they hope for some competence in the common chores like note-taking, answering examination questions, digging information out of the library and writing it up in readable term papers.

Recognizing our obligations to the University community should keep us from overemphasizing the literature component of the course...(Syllabus for English 307, 1978, p. 1)

What does it mean for an English department to "overemphasize" literature? Is literature not "primarily" a form of "communication--somebody saying something that someone else will want to hear and will be able to understand"? By whose standards is the "content" of a "literary essay about literature" not "significant"? Are we bound to accept those standards? Is that really what's involved in "recognizing our obligations to the University community"?

In what other department at this University does the faculty design courses in an attempt to "satisfy...needs...and...wishes" that members of other departments are themselves unwilling or unable to satisfy, according to terms imposed by those other departments? To do that, and to assume--as the statement I've quoted does assume--that our students won't or can't learn what they need to learn--i.e., to think, clearly, carefully, logically, with precision and imagination and a critical sense; and to write accordingly--by reading and writing about literature is to undermine not only the nature of our own enterprise (for that is what happens when we accept the engineer's valuation of what we do), but, on a larger scale, the very concept of a College of Liberal Arts. For the existence of such a college, if it be something more than a purely administrative expedient, is predicated on the belief that such subjects as history, literature, philosophy, and so on are of central importance to what is called "education," that they provide precisely the sort of intellectual training which is applicable across a broad range of disciplines, in liberal arts, in politics, in business, in the hard sciences. What are we ashamed of?

This is, after all, an English Department: I see no reason to be timid about what we do. Like other departments on campus, we should feel free to design our freshman courses as we see fit, and each of us should feel free to do so. If that means that there are as many different courses as there are instructors for them, we needn't worry: it's the bookstore's job to see that texts are available. It would still be possible, too, to say that in order for a course to count as a composition course, every

student must produce a given number of papers (or pages) during the term, that each assignment must be so designed as to demand the use of a different rhetorical strategy, and that at least one of those papers must require that students spend time in the library not merely "digging up information and writing it up in readable" form but actually thinking about it, weighing it, assessing its value and significance within an explicitly stated, firmly grasped intellectual context.*

It may be that as a result of such a change in our program, other departments in Liberal Arts and elsewhere would come to feel that their needs were not being well served, but I see nothing wrong in that: perhaps they would be forced, in that event, to assume their proper share of the burden, to develop a series of courses serving not only to introduce students to a given field but also to address the specific rhetorical and epistemological problems encountered by that field. (This is to insist that what counts as "evidence" in history differs sharply from what counts as "evidence" in literary studies, and that that in turn differs significantly from what counts as "evidence" in reporting an experiment performed in a biology laboratory, and so on.) These special problems are most properly addressed, it may be, by specialists in the fields to which they pertain.

Such courses do exist at other institutions: at Middlebury College, for instance, they are known as Foundation Courses, and have proved successful as composition courses and as introductions to the special methods and concerns of the various disciplines; they have also proven effective in attracting majors. Each student is required to take several such courses in order to assure that he or she is made aware of different disciplines, the different problems dealt with by each one, and the methods by which each discipline defines and addresses its particular concerns.

Such a proposal will not necessarily "solve" the freshman composition and staffing problems with which we are now faced, but it may contribute toward a solution. If we can persuade other departments (with the Dean's help) to offer "foundation courses" like those I've described, and if we can institute a College-wide (or University-wide) requirement that each student take at least two such courses during his or her freshman and sophomore years in order to qualify for upper-division standing, we may be able to reduce the sheer numbers of students we face each semester, and may thereby eliminate the desperate scramble for additional staff in which we have been forced to engage during the past several years. We have nothing to lose, I think, by such an effort, and everything to gain: we free ourselves to teach the sort of course in which we are interested and for which we have been trained, which for some of us will mean a course conceived and taught very much as E306 and E307 are now conceived and taught; we put ourselves in a far better position to interest our students in the various things we do early in their careers, and so to attract them to our advanced courses and to our major, we free ourselves from our impossible situation as the only department on campus which conceives its identity so largely in terms imposed from without. And we give to the problem of writing well the centrality it deserves without sacrificing to it our other interests.

John Slatin

*We could still require that AI's continue to follow the current syllabus, unless variant proposals are approved by the FEPC.