

## 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 307G (now E307) a literature course, limiting the



