

FRESHMAN COMPOSITION: NO PLACE FOR LITERATURE

Erika Lindemann

Recent discussions at professional meetings and in the pages of our journals have raised persistent questions about the role of literature in a first-year writing course. Some teachers regret that freshman English has become such an unholy "service course," stripped of the imaginative literature we love to teach. They argue that poetry, fiction, and drama offer essential training in the processes of reading. Although literature may have been taught poorly in the past, we should now reassert its importance in writing courses by adopting the insights of recent developments in critical theory. Other teachers find these arguments naïvely arrogant. When freshmen read and write about imaginative literature alone, they remain poorly prepared for the writing required of them in courses outside the English department. Instead of disparaging "the stuff" written in other disciplines, we ought instead to appreciate the varieties and excellences of academic discourse. Such an appreciation would discourage us from drawing false dichotomies between "them" and "us," between academic and personal writing, between writing inside and outside the academy.

Although imaginative literature disappeared from many first-semester composition classes years ago, it still survives in curricula that require a course in writing about literature, a course that some would argue belongs not to the writing program but rather to the literature program. Such courses, wherever they may appear in the curriculum, are being contested in ways that have not been apparent before. It is as if we have already played out our enthusiasm for writing as process and rejected those opportunities offered by the Writing Across the Curriculum movement to learn more about discourse in other disciplines. As we look about us, waiting for the paradigm to shift, we rediscover literature. For

interesting moment she describes

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some, the discovery represents a welcome resurgence of interest in reading-as-process; for others, an antidote to writing courses that lack "content."

What disturbs me about these discussions is that we have failed to ask a prior question. We cannot usefully discuss the role of imaginative literature (however defined) in freshman English without first asking what the purpose of a first-year writing course is. The debate centers on more important questions than whether or not to include a poem, play, or novel in a freshman composition syllabus. At issue are the goals of a first-year writing course, the training we give the teachers of that course, and the values people ascribe to the course in the college curriculum.

Most writing teachers reject the assumption that first-year writing courses serve primarily as a remedy for poor training in high school. To see freshman composition as remedial is to undervalue its importance as the only required course remaining in most college curricula. Freshman English does what no high school writing course can do: provide opportunities to master the genres, styles, audiences, and purposes of college writing. Freshman English offers guided practice in reading and writing the discourses of the academy and the professions. That is what our colleagues across the campus want it to do; that is what it should do if we are going to drag every first-year student through the requirement.

By defining the course in this way, I am excluding courses preoccupied with grammar, or the essay, or great ideas. As we have known for decades, focusing on grammar instruction reduces the amount of writing practice students are likely to get. Focusing exclusively on the essay—including the critical essay on a work of literature—amounts to collapsing the discourses of the academy into one genre, limiting students' abilities to practice other forms, experience other perspectives, negotiate the expectations of other readers. Focusing the course on great ideas also limits students' attention to writing, primarily because "ideas" courses devote too much time to lecture and discussion and too little time to planning, drafting, and revising. For this reason, I am also unhappy with WAC courses that substitute "global warming" or contemporary social issues for the great ideas listed in the thematic tables of contents of more traditional essay readers. The emphasis is still on the essay; the pedagogy, in practice, still involves too much teacher talk and too little writing.

Second-generation WAC courses come closer to the ideal I am describing. A freshman writing course linked to a freshman history course, for example, gives students practice reading and writing history. So does a first-year writing course that asks students to read and write a variety of texts found in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Such courses should have an immediate connection to the assignments students confront in college. They are not mere skills courses or training for the professions students may enter five years later; they raise

What is 1st year writing for?
The most important issues

Importance of Freshman English as only course required of all students

Do we focus too much on the essay?
What is the alternative?

What is this course?
Is it not focused on the essay?

questions of audience, purpose, and form that rhetorical training has always prepared students to address.

Such courses have as their subject matter the processes whereby writers and readers enter the conversation of the academy and begin to contribute to the making of knowledge. They focus not on nouns but on verbs: planning, drafting, revising, using data, evaluating sources, reading critically, interpreting evidence, solving problems in writing, understanding and applying the rhetorical and formal conventions of texts, becoming good collaborators. Such courses demand a persistent, rigorous agenda of reading and writing in the disciplines. They are difficult to teach. They look and sound more like writing workshops than literature courses, students always at work on some writing project, the teacher serving as an experienced writer, not a lecturer, guiding students in those uses of language that enable them to become historians, biologists, and mathematicians. To be this kind of teacher requires knowing how writers interpret and create texts in many disciplines.

*They seem at risk of being
topic centered*

The sort of writing course I have described neither requires nor finds particularly relevant a significant role for literature. That said, I would offer five additional reasons why using literature in freshman English is inappropriate.

First, literature-based courses, even most essay-based courses, focus on consuming texts, not producing them. The teacher talks 75 to 80 percent of the time. Students do very little writing, and what they write has little relation to the intellectual demands of assignments in a political science or chemistry class. A pedagogy derived from teaching literature looks and sounds different from one that encourages students to produce texts. Literature teachers are conscious of the difference. Not only do they sometimes express misgivings about the writing teacher's use of group work and peer evaluation, but they also report clear preferences for teaching by lecture and discussion. A 1989-1990 survey of upper-division literature courses supports this preference: "almost all respondents devote some time to [lectures and discussions], while relatively few devote time to [small-group activities and writing]. Further, even respondents using small-group activities and writing exercises generally devote only a small percentage of class time to them" (Bettina J. Huber, "Today's Literature Classroom: Findings from the MLA's 1990 Survey of Upper-Division Courses," *ADE Bulletin* 101 [Spring 1992]: 50).

But why not teach just one novel or poem, something that will restore the humanistic content to the curriculum? Because the curriculum already has humanistic content. Because college students must take humanities, arts, and literature courses, literature need not necessarily be transported into a writing course for the sake of "humanism." Moreover, many literature courses are not humanistic. They present the teacher's or the critic's truths about the poetry, fiction, and

Why does she get to be
dismissive of literature &
Supportive of all other disciplines?

such a
dismissive

drama being studied. They rarely connect literature with life. If students get to write a paper or two, they must assume the disembodied voice of some abstruse journal as they analyze the ingrown toenail motif in *Beowulf*. Such assignments silence students' voices in the conversation literature is intended to promote. In other words, literature teaching offers the writing teacher no model worth emulating.

This is a pretty
limited vision of
what happens in the
literature classroom

But doesn't studying literature help teach style? I don't think so. Examining literary language has limited usefulness in a writing course because our students do not *write* literature; they write about it or respond to it. If our students were writing poems, or short stories, or even dialogues, literary models might suggest stylistic options worth practicing. Most of the time, however, style is taught, not as language to emulate, but as language to appreciate, to respect all the more perhaps because we cannot manage our linguistic resources as well as Shakespeare or Frost did. When teachers ask students to write *about* literature, style becomes a subject matter, an object for analysis. It no longer represents a range of linguistic options for treating any subject. A better way to teach style is by asking students to examine the texts they encounter in the academy, texts that define a much larger repertoire of rhetorical options than literary language customarily allows. Simply recognizing or appreciating these conventions is not enough; students must also make them work in their own writing, by creating texts like those they read, by talking back to the models.

Some people believe that recent work in critical theory offers new reasons to teach literature in freshman English classes. Presumably we now have a better understanding of how readers engage texts, how those texts are socially constructed, and how the processes of reading and writing create bridges between the individual and the larger linguistic community. Although critical theory may offer new ways of interpreting texts, we do not have to study literature to apply these new insights. A theory of reading or of texts that depends on literature, that moves aside the texts our students read and write, is no help to a writing teacher. Reader-response criticism, social constructionism, and feminist approaches *can* inform the teaching of writing, not because they need literature to make the point, but because they also apply to nonliterary texts. Critical theory has value only insofar as it gives our students a more self-conscious awareness of their behavior as readers, engaged in significant acts of language in every class they take, not just in a literature class.

Interpreting texts also represents only one way of knowing, a process of knowledge-making peculiar to the humanities. Other disciplines value different methods of making meaning: closely observing natural phenomena, refusing to generalize beyond the data, removing the personal element for the sake of neutrality. Although literary critics value the personal interpretations readers construct from texts, social scientists value the ability to replicate interpretations

Critical theory
has limited use

of data, and most scientists would define "data" in such a way as to exclude texts altogether. Each discipline advances its own understanding of what claims are worth asserting, what constitutes evidence, what sorts of proof may be offered, what aims and audiences are legitimate to address, what genres are appropriate. It is simply not the case that interpreting texts will help students gain confidence in interpreting the results of a chemistry experiment, a field experience in a psychology class, or a sculpture. These contexts all assume different kinds of interpretation.

The final argument for teaching literature in freshman English is perhaps the most insidious: it would enrich our training programs for graduate students. They could learn to teach literature as well as writing, becoming the confident, professional pedagogues we hope to send into the job market, happier until then if we let them teach a poem or a novel once in a while. Happier maybe, but not better teachers. The truth is that few faculty members in an English department really care about teacher training. They care about keeping graduate students employed; they want other departments to know that freshmen are learning something; but they do not teach freshman English often enough to know what is going on in that part of the curriculum or what kinds of training writing teachers would find most valuable. Although literature teachers need training too, asking colleagues who rarely examine what they do in a literature class is not the best place to start. Departments can easily erode a good program for training writing teachers by sliding in a few workshops on teaching literature. A few workshops, however, will not do the job; a course, a practicum, or a substantial mentoring program promises better training. Writing teachers have over a decade of experience developing support systems for inexperienced teachers, but we may need to fight hard to assert their importance and unique goals. Those programs also need revising from time to time so that teachers can learn more about workshop teaching, for example, or the uses of writing outside English departments, or methods of peer, holistic, and portfolio evaluation.

As I have suggested, we cannot discuss the role of literature in the first-year writing course without first defining the purpose of the course. Although we are unlikely to reach consensus on either topic, the issues I have raised may usefully complicate their continued discussion. Beyond that, we also may want to ask why the discussion is taking place. What does it mean that this topic merits point/counterpoint debate in the pages of *College English*? In faculty lounges and committee meetings, where colleagues engage in animated arguments about whether or not to use literature in a first-year writing course?

One strength of our profession is our persistent effort to examine what writing courses should be and how to teach them well. Lately, these discussions have taken a more assertive turn, often depending on false dichotomies to support claims about either/or propositions. Are humanists, for example, really so differ-

① So what?
② Are you sure?

She's right about this being a problem

ent from scientists? Is the academy necessarily divorced from "real life"? Do we oversimplify matters by asserting that personal writing differs from academic discourse? I believe we do.

We simply do not have a unified theory to guide our work. In such times of disjunction and divergent views, it is tempting to cling to what makes us comfortable—literature. We like literature, we know what to say about it, and we have a lot to say. But that is the problem, not the solution: we are saying too much; our students are writing too little. If we will take the time to appreciate the writing that shapes other disciplines, we can become comfortable with, even confident about, constructing student-centered classrooms, where the acts of language we are most concerned about are those of first-year students eager to participate successfully in the rigorous work college demands of them. We need to join students in exploring these sites of composing found in the academy. Instead of asking our students to write *about* what it means to be educated, let us assist them to join the conversations an education enables.