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A PLACE FOR LITERATURE IN FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

Gary Tate

The presence of literature—fiction, poetry, drama—in freshman composition courses in 1992 is minimal. The last time I talked with Richard Larson about his national survey of freshman writing programs, he estimated that only about one in five programs contains any literature, and the ones that have a literary component are likely to be devoting a semester to “introducing” literature rather than “using” literature to help teach writing. A survey of textbooks or a glance through CCCC convention programs would support the same conclusion. We have denied students who are seeking to improve their writing the benefits of reading an entire body of excellent writing. It is not unlike telling music students that they should not listen to Bach or Mahler. Why have we taken such a seemingly illogical stance? Three reasons seem to me important: the pedagogical sins of teachers in the past, the revival of rhetoric, and changing attitudes about the purposes and goals of freshman composition.

Those of us who can remember how literature was often treated in writing classes are not surprised that it did not survive as a major pedagogical force. Its virtual disappearance, however, was not, I think, the result of all those theoretical reasons given in some recent articles on the topic. In large part, literature disappeared from the composition classes in this country because it was badly misused by teachers desperate to teach literature, teachers who really should not be blamed for trying to teach the one subject they knew. However, a teaching approach will not disappear merely because it is misguided or downright wrong. It will disappear only when there is something to replace it. Remember Thomas Kuhn’s argument that a paradigm will not just disappear. It will vanish—or whatever paradigms do—only when it is replaced by another paradigm. So it is

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with teaching. If there had not been something to replace literature in the writing class, it would never have disappeared.

What was waiting to replace literature was rhetoric, supported since the 1960s by the Rhetoric Police, that hardy band of zealots who not many years hence were to become the dreaded enforcement arm of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Pity the innocent young (or old) teacher in those days who tried to read a CCCC convention paper that did not contain a reference to Aristotle or the word “invention.” (A current analogy might be a person today who does not in her paper refer to, at least, collaboration, hegemony, and community.) Of course, the Rhetoric Police are still with us, but much like the KGB, their power and influence have been considerably weakened.

One of the fascinating features of this episode—and one that has gone generally unremarked by historians—is how rhetoric replaced literature in the freshman composition course with no sustained debate. It was not a matter of our deciding after careful and prolonged discussion that a change was needed. The Rhetoric Police merely moved in and we all surrendered. Here and there a sonnet or short story might have been hurled at the invaders, but such weapons were ineffective against the whole array of Aristotelian devices wielded by the RP. The situation changed so quickly and so completely that in 1969, when Ed Corbett and I tried to find current articles on composition and literature to include in our *Teaching High School Composition*, so few were available that Ed finally had to write one to fill out that section of the book.

Today, therefore, I can't *reopen* the debate about composition and literature because no debate occurred in the first place. What I can do is try to start a conversation by asking the question, “Did we give up too much when, without a fight, we allowed the Rhetoric Police to drive literature out of our writing courses?”

Certainly we gave up some words that I regret losing. “Imagination,” for example, sounds as antique today as another word we lost: “Style.” Instead of imagination, we now have “inventive procedures” such as cubing, looping, and brainstorming. Instead of style, a piece of writing now has “surface features”—always uttered with lips curled in disdain. Cubing and looping and brainstorming are sometimes useful pedagogical devices, but to assume, as many seem to do, that inventive procedures or the plotting of cognitive strategies do more than scratch the surface of the human mind thinking and imagining is to trivialize the creative act of composing. And to ignore the study of style as just another of the many misguided concerns of current-traditionalists (lips curled, again), is to deprive our students of the linguistic possibilities that just might elevate their prose above mediocrity, to use another unpopular word.

So we have lost some valuable words, some valuable concepts. But far more important, we have lost most of the texts that body forth that imagination and that style whose passing I mourn. And I speak here not just of those texts that

constitute the traditional canon of literary works, no matter how that term is defined. I am thinking of the entire world of imaginative texts: the canonical texts, of course, but also the imaginative texts of students, young children, and amateurs. Why do we deny our students the pleasure and profit of reading this literature? Some of us don't, of course, but for many years now, we have had to use it furtively, on the sly, with cautious glances over our shoulders. "Pssst. Hey, kid. Want to read a good poem?"

I am not prepared to argue that imaginative literature should be the only kind of reading required of our composition students, nor should it be the only kind of writing they are asked to do. All I am suggesting is that we need to think seriously about why we are neglecting literature. One major reason for this neglect is that many teachers now believe—or, more accurately, have been led to believe—that the freshman composition course is a place to teach students to write academic discourse so that they might "succeed as writers in the academy" or in order that they might "join the conversations that education enables," to use Erika Lindemann's elegant characterization. I have problems with both of these goals. And, inevitably, it is goals we must consider when we are deciding about what to teach, how to teach it, and such matters as what texts to use.

I am increasingly bothered—at least on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays—by the current focus on academic discourse. (I say MWF in order to indicate the degree of my uncertainty about this matter.) I sometimes think that we are very close to turning freshman composition into the ultimate "service course" for all the other disciplines in the academy. I reject—at least on MWF—that vision of the course. Does the vast apparatus of our discipline—all the journals, books, conferences, graduate programs—exist in the cause of nothing more than better sociology and biology papers? I hope not, because such a view is not only intellectually suspect, but impractical as well. Can we, in a semester or two, really help students function effectively in all the different communities they will be entering as they move from course to course, from discipline to discipline, throughout their four years of college? A recent text would have me help my students become writers in the health sciences. Even if I knew that some of my freshmen would be entering the "health sciences," should I force the entire class to learn to write in this particular discipline? And please don't tell me to design a different course for each student. (The freshman class I am currently teaching contains students who plan to study Finance, Journalism, French, Fashion Design, Advertising, Psychology, and a wide range of other subjects.) Even if I were to focus on the kinds of writing required in the so-called core courses they will all be required to take, those courses exhibit such a wide range of disciplines that the task is hopeless.

The alternative, of course, would be to attempt to deal with academic discourse generally, as if there were some features of all such discourse that could be abstracted and taught. If taken seriously, however, this abstraction would have

to take place at a very high level, a level that would not only be too complex for freshmen but a level that would, in the end, prove impractical if we are seriously trying to help students deal with the day-to-day demands of their academic work.

The recent interest in academic discourse and the various communities of writers that exist within the college and university is a small part of what I see as the increasing professionalization of undergraduate education in this country. It is as if all those students who come to college only in order to get a better job have convinced us that a college education is primarily job training and that the task of the freshman writing course is to help make that training more effective. We seem to have accepted this student belief along with a number of others—for example, that a “C” is a failing grade. Whatever our motives, I fear that more and more we are primarily interested in shaping and fitting students to perform their appointed tasks as good little workers in the various artificial—and some would say oppressive—academic/administrative divisions that constitute the modern American university. The analogy between shaping them into good, obedient workers in the academy and shaping them to be good, obedient workers in the world beyond the academy is obvious.

What do I offer in place of academic discourse as a focus for the freshman composition course? Very tentatively, let me suggest that there is another “community” that we should be preparing our students to join. Because I do not want to impose my beliefs on my readers—not that I could even if I wished to—I will speak only about myself. I have no interest in spending my few remaining teaching years helping students learn to write better papers in biology or better examinations in the health sciences. The “conversations” I want to help my students join are not the conversations going on in the academy. These are too often restricted, artificial, irrelevant, and—let’s be frank—boring. I refuse to look at my students as primarily history majors, accounting majors, nursing majors. I much prefer to think of them and treat them as people whose most important conversations will take place *outside the academy*, as they struggle to figure out how to live their lives—that is, how to vote and love and survive, how to respond to change and diversity and death and oppression and freedom. I find it ironic, for example, that the unprecedented freedom that many young people seem to enjoy today is largely an illusion. It seems that every time I am allowed to look beneath the surface affluence of the undergraduates in my classes, I discover young people bruised by alcohol or other drugs or by parents. I find young people whose “respectable” families harbor the most destructive physical, emotional, and psychological violence. I do not believe that my writing courses should be therapy classes for battered and confused students, but neither do I believe that I should ignore my students’ problems, my students’ lives, pretending all along that the smiling surfaces we present to each other are accurate indicators of the lives we are living.

All I am suggesting here is that I am far more interested in my students as individual human beings who will have private and maybe public lives that transcend whatever disciplines they associate themselves with while in college. It is the “conversations” of these private and public lives that interest me far more than the “conversations” of the various academic disciplines. A well-known rhetorician, upon hearing me utter some such words recently, scoffed, “Oh, that old humanist thing!” Probably so. And I know quite well that many writing teachers have quite different interests. Legitimate interests. But their interests are not mine. Maybe it is because I have never given myself wholly to the world of the academy, always holding back some part of me, some part of my life. Maybe it is because my background has often made me feel uncomfortable in the university—always the outsider, at least in my mind. I’m not certain. But I am convinced that true education, as opposed to training, is concerned with much more than what we find in the various academic disciplines.

What literature in the freshman writing class has to do with my concerns seems obvious to me. If I want my students to think and talk and write about human lives outside the academy—“Writing Beyond the Disciplines”—then I certainly do not want to deny them the resources found in literary works, just as I do not want to deny them the resources found elsewhere. I do not advocate having students read only literary works. But they should not be denied that privilege altogether. They should be denied no resource that can help them.

The discipline of composition studies, controlled as it was during its early years by the Rhetoric Police, has erred seriously, I believe, by elevating nonfiction prose and the discourses of the various disciplines to sacred heights, in the meantime ignoring an enormously rich body of literature because that literature was at one time misused by writing teachers and because many members of the Rhetoric Police had themselves been abused in various ways by their colleagues who professed literature. My own guilt in these matters is profound. In the past, at three different colleges, I have argued to keep literature out of writing programs. And even today, the old attitudes die hard. For instance, I am a great fan of the personal essay and find myself gravitating to it in almost every class I teach. But I am wrong in doing so because my fascination with the personal essay leads me to ignore other forms of literature that might benefit my students. What I am suggesting here is simply that it is time for us to adopt a far more generous vision of our discipline and its scope, a vision that excludes *no* texts. Only by doing this can we end the self-imposed censorship that for more than two decades has denied us the use of literature in our writing classes.