

Harvey Granite

Granite 1

Instructor Sarah Cass

Faculty Learning Community

August 17, 2010

Freshman English, Do We Stress Form or Content?

Almost all of the students matriculating at RIT must take a writing course as part of their first year schedule. The teaching of freshman English, by far the major assignment of members of the English Department, means that the full-time faculty must be supplemented by a large contingent of adjunct instructors to teach the approximately 2400 incoming freshmen. Most of the instructors, tenure track professors, lecturers, and adjunct instructors spend their scheduled time teaching freshman composition..

During the past year, for the first time in RIT history, the structure of the English Department has been supplemented by a Writing Director, who comes with special training in rhetoric, backed by a dissertation on the teaching of written composition. Traditionally most professors of English are trained in the study of literature, specializing in particular aspects of literary study, such as the Romantic period, or Shakespeare, or Chaucer, or literary criticism. They know no more about the actual teaching of writing than do other professors of humanities – history, government, philosophy, political science -- or even professors of science or computer technology. A few are trained in the teaching of writing. Nevertheless, English departments in most universities are very large because of the expectation that they teach writing skills to all freshmen. The result is a variety of attitudes and approaches to the teaching of writing itself, raising such questions as How much emphasis should be placed on “correct”

grammar and usage? or Do we concentrate on content or on form in introducing new concepts in teaching composition? The issue is further complicated by the fact that some students respond more positively to one approach or another, even though this is the least considered of all concerns when students are scheduled for first year writing courses. “Whatever the reasons, writing across the curriculum programs have advocated a movement beyond – indeed, away from – the English department. “ (Peterson 43)

In my judgment each subject area should be responsible for teaching freshman composition to its own majors. Not only would the kinds of writing – and the topics – be more suited to the students’ interests and talents, but it would underscore the crucial need of effective written expression for each department, not only the Department of English. This is particularly important for a technical university like RIT where there is no major in English, indeed in any of the humanities. In a time in which written expression itself, especially among young people, is under siege by the development of new forms and media of written language – e-mail, twittering, text messaging – students need effective instruction and practice in the conventions of effective writing across the curriculum, not only in literary criticism. At present, however, as in most universities, responsibility for the teaching of writing at RIT continues to fall to the English Department and to a large extent to adjunct professors. For me, as an adjunct professor of writing, the question becomes one of effectiveness in my approach to stimulate students, getting them to want to write and to want to write well.

In my freshman writing classes I emphasize content. I seek topics that engage students,

even provoke them into writing on issues. For example, I use a collection of essays called Open Questions, an anthology of short pieces, well-written and provocative, dealing with issues that sometimes keep students up nights in bull sessions. As one anonymous reviewer commented on this collection, among the issues it raises are such questions as: "Should we give money to that homeless person? Should we shade the truth to protect someone else's feelings? Should we endanger ourselves by chasing that purse-snatcher?" I found that using this collection got at least most of my students, if not all of them, to want to communicate their opinions, their ideas, to their colleagues.

For the sake of variety, I have sought out other issues to provoke student thought and a desire to express their ideas. In her paperback collection The Best Essays of the Twentieth Century, Joyce Carol Oates has collected several major essays on racism in America. For example, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" by Richard Wright, a 1930's piece about growing up in Alabama and Mississippi, "Notes of a Native Son" by James Baldwin, essays by W. E. B. DuBois, Zora Neal Hurston, Maya Angelou, Joan Didion, Alice Walker, all of them articulate, outspoken authors, Black and white, whose work provide models of great writing and topics for oral discussion and written composition. The issue of racism in America is particularly effective in tweaking the consciousness of students. "There are two absolutes in my life," Nadine Gordimer, the great South African writer, wrote in one of her essays before the achievement of democracy in her country, "One is that racism is evil – human damnation in the Old Testament sense– and

no compromises, as well as sacrifices, should be too great in the fight against it.

The other is that a writer should be a being in whose sensibility is fused . . . the duality .of inwardness and outside world, and he must never be asked to surrender this union.”

I find that some students resist thinking about racism, perhaps for partisan reasons, and their very resistance adds energy to their writing. The urgency of Gordimer’s concern about racism and my own understanding of the immediacy of ridding our society of it have helped me to recognize both its importance and its effectiveness as a topic.

The Writing Director is not fond of my use of a unifying theme for my writing class. We have not discussed the matter, but his attitude has been made fairly clear to me. But I agree with Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian philosopher of education, when he wrote

In problem posing education, men develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves. They come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in progress, in transformation. . . . Hence, the teacher-student and the students-teachers reflect simultaneously on themselves and the world without dichotomizing this reflection from action, and thus establish an authentic form of thought and action.

. . . Banking education resists dialogue, problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers. Banking education inhibits creativity problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action on reality. . . . (Freire, Pedagogy, 70-71)

Students can learn effectively when they are attracted to the subject matter, but they can also learn when they are challenged by it, even irritated by it. To have their closely held, perhaps even secretly nurtured, beliefs challenged by their reading material or their colleagues has brought out writing of a quality that I might never have seen otherwise in my classes. Unlike the impoverished peons of Freire’s Brazil in the 1950’s, RIT students

are not themselves starving, but some are the victims of racism, some its perpetrators, some its beneficiaries, and many unaware of its presence and its disguises.

;

Works Cited

- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York. Herder and Herder. 1970. Print.
- Kirsch, Adam. "Letters from Johannesburg." *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*. August 1, 2010. Print.
- Peterson, Linda H., "Writing Across the Curriculum and/or Freshman English," eds. McLeod, Susan H. and Margaret Soven. *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs*, Newbury Park, CA, Sage Publications, 2005, Print.