A Note on the Two Comps

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A Note on the Two Comps

MICHAEL WEBSTER

After reading Ben Lockerd's article on cultural literacy and teaching composition in the last Grand Valley Review, I suddenly realized that most comparative literature programs do not teach that other comp., composition, at least not as an "intellectual skills course" (Lockerd 6). How had comparatists missed this opportunity (or avoided the duty, depending on your point of view) to enlarge their enrollments? At Indiana University where I did my graduate study, the answer was at least partly a matter of politics. The English department controlled the teaching of composition skills courses and jealously guarded its enrollment fiefdom. The Comparative Literature program was allowed to offer courses in basic writing skills only when they were taught as literature courses with a composition component. Even then, English limited the number of sections that could be offered and designated one hour of each of those sections as the composition component, which appeared on grade sheets and transcripts as an hour spent studying in the English department. Theoretically then, whenever I taught writing skills at IU, I taught them for the English department.

But was interdepartmental infighting the only reason for the stunted development of composition teaching in Comp. Lit. programs? Probably not. In order to study comparative literature, your cultural literacy level must be quite high. You must know not only the Anglo-American cultural commonplaces but the Classical, European, and (at times) East Asian ones as well. More than that, you must be able to read texts in their original languages, lest you commit "the mortal sin of linguistic ignorance." Because of these heavy demands on literary and linguistic competence, many comparative literature programs offer graduate courses only, automatically excluding themselves from composition teaching. Perhaps, also, since the discipline was a European import, less emphasis was placed on writing skills. Were those skills simply a given?

At this point in my reflections, I suddenly realized that my article on the discipline printed in the same issue of the Review said nothing about the teaching of writing; indeed, it said nothing about teaching at all. Curious. I then realized that none of the sources mentioned in the article had talked about teaching either. Comparatists have written scads of papers with titles like "The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature" and none of the authors even mentioned, much less discussed, how to teach that literature once they figured out what it was. In an article that purported to
answer the question, "What do those men and women who compare the literature do for a living?" I had missed the most obvious answer: they teach it, of course. Curiouser and curiouser. What sort of Pandora's jar (and it was a jar, not a box—a huge Greek pithos of the kind normally used for storing olives, grain, or wine—) was I opening here? How had comparatists missed out on a chance to add a whole new set of buzzwords from education theory to their already bulging complement of esoterica? Perhaps once again, the answer lay partly in politics and partly in the nature of the beast itself. Perhaps comparatists were so busy questioning and probing the nature of what they taught that they forgot to question how they taught it. Perhaps the theoretical orientation of the discipline encouraged practitioners to concentrate on research at the expense of teaching. Perhaps the professional rewards were greater for publishing than they were for teaching.

Yet comparatists do teach, and some of them do it quite well. They do not teach great thinkers as Ben does in his English 150 course. Mostly they teach great writers, and their composition advice centers quite naturally on one of the rhetorical modes that Ben somehow neglected to mention: comparison and contrast. And, although many practitioners of new theories might blush to admit it, they also teach cultural literacy.

For example, on the same day the Review came out, I received in the mail the latest issue of the Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature. This issue contains an appreciative eulogy of Frank J. Warnke by one of his former students, Sumie Jones. While listing Prof. Warnke’s accomplishments as a scholar and teacher, Ms. Jones makes the following remark: “his second book, Versions of Baroque: European Literature in the Seventeenth Century, made the term ‘baroque’ into a sort of secret code among us when we needed to flaunt our sense of superiority to the English majors” (136). I haven’t checked Hirsch’s book, but I bet the term “baroque” is on his list. And it is here that we need to separate some issues: cultural literacy, the sense of secret superiority that attaining that literacy might imply, and the relevance of content to teaching composition skills.

Ben implies that students feel a sense of power when they acquire a certain level of cultural literacy. They are “better able to enter the discussion” in class when they know something about “the key names and terms of intellectual history” (9-10). And even though we all know that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, there is probably little danger that students will feel as smugly superior and confident in their new-found knowledge-power as Sumie Jones did when she learned some meanings of the word “baroque.” Any real knowledge that students manage to express confidently can only help them. But as Ben so rightly observes in his essay, real knowledge can only occur in some sort of context; that is why he says we must teach composition through reading and writing about essays written by “some of the really important thinkers” (9). In our case the context is the university, a place where (theoretically at least) people engage in intellectual discussion and disputation. Students can enter into that discussion, Ben and Hirsch say, only when they are ac-
quainted with the terminology. But how do we learn that terminology? And what is this content that we learn? I don't think *content* consists of lists of key words, names, and concepts, and I don't think we learn terms by memorizing them. We learn terms by using them in a variety of contexts. For example, I imagine most of us learned much of our vocabulary (and more importantly, contexts for that vocabulary) not by looking up words in a dictionary but by hearing them spoken and by seeing them in books. We activate meanings in various contexts and we keep meanings alive by constant various use. To me, cultural literacy is achieved by acting in a cultural process and not by storing information for future reference.

The strongest argument for introducing more content into process writing courses is not that students will thereby learn some more facts, but that content and process cannot in practice be separated from one another. Modern theory teaches us that we cannot read a text without "writing" it, if only in our heads. Robert Scholes notes that reading is not simply passive consumption or rote memorization but "productive activity, the making of meaning, in which one is guided by the text one reads, of course, but not simply manipulated by it." Our writing likewise is not made up of whole cloth, but pieced together from and guided by innumerable previous visual, verbal, and experiential texts. As Scholes puts it, "The writer is always reading and the reader is always writing" (8). Writing cannot occur without some cultural literacy, but that literacy consists not only of lists of facts but also of conscious activation of discourse structures and societal codes.

It follows that English teachers are always teaching both writing and reading, whether they realize it or not. Even comparatists who can't be bothered thinking about mundane skills like reading and writing teach writing when they talk about what constitutes proper grounds for comparison and what makes comparisons meaningful. If they were more conscious that they were teaching both writing and reading, they might do it better. And if Ben wants to add more content to process writing courses, I think it can only improve students' thinking and writing. But the director of SWS no doubt also realizes that our literature courses at times overemphasize content at the expense of the activation of that content in the students' own discourse. A little more instruction in rhetorical processes like constructing an argument, searching for interpretive criteria, and making meaningful comparisons can also improve students' thinking and writing in literature courses. For in reality, there are not two comps, but one.

Works Cited


Jones, Sumie. "In Memoriam: Frank J. Warnke." Yearbook of Comparative and