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WRITING

The Problem of Literature in Composition Classes

GREGORY SHAFER

In a quiet corner of the Writing Center she sits and toils, pouring over the poetry of Walt Whitman and reflecting on the directions given to her by her instructor. This isn't the first day Marla has sat begrudgingly at a table, and the level of frustration each time seems to become more salient. "Could you PLEASE read this over with me?" she finally asks. "I'm supposed to look at the language and Whitman's theme," she moans with resignation. "I need some help."

Marla's dilemma illustrates the challenge that students face when asked to interpret literature as a part of a writing class. While many would contend that literature stirs engagement in universal themes of justice and democracy, others have suggested that it usurps the participation of the student and transforms the writing class into a glorified study of literary analysis. With many of our colleagues employing the use of poems and novels in their classes, it is time that we consider the impact on our writers, who are already struggling to negotiate their way through the writing process to produce a scholarly piece of prose.

From Process to Literature?

Four decades ago, a plethora of composition scholars promulgated the idea that writing is a process—something that is done after many recursive episodes of personal search and introspection. Rather than simply producing a piece of prose for the instructor, writing was a search for truth, a voyage into uncharted personal waters, a discovery of vast emotional treasures. While Peter Elbow (1973) wrote of cooking and growing, Donald Murray (1968) ruminated on discovery and the need for freedom in writing about personal topics. "Writing is exploration—discovery of meaning, discovery of form—and the writer works back and forth. . . so that he can discover what he has to say and how to say it more efficiently" (p. 1). Fundamental to both authors—and the entire process paradigm—is the notion that writing emanates from writers and takes shape in the process of contemplating the

meanings of their lives. Writing, adds Langer and Applebee, is about allowing "room for students to have something of their own to say in their writing. Students must see the point of the task, beyond simple obedience to the teacher's demands" (p. 141).

The Dartmouth Conference and *Growth through English*

Of course, much of the expressive and personal composition theory generated during this time was a result of the 1966 Dartmouth Conference and the later publication of John Dixon's *Growth through English*. As Peter Smagorinsky explains, "the Dartmouth Conference found its imperative in its opposition to the teacher-and-text-centered tradition that dominated schools at the time and that has endured through the ages" (p. 23). For many who either witnessed or read about the conference, there was a general effusiveness about the liberation of the student as a social being who uses language to explore their own goals and aspirations, beliefs and verities. Adds Smagorinsky, "what was common to all of these changes was a shift of attention from the subject matter of English to the learners in English classes" (p. 23-24). In essence, Dixon argued that the emphasis on texts prevented students from learning about themselves through engagement with their writing and the personal journey that entailed.

With literature, I would argue, the personal and existential experience embraced by Dixon too often becomes undermined and supplanted by the authority of the text and the canonical writer that towers over students as they craft a piece of writing. For Marla, the process has become less about delving into her own values and beliefs and more about the verities of Walt Whitman and his nineteenth-century world. In place of a personal journey there is the quest for Whitman's themes, his concern about freedom, and his novel use of diction. "What matters, when you first sit down to write,"

argues Pat D'Arcy (1999), "is that who you are writing for is yourself and the why is to make a process of discovery" (p. 1). Such acts of discovery, such selfish and personal incursions into experience cannot be done when one is trying to uncover an author's hidden themes, and this is the conundrum that many of us confront when using literature. Does it, in fact, enhance and complement or subvert and disrupt the self-actualization that should occur when writers transact with words?

For many of the students I see, there is evidence of discord, confusion, and a divergence from the tenets of empowerment that often is inherent in good writing. While Marla grapples with the layers of meaning in Whitman's Civil War poetry, she moves further away from the self-discovery that is so essential to composition. After a few minutes of reading and reviewing the poetry, there is the need to enumerate the carnages of the Civil War, the fact that Whitman was a nurse for the North, and that the poetry reflected his experience in treating the horrific injuries and amputations. Gradually, the conversation evolves into a historic review, because one cannot understand an author without understanding the context in which he or she wrote. After fifteen minutes of discussion and another reading, Marla begins to appreciate the complexity of the poems. The puzzle has been completed, but what has happened to the writing process and the growth of the writer? In the protracted and often labored trek through a canonical work, Marla has abandoned any pursuit of personal investment and seeks only to find the proverbial answer to the literary artifact. At this point, there is an impediment standing between the writer and her life.

If we can glean anything from composition theory, it is that writing has traditionally been about subjects that had little to do with the student and the interests they brought to class. When James Britton (1975) studied writing in London in the early 1970s, he found that many of the compositions were not written for personal use but for an audience of teachers. In his study, Britton looked at over two thousand samples of student writing and found that too much of the work was done in what Britton described as "transactional writing"—or writing that is formally structured and devised for an academic audience. Much less of the writing was crafted for "expressive" or "poetic" reasons, where composition was done for introspection, personal expression, and for diverse audiences. The result, Britton argued, was that writing was removed from the personal exploration and process—the realm of composition that engendered "confidence and range in using written language" (p.142).

When writing is not connected to the life and values of the writer, it becomes a chore, a perfunctory academic exercise and students become passive recipients of teacher-driven models and assignments. Instead of using writing as a catalyst for expression and transformation, they use it as a way to extract the truth that lies buried inside a piece of literature or in a prescriptive model of writing. Of course, most instructors have moved beyond such dictatorial approaches, but the specter of literature creates a wedge between writing and the writer and often makes the experience much less "poetic" or "expressive" than it should be. As Marla negotiates the thicket of nineteenth century poetry, she thinks less of her own life because the subject is Walt Whitman and the poetry he has authored. Of course, there are questions as to how Whitman's work relates to her and her society, but one wonders why these questions—if they are meant to be for students—have to be introduced through the reading of a classical work.

Textual Authority

Towering over many writers who respond to literature is the power and erudition that comes with classical writing. For many who read great works, there is the tacit sense of reverence and veneration that seems to be inherent in reading published works. Many students who are invited to base their writing on their reading of literature tend to pay homage to the writer rather than making the work a springboard for their personal views. The notion that they are to respond as peers or equals to a Walt Whitman, Frederick Douglass, or Fitzgerald is simply beyond their ken. Instead, most writers I have seen in the Writing Center approach the poetry or prose with the respect that is reminiscent of Bible reading—a search for a reified truth resting celestially inside the text. In addressing the problem of textual authority, and its stultifying effects, Wilson, Dornan, and Rosen (1997) remind us that rather than question a text, students "are urged to assume its authority, a perspective that encourages acceptance without questioning, passivity over active reading. Textual authority," they later add, "has roots in the religious and cultural traditions of Biblical authority and the sacredness of the text" (p. 39).

In discussing the politics of reading a text and the world, Foucault complements this view by arguing that "truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of

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truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault p. 131). Implicit in Foucault’s quotation is the way—both surreptitiously and overtly—truth is constructed and controlled through the use of discourses that are accepted. When readers become educated, they are invited to unravel the meaning of a text and are empowered to bring their personal response to the literary forum. For those who are still students, however, there is often an emphasis on listening and fealty. With its erudite language and lofty themes, literature offers many of the “constraints” that Foucault discusses in his quotation.

Cleo Cherryholmes (1995) agrees, suggesting that “power operates visibly and invisibly through expectations and desires. It operates visibly through formal, public criteria that must be satisfied. It operates invisibly through the way individuals (teachers, administrators, and university based educators, for example) think of themselves and act” (p. 35).

In short, then, because truth is socially constructed through the implied and explicit demands of an academic context, it is imperative that writing classes create contexts in which truth remains a democratic, accessible entity. When students become immersed in literature, they too often assume the role of subordinate, of distant spectator as one admires the paintings at a great museum. Of course, one could say that a Reader Response approach to literature could expunge many of these problems, but the fact remains that literature—rather than the students’ lives—becomes the nexus of discussion.

Photograph by Megan Eaves

Within the novel, poem, or play lies an incredible amount of authority, of power. And, as Foucault has suggested, discourses are established on power. What is considered legitimate is predicated on rules of discourse, which are based on where instructors have established power. With canonical writers as their subject, students become ancillary in too many cases.

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic

This is clearly the situation with Matt, a second student who has visited the Writing Center to get help in dealing with literature in his writing class. In Matt's section, the author is Frederick Douglass, but the dilemma is equally as vexing as what Marla faced earlier. For Matt, the reading has transformed the academic landscape and made many personal topics irrelevant. While Matt enjoys and clearly seems to appreciate the pathos and fortitude of Douglass's story—and the historic context of the time—his interests are focused on his own community and issues that are specific to his life. "I wanted to write a paper about the state of Michigan and the fact that my grandmother can't get prescription drugs without driving to Canada with other older citizens," he says with a conspicuous sigh of regret. "We're fighting this war on terrorism and yet nobody can afford to stay alive without driving to another country. Now that's insane," he says as he continues to unzip his backpack.

Matt's lament helps underline the less glaring but equally nettlesome problems of assigning literature in composition classes. While Matt comprehends and enjoys the prose, and while he is intrigued by the tapestry of racial and social questions that the book inspires, his passion to write is a clear departure from the heroic narrative of the nineteenth-century slave. In such cases, then, students are forced to find a place for their lives as they respond to the literature. Even in a Reader Response class, where the meaning of a text is actively and collaboratively constructed—and where the meaning of the text is alive and mutable—there is the caveat that students begin with someone else's text, that their academic inquiry begin extrinsically rather than with intrinsic desires.

Matt has something to say about social justice and is immersed in a family member's fight for prescription drugs. And yet, he must channel his response to be congruent with the words and life of another. Much of what he writes will be contrived, forced, and ancillary to what resonates inside. He must use Douglass's work as a vehicle for his own simmering

expression. It is an unnecessary step for a student who wants to write and who bristles at an injustice in his own life.

In the struggle to make learning intrinsic rather extrinsic, instructors must return to the importance of classroom context and power relations. Where learning is shared and where the context fosters intrinsic learning, students quickly find personal issues to explore. "Teachers cannot, by definition, create intrinsic motivation in their students," writes Marcia Dickson (1995); "however, the manner in which they conduct their classrooms and the way they construct the goals that inform their practice can provide an atmosphere that brings intrinsic motivation to the forefront and values what the students see as learning goals as well as what the academy recognizes as knowledge" (p. 35-36).

For both Matt and Marla, literature has become extrinsic, something they do for the academy in their attempt to prove that they know canonical writers better. It is an approach has been nurtured through the insertion of literature. In his essay "The Cultures of Literature and Composition," Peter Elbow touches upon the salient contrast between composition and literature and the reason why literature is often an impediment to students who wish to find their voices. "Almost every literature class," writes Elbow, "is about a product, a text and the literature teacher usually wants the students to carry away a product too" (Elbow, 2008). In contrast, he continues, "almost every writing class is about a process, and the writing teacher wants the students to carry away some increased skill in that process" (p. 468). Essential to Elbow's point—and the dilemma I have tried to describe in this article—is the chasm separating process from product.

Freire would refer to it as a "banking" system versus an experiential approach, but no matter how we discuss the differences, literature is less about students and more about a revered author, the unquestioned greatness of their works, and the task of unraveling the verities it holds. Put simply, it is about a product—something that is canonized, holy, and deserving of readers' appreciation. For many students, this experience is marked by discipline, veneration and immobilization to any personal experience.

In contrast, writing, when it is done well, is all about experience, expression, rebellious energy, and personal transformation. "The culture of composition," Elbow continues, "carries a concern not just for teaching but also for students': attention, interest, and care for them, their lives, and what's on students' minds" (469). The culture, he concludes, "has

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somehow managed to build a felt value in identifying with students—or at least refusing to see them as other” (469).

Social Construction and Composition

Writing is a social and political endeavor—one that is crafted in response to a torrent of political and social forces that swirl around us. Composition and language itself is not simply right or wrong but part of a certain context—one that involves the ideology of writers and the setting in which they write. Thoreau wrote in a torrent of pre-Civil War storms, while Martin Luther King tailored his work to fit the white and black audiences that he needed to reach. Put simply, writing is forever part of a setting and great authors both appreciate and respond to the specifics of their context. With this in mind, it is imperative that we generate writing assignments that invite writers not only to express themselves in the Expressivist spirit of Peter Elbow and Murray but to critique their world and its injustices as the Social Epistemic would do. According to James Berlin, “social epistemic rhetoric views knowledge as an arena of ideological conflict. There are no arguments from transcendent truth, since all arguments arise in ideology” (p. 132). In other words, language is political and it is the task of writers to venture into this ideological cauldron and consider the significance of their experience as social beings. And while certain literature can foster this experience, students often find that their own modern day lives constitute the best context for this expression. Again, writing must begin with the writer.

Cora Jean Becomes Ideological

On Monday, Cora Jean, a retired African American woman, walks into the writing center and smiles with ebullience. “I have a paper to do on a social problem, and I’m looking at media and Black women.” Cora Jean’s essay is a tightly crafted examination of magazines and their depiction of color, particularly light and darker skinned African American women. After reading the first few paragraphs, it is clear that she is invested in the topic—that she has a fight to pick with the various magazines and electronic media that have made her children and grandchildren question their self worth. “Today we have a new war to wage but it has nothing to do with guns or drone strikes but with portraits of how African Americans should look.”

Cora Jean goes on to critique specific magazine covers and comments on the elevation of Halle Berry and other light skinned women to major stardom. “Beyoncé is

beautiful,” she continues, “because she fulfills the white corporation’s view of beauty. It leaves darker African American women with few options but to feel inferior.”

Central to my point is the idea that her writing—devoid of any literary analysis—both allows and encourages an ideological perspective—one that facilitates growth as a person. Could this be done by reading Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, or Alice Walker? Maybe, but without literature to analyze and critique, Cora Jean can devote all of her energies to her own social and personal travails, seeing the class as focusing on her as a writer—not as a subject to be filled with the words of great authors. What is moving about her work, is its scrutiny of the political and racist world of 2013 and how she can make it better for her daughters and granddaughters. It is through ideological questions that emanate from her own life—not a famous writer from another time and place—that she best is able to accomplish this.

Alternative and Solutions

When I was in graduate school the implicit attitude of the English department was that anyone could teach composition. In the dozens of sections that were taught by graduate students, only a small percentage were actually taught by people who sought to one day teach composition as their vocation. The others were led by graduate students who were studying various literatures or linguistics. Most had never taken a single composition class and their total knowledge of writing pedagogy consisted of an informal workshop on how to do a syllabus.

Because of this deplorable situation—one that still exists today, despite the demand for more composition teachers—teaching assistants relied on their passions and area of expertise to wend their way through the class. In one memorable course, a teaching assistant who was in an American literature program, taught *Moby Dick* to his sophomore level writing students, while in a second class, students plowed their way through the works of a Victorian novel. What either book had to do with writing process and the growth of students as writers and expressive, empowered individuals is clearly dubious. What is clear is that much of the literature we teach in writing is a lamentable leftover from our profession’s strange attitude toward composition as an academic discipline.

Beyond high school, we would never consider allowing a neophyte to teach Shakespeare to undergraduates if that person did not have an enduring commitment to the writer and his works. In English Departments we hire people as

Renaissance scholars, Medievalists or professors devoted to Hemingway. And yet, how often do we see people without a single class in composition theory teaching writing and doing it badly?

Much of the use of literature in composition classes has its origin in English department's fundamental arrogance toward and disrespect for composition. If we are going to ameliorate this problem, we need to begin by hiring people who teach writing and who are dedicated to that as a profession—rather than as a waiting period before their dream job as a teacher of Restoration literature. When we hire people at my community college we select from those who have evinced a dedication to composition in their graduate program, who have presented papers, and who have taught writing in classrooms.

As universities begin to see that their parade of Chaucer scholars is simply not needed, perhaps they will be more amenable to offering graduate degrees in composition, literacy, and language arts. Indeed, the phenomenon of teaching literature in composition classes is, in many ways, a direct result of the instructor's stark lack of confidence or background in how to teach writing.

Teaching Reader Response

If instructors are determined to use literature in a composition class it should be approached in an inclusive, reader response method, so that students have the opportunity to transact with the text and shape it to fit their concerns and worries. When literature makes connections with the lives of its readers it can be a potent force in inspiring essays and cogent responses. Writers can take the words of a Malcolm X or Kate Chopin and find a kindred theme of iconoclasm or disaffection. When literature is taught in the Reader Response way, students have the chance to treat the words of the author as an event in time, as a living document. "No longer then is the reader passive, merely applying a long list of learned poetic devices to a text in the hope of discovering its intricate patterns of paradox and irony, which, in turn will lead to a supposed correct interpretation," writes Charles Bressler (1994) in describing Reader Response. "For reader-response critics, the reader now becomes an active participant along with the text in creating meaning" (p. 49).

Many of the students who visit the Writing Center come with the impression that they do not have the latitude to shape and deconstruct a piece of literature, which leads to the sense of linguistic paralysis. Reading is not about creation but uncovering what has already been determined. Truth

becomes a fixed, static phenomenon and literature becomes a symbol of ensconced power. If instructors are adamant about using literature, they must do so with the explicit notion that it will empower students to make connections to their own lives and experiences.

The most effective approach to cultivating a free, unencumbered approach to writing is to let students use their own material as the foundation for class discussions and material. Instead of relying on classical or even contemporary literature, composition classes can simply examine the texts created by students through the writing process, making them the basis for discussions and further writing. When writing is rooted in personal and cultural engagement—and when students are writing for change and self-actualization—their prose become catalysts for intriguing discussions. Critical to this more invested response is the idea that literacy alters the world we live in and the way we perceive and talk about that world as writers. Of the many students who visit the Writing Center, few are as ebullient as those who have latched onto a personal topic and who feel that their words will raise consciousness about an issue or spark questions about an injustice.

In considering this kind of engaged response, it is necessary to include the experience of William and his unremitting process of writing and revising his paper on revealing his homosexuality. Through several drafts and discussions, he forged new and stronger pieces of writing and understanding. Key to both his alacrity and commitment was the notion that he was creating a text that was his, that said something about his life, and that would affect his world. Ownership and personal investment is most evident in such writing. Over a two week period, William visited the Writing Center several times and approached his essay as a personal project, as an intimate story that must be told carefully. His final draft was a form of self actualization. It said something about him and did it on his terms. In assisting writers who work with their own writing as the primary text, I have found an increasing sense of engagement. It is something they do for themselves.

In her essay "Sponsors of Literacy," Deborah Brandt (2001) discusses the way literacy is presented or sponsored by entities of power. In most cases, she argues, the sponsors keep restraints on literacy, so that students have limited ability to use it for personal and transformative means. The powerful work to persistently "conscript and ration the powers of literacy," (p. 557) she writes. They sponsor it in ways that serve limited purposes and often refuse to permit it to be used for more divergent and personal goals.

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However, as students who work with personal topics show us, literacy only becomes meaningful when it is appropriated for reasons that transcend the limited goals of the sponsor. When William uses his prose to comment on his status as a person, he does it with a passion that is manifestly absent from students who work with literature. His text is grounded in his life and self-affirmation. When he begins a new paragraph about his final decision to tell his family about his sexuality, he is writing with incredible sensitivity and investment. This isn't about the sanctioned response to a canonical work but the unleashing of a new identity. It is in such texts that students become enthralled and eclipse any perfunctory interpretive response.

This is not to dismiss literature, but rather to caution in using texts that are often more inviting for instructors than students. Not all learners respond to the same approaches, so we must consider literature while always honoring student writing as our primary texts. From transactions with student writing—and from the empowerment that unharnessed literacy creates—writers become more involved and introspective. It is this fundamental aspect of writing and expression that is key to effective composition.

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