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Coming to Terms with College Writing

TYLER JUDD

What is college writing? It's a pivotal question that everyone — principals, parents, teachers, and college-bound students — wants an answer to, but the problem is that the question is too complex to resolve because common sense tells us that it differs from one university to another, from one discipline to another, and even from one professor to another.

As I complete my third year of teaching English, immerse my classes in National Writing Project's College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP), and begin to wrap up an MA in Composition and Communication, I know that I still can't define college writing exactly; however, thanks to Joseph Harris, author of *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (2006), I'm starting to form some substantive ideas on the topic. Most importantly, I think other *LAJM* readers would benefit from learning about Harris's perspective because of the immediate benefits it can bring to the writing instructor's tool box: dynamic strategies for teaching research, fresh approaches to perspective taking skills, and terminology accessible and relatable to students.

"Coming to Terms" vs. Summary

For anyone who has ever taught anything, one thing is clear from the very beginning of that journey: some approaches work better than others. In my own experience as a middle school English teacher, one of the concepts that was rather difficult to convey to my students at first was how to work with texts in a meaningful way. In the beginning, I would ask questions that I thought would foster inquiry and critical thought — who was the target audience, what might have been the author's purpose for the work — but, for the most part, I would get only simple parroting of what the original text said. I slowly realized that these students had been taught only to summarize texts, so to provide them with the next level of writing skills necessary for college level composition, I turned to the work of Joseph Harris (2006) on coming to terms with texts. I see Harris arguing that college writing is really the ability to work with texts — read them, analyze them, and then, to some degree, *rewrite them* in order

to assist writers in whichever *project* (that's a Harris term, too) they are working on. To begin this process, Harris offers the phrase "coming to terms" and defines it this way:

striv[ing] to represent the work of another, to translate the language and ideas of a text into words of your own... to give a text its due and to show what uses you want to make of it. You are not simply re-presenting a text but incorporating it into your own project as a writer. (p. 16)

These critical elements of working with others' writing are the foundation for what Harris considers college-level writing. It is deeper than simply being able to articulate what a text says, which is summary. While the skill of summary is necessary and will play a role in all college writers' careers, it is a less dynamic undertaking than coming to terms. On one hand, Harris looks at summarizing as a basic retelling of events, ideas, or concepts that are housed within a piece, while on the other, he claims that coming to terms is a more involved and meaningful process that readers use to better understand the piece as an entire project. According to Harris, the coming to terms process involves defining the project at hand, identifying its exigency (which can be viewed as the causation, catalyst, or demand for the project's creation), defining keywords and concepts, and then assessing the uses and limitations apparent in the piece being analyzed (p. 16). Through these "moves," as Harris calls them, writers will be able to come to terms with a text, effectively gaining more from the process than simply summarizing - restating or re-presenting - the ideas that are found in the original text, as important a skill as that is. College writing, then, requires much more critical thought than summary. It asks for writers to analyze a work and find out how it can be utilized and put in conversation with their current project. In all, I think that Harris would consider college-level writing as including an ability for writers to place themselves into an ongoing conversation in which they articulate their own thoughts, beliefs, and opinions, in conjunction with what the larger context has to say about the same topic through outside source material.

Writing Center Experience: Harris's "Coming to Terms" Concept in Action

With writing being a dynamic and scholarly skill that spreads its reach into a majority of other domains in academia, a number of colleges and universities have an established program on campus often called a writing center. In these centers, established student writers act as consultants for other student writers on campus who are seeking assistance with their writing. My own undergraduate experiences as a Central Michigan University Writing Center (WC) consultant reinforce Harris's "coming to terms" concept (2006). As a WC consultant, my job ranged from assisting remedial writers who needed support for their main English class on a weekly basis, to drop-in writers who needed sporadic assistance on a piece here or there, to graduate students desperately trying to finish their thesis before they were slotted to walk. In this work, one of the most glaring shortcomings I saw in freshmen writers was that they often seemed totally lost — with the task, the source material, where to start, how to even say what they wanted.

It fascinated me: Sure, they were freshmen who were "novice writers" at a major transitional moment (Sommers & Saltz, 2004), but *English* was still something they had been *doing* since they were six. Why were they struggling so hard? The more I worked with these writers and thought about the dynamic that brought them to WC sessions, the more I started to analyze the writing tasks they brought with them: rhetorical analyses, source synthesis pieces, implications and connections reviews. Slowly, the pieces started to come together in my mind, and I believed, at the time, that my WC clients had never been taught how to engage in thought and communication so complex. Now that I have read the Harris text, however, I can give a more precise characterization: The freshmen writers had no idea where to begin working with texts, presumably because they had never been taught strategies that provided them with the necessary skills.

My writing center experience provided an especially broad view of writing assignments across class ranks and academic disciplines; however, most people with higher education experience (including *LAJM* readers) would agree that one of the first things apparent about the coursework is the amount of reading and writing required across the board. In addition, professors typically aren't merely asking what was read but rather what it means, why it's important, and how it furthers the academic conversation. This requires a higher level of thinking and a different set of skills than summary, and I carried this concept with me into my current classroom setting. I knew that I was going to be tasked with the important job of developing the skills these students need to do more than simply restate the text at hand, so my classroom focuses on developing these skills through a myriad of perspective

taking, critical thinking, and debate activities. For example, inspired by my writing center experiences, I currently teach my students how to manage the inquiry process that will lead them to the information they desire. I conference with them

one-on-one or in small groups, and then show them how to ask the right questions about the text, its author, and the context in which it was produced. By doing this simple process with them consistently, students begin to develop those inquiry skills independently, fostering the higher-level thinking skills that will be necessary for college-level writing. Thankfully, we teachers don't have to make it all up on our own; we can rely on impactful resources like National Writing Project's College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP).

Teaching Implications: Enter the C3WP

The C3WP aims at "creating respectful discourse for change in the 21st century," and in order to promote this



The Weaver by Diego Rivera

objective, it offers “an intensive professional development program that provides teachers with instructional resources and formative assessment tools for the teaching of evidence-based argument writing” (National Writing Project, 2018). People familiar with the C3WP know that Harris’s *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (2006) plays a key role in helping teachers guide their students in managing and working with source materials. In particular, C3WP focuses on what is called the Harris moves,

- **Illustrating:** “When you look to other texts for examples of a point you want to make” (p. 40);
- **Authorizing:** “When you invoke the expertise or status of another writer to support your thinking” (p. 40);
- **Borrowing:** “When you draw on terms or ideas from other writers to use in thinking through your subject” (p. 40);
- **Extending:** “When you put your own spin on the terms or concepts that you take from other texts” (p. 40);
- **Countering:** When you “aim not to refute what has been said before, to bring the discussion to an end, but to respond to prior views in ways that move the conversation in new directions” (p. 57).

However, it also makes sense that C3WP activities would help students learn to “come to terms” with written materials at all levels. The following two strategies created by C3WP are designed to foster students’ ability to work with texts on a deeper level. I will provide an account of their use and impact in my own classroom.

“Writing into the Day to Jumpstart Argument” Lesson Sequence:

This lesson sequence is described as a tool used to help students “consider multiple perspectives on an issue and enter the conversation” (NWP, 2018). The work done within this sequence is influential because it takes on that critical work of coming to terms with multiple written texts, each of which provides a different perspective on the topic at hand. Writing done during this unit requires a deeper connection to and synthesis between and among the texts and larger ongoing conversation, more than simply restating what each text says. In my own classroom, this sequence has been impactful for student learning because it forces them to approach a topic from multiple perspectives, think through the opposing arguments, and then slowly create their own opinion on a topic.

For example, when the NFL and Colin Kaepernick were at odds over kneeling during the national anthem, my students wrote argumentative essays on the issue. To begin the unit, I started by showing them texts from multiple presidents defining freedom of speech. After this, we moved into listening or reading interviews with numerous veterans who had weighed in on the issue at hand (both for and against the protest). Finally, we read multiple opinion articles from both sides and finished the discussion with the First Amendment exactly as it is written. During this whole time, the students were not asked to share their opinions yet, nor were they told they would need to form one. To prepare to put our thoughts down on paper, we had a roundtable discussion about which arguments we felt were the strongest during the week — which we personally agreed with or which we found convincing. At this point, students began to form substantive opinions on the topic, and, as their teacher, I knew that they had well-informed opinions after their discussions.

Argument Highway Writing Model

After reading and coming to terms with the various texts, my students were ready for the Argument Highway Model (Bordelon, 2016), another C3WP resource that helps guide student writers through the composition process of an argumentative essay. This model is one that explicitly uses the Harris moves to guide students through composing an effective piece of argumentative writing. The Argument Highway aims to “unpack Joseph Harris’s using sources moves for students through car metaphors” (NWP, 2018). The overarching metaphor is that the argument one wishes to engage in is like a journey on a highway. So, depending on the type of journey or task at hand, one would need to use different tools to accomplish their goals — or different vehicles to reach the end of their journey successfully. The specific sequence within the larger Argument Highway concept draws on the mini-unit “Making Moves with Evidence” (NWP, 2018), which is where explicit connections are drawn between the types of rhetorical moves necessary at different times in the essay and the vehicles that best symbolically represent them.

I have found this approach to be a strong one with my students because of the simple, authentic, and accessible connections to the metaphor. For example, I adjust the delivery slightly for effect, but when the argument highway discusses the idea of countering (providing a counterpoint, giving voice to the naysayer or opposition), it talks about how this is a tough job that requires pushing back against the source to a

certain degree. With that being said, one will need a strong, potent piece of evidence and accompanying commentary to get the job done — like needing a heavy duty vehicle strong enough to drive against oncoming traffic on the highway. Using the same NFL protest example as before, my students were able to conceptualize their arguments as a part of a larger conversation when using this model: They could see that the issue was complicated, that it meant different things to different people, that there was no one right answer to the situation, and that maybe their knee-jerk reactions to the debate when we had first started the unit had been extreme. In the end, my students were producing nuanced pieces of writing that paid respect to both sides of the issue while taking a firm stance on one side or the other of the proverbial fence.

Final Words

At the end of the day, there will never be a single definition of college writing or a golden path to help our students be ready for it. However, I speak from experience (as a former writing center consultant and habitual user of the C3WP) that Harris's *Rewriting* (2006) is an essential resource for teachers working with college-bound students. Whether we, as an academic community, start to find common ground in what defines college-level writing, the C3WP and the Harris text are foundational resources that foster skills that can and will promote positive and effective communication practices. Because of these potentials alone, the C3WP and *Rewriting* are worthy of a spot on any writing teacher's favorite shelf.

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