

Letter from America

Autumn 2008

With all of the talk about a Creative Writing A-Level, we're thinking a lot about the best ways to prepare students to study writing at the university level. How would it work? What would it contain? Will those studies prepare students for the culture, methodologies and rigor of university-level study?

On more than one occasion, British colleagues have asked me how the American system prepares students for university-level creative writing courses. What is freshman composition, and does it provide a foundation for studying other kinds of writing?

Within the American university system, as many of you know, students study a "core curriculum." The particulars vary from university to university, but generally include requirements within math, science, social science, and the humanities. They spend roughly the first two of their four years fulfilling those requirements. Although there is variety from institution to institution, all universities require freshman composition. A typical setup would be the one at Goucher College, where I recently started teaching. Students take two semesters of freshman composition. Then, later, they take a writing module that is housed within their major, so that they may learn the particular requirements and norms that are unique to their discipline.

So what is freshman composition and how is it taught? The short version: it's a writing course that's intended to prepare all first-year students to write at the university level. The longer answer is far more complicated.

Who are the instructors of freshman comp? Generally speaking, everyone in an English Department is responsible for teaching freshman composition. In the US, an English Department is comprised of literature, creative writing, rhetoric/composition, and linguistics specialists. So even though freshman comp sits most squarely within the realm of the rhetoric/composition specialists, there are too many sections of the module to be staffed by them alone. Most graduate students work their way through their degrees and gain experience by teaching freshman composition. It's often regarded as the grunt work of the department, shunted onto graduate students and parsed out evenly (and as sparingly as possible) amongst full-time faculty in order to avoid revolt. The classes have, on average, about twenty five students in them. With the sheer quantity of writing they typically do, the module is work-intensive for the faculty member. Plus, the students don't choose to be there, and the writing they produce may not be especially inspired.

In the US, the instructor designs each module, each semester as he or she sees fit. So each time, instructors of freshman comp must ask themselves: Which aspects of academic writing should students learn during their sixteen weeks in the module? How can I engage all students in the module, even (or perhaps especially) those who don't feel interested in learning to write better? And what should students write about during their time in this module? Will the module be structured around different forms of writing

(expository essays, argumentative essays, research papers, reports, etc) or will it be unified by a theme? Or both?

Recently, I asked some of my creative writing students what they studied in their freshman composition modules. The themes of their modules had included Art as Activism, Jane Austen, Harry Potter, Video Games, Rivers, and Jazz. I also asked them whether they thought that things they had learned in freshman composition had prepared them for the module they're taking with me – which is ENG 202 Short Story Writing. They said what I expected them to say – NO. “It was all just academic writing. It wasn't creative at all.” When I followed up, asking if they had engaged in any workshopping or peer review, I found out that they had, in fact, engaged in those activities. But because they weren't writing fiction in freshman composition, it was hard for them to see any connection. A couple of students seemed like they were on the fence – *maybe* it had prepared them a little, in quite general ways.

I also emailed some colleagues who are currently teaching freshman composition to ask if they employ any techniques that might prepare students for a creative writing module. Interestingly, most of them said NO, as well. “I don't teach any creative writing.” When I followed up to ask if they encourage students to critique one another's work or to engage in freewriting or journal keeping, I found out that they WERE, in fact, doing these things. The one faculty member who dissented was, interestingly enough, a creative writing specialist, who said “writing is writing is writing.” She said she didn't see much difference between academic and creative writing in terms of the process of conceiving and redrafting. Certainly, her view was in synch with my own. The two areas are so similar in my own mind that my creative nonfiction and my freshman composition classes are strikingly similar.

Based on my experience and on my recent unscientific surveys, my own sense is that freshman composition may prepare students for creative writing, even though they and their instructors don't realize that. I also feel like time prepares them – most creative writing modules aren't available until the students are beyond their first year. They've grown up a bit after a year or more at university. But I think it's exciting to envision an A-level for British creative writing – what if we met first-year students who had already engaged in the production of creative writing portfolios, learned about the necessity of redrafting, and understood how to give and receive critiques?

Who knows? Maybe we, in the US, will eventually be taking a page from your book. I, for one, will be paying attention.

Kathy Flann