

Master of Arts in Writing

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A number of books in recent years have challenged the conventions underlying traditional English studies. These include, among others, Robert Scholes, *Textual Power*, Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*, Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature*, Richard Ohmann, *The Politics of Letters*, and Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*. All of these writers in their unique ways single out three basic characteristics of the conventional English curriculum:

1. Writing and reading, that is, construction and reconstruction of discourse are separate activities and they do not re-enforce each other. The consequence of this preconception is the separation of writing programs from literature studies and the commensurate degrading of one of these activities in the curriculum.

2. A hierarchy of genres has been established in English studies, particularly as the legacy of new criticism, which placed poetry (epic and lyric) above other literary activities, with poetic drama following, and the prose genres sorted to the end of the list, with the novel first, and other ostensibly fictional forms following. The essay, with other non-fictional forms, has been relegated to the bottom of the list. The consequence of this hierarchy is the separation of fiction and non-fiction, prose and poetry, and imaginative literature from "practical" writing. This translates into a curriculum in English classes which primarily features those poets and novelists who were canonized by the new critics. In the writing curriculum, these distinctions are built into such specialized courses as "creative writing," "journalism," "professional writing," and "technical writing," as separate and distinct from what are identified as literary studies.

3. The convictions and practice in many English departments tend to deny that what goes on in the English curriculum concerns more than just the English department at any given university. But exposure to literature and immersion in the language we speak, write, and think is one of the major activities of the university, and this activity transfers from the school setting to the world, where literacy (in its most elemental and most developed models) plays a critical role. Therefore the English curriculum should be engaged in more than preparation of students for professional graduate study.

These scholars have been criticizing the fragmentation in the writing and reading curricula and the reduction of literary studies to a single methodology as represented by the new critics and unreflectively applied in literary studies until the recent wave of critical upheaval. They have drawn attention to the division between composition and literature, and the calcified place both have taken in the undergraduate curriculum as a consequence of this separation. This division is also reflected in the social and economic status of the professoriate, with teachers of literary studies receiving higher pay and greater respect, while the teachers relegated to "mere" composition are lower in pay, lower in status, and in many cases professionally marginalized, without equal pay benefits, job security, etc. A set of contradictions tends to regulate English studies. There is a pseudo-scientific emphasis on *analysis* of canonical texts—an attempt to treat them with scholarly objectivity and relate them to a highly articulated body of criticism. Irving Babbitt had recognized this problem over eighty years ago, and he made suggestions to reform the English curriculum. But, in fact, graduate and undergraduate studies in English in this century have lost their connection to established rhetorical practices and methodologies, and, as a consequence, writing and literature have often been taught in a cultural and linguistic vacuum. Returning rhetorical models to the English curriculum could re-integrate writing and reading, and attention to rhetorical purpose could clarify distinctions among genres without denigrating some while elevating others.

For the literary scholar, "composition" is at best a chore to be endured, a way of paying dues so as to enable one to rise to the more exalted level of pure research activity. Such a schism was unthinkable in the ancient world, when the tasks of the literary scholar and composition teacher were inseparable. As I reflected on this cleavage between reading and writing, between the study of literature and its production, I realized this was a relatively recent problem. Just in observing the American literary tradition, in such diverse writers as Twain, Howells, and Hemingway, one can see no clear division or hierarchy of genre. With the demise of Rhetoric as a discipline in the 19th century, the university lost touch with systematic methodologies for the production and interpretation of speeches and writing practiced for over two millennia. Reading and writing had been interrelated activities from the time of the emergence of Rhetoric as a discipline in Ancient Athens. The tradition of rhetoric held that interpretation and construction of discourse were related activities, and this attitude dominated education throughout the Roman Empire into the Medieval and Renaissance periods in some form or another until the 19th century. The

very structure of graduate studies in English today, for the most part, reinforces the idea of literary scholarship as separate from all other activities associated with the use of language. For example, the creation of literature, whether non-fiction, fiction, or poetry, the study of rhetoric, its history, disfavor, and demise, as well as the practice of rhetoric have all been set aside in favor of a single mode of literary transaction in graduate studies—the research paper.

Theoretical Issues

The Master of Arts in Writing described in this essay is an attempted reform of the masters degree in English. Designed to revive rhetorical approaches to the construction and interpretation of literary works, the program as it developed raised a number of important questions about curriculum reform, current, traditional, and ancient approaches to the teaching of writing, and the difficulties of replacing entrenched disciplinary practices. The implications of this experimental program apply equally to undergraduate or graduate studies in English because the dichotomies between reading and writing permeate both levels of English education. In fact, an argument could be made, as has been done in recent years, for different kinds of graduate studies in English to train for different kinds of undergraduate teaching, but perhaps the undergraduate curriculum, whose function is much larger than merely preparation for graduate studies, would be more effective if the relationship between journalism, for example, and other forms of "communication," literature, composition, or "creative" writing were re-established by the rhetorical model. This experimental curriculum, which reached back into formerly established academic practices, attempted to reform graduate studies, but its intellectual rationale is equally applicable to graduate and undergraduate English studies. The writing-across-the-curriculum movement, a revival of rhetoric, is clearly another such attempt to address a major problem of English studies as they are presently constituted: the marginalization of the composition program and the intellectual work which supports it.

As director of the undergraduate writing program over a five-year period, I had been thinking about an innovative graduate humanities program which would revive classical rhetoric. Underlying the original conception of the program, as my first response to the criticism of English programs for separating reading and writing, is a traditional Aristotelian framework, that hermeneutics and rhetoric (interpretation and production

of texts) are *related* activities. This central conviction of Aristotle's has been advanced periodically by rhetoricians since Aristotle, including Cicero, Quintilian, John of Salisbury, Philip Melancthon, Giambattista Vico, and more recently by Hans-Georg Gadamer, among others. Such a rhetorical approach to English studies, whether graduate or undergraduate, seems to offer a potential solution to the problems inherent in the design of the English curriculum.

A second response to the criticisms of English studies built into the initial design of the program considered current critical theory's challenge to assumptions about the definition of "literature" and the "literary." Also, many other conventions governing English studies, for example, the dichotomies between creative writing and non-creative writing (whatever that is), fiction and non-fiction, fact and fiction, journalism and fiction, history and literature, and research and creativity were to be scrutinized and dispelled. The idea that all writing engages the imagination was to undergird the academic rationale for the program. The revival of rhetoric and the rhetorical *paideia* would direct the curriculum as well as the idea that truth, knowledge, understanding, interpretation, and their expression are presented and developed through language and that therefore all verbal communication, whether the classics, the annual report of the Megatex corporation, or a computer manual engages the imaginative use of language. Though at the time I had not read Brian Vickers' *In Defence of Rhetoric*, which did not come out until 1988, its description of ancient rhetorical education and the Renaissance revival of that education corresponds intellectually with the objectives of the program.

Third, the developments in the teaching of writing in the last twenty-five years had offered the possibility to revolutionize the teaching-learning environment, providing the occasion for collaborative learning and writing, peer editing and responding, and interactive classrooms. These pedagogical advances treat students as subjects in learning groups, whose education must be engaged and applied beyond the narrow confines of a particular discipline and preparation for graduate studies. The classroom innovations adapted to the program would respond to the divorce of the reading and writing curricula with preparation for thinking, writing, and living in the world outside the academy. Ideas and intuitions, however, no matter how well-intended, original, or supported by historical precedent, do not realize themselves. How can insight be "bureaucratized," as Kenneth Burke put it? And even if it can be, will the innovations work?

Program Description

Funded by a \$75,000 National Endowment for the Humanities Institutional Grant for its first two years, this unique degree was designed for serious mid-career adult professionals, who had undergraduate degrees in a range of fields (law, medicine, accounting, English, Philosophy, and History, for example). The students in the program are all practicing writers, in the sense that writing plays a prominent role in their professional and private lives. The studies are intended to lead the students to proficiency in imaginative and professional writing as well as to the development of their editing and writing abilities through the study of non-fiction, fiction, and poetry.

The thirty-six-semester-unit graduate degree divides into six strictly writing courses, and six humanities courses chosen from ten possibilities. The students are required to take nine units, that is three courses per semester for four semesters, but these semesters last twenty-four weeks (year-round enrollment with three-week intermittent vacations). Students are accepted into the program as a "group" of eighteen to twenty who stay together for the duration of the two-year program. There are a number of academic advantages to this procedure. First, students develop alliances with each other which facilitate their growing capacities as editors of each others' work; second, because they know each other, they work collaboratively both on their projects and on morale boosting during an arduous and demanding program. This proved to be an effective policy because, of those in the first group, only one student out of nineteen dropped out. The second group had a similarly successful retention rate.

The writing component is comprised, first, of four writing workshops requiring both practice and study of the genre the student writes in (one workshop each semester, out of which students can select from poetry, non-fiction, or fiction), and, second, of two directed studies set aside for work on a "writing project." This writing project is a compilation of the student's best writing produced during the two-year program. It is assumed that the project (a working draft of a novel, a collection of short stories, poetry, non-fiction essays, or a mixture of genres) is a working collection. The humanities segment includes ten courses from which students select six.

The division of the curriculum into writing workshops and humanities courses was intended to integrate writing with "academic" studies and to

provide an opportunity for concurrent intensive work in a specific genre in the workshops and practice in creating, evaluating, interpreting, and analyzing literary works in diverse genres in the humanities courses. Also, the humanities courses in the third and fourth semesters took up a number of thematic issues connected to the production and interpretation of literary works. The diversity in humanities courses was not just distinguished by the content (i.e., literary style, genre, and cultural affiliation of the literary texts under scrutiny), but included the range of writing activities students would practice as a consequence of the literary studies. These were prose non-fiction in a range of styles, tone, and rhetorical stance or purpose, literary fiction and poetry in imitation of the "canonized" writers of the twentieth century, position papers, definitional and analogical essays, oral histories, and public addresses, as well as the more typical English graduate student research paper. The structure of the program then attempted to insure that interpreting and writing were brought back together as they were in traditional rhetoric.

Also, it should be noted that as a consequence of a year of "focus"-group meetings with outside consultants, we reached a general consensus that the humanities courses should provide some kind of "coverage" in the traditional sense. Our students would come from many fields, not necessarily from English, and they might not know what was deemed "canonical" or "non-canonical." Having at least two courses which were intended to acquaint them with twentieth-century literary breakthroughs would provide this kind of conventional coverage. Nevertheless, the approach to these works would contravene the norm.

While the literary assignments in the writing workshops were directed towards the student's writing project, the assignments in the other courses were to be diversified, providing opportunity for experimentation in both non-fiction and fictional genres, breadth of experience in interpreting and writing, and in the final semesters they were to include either research papers or position papers which probed perennial humanistic concerns with some depth. The writing assignments were to encourage self-reflexivity and awareness of the ways in which writing is an act of conscious reflection on self, society, history and tradition while also being an act of disguise or pretense, the presentation of a transformed or created self.

Beyond the course descriptions, however, is the teaching approach to the production and interpretation of literature. With the recent developments in teaching writing, combined with a class full of talented, intelligent, and highly motivated adults, the classroom atmosphere was to be

collaborative and interactive, along the lines of the recommendations of Peter Elbow and Donald Murray, among others. These students, as practicing writers themselves, could be counted on to be responsible participants in the classroom; their professional experiences and avid interest in the reading and writing activities could prepare them, with sensitive leadership from the faculty teaching the classes, for example, to be fellow editors of each others' work, leaders of seminar presentations, and capable discussion collaborators.

The faculty, on their side, who had critically rethought how a literature course would be taught to students interested in literary writing rather than literary research, would be prepared to cede some authority in the classroom to these students, for whom writing was a necessary part of their professional activity. Reading assignments were to be designed to fulfill the larger goals of the program: to develop the student as a productive writer and through the study of literary works to provide a background in literary styles, ideas, and techniques to add breadth and depth to the students' writing, thus enabling them to interpret, evaluate, edit, and contribute to their own work, as well as to that of others. These goals were to be advanced throughout the entire curriculum, supported by the writing and humanities courses, the reading and writing assignments, and the student's writing project. Writing assignments in the humanities courses were to be diversified in the tradition of the rhetorical *paideia* (imitation, parody, arguments, position and reflection papers, as well as research papers in the final semesters) and responded to with the pen of a constructive and creative critic, the teacher, whose performance would model teaching and editing practices.

To be accepted into the program, the student must demonstrate experience and skill in writing, have some background in successful humanities studies, and show a record of academic discipline and conscientiousness. The student application, designed to uncover these talents in the student, includes a sample of the student's writing (10-15 pages of prose, or a short collection of poetry), a grade transcript, a statement of purpose, a resumé, and two letters of recommendation. The student is accepted after an evaluation of these materials, all of which help the committee to assess his or her ability to succeed in the program. A committee of faculty, rather than a single person, evaluates all candidates; each candidate is scrutinized according to criteria which will enhance the academic environment of the class and benefit all members. These criteria are:

1. Diversity of personal goals. Because students write in a number of genres in their courses, care is taken not to admit a preponderance of fiction students. Students who are interested in developing themselves broadly in the humanities (literature and writing) rather than narrowly in a particular genre will be more successful and more satisfied with the program. An overabundance of students with an interest in fiction only is bound to cause complaints about being forced to abandon writing for "academic" courses. Since student applications include an extended sample of their writing and a statement of purpose besides the usual graduate school documentation requirements, it is easy to identify students' primary interests. Admission is based on the quality and diversity of the students' writing interests, as well as on their ability to perform academically.

2. Diversity of professional backgrounds. Though all the students must be promising writers, care will be taken that the group is balanced among teachers, editors, technical writers, and other professionals. A goal of the program is to develop students as writers who "write," that is, use their writing in the "real" world; an overabundance of students who do not appreciate the value of the craft of writing in the largest sense will contribute to undermining all the courses except the fiction workshops. Students who must write in their work will provide a critical edge to discussions of style, purpose, invention, audience, etc.

All that I have been describing so far, of course, is the design of the program, the ideal which would underly the actual practice. But, as so often in academia, the innovative must necessarily encounter the entrenched, which appears diversely as the fiefdoms of stultified administrative structures, traditional methods and attitudes which dominate our discipline, and the comfort of doing things as they've always been done. In the following section I outline the program's strengths and the problems which emerged in the first three years.

Program Strengths

The strongest aspect of the program lies in its original curriculum, designed to challenge conventional barriers among literary genres, as well as the hierarchy of genres that places novel and poetry (i.e., the traditionally fictional genres) above history, biography, essays and other non-fictional forms. This is supported by the integration of humanities courses and writing courses with an emphasis on the rhetorical tradition, giving

students the opportunity to work in non-fiction, as well as in the more common creative writing endeavors (poetry, novel, short story).

A second strength is the students, who are highly motivated and capable professional adults, eager to learn and consume our common cultural heritage which they in turn choose to re-present in their own work. Because classes are offered at night and consecutively, it is possible for adult working people to complete their studies. This design also makes it possible for them to complete a writing project during the two-year program.

A third strength is the engagement of the faculty, who are inspired by the possibilities of the program. Also, the writing workshops, led by Bay Area published novelists, prize-winning non-fiction and fiction writers, journalists, and poets, are small, interactive, and intensive, allowing the students to work closely with these authors.

Potential Problems

Faculty and Administration

Just as the students may have preconceptions about conventional literary studies and what they would like to see changed, so indeed do faculty and administration. After the first two years of the program, a serious problem emerged. The faculty had very different definitions of the program. In an experiment such as this, it is essential that all the faculty operate with a shared definition. This does not mean that all faculty must use the same classroom techniques, have the same convictions about what literary works merit "coverage," or assign the same kind of written work. Just the contrary, the idea underlying the program was that all kinds of literary activities had merit, and that they should be practiced in the program, and that lectures would certainly be appropriate on some occasions. Rather, coherence among the faculty should emerge on the fundamental premises that reading and writing are related activities and that literary style and form are developed by practice in reading and writing in a variety of forms. The ideal graduates of this program would not write great novels; rather, they would transform their writing by enlarging the range and capacity of their literary activity.

However, without these shared convictions about the program, faculty will fall back on conventional English studies definitions. Some perceived

the program as an "applied" literature program; others as a creative writing program with some "lit-crit" courses tagged on; still others as a creative writing program being ruined by the incursion of English-type faculty; some thought it was strictly a teacher-training program; and others believed it was a modern version of a program in rhetoric. This confusion multiplied because there was an administrative tangle about authority, and the faculty were therefore undermined, or they lost interest. Despite good intentions, these diverse strands, if not directed, will tend to fragment a new program, a condition students would readily recognize. As a consequence of this first problem, the faculty ended up teaching their own courses, just as often happens in higher education, with the door closed, as though only "my course" and "my students" counted, and the relationship with the remainder of the curriculum was abandoned.

A further concern is that a rift can develop between the adjunct professional faculty, on whom the program is dependent for its academic respectability, as well as economic viability, and the full-time English department faculty. Mistaken notions about the goals of the program as well as judgments of teaching practices and attitudes based on stereotyped views of "English" department types will create a rift. To address this problem, the adjunct and full-time faculty must be engaged, at regular joint faculty meetings, in the dialogue of the program's intellectual goals and the necessary interdependence of both parties for its academic stability. The adjunct professional faculty's salary must be commensurate with their experience, training, and contribution to the program. Alternating who chairs faculty sessions, whether adjunct or ladder faculty, would also help to build more community among the two sets of faculty.

Recommendations:

1. Faculty need to share techniques for conducting an interactive, collaborative adult classroom. Again these can be demonstrated in faculty meetings with all the faculty in the program participating in "show" and "tell" activities. Such occasions provide for discussion, exchange, dispute, and change. A frequently voiced complaint from these capable adult students is they are too often forced into the passive, receptive role in the classroom rather than being constructive collaborators in their own learning. The faculty should read, for example Don Murray's *Learning by Teaching* or Peter Elbow's *Embracing Contraries* and discuss as a group how these methods of classroom conduct and responses to student writing might be incorporated into their teaching practice.

2. During bi-monthly meetings faculty should take up particular rhetorical topics to refine the implications of such an experiment in education. They should be willing to write position papers advancing arguments on curriculum, teaching methods, changing attitudes, etc. The topics might include:

a) What is the connection between rhetoric and literary interpretation and how does this affect the design of a course or the objectives of the entire curriculum? How does it affect what we do in the classroom when we teach? Should writing courses be separated from reading courses? How can these activities be better integrated?

b) What is the role of research in a rhetoric curriculum? How can it be incorporated into a writing course so that its capacity to enhance understanding of a topic is manifest? How can a research project be more than a rote exercise repeated formulaically by each student?

c) How do we break down stereotypes about literary activity? That is, how do we construct a pedagogical argument, a discourse that directs away from clichéd literary attitudes that elevate one genre over another and which peremptorily dismiss the prose non-fiction genres both in literary study and in the academic curriculum? This particular prejudice is at the very heart of English studies and regulates the status and pay of those who teach the largest body of non-fiction in the university, the attitudes of faculty who eschew teaching it, and students who must write it. Naturally students attracted to the program want to write fiction. Our entire culture and the educational structure which supports it endorses this choice even though the pleasure and work of our language depends on a long prose non-fiction tradition which merits as much reverence and demands as much imaginative talent.

The working position papers and tentative conclusions which faculty reach should be shared with the students enrolled in the program. A newsletter which reports on the ongoing debates in which students are also involved should make the debates public.

Curriculum

The fact that the writing workshops and humanities courses were separate in the original design of the program, may have re-enforced the traditional dichotomies in English studies because students were split in conventional categories in the workshops (fiction, non-fiction, poetry) and into two directions—towards their “own” writing project and towards breadth and scope in rhetorical experimentation and humanistic inquiry in the humanities courses. The major problem with the entire curriculum was this division which resulted in student unrest, potential faculty conflict, and a general distrust of the humanities courses on the part of the students. I would say that the distinction between these two activities needs further refinement and consideration, and that simply saying as we do these days that “all writing engages the imagination” cannot dissipate the now entrenched academic division between “creative writing” and ordinary English classes, no matter how re-formulated these “English” classes might be with reference to the rhetorical tradition. What to do about this dilemma, which is central to the program’s academic difficulties, is not clear. The Writing Workshops are the most appreciated portion of the program. To eliminate them would resolve this problem, but kill the program. It is the opportunity to write a lengthy work that attracts students into the program, and this work is supported by the workshops. One response has been to bring the humanities courses more into line with the workshop format. The advantage to this has been to improve the quality of teaching in the humanities, but at some expense to the curriculum of the adjusted courses. My own conviction remains that the students need to have the overall goals of the program constantly emphasized by every faculty member so they understand the underlying coherence to the curriculum of the whole sequence of courses directed towards their development as skilled writers and interpreters of our language and its literary traditions.

Recommendation:

Curriculum, teaching practices, and grading standards must be confronted, discussed, shared, and modified. Otherwise an overlap between courses could potentially occur. Conflicts in curricula attitudes, including works to be studied, approaches to them, and grading standards can be the grounds for healthy discussions of the premises of our academic prejudices. In a program such as this, there are bound to be differences of opinions, and these should be focused on in an effort to trace their origins,

rationale, and implications. Conflicts in grading standards, particularly if the workshop faculty reject conventional grading standards, must be addressed because this could contribute to the undermining of the humanities curriculum, and its commensurate degrading in the overall curriculum.

Students

Students also have preconceptions about literary studies based on the conventional distinction between creative writing and non-creative writing, between traditional literature courses and a “practical” approach to writing. These must be confronted from the beginning. Prospective students should be informed that this program is unlike conventional English graduate studies, that it is neither a creative writing program nor a graduate English degree. The difference should be emphasized, demonstrated, and indeed celebrated throughout the program so the advantages of the new approach become clear.

Despite an extensive orientation to the program at information meetings, in individual interviews, and again at the registration meeting, many students still enter the program with one romantic goal in mind: to be a writer who writes novels. And the academic courses are perceived to interfere with this goal. Too many students attracted to the program are more interested in fictionalizing their lives in a novel than in advancing their rhetorical and imaginative abilities in a variety of literary forms.

Recommendation:

Students need to receive a thorough orientation to the academic and intellectual rationale for the program. If they do not, they may enter these studies with personal goals which may not match the program’s goals. As a consequence, some students may become annoyed by the humanities courses which they consider distractions from their writing. The writing workshops offer more easily self-gratifying work, but students must be shown how the work in the other courses is essential to their development as writers. Again, this conviction will emerge if the goals of the program are shared by faculty and students, and writing activities in the humanities courses are rhetorically based.

Conclusion

It can be seen from these accomplishments, concerns, and problems that an enterprise such as this hardly resolves contemporary dilemmas in English studies. Rather, it identifies them, scrutinizes them, and provides an opportunity to evaluate conventions while testing some new approaches. It also directs our attention to all the corners and crevices of higher education in literacy studies: attitudes about tradition and innovation, personal comfort and ego gratification, prejudice and ideology, and even energy and enervation, all of these appear in a long-term creative academic project. Probably the most important realization that could emerge from this experience is that a teaching and interpretive methodology which requires self-scrutiny, historical reconstruction, dialogue, conflict, and knowledge of the workings of traditions and prejudices in academic activities (teaching, curriculum development, administration) can only strengthen our shared educational goals. I have in mind the application of methodologies like those explored in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and Jurgen Habermas's important modification of Gadamer in "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality."

I have attempted to give an overview of the issues that must be confronted when a new program with new goals for literary studies is initiated. Others who have ventured into these territories have discovered similar conditions, and likewise have entered where "power failed the lofty fantasy" (Dante, *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 142), so I offer these experiences for others whose imagination is boundless but who know the limitations and boundaries of the academic community.

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