

A Defense of English

"poetry makes nothing happen"

W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"

As we know, the general education committee has been working on a proposal to change the way our freshmen and sophomores learn about the world that lies beyond their majors. Among other changes, the committee suggests replacing the second freshman composition course with a 300-level writing course in the discipline, and a subcommittee has designed a "Perspectives" area that contains Social Sciences (6 hours), Natural Sciences (6-7 hours), Humanities (3 hours), Fine and Performing Arts (3 hours), History (3 hours), and Comparative Cultures (3 hours). I admire the committee's work, and I applaud its emphasis on learning communities that help students to make connections between different disciplines' ways of thinking. But I worry about the shrinking place of composition and literature in this new curriculum. The proposed curriculum mentions neither a literature nor a foreign language requirement.

As a younger person on the tenure track, I should not be called old-fashioned, even if some think I am only guarding my job. I grant that no claim is wholly disinterested. But Social Sciences and Natural Sciences are well represented in the Perspectives section not only because members of that subcommittee were defending their interests, but because they had sufficient understanding of the importance of those disciplines in general education. I want to suggest that the committee, which has rightly shown us how writing within disciplines aids active learning and comprehension, has yet misunderstood the kind of learning that goes on in our current composition courses, English 101 and 102. Since those now teaching composition and literature are not represented on the committee, such a misunderstanding may be inevitable.

The minutes of November 24, 1997, summarize the question as the committee sees it: "Basic mechanics should be offered in English 101, but beyond that we want them to really develop writing skills appropriate to their major (linked to content, not just process)." Such a link is important, and I do not dispute the need for it. But freshman composition is not about "basic mechanics," though it may distress many teachers to hear it. Recent composition theory argues that students wish to learn mechanics only when they learn to take pride in their own writing. Despite their lower SAT scores, our freshmen usually know their mechanics; they simply do not value them.

In English 101, students learn to write about their own experiences and to determine more confidently how and to whom they will address them. In this way, they gain a stake in their own

writing. In English 102, on the other hand, students learn the basic lessons of submission to the gods of research, format, and citation--lessons they will need for college and the workplace. Which of these should be sacrificed in this new curriculum? Should the creative work of 101 be relegated to the Freshman seminar, where it becomes subordinated to instilling "a sense of place" and "a sense of community"? Will faculty in the several disciplines that absorb 102 teach the lessons of finding and documenting sources in the junior year? Should we tell students who are already struggling that they should trust their voice but follow instructions, all in the same semester?

This proposal, should it become policy, can also hurt our enrollment. Many of our students come to Western planning to transfer to another UNC institution. Many transfer here from other UNC institutions, and many complete their general education courses at the community college level. The Comprehensive Articulation Agreement, which governs transfers between two-year and four-year colleges, specifies that students must have 6 hours of composition, 12 hours of humanities and fine arts (of which one must be a literature course), 12 hours of social and behavioral sciences, and 14 hours of natural sciences and mathematics. Western already presents problems for transferring students because we do not allow students to substitute courses required for the major for general education courses in the same discipline. The general education curriculum that is being proposed would make transfers from Western less common, since those students would have to pick up so many more general education requirements at their new school. They might opt to stay on here, then, but they are as likely to enroll in the first place in a school that abides by the Comprehensive Articulation agreement (UNCCH, East Carolina, Fayetteville State, NC Central, NC State, Winston Salem State, Pembroke, Elizabeth City State, UNCA, Appalachian State, UNCW, and UNCC all require six hours of freshman composition, and most of these have a literature requirement). Students transferring in would have similar problems. We ought to be working to make transferring easier, not harder.

Students ought to learn the lessons of coherence and grace in all disciplines. But all our faculty are not trained to teach them, nor have they always taught them in the past. Making freshman composition courses the hub of freshman learning communities, instead of replacing composition with the freshman seminar, would serve several purposes: English teachers could share strategies for effective writing with other teachers, who could bring those strategies back to their own disciplines; English teachers could learn how to integrate the content of other disciplines into their writing courses; and students and teachers could share ideas and make connections between the major disciplines. We could achieve many of the general education committee's pedagogical goals without tying knots in FTE requirements, without subordinating composition's ability to foster intellect to its necessary but essentially cosmetic function, and without discouraging transferring students. And we would go a long way toward building a real writing across the curriculum program, one in which every teacher gives the message that grammar and coherence are part of life, not just English class.

More than practical considerations are at stake, however. We have a chance to say now what education is and what it ought to be. The fate of composition, like the fate of humanities in the general education curriculum (three hours in the new proposal), depends on our believing that all learning is not about specialty. Life is not only about work, and general education should not exist only to provide a portfolio of marketable skills. We also want a curriculum and a university that give our students a look into the richer world of understatement, intimation, and irony, to

free some who do not even read for pleasure from what Wallace Stevens has called "a mind of winter" ("The Snow Man"). As faculty, we are here because we saw that world. Because I fell in love with this university and hoped to build a life here, I want Western to say that students who have never read literature in college have not received the education they deserve.

We know that English can be useful. Piaget tells us that learning involves "de-centering." "We achieve de-centering by adapting ourselves to things and people outside ourselves and by adopting points of view initially foreign to us, as the anonymous narrator does with his single, dual, and multiple points of view" (summarized in Moffett and McElheny's Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories (1966), p. 572). But we mistake the matter when we justify any curriculum by its use. Like all arts, literature fuels the imagination; like all humanities, it enlarges our sympathies with what Stevens calls "the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." We ought to know the market and the mind too. We ought to teach real-world skills and computer languages. But as educated people, we have learned the quieter accents of pleasure, pity, and belief--and our students need that language.

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