

Foreword

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Teaching “Freshman Writing” has always been a vexed task.

Should we teach the students to write in the disciplines they intend to major in? It’s hard. The students do not necessarily know what they will major in. We cannot know the ways with words of all disciplines. And, too, it may well be that today’s students should not be majoring in disciplines but rather in themes or challenges.

Should we teach the students to find their “voice” (really “voices”) in writing? It’s hard. “Voices” are social identities formed through belonging and membership in groups outside Freshman Writing courses and not necessarily committed to the course’s norms or even the university’s. And such groups do not make judgments based on our grades.

Should we teach a myriad of modes of expression (“genres”)? It’s hard. There are way too many of them and each one requires, again, active and committed participation in a group outside the Freshman Writing class if it is to have real meaning.

Should we teach critique? It’s hard. You cannot criticize what you do not know, and our students know different things and little of it deeply enough yet to engage in authentic critique. While it is true that critique often precedes understanding in some types of academic literature, the other way round is better.

Should we teach “critical thinking”? It’s hard. Critical thinking requires mastery of a great deal of “content” in a domain and meta-skills, both of which serve as tools for critical thinking. Our classes cannot teach enough content—let alone enough for each student’s interests—to teach critical thinking beyond some generic version.

Should we teach the basics? It’s hard. If a student comes to college not knowing the basics of writing, that student has problems that go beyond Freshman Writing. Furthermore, the basics (just like cooking techniques) are pretty worthless when not embedded in the making of some authentic dish, and there are a great many types of dishes connected to a great many “cuisines” owned and operated by specific groups of people.

Should we teach the essay? Well, it is a dead form today, largely used for sorting people to assign rewards that have little actually to do with essays. Furthermore, what we teach as “essays” today has little to do with either Montaigne or Bacon, the inventors of the two major essay forms.

Of course, the problem here is just what Linda Adler-Kassner said it was in her 2017 Conference on College Composition and Communication Chair’s Ad-

dress: “Because Writing is Never Just Writing.” For me, writing is always and everywhere part of (Big “D”) “Discourses;” that is, it is integral to participation in social groups with their own evolved histories, norms, ways with words, and practices, almost all of them not beholden to—or even very respectful of—Freshman Writing courses.

So, what is one to do? Well, the authors you are about to meet in Jo-Anne Kerr and Ann Amicucci’s *Stories from First-Year Composition: FYC Pedagogies that Foster Student Agency and Writing Identity* do a wonderful job helping us think through these vexed, hard, but fascinating problems. You and I as readers of this book will have to come up with our own answers, and I am sure there are a number of good ones, not just one. As we do so, we will confront the nature of writing, and maybe even universities, anew.

Writing is the “Maker Movement” part of literacy. Writing is to literacy what game design is to gaming. We celebrate making today but have done little to solve the problem of one of our oldest and most important forms of making: writing. Universal literacy as reading, not writing, started in the West (in Sweden) as a form of enforcing religious beliefs. And, indeed, reading has often been supervised by religions, states, and institutions who want us to read (understand) in certain ways. In this context, writing has been deeply suspect, since in gaining the power to make, there is the deep risk people will break through to new understandings, forming and joining new groups with the power to question.

Today, young people are writing—in interest-driven groups (“affinity spaces”) on the internet—more than ever before. Writing as making is spreading and coming into its own. In the act, writing, like all powerful technologies, is being used for both evil and good. We can say this at the very least, though: It is the job of the Freshman Writing teacher to lead young people to the good. Yes, that requires making choices and taking risks and responsibility. It’s a dangerous job. Not for the timid.

Work Cited

Adler-Kassner, Linda. “2017 CCCC Chair’s Address: Because Writing is Never Just Writing.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2017, pp. 317–40.