1995

What's at Stake for Students and Instructors

What's at stake for students depends on what you think happens in a first-year writing course; if you believe that we are teaching functional literacy or a set of skills, I suppose you could make the point that skills could be taught in other ways, other places.

But if you believe--as I and many others do--that there is an additional goal in a first-year writing class, a goal that transcends functional literacy and calls students to engage in critical literacy practices, it's hard to imagine that we'd want to give up the space/the site/the structure that allows that to happen. For all the good that writing centers do, I don't think their goal is to teach critical literacy; for all the merit of WAC programs, I don't think their goal is to put critical literacy--or the student and her writing--at the center of their courses. In fact, however, critical literacy practice is the heart--and the heartbeat--of a first-year writing course as I understand it.

For me, the first-year course

1. is a site where students come to understand that language constitutes the world we live in and where they are initiated into the broader conversations about citizenship;
2. it's a site where students identify and claim their own subjectivities, where they begin to think about the ground from which subjectivities spring, and how these subjectivities--whatever they are--affect their view of their neighbors and of the world
3. it's a site where students begin to understand something about difference--difference in class, gender, race, sexual preference, for example--and to inquire about what consequences those differences might have, and how we might, in Trimbur's words, live and work together with these differences
4. it's a site where students learn, in Joe Harris's terms, not to romanticize academic discourse, but learn instead about the ways competing beliefs and practices intersect with and confront one another; where students experience collaboration, contradiction,

consensus, negotiation, and conflict and especially where they learn, again in Joe Harris's terms, that "one need not have consensus to have community."

So, in sum, I think of the first-year writing course as a site where students learn the rhetorical arts of self-representation: what it means to represent oneself in different public spaces and how to read and write those representations.

In support of maintaining first-year writing as a site that teaches critical literacy practices, I want to add to our conversation the voices of some students and some part-time faculty--who are after all the people who perhaps have the most at stake in this controversy; the first-year students whose voices I include in our conversation have just completed two quarters of a required writing course; the part-time faculty whose words I use regularly teach in the first-year writing sequences.

What you hear in these clips from students is what they believe they gained from a first-year writing class; it seems to me that the comments fall into two groups, what students learned about themselves--and what they learned about each other; what you also hear is students reporting that what happened in this class is not only important to them, but that it doesn't happen in their other classes.

1. Tom writes, "the course made me think about myself, which is far more than any of my other classes has done; we dealt with various ways of thinking and this challenged my own way of thinking."

2. Reed writes, "I was forced to evaluate my own value system, and ask myself, well, what do I think about a particular subject matter?

3. Carie writes, "The course has given me a broader perspective on the world; I know now that not everyone is a middle class suburban spoiled child with a mom, a dad, a sister, a dog, and a nice home; there's a whole world out there, and Freshman English has introduced me to it."

4. And, finally, Joe explains, "The course exposed me to different views of the world and different trains of thought; most importantly, it gave me the opportunity to react to

what I had learned. Unlike math and science where the ideas are very concrete (you learn the contents and then you're done), learning continues in Freshman English; you learn through reading, then through discussion, through writing, revision, editing, and reworking. I also learned a lot about myself. I've discovered how I can learn: what ways are successful and how I become confused. No other class has given me such a number of ways in which learning can occur."

Next, I offer the voices of adjunct faculty who want to continue to make these learning opportunities available; what you hear in the following clips from adjuncts is anger about their exploitation, but beyond that, you hear an even greater anger at the possibility of abolishing first-year writing.

1. One person writes, "The way to end the exploitation of teaching staff is not to eliminate our jobs. The way to end exploitation is to raise salaries."

2. Another writes, "The actual exploitation of freshmen would be to assume that being accepted by a university is equated with possessing university-level communication skills or that biology, chemistry, psychology professors will teach students to write."

3. And yet another adjunct says, "Frankly, the argument that FE exploits adjunct faculty strikes me as specious, not because we're adequately compensated, but because it reeks of phony altruism, or even hypocrisy. While we certainly would like better pay, we do teach these courses by choice, most of us with dedication and even pleasure. It seems to me that the real exploitation of adjuncts in this argument is the use of their genuine grievances to further a different agenda, abolishing FE. I'd like to see some of that energy directed toward bettering the lot of adjuncts. Of the many arguments for keeping FE--and there are many--I would add one that probably hasn't gotten the attention it merits, that our students would resist doing away with such a course."

And just a word of conclusion: Is first-year writing important? Along with many students and colleagues, I would say yes. Is the first-year writing course perfect?

Along with everyone I know, I would say no. For a thought about how to live with that discrepancy, I call on the words of Pat Bizzell who writes, "Healthy discourse communities, like healthy human beings, are also masses of contradictions." She goes on to say, and here I'm paraphrasing, that instead of seeking a means of dissolving the contradictions, we should accustom ourselves to dealing with them because they are a sign of life and a sign of health. So, I would argue that our task is not to abolish first-year writing. Rather, our task is to be ever in the process of remaking, revising, reforming; and even as we engage in that vigilant and ongoing revision, our task is to live with the contradictions and imperfections that remain, the contradictions and imperfections that are the sign not of sickness but of health, a healthy organism, a healthy discourse community, a healthy first-year writing course.

Schultz

Session I.18