

Will the Circle Be Broken: The Rhetoric of Complaint against Student Writing

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In his summer 2008 President's Column, Gerald Graff, who has been teaching composition since he began his career in 1963, called attention to the tenuous place that writing instruction still has in the profession:

One of the most depressing moments for me at MLA job interviews is when candidates are reassured that, if they get the job, they "won't have to teach comp." The only thing more depressing is when colleagues who are revolted at the very thought of teaching composition complain that their students write poorly. They blame bad student writing on the high schools or on their own campus writing programs and take no responsibility for the problem themselves.

Given that for much of the twentieth century, the MLA largely ignored pedagogy as a scholarly pursuit, such attitudes are perhaps not surprising. Before 1900, approximately ten percent of the articles in *PMLA* treated pedagogy. After 1903, however, when the MLA eliminated its pedagogical section to focus on literary scholarship, such articles largely disappeared from its pages (Goggin 22; Brereton 24; Bartholomae, "Composition" 1950–53). Even as rhetoric and composition reemerged as a vibrant discipline in the 1970s and 1980s—by 1986, twenty-four percent of listings in the *MLA Job Information List* were in composition and rhetoric (Bartholomae, "Composition" 1952)—it was still infrequently represented in *PMLA* (and remains so). While the last decade has done much to bring rhetoric

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and writing back from the margins, as Graff notes, old attitudes toward writing instruction and student writing linger.

Indeed, we have all heard the complaints against student writing. As one colleague bitterly complained to me of her freshmen, “They can’t write, they can’t reason, they can’t punctuate, they can’t spell.” These complaints are often born out of legitimate frustration at the difficulties of teaching writing. Our workloads are high, our classes large. Our students are often underprepared or exhibit such a wide range of preparation that we find ourselves teaching three classes in one. We ourselves may have had little training in writing pedagogy or lack the time to keep up with advances in the field. As Herbert Lindenberger noted in response to Graff’s column, “[E]ven if you understand how important these courses are[,] they take a lot more work to teach than lit courses.” In courses in which writing is not the primary focus, we may resent the time that writing issues take from other subject matter. Is it any wonder we complain?

I do believe that the overwhelming majority of us who are privately frustrated with student writing, in whatever course we encounter it, are sincerely committed to improving it. However, there is an important difference between venting by the photocopy machine among our colleagues and taking our complaints public. And yet each school year brings another round of bitter published invective against student writing from college English teachers. One critic finds students victims of a “cool consumer worldview,” complacent in their ignorance (Edmundson 40). Another argues they “don’t know how to—or care to—express their views” (Gerhardt), while another claims they engage in “illiterate and semiliterate scribbling” when they try (Clio). So “atrocious” are their grammar and logic, writes another, that most “are not writing even at the level of competence that was once required of third-graders” (Blue). Such invectives rarely make reference to the vast body of literature in rhetoric, composition, pedagogy, linguistics, and literacy studies that explains why students may have difficulty writing—and offers proven strategies for helping them.

We should know better. Since English was introduced as a university subject, hardly a generation has gone by without national hand wringing over an impending literacy crisis. In 1987, E. D. Hirsch warned that our nation was on the brink of cultural illiteracy. In 1975, *Newsweek* fretted that Johnny couldn’t write (Sheils). In 1955, Rudolf Flesch proclaimed that Johnny couldn’t read. Over a hundred years ago, professors at Harvard sounded the alarm at declining standards. In 1892, forty-seven percent of students taking Harvard’s entrance exam “passed unsatisfactorily,” and twenty percent failed (Berlin 100). Complained one faculty member, “The average theme seems the work of a rather vulgar youth with his light gone

out” (Briggs 30). A generation earlier, English studies itself was an upstart discipline, regarded with suspicion by classics faculty members doubtful that the study of mere belles lettres in the vernacular could ever match the character-building discipline of studying Latin and Greek grammar. Even Harvard President Charles Eliot felt compelled to publicly make the case for English, which he acknowledged was difficult to teach well (206), as a cornerstone in the new liberal arts curriculum.

Contemporary critics of student writing tend to locate the golden age of literacy at about the time when they were in school, before the corrupting influence of whatever feature of modern life most appalls them. Stanley Ridgley condemns “strange literary theories, Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, and other oddities in the guise of writing courses.” Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Professor X laments that his students “don’t really share a culture” (73); that is, they haven’t read the literary texts he deems to constitute one. Allan Bloom faults the 1960s for promoting moral relativism. Tina Blue wishes for the rigor of her third-grade teacher in 1958, who “took off points for *everything* we did wrong.” For Pamela Gerhardt, the violence at Woodstock ’99—and her students’ apparent indifference to it—symbolizes the anomie of an entire generation. Writing in the *Washington Post*, she attributes her students’ refusal to share her outrage to a decline in their thinking skills over her teaching career, which, at the time of writing, had spanned a mere six years.

LAYING THE BLAME

Who is to blame for the supposedly sorry state of student writing? A common strategy is to blame high school English teachers. Writing pseudonymously in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Max Clio, who teaches at an open admissions university where, as he dismissively puts it, “anyone . . . can take a whirl,” insists that “[h]igh schools no longer prepare most students to express ideas coherently or follow accepted English, let alone carry on serious intellectual work.” He is in venerable company. Responding to the recent overhaul of the SAT to include more questions on grammar and copyediting, the Harvard dean of admissions, William Fitzsimmons, argued that the new test will catch those who otherwise might have managed to slip by the gatekeepers with their polished entrance essays and that high school teachers, who “haven’t been doing a good job in teaching writing,” will now be forced to become responsible (qtd. in Lewin). In 1892, the Harvard Committee on Composition and Rhetoric also blamed poor high school instruction for the inadequacies of the school’s freshmen (Adams, Godkin, and Quincy). Instead of longing for a nonexistent past,

perhaps we should simply admit that eighteen-year-olds frequently write poorly, and consider it our job to take it from there.

Of course, it is easier to blame students. Gerhardt sneers at the student who wants to do an essay on what she considers the “‘problem’ of the instant replay.” But for the discourse community of sports fans, the instant replay *is* a widely debated, historically significant, and rhetorically rich problem, as is the use of performance-enhancing drugs, the Bowl College System, and, yes, even the question of whether cheerleading is a sport. Why shouldn’t students write about such topics?

It serves little good to condemn students for their lack of passion for our passions. Mark Edmundson, for example, excoriates contemporary students for being unwilling and unable to engage in serious debate:

For the pervading view is the cool consumer perspective, where passion and strong admiration are forbidden. . . . [I]s it a shock that the kids don’t come to school hot to learn, unable to bear their own ignorance? For some measure of self-dislike, or self-discontent . . . seems to me to be a prerequisite for getting an education that matters. My students, alas, usually lack the confidence to acknowledge what would be their most precious asset for learning: their ignorance. (42, 47)

Though his frustration may be sincere, it is also silencing. I think it telling that when Edmundson published his essay, the most thoughtful critique came not from a fellow English professor but from one of his former students, Lisa Kijewski:

I believe that I can explain the “generic” responses and lukewarm evaluations he garnered from students. I have encountered few classes in my university career whose objectives were so poorly defined and whose assignments were so amorphous and ill-explained. Edmundson, with his obvious contempt for undergraduates, wasted my time and my money, and then used his experiences in front of the classroom as fodder for a sardonic critique of my generation’s intellectual incompetence and consumerist attitude. . . . If Edmundson wants his students to be “changed by the course,” perhaps he should try teaching with a modicum of passion, enthusiasm, and respect for his students.

If we expect our students to share our passions, we must also acknowledge theirs.

STUDENT WRITING TODAY

I do historical work on rhetorical education, largely at marginalized institutions. Part of the thrill is discovering a fine piece of writing done by

a student in 1900 or 1920—and there are many such examples. Here is a delightful defense of slang from 1914, by Marie Erhardt, a Texas Woman's University student:

Why it is perfectly shocking to any nice young lady to think the latest, good-looking man can speak perfect English and find nothing in stock except second-rate discarded jabber that he has used ever since Taft's administration. Just think of a grown up man saying, "I should worry," when anybody would know that "Ish Ka Bibble" is the proper form. It should be the height of everyone's ambition to make the language they use sound like a musical comedy. Everyone should strive to speak so that it would be easy to enter into a conversation in which neither of the persons would understand the other. (189)

I get examples as lively today. A freshman from Texas, who persuasively argued for the uniqueness of her state's culture: "Have you ever seen a bumper sticker saying, 'I wasn't born in Iowa but I got here as fast as I could'? How about tortilla chips in the shape of Montana?" A junior from Los Angeles, who dreamed from childhood of playing in a professional ballpark but then had the worst performance of his life when he finally got the chance in a high school all-star game: "I sucked," he concluded, "but at least I sucked in Dodger Stadium."

Not all my students, of course, will emerge from freshman composition—or even from my graduate seminars—writing error-free prose. But writing well is a complex skill that develops slowly over time and not necessarily in linear fashion. At times of frustration we should take comfort that empirical research has shown that students today do not make significantly more errors than students did in the past, about 2.26 per 100 words in 1986 (well after the effects of open admissions) compared with 2.11 in 1917 (Connors and Lunsford 406). Given that then only an elite fraction attended college, we're doing pretty well.

It is also worth remembering that the tasks we give our students in freshman composition are far more complex than those given elite Harvard students a century ago. Then, freshmen were commonly asked to write simple narratives or descriptive sketches, such as "A Morning in Tarrytown Harbor":

While we were eating, a glorious breeze sprang up, and, moreover, it was down the river. The tide, also, was going out. Now for a sail! The waves danced round the boat; white-caps were omnipresent. Our nerves tingled with delight as we hurried about to make ready for the start. Hurrah! we're off! The sails caught the breeze, and the small craft bounded over the waves as if she too were glad to be released from her moorings.

(qtd. in Copeland and Rideout 112)¹

The then-dominant emphasis on form and correctness often led to formulaic essays as well. Consider this expository example from a 1922 Berkeley freshman, which placed him in the top quarter of the entering class:

The choice of an automobile depends primarily upon the purse of the prospective purchaser. There are three classes of automobiles to be considered: the high priced, medium priced, and the cheap cars. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. Cheap cars are not easy riding. Expensive ones are easy enough to ride in but their cost is prohibitive to the majority. The medium priced car strikes the happy medium: and decreases the disadvantages of each of the extremes while yet partaking of the advantages of each of them. (qtd. in Brereton 533–34)

In rhetorically grounded freshman composition classes today, students are commonly asked to write original, research-based arguments that synthesize and respond to multiple points of view, incorporate a variety of textual evidence, and seek to persuade a specific audience in a specific rhetorical context, in addition to following the conventions of edited English. Here's a paragraph from a recent essay arguing that hip hop, contrary to popular opinion, actually promotes positive images for women:

Today a super slim woman is the norm. As one 16-year-old girl said, "How thin you are is associated with success and how big you are reflects low self-esteem and being unsuccessful" (Martino and Pallota-Chiarolli 103). However, the black community condones just the opposite. The "thick" woman is idolized, being defined as having a large gluteus maximus and a big bust without excess fat elsewhere. This image is depicted throughout the hip-hop industry, representing that the average woman can be her normal weight and still be attractive. The most infamous example is Mo'nique, a big comedian who made a career out of embracing her size and has helped many big women everywhere to love themselves regardless of negativity. The hip-hop culture promotes physically diverse women that can do anything they put their minds to. The uniqueness of all women's bodies is accepted.²

While this student's syntax and word choice might lack the belletristic influence of her turn-of-the-twentieth-century counterparts, I would argue that the student is better prepared for the rigors of academic and public argument.

A century ago, English professors had no trouble telling students their work was "very elementary," "wretchedly loose," "discreditable," or "entirely inadequate." Today, though we might privately long for that freedom, we are less likely to insist on our gatekeeping function. Indeed, as a discipline we are committed to a democratic vision of literacy as the

linchpin of citizenship. Why then such resistance to student writing, such bitter, public complaint? It is the public nature of the complaint I find so troubling. I believe that this discourse speaks less to our students' capabilities than to our own fear of and discomfort with writing. Thirty years ago, Richard Young argued that many English instructors suffer from the lingering Romantic ideal of writing as a mysterious process, and the dichotomy he spoke of still remains. My graduate students often maintain that writing is an inborn talent, that there exists in us an authentic voice not subject to modification by rhetorical exigencies, even as they nod in agreement at scholarship that suggests that writing is a teachable skill and that success in writing is highly dependent on learning and adapting to the often implicit rules of a discourse community.³ What we have learned about writing as informed scholars and teachers does not always correspond to what we believe about writing as lifelong readers.

Whatever our reasons, by dismissing student writing we abdicate responsibility for our own failures as teachers, in particular our responsibility to teach *all* students, to take on anyone who wants to "take a whirl." Michael Ryan, writing in the *Houston Chronicle*, laments that students "don't know how to apply grammar and punctuation rules; to write strong summary sentences; to use direct quotations and dialogue; to organize essays effectively; to be creative; or to recognize the difference between good and bad research." If this is indeed the case, then why not show them how? Grumpily insisting that educated people should write everything well, "even a grocery list," or returning "without a response" student e-mails "that contain errors" will not cause students to spontaneously understand comma splices. Nor will insulting them. "The poor souls," Ryan quips, "couldn't write literate essays even if they knew failure meant they'd be shipped off to write reviews of Thomas Hardy novels." Given his attitude, his students might be forgiven for not wanting to learn how to write or for believing that writing is nothing more than a checklist of arbitrary and obscure rules designed to expose their ignorance. The pseudonymous Professor X concludes early in the semester that a forty-something returning student will fail. Yet he does little to help her: instead of showing her how to use the Internet to do research, he tells her she has "skills deficits" (71) and pushes her off on a librarian; instead of modifying the assignment so that she can research a contemporary issue she does understand, he insists she do a historical one she does not, though either assignment would seem to achieve his goal of having students address scholarship on both sides of an issue; instead of giving her a topic, he lets her flounder through several topic changes so as to preserve the integrity of the assignment; instead

of working with her through multiple drafts, giving her feedback on her progress, he lets her turn in a single failing one.

Obviously we cannot reach all students. And certainly it is frustrating when students do not share our conviction that writing is important, that we are important, that we have something to offer. But that frustration is part of the background noise of teaching. Many students also do not believe that math or science or foreign languages are important. But do Spanish teachers publish editorials lamenting their students' inability to use the subjunctive? Indeed, does any other profession so openly mock the population it serves? Blaming the victim is not just misguided, it's unethical.

Our students do not come to us, as one of my colleagues puts it, "shel-lacked" after taking first-year composition, perfectly preserved in the minutiae of mechanical conventions. By dismissing student writing, we thereby dismiss the teaching of writing as either an impossibility or a mere mechanical skill that can be fobbed off on graduate students, lecturers, and junior faculty members, who then provide us with a convenient scapegoat for the poor student writing we subsequently encounter in upper-level classes. Moreover, by dismissing student writing, we dismiss student writers and the possibility that they have something to tell us.⁴ Such blame can only come back to haunt us. While we fault students, parents, high school teachers, television, and text messaging for the inability of students to write, the culture at large is busy indicting us for the supposed national crisis of poor writing.

John Trimbur argues that the discourse of crisis masks the anxiety of the middle class over its socioeconomic status and its complicity in the perpetuation of inequality through the adoption of a privatized literacy that serves corporate ends. Our promulgation of crisis as teachers serves a similar function. Where there is crisis, there is crisis management, thus the increased reliance on standardized writing exams to counter the supposed failures of English teachers to teach English. The new "writing skills" section on the SAT tests not writing skills but decontextualized knowledge of prescriptive grammar, while the new timed writing exam—a twenty-five-minute response to a generic prompt—is an affront to nearly everything we teach in writing courses.

Unfortunately, contemporary debate about student writing and language and literacy education is not driven by academic journals. As scholars and teachers, we need to do a better job of publicly discussing what is right with student writing, of getting the message out to those same popular journals and newspapers for which the naysayers write—and that

a wide audience reads. We need to take up the call of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, in its Network for Media Action, and contact misinformed education reporters, write letters to the editor in response to misleading reportage and op-ed invectives, and write op-eds ourselves. We need to stop smiling our tight, polite, tolerant smiles when strangers, on meeting us and discovering we are English teachers, begin to rail against the grammar of kids today. In response to our students, we need to adopt what Kevin Porter terms a pedagogy of charity, not severity—not because it feels good, but because it works. As George Hillocks has demonstrated, optimistic English teachers who trust their students' abilities are far more likely than pessimistic ones to engage in the kinds of “environmental” classroom practices that improve student reading and writing; they allow group and independent work instead of relying on lecture, they spend more time on instruction and less on management and assessment, and they spend more time on content and less on mechanics (41–52). Finally, we need to embrace a vision of English studies as not just literary studies but also literacy studies and recognize that the teaching of writing, no matter what our subdiscipline, is part of our job description. After all, as Thomas Miller reminds us, our discipline began not in elite institutions such as Oxford or Harvard but in eighteenth-century Scottish public schools, “provincial institutions serving students who were often marginally literate in the language of the learned” (1). We have an obligation to serve such students today.

The trouble with English is that, more than any other subject, it carries the weight of our society's anxieties and fears about education and is the most visible emblem of both our failure and success. As English teachers, we are asked to do more than we possibly can. Yet students can and do learn to read, write, reason, and even punctuate and spell. Most of them, in fact. That most do is a message worth sharing. If we fail, at the very least these shortsighted invectives serve one pedagogical purpose: promoting student engagement. When I assign such essays to my students to analyze, they respond with enthusiasm, opening up lively discussions about argument, evidence, ethos, audience, voice, diction, and even grammar. Would Edmundson feel the same way if he taught at a commuter school rather than an elite university? Does the length of time Gerhardt has been teaching help or hurt her ethos? Does her tone make her more or less persuasive? Do we lack a shared culture, as Professor X suggests, and if so, is that a problem? So to these invectives I am grateful. As long as they continue to be published, our students will never lack for inspiration to write.

NOTES

1. The instructor evaluated the first draft of this fortnightly theme as “pleasant and readable” (qtd. in Copeland and Rideout 109) though requiring sharper and more vivid detail, which the student appears to have supplied in the subsequent draft.

2. I graded this essay a B, finding the argument to be focused, well organized, and engaged but somewhat underdeveloped in its address of counterarguments.

3. For an excellent introduction to the challenges freshmen writers face in negotiating the demands of the academic discourse community, see Bartholomae, “Inventing.”

4. Peter Elbow writes poignantly of the need to respond to students not merely as teachers but also as readers: “As teachers, we need to think about what it means to *be an audience* rather than just be a teacher, critic, assessor, or editor. If our only response is to tell students what’s strong, what’s weak, and how to improve it . . . we actually *undermine* their sense of writing as a social act. We reinforce their sense that writing means doing school exercises, producing for authorities what they already know—not actually trying to say things to readers” (65).

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