

social and historical movements, and most importantly, connections that were personal to my life as both learner and teacher.

(SECOND STUDENT) The early class dynamics were very disturbing, but I have come to appreciate the diversity as the class has progressed. At the start of the class, I felt like an educationally disadvantaged student most of the time...the times we reflected on the class — stopped and looked at what was happening — were helpful and encouraging...this experience has given me more empathy for those struggling with other literacies.

The class did not — and undoubtedly could not — work for all students. One student commented in a midterm freewrite, for instance, that “I see a lot of words surrounding precious few ideas.” Another wrote on a final evaluation of the class that “For an allegedly less hierarchical class in terms of power structure, I felt we had very little real input on the selection of what you considered important for us to read.”

I’m still reflecting on this class, which I’ll teach again next year. There’s much that I don’t know, such as how to resolve the questions raised by my authority as teacher and how to address the very real hegemony that theory holds over practice in the academy in general and composition studies in particular. But my experience teaching “Composition, Literature, and Literacy” has reinforced and deepened my understanding of the significance of Brian Street’s assertion in *Literacy in Theory and Practice* that “the processes whereby reading and writing are learnt are what construct the meaning of it for particular practitioners” (8).

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CONFESSIONS OF A BACKSLIDER; OR, HOW I LOST MY *ETHOS* BECAUSE I COULDN'T READ THE MAP OF THE TERRAIN OF THE MIND OF RHETORIC

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Something strange happened to me in the three years after I got my Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition. I got lost. I didn’t get it anymore. I didn’t understand my own field. I suffered from what I now diagnose as a disenchantment with freshman composition. Not just in teaching it, though that did happen too, but in most everything associated with it. Especially grading. But my frustration primarily centered around theory and even more especially, articles about theory. As I look back on it now, and of course I look back on it as a healthy person looks back on a particularly nasty, virulent illness that came close to claiming her life, I realized that a number of factors led to my estrangement from my chosen field.

The most notable and probably most ironic factor that caused my disenchantment was my appointment two and half years ago as

the Director of Composition at the university where I had landed my first job. In retrospect, I should have known it would happen. I should have seen it coming. The Search Committee had told me during my interview that eventually I would be the Director, and to a lowly A.B.D. graduate student that prospect was heady stuff. Imagine: me as the Director of Freshman Composition. (I know some of my former professors are still trying to.) When the chairman called me a few days later and actually offered me the job, I felt like Sally Fields accepting her Oscar and giving the same dumb speech. But I didn’t know what would happen *after* I became the Director.

The second contribution to my disenchantment was feeling the need to use a textbook. I don’t exactly know how that one came about. I’d never felt even the slightest urge to use one, even in graduate school. It was a bad habit that I was proud of never having developed a taste for — like not drinking coffee. I think now that deciding to use a textbook was the result of feeling the need to show my colleagues in the department that all our deliberation on the composition committee over the countless new textbooks, readers, handbooks, and workbooks that pour out of the publishing houses each year was worth it. These books were delivered each year by a myriad of book reps. (The book reps were something we didn’t learn about in graduate school.) These people descended on my new office with bulging briefcases and huge notebooks they leafed through feverishly no matter what I said. They gave me textbooks, readers, handbooks, rhetorics, and on-line handbooks they urged me not to resell even if my department didn’t adopt them because it would drive up the price of new textbooks and cheat the authors out of their royalties. I apparently fell for this ethical appeal since these textbooks, handbooks, etc. etc. now completely fill two huge bookcases in my office. I have taken to stacking them on the floor and am now threatened by two precariously wobbling towers that I am certain will someday come crashing down on me. “Yeah, that was Harris’s office. She’s under there — somewhere.”

So I got sidetracked by the textbooks. In my lost and confused state, I actually examined (even read!) each one of the new books that I received every spring and found six textbooks, readers, and workbooks that all thirty-five members of my department could live with. Maybe I wanted to feel that all my work had some personal benefit too. I’d spent all this time looking at the damn things — might as well use one. And, to be honest, since I had never used a textbook before, picking one was a novelty. The covers were so bright and colorful, and the writers all sounded so positive, cheerful and decisive. Frankly, I was feeling a little insecure in my new job and thought a textbook would provide me with security. It was also an opportunity to bond with my new colleagues over coffee in the mail room. “What are you using? Yeah, I’m using that too. How do you like it so far?” I could look at my new textbook and actually know what I was going to do next Tuesday. Or next Thanksgiving.

But I went from disenchanting and sidetracked to disturbed when I found that I had no time to read *CCC* and *College English*. They’d come and I’d glance at the front cover to see if anybody I knew had gotten lucky and then put them on the bookcase next to the textbooks I wasn’t selling so that the free enterprise system wouldn’t collapse. I knew I should read them, but I just didn’t have time.

Then, a couple of summers ago, I had surgery and decided to catch up on my journal reading. That’s when I really became disturbed. For a while I thought I was hallucinating the weird titles; I surmised it was the Demerol the nurses were pumping into me. Titles like “The Working Class Novels of Sid Chaplin” “Fishing in Atwood” “The Rhetoric of Paralogy” “Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism,” and, most daunting to me, “Psyche/Logos: Mapping the Terrains of the Mind and Rhetoric” spun around my confused, drug-crazed brain. But the real headache arose when I actually tried to read some of them. Just a sample:

"Materially didactic in its decomposition any fiction by Acker engages a post-structural skepticism regarding the constative efficacy of language" (Scioline 437). I wondered: "What in the hell does this have to do with teaching composition?" Once the Demerol wore off, I asked, "What in the hell does this have to do with *anything*?"

Finally, reluctantly, I came to the painful realization that weary travelers often must come to: I was lost. Further, I was probably lost because I was simply too ignorant or unmotivated to follow the map. Especially the one of the terrain of the mind of psyche/logos. These writers obviously had read and understood Bakhtin, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault. I was still marveling over Murray, McCrorie, Emig, Coles, and Elbow. Hell, I was still reading Plato and Aristotle.

Perhaps it is unfair or uncharitable to blame my confused and lost state on simply becoming the Director of Freshman Composition, the relentless proliferation of examination copies, or articles I was either too busy or not patient or well-read enough to understand. It also probably had to do with the fact that before I became Director I was teaching two and even three sections of freshman composition a semester. (Now that I'm Director, of course, I only teach one.) Departmental policy requires that each student write eight essays in English 10003; enrollment in each section runs about thirty students. I guess between the 480 to 720 essays, not including the revisions I encouraged, the committee meetings, office hours, and the strangers I used to call "my family," I became confused; the terrain no longer looked even vaguely familiar. There was no denying it. I was truly lost.

But it didn't really matter. Busy, dumb, or impatient I developed what my students call "an attitude." It manifested itself in pronouncements like: "Yeah, I'm kinda gettin' away from the comp. thing—gettin' into the rhetoric thing." (Where that split came from I still have no idea.) Later on, when I realized that attitude wasn't helping me find any signposts, I went even further. "Yeah, I've outgrown the rhetoric thing. Kinda gettin' into the feminist rhetorical theory thing." Finally I just gave up. I threw away the map of rhetoric and found a new map.

It was a map of Nebraska, and it still hangs on my office wall, barely visible above the dusty composition texts that I moved from the floor to the top of the bookcases where they now are flush with the ceiling. Nebraska. Cather country. I decided I was sorry I had ever heard of composition/rhetoric. I wished I had written my dissertation on Willa Cather. I read everything she wrote, including her newspaper and magazine articles, poetry, (a true indication of just how lost and confused I had become), and letters (that didn't take long), and short stories. Then I moved on to the biographies (even read Phyllis Rose's *Willa*, a sure sign of dementia), and then the rest of the secondary works, including Joan Crane's *Willa Cather: A Bibliography*, (very dry reading). I wrote hundreds of pages about Cather, mostly dealing with the "subtextual" and "deconstructionist" meanings of some of her more obscure short stories. I attended seminars and conferences on Cather and read papers. I even published an article in *Modern Fiction Studies*. I joined the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. I made the obligatory pilgrimage to Red Cloud and took more pictures there than I did of my only child when he was a baby. At the height of my Willa Cather infatuation, I stood on the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie as the sun was setting and imagined that I saw a plow against the sun. (I think it was the next day that I bought the Willa Cather button and ashtray.) I thought I had found my terrain in the flat, endless prairies of Nebraska.

A couple of things turned me back to the more familiar terrain of composition. One was something I. Hashimoto said of teaching students about ethical argument. It didn't have anything to do with *ethos* or writing with students so I'm taking his comment entirely out of context, but it helped me put composition into perspective, as reading Hashimoto often does. In discussing textbook authors'

admonitions to students to "do good deeds, argue fairly and be sincere" he wryly suggests that "English teachers ought not take their mission so seriously" (51). I realized that I needed to lighten up and, as my students say, "Get a life."

However, there were some other things that happened to me that have implications for the teaching of freshman composition, and, if you too have become lost or confused on the unfamiliar terrain of today's rhetoric and composition, then I would suggest giving this a try. I won't guarantee this idea because I know there are teachers of composition who 1) won't try it because they think it won't work and would be too much extra work or 2) have tried it already and *know* it was too much work. At any rate, that's usually what happens with these "This is what I did, and this how it worked for me" kind of articles, right?

First, I must make disclaimers. This idea isn't new or original—but then not much in composition and rhetoric ever is. My idea has to do with *ethos*, and idea of *ethos* is very old indeed. But the discussion of *ethos* is still carried on in our professional journals and discussed at our conferences. For example, while reading the reviews in *CCC* last year (I could still read and understand the reviews and "Staffroom Interchange") I was struck by something Andrea Lunsford wrote. In a discussion of Quintilian's *Institutio* as her choice of the one book she would pick if stranded on a desert island, (no, I'm not kidding), she writes that the "heart of education [is] the *ethos* of any classroom" (229). Mike Halloran, an expert on the subject of *ethos*, talks about the various meanings of the word in a number of articles and asserts that "The word *ethos* has both an individual and a collective meaning" (62). In thinking about these two statements by Lunsford and Halloran I was reminded of something that I had learned in school over the years as both a teacher and a student—that the collective *ethos* of the classroom is a result of the interaction between students and teacher. The teacher sets the tone

by the way we structure the curriculum and the way we arrange the furniture in our classrooms, by the clothing we wear at school and the books we select for our courses—by these and the countless other choices we make, the world in which our students gather together is defined. This is why the concept of *ethos* is so important and it is why a composition course that deals only with technical matters of stylistic choice is inadequate. Rhetorical choices define the character of the speaker and of the world. We must understand how that happens, and we must help our students to understand too. (63)

Suddenly, I remembered reading for the first time as a graduate student Halloran's definition of *ethos* in "On the Death of Rhetoric, Classic and Modern": "... *ethos* is the measure of one's willingness to risk one's self and world by a rigorous and open articulation of them in the presence of the other" (628). I also remembered something that Jim Corder says in "The Varieties of Ethical Argument" where he narrows the discussion of *ethos* even further, suggesting that we need to "examine the kind of *ethos* we present to our students" (2). I think in the transition between graduate school and my first "real job" I had forgotten some of these things. In the scramble to attend meetings, teach my classes, adopt textbooks, adapt to the responsibilities of my new position (of which the major one was and still is writing memos), I forgot a lot of what I learned in school. I most definitely forgot how crucial *ethos* is to teaching composition.

Ethos, I admit, had always fascinated me. *Ethos* has always been good to me. The first article I ever published about composition was entitled "The *Ethos* of Squattiness" and, in fact, the most recent article I published about composition was "Risky Business: Malcolm X, Teacher *Ethos* and the Teaching of English." I even wrote my

dissertation on *ethos*. I learned a lot about *ethos* from Halloran, Lunsford, and Zoellner. I learned a lot about *ethos* and writing with your students from Corder. I think maybe I forgot that when I was wandering in the wilderness. I forgot too what he said once in a composition practicum about how students perceive themselves: "Until students see themselves as informers or entertainers, they will never be good writers." I forgot that unless you create an *ethos* in the classroom that will make students want to write for an audience, (you and their classmates) and to want to please that audience, you are doomed.

Last year I remembered the things I had learned from my teachers at school. I did what Corder said he did; I wrote every paper I assigned to my students with them. And after three and half years of wandering away from composition — by using a textbook, by becoming Director, by reading and writing about Willa Cather — I came back.

Now it's true that writing with your students, like the concept of *ethos*, isn't a new idea. Lots of people who write about freshman composition have told instructors to write with their students. One of my teachers as an undergraduate, Robert Zoellner, wrote a landmark article in the October 1969 issue of *College English*, "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Approach to Pedagogy." Zoellner's article was the first time I had ever heard of a teacher actually writing with students. (How come nobody ever talks about the "visceral blurt" anymore?) I even vaguely remember writing with my students when I was a first-year graduate teaching assistant. In preparing to teach my graduate seminar this spring, "Teaching Writing in the Schools," I selected *Inside Out*. The authors, Dan Kirby and Tom Liner, urge secondary school teachers to write with their students too. Everybody agrees it's a very good thing to do, very admirable, except a colleague of mine who says she would never do it because she's "too busy grading papers" and besides she says she "doesn't have to prove anything to them." I'm fairly certain many composition instructors feel the same way. I totally understand and sympathize with their feelings. They may have read Corder's admissions in "What I Learned in School" about his experience with writing with his students. "I learned that to write nine essays in a semester of fourteen weeks... is a task very nearly not doable" (164). I've always thought it interesting that Corder never once says he found the task to be enjoyable or that he ever intends to do it again.

At any rate, my reconversion to composition didn't happen all at once or in a dramatic way. I think it started during the second five-week summer term last year when I was beyond burned out. I was a cinder. I had already taught Seminar in Composition the first five-week term and Mythology, a subject which I knew nothing about. I only taught one class the second five-week term, Freshman English II. I had a small class, pitifully small by most standards. Only nine students. I wept with unabashed joy when I saw them. I immediately took them to the Writing Lab, which seemed a strangely peaceful place at night, showed them how to use the computers, gave them each a blank formatted disk and told them to start writing.

They were baffled at first at what to write, but, eventually, like all people in front of a blank computer screen, they finally began to write — probably just to have something to do. And like all good writers, they eventually became testy when I came to stand over them and read what they were writing. "Dr. Harris, could you like not lean over my shoulder when I'm writing — it like distracts me?"

I didn't write anything with them but I liked them. They liked the computers. We liked each other. It's amazing what a small group of students will do for your morale. You start actually to feel that maybe, just maybe, you're teaching them something. Anyway, I felt I had the *ethos* revved up and popped the clutch. I even did some doughnuts and some wheelies. I looked around and recognized the terrain. I was psyched — not on *logos* but psyched nonetheless.

So last fall semester I decided to push a little further and see if anything else still looked familiar. I abandoned the textbooks. I felt reborn. My students thought I was demented at first and later declared that they knew it for a fact. But I had found my *ethos* and it's the gospel I'm preaching. *Ethos* showed me the way. And I learned this: I can not make the claim that writing with your students will make them excellent writers. It may make them better or it may not. I don't think Corder ever makes this claim nor does anybody else. I believe that it could make them better but mostly they listen to what you write and go try it themselves. Then, at least, they have some idea of how to respond to the assignment. I suppose if you had some sophisticated, talented writers, they might be able to copy your structure and maybe even echo your voice. But that's not the point.

You don't write with them to show them how. You write with them to show them why. You do it to show them something about *ethos*. You do it to show them that the point of writing is to share it with an audience. You do it to show them that you're not afraid to read what you've written so that they won't be afraid either. You write with them so you can say, "I will never make you do anything that I won't do myself." Any good drill sergeant worth his/her salt knows that promise helps morale and motivates people to do their best. And really, that's all you can hope for. That they will do their best.

And you also do it because, gulp, it's fun. They like it. And if you don't, it may be because your assignments aren't really worth writing. Like Corder said, "I was sitting there looking at the assignment I had given to my students when another dark thought came to me: 'I know how to write this... but why in hell would anyone want to?' (165). It's a pretty good bet that if you don't like writing it, your students won't like it either.

I'm pretty sure my students learned something about audience too. They learned that it was rewarding to write something and have people listen and respond with praise and suggestions. They were a good audience for my paper about my grandmother's quilts. They were a good audience for Laura's paper about the Lepanto Terrapin. Derby and Mike's paper about the pictures of his family. They were a good audience for Tammy's paper about Christmas at her grandma and Wendell's paper about his family's reunion.

Now that I'm back in the familiar terrain of composition, realize that I'm back because I started teaching writing again instead of teaching a textbook. I remembered what I learned in school from my teachers and what I learned from my students. *Ethos* is everything. It makes all things new and all things fun. It may not be psyche/lo or post-structural or subtextual, but it sure is fun.

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