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2009

## Teaching General Education Writing: Is There a Place for Literature?

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# Teaching General Education Writing

## Is There a Place for Literature?

*Emily Isaacs*

While there is strong support within the field of composition studies for requiring two writing-intensive general education courses, there is, as others have noted (Lindemann 1993; Richardson 2004; Steinberg 1995), little agreement as to what the second course ought to focus on. Genre research revealing the particular nature of disciplinary writing has persuaded many to lobby for a second semester of writing within students' major area of study (for example, see McLeod et al. 2001). Others argue for a research-intensive course, particularly as first-semester study focuses on developing writing and critical thinking abilities through thematic or rhetorically arranged readings, leaving little time to address research writing (Rutter 1986). Arguably the truly forward thinking have turned to second courses in digital literacy, hypertext, writing for the World Wide Web, or, more broadly, writing with digital media (Yancey 2004a). These options share the recognition that writing, though often housed in English (literature) departments, is not the exclusive or even particular province of English departments and literature faculty. As the discipline of composition and rhetoric has gained in prominence to the point where some institutions have heeded Maxine Hairston's 1985 call for separating writing instruction from English and developing rhetoric, composition, or writing departments that stand apart from English altogether (see Harris 2006b for the most recent iteration of this call), many are asking if there is any good reason to require university students to meet general education writing requirements through writing about literature. In short,

despite recent arguments for the value of literature to teaching writing (see Gary Tate's famous argument of 1993; Elbow 2002; Richardson 2004; and McCrimmon 2006), claims that developing students' abilities to write about literature as a means to more generally develop students' academic writing abilities have largely been discredited by composition scholars, or perhaps just silenced in the face of dominant voices within composition studies who speak against the general value of writing about literature. A typical comment is this by Erwin Steinberg in 1995: "For the immediate present and near future, at least, there will be fewer and fewer advocates for using imaginative literature in composition classrooms. . . . We have entered the age of rhetoric for teachers of composition" (271).

Yet across the country, writing about literature general education courses remains, and advocacy for these courses quietly continues as well. Most recently, Miles McCrimmon (2006: 121), speaking from the vantage point of twenty years in the community college system, goes so far as to argue that "engagement with literary texts, in a learning environment that partakes of the best of composition theory, may be the most cost-efficient way for our students to have the mind-bending experience we associate with the first year of college." Arguments for teaching literature to first-year students, as exemplified by Mark Richardson and Peter Elbow as well as McCrimmon, often speak to the general value of literary study and writing rather than to the specific advantages of literature faculty teaching general education courses in expository writing using imaginative fiction as primary text, which is the argument I will make in the pages that follow. But before furthering my argument, it is useful to briefly discuss Richardson's and Elbow's essays as they speak to some of the ways in which arguments for and against literature get mired down, complicated, and simply lost by our disciplinary allegiances, many of which are emotional, and not really supportable, or by our personal experiences with the larger conflict between composition and literature. Notably arguments for or against literature and composition courses gain their weight and emotion not from any actual debate about the reading matter for first-year composition courses, but from conflicts over everything from what ought to constitute English studies to how to divide limited departmental resources, most particularly around hiring priorities, tenure and promotion, and curricular emphasis.

Mark Richardson and Peter Elbow, both writing in a journal that is aimed at both composition and literature faculty, *College English*, reflect traditional notions about the special, superior quality of literature and literary language. In an essay describing his approach to teaching literature to general

education students, Richardson (2004: 278) refers to imaginative literature as “that richest and most intellectually challenging of human arts.” It’s this kind of absolute declaration that makes many in composition suspicious of those who want to link general education writing instruction with literary study. Arguing for a kind of cultural studies approach to teaching literary interpretation in which students use personal and popular knowledge to enter texts, Richardson’s essay is really an argument for an *approach* to teaching literature and doesn’t at all advance the question suggested: why link literary study and writing? For him, it’s too obvious to argue, and actually, one wonders if, given his very decided point of view about the superiority of imaginative writing, he is in a strong position to make an argument that would be convincing to anyone who did not share this opinion.

Elbow, for his part, is not making an exclusive case for teaching writing about literature over anything else. Echoing Gary Tate, he suggests that first-year writing students would benefit from more work in writing with metaphor, imaginative language, “elegance and irony and indirection” (2002: 540)—all reasonable suggestions. However, there’s nothing in his argument that really says that literature *should* be in a first-year writing course sequence. His focus is instead on what composition studies could learn from literary study and from their literature colleagues; his argument is about *how* we teach, not so much about the content of the course. Elbow, in this essay, is doing what he does very well: he’s looking to make connections, to reach across the composition-literature divide from his position as a composition scholar reasonably well known to have begun his career as a Chaucer scholar. Yet, as becomes clear from Michael Mattison’s (2003) response to Elbow’s article, his efforts to bridge the gap actually, in effect, reveal a history of suspicion and distrust, at least from the composition perspective. In his response to Mattison’s critique of his article, Elbow (2003: 442), in characteristic generous fashion, acknowledges, “Perhaps I’m distorting my picture because of my leftover hurts and resentments about the treatment of composition by literature” in his description of conflicts between literature and composition that he is working to help resolve.

Despite the efforts of Richardson and Elbow, and a few others,<sup>1</sup> outside of forums aimed at broad literature and composition faculty constituencies, the move appears to be away from coursework focused on imaginative literature. As the field of composition studies matures, developing discrete departments and gaining institutional status, it appears that those who are aware of current trends in the field resist any move to add a required writing and literature general education course to their university’s curriculum: “The relation of the

study and teaching of writing to English departments is both accidental and overdetermined — the result not of a necessary belongingness between the two but of a particular historical conjuncture” (Trimbur 1999: 27).

Why then, did I, in 2003, as the director of first-year writing at Montclair State University, aggressively push to locate the university’s new second-semester writing course in a literature course? I imagine how a comp-rhetorician reading our catalog’s announcement of this new course might respond: “Humph! No comp/rhet people here! This program shows no reflection of current thinking in the field. Why must every student write about literature? Why not political science? Anthropology?”

Yet, despite compelling theoretical arguments against placing general education writing instruction in English departments (by Harris, Steinberg, Trimbur, and several of the collected authors in Peggy O’Neill’s volume *A Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and the Future of Composition Studies* [2002]), I believe that many of us who calculate what is possible at our institutions, both in the real world of local campus politics and as a result of trends in English graduate education and English studies as a whole, will come to realize that courses in writing about literature can effectively promote students’ opportunities for intensive and well-supported writing experiences. In designing and implementing this course, I think Montclair State University has best responded to Harris’s (2006a: 536) recent plea to move away from prolonged efforts at “building composition and fixing English” and has, in fact, joined him in asking “not where we belong but what we can do now — in English, or in writing, or outside of both — to offer more students the sort of writing courses they deserve.” Offering good writing courses is the main goal, of course, yet with our histories of conflicts, I wonder if composition and literature faculty are doing as much as they could to collaborate on achieving this goal.

In well-structured courses in writing about literature, students can develop their abilities to marshal evidence in support of general claims, to analyze intellectually challenging ideas, and to write unified and cogent sentences, paragraphs, and full compositions through the pedagogies of process-writing instruction that emphasize revision through writing heuristics and feedback from peers and instructors. If our goal is to provide multiple opportunities for process-writing instruction, composition faculty need to put aside personal, professional, and even theoretical arguments against literary studies and English departments and consider — as a practical measure — who at our universities is actually in the best position to teach writing *well*, and which constituencies have the power and influence to change major, expensive university policies.

My argument is directed primarily toward the many colleges and universities that are similar to mine in student body and status. Montclair State University is a comprehensive university with 17,000 students who are representative of the general population in the state of New Jersey. The English department, the fifth largest in the university, is staffed by faculty members who see themselves either as teachers *and* scholars or as primarily teachers and secondarily scholars. With a teaching load of 3/3 and limited opportunity for research, tenure-line faculty develop many pedagogical and scholarly interests, often teaching and writing in two or even three specialties. All tenure-line English faculty have always taught what was until recently titled “Freshman Composition” at least every few years; fifteen years ago faculty taught first-year general education courses every semester. Over the last fifteen years every job description for a tenure-track line, regardless of specialty, has included the expectation to teach what we now call “first-year writing courses,” and department chairs and interview committees throughout this period have made sure that finalists demonstrate experience in or promise for teaching these courses. But because the necessary number of sections far exceeds the number of tenure-line faculty, the majority of our first-year writing courses are taught by faculty off the tenure track: full-time instructors, half-time instructors or assistant professors, and adjuncts. The majority of these teachers have strong background and interest in literary studies.<sup>2</sup> All of these individuals, hired and supervised primarily by the director of first-year writing, are selected on the basis of their experience, training, and abilities in teaching revision-based expository writing.

Although certainly the situation differs at research universities and some highly selective liberal arts colleges, I believe that Montclair State’s English department mirrors those in most comprehensive universities. At research universities and some highly selective colleges, literature-line faculty may never teach writing, but at most colleges and universities all literature faculty teach first-year writing.<sup>3</sup> Yet when attending the Conference on College Composition and Communication, for example, because of the dominance of research university participants (faculty and graduate students), attendees might easily get the impression that only composition faculty and graduate students teach composition and that literature faculty have entirely washed their hands, quite happily, of this pedagogical work. What do they know about the perspective of McCrimmon (2006: 118), who writes, “For twenty years I have bemusedly observed the internecine conflicts in the journals between the forces of literature and composition, all the while continuing to teach both in the same course”? For graduate students in doctoral

programs — most obviously for future literature and composition faculty — it is important for scholarly conversations to include greater representation from literature faculty who teach composition and from composition faculty who welcome literature colleagues, many of whom are situated in teaching universities and colleges, public and private, large and small.

Not only are English literature faculty at Montclair State and similar schools teaching writing, but they are also in an increasingly good position to teach writing well. In the last two decades, graduate programs in English have changed. Today, according to the *Doctoral Consortium in Rhetoric and Composition* (Graduate Program 2007), at least seventy-one doctoral programs exist in the field, two-thirds of which are housed in English departments, and they are changing the graduate school experiences of literature graduate students. Because of large doctoral-granting institutions' enormous undergraduate demand for first-year writing sections, most English literature graduate students teach first-year writing, and therefore participate in training programs, take courses in the discipline, and are part of strong, supportive university writing programs. While a few elite doctoral institutions still choose not to provide graduate students with training in teaching composition, most doctoral programs in English have developed strong training and support programs in teaching composition for their literature graduate students, partly in recognition of the demand for these skills in the job market, and partly because directors of writing programs require this training and support.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, today those literature graduate students who are not in or bound for employment in elite universities and colleges expect to teach writing and have therefore acquired both training and experience in the pedagogies of writing. Of the eight untenured-line English faculty currently at Montclair State, all but two have received at least some training in composition as part of their graduate education, and one of the “untrained” two actually sought support outside his (elite) university, becoming a university writing center tutor at another university. The assumption that newly minted literature PhDs, MFAs, and MAs are unfamiliar with current theories and practices of teaching writing is simply no longer accurate. Today literature graduate students have benefited from the institutionalization of composition, as have the universities that have hired them. Finally, prospective graduate students of English may believe that good writing skills are inseparable from the study of literature and are therefore taking responsibility for inculcating or reinforcing those skills in their students even while insuring that they know how to interpret literary texts.

### **What We Can Do Now**

Because I believe the institutional conditions at Montclair State reflect those at many institutions, and because in our story lies a plan that other English departments with general education courses in introduction to literature may find useful, I will review how Montclair State University came to adopt a second general education course in writing about literature. Since at least the late 1960s, Montclair State's general education requirement in literacy had been met by a two-semester sequence in composition and literature. However, by 1975, faculty in the department had taken note of developments in the field of writing and changed the first required course to focus more explicitly on teaching the craft of writing expository prose and the research paper (Adams 2006: 22). With the name change from Composition and Literature I to Freshman Composition came license and support for reading and writing about nonfiction essays. At the same time, the department redefined the second course, Composition and Literature II, as Introduction to Literature, a course that emphasized attention to the genres and aesthetic appreciation but required no attention to writing. It was a calculated trade: to enable strong writing instruction in at least one course, freshman composition was lowered to a manageable enrollment cap of twenty (from twenty-eight), and introduction to literature was born, with a class size raised to thirty-two (from twenty-eight). As one colleague from those times notes, "We wanted lower caps to allow at least one real comp. course and because some older faculty were teaching both courses as lit courses, with not enough writing or with only lit. analysis" (Nash 2005: pers. com.). Thus we see the evolution at Montclair State following recommended "best practice" in teaching writing, but doing so slowly and imperfectly, as is often the case when theory moves to practice in the very real world of academic exigencies. In 1975, one manageable, focused course in writing was an important step in providing strong writing instruction and support for undergraduate students.

A quarter of a century later, in 2001, the president of Montclair State University called upon us to reform the general education requirements, a call we all hear every decade or so as national philosophies and trends in general education change. These initiatives are often opportunities for emerging pedagogies, as was the case at Montclair State. A cross-curricular university committee compiled surveys of faculty, staff, and students, and what resulted was, among other things, a plea for more writing instruction. The public report that was distributed across campus included the rather eloquent and memorable line, "Writing! Writing! Writing!" (General Education Program



1998: 4), a clarion call for those of us interested in developing additional writing courses.

At Montclair State, the first colleague to recognize the opportunity was an eighteenth-century British literature scholar and former chair of English, James F. Nash. A veteran of earlier struggles for greater attention to writing and writing instruction, Jim argued that this was our chance to get a second semester of composition for all university students in a course with a student capacity appropriate for effective writing instruction. The First Year Writing Committee drafted a comprehensive proposal for College Writing II: Writing and Literary Study (2002), a course capped at twenty students that requires six thousand words of formal, revised expository prose.<sup>5</sup> Crucial support was found elsewhere in the department: the then chair, a twentieth-century American literature specialist, had long been committed to a curriculum emphasizing writing instruction, as were many department colleagues, including those with specialties in film, black U.S. writers, Victorian literature, and medieval literature, among others who were and are invested in teaching writing and experienced enough in the practice to have discovered effective process writing methodologies of revision, peer review, and instructor feedback on drafts. Thus together we were able to argue, with force and persistence, for a composition and literature class appropriately configured — with a focus on writing and with appropriate class size — for strong writing instruction. My colleagues were not “compromised” by the fact that they are primarily teachers and scholars of literature. Rather, with strong support from both tenure-track and first-year writing nontenure-track faculty, we developed a second semester of the first-year writing program that allows individual faculty to teach writing in the context of a discipline they know well and value highly.

### **Can Literature Faculty Teach Literature *and* Writing?**

Critics of general education courses in writing and literature argue that literature faculty cannot be persuaded to teach writing when they have a syllabus full of literary works that they — and ideally their students — are enjoying and eager to discuss. John Schilb (2002: 171) makes the point that since the presence of literature in a writing course allows English literature faculty “to draw upon the kinds of texts they know best,” they will be tempted to ignore writing “in favor of explicating the literary work at hand.” Similarly, Barry Maid (2006: 97) asserts that “the first-year writing required course becomes not a writing course but an excuse for English faculty to teach literature in disguise.” As Christine Farris and Judith Anderson (2007: 2) note, “There

are those for whom the inclusion of literature in composition courses or programs would signify the loss of political ground,” most significantly, “the intellectual place of composition.”

In an echo of what I hear repeatedly from composition colleagues (also recounted in many of the essays in the collections of Anderson and Farris and Bergmann and Baker), a member of the WPA Listserv opines directly on the folly of permitting literature faculty to teach writing about literature: “If you allow teachers to include the subject that they like and know most about in a course about a subject they don’t like and know almost nothing about, guess which one will become the focus of the course” (McLeary 2005). This opinion was by no means a lone one. In fact, on the WPA Listserv the topic of general education writing and literature courses generates such overwhelming objections to literature that one Listserv member, in a previous such go-around on the danger of literature in writing classes, was provoked to write, “I’d like to ask folks who raise and support these arguments [for writing about literature] to continue to speak up on this thread. I know that the tide goes against writing/lit courses for FYC [first-year composition], and I’ve heard lots of the reasons against it, but I’m eager to hear some of the proponents of lit-based writing courses. . . . I hope the strong tide doesn’t squelch those voices” (Bouman 1999). Bouman’s call was unheeded and no one spoke again (on that thread) for writing and literature courses.

In these particularly impassioned articulations from the Listserv and in the more measured quotes from articles are notes of cynicism for which I feel sympathy, but also skepticism. Is it accurate to assume that most literature faculty are both hostile and ignorant about the teaching of writing? Just as important, do composition faculty suspect that their colleagues will simply disregard course intent in favor of their own desires? I think it *is* unfair to assume that the literature specialist — particularly the one who has had training and experience with teaching writing, as I’ve argued is the case for most of those who have graduated in the last fifteen years — is going to abandon the business of teaching writing simply because the course is designated writing *and* literature. I say this both because of my work with senior colleagues in literature who never received graduate school training in teaching writing but who sought the knowledge on their own because they were dedicated teachers and understood the need for writing instruction and also from my experience working with more recent graduates. All of these graduates from doctoral, MFA, and MA programs are familiar with composition as a discipline; most have had training and experience in graduate school, from rudimentary to extensive, with contemporary theories and practices of teaching writing.

Finally, the emergence of new scholarship on negotiating writing and literature in first-year writing courses, as well as many first-year writing textbooks, written by composition, literature, or composition/literature hybrid scholars, suggests that there is still an audience of English faculty interested in general education writing about literature coursework.<sup>6</sup> What I have found is that most literature faculty in my department are able to balance the teaching of writing with the teaching of literature when the course description makes this dual focus explicit, and when they are given some support and guidance for combining the teaching of writing with the study of literature.

Nevertheless, mindful of what we might call the allure of literature, my colleagues and I at Montclair State have determined that, as with the introduction of any new course, College Writing II had to be accompanied by thorough and ongoing support for successful implementation. I worked with a relatively large committee of eight to develop sample syllabi, detailed units, and secondary reading lists. The course is further supported by regular workshops, a Listserv, an extensive Web site, and for the new faculty, a paid orientation in teaching writing that includes one full day on teaching the writing and literature course. The course proposal for College Writing II: Writing and Literary Study, developed in committee for six months, did not simply serve as a means to get the course approved through various committees. Rather, it is the blueprint that we refer to regularly to teach ourselves and our colleagues how to approach the course. Notably, the course description foregrounds writing and the writing process: “The second semester of the intensive first-year writing sequence. Emphasis on the writing process continues as students study works of fiction, poetry, and drama in order to improve their writing and their understanding and appreciation of complex literary texts. Required: approximately 6000 words of formal writing, including at least one documented essay” (“Montclair State University Course Catalog, 2006–2008”: 136).

Course catalog descriptions are important—not for senior faculty who have taught the course many times, but for students and new faculty, particularly part-time and nontenure-track faculty who teach the majority of first-year writing courses at most of our institutions and are able to be guided and supervised in ways that tenure-line faculty are not. In addition to the extensive guidelines, workshops, and support materials that are made available to all teaching faculty, Montclair State maintains additional control of the content and instructional methods of the course for nontenure-line faculty, through required workshops, through the review and approval of book selections and syllabi, and through student evaluations and class observa-

tion reports. When a faculty member — tenureline or not — first takes on this course, I make myself available for consultation, sharing teaching documents, strategies, and assignments. I would argue that maintaining coherence and consistency in any course that is taught by well over sixty people in one hundred and twenty-odd sections over the course of a year will always require regular support, attention, and vigilance. It is true that this kind of attention can be unwelcome initially in English departments and in the humanities more generally, where historically faculty have been encouraged to design courses around our own interests and predilections, a method that works well with seminars but not so well with required courses. But by treading carefully, and by honoring and celebrating creative and original ways to meet course objectives (for example, faculty have autonomy in choosing literary texts), our course in writing about literature is generally a popular choice for faculty — both those who see themselves as “literature people” and those whose first identification is with composition, creative writing, education, or another field.

#### **Why Still Such Discord? Scholars Have Feelings — and Long Memories — Too**

Michael Mattison (2003), writing in response to Peter Elbow’s essay “The Cultures of Literature and Composition” (2002), claims that Elbow has, inadvertently, widened the chasm between composition and literature. Elbow, I think, intended the opposite; in it he actually advocates for more attention by composition teachers to literature and the pedagogies of literature faculty. Identifying himself as a graduate student in literature at the University of Massachusetts, where Elbow then taught, Mattison (2003: 439) makes the following argument:

My main worry is that Peter has further entrenched us in the camps of composition and literature, resorting to rhetoric too reminiscent of that of Washington regarding the war on terror (with the “us” being composition folks). “We are for teaching, for learning, for active classes, and for reading ‘what’s on [students’] minds.’ Literature folks (the others) are for scholarship, for lecture, for analysis over creativity, and ‘for reading the literary text.’” [537]. Though Peter is trying to escape “either-or thinking” when talking about certain details [542], he firmly sets up literature and composition as two competing fields.

What Mattison is suggesting is that we have mixed many arguments into one and that literature and composition faculty cannot easily be sorted out along disciplinary lines. There is one issue about appropriate pedagogy (student-

versus teacher-centered), another about appropriate content (essay versus imaginative writing), and yet another about focus of writing (self-reflective versus externally focused). These are entirely different arguments that ought to be kept separate. Today, student-centered pedagogies are not the exclusive province of composition faculty any more than writing about ideas outside of the self are the exclusive province of literature faculty.

In rereading Elbow's article, I see Mattison's point of view or, rather, how their two perspectives could be so different, inasmuch as they began their careers some thirty-five years apart and had very different formative graduate school experiences (Elbow at Brandeis and Mattison at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where, according to Elbow [2003: 442], "relations between literature and composition" were "warmer, less vexed—and more conducive to merging—than at most other departments" he had observed). Mattison argues that his generation of future literature faculty do *not* see great disciplinary difference between literature and composition, either in how they write and think about writing or in their preferred methodologies for strong instruction. This result, he suggests, springs at least in part from the influence that composition studies has had on pedagogical practices of literature faculty. He (2003: 441) concludes: "We are the new faces of English departments, and if we are allowed to share our experiences then perhaps we will be able to 'get past the deep legacy of anger, hurt, and guilt' [Elbow 2002: 533] shared by composition and literature." On some level, Mattison is asking senior colleagues in the field to move on. Clearly, pioneering composition scholars created a new discipline and, within English departments, specialization, in part through difficult negotiations with members of established specialties within English. The pioneering composition faculty (and the literature colleagues who sponsored and supported this work) have put Mattison's and my generation in a position to work together, lit and comp, to collaboratively develop programs and curricula that better serve students and us all.

The result of the emergence of composition as a field of study is greater than simply offering scholars a new area of specialization. Contrary to original expectations, the rise of composition has not meant first-year writing courses are mostly taught by composition specialists (Bartholomae 2000: 1953). Rather, the specialization has had great impact on the whole of English studies: creating graduate coursework in composition required of literature students teaching composition, and creating writing programs and funding for program administrators who are able to provide the kind of faculty sup-

port, development, and oversight outlined previously. The specialization, more than anything else, has enabled the development and dissemination of expertise in teaching writing to an increasingly large population of future and current college faculty. Harris (2006b: 166) argues that “what really counts is our ability to recruit good teachers of writing and to support their work.” Part of that recruitment may require compromise through offering opportunities for faculty in literature to do good work in teaching writing while also introducing students to the literary texts and interpretive frames that excite their passions.

Still, reading through the scholarship on the composition/literature divide, my assertions about the possibilities of compromise and collaboration may seem weak, even simple minded. It is important, however, to question the vantage point that those who assert the existence of this great divide between literature and composition are coming from. Recall their names and institutions: James Berlin (Purdue), Peter Elbow (University of Massachusetts at Amherst), Maxine Hairston (University of Texas at Austin), Joseph Harris (University of Pittsburgh/Duke), Erika Lindemann (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), John Schilb (Indiana University), Robert Scholes (Brown), Erwin Steinberg (Carnegie Mellon), and Gary Tate (Texas Christian University). Also, less easily, consider from what generation they come; many were establishing their careers just as composition studies was establishing itself as a discipline (the most junior I have mentioned, Joe Harris, completed his doctorate in 1986). In short, those who speak most urgently to the divide are more often from the generation and context of Peter Elbow than of Michael Mattison; more often from research universities than the nonelite, small and midsize institutions that actually educate most of the country’s undergraduates; and more likely tenure-track faculty than adjunct or part-time faculty. Literature faculty at these institutions, mine included, often (but not always) prefer teaching literature to teaching composition. However, compared to what graduate school led me to expect about literature faculty when literature faculty’s hostile and contemptuous attitudes toward composition were described at composition conferences (and observed, to some extent, in my doctoral program in English), I encounter very little disrespect for my field when at my home institution. Further, and perhaps most important, I observe great respect for the importance of teaching expository writing to undergraduate students. This discord is puzzling and requires some attention by those who are preparing future composition scholars: do we exist in two different worlds?

### Literature as Cultural Text

Perhaps objections to writing about literature are also rooted in notions of literary instruction that, one had hoped, with the advent of poststructuralism and the proliferation of scholarship on literary text as cultural artifact, had been abandoned, or at least called into serious question. Surely the study of literature for “glorification,” or Romantic ideals of “the spiritual powers of literature” (Scholes 1991: 2), or aesthetic appreciation à la New Criticism have been in large part set aside, or at least coaxed to one side, asked to at least share the stage with study of a literary text in cultural context: “plac[ing] or situat[ing it], to understand it from the inside, sympathetically, and to step away from it and see it from the outside, critically. It means being able to see a text for what it is and to ask also how it connects — or fails to connect — to the life and times of the reader” (Scholes 1998: 130–31). I want to ask what literature, or rather what approach to the study of literature, is assumed when critics reject it as too narrow to require in a general education writing course.

Perhaps the best way to address this question is to assert a positive: in courses in writing about literature composition faculty should ally themselves with those literary scholars who have embraced the study of literature for social, cultural, and political inquiry. To quote Scholes again: “The political enters the study of English primarily through questions of representation: who is represented, who does the representing, who is object, who is subject — and how do these representations connect to the values of groups, communities, classes, tribes, sects, and nations?” (153). These questions formulated around representation, raised by thoughtful, attentive reading, well complement the intellectual work that students at Montclair State embark on in their first course of first-year writing, College Writing I: Intellectual Prose, in which students follow curricula developed by cultural studies scholars.<sup>7</sup> When a general education course in writing about literature is designed to complement and continue intellectual work begun in an expository writing course rooted in cultural studies, there is possibility for continuation of the intellectual work that is advocated by cultural studies scholars such as John Clifford (1991) and Robert Scholes (1991, 1998). At the University of South Carolina at Lancaster, Lori Robison and Eric Wolfe (2007: 201) developed their general education composition and literature course around the question, “What does it mean to read literary texts as working ideologically in the culture in which they were produced?” In all general-education writing courses — those that include intellectual prose or imaginative fiction — students can be asked to engage in ideological and cultural analyses, in short,

reading and writing about texts *as* texts that are embedded in the rich context of writers' and readers' cultural, political, and historical experiences.

At Montclair State, College Writing II: Writing and Literary Study was conceived against its predecessor, Introduction to Literature, to ensure focus on teaching writing and simultaneously on the study of literature as cultural text. This thinking was in keeping with a change that occurred in 1994, when the department replaced a traditional, canon-based major with one that, as one of its principal authors writes, takes “a modestly postmodernist direction — one that recognized diversity and complexity and acknowledged publicly that all interpretation is constructed and that any and all versions of a set of major requirements are value-laden” (Schwartz 2003: 16). In keeping with this aim, our new College Writing II was designed to foreground questions about the function, reception, and experience of literature in various contexts. For example, one goal of the course is that students should understand “the roles of the reader and the text in the literary experience, and of the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts that bear upon the production and reception of literary texts” (“Proposal” 2002: 1). In practice, though students write some literary interpretive essays, they also write argumentative and exploratory essays on the function of literature; in this way, students read literary texts in much the same way as nonliterary texts are read and written about in our first course, College Writing I.

### **Five Years Later: A Progress Report**

College Writing II: Writing and Literary Study, first taught in spring 2003, has been well received by students (as judged by student evaluations) and is fairly popular among all faculty. Students enter the course imagining a standard high-school class in which a teacher will expect students to chase symbols and are generally pleased instead to find themselves invited to use tools of interpretation to make meaning of literary texts. For students to become author-interpreters, true agents rather than simple transmitters, in the seemingly familiar world of literature, is an important step in the journey on which, at Montclair State, the first-year writing sequence aims to take students.

Students are not the only cohort served by this design. First-year writing faculty enjoy having two different courses to teach over a year, and many report being inspired by the opportunity to continue the cultural analysis work begun in College Writing I through more focused analysis of representation found in literary texts. The many part-time faculty who have received



graduate education in literature in the last fifteen years are happy to find in our course the opportunity to introduce and discuss literature through the cultural and theoretical lenses that they developed in their own graduate coursework. Classroom teaching observation reports of these faculty suggest that both the teaching and supervising faculties attend as closely to writing instruction in this course as they do for College Writing I, generally using the same methods for teaching writing — invention heuristics, drafting, peer review, and teacher feedback.

While surely there are some among the faculty who are not excited about the course — as would be the case with any course — broadly there is strong support for it and particular enthusiasm for the opportunities to work with first-year students on writing about literature; they are also happy to be working with a class of nineteen students rather than the typical literature class size of twenty-five to thirty-five. In the five years since the course has been required, tenure-line faculty choose to teach it with the same frequency with which they once taught the old Introduction to Literature. Tenure-line faculty attend some workshops and more frequently talk with me about what they are doing, often reporting their enjoyment of the course's structure and of the advantages of having students in a writing course who already know something about invention, peer review, and revision, as well as basic structures of academic writing and argument.

In the end I think we have a strong course in writing about literature and that my literature colleagues do a good job extending students' abilities to write cogent and often thoughtful arguments, analyze texts closely and contextually, and think more critically about the texts they compose, consume, and are constructed by. My Listserv colleague's concern that literature faculty will end up only attending to the literature is one that can never be entirely satisfied. But from my work with other faculty who are expected to develop discipline-anchored writing courses, I have found that the problem of faculty neglecting writing is even greater when, for example, a reluctant geologist teaches her section of writing-intensive geology. The geologist is likely to be even further away from the influence and persuasion of the university's composition faculty and from the field of composition more broadly understood. This is not to say that we are not interested in developing our efforts in writing across the curriculum. In fact, we are working in various ways toward stronger writing experiences in the disciplines. But it needn't be an either/or proposition. In 2008, forty-two years after the Dartmouth Conference on the Teaching and Learning of English of 1966 arguably jump-started the field, composition studies is a solid presence in English departments — not only

in numbers of specialists, but also through the spread of our research and theorizing about teaching writing. At my university I am as likely to hear a literature colleague preach the value of drafting and revision today—in or out of a specifically labeled writing course—as I am to hear it from my composition colleagues. Perhaps today, at least at universities like Montclair State, the time has come for composition faculty to have confidence that the central premises of teaching writing through teaching revision, with instructor and peer feedback, will be attended to regardless of the texts students read.

### **Recognizing Institutional Differences: A Call to the Field**

First and foremost, this narrative illustrates that at each institution we need to measure progress in the goal of increasing our students' experiences and facilities with writing against our own histories, contexts, and communities of colleagues. At Montclair State, while it may appear that we stepped back a few decades in adopting a writing-about-literature general education course, in fact we intensified and elongated our first-year students' writing experience. Some might argue that the call for “writing, writing, writing” from Montclair State's general education report was just the point at which we should have developed a program for a strong writing-across-the-curriculum requirement; we might have “imagine[d] composition not as a new discipline, but as a kind of intellectual work that takes place *outside* the conventional academic disciplines, that resists the allure of both English and of becoming a separate field of its own” (Harris 2006b: 155–56). However, Joe Harris quite compellingly argues not so much for the Duke model of first-year writing in the disciplines (which he developed and recognizes as not always reproducible), but for composition to take on the job of teaching faculty how to teach writing with greater success, a job that composition faculty have been working at with their literature colleagues and graduate students for a number of decades.

At Montclair State, despite a history of effort toward developing meaningful writing-across-the-curriculum programs, centers, and policies—still ongoing—to date the work of achieving a cross-disciplinary team of influential faculty able to develop a strong program for teaching a second course in writing has not been as successful as we intend it to be. To wait for the moment when this would be achievable would be to miss the opportunity that the call for “writing, writing, writing” presented. What is more, locating the second semester of writing in the English department makes sense at institutions with strong English departments composed of academics who consider teaching to be important work, rather than as the work that is required to sustain the more important work of scholarship. As Doug Hesse (2002: 41–42),

a long-time writing program administrator (WPA), notes, “WPAs simply must be politicians. . . . They need action by individuals with the official power.” Politician WPAs need to listen less intently to current trends in the field—appealing and sensible as they are—and instead examine our own institutional context and, following Hesse, recognize where those with power are located, and where their interests lie.

Commanding the respect and resources required to support campus-wide programs for teaching writing requires strong, ongoing, institutional support. As many historians of the discipline of English have noted (e.g., Berlin 1996, Eagleton 1996, and Scholes 1998), English departmental power within universities is well known and real. For many composition faculty, the placement of powerful allies in the English department and not in the disciplines more broadly makes literature the best focus for a second general education course on writing instruction. English faculty power and clout is not to be underestimated, hence the reluctance most composition and rhetoric faculty have shown to establish independent writing programs, despite the great appeal of doing so. Timothy Doherty (2006: 38), a composition scholar who survived the split of composition from an English department only by leaving the university altogether, notes that “when composition splits from English, independence may prove ambiguous and, for the unprepared, turbulent and precarious.” When writing programs or courses are unallied, they can thrive if powerful individuals at the top are able to maintain close allegiances with key decision makers in the university (as discussed in Peggy O’Neill’s *A Field of Dreams* [2002]), but without these stakeholders’ support, they run the risk of marginalization and irrelevancy. Linda Bergmann in the introduction to *Composition and/or Literature* (2006: 3), writes that “if composition programs are situated in English departments (as compared to independent writing programs), those departments need to initiate and sustain ongoing, productive discussions and collaborations between the fields of literature and composition, rather than simply serving as sites for exerting disciplinary power.” However uneasy the relationship between literature and composition faculty may be at some institutions, for many of us, recognizing the power, support, and shared interests in literacy education that can be found within an English department makes it possible to actually build and sustain alliances between composition and literature faculty through such courses as College Writing II: Writing and Literary Study.

Finally, and perhaps most important, I want to underscore my point that at colleges and universities whose English faculty are hired with the expectation that they *will* teach first-year writing, students are best served

by a second course in writing about literature, because out of all faculties in the university (excepting composition faculty), overall, the best prepared for the job of teaching writing are literature faculty. While in theory some might argue that the study of literature has no more to do with teaching writing than the study of history, in practice it is graduate programs in literature, not in history, philosophy, or finance, that are providing their students with training and experience in the teaching of writing. For years composition and rhetoric faculty have been making inroads in English departments, arguing for the importance of pedagogy in general, and specifically for the notion that teaching writing is not an instinctive task but one that requires training. Despite mixed feelings on both sides, the realities of doctoral and MA-granting institutions' need for writing programs to fund graduate students and of writing programs' need for staff to teach writing have led to significant reform in English graduate student training in composition. In effect, composition faculty have said to their literature colleagues: if you want your students funded, they're going to have to be trained and supported on our terms. Ideally and often these terms include a graduate course in teaching writing, a training orientation, as well as ongoing support and supervision through targeted workshops and regular evaluation.

Among major composition and writing program association venues (the WPA Listserv and the Conference on College Composition and Communication, for example), it is easy to theorize about ideal curricula and program change, all the while forgetting one's own university's and department's particular strengths and weaknesses. This theorizing is important—it allows us to imagine possibilities without the constant constraints of circumstance. Still, what is possible at elite and research colleges and universities may not be readily applicable to the institutions at which most faculty work. The current interest in removing writing almost completely from English departments is arguably persuasive. However, most universities, like Montclair State, have histories of very strong English departments with faculty who are increasingly well trained to teach expository writing and have few or no resources for the enormous investment required to develop a standalone writing program, or even a truly successful WAC program. For this reason, among others, it is useful and logical to revisit the value of English faculty teaching writing. Perhaps it is also time for us to consider some of the limitations of the points of view expressed by leaders in the field, like Peter Elbow and Joe Harris, for example, who have spent most or all of their careers at doctoral-granting institutions.

Elbow has been in the English department at the University of Mas-

sachusetts at Amherst, and Harris is director of an independent writing program of noncomposition specialists at Duke (and formerly was in the English department at the University of Pittsburgh). Typically, we see these authors writing forthrightly about the privileges of their institutions and positions, but I am not sure they adequately consider the special and perhaps extraordinary *burdens* that they carry as composition faculty teaching at these institutions. At these research universities, as is typically the case, English literature faculty are not vetted for their interest or preparedness for teaching expository writing, and once hired, they are not required or encouraged to do so. The kinds of conversations that occur about teaching writing, and literature faculty's interest in doing so, are necessarily very different when the only parties who are personally invested in the coursework are composition scholars. In contrast, at institutions where all faculty in English teach expository writing, considering the perspectives and interests of *all* teaching faculty — most of whom are trained in literature — is both respectful and practical. In the end, I am left wondering how the perspectives and positions of those composition scholars who have spoken most in this debate might be different if their careers had allowed them more opportunity to work with literature faculty who see teaching expository writing as part of their work as English faculty.

Arguments based on one's own experiences and observations are necessarily influenced by institutional placement, but it is time that we observe that in fact most of the arguments about divorcing English and giving up on collaborating with literature faculty on first-year writing courses are made by individuals at research institutions. One can easily see how this would be the case — these individuals are at research institutions precisely because they are accomplished scholars — but we readers, the majority of whom work outside these institutions, have to recognize the collective narrowing of possibilities that this phenomena creates. With this recognition comes responsibility as well: to reflect on our experiences and to theorize about other collaborations that might not only strengthen ties between composition and literature but also enable English studies to reclaim literacy — increasingly claimed by departments and schools of education — as our primary and essential contribution to a university education.

## Notes

I thank my colleague Naomi Liebler, a Shakespearian scholar and teacher who never thought of herself as *not* teaching writing because she taught literature, for responding to two drafts in ways that helped me develop my ideas *and* my prose. Additionally, I thank Paul Butler and blind reviewers for suggestions on various drafts of this article.

1. For new arguments for writing about literature courses, see several of the articles in Judith Anderson and Christine Farris's *Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction* (2007), in particular the chapter by Lori Robison and Eric A. Wolfe in which the authors suggest cultural studies and a rhetorical approach as embracing frameworks for uniting the study of composition and literature. See also Edith Baker's chapter, "Composing English 102: Reframing Students' Lives through Literature," in *Composition and/or Literature* (Bergmann and Baker 2006: 187), which concludes with the suggestion for the "circular relationship of literature and composition" and the potential for such general education writing and literature courses providing disciplinary direction and mission for English departments.
2. Of these nontenure-track faculty, 15 percent have their doctorates (mostly in literature), 20 percent have MFA degrees, 30 percent have English MAs, specialized most typically but not always in literature, 20 percent have degrees in English education, composition, or a related field, and the remaining 15 percent have degrees in various fields, from theater to law to American studies to linguistics. While almost all of our faculty have studied literature significantly, it is interesting to note that about half of our faculty claim some form of writing or education as their primary graduate field of study.
3. In an MLA survey from 1999, David Laurence (2001) reported that just 7.4 percent of doctoral-granting university first-year writing courses were taught by tenure-track faculty, compared with 20 percent of the sections at master's-granting universities, and 42.2 percent of sections at BA-granting universities.
4. MA and MFA programs, from which, at Montclair State at least, many first-year writing faculty come, have similarly been influenced by the institutionalization of composition studies. (As of a 2005 survey by Brown et al., fifty-four MA programs in composition/rhetoric were in existence.) While most of our faculty who hold MA degrees focused their studies in literature, it is no longer difficult to hire only faculty who have had coursework and/or training in comp/rhetoric.
5. Freshman Composition was changed to College Writing I: Intellectual Prose and also updated in ways that moved it away from expressivist methodologies and toward an approach that Farris and Anderson (2007: 3), drawing on Kent, describe as postprocess theory that "assumes that writing is a situated, public activity requiring interpretive interaction with others."
6. For new scholarship, see Tokarczyk and Papoulis 2003; Yancey 2004b; Bergmann and Baker 2006; and Anderson and Farris 2007. For fairly new textbooks that advocate writing about literature, see Meyer 2001; Lynn 2004; Madden 2003; and Schilb and Clifford 2006.
7. Cultural studies scholars whose texts are used at Montclair State include Hirschberg and Hirschberg (2002); McCormick (2002); George and Trimbur (2006); and Maasik and Solomon (2006).

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