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In the Beginning Is the Word: Leading from the Front of the Classroom By Rethinking the Comp Model

— Bill Mesce, Jr. and Walter Cummins

The other adjunct sitting with me in the adjuncts' bullpen was working on the same problem as I. This was my first semester at this particular county college, and, while he was a veteran of some years, this was his first time teaching a remedial composition class, as I was. We were both running into the same wall. For final examinations, our students were required to write an in-class response to a pre-chosen essay. The problem was we could not find an essay for them to read. *Correction*: we couldn't find one they *could* read.

"Every time I think I've found one," he said to me, "I look it over and go, Nah, they're not going to get it."

I was in the same boat. About 20% of my students had been through rehab (some more than once), a few – young as they were – had children (some more than one), one had had run-ins with child services, a number were from dysfunctional homes, a few were dealing with ESL issues, one or two had only attained their high school diplomas through GED



programs, and the overwhelming majority couldn't name the last book they had read willingly. I had a 19-year-old student who wrote out 13 and 15 as "thirteenth" and "fifteenth," and most couldn't understand an article or editorial from the state newspaper (keeping in mind, most newspapers are written at the 6th - 8th grade reading level). Not only was the writing in the paper beyond them, but they were so uninformed that they had no points of reference with the major stories in the daily paper – international, national, even local items – which made the news even more incomprehensible to them. Using college-level essay collections like Penguin's *Fifty Great Essays* with pieces by Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Joan Didion, Thoreau, Orwell – all names alien to them – were out of the question.

From the venting I regularly hear from my colleagues in the adjunct bullpens at the various colleges where I teach, it would seem I'm not the only one so frustrated, nor, evidently, are those frustrations confined to remedial courses. While the problems I faced with that remedial class were as daunting as I've ever had to deal with in my seven years of adjunct teaching, I've seen them manifest in other schools as well, from community colleges to state and private universities – schools serving primarily low-income, minority students to

campuses in nearly all-white, well-to-do suburbs. The only difference is degree, and by degree I don't mean "mild" to "tragic," I mean "tragic" to "disturbing." Examples:

- During the 2014 Scottish vote for independence, I asked my students what countries comprised the United Kingdom. Among the guesses: "Spain" and "Europe."
- There was the student who thought "Earth" was a continent, and the Public Administration major who couldn't name our own high-profile governor.
- During a regular class exercise, I read from the major news stories of the day and asked students to find the relevant locales on a projection of blank maps of the U.S. and the world. Several students couldn't find Afghanistan where our country had been fighting since 2001, Others couldn't find our neighboring states of Pennsylvania and New York. Regarding a story concerning Congressional action, a student revealed his lack of knowledge of the existence of both a Washington state and a Washington D.C. And even following three prompts (i.e., "Where they make the country's laws," "The nation's capital," and "Where the president lives"), the student continued to point to Washington state.

I can't help but conclude that the strategies and tools we instructors are given to address these problems are designed by people who've never been in similar environs. They have purportedly misdiagnosed what is actually a symptom to constitute the problem.

Perhaps no one is in a better position to address this crisis than the people who stand at the front of the classroom: the men and women charged with — especially at the college level — preparing not just the next generation of professionals, but the next generation of (hopefully) engaged and informed citizens. Second only to parents, no one spends more time with our young people and no one is more exposed to the way they think (or don't), the way they see the world (or don't), and what moves them (and what doesn't) than teaching professionals.

They possess a particular vantage point others in the educational community (i.e., administrators and principals) simply lack. Wrote Charlotte Danielson in the 2007 article, "The Many Faces of Leadership" for *Educational Leadership* on this very issue:

Teaching is a flat profession...The 20-year veteran's responsibilities are essentially the same as those of the newly licensed novice...In many settings, administrators remain in their positions for only three to four years, whereas teachers stay far longer. Teachers often hold the institutional memory; they are the custodians of the school culture...they are in a position to take the long view... .

In other words, teachers at any level in position for any length of time can assess how students change from one generational iteration to the next as well as witness how student culture, mindsets, and worldviews change. The good teacher — and I'd be lying if I said they're all good at their jobs — resets, retunes, and refines tactics and approaches, often instantaneously, as they confront such behaviors and paucity of skillsets on a daily basis.

The teacher's job, in the end, is to prepare and guide students to lead to the next level of their education, desired professions, and roles in the world beyond institutional walls. But if teachers and instructors are to lead from the front, someone has to be tasked with pushing from the rear. And in that basic building block of education — the ability to understand and communicate with the written word — the pushing side of the partnership is failing.

I recently caught Yale professor Tim Snyder, one of the nation's leading history professors, on MSNBC's *Morning Joe* in an exchange stemming from the publication of his newest book, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. He bemoaned how public schools have significantly retreated from teaching history and civics. Snyder maintained that these are the lessons which provide the protocols and information on the fundamental underpinnings of our national and international discourse. Or, put another way, they tell us how the world and our country work (or, rather, are supposed to work).

In an earlier interview with NPR's Robert Siegel, Snyder warned that fascism finds its growth culture in "... the neglect or repudiation of the real world..."; a place where "... facts are irrelevant."

But the underlying problem which has led to the repudiation and forfeiture of fact is more basic and foundational than a lack of civics education. How does an educator impart the lessons on governance to a generation who has collectively and deliberately retreated from a real world of facts and true events and whose capacity (let alone will) to even understand them is limited by a growing inability to digest even modestly complex written text? Again, to oversimplify: how can you understand the news if you can barely read it?

When I survey my classes, I find that most, including many in my Creative Writing classes, haven't read voluntarily in years! Some claim (boast, actually) they never have. I'll never forget one freshman who admitted, without reservation, that he hadn't read anything since *Where's Waldo?* Many freely admit to not reading assigned textbook readings even though they include instructions on how to carry out an upcoming task. Guest speaking at an upscale private high school, I asked one student why he read so little; there had to be *something* in the tens of thousands of volumes in print of interest to him. He replied, "It's *boring!*" The subject didn't matter; it was the *act of reading itself* which bored him.

Which makes tragic sense. Again, after surveying my classes, most have had a cell phone since at least their mid-teens, some even earlier. Nearly all have had access to a computer and videogame console in their households since they were children (this includes students from low-income households). According to a 2009 Kaiser Foundation study of 2,000 young people ages 8-18, even at that time, kids were already spending nearly every waking minute they weren't in school connected to some device or another: texting, cruising the net, videogaming, etc. Nearly half of the heaviest users averaged grades of C or lower.

Increases in this kind of media usage among youth negatively affects scholastic achievement. According to 2015 SAT results, less than half of those taking the test achieved the benchmarks indicating they were ready for college (the results vary by demographic with the percentage climbing steeply for minorities). For those who have reservations about the validity of SAT scores as an intellectual measurement, the ACTs put the percentage even lower: below 40%. The discontinued writing portion of the SAT experienced a steady decline in scores since it was introduced in 2006 (which no doubt contributed to the decision to drop it as a required section). According to a 2015 study by education analytics company Renaissance Learning, the average college freshman is reading only at a seventh-grade level. Education expert Sandra Stotsky, commenting on the study, said that by the time collegians graduate, they are still only reading at the level of a high school senior.

Considering how little today's young people read before they enter college, this should come as no surprise. According to "What Kids Are Reading," a 2016 Renaissance Learning report

based on data from almost 10 million students at schools across the country, more than half of U.S. students read for less than 15 minutes a day. The report emphasizes that minimal exposure to the written word has a negative impact on and deters students from “developing vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, writing and higher-order thinking skills.”

According to an April 16, 2016 *Washington Post* story by Danielle Douglas-Gabriel — “Remedial Classes Have Become Hidden Cost of College” — one in four college freshmen enroll in remedial courses at a cost of \$1.5 billion to their tuition-paying parents. While the percentage of remedial students climbs to as high as 60% in community colleges with their higher percentage of minority and economically-disadvantaged students, the *Post* story points out that overall, 45% of those in college remedial courses emanate from middle- and upper-income families. Even more frightening is the fact that a student taking remedial courses is more likely to drop out of college.

Anecdotal as my experiences may be, I’ve seen nothing in my classrooms to persuade me otherwise, and I doubt any of this is news to any veteran instructor. But it does raise the question of how to remedy comprehension and writing deficits in a 15-week semester when those deficits have been accruing over a young person’s lifetime. The approach of trying to teach kids alienated from text by concentrating their exposure to dense and arcane reading materials seems not only self-defeating, but, considering the materials currently in use, almost guarantees to increase their antipathy toward reading and writing, and, consequently, nullifies an informed engagement with the world at large.

My experience has been that the strategy of the typical remedial comp course is to take students back to basics. For example, here are the chapter headings from the text I was assigned to use for a county college remedial course I taught a few semesters ago:

- The Simple Sentence
- Avoiding Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices
- Verbs: The Four Main Forms
- Making Subjects and Verbs Agree
- Using Pronouns Correctly
- Punctuation
- Words That Sound Alike/Look Alike

The introductory paragraph from the chapter, “Beyond the Simple Sentence: Coordination,” provides a sample of this basic form of instruction:

*A group of words containing a subject and a verb is called a **clause**. When that group makes sense by itself, it is called a sentence or an independent clause. A sentence that has one independent clause is called a **simple sentence**.*

For my remedial students, this is meaningless. I will ask what are the necessary parts of a sentence, and they will answer, “A subject and a verb,” but then it’s clear in their writing they have no idea what constitutes a subject or a verb let alone a complete sentence. Going further into the arcana of grammar and syntax with terms and concepts like indefinite pronouns, verb tenses, irregular verbs, dangling modifiers, etc. only bludgeons them into a kind of numbness. I might just as well be speaking to them in tongues.

When I taught remedial writing at a well-to-do suburban community college, that institution, too, took a back-to-basics approach, but had introduced an online system for grammar

homework in the belief more favorable results would be produced from engaging students through a favored medium: the computer. What I saw was that kids were equally repugnant to reading or performing grammar exercises online as they were in a workbook. A significant number of my students in that class failed to complete the online component (even though it was required), and a few never attempted to at all.

While I'm sure substantial pedagogical theory supports the design of the materials I've used in my classes, it is difficult for me to assess how teaching writing to students — whose comprehension and writing skills are already significantly below their grade level — by immersing them in the drudgery of basic grammar is going to engage them as either readers or writers. Or, more starkly stated, if they're already disengaged with reading and writing, what does one accomplish by subjecting them to the banal even further?

I cannot claim to match the pedagogical expertise of those who design these texts and syllabi. I am not a trained education professional. I've been an adjunct instructor for just about seven years. But I like to think I know about writing.

I've written books ranging from mainstream commercial fiction to academic non-fiction. I've written for film, TV, and the stage. In a 27-year corporate career, I have written speeches, presentations, brochure copy, annual report text, executive correspondence, reports, and press releases. I'd go as far as to say that in a writing career which now exceeds 36 years, there are few forms of writing — creative or otherwise — I haven't at least attempted. I've even had a few horrible poems published.

Even though I'm of a generation that did have to sit through elementary classes slogging through diagramming sentences and the like, most of what I have learned about writing I have learned — or perhaps the better word is “absorbed” — by reading other writers, and then trying to apply what I've learned to my own work. Trying to attune remedial students to effective writing through a back-to-basics strategy is like trying to introduce one person to another one organ at a time: “Hello, Mary, this is my friend Joe's liver, this is his left kidney, this is his pancreas.”

I was recently a participant in a Creative Writing MFA program at Fairleigh Dickinson University. The design of the program substantially mirrored my own personal experience. The driving philosophy of the program was that writing isn't taught; what's taught is learning to write through reading. More succinctly stated is that absorption, with raw input refined through a continual process of writing, feedback, and rewriting, is what is needed to effectively lead in the classroom. In the same way that vocabulary is built through a process of inculcation, so, too, are writing tactics and strategies which are first seen in reading materials, digested, and then hopefully synthesized into the student's own work.

Granted, a master's level program dealing with graduate students dedicated to creative expression on the page isn't quite the same thing as dealing with a class of writing-resistant, text-alienated freshmen trying to grasp the fundamentals of the basic college essay. But it strikes me that a holistic approach — as opposed to a back-to-basic strategy — provides a more natural roadway to basic writing competency. It certainly can't be worse, at least in the context of trying to equip freshmen who are already reading and writing below their grade level, to write at the college level in a short 15 weeks.

To that end, it may be time to jettison the idea of introductory and remedial writing courses garnered from a textbook. The text publisher's marketing concept that there's some sort of

one-size-fits-all approach may be an attractive sales pitch, but it simply doesn't work in certain environments. For example:

One county college where I've taught has a student body that is easily 90% Hispanic. Many are either the children of recent immigrants, or are immigrants themselves. Not only is the florid language of George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" or Kate Chopin's "The Storm" beyond my freshman comp class's less than firm grasp of English (these are readings from the 792 page Patterns for College Writing they were required to buy), but the essays themselves, brilliant writing though they may be, have no point of connection to their demanding, low-income, urban lives. Basic written English is tough enough for them to digest without also having to deal with content which is, for them, meaningless and rendered in a high literary style to boot.

Similarly, a typical element of freshman comp — and the usual form of comp midterms and finals — is to interject a well-written essay and ask students to write a response within a given time limit. In my experience, the topics of these essay prompts tend to ascribe to what department chairs think students *should* know rather than what they *do* know. Consequently, students usually can only respond with no more depth of information than they can extract from the essay itself, providing they have a grasp of the essay's main themes. In one comp class, I used an essay on "American Exceptionalism" as a prompt from a previous semester as a practice exercise." Luckily, this was only a practice as I had to spend 10-15 minutes explaining the concept of American Exceptionalism. I might just as well have asked them to respond to an essay on the First Law of Thermodynamics.

What I've found to work better (full disclosure: not necessarily well, but better), is a series of texts (both written and visual — i.e. films, TV episodes, music videos) introduced over the course of the semester chosen to target the general sensibility of my class. They won't learn unless they're engaged, and it's easier to engage them with forms and content they recognize and appear relevant, that, if nothing else, take them outside their preconceptions of collegiate drudgery (FYI, the overwhelming majority of my community college students are the first in their families to attend college; some are often the first to finish high school). It appears easier for them to recognize concepts than digest grammar. By using content that triggers their interest and sparks an idea they want to express, it becomes easier to help them perfect that means of expression than attempt to accomplish this same objective through a series of rote grammar exercises.

Is it an approach that would work universally? Probably not. Students who are better prepared for the intellectual rigors of college don't need their intellects tickled in this fashion (although experience has shown me they still need such stimulation, just levied in a more complex manner).

Says Kim Brian Lovejoy, editor of the *Journal of Teaching Writing*, there is substantial research addressing the very points I've made here; a good deal of the pedagogy used in classrooms is both outdated and mismatched with today's students. So, why aren't the new models being implemented? Lovejoy suspects underfunding and writing program directors trained in literature rather than rhetoric and composition. Those in leadership positions — those who draft curricula, who decide on texts and strategies — are often, by their backgrounds, ill-equipped to make practical, effective decisions on what should happen in the classroom. Whatever the reason, a paucity of the research — at least from where I stand in front of 20 students (a typical size of a freshman composition course) — is making its way

into the learning-to-write process or into the high-priced materials textbook publishers push as the latest multimedia must-have.

To design effective teaching materials, we first need to truly understand the extent of the crisis and I'm not sure we do. The problem isn't what incoming freshmen don't know; it's *why* they don't know it — their generational resistance and avoidance of text. And dealing with that, as I said earlier, requires a larger, complicated conversation because these issues are the symptom. Curing the symptom does not cure the disease.

The disease is that by college age, the damage to literacy has already been done, and it is damage inflicted deep into the intellectual tissue. It goes hand-in-hand with a generational disengagement from what is happening in the world around them, even to a lack of interest and curiosity in their chosen professions (I can't remember the last business major I had who willingly read *The Wall Street Journal* or even followed business news online or on TV). According to that same Renaissance Learning study, reading levels appear to be leveling off by fourth grade. In the November 8, 2015 *Washington Post* piece, "Why Americans Can't Write," Natalie Wexler, trustees' board chair of the non-profit Writing Revolution, wrote:

It's no secret that many Americans are lousy writers. Just ask any college professor or employer...Surely one reason so many Americans lack writing skills is that, for decades, most U.S. schools haven't taught them...if we keep expecting students (in the upper grades) who can't construct decent sentences to magically produce coherent essays, we'll remain a nation of lousy writers forever.

A 15-week remedial course is a patch job, nothing more. Literacy — the ability to understand written text and express one's self competently through the written word — has to be built brick by brick on a foundation laid at the earliest possible moment not just in schools, but in the home. Otherwise, instructors are, in effect, being handed a mop and bucket, pointed to rising flood, and told to "Clean it up."

This isn't about insuring a college kid can write a decent college essay. The essay is simply the mental callisthenic to develop intellectual muscle. Writing an effective college essay requires long-term focus, the ability to compile information and discern its validity, organizing one's thinking into a clear picture of what the data suggests, and communicating that vision to others. It's about — to quote that Renaissance Learning study — "higher-order thinking skills." As I often tell my students, "You might be a genius in your head, but if you can't get all that genius thinking out of your head, if when you open your mouth or set words to paper you come off like an idiot, you'll be labeled an idiot."

Under the guiding hand of the person at the front of the room, the basic skills of reading and writing at a college level take the student into the intellectual terrain of critical and analytical thinking, of ideas and evidence, of an understanding that goes beyond the parochial aim of, "Will this get me a job?" to seeing each student's realization of their connection to the day's headlines, and to the global political and socioeconomic undercurrents that do, directly and indirectly, impact them.

But right now, we're at a point where we risk — if we're not already there — a nationwide state of intellectual chaos. Voting patterns in the 2016 presidential election showed clear demarcations between voters with college degrees and those without. There are similar lines of division between audiences for various news sources and even, for that matter, what even constitutes news. The idea of "alternative facts" finds a fertile growth culture

where the responsibility to educate our citizenry on how the world works, how *our country* works, has failed; this is the “... the neglect or repudiation of the real world” Tim Snyder talks about.

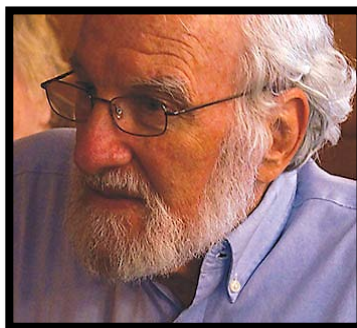
Teachers can lead. The best of them *want* to lead. But as I have said, there has to be a concerted effort to help them by pushing from behind. That involves a conversation which needs to happen and which includes the teaching community, producers of educational materials, pedagogues, administrators, politicians, and parents. And, sadly, that is a conversation which will probably never happen.

Each round of poor scores — whether they’re in the form of state assessment tests or college entry exams like the SATs and ACTs — *doesn’t* bring a conversation around the question of, “How do we fix this?” but rather one of “Whose fault is this?” Most of the blame tends to fall on instructors working with materials they didn’t select to teach curricula they had no voice in designing to achieve goals often set because they’re attainable rather than vital (i.e., dropping the SAT required writing section apparently because SAT takers were growing worse at writing every year). Defensiveness, self-interest, turf wars, mercenary politicking...all eclipse central questions of, “What do we want our kids to know? What do we want them to be able to do?” Paradoxically, the contingent given the least input into answering those questions are those best positioned to address them: teachers.

But if all of the parties involved and all of the elements of an educational and social system are producing collegians bragging that their last book was *Where’s Waldo*, how far can teachers be expected to lead them?



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