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## Teaching English in Uniform

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## Teaching English in Uniform

Robert Shenk

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capabilities. *But the letter needs to be sent by mail:* comments appended to papers or letters handed out in class do not achieve the same results because in the student's mind they do not carry as much weight as the letter received at home, after the student has recovered from exam week and has had time to reflect on his or her future. What the psychological effect boils down to is this: a comment written on an exam or paper shows that a teacher is interested, but good students have already seen plenty of similar comments, and "notes" have lost their edge for the people we are usually trying to reach. On the other hand, the mailed letter is something new, something unexpected; it shows *real* interest, and even the best students will have received precious few such letters. Consequently, students are more receptive to the contents.

Each time a letter is sent, the sender gives the chairman of the department the name of the student, a comment about the student's work, and an indication of how he or she intends to explain our programs to the student. This information allows the chairman to be prepared should the potential candidate drop in unexpectedly for advice. Furthermore, minimal record keeping permits us some measurement of the results for the semester's recruiting program.

We do not follow up our efforts with students who do not respond to the letter; if they ignore it, we assume that they are not interested and that additional letters or telephone calls will be counterproductive. I specifically reject telephone calls for recruiting because few people are at their best over the telephone, and phone calls from professors make students uneasy. A student may receive an additional letter, at the end of another semester,

from another instructor, but I suggest that an individual teacher never write more than once to any single student during a given semester. Too much attention can create more problems than it solves.

For those students who respond, complete honesty and clear information bring the best conference results. As a general rule, when a student comes to see me in response to one of my letters, I talk about the career potential of the degree and then introduce him or her to our chairman, who describes our various degree programs for the candidate. As I suggest in the letter, we do not use hard-sell tactics, and we let students know from the beginning that we are not going to find a job for them when they graduate. Instead, we are going to try to help them prepare for whatever occupation they enter.

That is the procedure. It is utterly simple in conception, and the conception translates easily into action. And it produces results. I think it succeeds because it offers a new kind of recognition for work well done, something beyond the A or B we put down on the student's transcript. It means additional work for the faculty, of course, but I think it is worth the effort. These are, as I have said, hard times; the nation is committed to mass education, and most governing bodies are becoming steadily more committed to accountability. The days are gone when we could afford to sit quietly in our studies and wait for the best and the brightest to find us. If the humanities in general and English programs in particular are to do more than survive, if they are to prosper, we are going to have to make the kinds of extra effort I have been talking about. If we do so, our discipline, our students, ourselves, and our institutions will all benefit greatly.

## TEACHING ENGLISH IN UNIFORM

TEACHING English as an officer at a military academy might seem difficult to outsiders. In practice, certain basic advantages in the Department of English at the United States Air Force Academy can make teaching there a positive and rewarding experience. In this essay I'll try to point out the form such advantages can take by describing in detail the Academy's English department and especially the ways it differs from its civilian counterparts. The perspective I think I can bring to my description comes not only from my work as a teacher at three different state universities before I joined the Air Force Academy staff but also from my point of view as an officer in the Naval Reserve who voluntarily left civilian life to teach at the

*Robert Shenk\**

academy two years ago, who will move on from the academy eventually, and who has no long-term vested interest in the institution. I guess I'm really a civilian at heart; I certainly speak mainly as a civilian here, rather than as a spokesman for the department or for the air force.

To start with the most obvious point, the needs

\* *The author is a member of the English department at the United States Air Force Academy.*

of the air force mandate the academy's curriculum, and we in the department, as military officers, necessarily must conform to the curricular requirements of the air force. If the academy chiefs and review boards decide, as they have done, that all air force officers need heavy preparation in science and technical subjects, the core curriculum soon reflects that decision. The setup has had several marked effects on the English department. One of the most important is this: several years ago a curriculum review determined that officers were not being educated well enough in basic communication skills, and the review required all students to take English courses each year; most of the courses were to be in writing. And so the typical cadet now progresses through an academy career from the freshman composition course to sophomore intermediate composition to junior advanced composition (or technical writing), with significant writing required even in the senior literature course. The academy thus seems unique among college English departments in being able to teach every student during each year of a four-year curriculum. This enables us periodically to reinforce and expand our original teaching and to ensure that all cadets become competent writers and (we hope) able, original thinkers prior to entering the service. Meeting the student again and again forces us to come to terms with the results of our own teaching and grading, a kind of enforced self-evaluation that I think is beneficial if not always pleasant. We are not told exactly how to fulfill the four-year requirement but can try it this way or that. One of our faculty, a graduate of the NEH-University of Iowa Institute on Writing, has introduced a program of sequenced writing assignments, for example, into our freshman course, and experienced technical writers have developed an imaginative interdisciplinary way to teach their subject; consequently the English requirement seems a positive feature of the academy program, offering any number of possibilities.

Other mandates from the administration and Boards of Review (composed of both military personnel and civilians) have had more controversial effects. For instance, when the department established the four English core courses we learned that one of the courses would have to include instruction in speech. Our ingenuity has certainly been challenged to make that course effective in teaching both speech and composition, and yet our practical experience of several years with this course suggests that connections between the two subjects are very close and that the split between speech and English departments early in this century was not an altogether happy event. One can certainly argue about the advisability of joining such subjects, but I'd say that our experience in teaching speech, judging and

coaching debate, and helping to teach drama has made us all better teachers of English. Certainly the department's scope is unusually inclusive, with the same instructors normally teaching not only writing and literature but speech, drama, and even a very successful course in television production. The effect of this inclusiveness is a wider outlook toward the profession and a much broader professional preparation in communications than is customary in the profession at large.

A third special feature of the department's activities is its outreach to the military, specifically to the U.S. Air Force. Perhaps the most unusual and dramatic aspect of this participation is the Air Force Executive Writing Course. Anyone familiar with military and government writing knows that typically it is excessively formal, jargon-ridden, and impersonal, to name just a few of its bad points. In an attempt to correct these faults, the executive writing program has for the past several years made personal presentations to some thirteen thousand Department of Defense managers annually—and this program is staffed exclusively by the academy's Department of English. You might think such presentations would evoke ho-hum reactions at best, but the practical writing advice and the lively teaching style typically elicit enthusiastic responses from the field: we often play to standing-room-only audiences, and client institutions usually ask us back a second time, at their cost, not ours. One reason for the audience interest is that in our presentations we analyze writing from the very unit we're talking to. Certainly doing these analyses and then flying all over the country to make one-day presentations drains faculty energy, yet most participants find themselves stimulated by the opportunity to speak about writing to hundreds of professionals at once. Without a doubt this course—supplemented by a filmed version that is required viewing for all air force writers—has gone a long way toward reducing the smog level of air force writing. In addition, the head of the program—whose Ph.D. is in literature, by the way, although he's a brilliant speaker as well—has just been awarded a sabbatical to work on the same kinds of things at Navy Headquarters next year. I know of no civilian English department's program that has had anything like the impact of this course on the professional world of communications. The success of the program shows what can be done if imaginative links to that world are developed and maintained.

We also participate in the profession at large by occasionally editing technical and other writing for various air force agencies, and we have bonds with the "real world" of the air force, insofar as most of our faculty come from that source. All our new instructors must serve several years as pilots, missile-

men, or specialists in other military subprofessions before joining the department. The air force follows this procedure so that instructors will bring fresh knowledge of current air force issues and procedures to the academy students and staff; most instructors eventually return to the field to influence the nonacademic profession. Such a connection works at least one marked benefit within the department: in contrast to most civilian graduate students, our M.A.'s and young Ph.D.'s don't have to worry about job security or tenure, for whoever leaves the department after an initial tour will go back to an already established air force career specialty. The advantage of this on the morale of department members is simply incalculable: I've never been associated with a happier, less uptight staff. We don't live or die by English in this department, and this unique situation has its virtues, even if we do not have the years of experience or the long-term dedication of civilian faculty. Youthful enthusiasm can largely compensate for the absence of the famous professors and fabled courses often found at civilian institutions where faculty are stable for decades. And drawing faculty, as we do, from a profession with an optional twenty-year retirement policy, youth is one of our most sharply distinctive characteristics as a department.

One other advantage of our close connection to the nonacademic world is that we can flavor our lectures and discussions with air force and other military illustrations and analogies. The challenge of making our courses (especially literature courses) seem relevant to our students' future careers is naturally great. While such efforts of relationship no doubt can be carried too far into a kind of vocationalism, the effect of keeping the cadets' future as officers before our minds is on the whole pretty healthy, I think, in warding off the stultifying isolation and irrelevance that we all realize infects far too many English classes.

In other ways, too, we differ from typical English departments, and not always in advantageous ones. For example, we work under the constant burden of training new instructors, and, perhaps as a partial consequence, we tend to oversupervise our teachers. I must be careful, however, not to paint the distinguishing features of our department in too vivid a color, for in many ways we do closely resemble modern civilian departments. This is both bad and good; my personal opinion is that we have followed the profession and the demands of the marketplace too far in their concessions to basic

"skill" instruction and their consequent partial abandonment of the teaching of literature. Yet our departmental dialogue on this subject has been fruitful, resulting recently in a collection of essays written by department members attempting to ascertain precisely what role literature ought to play in the education of the military professional. And a senior faculty member is producing some excellent multimedia presentations on the reflections of literary figures such as James Dickey and John Ciardi on their own short tours in the air force, thus in an unusual way trying to discern links between our profession and the culture at large. Faculty members also work in more traditional areas, from preparing scholarly articles for standard literary journals and for *College English* to writing critical and scholarly books such as the definitive bibliography of the works of Robert Penn Warren shortly to be published by a senior member of the department. And the more education- and speech-oriented faculty publish in their respective areas. Nevertheless, as you might expect in our vocation-focused times at a technologically oriented institution that does not offer a major in English, our traditional English elective classes have relatively low enrollments, and we therefore try to attract students with courses in popular topics like science fiction, film, sports in literature, military fiction, and the Bible as literature, to name a few. In this clearly we are little different from anyone else.

Finally, there is the interesting issue of what happens to academic freedom when you put uniforms on English teachers. There can be no question that there is a difference between us and a civilian staff; statutes require us to get clearance before speaking our minds on sensitive subjects, for example, and before publishing articles criticizing military and government heads. Nevertheless, despite the amusing fact that the chairman of the department must by regulation review this very article before I sent it off, I should say that our own predispositions—far more than any actual or feared censorship—govern what we say in our professional writing and that students and teachers voice and defend all kinds of opinions in class discussions. It must be acknowledged, however, that two things are absolutely denied the cadets—they are not allowed to be disrespectful, and they are written up if they dare to cut class. But, since you and I as taxpayers are paying for the cadets' education, class attendance and respect don't really seem too much to ask.