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A Response to Submitting to the Disciplines of Liberation

Marcea K. Seible

When Bill Koch quoted Mark Van Doren at the beginning of his article, he situated me within a familiar context as a teacher and a lifelong learner: “There is no more perfect situation...than teachers teaching teachers.” My first thoughts in relation to this were of my time as part of the Illinois State Writing Project, a site within the National Writing Project, located in Normal, Illinois. “Teachers teaching teachers” provides the foundation within which the National Writing Project operates, and it is a motto that has been ingrained in me as both a teacher and a mentor of other teachers. With his reference to an already-familiar concept, Dr. Koch drew me into his conversation about teaching, inviting me to listen and giving me permission to join. It is this sense of familiarity and belonging which becomes integral to our teaching that I wish to discuss in regards to Koch’s comments upon education in his reflection on Van Doren’s *Liberal Education*. In particular, I wish to discuss how it applies to students in the developmental writing classroom.

As a teacher of writing, I have found myself discussing the act of writing in different contexts and with students from various backgrounds. From the university to the two-year college classroom, I have worked with students to engage them in matters pertaining to technical writing, legal writing, business and government writing, and of course, the general education, liberal arts, or “first-year,” composition course. I have worked with students who come from strong educational backgrounds with an interest in writing, and of course, I have worked with the not-so-passionate but simply “there to get through it” students as well. But it is through my current position as an Instructor of Developmental Writing at a two-year college from which I will situate my comments in relation to Koch’s observations.

Currently, I teach multiple sections of two developmental writing courses, courses meant to prepare students for success in the transfer-level composition courses which are part of the liberal arts sequence. They also prepare students for the next courses required for their technical (otherwise known as “vocational”) studies on campus as well. The students in my writing classes are as diverse as they come: from the “traditional” student who just graduated high school; to the student a few years removed from the classroom who is working, going to school, and taking care of a family; to the student coming in from the alternative school due to life circumstances making inclusion in a traditional setting difficult; to the displaced worker whose place of employment closed or left the area, and now, at age 50+ they find themselves in a room with a student body that is significantly younger; to the student with physical and mental challenges and/or learning disabilities; and the list goes on. As diverse as they are, most of the students in these classes share one or two common features: they struggled with writing (or writing teachers) at some point and they really do not want to be sitting in an English class.



Such a population is less likely to be easily persuaded by discussions of the usefulness of literature or the significance of metaphors and language in their education, let alone their daily life. This is not to say that the concepts both Van Doren and Koch submit as important to liberal education are lost on these students. Communicating with them about such matters requires a different approach, one more adequately matched to the students and what they value. As an educated person, and one who aspires to educate others, I am well aware of the importance of a liberal education and how metaphors drive our understanding of the world around us. But to communicate that to students who are under pressure to get an education and get in the workforce as soon as possible is a difficult task. These students will most likely communicate that they are there because they have to take this required developmental writing course in order to get into a credit-level writing course required by their program. Such a class often, in their opinion, is keeping them from getting their degree or certification in a timely manner. This is not in any way meant to imply that these students are not interested in learning the connections between a liberal education and their field. I share this as but one example of several conversations I have had with various students from both sides of our college. Sometimes the relevance or connection between liberal arts studies and professional or technical skills is not always present in their minds, but of course, this can also be said of numerous college students across campuses nation-wide.

What Koch, Van Doren, and I do share is the belief that attitude plays a bigger part in our students' education than we may often give credit. Koch writes, "Besides making them aware of unconscious mental habits related to their engagement with words, I also ask them to consider their *attitude* about their engagement with words" (4). In my case, however, instead of working with students to make them aware of their unconscious mental habits, I try to help them unconsciously discover the relevance of language and communication to their lives. That said, I do not "knock students out" and then impart upon them all worldly knowledge about rhetorical situations, etc., hoping when they come to it will all make sense. No, what I mean is that I do what Koch recommends which is to "...encourage them to engage with their language playfully" (4).

Students in my classes often bring with them the baggage associated with past negative learning environments, low reading abilities, weak writing skills, and a variety of learning challenges or disabilities. I have to compete with every negative experience they have had as a student, whether it was a few months ago or twenty years ago. As a result, I know I have my work cut out for me. Enticing them to see the playfulness of learning about language and writing is an essential part of what we do in class.

Instead of focusing on the negative experiences that have shaped their identities as students, I try to shift their expectations of the class in another way: by valuing the everyday experiences they face and relating those to the act of written communication. My students are often surprised to learn that it is okay to discuss the seemingly mundane



(such as balancing school, work, kids, and home), to discuss tragic and horrific events (the deaths of friends and family through violence), or even to find humor in education (discovering that it is okay to laugh in an English class). Through our shared experiences and the discussions we have in class about life, college, and the professional world awaiting them, both students and teacher learn to “loosen up,” as Koch states, and find the relevance of writing to our lives in general (6). Doing so helps bridge the divide between the liberal education we, as teachers, are giving them and their ability to process the usefulness of that education in their lives.

In short, though the challenges of such a classroom sometimes seem to outweigh the successes we hope to see, helping these students realize that they already possess some of what Van Doren describes as “intellectual skills(s) which can be employed to advantage in other studies” becomes an accomplishable goal (Koch 7). Respecting and valuing students’ personal experiences in such an environment becomes the first step to opening their minds to the disciplines of liberal education. Here I cannot help but insert the old teachers’ adage, “They won’t care what you know until they know you care.” I have discovered the truth to that statement more in the years I have spent in a developmental writing class than I have in any other teaching and learning environment I have ever taught or been a student in.

Much like the initial feelings of comfort, ease and belonging I felt upon beginning to read Koch’s response, so too is the need for our students to find comfort in the familiar before engaging with the unknown. In an educational setting, this may just make all the difference when it comes to opening oneself to the possibilities of education—liberal, vocational, developmental, or otherwise.