A Letter from the Chair

Emily Golson

In a recent position statement on the Multiple Uses of Writing, a Task Force appointed by the College Division of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) submitted the following statement:

To restrict students’ engagement with writing to only academic contexts and forms is to risk narrowing what we as a nation can remember, understand, and create. As the world grows smaller, we live by words as never before, and it will take many words framed in many ways to transform that closeness into the mutuality needed to pursue peace and prosperity for our generation and those to come.

Written in response to questions regarding the use of “high stakes assessment procedures which encourage over-emphasis on correctness, formulaic writing, unoriginal thought, and test driven teaching (Arnein & Berliner; Hillocks),” the statement also contains a mandate to include many different forms of discourse - academic, workplace, civic, personal, cross-cultural, and aesthetic - in our instruction, and to teach these forms well.

As with any position statement, the piece rests on a string of explicit and implicit premises regarding intentions, values, and assumed knowledge, among which are the following: that we all strive for peace and prosperity; that “mutuality” is the only way to achieve this goal; that mutuality rests on consensus; that consensus rests on equal participation; that equal participation allows for the generative, creative, critical, collaborative environment from which mutuality and subsequent peace and prosperity emerges.

It is unwise to assume that all faculty hold all of the above values, but it is possible to say that most understand the need for collaboration and many in Rhetoric and Composition are modeling and/or encouraging students to explore some aspect of consensus/collaboration via formal (academic) and informal (blogs, wikis, email) writing and speaking. The Undergraduate Research Conference, in which students from a number of disciplines formally present their research findings to an audience of faculty and peers, the Stanford Project, in which small groups of self-selected students meet in global, high-tech, virtual environments to analyze visual and written documents, and James Elmborg’s guest column in this newsletter, are three examples of the Department’s efforts to develop the collaborative atmosphere which encourages the exchange of thought. Other approaches include informal, non-graded assignments that encourage students to play with and share ideas, non-threatening, critical methodologies that allow students to discuss weaknesses in evolving pieces of writing. Formal, technical presentations that are evaluated for clarity and preciseness; writing for publication; various types of service learning activities and writing assignments that encourage students to formulate and reformulate emerging perceptions and thoughts are just some of the “multiple uses of writing” our students are exploring.

This issue highlights a few of our efforts.
The Student as the Locus of Meaning

James Elmborg

The twentieth century saw the rise of the discipline as the primary organizing principle of the modern university, and indeed, the academic discipline (with its primary engine, the rigorous disciplinary methodology) was the primary vehicle for much of the knowledge explosion we experienced over the past 100 years. Disciplines that thrived during the previous century were what Becher and Trowler have called “Pure” disciplines (Becher & Trowler, 2001). They were tightly focused around the study of a particular intellectual object, and they had a very precise methodology for the study of that object (Foucault, 1972). Members of the most powerful disciplines tended to police their boundaries to keep them pure, which means to keep the object of study in focus and to check the methodologies to keep them rigorous.

During the last twenty years of the twentieth century, we saw the breaking down and reorganizing of this disciplinary structure. During this process, powerful university disciplines were diminished, largely through reduced funding and declining enrollment. This shift has been driven in part by the demand for accountability, what Lyotard called “performativity,” a term encompassing both the need to perform and the need to argue for the value of the performance (Lyotard, 1984). With the need to justify research for internal and external funding based on performance value, and with the need to justify to potential students that a career track might reasonably ensue from a course of study, many disciplines fragmented or deteriorated. New fields of study arose based on interdisciplinary approaches. These new fields tend to have practical value that can be used to garner grant funding and to be able to attract students who see job possibilities. Area Studies, Communication Studies, and the various professional schools have all thrived in this new environment.

In this climate, Composition Studies was born and grew as a branch of English Studies because it could point to a real need and a career track: the need to teach students to write, and the need to have teachers to teach them. At roughly the same time a movement in academic libraries began to take hold, one called “information literacy.” Like English Departments, libraries needed to create a new and compelling argument that would lead to a new professional practice. Both librarianship and composition instruction broke from a dominant organizing object (the “book” or the “text”), and moved toward a new locus of meaning, student work. In doing so, both writing teachers and librarians developed an educational identity built around helping students succeed at academic tasks.

The similarities between Composition Studies and Information Literacy are striking on many levels, and I have explored them in detail elsewhere (Elmborg, 2003). Both movements grew through an early “process” phase, with the writing process holding sway in Composition Studies and Carol Kuhlthau’s library “research process” defining the instructional paradigm through much of the 1980’s (Kuhlthau, 2003). Both Composition Studies and Information Literacy made a turn toward academic work as a social practice at the turn of the century, with Composition Studies much more aggressively developing that agenda. Perhaps the most global similarity between Composition Studies and Information Literacy is that both emerged in the “twilight of the disciplines,” that period in which disciplinarity was dissolving itself, a period where progressive academics were willing and able to create new fields of study to respond to real needs.

Given this historic similarity and institutional simultaneity, I wish to point out an interesting phenomenon. Both Information Literacy in libraries and Composition Studies in (and outside of) English Departments have retained many of the habits of mind of disciplinarity. Some of these habits are harmless or even useful, but some are a hindrance to the growth and development of successful educational programs. At the heart of the problem I’m describing is that librarians and writing teachers are still focused around intellectual “objects”—research and writing respectively—as their primary locus of study. I want to propose that our practice would change dramatically if rather than looking at writing or research as our defining intellectual object, we construct our inquiry around the student as locus of meaning.

When students get college assignments, they have a specific task to perform, but that task is complex and fragmented. They have to create an argument or prove a hypothesis. This task involves creating a framework for thinking about a problem, a framework that has to be logical and that will be measured by the standards of the academic discipline of the course. The student must use language in sophisticated ways, and that language is usually specific to the discipline of the class. Students must also engage the literature of the field to determine what kind of work has been done in the area so they can emulate it and build on it. These tasks all involve learning to work with and understand disciplinary conventions.

In terms of workflow, the student generally gets an assignment, begins searching for relevant resources to understand the research context, and drafts a written product that more or less emulates the writing the student thinks the discipline demands. Once the draft is written, the student begins to look for weakness-
The Student as the Locus of Meaning continues...

in the overall structure—places where more argument is required or sections that need to be further developed. This process often entails returning to the search for more focused, more targeted resources. This recursive process between the drafting of the argument and the hunt for more specific resources tends to continue until the final draft is produced. At this point, the student must generate an edited paper and a bibliography in appropriate format.

The purpose of the above overview of the student writing process is not to be didactic or prescriptive, only to provide some general overview of how the student might effectively do his or her work. It is also intended to suggest how seamlessly integrated “writing” and “research” are in the work that college students do. From the point of view of the student, it seems highly likely that the above process would seem like one coherent effort. With that in mind, it is interesting to note that two primary places the student might receive instruction in how to do this work—i.e., the library and the composition classroom—behave as if there are two discrete things going on.

From the point of the composition classroom, the student is constructing an argument or a proof. The student is creating a draft, which for the most part means the student is creating a scaffold for the idea(s) in the paper. The student is working with language to understand and approximate discourses that are successful in the discipline of the course. The student is working to create effective grammatical prose as a vehicle for her or his ideas. From the point of view of the library, the student is searching for sources in the library. The student presents the library with “reference questions.” The librarian works with the student to articulate a clear question that can be answered or to conduct a solid search that will retrieve relevant results. The librarian will attempt to do so by asking the student to provide terminology from the course (and by extension from the discipline). From the point of view of the student, there is one coherent effort. From the point of view of the library and the composition classroom, there are two separate and discrete processes.

To some extent, the current bifurcated instructional practice represents a snapshot in time, and there are practical reasons for things to be this way. Disciplinarity confers prestige and credibility on fields of study. When compositionists claim “writing” as their disciplinary object, and when librarians claim “research” as their disciplinary object, they are establishing legitimacy, boundaries they can patrol, and research methodologies they can defend as rigorous and precise. This action makes a good deal of sense in the university still organized by disciplines. To think creatively about what’s possible in the interdisciplinary university, however, means to ask whether this way of dividing student work into different objects of study is the best way to proceed. If we are really experiencing the breaking down of disciplinary structure, then I would argue that libraries and writing teachers should be purposefully and mindfully transgressing each others boundaries, and they should be opening their borders to each other in that same spirit. If we do that, I think we will find that librarians and writing teachers share a number of interests. Above all, they share a strong interest in helping students be better at learning in school. By creating two separate “disciplines” and two “objects of study,” we miss the fact that the student is the “locus of meaning” for what we do. If we see the student as locus of meaning, we completely reorganize our efforts into a collaborative partnership that has the effect of blurring our identities and breaking down our own nascent disciplines into something much less defined and potentially much more interesting. This would seem to me an overall healthy development that might promote vitality and intellectual rigor in our respective fields of study and practice.

Dr. James Elmborg is the Director of the School of Library and Information Science at The University of Iowa, Iowa City. He has an appointment in the Project On Rhetoric of Inquiry (POROI). His previous position was in South Carolina as the Andrew Mellon Librarian for Information Technology at Furman University and Wofford College.

The Collaborative Imperative:

Doris Jones

The literature is replete with books, articles and case studies advocating the benefits of faculty-librarian collaboration to implement information literacy (IL) competency standards across the curriculum. While such activities are quite common in higher education, what remains challenging for IL practitioners is how to integrate sustainable best practices into the classroom (Stevens, 2006). The American Library Association’s Report of the Presidential Committee on Information Literacy defines the information literate person as someone who “must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (ALA, 1989). As library resources become increasingly digitized and available through complicated databases, the call for librarians and faculty to work collaboratively to help undergraduate and graduate students navigate these resources requires pedagogical enactments that strategically links the curriculum to the library. Answering
A Postscript Book Review continues...

the call to promote faculty-librarian instructional models is the 2000 publication of The Collaborative Imperative. The book is worth a second look as it foregrounds guidelines and practical strategies for successful IL collaborative engagement and remains one of the most frequently cited collection of essays for its honest assessment of the obstacles that may impede the success of such partnerships.

Organized in eight chapters, editors Dick Raspa and Dane Ward have brought together a compilation of perspectives that include case studies of pilot projects; a literature review; surveys about informational collaboration; theoretical models and a directory of electronic resources that is chock-full of links to articles and online discussion groups. The authors of Chapter 1, “Listening for Collaboration: Faculty and Librarians Working Together,” serves as a primer to help readers understand the nature of collaboration. The authors argue that librarians and faculty are no longer seen as isolated agents along the educational hierarchical chain. Instead, librarians and faculty are one of several integral partners situated in a much larger collaborative equation to achieve information literacy’s intended outcomes. These outcomes, while monumental, requires what the authors refer to as the “Five P’s of Collaboration” -- passion, persistence, playfulness, project, and promotion (Raspa & Ward, 2000).

Perhaps the most intriguing chapter in the book is “Case Studies in Collaboration: Lessons from Five Exemplary Programs,” in which Scott Walters examines information literacy projects established at Earlham College, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, Evergreen State College, The University of Washington, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. This examination underscores how librarians and faculty members may view each other. A recurring criticism from librarians in this study asked why some faculty are not taking the time to learn about library resources. Yet another concern involved who should take ownership of the information literacy agenda. This essay provides readers with a realistic view of the kinds of obstacles one can expect in such collaborations.

An index and a comprehensive bibliography would have been helpful for readers to immediately locate desired information. The book also purports to provide a concise “map” on how to establish collaborative learning exercises, is not as forthcoming. However, The Collaborative Imperative has established a precedent for an important and continuing dialogue about the benefits librarian-faculty partnerships can bring to the goals of information literacy.

References


Knowing Our Place
The Writing Center’s Imperative to Decentralize WAC/WID Initiatives

Michelle Henry

To address the burgeoning numbers of “writing-deficient graduates,” writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) and writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) initiatives have become increasingly important to higher learning institutions (Wallace 43). Closer to home, these initiatives are vital to achieving AUC’s mission to provide intellectual development for students from diverse educational backgrounds. In the past, general education courses followed a Freirian “banking model” of teaching, in which the omniscient professor disseminated knowledge to the students, and they wrote responses to the professor to demonstrate how well they had received the content. Writing, in this model, becomes a singular mode of communication (one reader, academic context, genre, and subject), which does not necessarily translate to other forms or disciplines. Teaching multiple modes of discourse in the Rhetoric and Composition courses alone, when these courses were not also reinforcing the traditional forms, could not sustain student writing development throughout their academic careers. It is no wonder, then, that professors complained that students simply could not write.

While this model is still somewhat present, American educators in the 1970’s, influenced by James Britton’s work in England with elementary school children in the 1960’s, developed WAC/WID initiatives to address the problem of poor student writing in the disciplines (McLeod 149; Ochsner and Fowler 118). The focus of these cross-disciplinary initiatives is activating students’ critical thinking and communication skills by focusing on both the content of the course and the distinctive rhetorical features of the content (contexts, audiences, genres, exigencies, discourse conventions, organizational modes, forms of evidence and argumentation, methodologies, etc.). This “it-takes-a-village-to-raise-a-child” theory of activating student learning has been widely accepted. While scholars in composition and other disciplines are still refining the specific pedagogies, most acknowledge the validity of two “synergistic” approaches to WAC/WID—“writing to learn” and “writing to communicate” (McLeod 151). In the “writing to learn” pedagogy, students write for discovery: to understand what they already know, make connections with what they are learning, and ask the questions needing further research. The “writing to communicate” approach helps students to develop their own voices within a disciplinary discourse. Other researchers have refined the relationship between WAC/WID as “writing to learn” and “learning to write” (Ochsner and Fowler). In analyzing the objectives of these approaches, James Reither contends that our teaching process should “bring curiosity, the ability to conduct productive inquiry, and an obligation for substantive knowing,” which requires that instructors “find ways to immerse writing students in academic knowledge/discourse communities.
Knowing Our Place continues...

so they can write from within those communities” (290). To successfully implement WAC/WID approaches, then, these initiatives must extend beyond the borders of the writing classes and engage other disciplines and modes of learning.

At the nexus of this cross-disciplinarity, Writing Centers are working to support instructors’ efforts to develop students’ communication, writing, and critical thinking proficiencies. A prime location for sustaining WAC/WID synergy, the Center at AUC provides for students and faculty from all disciplines. The Center functions as a bridge for first-year students between the critical reading, writing, and research skills they acquire in their Rhetoric and Composition courses and the discipline-specific modes required in their upper division courses. The more students utilize the Center, especially after finishing their core requirements, the more likely they are to sustain these skills and, more importantly, to translate them to other disciplines. The Center also serves graduate students from educational systems which do not sufficiently prepare them for graduate-level work. The Writing Center and WAC/WID connection is also logical because both programs resist essentializing and privileging academic writing under the purview of a single department. Theorist Mark Waldo argues that the Center is the ideal “home” for a cross-curriculum program because it is a “rhetorically neutral ground” in which tutors “do not have the rhetorical agenda common to one discourse community. . . . [and] can thus resist imposing what they value about writing on other departments” (18-19). While this rhetorical neutrality serves the cross-curricular relationships between instructors, tutors, and students, it challenges writing tutors’ authority to work in discipline-specific areas.

If the social-constructionists’ theory about the nature of discipline-specific knowledge/discourse is true, then how can writing “specialists” from Rhetoric and Composition, or any other discipline, claim to understand how to help students write for specific disciplines? (Pemberton 446). While many of our tutors specialize in writing in various disciplines, most are trained to teach the rhetorical modes of our discipline. However, we do not claim ownership of interdisciplinary modes of writing. Rather, as experienced readers of text, trained in the art of analyzing academic forms of writing, radically contingent rhetorical situations, and responding to and with students about their own writing, we claim authority to help student writers access and negotiate multiple discourses. On the disciplinary margins, we have an ideal position from which to stimulate students’ critical thinking and communication about their writing because our tutoring does not employ the traditional teaching methods, but evokes response from students regarding their readings, communication, thinking, and writing, including discipline-specific features. This method reflects our purpose, which is not to “duplicate, usurp, or supplement writing or writing-across-the-curriculum classrooms. Writing centers do not and should not repeat the classroom experience [. . . ]” (Harris, “Talking” 27). Rather, our purpose is to provide a learning interaction with tutors who inhabit a middle ground between the teachers and students, creating a risk-free environment in which students are free to listen, accept or dismiss advice. In the larger sense, tutors do not exercise authority as do instructors, so students may feel safer to experiment with their ideas and writing. To promote insight through questioning, tutors ask about assignments, disciplinary concerns, and, more importantly, students’ reflections on their writing. This multi-dimensional interaction helps tutors to contextualize the individual needs of student writers because sessions focus on more than just a paper. Stephen North asserts that the Writing Center’s success is a function of the change in students’ writing process, not necessarily in their texts (438). Thus, in challenging students’ writing process across the disciplines, Writing Center tutors are uniquely qualified.

While acknowledging the place of Writing Centers in WAC/WID, the literature concurs that without institutional and faculty support, very little progress may be achieved (Ochsner and Fowler; Parks and Goldblatt; Smith; Thomas and Crawford). However, some instructors have hesitated to support WAC/WID initiatives in their classrooms (or to utilize the Writing Center). It may be that instructors are overwhelmed by rising course caps, departmental work, publications and conferences, not to mention civic engagement. Some instructors, willing to take on the challenge, may feel insecure about teaching or evaluating discipline-specific writing. Other instructors, especially at the undergraduate level, attempt to construct assignments which require students to write from within the discipline, but many of those assignments actually fall back on more “generic” rhetorical modes. When instructors do construct assignments that challenge students to use the discourse, the evaluation criteria may not be truly discipline-specific (Pemberton 447). Still others may feel their disciplinary spaces threatened by these initiatives or collaboration with other departments (Riley).

While these issues, as part of ongoing conversations, can not be satisfactorily addressed here, what should be considered is the need for greater research and teaching collaborations across the curriculum. WAC/WIC initiatives simply cannot be localized in the Rhetoric and Composition department, the Writing Center, or any other discipline. Dick Raspa and Dane Ward’s research provides the rationale for such decentralization: “old borders separating disciplines along departmental lines are blurring. . . . [ ] The old fragmented view of disciplinary practice cannot deal with the complexity of social issues today. . . . [ ] Such understanding requires a number of competencies, including the power to analyze, synthesize, and present information in multiple contexts for very different audiences.” This university-wide “collaborative imperative” opens spaces for “making localized knowledge,” or constructing specific knowledge about the needs of our faculty, administrators, and students by involving all in the process (Harris, “Writing Center” 76). When faculty and students from across disciplines work more closely, even from within conflicted spaces, undoubtedly, we will find more productive ways of engaging active learners (Geller et al 130).

While no single response to this imperative is sufficient, the AUC
Writing Our Place continues...

Writing Center is answering the call. We continue to invite faculty to collaborate through class visits, workshops, written assignments and resources, or discipline-specific online materials, and to encourage their students to participate in our core tutorial sessions. More recently, the Center and the library collaborated on the Research and Writing Open Lab to meet the diverse needs of graduates. In the upcoming semester, we will extend our conversations through faculty and student surveys to know more about individual needs, and feedback we receive will help us to better serve teaching faculty and their students and to initiate further discussions. We will also implement a referral system by which faculty who identify students with specific needs may initiate a collaboration between the teacher, student, and tutor. These collaborations with teaching faculty and students from across disciplines are a win-win proposal. The Center answers its disciplinary call to “lean in” to discussions taking place and closely examine its pedagogy and practice (Eodice); the teaching faculty create partnerships across the disciplines to activate student learning; and the students, most importantly, respond to the strength of our united resolve to support WAC/WIC initiatives.

Cited Works


... “Writing Center Administration: Making Local, Institutional Knowledge in Our Writing Centers.” Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation. Paul.


EUREKA! We’ve Found it!

Deanna Blevins and Amani Mohamed El Shimi

“Our papers are not just assignments... they are tools to enhance the awareness of people attending the conference. Feeling that my work adds knowledge to the public is a great motivator to work harder.”

“I understood that to write just for class is tremendously different from having to convey meaning to a real audience, and it’s even further away from attempting to produce change, initiate action, and make real contributions to research.”

“During my three years at an AUC student, I have rarely, if ever been personally involved in a research project as I have been with this one. I took a conscious pleasure in the research process itself, letting myself be carried away by whatever interests me along the way, reading an entire journal article when all that was needed was a page or paragraph, an entire book when all that was required was a chapter. Research makes sense when you have a visible target.”

The above student reflections are testament to the relevance and value of undergraduate research. Providing the space for active inquiry and professional presentation motivates students to excel, and fosters a passion for scholarship. Students acquire the skills and values of knowledge collection, critique, creation, and dissemination.

The Annual AUC Conference for Excellence in Undergraduate Research, Entrepreneurship and Creative Achievement (EUREKA) addresses these particular learning outcomes. It contributes to the institutional cognitive outcomes of research, critical discernment of knowledge and creative problem-solving; it fosters student growth and maturity – personal, interpersonal, attitudinal, intellectual and professional; it develops the values of academic integrity and continuous learning and, if community-oriented, it further civic engagement and responsible citizenship.

In the Rhetoric and Composition Department, we have, over the past four years, organized the annual conference to fulfill these objectives and immerse students in real, student-driven, academic conversations. Students from all schools come together to present, share, and celebrate their research and creative works. In May 2006, the First Undergraduate Research Conference (URC - now renamed EUREKA) was held on the theme of “Reform in Egypt: Opportunities and Challenges.” Twenty-eight student papers were presented from various disciplines. In May 2006, the Second URC took place, with 41 presenters, including one who came from the United States. The Third URC saw more expansion: our first student from another Egyptian university presented, we included literary works for the first time, and we had 55 presenters. This year, on May 7-8, we had 83 presenters collaborating on research presentations, poster presentations, photography exhibits, social marketing campaigns, and short stories. Over the years, there have been presentations from the departments of Biology, Political Science, Economics, Mass Communication,
Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities at AUC
Sanaa Makhlof and Duncan Fyfe

At this year’s AUC Research Conference, Sanaa Makhlof and Duncan Fyfe from the Department of Rhetoric & Composition coordinated a panel to discuss the issue of students with disabilities (SWDs) at AUC and were joined by colleagues from the Department of Psychology, the Office of Student Services, Academic Computing Services and Mahmoud Ghanem, a student with total visual disability in Makhlof’s RHET 103 class. The intention was to build on the initiatives of the Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ann Lesch, and Vice President Ashraf El Fiqi by attempting to make the state of knowledge about and situation of SWDs at AUC, thereby help to inform current initiatives, including a code of best practice, and to establish an informal network for those actors at AUC focused on SWDs.

There are increasing numbers of students with recognized disabilities in higher education. Such disabilities range from partial and full sensory impairment to dyslexia, to conditions such as depression, and attention deficiency disorders. While students with disabilities (SWDs) are at a certain disadvantage in achieving their academic objectives, there is a range of services which institutions can provide to address these issues, thereby enabling SWDs to fulfill their academic potential. This is increasingly important as governments legislate for the rights of SWDs to full education. There has been a major shift in attitudes towards people with disabilities (PWDs). Society has come to see them as ‘subjects’ with full rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society, something reiterated in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, December 2006. The UN definition of PWDs, those who ‘have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ can help us to understand the paradigm shift in attitudes. The above language reflects the realization that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and a non-inclusive society with attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

The issue thus characterized shifts the onus onto the institution itself and its various administration, offices, faculties, policies and services to evaluate its compliance with basic principles of non-discrimination and of reasonable accommodation of PWDs. The panel followed the guidelines of the UN Convention in trying to determine AUC’s existing level of accessibility and inclusion of SWD. Ironically, the lack of faculty interest and knowledge in identifying and dealing with diverse sensory, learning, physical, psychological disorders (per the findings of the survey) shows how SWDs, justifiably, have often felt let down by their own teachers. Faculty on the other hand become frustrated at their inability to fully include SWDs in the learning process while the institution’s values of equal opportunity and diversity are further undermined. Furthermore, existing barriers to inclusion and accessibility act to reinforce disability and close down an important learning space for our community, and thereby society at large. How full an academic life an SWD can lead during their time at AUC is important as it raises crucial questions about the nature and quality of the ‘AUC experience’ and the university’s claim to provide an inclusive ‘whole’ learning environment.

To reach this target and ensure that persons with disabilities can reasonably participate and benefit from AUC’s offerings, every aspect of AUC activities must be analyzed to ensure accessibility and inclusion. And, while it is expected the move to the new campus will solve some of the problems of physical accessibility to AUC buildings and office space, for example, serious doubts remain regarding the accessibility of Library resources, the university’s information and communications systems, course materials, lectures and activities, and the levels of awareness amongst all AUC stakeholders. Different entities need to ensure that their respective spheres of responsibility provide the necessary opportunities and access to persons with disabilities, on an equal basis with others. However since no entity can achieve the goal of equality for SWDs ‘on its own’, an interconnected network of actors is required, and ‘if any one element of the network fails in this obligation, persons are not able to reap the benefit from the other elements’ (UN Convention).

While AUC’s Office of Student Services, the main interface for SWDs, provides services to hundreds of SWDs each year, from specific services such as dictation during exams to more general
Meeting the Needs of Students With Disabilities at AUC continues...

ones such as structuring academic accommodations and referral for disability assessment, awareness of these services, and AUC policy on SWDs among faculty, according to a recent survey, is very low. At the same time, the survey's results show that the general ethos towards SWDs among faculty and their desire for increased awareness and training is high.

From a teaching perspective, it is clear that many courses are not designed for SWDs. Course materials are often not produced in an accessible format, they are often not easy to access via the university library, and it can be extremely time-consuming to transfer them into an accessible format. Furthermore, there are various issues within the classroom, including such apparently simple things as, for example, seating arrangements, and the use of in-class assignments and audio-visuals. In many cases the member of faculty concerned does not know how to adapt to the needs of an SWD, and all of this can create a lot of frustration. At the same time, there are ways to adapt syllabuses, materials and methodologies, there are research databases specifically designed for SWDs, and there is adaptive technology, screen readers, talking books, and Braille software for example, that can allow SWDs to be fully included in the learning process.

In the end, whatever issues are highlighted, the need for awareness raising, staff and faculty training in identifying SWDs, or increased availability of adaptive technology, there is general agreement that SWDs should be active participants in the discussion, able to air their concerns, recount their experiences and give their recommendations. In the light of the UN Convention’s slogan: ‘Nothing about us without us’ the panel included the contributions of Ahmed Khater, of Helwan University and Mahmoud Ghanem, one of our RHET students, both of whom are learners with total visual impairment. Mahmoud’s description of his personal experience at AUC corroborated all of the above and lent a sense of urgency to the matter.

AUC needs to hear their voice. Now.

---

The Japanese Haiku, and Haiku Competition

Richard Byford

Ever been captivated by the power and the magic of haiku? Now is your chance to write your own in our exciting competition.

Sitting in the Yamato restaurant at the Ramses Hilton Annex, cup of sake in hand, I listened intently as my Japanese wife’s uncles and aunts, who were marking the end of their holiday, in turn improvised verse which celebrated their experiences in Egypt. It was such a joy to watch the face of the one about to give vent to their feeling, the lines of their face thoughtfully furrowed; then the slight grin as the next verse was delivered, often with devastating effect, the others politely clapping and congratulating the poet when a verse particularly apropos to their holiday experience was uttered. It was though, amazing to listen to a custom hundreds of years old that of the spontaneous improvisation of poetry, a custom that our younger more modern generations would be hard pushed to follow. Neither my wife nor I were up to the occasion, unfortunately.

Poetry is one of the great literary art forms of Japan. Extemporaneous poetry though, was especially prized during the Heian Era, 794-1185 AD, the great classical period of Japanese civilization, a golden age where many of the fine arts were perfected; a period celebrated by Japan’s first novelist, the lady Murasaki Shikibu, whose Tale of Genji relates the deeds of the decadent courtiers whose acute awareness of their own impending downfall adds a deliciously poignant sense of loss; a civilization of impermanence as fleeting as the cherry blossom that the courtiers delighted in viewing every early spring season. It was in this world too, that lusty courtiers would pursue their illicit amorous adventures they would use poetry with which to entice the lady, sending a message in verse hoping for a favourable reply. In chapter 10 of Genji, before Genji is about to leave the Rokudo lady, he says to the lady in question:

A dawn farewell is always drenched in dew, But sad is the autumn sky as never before.

And she replies:

An autumn farewell needs nothing to make it sadder. Enough of your songs, O crickets on the moors!

In Genji’s verse perhaps we can feel the sense of an intense longing and the utter sadness and suffering of unrequited love expressed through an autumnal scene, a period itself where the loss of the summer is both felt and lamented; yet conversely, when we come to the Rokudo lady, underlying the metaphor is expressed an instance of extremely dry wit when she compares Genji to just another singing suitor empty of any real emotional feeling, but which also intensifies her own sense of suffering and perhaps her own cynical view of this world empty of a lasting love.

This though, is not haiku, the subject with which we are to deal in this particular article. Although the poetry above contains hokku-esque elements haiku wasn’t to appear until several hundred years later with the poet Basho who lived 1644-1694, the greatest master ever of this form of poetry. Examples of his work include:

On a withered bough A crow alone is perching; Autumn evening now.

Or:
The Japanese Haiku, and Haiku Competition continues...

The old pond-
A frog leaps in,
And a splash.

The delicate, the ephemeral, the fleeting have always been key elements in Japanese culture, and we can certainly see these in the above examples. Yet the language too, has been instrumental in determining the length of much of the different types of Japanese verse. Obviously, the scope of this article does not have the space to give a full account of the nature of Japanese poetry, yet a few points need to be briefly mentioned for the sake of our competition.

For a start, the Japanese language is essentially syllabic, it's basic orthographic patterning rests on the regularity of its syllables, thus: a, i, u, e, o; ka, ki, ku, ke, ko; sa, sh, su, se, so; etc., words then being a combination of such syllables would make rhyming so easy as to be lyrically meaningless. Stress patterns in Japanese too, are completely regular to the extent that each syllable is accorded an equal beat; there is no variation, the resultant being for a potential monotony of versification if longer pieces of poetry are attempted. As a result of these two points brevity has been favoured over length, and as Kenneth Yasuda points out, the 5-7-5 pattern of syllables used particularly in haiku, but also used in other types of Japanese poetry, actually corresponds nearly enough to the amount of syllables one can utter in one breath, and within that period of time something syntactically and semantically meaningful can be articulated without it becoming monotonous.

Other elements too, inform the haiku. The focus on nature is extremely important, again an element which probably dates back to earliest times, as pointed out by Yasuda when the proto-Japanese were observing fertility rites and spring festivals which celebrated the rebirth of nature. By the haiku period, the seasonal aspect had become central, nature as an experience could only be truly felt through a temporal dimension, best expressed obviously by the seasons, and as the poet experienced that single moment so too would he become one with the universe, and at the same time be able to express his unique perception through his haiku. Such an insight was obviously also influenced by elements of Zen Buddhist thinking. The seasons did not just appear through the mention of the words “summer,” “winter,” etc., but various verbal images became associated with the seasons, and we can see that with the use of words such as “withered,” and “alone,” which are perhaps suggestive of the bleakness of autumn. The haiku too, as an aesthetic construct was conditioned by Chinese ideas of poetic refinement, as well as conversely being able to use “earthy” expressions, the idea of which had come from another form of Japanese poetry, the haikai, which was a kind of rebellion against loftier ways of expression. Another important element was to answer the three questions, “where,” “what,” and “when?” which are observable in the above two examples.

Our above account can only be of the most sketchy, but the haiku non-Japanese, including obviously myself. Famous poets though, include Ezra Pound with his:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

As English language poetry this is perhaps a great experiment, but as haiku, arguably it fails. For a start the seasonal element appears to be missing, but we as readers are being asked to supply the missing semantic content which marries the first line with the second. Although the imagery is quite startling, juxtaposition of two distinct ideas is not a part of haiku, and we as readers do not feel a sense of oneness with the poet’s perception of a universal moment that he has just experienced. We are also perhaps left with too many questions that need answering:

What apparition? "Whose faces?" "To which flower do the petals belong?" Etc., etc.

One of the strangest manifestations of westerners playing with haiku must have come in Ian Fleming’s James Bond story You Only Live Twice. Tiger Tanaka the head of the Japanese secret service, jokingly bitter for he is knowledgeable about Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes etc., takes Bond to task for being ignorant about the poetry of Basho. He quotes a little then asks Bond to improvise a haiku, the practice we have already considered earlier. Bond’s attempt was as follows:

You only live twice:
Once when you are born
And once when you look death in the face.

This is not quite haiku at all, being rather a reflection of Bond’s own blunt upfront character. It is perhaps not even particularly poetic in English, yet it is not without sentiment, strangely enough. Rebirth through facing death is a conceptually thoughtful interesting idea, and for those of us who have “looked death in the face,” to be at a point beyond that experience does allow us to contemplate existence and rejoice that we are still alive. Thus it is not without merit.

A beautiful example perhaps, of the haiku-esque, appears in Henry Reed’s poem Naming of Parts. The first verse follows, there not being enough space to reproduce the poem in full:

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And to-day we have naming of parts.

The mind of a rather refined and sensitive man who has been conscripted into the army during the Second World War is drifting whilst the sergeant explains to him in a drill-like fashion the parts of a rifle. In between however, we feel his mind is some-
The Japanese Haiku, and Haiku Competition continues...

where else, in a haiku like daze dream about the
Englishman’s garden which is of more significance than a world
war. The imagery is light and delicate like a haiku. To what extent
Reed though, was influenced by haiku, I couldn’t say.

Before, however, we consider the “rules” of our haiku
competition, let us have a few more instances of Basho’s genius:

Under the trees
Soup, fish salad, and everywhere
Cherry blossoms.

A wintry gust-
His cheeks painfully swollen,
Face of a man.

On the withered grass
Shimmering heat waves rise
One or two inches high.

The sound of a water jar
Cracking on this icy night
As I lie awake.

A pile of leeks lie
Newly washed white:
How cold it is!

Now for the rules

1. Japanese haiku follow a three line sequence of 5-7-5 syllables
which have been reproduced in the English translation of the
“crow” poem mentioned above. You don’t have to replicate
the 5-7-5 pattern, two or three short lines as shown in the examples
above will be fine.

2. There should be a seasonal element and an attempt to perceive
a single universal moment.

3. An attempt should be made at answering the three questions:
“where,” “what,” “when?”

4. Use of examples with assonance and alliteration will be appreciated.
You can attempt rhymes as Yasuda shows us in the following
examples of Basho below:

Brushing the leaves, fell
A white camellia blossom
Into the dark well.

The white camellia blossom
Brushes the leaves and falls
Into the dark well.

5. The winner and two runners up will be chosen by the Rhet Herring
editorial team.

6. No Rhett Herring contributor nor members of their families may
enter the competition.

haiku published in the next issue of the Rhett Herring.

8. The winner will receive a LE 200 book token for the AUC
Bookshop, and the two runners up will each receive a LE 100
book token.

9. Closing date for the competition is 30th June 2008.

10. The names of the winner and runners up and their haiku
along with a selection of haiku from other entrants will be
published in the September 2008 issue of the RHET Herring.

11. Along with your names and entries, please also supply an
email address.

Finally, just to encourage, here below is my own more modest
attempt to write a haiku. Feel free to criticise:

Still the scent of incense lingers on;
My old mother’s bedroom.

Good luck to all entrants! 🌺

Works Cited and Bibliography


http://www.scribshupdx.net/haikutg/arts/haikutgarts.html


The Freedom to Write

John Verlenden

A merican novelist James Gordon Bennett (My Father’s
Geisha; Moon Stops Here) ate every meal at a restaurant. Even
breakfast. With his wife and two kids.

“I hate it,” he said, “when people say they’d write if they just had

time. As if I have more time in my life than they do.”

Giving parties, talking on the phone, writing emails. Keeping
track of favorite TV programs, going to movies and renting them.
Plugging into the sound system. Writers routinely eschew these
activities in order to have ‘the freedom to write.’

It must be important, this freedom to write. But what is it exactly?
And why don’t students feel its keen appeal?

Aren’t students interested in freedom?

Some students will tell you they want total freedom, now -- fre-
dom from taking writing courses.

Other students accept writing courses because of vague principles
having to do with a liberal arts education: ‘Only let me write about
something interesting (to me).’
The Freedom to Write continues...

The freedom to choose writing from among other courses, the freedom to write on a subject of one’s choosing – these are facades behind which nothing may stand. After all, why write at all?

To begin with, writing doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Emily Dickinson – creator of over 1400 poems, only a few published during her life – wrote for herself. She must have. Why else would she take up pen and paper? Why not play piano? Why not catch butterflies? Plenty of solitary pursuits must have existed in mid-nineteenth century America.

Is self-expression then what we’re after? Is that the elusive ‘freedom factor’? No doubt it is key. But then why do some people feel the urge to express themselves, while others never give it a thought?

Perhaps that last word – thought – deserves another look.

No doubt personality – most likely genetic predisposition – plays a role. Surely we’ve known people – perhaps most people – who fill up a life by acting on no more than a half-dozen vaguely felt impulses. Not much thought at all for these folk. We might think of such persons as acting out the Aristotelian stage axiom: character is expressed through action.

Another set of persons avoids self-expression out of fear. Self-expression puts people squarely in an arena where their thought can be challenged by others. Challenge leads to change. Changing one’s thought can be upsetting. It can change who we are. At one time or another, all of us just want to slave ahead for a while – forget the thinking. Seen in this light, writers can be defined as persons who prefer fewer such periods in their lives – in fact, as few as possible.

The fact that writing involves thought provides a clue as to who discovers freedom in the act of writing – as opposed to those who discover a Sahara of boredom or a minefield fraught with nasty surprises. Take, for example, poetry. Poetry readers typically think poetry is all about emotion. Poets, however, work behind a dense network of higher-order thought in order to deliver the emotion particular to any one poem.

What kind of thought are we now talking about? Not thought in the sense of ‘I had a thought the other day and I wanted to write a poem based on it,’ but rather ‘thought’ in the sense of something that traverses the mind. A fleeting sensation. More than a perception but including, in any case, the realization that one is having the perception.

This sort of thought might precede the act of writing or be discovered in the act of writing. There’s a cycle going on here – for regular writers. Non-writers allow such thoughts to disappear. They disappear so completely that it’s as if they never had them.

‘I don’t think. It just doesn’t happen with me.’ Really?

Once the writer perceives a worthwhile or interesting thought, he or she reaches for the pen and paper. One is now ‘free to write.’

So the ‘freedom to write’ actually involves a complicated process of self-monitoring, a confidence in one’s perceptions, their validity – their authority – which needs no outside stamp of approval, no voice saying, ‘Yes, yes. You’ve come across something of value here, pursue it.’

This isn’t just freedom to write. This is freedom to be alive, to be sentient. What the mystics call being fully alive. Asking no permissions, seeking none – in fact, never thinking in terms of permission at all.

Often students wait for the instructor to tell them what to write. They fume or become listless if the instructor doesn’t come across with the goods, i.e., thoughts. Once given this seed information, they set about concocting a reasonable facsimile of what the teacher told them, only in a voice that isn’t the teacher’s. Almost ventriloquism, isn’t it?

But students aren’t the only ones who can’t find a driving perception or an urgent point of view, when they most need it.

Writers are not so blessed themselves. It’s a mythology that writers walk around in a fog of inspiration. The fact is, they know how the process works. They not only stay alive to the passing thought or perception that travels on a schedule of its own. In order to attend to such thoughts – and discover others – writers adopt a schedule.

Having a schedule prepares the mind for writing. Unfortunately, such a prepared mind attracts the most mundane and worthless of thoughts. Unpaid bills, sputtering relationships, the agony of too few pressed shirts for the week. The experienced writer keeps pushing through, takes out pen and paper or punches a button for the keyboard to start humming.

What then happens? Usually some writing. Writers write until they can’t write further without straining their powers. It’s just no good to do so.

Writers who write regularly know that writing is a state of being. When the writer enters this state, a mode of higher consciousness flickers into existence. Mundane thoughts can’t stand this rarified light. Call it ultra-violet, or some such. The rays emitted by the mind make for a refined playing field for thought. What is more freeing than thought? Not much. We hold sexual love and religion in high esteem, because these experiences enable us to feel free from petty constraints, from the onerous is-ness of life. So does thought. And if writing is a doorway to thought, not just the attribute of certain minds who happen to think more often than others do, then one might rightly argue that one is now engaged in an activity of unusual freedom.

What then has happened? That is, while they wrote.

Writing is also a realm of the unknown – another attribute of freedom. Writers don’t know what will come out of a session of writing – even when they’re dealing with an assigned subject (so, enough of that excuse). We simply can’t know our response. Not exactly. What we do know is that when we give ourselves the freedom to write, we will be re-
The Freedom to Write continues...

plenished by our engagement with thought.

Why?

Because thought breeds clarity. It’s refreshing. It’s sanity-producing, even when it brings us face to face with contradictions. It’s especially refreshing when the thought is our own – not served to us like a cold sardine on a plate.

What more can we expect from a stint of writing?

Mohamed Afifi Matar, in Quartet of Joy, said that the poet, spending his life blood in the act of creation, could send the people a letter, but it was up to them to open and read it.

In short, who knows what else an act of writing might produce – in others? Maybe nothing. It’s out of our hands. Students all know that their writing gets graded, but do they know that grading is relatively unimportant?

The point is, the ‘freedom to write’ has already been possessed, experienced. Like the deepest freedoms, it cannot be removed or cancelled.

Writing Beyond the Classroom

I Write, Therefore I Am

Ahmed Hosny

It all started a few months ago when I was victoriously walking out of the studio with the members of my band after a successful rehearsal for our talent show song. My joyfulness was instantaneously overtaken by revulsion at the sight of the skeletal blood-covered legs protruding from beneath a pair of ragged soiled trousers. Silently screaming at me were two defeated eyes that defenselessly sunk in the bruised face of a twelve-year-old homeless boy. A typical everyday scene, one would think. Yet, it evoked in me a dormant kaleidoscope of emotions. I was ashamed that the only time I considered lifting a pen outside the classroom was to write lyrics for our songs.

At that very moment, I was determined that I will no longer tolerate my lame oblivion. I realized that we are created to think, apprehend, calculate, assume responsibility and introduce remedies. At present, whenever I feel that I am a powerless immobilized creature dominated by a subtle cultural and sociopolitical ascendancy I find a safe haven in writing. Even though most of us are not allowed to vote or to write for the mass media on the grounds that we are young and inexperienced students, we are lucky to have other outlets of a substantial outreach. For example, I have decided to voice the subdued silent screams of the young boy and the two million homeless abused children through actively writing in the Annual Bulletin of The Egyptian Society of Human Rights Supporters.

Fortunately, this semester I was empowered to undergo my transformation into a rationally prudent and obliging individual. The reading and writing tasks assigned to us in the Rhet 102 class, have enabled me to escape my destiny as a minute satellite blindly rotating in a predestined orbit. The main theme of this course, which is individual and collective memory, has uncovered to me that much of the communal remembrance and the selective amnesia passed on to us by our ancestors are impartial and biased, probably contributing to our apathy and identity crisis. The invaluable input of the course is its climax which will allow students to personally document the memory of AUC veterans from their own perspective. Being bystanders of the AUC legacy, we shall serve as Odin’s ravens recording the collective AUC remembrance in the most impartial fashion.

Moreover, my newly acquired perception of writing has furnished me with the necessary skills to endeavor to bridge the cultural gap between the west and the Arab world through extended reflexes and essays in cultural blogs. I am also able to entice and retain a coherent body of supporters of my favourite football team by designing a website and an open forum for exchanging views, sharing joy and releasing anger.

Thus, writing is the ship that safely steers me from the volcanic eruptions of my anger to the tranquil meadows of entertainment. Clinging to my pen is emblematic of the various frames of mind and experiences that I carry on with me. Candidly, I am not ashamed to say that writing acts as my unpaid readily available psychiatrist who helps me attain my rationality and retain my sanity. I no longer simply write in order to perform well in academic assignments. More importantly, I write to record and remember. I write to alert the society of the violations of our human rights. I write to clear misconceptions about my people and to exchange views that help to exterminate my delusions about other cultures. I write to express my emotions and feelings and to share them with others. I write, therefore I learn to explore and live through all facets of my character. I write, therefore I am.

Ahmed Hosny is an undeclared freshman planning to major in Finance and double major in economics and development studies. He is also a member of The Egyptian Society of Human Rights Supporters.

Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Revamped

Ghada Elshimi

Marratech v. [ma-ra-’tek] : to participate in a cross cultural project with overwhelming possibilities.

Cross cultural communication is taking on new meaning for students and faculty in the Department of Rhetoric and Composition. In Spring 2008, various instructors partnered with colleagues in Stanford University to participate in Project ‘Cross Cultural Rhetoric’, an activity where students engage in cultural dialogue and interaction with peers in far corners of the world.

The project was initiated by Alyssa O’Brien and Christine Alfano, lecturers at the Program in Writing and Rhetoric in Stanford University, and authors of Envision In-Depth: Reading, Writing, and
Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Revamped continues...

Researching Arguments. It brings together students from all over the world and invites them to share perspectives and exchange ideas on theme topics for the session.

Video conference sessions are exciting and fast-paced. Each session aims at allowing the students opportunities to practice particular skills, introduced and discussed in class. In a typical session, students are asked to analyze a certain text or visual, which will be the subject for discussion. Sometimes this is a speech, a text, a film or visuals found by the students, depending on the current classroom activities. The session starts with all participants ‘meeting’ in cyberspace where they get acquainted with the day’s activity and are given instructions for the session. They then divide into small groups and go off into separate rooms, where each student meets his/her counterparts from around the world and they engage in a 90-minute dialogue of cultures. These individual conversations are made possible by Marratech software, hosted by Stanford University, which allows an unlimited number of students to engage in one-on-one conversations with peers for as long as the session lasts. This amazing feature distinguishes the project from a typical video conference where large groups of students have limited interaction time due to turn-taking and technical setup. At the close of the session, students come back to the common room where all groups congregate, and they present the results of their discussions to all other groups.

As well as being aligned to AUC’s mission of providing activities that promote communication skills and liberal education, this project is especially valuable for Department of Rhetoric students. It brings together many of the core skills taught in the department. Each session revolves around a set of objectives closely correlated with various course outcomes. To prepare for the session, students need to engage in an in-depth analysis of the relevant texts or visuals. They then discuss these views with the other students and use argument strategies to explain their views to those unfamiliar with them. They integrate presentation and oral rhetoric skills to deliver their message effectively. The topic of the day is only a springboard for the discussion, but there are no limits to the ideas that participants can bring in, as they explore one another’s cultures. After the session, students are invited to continue their discussion on a lively cross-cultural blog, accessible by all participants. The blogs go on indefinitely and the learning continues.

A major plus to this project is the opportunity to use the skills taught in the program in an authentic rhetorical situation to a real audience. Students recognize the value of logical organization of thought, audience awareness and careful selection of communication strategy. They see first-hand the impact their ideas are having on their peers, and they engage in on-the-spot revision, improvement and re-negotiation. And it is this live exchange that boosts their motivation and develops a new appreciation of communication skills. One student writes, “It makes me more and more excited about my paper and I have become not just concerned about it for the grade, but rather I feel that I like what I am doing. And I am doing it just because I want to. Thanks so much.”

Participating faculty are also learning along with this project. As well as the complicated technological preparations required for each session, the actual interactions among students are great opportunities for analyzing student learning and communication styles, and identifying areas for further classroom discussion. The moderators’ impromptu crisis resolution skills are also tested each session, when technological or logistical obstacles arise.

The teachers involved hope to develop a course that incorporates this activity into the course requirements and involves a larger number of students. With sufficient technical capacity, new audiences, topics and tasks could be included and the project could take varied directions.

So please come Marratech with us.

For more information, please contact any of the participating faculty: Samaa Makhlouf, Doris Jones, Wafaa Wali, Jasmine Maklad, Ghada Elshimi, Mark Mikhail. (2)

Community and (Dis)Consensus in Collaborative Learning

Samaa Gamie

The shift from emphasizing the writing product to the process of writing has led to the interest in how and what makes writers write and the processes involved in such an act, which has come to be viewed as socially-situated. This has led to an increased interest in collaborative learning, which arose in the 1980s, as more US colleges face the educational needs of students during and after the open admissions era in the 1970s—most of whom are seen as unprepared or as having difficulty adapting to the traditional or “normal” conventions of the college classroom” (Bruffee 637). The belief that these students need “help that was not an extension of but an alternative for traditional classroom teaching” (637) has led to the rise of the idea of collaborative learning as the optimum alternative.

For Bruffee, Wiener and other supporters of collaborative learning, collaborative learning is a classroom practice that changes the social context in which students learn and “harness[s] the powerful educational forces of peer influence” (638). Bruffee stresses that education becomes an initiation into this intellectual conversation and the initiation of students’ reflective thought and ability to internalize public or social conversation. Hence, collaborative learning provides a social context and a community of equals—of peers, for students to experience and practice the conversation valued within academia—thus creating Kuhn’s “a community of knowledgeable peers” (642).
Hence, collaborative learning is seen as empowering as it challenges the traditional basis of the authority of teachers and relocates the authority of knowledge from the teacher to the community of knowledgeable peers students aspire to join. Bruffee contrasts normal discourse, where the writer and reader are guided by the same conventions about what counts as relevant with abnormal discourse, i.e. knowledge-generating discourse, which occurs between coherent communities when consensus no longer exists with regards to rules, assumptions or values. He asserts that knowledge is a community construct, and acknowledges the “subservience” and the limitations involved in acquiring knowledge (713). For Bruffee and Wiener, consensus is the end of the group’s intellectual negotiation which the members reach by their own authority and where the demand for consensual learning and collective judgments is what unifies the group. In this context, social construction and collaborative learning depend on “difference and dissent negotiated to consensus” (714), where change occurs “peacefully” through the formation of new communities of knowledgeable peers—such options, Bruffee admits, aren’t always available in the classroom.

Bruffee’s and Wiener’s account of that collaborative setting presents the creation of the community of knowledgeable peers and the arrival at consensus as a natural and inevitable act—central to the constitution of one’s identity. Both Bruffee and Wiener fail to see the totalizing effects of the idea of consensus in collaborative learning and the dangers it holds especially for marginalized students in the classroom—whose views might be unconvincing and thus dismissible by other group members, and if taken, the purpose would be getting the teacher’s approval and not demonstrating any deep conviction or belief. In essence, Bruffee advances an Aristotelian view of knowledge as authority of knowledge is weighed against multiple social forces: one’s peers, teacher, discourse community, and the individual free will of the group member is subordinated to the will of the community and its sources of authority—i.e., the community of knowledgeable peers. In addition, advancing the naïve notion of the equal status of peers in the classroom ignores many socio-economic, cultural, gender and racial identifiers in the classroom that are engendered in students as they interact in the classroom setting—as human subjects, they inevitably enact and perform their student identities through the sign systems they already inhabit (Gonzales); thus, they are unable to leave behind the social and racial categories that define them in the real world and the hierarchical power structure that accompanies one’s situated identity.

If as Rorty and Bruffee contend, “social speech is inextricably involved in learning and in active thought,” then a problem arises when teachers only focus on teaching the normal discourse of a community—the discourse that promotes, what Barbara Hermstein-Smith calls, the normative mechanisms of knowledge-production. Furthermore, the idea of interpretive communities should alert us to the inclination of communities to homogenization and imagined uniformity, without which the communal sense is threatened; thus in these imagined interpretive communities, ined unity, and the silence of the voices of dissent or their self-erasure is evident within the classroom community. To avoid that increased interest in uniformity, the need arises to teach abnormal discourse which Bruffee dismisses as unteachable. In fact, it becomes central, as Powell asserts, to introduce not only the texts that represent the imperial desires of traditional scholarship, i.e. normal discourse, but also those that run counter to it—the abnormal discourse.

Myers acknowledges Bruffee’s relocation of the authority of knowledge from the personal to the social and of the many possible negative effects of peer group influence: conformity, anti-intellectualism, intimidation, and leveling-down of quality” (168); thus, he critiques Bruffee’s “idealistic” pedagogy which presents consensus as the “normal” end of collaboration and calls for students’ leaving “their social differences behind” (38) as necessary for the collaborative endeavor. Myers asserts “[o]ne cannot escape from one’s economic interest and ethnic background, but one can try to understand how they shape one’s thinking and social actions” (168). Myers stresses the need for skepticism about appeals to consensus as they can result in the reproduction and maintenance of the existing, oppressive homogenizing power structures—a danger which can be heeded by investigating interpretive communities and the historical processes and power structures that shape their production of knowledge. Despite Myers’ critique of consensus, he upholds a revised notion of consensus that represents not only agreement but also disagreement and conflicts, instead of advancing a new notion that acknowledges the problematic of the social construction of knowledge.

Trimbur examines the critique of, what he calls, the politics of collaborative learning and its key term: consensus. Some of the criticisms laid against the use of the term is that it is an “inherently dangerous and potentially totalitarian practice that stifles individual voice and creativity, suppresses difference and enforces uniformity” (602). Another line of criticism of consensus pedagogy views Bruffee’s social constructionist pedagogy as potentially limiting in its focus on the internal workings of discourse communities and its disregard of the wider social forces and power structures that organize the production and validation of knowledge (603).

Rather than abandoning the notion of consensus based on the above criticism, Trimbur proposes its revision toward developing “a critical practice of collaborative learning” (603). Though Trimbur concedes that consensus in some of its pedagogical uses can promote conformity and accommodate normal discourse, he asserts that consensus can still be a powerful instrument for “students to generate difference, to identify the systems of authority that organize these differences, and to transform the relations of power that determine who may speak and what counts as a meaningful statement” (603). Trimbur uncritically dismisses the idea of saving the individual from the group and the fear of “group-think” as misguided, teacher-centered and
Community and (Dis)Consensus in Collaborative Learning continues...

authoritarian, as it prevents students from empowering each other and transforming themselves into a “participatory learning community,” where consensus “can enable individuals to empower each other” (604).

Trimbur revises consensus as a strategy that organizes differences in relation to each other, thus deeming abnormal discourse as not simply necessary to keep the conversation going as with Bruffee’s pedagogy, but rather as a reference to dissensus, the marginalized voices of resistance, and to the relations of power that determine what is deemed as consensus or dissensus. Trimbur uses Habermass’s definition of “genuine consensus,” i.e. an ideal speech situation and Bakhtin’s notion of “heteroglot” to stress the plurality of voices involved in the conversation according to relations of non-domination and the consensus on difference and challenging the prevailing conditions of knowledge production rather than on collective agreements.

However, Trimbur’s use of “society of peers” becomes problematic as he presumes the leveled ground of peers, assuming the unrealistic absence of hierarchy and power differentials in the classroom. The concept of empowerment in consensus as presented by Bruffee and Trimbur is equally problematic, as it assumes that in both the consensus to agree and that to disagree, group members empower each other. The lack of interest in underscoring and resisting the problematic of the notion of consensus in collaborative learning, even though in its deflected, utopian and revised form, remains evident in both Trimbur’s and Bruffee’s accounts—where, in fact, Trimbur advances the same term that fails to articulate the critique of normativity or the need for legitimating the politics of dissent.

In Walters’ discussion of the politics of dissent, he affirms that the content of students’ writing is detailed by “the corporate elite, the knowledge brokers, the guardians of culture and knowledge” (822). Thus students and teachers are in danger of losing their language to a social structure that emphasizes the economies of consumption and production—a danger he attributes to the powerful influence of the metaphor of community as a democratic vision and as a consensus-driven composition pedagogy. Walters references Kurt Spellmeyer’s likening of the community metaphor to “the ‘shared conventions’ of a prison” (823) and Myers’ view of community as a democratic ideology that advances conformity and stamps out dissent and difference. Walters argues for Spellmeyer’s call for moving beyond the confining and delimiting metaphor of community and asserts that for the politics of dissent to be of genuine value and achieve social change, they need to move away from simply voicing difference to destabilizing the confining structure of the discourse. Thus, he advances Bridwell-Bowles’s rhetoric of disruption and discontinuity as an alternative to consensus pedagogy and as central to a new politics of difference, which creates a discursive space to motivate actual change and where the “mere permission to speak...is converted into the imperative to speak, to write new orders of freedom against directive hegemony” (836).
Fantastic Great Women in History Quiz

So, how well are you acquainted with great historical female personages? Find out with our fantastic great women in history quiz. All you have to do is to match the name of the famous woman on the left with her quotation on the right.

Go on, test yourself, or why not try it out with your friends.

1. Queen Elizabeth I 1533-1603

A. Because I could not stop for death –
   He kindly stopped for me –
   The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
   And Immortality.

2. Lilian Hellman 1905-1984

B. Abroad is unutterably bloody and foreigners are fiends.

3. Emma Lazarus 1849-1887

C. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year’s fashions.

4. Empress Catherine the Great 1729-1796

D. Give me your tired, your poor.
   Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

5. Emily Dickinson 1830-1886

E. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman,
   but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too; and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm.


F. I’m not denyin’ the women are foolish. God Almighty made ‘em to match the men.

7. Sarah, 1st Duchess of Marlborough 1660-1744

G. How could they tell? [On being told of the death of President Coolidge.]

8. Mme Roland 1754-1793

H. I shall be an autocrat: that’s my trade. And the good Lord will forgive me: that’s his.

9. Dorothy Parker 1893-1967

I. The duke returned home from the wars today and did pleasure me in his top-boots.

10. George Eliot 1819-1880

J. The more I see of men, the better I like dogs.

How well did you do?

9-10. You certainly know your women.
6-8. Not badly acquainted.
3-5. Hmmm? Perhaps you’re better at pop trivia.
1-2. Utterly pathetic.

NB All names, quotations and information have been taken from The Oxford Library of Words and Phrases: I, Quotations. Oxford: OUP, 1981.
We would love to receive your comments!

- The Department would appreciate receiving news items for the next Rhet Herring Newsletter.

  Email: visual@aucegypt.edu

- Visit the Department web page: http://www.aucegypt.edu/academics/dept/rhet/Pages/default.aspx

---

The Rhet Herring Crew

Editor-in-Chief
Doris Jones

Editorial Team
James Austin
Richard Byford
Samaa Gamie
Mark Mikhaels
Kathleen Saville

Graphic Designer
Mustafa Al Ezzi Naji