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ABSTRACT

The required English course is one of the best places to assist with career guidance, particularly in schools where the placement office and the counseling center lack personnel to offer regular group seminars in career choice. For this reason a basic composition course was designed with an emphasis on vocations and was intended to teach writing and to bring literature to bear on the issue of vocational choice. Two works of literature were chosen with this in mind--Shakespeare's "Henry IV, Part I" and Kurt Vonnegut's early novel "Player Piano." Writing assignments and discussions relating to the problems of work were based on these two books and provided the common core of the course. The professional help of the placement office and counseling service was solicited, and a number of the staff of the placement office spoke to the students about the services of that office. The counseling center tested nearly all of the students for vocational preference and followed the tests with vocational counseling. (LL)

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CS 201 155

CAREER PLANNING IN FRESHMAN ENGLISH

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Donna is in her first term in college. She takes only seven hours of course work, though, because she works forty hours behind the jewelry counter of a local department story and sixteen hours on weekends at Walt Disney World. She hates sales work, but she needs the job. A college education offers her a way out of it.

Jeff is a seeker. He hasn't settled down to a definite major yet, because he's interested in everything. He'd like to be a doctor, but the pre-med curriculum doesn't excite him enough. He works sixteen hours a week at Walt Disney World dressed as Mickey Mouse, but that's not anything you can do for a living. Jeff has read a lot, and he looks thoughtful when I suggest that he major in English.

Major P-- is at the mid-point of a career in the Air Force. The Air Force is sending him to school to study business administration, and he thinks he'd like to take some courses in English while he's at it. His point of view is unique: after six years as a prisoner of war in Hanoi, he finds college--and life itself--a refreshing, exciting experience.

Donna, Jeff, and the Major are among thirty first-quarter freshmen in English 101, and--different as they are--I am charged with teaching them all something called "Composition I." When my department decided last year to give up the standardized freshman English course in favor

of a format permitting each teacher to offer a course based on a selected theme, I benefitted from that terrible freedom of indulging my own definition of "Composition I." After someterm-to-term bouncing from one theme to another, I decided to try a balancing act between a teacher-directed course on one hand and, on the other, a course that takes its lead from the students--not necessarily from what they think they want, but from what they are.

We teachers of English have done our best to serve Donna, Jeff, and the Major in their role as Man Thinking. As soon as we learned that they did not like our chronologically arranged literature courses, we gave them black studies and women's studies and thematic courses like "Literature of Disenchanted Man" and "Literature and the Environment." This approach is sound, I believe, and we should keep our curriculum flexible, adaptable to current social and personal problems. This is one of the ways that we show students that literature can and does dart some illuminating flashes of light into the dark corners of life.

But Donna, Jeff, and the Major are not just Man Thinking. They are also Man Working. I don't mean that they're going to start work four years from now, but that they have been punching time clocks before they came to my freshman class. They and most of their classmates are in college because they believe the myth that college graduates inevitably make more money, or because they expect, in some vague way, that they will have a more prestigious and more comfortable and happier life if

they go to college. Some of their classmates think that they know exactly what to major in so as to get these results, but they may not know that half of them will change majors before they graduate.

During the past several years, I have become increasingly aware that a great many college students expect too much out of their degrees. A recent newspaper cartoon showed a bearded graduate, capped, gowned, and diplomaed, looking blankly at his parents and asking, "Now what?" With the job market what it is, we cannot afford the luxury of leaving our students with the notion that commencement is a kind of magic ceremony that endows them with the inalienable right to claim a job from society. Nor can we as humanists give in to the shallow vocationalism that is becoming more and more prevalent nowadays. It is up to colleges and universities to guide their students in intelligent career choice, but Man Working ought to be Man Thinking as well, and vocational guidance should take place in the context of humane values.

I believe that the required English course is one of the best places to assist with this guidance--indeed, in schools where the placement office and the counselling center lack personnel to offer regular group seminars in career choice, it may be the only place. For this reason, I decided to make my section of Composition I into a class on vocations. Considerable help came from an article by W. Gary McGuire in the January 1972 issue of the Journal of College Placement. Mr. McGuire in this article describes a course in career planning at Augustana College, a liberal arts college in Rock Island, Illinois. The elective course at

Augustana College is taught by a member of the counselling staff and extends over two quarters. The course meets once a week, and the primary orientation is toward self-assessment, vocational testing, and the analysis of vocational preference tests. It culminates in a "career monograph" written about the student's chosen career.

However, I had two purposes in addition to those of the course at Augustana: to teach writing and to bring literature to bear on the issue of vocational choice. I chose two works of literature--Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 1 and Kurt Vonnegut's early novel Player Piano. Prince Hal's story is about education--the choices the young prince has to make in order to prepare himself for a vocation. Vonnegut's first published novel is set at some indeterminate future date when men, threatened by a machine-dominated society that has robbed them of the pleasure of achievement in work, revolt and smash the machines. These two books, combined with discussions relating to the problems of work, would provide the common core of the course, something on which writing assignments could be based.

The specific nature of the course gave it two aims: to prod Donna, Paul and the Major into thinking about the nature of work, not just its rewards but also its demands and pressures on the individual; and to encourage each of them to pursue a curiosity about a single occupation to the point of writing an analysis of the preparation and chores involved. Seeking outside assistance with both aims, I called

in the professional help of the placement office and the counselling service (the Developmental Center). Both offices were enthusiastic about the course and ready to help. A member of the staff of the placement office spoke to the students about the services of her department, and the Developmental Center tested nearly all of them for vocational preference and followed the tests with vocational counselling.

The writing assignments fell into three categories: objective writing about work or about a specific occupation, papers on Henry IV, Part 1 and Player Piano, and a written self-assessment. The first assignment was a paragraph differentiating between the words "job" and "vocation," and the last was a career monograph of about 1000-1500 words analyzing a single occupation: the education required, the type of work done, salaries and other benefits, and employment opportunities.

The career monograph not only gave most students the chance to write about something of immediate interest to them, but it also gave me the occasion to teach techniques of research and documentation. Because I like to get freshmen into the library as soon as possible, early in the term I required each student to familiarize himself with seven principal reference tools: the Readers Guide, the Biography Index, the Bulletin of the Public Affairs Information Service, Current Biography, the Dictionary of National Biography, the Dictionary of American Biography, and one major reference tool associated with his major field, such as the Business Education Index. The assignment

consisted of locating the reference tool itself and devising a question and answer based on specific information to be found in it.

Later, each student was required to prepare an annotated bibliography of five articles dealing with a problem concerning work. This assignment was a prelude to what turned out to be the most enjoyable part of the course--a series of panel discussions on contemporary problems of Man Working. To prepare for this, I listed several topics for panels, and by calling for volunteers and doing some polite pushing and shoving I managed to apportion the students among eight subjects for investigation: (1) attitudes toward work in America, (2) careers for women, (3) new careers since 1950, (4) the value of a college education, (5) the tendency of some labor to be "de-humanizing," (6) careers for liberal arts graduates, (7) how to choose a vocation, and (8) preparing for retirement.

Each of the panels was successful in its own way. If you don't make a steady diet of this sort of thing, a round of panel discussions in the middle of the term can be healthy. Students become better acquainted with one another, they get a chance to explore a subject that interests them--and best of all, they get a respite from listening to the teacher.

It may have been my own guilt feelings that made me include Shakespare in the course. After all, career planning is a rather Philistine subject; and I had to apologize to myself for devoting time to it when I consider my students' brain cells starved for lack of richer fare. Prince Hal is not only richer fare, but he also has something to

teach us about what it means to direct your life toward a certain ambition. Granted, Hal doesn't have much of a choice as to what career he is going to follow, but he has a wide array of choices as to what attitude he will take toward being ruler of England. A crucial index of Hal's attitude can be seen in his rejection of Falstaff, his placing of loyalty to the kingdom over personal loyalty. Even without Watergate, students can see the necessity for such a choice, but in a post-Watergate America it has a special relevance. I like old Falstaff so much that I can't resist clucking the tongue at Hal's dismissal of him, but my freshmen side with Hal to a man. When we finished reading Henry IV, Part 1, I had the students play the role of an employment examiner who has just interviewed Falstaff for the position of commander of the state militia. They were to report to the Governor their judgment of Falstaff's fitness for the job. It was surprising how few would mention the engaging qualities of the old rogue, and I fear that my red pencil managed a surreptitious revenge for the outrage done to Sir John along that processional route to Westminster.

Player Piano entertains with a more obvious humor than Shakespeare's. Vonnegut is groping after a satire of American society--as he would put it--machine-wise, efficiency-wise, and organization-wise. Plotwise, the novel is not very successwise. But humorwise it shows sallies of the wit that would characterize the mature Vonnegut. He has placed the novel in the future, but all the laws, institutions, and mores are those of the present. The major difference is the stratification of society into

managers and commoners. The end of the novel, with its short-lived Luddite revolt, recoils on itself with the pessimistic conclusion that machines, organization, and efficiency are a kind of constant in human nature that can't be gainsaid--but that it's edifying to oppose the abuse of them anyway.

I could get away with a playful theme topic about a serious work like Henry IV, Part 1, but a pot-boiler like Player Piano called for a serious theme topic. The students wrote their papers in class, and I revealed in advance the kind of subject they would have to write about. Then when they arrived, I presented them a choice between two topics: (1) an assessment of Vonnegut's opinion that the troika of machines, organization, and efficiency makes for an evil regime, or (2) a discussion of the value system satirized in the novel--the emphasis on How rather than on Why, the expectation that managers are to compete for advancement while commoners are to remain content with their lots.

The two literary works gave rise to consideration of the values behind a person's choice of vocation, and I sandwiched between them another paper on "My Choice of a Life Style." Oddly enough, this assignment fell flatter with most students than any other in the course. One of the hardest things for most of them to conceptualize is their mode of life ten or twenty years from now. Even Major P-- was forced to resort to abstractions. Jeff, the seeker, wrote an amusing Walter Mitty-ish piece about daydreams and reality, but most wrote about "a nice home in

the suburbs," "two cars," "a beautiful wife," " a comfortable life," and so forth. This assignment will call for a set of caveats the next time around.

In spite of an assignment or two that turned out rather unsatisfactorily, the course was fun to teach and, judging from course evaluations, was well received by the students. I came to know Donna, Jeff and the Major a little better than I might have otherwise, because the personal nature of some of the writing led to discussions of career plans and personal values. Many students tend to encapsulate separately their workaday lives and their school lives, and to see no relation between them, but several began to see that the required English course can be pertinent to what they do in their lives away from school. If it accomplished no more than that, it was worth trying.