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ABSTRACT

Students enrolled in composition classes may provide the answer to the dilemma of coming up with a writing topic: work--the "four letter word." Most, if not all, students have already become part of the labor force. The theme of "work" is naturally successful because it centers around a topic students know well, something that is within their capacity and interest to explore. Not only is there much to write about using the theme of work in the composition class, there is much to read as a way to spur students' thinking and to see other people's perspectives on the issue. By examining the theme of work in a writing class, students have the opportunity to explore those dreams that lie deep in their souls, to mine the depths to discover the riches within, to make tacit what would otherwise go unnoticed. The single-theme composition course provides students with an opportunity to look closely and thoroughly at one aspect of their lives and the world around them and guards against a superficial encounter with a topic. (RS)

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Working Topics for Students' Papers

Myriads of conference papers, articles, and even books have featured composition papers' topics as their principal concern--and for understandable reason: well-chosen topics have a greater chance of yielding better papers than the garden variety generics. Certainly professors will find reading the papers more pleasurable (if reading student papers can be termed pleasurable) or at least worth the time and effort it takes to gtive papers the kind of reading they deserve. Whatever the case, teachers and researchers have spent considerable effort on the pursuit of topics: trial and error in assigning them has produced at least some experience in what works and what doesn't, thus avoiding the disappointment in reading what results from assigning the duds. But as teachers well know, this pedagogy doesn't prevent students writing papers on topics that are less than inspired--even when meticulously devised by the teacher. Dauntless in their quest for some solution, teachers offer--and students in turn disregard--advice that is as plentiful as corn in Iowa come

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August: narrow your topics; write what you know about; choose topics that you are interested in and committed to, etc. And yet this too provides no panacea to the selection of good topics, no formula that will guarantee success, just as there's no magic in producing "good" writing.

Although I do not want to be one of the many who offers the profession yet another failproof topic, I do want to suggest that we look at the new population of students entering our composition classes as an inroad to the problem of suitable topics. Simply put, students enrolled in composition classes may provide the answer to the dilemma of topics.

The answer to which I am referring is what some of my students have affectionately termed "the four-letter word": work. Students know about it because most, if not all, have already become a part of the labor force. Consider, if you will, the students in a typical freshman English class. If your students are anything like mine, I daresay the majority of them hold part-time jobs while going to school. In fact, a few might even have full-time jobs. In addition, some of your students might even be "returning" or "mature" students, whatever the current lexicon is these days. This is the population to whom we are now catering. And therein lie rich possibilities for the composition paper's topic: combining what they are most keenly aware of--work--with the focus of the course--writing.

This theme is naturally successful because it centers around a topic students know well, something that is within their capacity and interest to explore. Hard to imagine is the student who does not have a striking description of a boss or co-worker; equally difficult to imagine is the student who cannot narrate an incident that happened at work, be it a blazing account of being stiffed while waiting tables or a kind-hearted reminiscence of a fellow employee who covered for a fellow worker. Ergo, papers that deal with personal experiences, part of the typical fare in most, if not all, composition classes. But just as important is that students are eager to relate such stories: the material is close at hand, waiting for the opportunity to be made permanent. Not only that, students are given the chance to see what writing is made of, how their lives outside of the academy can become an integral component of their formal education.

And the work theme does not end there. Not only do students have descriptions and narratives of their work experiences to write about, they have a lot of ideas about work. Because students have had both positive and negative work experiences, they have opinions about jobs, bosses, co-workers, and even their own work ethic. Such information translates well into papers that deal with opinions, viewpoints, beliefs, editorials, or ideas. This, I believe, is especially important for students because of their seeming reluctance to admit to having an idea to write about when asked to. In short, many students are simply unaware of where ideas come from, that they actually have ideas, and such ideas are fair game to write about. And because work-related ideas are a real and palpable part of their lives, students can assume greater ownership of their writing, have more of a stake in it than if they were told to write an argumentative, persuasive, or expository paper on the drinking age, local legislation, the university core curriculum, or other such generic topics. What the work theme amounts to, then, is a wide range of topics suitable for personal, expressive essays as well as expository ones. And because the theme addresses the lives of the students we are now teaching, they will see the value of their efforts.

Not only is there much to write about using the theme of work in the composition classs, there is much to read as a way to spur students' thinking and to see other people's perspectives on the issue. I can think of no more appropriate a start than Studs Terkel's Working. While this collection of interviews with workers was published in 1972, students find it informative and engaging. It opens their eyes to occupations with which they are unfamiliar, thus educating them about worlds different from their own. It also provides perspectives on jobs they thought they knew all about. Because this collection of interviews is almost twenty years old, it provides a natural way for students to see how jobs have changed over the years. Most importantly, however, Working shows students the many ways in which people reflect on what they do for a living, the diverse ways people talk about their lives, and the wide range of ideas that can emerge from the topic. It is a hallmark of language at its richest because it is so very real. And there is something for everyone in the book:

> As the automated pace of our daily jobs wipes out name and face--and, in some instances, feeling--there is a sacriligeous question being asked these days. To earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow has always been the lot of mankind. At least, ever since Eden's slothful couple was served with an evication notice. The scriptural precept was never doubted, not out loud. No matter how demeaning the task, no matter how it dulls the senses and breaks the spirit, one must work. Or else. (xii)

Along with Terkel's book, a number of thematically based readers now include sections on working. In these, germane essays such as Virginia Woolf's "The Professions of Women" provide springboards for class discussion or topics for students to examine in their papers. And for composition classes that use literature, such classics as Death of a Salesman add additional voices to the conversation about work.

A course that employs (excuse the pun) the theme or work as its context is a way not only to engage students, but a way to help them produce their best--and most valuable--writing. Besides the work theme addressing the real student audience in our classes (much like we tell our students to write for specific audiences), such a composition course succeeds because it provides an important way for students to see how writing can relate to other aspects of their lives; that is, writing need not be something done only in English classes. Rather writing is a way to incorporate, examine, analyze, and perhaps even make sense out of other parts of their lives. Writing, therefore, can make sense to students, and they in turn can make sense out of it. The work theme, therefore, is a strong bridge between job and school.

The single-theme composition course, much like sequenced writing assignments a la Robert Coles, provides students with an opportunity to look closely and thoroughly at one aspect of their lives and the world around them. It guards against a superficial encounter with a topic. As David Bartholomae states in "Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins," "Our students have come to us...to learn. It is not enough to say to them that knowledge is whatever comes to mind. If we have them write one week on Democracy, and the next on Pollution and the week later on My Most Memorable Character, that is what we are saying to them. Tell me what comes to mind. The writing that I value, that demands something of me as a reader, that turns back on whatever comes quickly to mind, requires repeated and on-going effort. Students need to work at finding something to say. They have to spend time with a subject. That, to me, is what it means to be a writer at a university." (312)

The working theme also benefits students by giving them an opportunity to rethink their "career goals": why they want to do what they have chosen to do. For students who haven't yet decided what they want to do when they "grow up," it gives them a chance to explore the possibilities. Inherent in all of this comes an inquiry into the work ethic: what it is, why people believe in it, what has shaped people's beliefs, etc. The temptation to relate students' work ethics to their beliefs about what their responsibilities are as students (or their "student ethics") is not only rich, but I think justified. It calls into question the role of education in students' lives: is their presence in the university to secure a "formal" education or is it for pre-work "training"? In other words, why are students attending the university, what do they want from it, and what do they plan to put into it? And just as we can talk about "school" when asking such questions, replacing the word "work" continues the conversation.

Finally, the theme of work, as Freud asserts in Civilization and Its Discontents, "gives [people] a secure place in a portion of reality, in the human community." Such grounding appeals to students, I would think, because it helps to put their lives into perspective, gives them some sense of where they fit in. In a way, it is an inquiry into the past, present, and future tenses of their lives.

In the introduction to Working, Terkel reflects on the interviews he conducted: "During my three years of prospecting, I may have, on more occasions than I imagined, struck gold. I was constantly astonished by the extraordinary dreams of ordinary people." (xxiv) By examining the theme of work in a writing class, we can offer students the opportunity to explore those dreams that lie deep in their souls, to mine the depths to discover the riches within, to make tacit what would otherwise go unnoticed. Such is the stuff that makes writing important, writing that needs to be written and writing that demands to be read.