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ABSTRACT

Many high school English teachers rank their priorities according to the expectations of the institution in which they work. The scope of high school English teachers' jobs also differs from that of their college sisters and brothers. The former see themselves as accountable for the growth of the whole child, in addition to the growth of the child's expertise as a writer. Another difference lies in the fact that most college students have chosen to be there and have paid considerable money for the privilege. As a result, college writing teachers wield power. While few high school English teachers neither see themselves as writers nor are they encouraged to write for publication, their college counterparts can move up the career ladder as a result of publishing or speaking at conferences. For some high school teachers, teaching an activity they no longer perform causes rigidity. Many still teach the standard five-paragraph essay, a formula which focuses on form rather than content but which gets the job of organizing a student's writing done. Talking with former students who are now studying composition in college can help high school English teachers learn about writing instruction. (CR)

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High Schools Are from Mars, Colleges from Greece: Why We Exist Eons Apart

I teach in an overcrowded surburban high school in a changing community in New Jersey. South Brunswick used to be mainly farmland but now includes a population that lives in condominiums and works in offices along the Route 1 corridor, commutes from three hundred thousand dollar houses to businesses in New York City, and rents homes where old vehicles clutter the driveway. In a few years, we expect 2000 students, from diverse cultures, in South Brunswick High School.

These students jostle each other - and their teachers - in the dense hallways. Part of the itinerant stream, five times every day, English teachers push their way to classrooms, from which previous classes exit. The remaining two periods of the day, these same teachers prepare lessons, grade papers, and conference with students in a windowless office the size of a guest bedroom in a moderately priced house. This office holds sixteen desks, one for each member of the English department, a telephone, and two computers. It also doubles as a writing lab and a fast food center for English faculty.

Don't misunderstand: this description is not a plea for a new building nor a generalization. (Actually, a bond issue has been passed in my district and a larger high school, with a writing lab, is in the process of construction.) In some high schools across the country, English teachers teach four classes instead of five; and in others, English teachers unfortunately teach six. In some schools separate writing labs do exist. However, even in high schools where teachers teach four classes, or even in

new buildings, a gap exists between the way writing is taught in high school and the way it is taught in college because of the following: differences in the environments in which high school and college teachers work; inconsistencies between what each institution encourages its teachers to accomplish; and dissimilarities between student bodies and tasks.

The environment in which a high school English teacher works - and remember I must remain in my situation at least eight hours a day, five days a week - discourages reflection, original thinking, and private consultation with students. I have no place to hear my own voice separate from the voices of my colleagues; I have no space to consult with students and recognize their differences. Asked to teach five periods a day, with three different preparations, and scheduled for only one forty minute break in an office I share with fifteen others, I have little time to assimilate ideas, prepare lessons, and reflect on my practice.

A high school English teacher ranks her priorities according to the expectations of the institution in which she works. First of all, I must spend as much time as possible with my students. Secondly, I must act as an integral part of my department. This means building upon the work of colleagues who taught my students previously and preparing my students for colleagues who will teach them when i have finished. Although space may also be tight in many colleges and class loads burdensome, the high school English teacher's environment actually conforms to job expectations. Reflection and original thinking do not assume precedence.

The scope of the high school English teacher's job also differs from that of her college sisters and brothers. A high school writing teacher sees herself as accountable for the growth of the whole child, in addition to the growth of his expertise as a writer. Although more and more college writing instructors find themselves involved with school psychologists and developmental learning specialists, as far as I

know, they are not asked to stand in hallways and check hall passes, patrol bathrooms, sit in study halls, oversee decorum in cafeterias, break up fights, advise clubs and attend sports events; nor are they professionally obligated to meet with guidance counselors, school psychologists, drug and alcohol counselors, special education consultants and parents - while they teach writing.

Speaking of duties outside the scope of teaching writing, high school English teachers waste a great deal of time disciplining their students. Although I've heard stories about college students who torture their teachers by showing up late or sleeping through classes, most have chosen to be there. In fact, they have paid considerable money for the privilege. As a result, college writing teachers wield power. Students must behave and do their work; otherwise, they can be asked to leave (enrollment figures not withstanding). On the other hand, high school English teachers sometimes find themselves trapped - five days a week, ten months a year - with undisciplined students suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder, unstable homes, or various addictions. No wonder they find it difficult to initiate the give and take of teaching writing.

This brings me to yet another major difference: few high school English teachers write or see themselves as writers. If you were to ask them why, they would probably reply that they barely find time to respond to the writing they assign. Although this may be true, other issues interfere. The high school institution does not encourage teachers to write for scholarship, publication, or personal satisfaction. High schools set no formal expectations for faculty scholarship. Unlike my college counterparts, I will not move up the career ladder as a result of publishing or speaking at conferences. Since some high school teachers rarely write, they often find themselves teaching an activity they no longer perform.

Consequently, they may teach this activity in a rather rigid way. To the dismay

of some college writing instructors, many high school English teachers still teach the standard five-paragraph essay. Just as unpracticed cooks follow recipes, measuring their ingredients one by one, some high school English teachers enjoy the security of formulas. However, high school teachers not only rely on the five-paragraph essay because of their own lack of writing experience, they also rely on it because of their *students'* lack of skills. The high school teachers I speak to regard the five-paragraph essay as the shortest distance between two points: the point where students enter, only able to write in a disorganized, expressive fashion; and the point where students exit, qualified for college or the world of work.

Selected for its ease and expediency, the five-paragraph essay reinforces itself through peer pressure. Cramped together in small quarters, high school teachers hear each other teach writing all day long: "Where is your thesis, D.J.? I can't find it on your paper." "You can't think of a thesis? Surely something interested you in *The Scarlet Letter*?" "What nothing? Not even the idea that in a Puritan society Hester Prynne showed courage by keeping her fatherless child?" "Well, that was sort of interesting, wasn't it? Wouldn't that make a good thesis? Now, let's talk about your first body paragraph. What do you think your topic sentence should be?"

To me, its focus on form rather than content makes this dialogue painful. Most of us would agree that the five-paragraph essay has its place, particularly when a student's writing defies organziation, when a student knows nothing about structure. But, what if the student has *no* ideas of his own, like D.J., or two great ideas and needs three body paragraphs or four ideas and needs to compartmentalize them into three?

As a veteran high school teacher, I sometimes find myself wondering about the place of the five-paragraph essay in the high school curriculum. I know that younger students need structure, and that the five paragraph essay is a stage, a support, a

stepping stone for students to stand on and then jump beyond. Nevertheless, I am aware of its dangers: teachers concentrating on form rather than content; students concentrating on filling in the blanks, instead of taking risks and growing as writers and thinkers.

In all fairness to D.J.'s teacher, she did not create her student's thinking problem. Throughout his schooling, D.J. may not have been in the habit of taking responsibility for his own thinking; he may never have been required to analyze ideas. To take a different tact: perhaps D.J. did not even read Hawthorne's novel. (He might have glanced at Cliff Notes and listened to class discussion.) Whatever his deficiencies, D.J. has the attributes of a quintessential junkie: begging his teacher for a five-paragraph essay fix. Students like D.J., unpracticed in thinking for themselves, become addicted to five-paragraph essays; they're easier for them to follow than finding their own way through their thoughts.

And institutions, other than high school, reinforce this pattern. At the beginning of his junior year, D.J. must pass the New Jersey State High School Proficiency Test in writing. His teachers have been trained by the state in the requirements of this test, and administrators will judge the performance of D.J.'s teachers by the score D.J. achieves. Due to the grading rubric developed by the state, adequately written five-paragraph essays receive decent scores.

D.J.'s pragmatic teachers prepare their students for the High School Proficiency Test by teaching them three essay forms: persuasive, cause and effect, and problem solution. They prep their students to attack the Test by looking at the question asked and then deciding whether their answer should be in the form of a persuasive, cause and effect, or problem solution essay. Unfortunately, because of the grave repercussions of the High School Proficiency Test - funding, jobs, graduation requirements - D.J. may know what *kind* of essay to write, but may not know how to

answer the more difficult questions that remain unchallenged on the exam: for example, what does he value? Or, what does he think?

Even if D.J.'s teachers wished to give D.J. the time to experiment with different forms, to find his own voice, they might not have the time or space to do so. Certainly these deprivations hold true for some college writing teachers as well, but the limitations differ. Although college writing teachers sometimes teach MLA style and documentation; and depending on their department, a host of other things - argumentation, Introduction to Literature, how to read a newspaper - they know they have been hired to teach writing. A high school English teacher's job description is less focused: it involves covering a core curriculum which includes literary conventions and literature in addition to teaching writing. In my own case, I have been asked to teach everything from *Gilgamesh* through contemporary film, along with Shakespeare, Egyptian novels, and the dramatic elements of tragedy. Sometimes I find it hard to remember to teach writing.

I also find it hard to utilize Writing Workshop in my classroom, to conference with students effectively and encourage them to *really* think. Teaching over one hundred students five days a week, my energy is sapped and my resources limited.

Most high school English teachers, like some college writing teachers, cannot write their own curriculum or choose their own books. However, the scope of the problem differs because high school budgets include money for few new books; and unlike college, students do not buy their own. Furthermore, new book orders must pass community gatekeepers: Do the texts eliminate other cultures? Do they include explicit sex scenes? Are they listed elsewhere in the district? Since beginning writers often mirror their writing on what they read, books assume importance. Having to deal with budgets and community mores, high school writing teachers often find themselves with a paucity of models from which to teach.

And unfortunately, the available models include few essays. Presently, my English department is in the process of adding more essays to the curriculum. To our surprise, we have found few quality anthologies produced for high school audiences. In order to include essays in our curriculum, we must order books advertised for college composition courses (which perhaps is not a bad idea).

Nevertheless, despite difficulties, high school writing teachers labor to teach writing skills to the majority of students. And in most cases, we succeed - in a more limited fashion with some students than with others. Junior and senior year, after students have taken the High School Proficiency Test, emphasis on formulaic writing becomes less evident. Change can be viewed most clearly in tracked courses; for example, Advanced Placement and Academic English. In these courses, high school teachers work to bridge the gap between high school and college writing.

We do this by forcing students to make more choices: not only to choose their topics but also their forms. In addition, teachers emphasize conciseness and focus. (Our students, as I'm sure you've discovered, have problems getting to the point and proving their point.) Working in this manner, teachers of juniors and seniors re-emphasize the connection between thinking and writing. As a result, students take greater ownership of their work. Gene, in the reflective essay that accompanied his portfolio last year, wrote: "Thank you, Mrs. Lott, especially for enforcing the 'so what' in my papers; now I realize that is the main reason I write." And Trisha, in her end-of-the-year portfolio, wrote: "I was most proud of this paper because I was thorough with my investigation and report, yet kept the piece interesting and easy to follow. The topic really interested me, allowing me to speak with energy and excitement." One of my colleagues, who teaches Advanced Placement English, contributed the following student quotation to this talk: "Thank you for making me do it on my own. It hurt at first, but you were right; I have to make the decisions."

Although I learn a great deal from senior portfolios, I also learn about writing instruction from students who return from college to visit me. This past year, Christy, a freshman at Douglass College, taught me some important lessons. Interviewing me for a project she was doing in women's studies, Christy and I spoke on a regular basis.

This past October, when Christy first called me, I asked her about freshman English. "I'm barely getting 'B's'," she said. (Christy had been an "A/B" student in high school.) "It's really different. My instructor began the course by saying, 'Forget everything you ever learned in high school. We don't want the standard five paragraph structure here. We're interested in ideas, in your viewpoints.' " Since Christy exuded ideas as a senior in high school, I told her not to worry.

As we continued to communicate, and Christy continued to earn "B's" on her papers, she talked more and more about her freshman comp experience. "I'm doing a paper where my instructor asked me to refer to four different works of literature!" she told me. Actually, from what I could see, Christy was beginning to synthesize more than four pieces of literature. She was beginning to synthesize two languages: French and English. "You know, French writing in high school really helped me," Christy volunteered. "We used deductive reasoning, came to conclusions. In freshman comp they want you to play with ideas like we did in French last year."

When Christy received her first "A" in comp - on her fifth paper - she telephoned me, excitement in her voice. "What did you write about?" I asked her. We read this story by Rodriguez," Christy replied, "and this essay by Adrienne Rich. "I really liked the essay. It reminded me of Wordsworth's 'Ode.' Do you remember when we read Wordsworth senior year?"

Since Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" reverberates strongly for me at my age; and as far as I know, has inspired few of my students, I, of course, told Christy that I remembered it and asked her if she would mind sending me a copy of her

paper. Christy's college experience had certainly helped her to grow as a writer. A few lines from Christy's second paragraph follow:

> The theme threaded throughout "Ode Intimations of Immortality" centers around "re-vision," or what essayist Adrienne Rich defines as "...the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction."...Rich's views can be explained in relation to the idea of identity and maturity.... Hence, "re-vision" is a cycle: the cycle of life, which constantly transforms the being. ...Both Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken; Writing as Re-vision" and essayist Richard Rodriquez's "The Achievement of Desire" capture this "re-vision" as a cycle, in which women, Rich, and Rodriquez have followed a circular path toward forming identity and a rediscovery of the "Self."

In her initial paragraph, which I have not quoted, Christy states that Wordsworth also captures "re-vision" as a cycle and a rediscovery of Self.

Reading Christy's essay with interest, not only because she had been my student but also because she had connected Wordsworth and Rich, two writers of importance to me, I could not help but smile as I recalled her instructor's words: "Forget everything you learned in high school!" Fortunately, even though Christy learned a great deal from her college writing instructor, she did not follow her teacher's advice in this area. If she had, she might have forgotten Wordsworth; French 4; how to focus her ideas and make her point. And, she might also have forgotten the basic structure of a paper.

Of course, gaps exist between high school and college. Certainly we should try to bridge them. Too many colleges are in the business of remedial education as it is. But, even if this engineering fete - given the differences between institutions of learning - proves unsuccessful, some students will leap across anyway. Others, like Christy, will continue to swim hard, carrying their earlier education in waterproof satchels on their backs.

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