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ABSTRACT

Two years ago an instructor left a large public university to teach composition at the University of Findlay, a small private coeducational institution located in a city of 36,000 people south of Toledo, Ohio. Describing the differences between small and large schools, he touches upon the more personalized student-teacher interactions at Findlay. At his former school, he was not encouraged to know or even be interested in knowing most of his students beyond their work for his classes. The instructor has found Findlay's more personalized setting is influencing his teaching. Increasingly, he finds himself wanting to explore with students those topics which haunt them. He wants more of their work to grow from their questions, their trials, and their tribulations. (CR)

Personal Stories, Composition, and Varying Institutional Dynamics: What Role Does 'Story' Play in Small Schools Vs. Large Ones?

A paper submitted for the 1998 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication

April 1-4, 1998
Chicago, Illinois

by

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Whenever I attend large conferences such as this one, I can count on encountering one question several times. Whether I am at a session, riding innocently in an elevator, or sitting with friends in a restaurant, passersby want to know what it is like at The University of Finland. Sometimes I describe in great detail my life in Helsinki. However, I more frequently (if not more responsibly) explain that The University of "Find-lay" is a private, coeducational institution located in Findlay, Ohio--a city of 36,000 people located about 45 minutes south of Toledo. If the passersby still appear interested, I continue by explaining that the school was founded in 1882 by the Churches of God General Conference, and that we currently enroll 4,000 students--about half of whom are full-time. There are, I generally add, 127 full-time faculty members on campus but this number, much like the enrollment, is growing rapidly these days.

At this point, I pause for follow-up questions, and the first is almost invariably: "So, you're at a small school?" "Yes, yes" I reply with a grin and a nod, "Findlay is a small school."

As a conversation regarding the differences between small and large schools unfolds--as it often does in these situations--I find myself explaining the adjustments that I have had to make since leaving a large, public university for a small, private one almost two years ago. During these explanations, I typically touch upon the more personalized student-teacher interactions at Findlay, but rarely do I press beyond the general observation that such interactions exist. I do not, in other words, press into the tougher questions that a more personalized method of instruction raises, especially when it comes to writing instruction. However, several recent events suggest that I should. Before I share the questions that I would like to consider today, I want to sketch out the first of these events. The following three memos convey the story of Karyn W.--a first-year student who was enrolled in my freshman composition class last fall.

MEMORANDUM 1
October 13, 1997
To: Eric Martin
From: The Director of Counseling Services
Re: Your Student, Karyn W.

> This is to inform you that Karyn W. has been seen at the Counseling Services for symptoms related to depression. Those symptoms include insomnia, pervasive sadness, withdrawal and isolation, anxiousness, and inability to concentrate. These are likely affecting her attendance and/or performance in her classes. Please do not hesitate to call if you have any questions or concerns.

MEMORANDUM 2
October 20, 1997
To: Eric Martin
From: The Vice President for Academic Affairs
Re: Your Student, Karyn W.

> The Director of Counseling Services has notified this office that Karyn W. will miss some classes this week due to coping with the loss of her horse. Please work with Karyn as she struggles to work through this crisis in her life.

[I should note that The University of Findlay has a large Equestrian Studies Program; however, we are certain that Jane Smiley was not writing about us in *Moo.*]

MEMORANDUM 3
December 13, 1997
To: Eric Martin
From: Chair, Academic Standards Committee
Re: Your Student, Karyn W.

Recently you indicated to The Director of Counseling Services that you plan to fail Karyn W. in Freshman Composition because of excessive absences (19). I am writing to inform you that Ms. W has since appealed to this committee for a late withdrawal from your course. Attached you will find letters of support from The Director of Counseling Services and Ms. W.'s psychologist. These explain Ms. W.'s battle with depression--a battle which began when she was sexually abused as a child and which resulted in a suicide attempt not long ago. Due to recent changes in her medication as well as several circumstances beyond her control (including the death of her horse), this committee is inclined to support her request. Please let us know if you have additional information that we should consider.

As I received these memos and watched the story of Karyn W. unfold, I couldn't help but be puzzled. Okay, that's an understatement. On more than one occasion, I was heard crying out, "Only at Findlay!" "Only at Findlay can a student miss a class 19 times and still have recourse!" I followed such outbursts with trips to my colleagues' offices where I shared the absurd story.

I wasn't laughing at Karyn W., mind you. Her personal circumstances are tragic. Instead, I was confused by an institution which would go to such great lengths to treat a student so gently. Clearly, she did not belong in school last fall, and I dare say that the same student would not have received such attention at my former school. I know because during the five years that I taught there, I had numerous students who missed seven, eight, twelve, and nineteen times. These students simply failed the course. I neither saw nor heard from most of them again. On those few occasions when students did try to reveal profoundly personal information to wiggle around class policies, I did everything but close my eyes, stick my fingers in my ears, and sing at the top of my lungs "It's the Hard-Knock Life." At that school, I was not encouraged to know or even interested in knowing most of my students beyond their work for my classes. I wore my armor well.

However, I am beginning to realize that I cannot wear the same armor at Findlay. "The Personal" is simply too pervasive. Indeed, it is woven into the fabric of the institution and is revealed everyday through informal and formal channels alike. Like most campuses, personal information grows near office coffee pots, and it thrives in the campus snack bar. But at Findlay, it also springs from your mailbox each morning in the form of memos like those above, it throbs in the red light of your "incoming message" button whenever you return from class, and it downloads itself into your PC several times each day. The messages go something like these:

from voice mail
"Dr. Martin. I forgot to tell you last week that I'll be in court all this week because my uncle is suing a ski resort in Michigan. My cousin was killed last year when their lift collapsed when Tim was on it. I'm a witness. Let me know if this is a problem. --Becky."

from email
"Dr. Martin. I won't be in class today. My dad had a heart attack back home and I gotta go. I'll call asap when I get back. He's only 42. --Ben."

These messages reveal a great deal about Findlay students, if not the institution itself. The senders of such messages feel obliged to press beyond the basic information--"I won't be in class"--into their personal responses to the crises that they face--"my dad has had a heart attack; he is 42-years-old; this is unfair." Having now received a number of these messages, I have learned to anticipate what follows. When I see these students again, they will expect me to ask how things are going. If I don't, they will likely tell me anyway. At my former school, I resisted knowing and most students didn't press the matter.

Tough questions arise as a result. Does this institutional dynamic affect my teaching and, if so, how? Likewise, should it influence my teaching, and what do students and teachers gain (and/or lose) when a setting guides pedagogy in classes such as freshman composition?

In my former life, I had answers. The setting was so impersonal that it was easy to slip personal writing into freshman composition in controlled, risk-free ways. When I asked students to write a personal essay, for example, I knew that most would write about winning the big game or the death of a grandparent. Or when I asked students to personalize their argumentative writing, I knew that most would merely touch upon their personal beliefs regarding a topic before diving into a collection of sources. For most of those students, the opportunity to include or perhaps even foreground their personal experiences and observations was a welcome break. But because such moments were seen as breaks, most of the students kept their explorations short and safe.

Thus far at Findlay, I have taken the same approach toward introductory writing classes, but the different circumstances bring about different results. Because personal information precedes many students to class, because it drips from them as they work at their desks, and because it crawls into my briefcase to accompany me home at the end of the day, the stakes can be dramatically higher. I discovered as much in my first semester at Findlay.

I taught three sections of a basic writing course. As part of the course, students were asked to write a paper in which they discussed a significant person, place, or thing. After making the assignment, I expected to receive a mound of first drafts discussing either the big game or burying grandpa. In truth, I did receive a number of such essays, but I also received essays describing what it is like to be the child of an alcoholic, essays explaining life in a gang and the challenges of leaving that life behind, and essays sharing students' ongoing struggles with eating disorders. I even received an essay in which a student discussed her grandmother as the "most significant person in [her] life"--not because grandma's house was cozy in the winter and smelled of fresh-baked cookies, but because grandma was named the student's legal guardian when the student's father was sent to prison after killing her mother in a fit of rage.

Although I am certain that witnessing a murder is not an everyday experience for most college students, I am equally certain that issues such as alcoholism, drug abuse, gang violence, and eating disorders affect many more students than we realize. Such experiences are not unique to students at The University of Findlay. In fact, I am certain that students at my former school had many such experiences themselves, but they chose not to reveal them. The setting and the assumptions found therein were dramatically different. At that school, invitations to share such experiences were virtually nonexistent; at Findlay, they echo in every corridor.

Will this more personalized setting influence my teaching? Should it? Frankly, I don't see how it can't. What remains to be seen is just how it will do so and it is too soon to tell, although I have noticed changes. When I started teaching college writing eight years ago, *I* selected the topics and the readings, and the students wrote in response to assignments that *I* devised. Back then, control was the issue. I wanted to know that every reading was covered in full and that every writing exhibited the accepted features of academic discourse. Increasingly, however, I find myself wanting to explore with students those topics which haunt them. I want more of their work to grow from their questions, their trials, and their tribulations, even if it means that certain things go "uncovered." In short, I want my students to see that the writing they do in school can help them improve the conditions of their professional *and* personal lives.

Now I can hear my fellow administrators grumbling. Yes, I too realize the danger in such thinking. I recognize the potential for chaos and the need for accountability given that legislators, taxpayers, and boards of trustees are looking over our shoulders. Likewise, I realize that many students will not welcome such pedagogy because many come to college to escape their personal stories, not reveal them to perfect strangers. And I have trained enough teachers to know that some people are uncomfortable even seeing their students at *McDonalds* let alone learning the details of their private lives. I once felt the same way and, to be perfectly honest, I still do to a certain extent. However, I can't help but wonder whether change isn't inevitable for me given where I work. I can feel it.

I felt it very strongly one day last December when I wrote a lengthy memo of my own about Karyn W. and sent it to the Chair of the Academic Standards Committee. Among other things, I indicated that Karyn is an intelligent young woman with "above average" writing ability, and I expressed my sincere desire to see her succeed in school and life beyond. I also explained that I would welcome her back into my class the following term provided that her medications had stabilized and she could attend a morning class regularly. I also agreed with the committee's decision to allow her to withdrawal from my course late instead of receiving the F. As I dropped my memo through the "Inter-Office" mail slot in the basement of Old Main, I couldn't help but feel changed. I haven't thrown my old armor out quite yet, but I have replaced it with much lighter knee and elbow pads and a sturdy helmet. The fit is dramatically more comfortable.

As a profession, we have debated the role of personal story in the composition classroom for many years. While doing so, we have invoked pedagogical preferences, theoretical positions, and programmatic constraints. I currently teach at a small, private university several thousand miles southwest of Helsinki. The role of story in the composition classroom, it seems to me, is also largely dependent upon where your classroom is located and who is occupying the desks in front of you.

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