

# The CEA Forum

**Summer/Fall 2006: 35.2**

---

---

## DOES HAMLET BELONG IN FRESHMAN COMPOSITION?

### THE DEBATABLE ROLE OF CANONICAL LITERATURE IN COMPOSITION

[Marie A. Fitzwilliam](#)

---

The question of whether *Hamlet* belongs in a freshman composition classroom is one that institutions like mine are making easier to answer, though perhaps for political rather than pedagogical reasons. My colleagues and I have recently been asked to engage in a dialogue with the administration on institutional identity, which the provost claims is more professional than liberal. If she is correct, then *Hamlet* will most likely be a subject relegated to upper-level courses for English majors, not the stuff of papers in a first-year writing course. For if the goal of composition instructors is to provide the critical reading and writing skills necessary to surviving four years of college and entering the workplace, *Hamlet* and other representatives of canonical literature will become expensive luxury cars in a market that demands economy models. The debate centers on what goals fuel the required composition curriculum and if students may learn then from reading and discussing *texts* in general, as opposed to *the texts* (so-called great literature). Bear in mind that the prevalent gospel of compositionists is to ♦provide reasoning and writing skills that are broadly applicable across the university [and] will carry over to the work of students in other classes and fields of inquiry♦ (Moskovitz and Kellogg 313).

A look at the 2000 WPA (Writing Program Administrators) [Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition](#) indicates that the skills being measured♦♦rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, reading, and writing processes, and knowledge of conventions♦♦are generic ones that may be learned from examining any relatively complex text. Indeed, students could glean much about purpose and audience by examining print advertising or political blogs. They could, in fact, learn a great deal about the ♦relationship among language, knowledge, and power♦ (quoting WPA) from analyzing an important document in European history (Machiavelli's *Prince* comes to mind). Familiarity with the generative and re-visionary process of writing could come from exploring any of the texts mentioned above in discussion, followed by drafting and rewriting, with each subsequent step paying greater attention to refining thinking and expression. Conventions of grammar, punctuation, and syntax might be reinforced at each step of the writing process using examples from student texts.

None of these goals suffers from the absence of *Hamlet*. Indeed, whether one calls the course First-Year Seminar (FYS), Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) or Introduction to Academic Writing, students benefit from

analyzing and writing about texts from a range of disciplines—not just canonical texts—as that is the essence of academic inquiry. Absent *Hamlet*, the process of writing supersedes the product, the artistry of this great and enigmatic text, which too often becomes a more compelling focus of instructors than the nuts and bolts of invention and student writing. To quote Sharon Crowley, the respectful attitude towards already completed texts embraced by literary scholars does not necessarily forward the productive or generative art that is composition (13). Put another way, texts like *Hamlet* also produce what composition scholars call an anxiety of coverage that trumps process pedagogy, the purported goal of a freshman writing course (Brent 268).

On still another level, sans *Hamlet*, composition instructors could come from a larger pool of faculty, so long as they are willing to engage in the labors of writing-intensive instruction familiar to those who have been TAs and later instructors in English departments or writing centers. As has been argued by Lex Runciman, there is much to be said for seminars taught by any teacher on any topic that lends itself to inquiry, provided the course adopts certain pedagogical practices and encourages in students a self-conscious awareness of the intellectual habits and mind associated with those practices (qtd. in Brent 262). Perhaps the best benefit from this practice is cross-discipline dialogue on writing and pedagogy, removing some of the stigma presently associated with writing as a service course taught primarily by underpaid adjuncts and untenured faculty. As Cary Moskowitz and David Kellogg argue, involving all disciplines in first-year writing would make the entire academic community more invested in and accepting of the writing program's place in their curricula (320).

Moving away from composition pedagogy to cultural trends and economic expediency, *Hamlet's* presence in the classroom would seem to conflict with the 21st-century democratization of culture that has tended to level the distinction between high and popular works. Though it is an exaggeration, quoting Donald Lazere, to say that cultural studies have put *Seinfeld* and Shakespeare on the same level aesthetically (300), it would not be unfair to note that mass-cultural texts like *Seinfeld* have become incredibly popular in the university classroom, if only because they are almost universally known. A cursory look at home pages of two prestigious schools, Duke and Chapel Hill, yields statements about the success of their newly modified writing programs in preparing students for and enhancing the academic experience. Duke's required Academic Writing course bills itself as Introduction to the complexities of producing sophisticated academic argument, with attention to critical analysis and rhetorical practices and seeks to engage students with such provocative titles as Cannibalism to Anorexia, Sex and the Citizen, and, last year, Queer Eye Culture, clearly topics designed around pop culture rather than traditional literary texts. The two additional writing courses fall under the rubric of Writing in the Disciplines where all inquiry relates to a chosen field: science, social science, art, or humanities. Likewise, at Chapel Hill, the required First Year Seminar is offered by the different disciplines, not exclusively by the English department. The two succeeding writing courses, entitled Composition and Rhetoric, are billed in the course description as being process, group-oriented courses designed for various discourse communities. Once again, reflecting current trends, great texts per se do not play a major role.

Economically speaking, the shift from *Hamlet* to *Queer Eye* also seems to make sense. Simply put, if departments can staff and fund a course like freshman composition more effectively through, say, institutional training and writing center mentoring of faculty across disciplines without compromising assessment, why should they hire specialists in literature? With about 60 percent of high school graduates making their way to college where most identify career skills as the top priority, the idea of a university has changed radically from John Henry Newman's or Matthew Arnold's. Providing students with measurable skills that translate into the raw data that impresses state and federal funding agencies has become more important than teaching intangibles on the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or what John M. Ellis calls an understanding of human existence (2).

Having considered all the reasons why *Hamlet* does not belong in the freshman composition curriculum, let us look at why it might. However, to do so, we must step away from the current obsession with measurable skills and into the realm of intangibles. Provided the process of writing is not sacrificed at the Altar of the Bard, why not introduce students to the beauty and artistry of his language? If we teach students only what they need, we succumb to the gods of professionalization and utility. As Lear tells his daughters, Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man's life is cheap as beast's (2.4.266-67). There are worse fates for the average college

freshman than being exposed to arguably the greatest writer in the English language before entering her chosen field where she will probably never have the opportunity to read Shakespeare. In fact, as very few students take literature courses beyond those intending to become English majors, the freshman writing sequence is the best opportunity to expose them to great writers. The caveat here is that *Hamlet* should be a vehicle for students writing to learn and learning to write (to use Susan McLeod's mantra) and providing that other texts are present.

Somewhere between the 19th-century philosophy that reading and writing about great literary works fosters desirable moral values, seen by some as a tool for consolidating upper-middle class hegemony, and the 21st-century utilitarian view of textuality lies the answer: a required two-semester writing sequence taught by cross-institutional faculty in which the first is a bona fide academic inquiry course espousing process pedagogy generated by readings and discussion to suit the instructor's interest, and the second a theme-based composition and Great Works course. Whether the theme of the latter course were Great Tragedies or Great Scientists or Freud and His Critics, the inquiry would continue to hone essential writing skills established in the earlier course. This configuration would embrace the cross-discipline teaching that would ameliorate the stigma of remediation from writing courses and foster more institutional commitment and diversity in freshman composition. Most importantly, it would broaden student definitions of writing as something other than literary criticism to a more realistic view of academic inquiry and conventions. As Elaine P. Maimon notes, once freshman form their definition of writing through the required gen. ed. composition course, it is difficult to modify (xi).

I am not naïve enough to believe that my suggestions are without the roadblocks that are still the subject of debate at colleges and conferences. First and foremost, one must ask whether the burden of teaching such courses would not continue to fall on the newest members of the college community and the most vulnerable. Would English departments get hung up on labels and territoriality? How should the funding be distributed and the FTEs calculated? Nevertheless, I am convinced that neither academic integrity nor the liberal arts mission would be compromised if *The Origin of Species* were to share the stage with *Hamlet* in freshman writing courses. Indeed, *Hamlet* might be more desirable to the intellectually curious freshman if it were not the default text, but one option among a diverse number of texts great and small, taught with enthusiasm and a commitment to generating students' thinking and writing skills.

## Works Cited

- Brent, Doug. Reinventing WAC (Again): The First-Year Seminar and Academic Literacy. *College Composition and Communication* 57.2 (2005): 253-276.
- Crowley, Sharon. *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1998.
- Ellis, John M. *Literature, Social Agendas, and the Corruption of the Humanities*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997.
- Maimon, Elaine P. Preface. *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs*. Eds. Susan H. McLeod and Margot Soven. Newbury Park: SAGE, 1992. ix-xiv.
- McLeod, Susan H. Writing Across the Curriculum: An Introduction. *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs*. Eds. Susan H. McLeod and Margot Soven. Newbury Park: SAGE, 1992. 1-11.
- Moskovitz, Cary, and David Kellogg. Primary Science Communication in the First-Year Writing Course. *College Composition and Communication* 57.2 (2005): 307-334.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Boston: Houghton, 1974.

**Marie Fitzwilliam** ([fitzwilliamm@cofc.edu](mailto:fitzwilliamm@cofc.edu)) is a Senior Instructor at the College of Charleston. She writes, "Specializing in Victorian literature with a dissertation and publications on Elizabeth Gaskell's short fiction, I now teach composition classes exclusively. Because of my background, I have sought to explore the emphasis in many writing classrooms on the literary analysis of canonical works and the temptation to consider the already-completed text to the detriment of the writing process itself. This paper also considers how the literature/composition pairing limits the pool of writing instructors to a specific and sadly too-often disenfranchised group." Her website is [www.cofc.edu/~fitzwilm/](http://www.cofc.edu/~fitzwilm/).

Return to the [Table of Contents](#)