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SUMMER
READING:

A must read for any teacher of writing, Brookfield and Pre-skill's *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* gives practical advice for utilizing discussion effectively in composition. Share your experiences with the book and in your classroom on our facebook page.

CompTalk

What Happens in the Contemporary Writing Classroom?

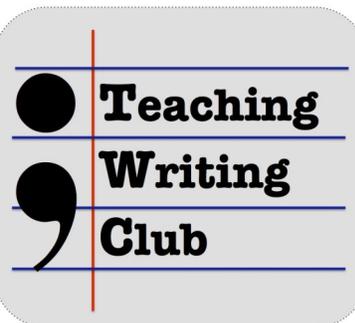
by *Emily King*

For this last issue of the academic year, *CompTalk* focuses on approaches to the teaching of writing. We've asked some faculty and students to share their experiences with different pedagogies as we share some of our own.

The composition classroom is no stranger to trends, and, although most teachers would hate to think about their pedagogy as trendy, it's hard to deny that our practices are highly influenced by what's happening in the world and in popular culture. Because our discipline is tied to the way people communicate, we often have to ask: What are people talking about? Or sometimes, what *should* people be talking about?

What draws so many of us to the teaching of writing is that, in addition to our passion for language, we love that we get to create curriculum that is meaningful to us. In first-year writing, lectures are few and far between and individual classrooms are as

diverse as their instructors. Though we share similar goals for our students, and we teach the same key concepts, we approach the instruction differently. In one classroom you might explore the rhetoric of zombies, or, perhaps, the rhetoric of music, the environment, nutri-



tion, politics, or even comics. These "themes" are used as platforms to teach the ins and outs of composition and rhetoric.

Why the themes, you might ask? The purpose of teaching a themed composition class goes beyond our desire to have fun with writing. These themes allow us to understand the ways people think, the ways we write, and the ways we make mean-

ing beyond the classroom. As a platform for understanding rhetoric, the themes provide a useful (and purposeful) process of learning that encourages a philosophy that all knowledge is connected. In addition, thematic courses are aligned with department and university-wide efforts to

help students make connections between disciplines and amongst schools of thought. CSUF's new Pathways program and other learning community programs are examples of these approaches. Some campuses utilize "one campus/one book" programs that also support this kind of thinking.

What is particularly exciting about this pedagogy is that, while it provides teachers the opportunity to teach more effectively by engaging students in meaningful dialogue and processes of learning, it also supports university efforts to encourage student retention and possibly increase graduation rates. It seems to be a win/win for everybody.

Teaching Literacy Narratives

by Martha A. Webber

The literacy narrative is a key genre in the field of rhetoric and composition. It tells a vivid story or stories about impactful literacy, literacy practices, or literacy sponsors (institutions, organizations, communities, cultures, media, families, ourselves, etc.) in the narrative writer's life, family, or larger community. Some literacy narratives blend memoir and academic discourse forms while others are entirely narratives that draw on memoir and creative nonfiction essay forms to communicate meaning. Creating research through composing literacy narratives (see Brodkey, Rodriguez, Rose, Royster, Yagelski) as well as research about literacy narratives (Brandt, Hawisher and Selfe, Selfe) has developed extensively in the sub-field of literacy studies since the late 1980s.

Mike Rose, on writing *Lives on the Boundary*:

"I had been doing both kinds of writing – poetic and scholarly – for six or seven years, both important to me but each separate, separate in purpose, style, and audience. Over time, this separation began to feel artificial, splitting life apart, an attempt to understand and render experience with one linguistic hand tied behind my back. I became curious about the possibility of combining different kinds of writing" (Afterword 243-4).

A Unit on Literacy Narratives:

I have developed a unit on rhetoric and composition for my English 307 class where I teach Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, a 250-page literacy narrative that weaves his early literacy experiences in South Los Angeles together with his development as a composition tutor, teacher, and advocate for literacy education for underserved populations. His focus on estimations of intelligence and their connection to writing

and conceptions of writing error moves from his experiences to offer a powerful challenge to the American educational system and culture more largely. I note Rose's shift from his individual experience to larger insight by his conclusion when students move from reading *Lives on the Boundary* to writing their own literacy narrative or analyzing a number of them for the major assignment in the unit. Although students have the choice to compose a "creative-analytical" or "analytical" literacy narrative essay, I emphasize that all essays should focus on a specific form of literacy or literacy sponsor where the experience they write about moves outward to recognize a larger insight or significance. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose represented school or "critical" literacies to offer larger insights about the ideas we have about intelligence and error in the U.S., but I encourage students to compose a narrative about or research a form of literacy that has been significant to them.

Throughout the unit, we discuss Rose and students engage in informal writing that is both creative and analytical to consider the book and conceptual terms related to the field of rhetoric and composition, like literacy sponsor and emic/etic perspectives. For a TITANium online post, students in the class search the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (<http://daln.osu.edu>), the largest collection of literacy narratives available to researchers in the field. The online archive is open-source and contains text, audio, image, and video files of narratives investigating a range of literacies and literate experiences. They range from the powerful to the Power-Point (seriously).

In the past, I have taught a first year composition unit on the literacy narrative featuring a short excerpt of Rose and a number of narratives from the archive. Please contact me if you want any teaching materials or additional resources on literacy narratives.

Reflection on Writing: Literacy and Me

A literacy narrative experience by Daniel Turrubiarres

One of the motivations for writing my literacy narrative was to discover more about how language came about in my early development. At first, I found it a little daunting to write a narrative about literacy, especially my own. What I discovered, however, was that storytelling was a common theme in my literacy journey. After that, I felt more confident about, not only writing the narrative, but presenting it at the Acacia Conference as well. This was the first time

I'd ever written something like this. If I were to ever teach composition I think the literacy narrative would be a great way for students, at any level, to learn more about themselves and what they've gained in regards to their own literacy paths. After writing the narrative, I gained more of an interest in literacy narratives and hope to discover other areas of my own literacy as I continue my education.

Environmental Rhetoric in English 101

by *Elle Mooney*

In my freshman composition class I focus the course readings and writing assignments on an overarching theme – nature and the natural world. Focusing on one topic isn't a new idea; in fact, many composition classes use this strategy to teach composition. A course theme offers a continuous conversation based on an accumulation of new viewpoints that are integrated with forming and existing ideas. The course topic can then be expressed and re-expressed through a variety of rhetorical modes that allow the students to learn effective strategies within an ongoing discussion.

Sounds good right? Except that nature is not an overwhelmingly popular choice for a themed class. For every four students that are excited about the topic, there are usually another twenty or so who are not excited about it at all. A handful might even be angry about it. But I'm always glad those students are in the class because their attitudes challenge the expected rhetoric around nature. Conversely, the psyched students challenge the skeptical as well because their attitudes often defy perceived ideas about who "likes" nature and who doesn't.

When the topic of "the natural world" is brought into the classroom, there can be assumptions that make the conversation difficult. Students are often resistant to meaningful conversations about nature. Some people assume that the conversation will focus on a policy-driven stance or veer into the poetic, and words like tree-hugger, eco-snob, and environmentalist (often used derogatorily with accompanying air-quotes) are tossed around. Also, many people tend to view the natural world as something occurring beyond the classroom, or even outside the human world or human activities, and so they resist finding connections between the two.

In a heterogeneous population, which is of course represented in the classroom, we get to ask, why are there such contradictory attitudes about nature? Where do these contradictions lay? Even more interesting to ask is why do some not think about nature at all? Rather than look at similarities, I prefer to analyze differences, because that allows a larger range of voices to be heard, which broadens the scope of the topic even further and gives a more realistic view of nature rhetoric.

In this spirit, the first essay I assign asks the student to consider their personal relationship with the natural world, be it adversarial, ambivalent or groovy. We warm up to this by analyzing images on Facebook, Instagram and in the media. We ask: What clues are offered in selfies and vacation snaps that might explain a relationship to the natural world? How does the media manipulate our perceptions of nature? How do these images affirm or contradict what we experience everyday?

Then we read narratives from a variety of writers who discuss their relationship to the natural world. Reading a range of voices lets the students find their place along a spectrum of attitudes, none right or wrong. Writing about it lets them see that their attitudes have an originative story, which informs their worldview.

Students tell me that the second essay I assign is the hardest one, and it is. I'm still working the bugs out, but I feel it is an important one so I continue to use it. I have the class observe any natural phenomenon in real time, analyze it, and then synthesize that analysis with any of the authors we've read to that point. Their reading includes personal narratives from authors like Momaday and Ehrlich and more scientific and analytical essays that look at phenomena, like the work of Darwin, Lewis, and Ackerman. I often notice several struggles with this essay once students realize that lightning, hurricanes, and tsunamis may not occur in time to inform their essay. To observe a phenomenon, they are forced to look deeper into the mundane, and this feels boring (unfortunately, this semester's essay was due before the La Habra earthquakes).

Also, once a phenomenon is decided on, students often feel they do not have authority over what they are witnessing because they are not scientists. Yet, they are witnesses. I use social models to show how they wouldn't question their assessment of a band's new music, or even their classroom space, and they are not professional music critics, architects or psychologists. So, I ask the class: "What is it about nature that makes us question our authority to speak?" To help them answer this, I have them look at topics they feel connected to, and in each case, this connection comes from interaction and involvement with the topic, access they grant themselves. Then we look at what we conceive to be natural or unnatural. This exercise is difficult to do logically which helps students become aware of the rhetorical barriers constructed between themselves and the natural world that may undermine access and interaction.

By then end of the course, we have read through a variety of ideas regarding the natural world, and written through various modes to better understand our own relationship with nature and to begin to see the rhetoric that surrounds nature. Perhaps students have discussed their relationship with nature for the first time, challenged it, and researched a little, so they are now ready to take an informed reflective position on the topic. I offer (and I hope) that perhaps they will re-examine their position beyond the class because of this reflection.

By providing rhetorical conditions that allow the examination and interrogation of personally and culturally held beliefs and assumptions, the topic of the natural world can be an effective strategy for teaching writing. Any topic that questions unexamined cultural, social and historical beliefs ignites and allows the critical thinking necessary to engage in meaningful and inclusive academic conversation, and this benefits the emerging scholar.

So, What Are You Gonna Do With Your Life?

Our graduating members share their plans for the future (near and far)

Stephanie Flint: I'm signed up to teach two courses at CSUF this summer and I'm really excited to be a bonafide instructor!

Kim George: I am currently applying for adjunct teaching positions for the fall. Over the summer, I've decided to do some private tutoring rather than teach classes. I'm hoping to relax and travel a bit before jumping back into teaching and commuting in the fall.

Cameron Young: My plan is to teach at a community college and get an eventual professorship at a university. After I graduate and (hopefully) begin teaching, I will also be working on my novel with the hope of an eventual publication.

Emily King: Well, I'd really like to get that tattoo and move to the woods; that would be ideal. But I'll probably stick it out a bit longer and teach some composition.

Ashley Lunsford: Try to take over the world of composition ^_^ (actually she's headed up to SFSU for graduate study).

Sara Uribe: Get married, go on a honeymoon, and enjoy a few drinks! Then get back to the classroom. I need it in my life!

Ian Tompkins: Teach English at an independent school while I pursue my credential.

Elle Mooney: Teach at CSUF and Fullerton College. I also plan to study for the GREs, get back in shape, and make art again!

Bob Neis: Immediately after the graduation ceremony, I am going to drive to Big Sur, undergo a Native American sweat lodge ritual, have a good cry, and return fully prepared to teach!

Calls for Papers: Focus on the Classroom

The Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association's 2014 conference will be held October 31st through November 2nd in Riverside, CA. The conference has space for a wide variety of topics, but one of greatest interest to the pedagogically minded is comparative media, which provides room for investigations of media in the classroom. 500 word abstracts are due May 15th 2014. Find the PAMLA CFP

here: <http://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/node/56382>

4 C's is accepting proposals for their 2015 conference on the theme of risk and reward. Submitters are encouraged to share reflections on classroom practices (successes and failures). Proposals are due May 19th. For more information, go to the NCTE's website: <http://www.ncte.org/cccc>

Thank You *CompTalk* Contributors!

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This newsletter began in the spirit of collaboration with a desire to promote a sense of community and to provide a platform for intellectual exchange amongst teachers and students of composition. Your voices have made that possible. Thank you!