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Uncommon Composition

The Best Non-Required Reading for Composition Teachers

*Composition at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln
139 Andrews Hall / 472-1803*



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The Writing Center will reopen in the Fall.

See you then!



New Associate Coordinator of the Writing Center

In the fall of 2008, Mike Kelly will begin work as the new Associate Coordinator of the Writing Center. He will collaborate with faculty coordinator Frankie Condon to make the writing center more responsive to a university-wide population.

Mike is finishing up his second year in the PhD program specializing in composition and rhetoric. During his time at UNL, Mike has taught first-year writing classes in the TRIO program as well as worked as a writing center consultant for two semesters. He is looking forward to transforming the writing center into a hub of writing activity university-wide. Please stop by the new WC, now housed in Andrews 115, any time to say hello.

Josh and Sandy's Office Hours:

Josh:
Tuesday/Thursday
9:00-12:00

Sandy:
Office hours change weekly. Please see office door for details!

From the Classroom of Daryl Farmer
by Sandy Tarabochia

Daryl Farmer is a fifth year PhD student and creative non-fiction writer who has developed a dynamic approach to teaching writing during his tenure here at UNL. Daryl's writing pedagogy, grounded in a deep respect for liberal arts education, focuses on two things: empathy and engagement. "The joy of fiction writing," says Daryl, "is getting inside the mind of another person." Daryl delights in challenging students in his creative writing, literature and composition courses to develop characters unlike themselves, to draw a reader onto the page by understanding and representing how others perceive the world.

Daryl purposefully designs writing activities that invite his students to approach unfamiliar situations, experiences and perspectives with the hope that this way of "imagining an audience," of "connecting with other people," will cultivate empathy. For example, early in the semester, Daryl often asks students to think of a conflict they experienced recently, a time when they were really angry. Students compose the scene using as much detail as they can. Then, Daryl has students write the story again, this time from the perspective of the person who made them angry. The experience has a lasting effect on students, Daryl reports, because it pushes them out of their comfort zones, disrupts their familiar ways of looking at the world.

A sense of empathy often goes hand in hand with close observation, another skill foundational to liberal arts education which Daryl emphasizes in his writing classes. Students often don't even realize they aren't paying attention, Daryl notices. In response, he incorporates several methods for helping students become more conscious of the world around them. One invention activity, for example, focuses on point of view. Daryl has students read Joyce Carol Oates' story "Ghost Girls" and talk about the way a character's perception of their world creates tone in a piece of writing. The girl in the Oates story, for example, is constantly surrounded by death, the fear of death, etc., and is hyper-aware of its presence in each moment of her life. Then, adapting an activity from John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*, Daryl has students go outside and observe Andrews Hall.

Daryl asks them to describe the building from the perspective of a man who just lost his son in the war.

Then they describe it a second time as young college students who have just fallen in love. The trick is that students can't explicitly refer to the context. They must indicate the point of view through descriptive writing. "A lot of what we talk about with the piece," Daryl explains, "is the way that environment can be used to create nuance in a piece of writing."

Student engagement is central to Daryl's teaching philosophy. "It's too easy to be disengaged," these days, he explains. "Students could spend their lives behind a computer screen and feel productive." So Daryl makes it a point to get his students out of the classroom. One assignment in particular is based on the idea that "eavesdropping is one of the best ways to learn about language and dialogue." To experience this first hand, Daryl sends students into the field. "I have them write a profile about someone outside their norm, their usual life," he begins. "But they can't use the first person." At first, students resist the process of describing an experience they've never had from the perspective of someone very different from themselves. Eventually, though, they understand the point of the exercise and immerse themselves in the assignment. Daryl's had students arrange police car ride-alongs and observe meetings of the UNL Juggling Club.

From composing fiction pieces to personal essays, no matter what the writing task, it's all about "human connection," for Daryl and his students. Personal experience is a valuable resource for writers of all kinds, but empathy and engagement with others guide Daryl's students to find in their stories "meaning that is compelling and fresh for readers." "I tell them stories weave a textile of what we are," Daryl explains. For him, the goal for teachers of writing is to encourage students to contribute to the tapestry, to write their stories, whatever they may be.

To see Daryl's pedagogy of empathy and engagement in action, check out an excerpt from one of his English 252 writing activities on page 4 of this newsletter.

Celebrate Good Times: Changes in the Writing Program

By Josh Call

Well, another year has come and gone. Rather than celebrate with a pictorial retrospective set to cheesy 80's hair music, we thought we would take a quiet moment and reflect on all the happenings that this year has brought us and celebrate some of the upcoming changes for the program. Feel free to sing accompaniment with your favorite Poison tune.

New Faculty News!

We will be joined in the Fall by **Dr. Shari Stenberg**, currently Associate Professor of English, Director of Composition, and Assistant Director of the Honors Program at Creighton University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in writing, literacy and community, pedagogy, composition and rhetorical theory, and service-learning. Professor Stenberg is the author of *Professing and Pedagogy: Learning the Teaching of English* (National Council of Teachers of English, 2005) and has published extensively on teacher development, feminist and critical pedagogy, and service-learning in edited collections as well as *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *JAC*, and the *Journal of Basic Writing*. Professor Stenberg will head up our new Program of Excellence, the **Faculty Leadership for Writing Initiative**, which aims to foster capacity and leadership for writing across campus and in the K-12 schools.

Writing Center News! (also New Faculty News!)

There are several changes underway for the Writing Center. In addition to the new look, the Writing Center also received a new name (here's a hint, it involved doing something with the word "assistance"). For the moment, the Writing Center (or as we like to say, the "WC") has undergone some impressive renovations, moving from Andrews 129 to its shiny new home in Andrews 115. To celebrate its new location, the Writing Center has been updated with new furniture (nice comfy chairs and coffee table) and an impressive bank of networked terminals for use during consultations.

Beginning Fall 2007, the Writing Center will have a new faculty coordinator: **Professor Frankie Condon**. Professor Condon is currently Associate Professor of English and Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in writing center theory and practice, first-year and advanced composition, including analytical and rhetorical writing, *Race in America*, among others. She brings a wealth of Writing Center experience and expertise, having worked in, written about, given presentations on, and served in professional organizations devoted to Writing Centers since 1993. Dr. Condon's new co-authored book, *The Everyday Writing Center: a Community of Practice*, has just been published by Utah State University Press. Professor Condon also has published in *Praxis*, a writing center journal, in the journal *College Teaching*, and in a collection called *Foregrounding Ethical Awareness in Composition and English Studies*.

New Course News! (also tied to WC news and New Faculty news)

Beginning this fall, the composition program will be offering a new course 480/880: Writing Center Theory and Practice, taught by Professor Condon. Operating on a yearly rotation, this new course will focus on the historical and disciplinary conversations around and coming out of writing center scholarship as well as practical training in writing center consultation.

All in all, a pretty exciting year of changes! We welcome our two new faculty members, Shari Stenberg and Frankie Condon, look forward to the exciting work that they bring to our program, and anticipate another exciting and successful year.

Classroom Connection: An Exercise in Empathy
By Daryl Farmer

Class Exercise: Think of a specific conflict you have had at some point in your life, where you and the other party were angry with each other. The exercise works especially well if the conflict revolves around a single incident. This conflict might be an actual fight, or an argument, and could be with a peer, or a parent, or a boss, or a significant other, etc. Now, explain in writing the incident or conflict, but from the other person's perspective.

This is an exercise designed for fiction, but I'll use it in my nonfiction classes as well. Often, in discussions that follow the writing assignment, students will say that they "feel bad now," or that now they understand that the incident wasn't entirely the other person's fault. I have been interested in how often the exercises have relied on humor, how the students use the voice of the other person to poke fun at themselves.

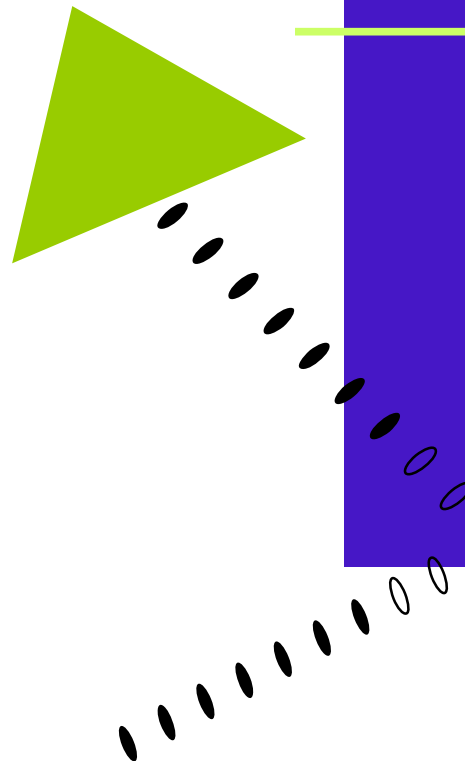
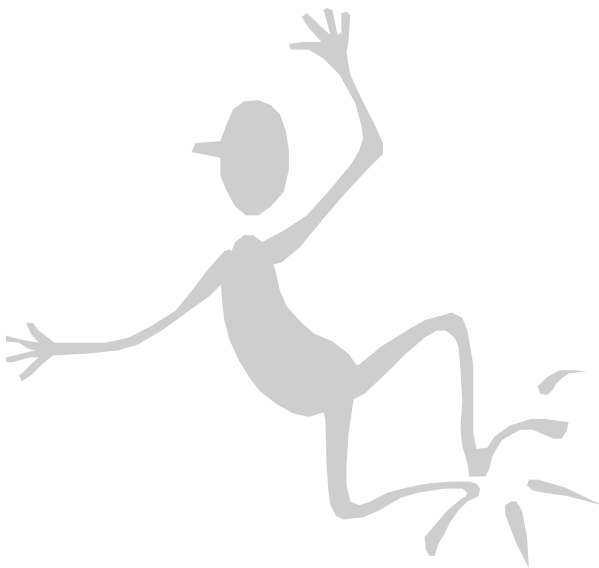
The exercise serves a couple of purposes. For fiction writers, it is a way to step outside of their own selves and appropriate a unique voice and to approach conflict from a new perspective.

Also, the very nature of the exercise infuses the writing with a sort of tension--always a good thing. But I think the best aspect of this exercise is that it develops empathy.

For the nonfiction class, the exercise can be used to spark a discussion about the ways in which writing can work to reveal complexities rather than hide behind simplistic sloganism. In her essay "Moral Fiction," Mary Gordon writes, "Serious fiction is uniquely qualified to combat the sound bite. It says that the truth of human beings is often more complicated than we think." Empathy, it seems to me, is one of the writer's most important tools.

"Empathy, it seems to me, is one of the writer's most important tools."

~Daryl Farmer



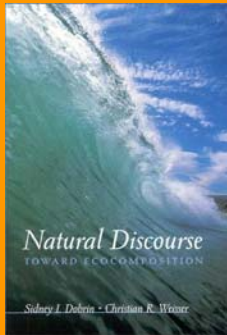
Natural Discourses: Toward Ecomposition
By Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser
Review by James Engelhardt

As discussions about “place” gain momentum in English studies, a small but growing number of composition instructors have begun to assemble around the idea of “ecomposition.” Two very visible and influential figures in the field, Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser, have written a slim book, *Natural Discourses: Toward Ecomposition*, that attempts to articulate the concerns of the field. If you take nothing else away from Dobrin and Weisser, you should at least take away that they believe that any composition class—ecomposition or other—must be about composition, about student writing, about teaching writing. They take a good half dozen other writers to task for emphasizing reading or criticism over student writing. Because ecomposition is a young field—maybe ten years, by name—the authors work hard to underscore what it does. But more importantly, they describe the new projects, the new understandings, that make this practice important and necessary. First among their ideas is that nature is a pre-existing force on everything that has happened, is happening, will ever happen. Relatedly, they argue that ecomposition is about context in the most profound and varied sense(s) possible. They make clear that “place” is nuanced and changing. Place is physical, but also cultural, intellectual and historical. Lastly, they see ecomposition as a practice that continues and extends a variety of progressive composition classroom strategies and/or ideologies. Ecomposition, as they envision it, is interdisciplinary and activist.

They offer two general approaches to the ecompositional classroom, but have very little else in the way of classroom practices.

Instead, this is a book that builds a theoretical underpinning that should suggest appropriate practices. Of the classroom practices, they first discuss the “ecological literacy approach.” This has four key aspects. First, place and setting are emphasized (including non-natural places). Second, they call for multiple perspectives and disciplines, including contrary voices, in the classroom. Their third point is fairly traditional for composition: have an audience for the writing projects beyond the classroom, though they argue for understanding internet and web places as public. Lastly, in the manner of Freire, they believe that ecomposition students should be asked to be critical of their environments and should consider how their work affects that environment.

The second illustration they offer is the “ecological discourse approach,” the practice they seem to favor. Here, they ask for instructors to challenge their students to see their writing as being situated in complex, ecological relationships to their environment(s). First, this approach stresses the reciprocal position of writer and writing to each other and to the world “out there.” Second they argue for the importance of understanding language itself as situated. They mean here that it is situated in culture and place as well as situated within sentences that are in turn situated in paragraphs, and so on. Third, they again stress that writing starts in a *place*. That is, before writing can be individual, can even be formed by an individual, writing is already out in the world. Thus, the ecological discourse approach will situate students in discourse. They add, later, that discourse, too, begins in *place*. Dobrin and Weisser turn their attention briefly, in the final chapter, to issues surrounding rhetoric.



Book of Note

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There's a bit of facile, verging on specious, discussion of Aristotle as an ur-eco-rhetor. They read his broad interest in natural phenomena as well as his similarly broad interest in human culture as evidence that he was a systems thinker. Natural philosophy being what it was, however, you'd be hard pressed to find any thinker who didn't have interests as broad. More intriguing is Dobrin and Weisser's work to reclaim the rhetorical effectiveness of pathos. They argue that emotion is an evolved response and that it develops in each person in discourse with their culture. Thus, emotion—like reason and language—should be respected in discourse. That emotion is not respected they track back, rightly, to Western cultural prejudices, and, while I applaud them, I fear that they've taken on a project much too large.

Natural Discourses is fairly bracing and exciting, but it spins its wheels in places it could have been better organized, perhaps with more chapters. As it is, it reads as if it needs a bit of editing. I would have liked to have seen more examples of the ecocomposition classroom. They could have used that space to work through some difficult issues about urban environments, race, class and gender.

It's not that they ignore these issues, but their discussions are cursory, particularly compared to their critiques of other essays that have been labeled as being about ecocomposition (their universal critique: too much about reading, not enough about writing). The most generous reading is that much remains to be done when it comes to the teaching of ecocomposition, particularly when envisioned by these two early theorists and practitioners.

Composition Program Announcements

- ❖ The Composition Colloquium, a composition-oriented writer's group for graduate students and faculty, has one more meetings this semester, on Thursday, May 3rd. The meeting will take place at 3:30 in the Dudley Bailey Library. See Sandy Tarabochia for more information.