

Disciplinary Literacy

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WE OFTEN TALK ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD WRITING without explaining what it is or how we know what it is. Nonetheless, students who don't write well are marked down and excluded from scholarships and graduate school; some get so discouraged they drop out. Our knowledge of what makes writing good is tacit and untheorized, however, not something many of us studied in graduate school or write scholarly articles or books about (Giltrow).

Our notions about the importance of good writing fit with those about good English commonplace in educated society, where fears about its decline sometimes reach the stage of moral panic focused on those who arrive in Canada without fluent (or fluent-sounding) English, however well they may speak and write other languages, or on those who manage to pass through the school system without acquiring this ability.

The connection of good speech and writing and moral health has always been a mainstay of the middle class. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, this use of mastery of the standard written language as a touchstone privileges those children who grew up with it at home, making their entry into school and university easier than for the poor, for dialect speakers, and for those whose first language isn't an official national language. As admissions

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to universities rise, these seemingly underprivileged students appear as a problem in our classrooms. Our failure to critique the historical and ideological forces that permeate our discipline means that our taken-for-granted attitudes and practices often conscript us into doing the work of social sorting. Nor are we particularly interested in thinking about how the problem might be solved, shifting the blame onto high-school teachers and the responsibility onto the disproportionately female and usually underpaid instructors of composition courses.

Other disciplines have been more proactive in self-critique. Medical schools offer courses that examine the social, political, and ideological forces that drive much commonsense thinking around health. The Applied Science faculty at UBC requires first-year students to take a course on the impact of technology on society. Research ethics courses are central to many science and social science degrees. Legal ethics scholarship is burgeoning in Canada. And professional schools worry constantly about diversity in admissions. English, however, has not entered these conversations, despite our critical scholarly work on issues around racialization, gendering, social stratification, and sexuality in literature. Yet the discipline of English was and continues to be imbricated in colonization (Pennycook; Viswanathan) and to play a role in class hierarchy and social mobility (Bourdieu). We do not often examine our own graduate admission or hiring practices, an avoidance of what Anthony Stewart calls “institutional literacy.” Thus it may come as a surprise that despite our move to more diversity in the curriculum, we haven’t moved very far on diversity amongst those who teach it.

Most English professors in Canada from the founding of English departments in the late nineteenth century to the mid-1960s taught an elite group of English-speaking students a curriculum dominated by the British historical canon (Murray). This remarkable almost century-long curricular stasis can in part be ascribed to a colonial perspective that Daniel A. Coleman has described as “White civility.” Another stabilizing force was the dominant Anglo-Canadian tradition of philosophical idealism. This, according to Henry A. Hubert, allied with the notion supported by Baconian science that reality is fixed and knowable, supported the high value placed on “clear arrangement and superficial correctness” and the view of writing merely as a “conduit of pre-existent truth ... from the mind of the critic to the mind of the audience” (178). Writing, therefore, was a means to an end (conveying truth about the universal moral values found in great literature) rather than meriting study in its own right.

As a result of this history, regular faculty in English departments in Canada generally teach first-year literature courses as a duty and rarely teach writing at all, leaving these tasks to teaching assistants or contract instructors. Everything these instructors and their students need to know, after all, is supposed to be contained in fat prescriptive textbooks, although these often transmit shibboleths about grammar and usage, outline proper citation style without any explanation of why intellectuals might acknowledge their predecessors, and provide a host of models and practical tips innocent of any theoretical or explanatory framework (see Brooks; Cameron; Giltrow; Miller). Thus, English graduate students usually end up teaching writing without having studied rhetoric, composition theory, communications, or pedagogy, except perhaps in a variety of brief teaching assistant workshops, marking meetings, or short courses run by university centres for upgrading teaching skills. Oddly, then, our attitudes to and practices around writing instruction continue to convey a view of language to students that is entirely antithetical to the poststructuralist theory that underpins the literary research that most of us do.

We need to turn our critical notions of discourse to literary studies to see how this perspective would move us into fields often thought to be outside English, such as media studies, communications, rhetoric, composition theory, literary history, publishing history, literary celebrity, ethical and activist pedagogy, institutional studies, and beyond. Rather than worrying that our discipline is too baggy, too broad, we should worry that it has not undertaken a rigorous enough examination of its social workings and intellectual connections. Many of us have allowed ourselves the *jouissance* of transgressing disciplinary boundaries without paying sufficient attention to how the boundaries got there in the first place and who it is they keep in (and out).

We agonize about marking students whose first language is not English. (How can we give them good marks if they don't write well?) We agonize about admitting so many graduate students whose job prospects are dim. (How will English survive if we don't?) We agonize about admissions and hiring. (How can we encourage diversity without dropping our standards?) Although there is no single pill for this agony, I would like to prescribe critical reflexivity. Somehow, when the moment arrives to examine our own gatekeeping practices and our own disciplinary lacks and omissions, we never seem to have time. We talk about them only on the fly, at the tired and cranky end of the admissions or hiring or marks meeting, when we should be seeing these questions as integral to our discipline, as part of what we conduct research into and teach about in English.

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