

How to Heal the Lit/Comp Divide

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THERE IS a way to heal the split between literature and composition. It's already in use at a few campuses, and it could become the dominant model. I'm talking about the tactic of linking first-year writing courses with literature courses and having the same cohort of students enrolled in both.

But first, a story that illustrates why this linkage of composition and literature is needed: About a decade ago, before I retired in 2016, I pretty much stopped teaching literature and switched to teaching mostly first-year writing (or the teaching of writing), and I'm not ashamed to say that I found the switch to be a great relief. In my literature courses the great majority of the students needed a lot of work on their writing, but, since literature was the declared subject, any attention given to writing had to be done on the side, and it was never enough.

Eventually, this got to me. Like the writing assignments in most literature courses, mine asked students for essays in which they made an argument about what they interpreted one or more texts to mean. The problem was that few students had learned to write this kind of argumentative essay not just about literature but about *any* subject. Being forced to write their essays about literature, then, imposed a double burden, since it meant that in addition to coping with the unfamiliar conventions of the argumentative essay, they also had to cope with the even more unfamiliar conventions of literary criticism. I concluded that, to help students learn to write argumentative essays, the last place I would want to start is by asking them to write such essays about literature. It seemed absurd to require students to write *literary* arguments when what they needed most urgently to learn was to write arguments about *anything*.

In other words, literature just got in the way. Reading a batch of literature essays, I felt I was failing to help my students learn either how to analyze literature or how to write. This was why it was a relief when I switched over to teaching mostly composition, where I was free of the burden of literature and was able to go directly at writing issues full bore.

As a result of this experience, one of the conclusions I came to about the literature/composition relationship is that even though literature is the more privileged and prestigious of the two subjects, institutionally literature needs composition more than composition needs literature, and not just because the many sections of required first-year comp bring in the money that makes possible the luxury of elite literature courses. It's also because of student skill sets: if the students struggle with their writing in a composition course, that's what you're there to address; but you can teach the greatest literature course of all time, and if your students' writing is not up to par you probably won't end up feeling very good about it.

My story had a happy ending, though, when I found a way to come back to literature without the double bind I've been describing. My university experimented

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with a program that paired first-year writing courses with general education courses in literature, as well as in history, sociology, and even math and physics. I taught a writing course that was coupled with an introduction to German literature in translation. Right from the start it was clear that linking the courses made possible a sensible division of labor: I concentrated on the students' writing while my German colleague concentrated on the literary works. And in an unexpected dividend, the pairing put me into a more comfortable relationship with the students: since I was coaching them to write their papers for another course, they now saw me as being on their side instead of as their adversary, as I'd seemed when I taught my own course. It's true that I had to do some added preparation to familiarize myself with the readings for the German course and to coordinate with my teaching partner, but the amount of extra work was modest, and it was more than made up for by my sense that I was more effective with students now that I could focus without distraction on their writing.

Another nice thing about pairing the courses was its cost effectiveness—it didn't cost the university any extra money. The students all had to take the writing course anyway, since it was required, and the literature course satisfied a general education requirement, and in the same vein, somebody had to teach both the courses. So it made economic as well as pedagogical sense to hook the courses together. But one of the big added satisfactions was the realization that, in pairing the courses, my partner and I were doing our bit to overcome the split between composition and literature. It's an idea, I think, that deserves to be tried on a large scale.