
W-Courses in the English Department: A Goodbye Interview of Henry Vittum

Mary-Lou Hinman

“Where do I begin,” I thought, fingers poised over the keyboard. I had been chosen to describe how English Department members teach majors to write for the discipline. I have great affection and admiration for my colleagues, who daily use writing to teach their students to think for themselves, to learn how to learn, and to be creative, whether they are writing nonfiction, criticism, fiction or poetry. How could I count the various techniques employed, much less describe them in a short article: the freewrites, the journals, the workshops, the portfolios, not to mention the myriad of paper assignments that encourage students to examine literature closely or to create literature that deserves to be read?

In my desperation, my mind wandered to various colleagues who have shared assignments and their excitement with me. With sadness, I thought of four men the English Department was losing to retirement. “No one is irreplaceable,” people say, but I am not convinced. When I think of the English Department without Richard Chisholm, Russell Lord, Henry Vittum, and Gerald Zinfon, I get an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach. They were all members of the English Department long before I joined; three of them have been active participants in Writing Across the Curriculum from its inception; and all four have written articles for *The*

PSC Journal on Writing Across the Curriculum. We will miss them.

Then it hit me. One of their number, Henry Vittum, has consistently taught the two W-courses offered in our department, in addition to Advanced Composition, required of all of our majors. He, more than anyone, has been involved in teaching students to write for our discipline. He has been PSC's Distinguished Teacher, evidence of the great affection students, faculty and staff hold for him. What better way to examine writing in our department than to talk to the English Department's Master Teacher,

I met Henry in his office one day last spring to talk about writing. If you have never been in his office, you have missed a real pleasure. It is like his mind—uncluttered, organized, full of information, books, and his love affair with the Victorian period. In the comfort of that special place, we talked about his classes and his students.

“What should a W-course for an English major accomplish? What are its goals?” I asked.

“W-courses (in our department either Literary Criticism or one of the two Shakespeare courses) should go beyond other writing courses,” he said. “They should be more intensive, more creative, and more individualized.”

I had anticipated the “intensive” part of his response, but asked what he meant by “more creative” and “more individualized.” He gave me the example of a journal assignment he uses in his Shakespeare classes. Each semester, Henry discusses a number of plays, but focuses on one, which the class returns to every week for continued in-depth study. Fall term that play was *King Lear*. Students were asked to assume the persona of one of the sisters (Goneril, Regan, or Cordelia) or one of the brothers (Edgar or Edmund) and keep a journal of responses from that character's point of view throughout the semester. The students wrote one entry a week, and Henry collected and responded to the entries weekly.

Students were invested in the activity, Henry explained, really entering the persona of the character they had chosen. (He thought it interesting that students did not necessarily pick a character of their own gender; they seemed to enjoy viewing the play through entirely different eyes.) On the whole, students showed excellent understanding of the character whose identity they had assumed, and they wrote with imagination.

For Henry's part, the journals allowed him to individualize instruction as he responded to each entry; in his words, "I carry on a dialogue with each student." And because he limited the entries to one a week, the work load for him was not excessive. Still, the students had the advantage of a sustained inquiry and became much more involved in the play under discussion.

Other writing activities from the Shakespeare classes intrigued me. From the beginning of the semester, students are assigned to the same discussion group. They are given written questions on a worksheet and asked to respond collaboratively in writing. They learn to listen to one another and to approach a problem as a team. Collaborative writing focuses discussion and creates fewer pieces to read by the professor. Henry also employs what he terms "working papers." He always gives a list of questions for each play's study. Students choose two of those questions and write response essays before the discussion. They may write more "working papers" if they would like.

As for the formal essays in his Shakespeare classes, Henry expects "much more critical insight" than he would in other courses. Still, he is always willing to talk to students about their ideas and will read drafts for students who prepare them in advance.

Our discussion drifted to the other W-course Henry teaches, Literary Criticism. There, he employs a variety of writing assignments and techniques to aid discussion, get students thinking, and inspire close reading. For example, he will often give his students a piece of literature not in the text and ask them to write a response to it. Then he introduces a critical theory and after the

discussion of the theory asks the students to revisit the piece they had written about previously. “Now what would you say,” he asks, and students write again, displaying new insight.

The textbook used in Literary Criticism contains sample student essays which employ the critical approaches outlined in the various chapters. Henry has his students write a response to the student essay, and over the process of the semester, students learn how to read another’s work and respond productively and critically. Then they try their own critical analyses of short fiction and read them aloud in class for peer response. During the process, they become less timid about sharing their work and more skilled at giving meaningful feedback to their colleagues.

In addition, students are often asked to, “write for a few minutes about...,” a common freewriting technique to start students thinking, to give them something to contribute to class discussion, and to force them to look more closely at a given problem. It is writing that is not collected or read yet is nonetheless invaluable practice at the kind of critical writing the course demands.

Of course, the examinations for the class are critical essays where students show they have mastered the theory and are able to apply it in a meaningful way. The mid-term during spring term was an essay about *The Pearl* and the final a discussion of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The examination essays, like every piece of writing for the course, are patterned after the critical techniques Henry has introduced to the class.

After our conversation, I thought about the variety of writing activities Henry employs. In the two W-courses Henry uses freewriting, journals, multiple draft essays, peer response, informal informational essays, formal critical essays, and collaborative written responses to discussion questions. And these are courses where content (either literature or literary theory) is stressed. Writing in his classes enhances understanding, allows for individual response from the professor, and teaches close reading and analysis. At the same time, students are learning what is entailed

in “writing for the discipline.”

I’ve already decided to “steal” his journal assignment once Henry leaves; it is such a creative way to teach character and point of view. But there is one other aspect of Henry’s teaching I also hope to inherit. At the end of our conversation I asked, “How have our Majors changed over the years?” He never missed a beat.

“Oh,” he said. “They are much better than they used to be. My students are better every year.” And when we as a faculty believe in our students, they do become better every year. When we demand a great deal of our students, they deliver a great deal to us. Henry Vittum figured that out a long time ago.