

Rosemary Winslow and Monica Mische

# THE HERO'S PERFORMANCE AND STUDENTS' QUESTS FOR MEANING AND IDENTITY: A HUMANITIES AND WRITING COURSE DESIGN

*ABSTRACT: This essay describes a seminar course for underprepared students which focuses on the study of the hero's quest and solves many of the difficulties inherent in the remedial writing course as it had been taught on our campus. An understanding of the individual as formed within culture and society but as having some power to choose her path informs the use of verbal and visual materials from several humanities fields to guide students through an examination of cultural and societal images of strong, courageous, and responsible individuals at selected points in time. Students' journeys through the materials are in themselves hero quests as they struggle through difficult but interesting and relevant reading and writing assignments, supported by intensive help in small group workshops and tutorials. The aim is to teach critical thinking, close critical reading, and critical and creative writing as these are necessary for making the journey of inquiry. As the theme necessitates a study of individuals making personal and moral decisions, learning goes beyond these critical skill areas into "critical wisdom."*

At the Conference on Global Literacy that convened in Heidelberg last summer, Miep Geis gave an invited talk about her experiences sheltering Anne Frank and her family during the early years of World War Two. Near the end of an hour of moving reminiscence, she mentioned that people often remark to her that she is a hero. Always her reply, she stressed, is that she is not. Her reason? That anyone could have done what she did. In her view, to act with courage, to risk one's own life to help save another, is nothing special; it is something anyone can do. In "On Christian Heroism," an essay on the Jewish Holocaust, Cynthia Ozick argues another perspective—that anyone could have acted as Geis did, but only a few did, and this active re-

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*Rosemary (Gates) Winslow is Associate Professor of English and Director of Rhetoric and Composition at The Catholic University of America, where she has taught since 1979. She has published numerous articles and book chapters on American poetry, rhetoric, composition, and business and technical writing. At present she is at work on a study of rhetoric and poetics in a community near her home in Washington, D.C.*

*Monica Mische is a doctoral student at The Catholic University of America and is writing a dissertation on agency and temporality in critical theories and the teaching of literature and composition. In addition to her own study and teaching, she coordinates areas of the writing program, including this course.*

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sponse despite significant difficulties is what constitutes heroism. Such action requires a sense of responsibility to others that overrides even fear for own's own safety, a sense which itself requires a transcendent valuing of something greater than the individual.

We have designed a course around the idea of the hero as one put into a position of difficulty and who must then decide whether to act to overcome obstacles, to establish a new position for himself in society, and perhaps to renew society in the process. Though the course was developed in our work with students who were identified as being at risk of not making the transition to college successfully, it would make an excellent course for any level of student, a direction we are now pursuing. With an interdisciplinary content study of the hero quest through visual and verbal texts, we sequence concepts, strategies, and skills in small steps and provide intensive help in writing. Because the preparation of sequenced materials and the intensive writing help require two and a half times the amount of instructor time as the usual course, at least initially, it is more costly and so is reserved for those most in need.

We developed the format over three summers in the special four-week session for these students and expanded it two years ago to a full semester, six credit-hour course (three credits in literature, three in writing) to replace the remedial writing course for this group of students. The students not only liked the course, they wrote better at the end of the summer version than the groups in the previous two summers who had taken our usual version of remedial writing using a standard remedial writing textbook. All students from the hero quest course placed into regular composition by the end of four weeks, and, with overall grade point averages of around 2.5, they matched a control group of students who had some but not all indicators of being at risk. The average of first semester GPAs for students who took the new, full semester version in the fall of 1995 was 3.16. Their course load included philosophy, math, foreign language, and our course. Our course—in which the course average was 3.05—pulled the overall average down slightly.

We have two main objectives here: to explain why we decided on the hero quest theme and to describe what we did. These comprise the two larger sections of this essay. A short final section draws implications from what we learned that are being used to restructure our first and second year writing and literature programs for all students.

## Why the Hero?

The students in our program have a wide spread of ability levels, at least insofar as they can be judged from such indicators as SAT scores, high school GPAs, and entrance application essays. Many of them are not sure they want to pursue college study. Some have low confidence, some a false confidence: they don't believe they can do college work, or they think they are already well prepared for the work. Most have an inaccurate view of what college study requires, either that it is easier or more difficult than it really is. Many have what we call a "damaged interest" in learning, resulting in low or misdirected motivation, which is a key factor: where there is little will to learn, there is likely to be little success. The majority, though not all, do not see the relevance of academic learning in their lives beyond long-term occupational goals. Some do not have even this goal. A few display anger at schooling, or at authority figures in general. In the first two summers, most openly expressed anger at being labeled "remedial" and blamed that for their current situation. Finally, like the vast majority of adolescents, many of these students have impoverished images and models of what their resources are, what they could be, and what strong, responsible adults in a democratic society are—and do. In addition, for whatever combination of reasons a student may have been placed in the program, all of them share lower high school GPAs. Though occasionally the critical factor was long-term illness, low high school achievement has left these students with inadequate learning in critical thinking, reading, and writing skills.

We speculated that a course which approached these skills through a focus on cultural and social construction of hero images might enable students to explore and develop a new perspective on society and their place in it, including their current, difficult situation as underprepared first year students. The course would open up critique but would go beyond critique to examine what strengths and resources cultural traditions and society offer and what ways strong individuals have responded to these constructions of self by struggling to overcome them. Through materials that ranged across time but focused in on a few specific points in time, past and present, students would explore the complexity of self—and social identity and responsiveness. The curriculum would be challenging—a struggle to be engaged in—but intensive help in skills would be provided in small group workshops and tutorials outside of class. In this way, the how of skills and strategies would be learned by way of the need to use them to delve into the inquiry. The why, when, and where of critical approaches

and literacy skills would not be detached from sustained inquiry into a topic and neither would the in-class sessions need to concentrate on this learning. In short, the course itself would be a hero quest, complete with student choice and responsibility as well as social responsibility on our part to provide the "gifts" – the outer resources to complement the individual's inner resources – as assistance along the hero's journey. This focus would move through various literacies (linguistic, critical, cultural) to include the next developmental step, which we call "critical wisdom," that is, grounding critical thinking in both human circumstances and transcendent values, in which the individual is located and acts within something larger than the self. We hoped they would learn that intellectual study could become an important avenue in a search for identity, meaning, and purpose.

That small children are keen and curious learners is perhaps evidence enough that somehow relations to learning and its value have been disturbed through causes outside the learner. Though only the learner can attempt to repair effects of disturbance in himself, social entities can – indeed must – assist this work. Thus, part of our responsibility as educators is to assist such repair while working to repair disturbances in social institutions themselves.

But let us draw briefly from two theorists to expand on our rationale. In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Jurgen Habermas theorizes the processes of individual action amid the interconnected individual, social, and cultural domains in which one lives. Socialization functions both to restrict and to provide resources. For the individual, "[a]ction, or mastery of situations, presents itself as a circular process in which the actor is at once the initiator of his accountable actions and the product of the traditions in which he stands, of the solidary groups to which he belongs, or socialization and learning processes to which he is exposed" (135). He both makes and is made by tradition. Identity is developed within an ordinary understanding of lifeworld, in which the individual forms a narrative that functions in the service of self-understanding by locating himself in time and across time with respect to traditions in the social space (136). Thus, narration as "communicative action serves the formation of personal identities" (137). Whether we like it or not, then, teachers of language and literature tacitly encourage and support either the reinforcing or the renewing of students' identities. Clearly, we think some renewal is in order, and we see in Habermas's explanation of disturbances in the lifeworld an explanation for the ways we understand underprepared students see themselves.

Habermas regards certain disturbances in the cultural reproduction of the lifeworld as "get[ting] manifested in a loss of meaning and lead[ing] to corresponding legitimation and orientation crises" (140). These three areas correspond respectively to the three major "domains"



of reproduction processes of the lifeworld: "loss of meaning" to the cultural reproduction domain, "legitimation" of the order of interpersonal relationships to the domain of social integration, and "orientation crises" to the domain of the socialized personality. Habermas contends that "each of these reproduction processes contributes in maintaining all of the components of the lifeworld" (142). For example, when there is loss of meaning in the cultural domain, collective identity and breaks with tradition accompany it. These disturbances in the cultural domain further disturb the social and personal domains, and these features manifest: "withdrawal of motivation," "anomie," loss of "personal responsibility," alienation," and "crisis in orientation and education" (143).

Charles Taylor's analysis of ethics in modern democratic culture explains the problem in these three domains in terms of the loss of the "heroic dimension" to life. He sees individualism, for all its positive benefits, as one of three chief "malaises" of the modern era.

Modern freedom was won by our breaking loose from older moral horizons. People used to see themselves as part of a larger order. . . . People were often locked into a given place, a role and station that was properly theirs and from which it was almost unthinkable to deviate. Modern freedom came about by the discrediting of such orders.

But at the same time as they restricted us, these orders gave meaning to the world and to the activities of social life. The things that surround us were not just potential raw materials or instruments for our projects, but they had the significance given them by their place in the chain of being. The eagle was not just another bird, but the king of a whole domain of animal life. By the same token, the rituals and norms of society had more than merely instrumental significance. . . .

The worry has been repeatedly expressed that the individual lost something important along with the larger social and cosmic horizons of action. Some have written of this as the loss of a heroic dimension to life. People no longer have a sense of a higher purpose, of something worth dying for. (3, 4)

And without a higher purpose deemed important enough to die for, it may be that there is not an important purpose worth living for beyond the pursuit of what is of "use." Taylor sees this as the second chief malaise—"the primacy of instrumental reason," which is one result of the "disenchantment of the world," the loss of the "heroic dimension" (4,5). The present phase of democratic development has restricted the sense of "resonance, depth, and richness in our human surroundings" (6) as well as the choices open to individuals, who cannot

act fully on their principles within a social structure that values the expedient and economic at the expense of other higher purposes (7). Taylor blames further loss of freedom on a third malaise: the segregation of people within their own private concerns and satisfactions, including the "heart" – a situation which harms political and moral action (7, 8). But while Taylor sees the reality of factors of cultural and social organization that make it difficult for the individual to act with greater degrees of responsible freedom, he does not despair of progress in this direction, as many do. He sees change needed on two fronts: both the individual and the institutional (8).

We concur with Taylor that all is not hopeless, that individuals are not totally already constructed by society or that individuals cannot make changes in themselves and society. Nor do we see the passing of the old order and its "heroic dimension" as all positive or all negative. Rather, we see the study of this dimension as a vital one for all students, but especially and crucially for those who are adrift in a sea of unexamined societal images and values, many of which appear to offer freedom but within a narrow field of action that is not encompassed by a sense of higher purpose. With Taylor too, and the many other thinkers who have contributed to social critiques on the repressive aspects of modern society, we view the situation in which students-at-risk find themselves to be largely not of their making. The complex interactions of life domains, in the disturbed forms that exist, require knowledge and wisdom to negotiate and renew. But each individual must be able to make that negotiation and renewal for his own and the social good.

## **The Course Design: Theoretical Backgrounds for Approaches to Texts and Assignment Design**

While ideas such as Habermas's and Taylor's affirmed our decision to treat the theme of the hero, we needed other inspiration for designing a detailed curriculum. Though we drew from many theories, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, as the intersection and working through of conflicting constructions of tradition, discourses, and identities, provided the pivot for selecting and approaching course materials. The chronotope of the "road" was particularly suggestive as the place where the various domains of the lifeworld come into visible contact so they can be seen and examined. In "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," Bakhtin discusses the "road" as a place where "[p]eople who are normally kept separate by social and spatial difference can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another" (*Dialogic Imagination*, 243). We viewed the hero's journey as such

a road, as well as the course itself, as a place to bring together texts from past and present for a study of how they continue, contradict, and transform tradition. The course would be a "space" where students would encounter perspectives from various times put into contact with each other. The cultural basis of the lifeworld could be made present and relevant as students studied its impact on their lives. Bakhtin emphasizes this characteristic of the road as a "course" which is only made when time (past, present, future) encounters and enters into space: "Time, as it fuses with space and flows in it (forming the road); this is the course of the rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course: 'the course of life,' 'to set out on a new course,' 'the course of history,' and so on; varied and multi-leveled are the ways in which road is turned into metaphor, but its pivot is the flow of time" (*Dialogic Imagination*, 244). Students' journeys through our course would similarly proceed through time, encounter the various discourses of tradition, but would focus on the way a selection of heroes had met, grappled with, and responded to these discourses. The responses of the hero, together with the responses of authors and visual artists, would be analogous to the students' learning responses: they would be negotiations through the discourses, a traveling of their own course. As thinkers and writers, students would engage in a quest for a position and a voice to speak from that position.

Bakhtin writes about education as expanding awareness of the multi-voiced nature of social discourse, of bringing their languages out of their "different chambers" where they can "collide" and where a person must "attempt to coordinate them." Consciousness of the diversity of language and thought is what opens up choice, and makes choice not only possible but inevitable (*Dialogic Imagination*, 295). From the standpoint of awareness, students can decide where they will locate themselves, on what road they will travel, what images and languages they will align themselves with. To make this idea prominent, we extended Bakhtin's "road" into a chronotope that he does not discuss but that is related as a place where many different people and discourses encounter each other – the city. We sent students on "City Quests" to put academic learning into contact with everyday life, especially at points where tradition is remembered and set in the midst of the ongoing present and projected into the future. These quests, mostly to monuments, museums, and transportation centers, were effective in bringing the textual materials further into the personal dimensions, as students inevitably had strong emotional, spiritual, and sometimes physical responses that assisted their intellectual understanding.

Wolfgang Iser's recent work on literary anthropology added to Bakhtin's ideas by providing analytic tools for examining literary works as exposures of cultural, social, and literary realities as schemata, as testing their boundaries, and negotiating gaps between them through

processes like "staging," "doubling," "envisioning potentialities," the "self-unfolding" of complex identity, and determining "goals of becoming." Martha Nussbaum's essays on literature and moral philosophy provided a way to set emotion in relation to the intellectual, spiritual, and moral domains. Her regard for literature as a necessary (because complex and specific) supplement to moral philosophy's abstract reasoning enabled a theoretical ground for including emotion and suggested analytic tools based on style. Research being conducted in our Psychology Department by James Youniss and Miranda Yates on adolescent moral development strengthened our commitment to the importance of integrating the emotional, intellectual, and moral dimensions. This work, now completed, indicates that adolescents who write about their emotional response to subjects they are studying are the ones who go on to show growth in moral reasoning. Youniss and Yates contend that students need to find a perspective on the various values and philosophies in and outside of the academy, and to do this in a responsible way requires moral thinking and development. To assist students in developing, distinguishing, and integrating the dimensions of self, we sequenced readings to move through the dimensions and assigned frequent free response writings. We also paired creative and academic writing assignments. We paired conceptual readings with literary reading, presenting several conceptual models of the hero so that students could see how even theories arise from perspectives. We hoped for, and witnessed, a growing sense of authorial privilege and stylistic inventiveness, the two key features David Bartholomae finds students need for entering academic discourse communities.

### **Integrating the Learning Materials: Two Examples**

We'd like to take you through a description of two course modules, one from the second week and one from mid-semester, in order to show how the materials are presented and integrated. We begin with a study of archetypes of the hero. Initial readings include a conceptual book, a feminist re-vision of Jung's theory, Carol Pearson's *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By*, and Homer's *Odyssey*. Readings from other cultural traditions (Native American myths, stories from the Bible, etc.) enable comparison and contrast of heroic figures and actions. After students have studied these texts for two weeks, and written a myth of their own, we prepare them for their first field trip and major writing assignment – the "Aesthetic Quest" – with a two-hour interactive slide presentation. The focus here is on applying conceptual thought to factual details and viewing examples of heroic images in different centuries. First, we show a slide reproduction of one of Paolo Uccello's "St. George and the Dragon" paintings (15th century

Italy). The painting depicts a familiar triad: a fierce, fire-breathing dragon, a beautiful maiden, and an armored knight on horseback, what Pearson calls the villain/victim/hero paradigm. We ask students to "read" the picture by having them describe what they see and what's happening. They note the use of color, line, composition, elements of foreground and background, body positions, facial expressions, light, dark, narrative events depicted in and outside (before and after) the scene. Then we ask them to use the concepts Pearson presents to inquire into stages of the hero, male/female roles, motivations, and the artist's conception of the cultural and social roles the figures seem to embody. Students share and negotiate their findings, discovering and justifying interpretations with factual details from the painting. After a sometimes heated discussion, we introduce a modern American poem based on the painting, U.A. Fanthorpe's "Not My Best Side," and stage a dramatic reading so that students can hear all three of its voices—dragon, hero, and damsel-in-distress—and the perspectives they are representing. Not only do the students see how the contents of the paradigm have shifted, though not the paradigm itself, they recognize stereotypes of these figures in the paradigm from contemporary society and examine the poet's perspective behind the ironic take on both medieval and contemporary images of self. Helped by the archetypal theory studied, they see that each individual can embody or suppress one or more of these elements but that a full view incorporates all in each person. In this way, we pull the personal dimensions into relation with the cultural and social domains and also distinguish the kinds of thinking that will be needed for academic analytic and interpretive work.

In the second hour, a lecture with slides on images of the hero in Western culture from ancient Greece through 1900 in sculpture, architecture, and painting teaches historical material while demonstrating argument from evidence and "reading" visual forms of cultural expression. Several writing assignments derive from this. One is a creative piece in which students select a painting and create a prose or poetic narrative from the point-of-view of a character depicted in the painting. Students have fun with this assignment, but it also functions in other ways: to demonstrate and reinforce that details must carry the argument in both aesthetic and academic texts; to enable a response to the materials using emotion and intellect; and to stretch their stylistic repertoire. They imaginatively "throw" themselves into the painting and into the hearts, minds, and souls of the characters. They imagine past deeds or family histories, document inward emotional traumas, physical exertions, or spiritual unrest, or dramatically retell familiar historical events. The narratives are lyrical, tragic, and comic in tone. They get students creative juices flowing, and attune them to the textual details in art and literature that not only tell a story but evoke

aesthetic and emotional responses and moral evaluations.

A second assignment is a longer thesis-driven paper with supporting arguments and specific visual and verbal textual evidence. Students make a trip to the National Gallery of Art in downtown Washington, D.C., and as they tour the museum, they choose an artwork (painting, sculpture, or print) that seems to embody one or more of the heroic archetypes Pearson describes (innocent, orphan, wanderer, warrior, martyr, magician). Students make careful notes and purchase a postcard of the artwork to show the class. In their essays, they first provide a working definition of the archetype as set forth in Pearson's framework, including a discussion of fears, goals, values, actions, and beliefs central to that particular archetypal mode of being. They then describe the artwork in vivid detail, using their newly acquired sensitivity to formal elements of visual art to explain the ways in which the artwork seems to illustrate Pearson's archetypes. Students may also include in their essays their aesthetic and emotional response to the artwork and their sense of what the artwork, and the artist behind it, seem to be saying — what theme, message, or insights are revealed about human nature, heroic action, or stages of the life journey. The focus here is on strategies for interpretation from details within a given conceptual framework, thesis formation and support, and organizing ideas as necessary tools for pursuing inquiry into the topic and writing about one's findings.

The gallery visit also provides the basis for a third piece of writing, as students take notes comparing and contrasting the two buildings of the Gallery, one built around 1940 on classical (Graeco-Roman) principles of design (architect John Russell Pope), as presented in the Greek temples in the slide lecture, and the other modern in design (architect I. M. Pei). Giving a set of varied but related assignments at the same time demonstrates that inquiry can be multi-faceted, that research can take place outside of the university, and that it can be interesting, enjoyable, and relevant to personal interests.

The assignments are drafted and taken to writing workshop for one or two revisions. During this first set of assignments, students' writing improves dramatically from first to last draft. Descriptive powers are enhanced, language becomes more concrete. Students' ideas are elaborate, often daring. Their papers display, if not a standard academic "thesis statement," then at least an implicit focus or organizing principle. Perhaps more importantly, students manage to incorporate and "flesh out" an author's theory without losing their own voice or subordinating their own interpretations and ideas. We encounter few of the labored, near-plagiarized summaries and paraphrases so often found in basic writing. Students have learned very quickly to take an interpretive position and support it with a wealth of textual — verbal and visual — evidence. Students have been quickly launched



into finding a position from which to say something of their own while using the others' (textual) voices to locate their own ideas and voices.

At mid-semester, we settle into an integrated study of slavery in nineteenth-century America and the Jewish Holocaust before, during and after World War II. Students read autobiographies: Elie Weisel's *Night*, depicting his internment in a concentration camp during his adolescence, and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. They do library research on both topics; compare filmic representations of events to written versions; read the first chapter of W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, ideal for its naming of slavery as a holocaust and its recognition of the problems of identity and double consciousness; read Cynthia Ozick's essay, "On Christian Heroism," a taxonomy of types of people during the Jewish Holocaust—hero, victim, murderer, bystander—that revises the Pearson paradigm and asks readers to contemplate their own capacities for heroic action. They also read poems by nineteenth century American slaves and World War II concentration camp prisoners and visit the National Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Frederick Douglass Historic Site (his last home, overlooking Washington)—the "History Quest." After these texts, students read Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, a contemporary science fiction narrative of emancipation in which the heroine compares slavery to the Jewish Holocaust as part of her attempts to understand her identity in terms of present conditions as affected by the past. Butler uses time travel as a device for exploring connections, for understanding Douglass's life and writings from an experiential perspective, and for contrasting nineteenth and twentieth century social conditions and conditioning of modes of thought and perspectives. These materials take students deeply into the complex issues of the individual's struggle for identity and meaning amid oppressive social forces and cultural realities vs. stated ideals.

Having recorded their intellectual, emotional, often spiritual and physical reactions to these readings and experiences, students compose a comparative essay that links researched facts, authorial perspectives, witness perspectives, and reader experience. Students focus on particular exhibits and narratives that depict what life was like during both of these periods of history. Calling attention first to the particular structural details that make these remembered events and stories resonate so powerfully, students then interpret the larger vision and moral imperatives that the authors, architects, film makers, and curators convey—ideas about the construction of history, community, and identity, about the horrors, consequences, roots and possible forms of resistance to such injustices. Finally, in class discussion, and in their writing, students consider how the knowledge they have learned about these past events might illuminate current social and political situations (in the former Yugoslavia, in the Middle East, on



the streets of Washington, D.C.) and current racial, religious, and ideological tensions, thereby helping us to understand better our own selves and communities, helping us to shape and transform our future world.

The remainder of the semester's study comprises books, poems, films, and essays selected to give a view of the complexity of human thought and action in all three domains of the lifeworld and several dimensions of the personal domain. Lectures by professors of religious studies, mythography, film studies, semiotics, history, and psychology supplement knowledge. Additional "City Quest" field trips include war and police memorials for a unit on remembrance, and a theatre production or a film students have selected together to study. We, and our students, have liked Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and her Nobel lecture, in which she expresses a vision of the role of language and literature for the renewal of individuals in community. Eudora Welty's short story collection, *The Golden Apples*, involves interconnected, mythically-based hero quests for love and beauty in the world by characters who never quite fit into society and are never quite successful in their searches. Most of Welty's characters live what, on the surface, appear to be quiet, unremarkable lives, but their inner lives are profoundly rich — sometimes hopeful, sometimes tragic. Treating themes of time and timelessness, self and community, Welty traces the inward journeys of her characters and their moments of realization, which illuminate the depth and complexity of human experience. Like Pearson, Welty shows that our journeys are spiral in shape — they take us through time, allowing us to revisit the past, reassess the present, and imagine the future.

Either T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or *The Four Quartets* affords focused study of the spiritual quest interrelated with concomitant effects on and influence from lifeworld domains and personal dimensions. Hermann Hesse's novel of a young man's spiritual quest, *Siddartha*, provides yet another perspective, and Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, magnificently and beautifully treats a sixteen year old boy's transition to manhood through a quest that is difficult in all dimensions of life, throwing contrast on American tradition and society when the young hero journeys into Mexico for adventure. The boy's experience of initiation teaches him to respond differently with head and heart, eventuating a new spiritual and moral positioning with respect to American society, to which he returns and in which he no longer fits. The book highlights the difficulty of discovering and living out high moral principles and hard-won vision within a society that does not value the hero's knowledge. Throughout the semester, news, magazine, and journal articles as well as short poems help to expand perspectives on the topic into current situations.

In addition to providing a range of perspectives on these issues materials must, to meet various instructional needs, include a range of

easy to difficult, literary writing to workhorse prose, young men's and young women's viewpoints, perspectives academic, non-academic, and multicultural.

## **At the End of the Course**

The glimmer of future possibilities, of self and social transformation, echoes in student papers throughout the course, but particularly in the culminating essay—an open-ended assignment, reflective and synthetic in nature. Although we never explicitly ask students to consider their personal experience or situations, here many elect to write about their own "quest"—where they are now, where they've come from, where they hope to go as they make their journeys in life—and connections they see between their own values and systems of belief and wider historical and social realities. Students find clear parallels between their own lives and the lives of the people in the texts we read. Many express deep appreciation of the knowledge they have acquired about paths the hero may take, the limitations imposed on human beings, but especially the power individuals do have to choose to act and direct their lives at moments in time. By the end of the semester, students write of the profound affect and deep personal meanings and self-redirection the course has assisted them in achieving. The repositioning of self with respect to school, society, and culture is evident in the strong voices in the writing (a sign that they have seized authorial privilege), in the varied organizations of papers that incorporate rhetorical modes and stylistic features flexibly and appropriately, and in the demonstrated depth of understanding of the subject matter.

To illustrate what students say they have learned, we offer a few excerpts of from the final papers.

—I am now beginning to see how reading can affect you as an individual. I am starting to understand how the use of propaganda works. When people read, the information is absorbed into their subconscious whether they want it to or not. College has changed me a great deal. I admit the amount I read now is far heavier than the way I read a year ago. Lately I have read books on all subjects, some on philosophy and others on social and political issues. I also feel more comfortable in starting a conversation with someone because I am not in fear of being intimidated because of lack of knowledge on the subject. I now feel as many do that reading is fundamental.

— . . . the texts we have read this semester have . . . given me a new perspective of looking at problems and occurrences in

everyday life. I was shocked to know that many of the ideas and feelings I had in this class were also shared by other class members . . . . Douglass [who may be my relative] showed me never to let your spirit die. He showed this through his entire life. He was put down, and he got up. . . . I should always try to believe that if something doesn't work the first time, don't quit, maybe it was just done the wrong way. I won't just call Douglass a role model but I will call him a guide to live by.

—For these authors [Butler, Douglass, and Weisel], identity is the only thing a person can hang onto. . . . People strive to know who they are because once an individual knows his/herself then they can move on with their life, and know exactly where they are headed.

—Until this year I have never read so many pieces of literature that have crept so far into my soul as to pierce my heart and run into my consciousness. . . . no other written works have touched me so deeply as Elie Weisel's *Night* and *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. . . . These two works have opened my eyes to the unexplainable terror that one man can bring upon another man for no apparent reason but the color of his skin and the affiliation of his beliefs.

—College has helped me start my journey but the rest lies on my shoulders. I am not sure what my life will become but I do know that I want to make an impact on the world for the good. First I must come to terms with myself. There are things about me that I must change before I will be able to help the world.

—Viewing or visiting something rather than only reading about it gives us a feeling of actually taking part in the journey. Although I had heard about the people and events we studied, I could not fully grasp or imagine what the experiences were like until I went on my own personal journey and visited the places where the events took place.... I was able to be affected first hand because I could almost put myself in:the characters' positions.

## Organizational Structure

To give students daily support as they work with these challenging materials and assignments and to give them experience in the various learning environments at the university, we use a tripartite organizational structure—seminar, large group lecture, and small group workshop plus tutorial. Seminar sections are limited to 15 students and meet for two two-hour sessions per week. Instructors inquire regularly about progress in other classes and about general difficulties stu-

dents may be experiencing as they adjust to college. Twice-weekly writing workshops of four or five students and individual tutorials not only provide crucial, intensive help with writing but maintain continual contact and support. Bi-weekly large group lectures and field-trips into the city reinforce note-taking skills and help students find relevant connections among disciplines and between academic study and their lives. Lectures and field trips act as pivots for the relational learning: weekly work is preparatory to them, and major writing assignments ask students to consider daily readings in connection with them.

To make this design work in a flexible way, ongoing collaboration among the various instructors is crucial; and flexibility is key if students' needs are to be met. The writing director has responsibility for general planning, scheduling, and oversight. A coordinator has responsibility for weekly staff meetings and day-to-day communication. Instructors for the seminars and the workshop/tutorials maintain close daily contact (by written notes, e-mail, or telephone) and attend weekly staff meetings on curricula, strategies, and assignments and evaluate individual students' progress and academic needs. Student writings or verbal statements are shared anecdotally and serve to generate new assignments, projects, and teaching strategies that can in turn better match, challenge, and deepen students' knowledge, abilities, and interests. Grades on all papers, quizzes, and tests, are assigned by seminar leaders; these measures comprise 75% of the final grade. The remaining 25% is assigned by the workshop/tutorial instructors and is based on preparation of drafts and peer response group participation as these give evidence of learning.

## **Implications: Our Learning and Program Changes**

Teaching this course for three summers and two semesters demonstrated several things that are translating into changes in other courses.

1. The focus on a single theme that was explicitly and immediately relevant and interesting to everyone (students and instructors) motivated inquiry and made the teaching of modes, strategies, close reading, research methods, style, and mechanics easier and more complete. Most of the writing instructors and some of the literature instructors have developed their own themes for first year courses for all students, and find similar results.

2. Because the course considered material from a fuller range of perspectives, everyone in the class was able to contribute to discussions. Since these students varied widely in language competence, all were challenged to learn new ways to read, think, and write; thus old

ideas of who was better at what were leveled. In addition, each student could work toward her potential, which is much more difficult to do in skills or modes based classes. By the end of the term, the basic writers are ready for the required first year rhetoric and composition course. Others who were not basic writers to begin with make large gains in writing as they are making important adjustments to college in other areas. These have a head start on the rhetoric and composition course, and ten to fifteen percent of these place into honors composition at the end of the course.

3. Since we conceived this course as a summer replacement for remedial writing, we initially planned that students would take rhetoric and composition or honors composition following it. But since all students did not take this summer course, we kept the previous version of remedial writing for the fall semester until last year. Because the growth in students' writing performance was so great, we decided to eliminate the remedial writing course altogether and offer workshop/tutorials as part of the rhetoric and composition course for those students who would have been placed in the remedial course. If evaluations in the next two semesters match those of last fall, we plan (budget permitting) to offer the workshop/ tutorial to all students in the fall of 1998.

4. A comparison of skill level of end-of-semester papers from the Hero Quest course and from both groups of students in rhetoric and composition, workshopped and not, revealed that all three groups overall displayed the same range of competence. Because we had wanted to do certain kinds of writing in the Hero Quest course, we did not include argumentation nor a sustained piece of researched argumentative writing. Thus, we have up to this point required that students take rhetoric and composition in addition to the Hero Quest course. For next fall, we plan to incorporate this kind of writing into the course and list it as special sections of the rhetoric and composition course. However, as successful as this course has been and as committed as those who have taught it are to continuing, we do not plan to change the entire program over to it. We do not believe it is the only way to teach well, nor do we believe in placing instructors in the position of using an instructional model they do not want to use. To do so would undercut the aims of the course and our aims for teachers.

5. The exploratory and creative assignments have appeared to have spurred the deeper learning through building connections among the various personal dimensions and between the personal and the academic. We think this deeper learning may, in turn, be responsible for the growth in voice and style that student writing in this course displays. Accordingly, we have made changes in other courses to accommodate such learning. After the first summer, we began to change the requirements of two courses — rhetoric and composition and com-

position and literature — to accommodate more such assignments. The development of curriculum around a theme was encouraged, with instructors designing courses that made use of their areas of greatest interest and expertise. Several instructors incorporate field trips as a way of teaching, through museum exhibits and monument design, how knowledge is constructed. Maximum enrollment in the composition and literature course was cut (at the suggestion of the dean's office) from 25 to 18, the same as the rhetoric and composition course, to allow for more frequent writing. At the sophomore level, we are making plans to develop literature courses that work in the ways this course does. The first such course, to be offered in the fall, will be an extension of the study of quest literature.

We never expected to learn so much, nor for the course to impact our entire first year program so pervasively. We have our students to thank for teaching us so much, for writing so well and for expressing so frequently and cogently what they were learning and valuing along the way. We have one final comment, one our students made over and over again: the work is hard, challenging, and there is a lot of it. But that is a great part of the success. Students are amazed that they can read these books, and so many of them, and write and speak so well about them. They find they have accomplished something they didn't think they could do, they like it, they value it, and their confidence soars. It is a well-grounded confidence, for indeed they have achieved everything we believed they could.

### Notes

Previous versions of this essay were presented at the Conference on Global Literacy in Heidelberg, August 1996, and at the Conference of the Modern Language Association in December 1996.

We wish to acknowledge our debt to all those who contributed to the success of this course design: the students, who worked so assiduously and expressed so frequently and enthusiastically what they were learning along the way; and the instructors who also worked with devotion to teach and support students in their work. We would especially like to thank Lisa Robeson, whose ideas helped formulate the initial design, and Felicia Pattison, who gave much precious time to the expansion of the course to a full semester.

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