

REFLECTIONS ON THE WRITING INTENSIVE CORE WORKSHOP

Tony Gault
Mass Communications and Journalism
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The Core class I teach is called, “Analyzing the American Dream,” and it falls into the Core category of “Self and Identities.” My teaching background is in film studies and film production, and the class focuses on one of my favorite periods in American film history, the post World War II era. I’ve taught the class as writing intensive for three years.

The goal of the class is to analyze a sampling of films from the post-war period and come to understand the implications of Hollywood’s power in constructing identity in our culture then and, perhaps more importantly, today. Students choose from a list of ten or so current films, and they write a series of papers about their chosen film over the course of the quarter. My hope is that each student will find a personal connection to the film he or she chooses to write about and explore the ways identity is reflected and constructed in the film.

For example, a current favorite is *Pretty Women*. Often female students will choose to write about the film because they grew up with it and see it as influential within the context of their childhood. After watching, reading about and discussing a few 1940s and 50s films that grapple with the pressures of conforming to domestic enslavement, women who write about *Pretty Women* often come to a new and confusing reading of the film. What once was a magical fairy tale that promised material happiness and romantic love to a few lucky girls like Julia Roberts becomes a nightmare of shallow existence where a woman’s only hope of success comes in the form of tracking down a wealthy man and propping him up emotionally for the rest of his wretched, workaholic existence.

We also read a wonderful novel called *Revolutionary Road*--about a newlywed couple in the 1950s who struggle between the seeming necessity to conform to suburban life and the impulse to “chuck it all” to become bohemians in Paris. The author, Richard Yates, is cynical (and

astute) enough to color each choice as banal as the other. The book offers no solutions – just a vivid depiction of modern life and the limitations of how identity is defined in our culture. Students love its rebellious and cynical tone, though they clearly are disturbed by the lack of options it offers. The question of the class becomes, “how can I formulate an identity that is truly my own?” All of the movies in the class agenda address this question in some way.

I try to answer the question loudly and clearly - “Through your writing!” My training as a writing instructor came in the late 80s and early 90s when “personal voice” was a catch phrase of the time and main focus of my training. I still live by the pedagogical goals inherent in teaching writing through personal voice. I firmly believe that if a student doesn’t have a personal stake in his or her writing, it will suffer. Twenty years of experience teaching writing has shown me that when a student discovers this personal stake - organizational and stylistic problems start to fall away, and content begins to determine form. When this approach works in the Core class, good writing becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy: the content of the class compels them to ask a desperate question about identity, I provide a solution through their writing and everybody’s happy and literate. Unfortunately, it never works out so neatly.

Each student comes to the class with a different background in and attitude about writing. However diverse the students seem to be, they do seem to fall into two general camps. The first feels liberated by the notion that they can explore and experiment with personal opinions and voice in the discovery stages of writing. Many of these students are under the mistaken impression that the argument and form of a paper must be worked out first and foremost, and they hate the confining nature of this demand. The first assignment I hand out encourages

experimentation and exploration, and the first camp loves this process of discovery and doesn't want to move beyond it.

The second camp is also under the impression that figuring out their argument and creating a formal strategy comes first on their list of things to do. However, unlike the first camp, they love the limitations of imposing form on the process. They want to figure it out NOW and be done with the process. They resist my initial assignments regarding discovery and have a difficult time finding personal voice.

However, both camps suffer from the same basic problem: a lack of willingness to express a strong personal opinion about how identity is constructed in their film and how this construction affects them and the culture at large. The discovery camp doesn't want to be nailed down by an opinion, and the formal camp doesn't want to explore and develop an opinion. The discovery camp tends to write unfocused essays that wander through the thought process using flowery prose. The formal camp tends to write rigid, underdeveloped essays whose language is often stilted and awkward. Obviously, I am being reductive in my assessment of student writing problems. Most students struggle somewhere between these poles. But, for me, the bottom line is that almost all student writers are resistant to the discovery of and/or the commitment to a strong, personal opinion about their film and its personal and cultural implications.

With a strong personal opinion, a student is equipped to move beyond the problems of both the wanderer and the repressed. With a strong opinion, the wanderer feels compelled to organize ideas to prove an opinion, and the repressed feels compelled to search for a deeper articulation of what they're trying to say. I'm not sure why students have such a difficult time formulating strong personal opinions about the world. Perhaps the digital age and our new interactive approach to things encourages the attitude that one choice is as good as another (though I had problems wrenching opinions from students before the internet came into popular use). My guess is that it's more of a long-term pedagogical issue.

When I first began as a writing instructor, I was intent on teaching students how to impose form on their ideas. After all, a finished essay

should be neat, clean, concise and coherent. Years of struggle with learning the essay form had taught me these attributes, and I believed that my students should incorporate them into their work immediately. The goal of "neat, clean, concise and coherent" was paramount and, damn it, my students would keep these goals first and foremost in mind. I didn't even consider how many years of hell I had to go through to learn how to write a decent essay. In an almost unconscious process, I had discovered - above the clamor of demands about "neat, clean, concise and coherent" - that I had to have an approach, an intent, *an opinion* about my subject before I could impose structure on it. My diatribe may seem obvious, but I honestly don't think a majority of our students understand that an opinion needs to come before structure.

The first class discussion we have in my writing intensive course addresses the students' perceptions of what a good essay is and how they've come to learn these values. Over and over, I hear the same clichés: "good structure," "strong argument," "related evidence," "clear thesis statement in the first paragraph introduction," "conclusion that summarizes the argument." Have students been trained to think this way about the essay because of our cultural (and educational) obsession with finished product? I am waiting for the day in our class discussion when I hear phrases like "passionate point of view," "a reflection of my worldview," "a means of changing the reader's (and the world's) position on an important issue."



It's been 24 hours since I wrote the preceding pages. A student just sent me an email draft of his final paper for the Core class. He is writing about what drives the main character, Patrick Bateman, of *American Psycho* to become a serial killer. In it, he argues that Bateman, a well-heeled investment banker, feels "frustration" about the fact that no matter how hard he tries, he cannot achieve a level of success that doesn't leave him feeling like a failure. Ultimately, the student argues that Bateman must savagely kill his victims to find a sense of balance. He relates Bateman's experience to his own experience as a student, a hockey player, a son. The student writes that even if he does his best, he is often made to feel like a

failure, and he must lash out in order to find balance.

Considering that the student and I have spent over two hours in personal conference trying to isolate his argument, he has made pretty good progress. However, the heart of his argument ends up being (and I paraphrase here), “violence and rage are necessary to achieve a sense of balance in a world where failure is not an option.” I know, from our hours discussing the film and his relationship to it, that this is not exactly what he’s trying to say. In the draft, he argues that violence is justified. In our conferences, he was more interested in what makes him feel like a failure after trying his best, where this feeling comes from, why he gets violent because of it and how American Psycho is a perfect representation of this cycle.

His writing problem is not uncommon in my experience. He’s been led astray by his own thought process, and this process is more concerned with formulating a “strong argument,” “good structure” and collecting “related evidence” than with discovering and articulating what we discussed in conference – that some cultural force is at work and that the only way he (and Patrick Bateman) knows how to respond to it is by lashing out. After our last conference, he left with explicit instructions to explore what that cultural force is, how it affects him and other people, and what its repercussions are.

But, for some reason, he (and the majority of my other Core students) is not willing to go there. Many of my students don’t want to be challenged in this way, and the resistance is a major barrier to discovering their writing voice. I’m not sure what keeps many of our undergraduates from becoming astute observers and critics of culture - maybe it’s their age or the impermeable constructions of hegemony. I do, however, believe that the mission of liberal arts universities is to teach students to be free thinkers who challenge the status quo.



During the last minutes of our three-day writing workshop for the Core, I found myself arguing for the creation of some common foundational goal, agreed upon by all faculty members who assign essays to their students.

“Can’t we all admit that if a student isn’t able to clearly state what he or she is trying to prove, how the paper will be argued and why it will be argued, that he or she should be held back?” It’s a simplistic question I hear sometimes from colleagues but most of the time in my head, echoing obsessively.

It reflects a frustration that some teacher down the pike let yet another student pass with substandard writing skills. It’s a question that implicitly asks, “Why can’t all students and teachers think the same way?”

Every discipline, class and teacher asks a student to think in a different way. This is imperative to a liberal arts education. Given this, how could I ever wish for a student to employ a cookie cutter method of writing to my class and its unique demands? To every other discipline, class and teacher? This seems absurd. What I’m really searching for is the employment of something else. Colleagues in the workshop called it “the X Factor.” And I think the mysterious “X Factor” in student writing is also called “style.” In my experience, style comes from the development of personal voice. Ultimately, if I embrace the principals of a liberal arts education, I also need to embrace teaching my students how to become fluid writers whose style will transcend the demands of most disciplines, classes and teachers. However, writing about this principal and living it are two very different things. The development of a writing culture where inquiry, experimentation, personal voice and style are valued more than formal concerns is a messy, time consuming business.

When I think of my best moments as a teacher, I think of students who’ve made the leap from conventional thinking to developing a worldview that is truly their own. I think of students who can articulate a unique worldview with the written word and how their lives will be enriched by this ability. I think of the writing teachers who took the time with me so that I could develop a personal worldview and articulate it. I think about how this has enriched my life - giving me a freedom of expression that’s far too rare in our world. I think of style – those who’ve been able to learn it and cultivate it and those who are left behind.

So, how can I become a better writing teacher? The Core workshop helped me in three distinct, concrete ways. First, it made me more tolerant of the fact that each discipline has different expectations for the kind of writing students should engage in. I think this makes me a more malleable instructor and encourages me to spend more time addressing issues of student training and audience.

The workshop also helped me to realize the importance of revising my own approaches and assignments. I can see now that my *American Psycho* student writer is struggling because I didn't spend enough time helping him to clarify his relationship to the film. Ten weeks is not a long time to teach the different strategies of analyzing a film (cinematography, editing, sound, mise en scene, etc), and my impulse was to get him thinking and writing about these formal elements before he knew what he was looking for in the formal elements. The workshop encouraged me to break my assignments into smaller parts that reflect the thought process inherent in good film analysis. Instead of giving students a five to seven page essay due in two weeks, I am now breaking assignments down into three or four parts, each due the next class.

I can't expect a student to write well about one thing if there's another broad conceptual

demand begging for attention in the next bullet point of my assignment. It's smarter to have a student write about a character's struggle with identity and how it reflect his or her own struggles before having to think about how the cinematography reflects this too. Those ideas can come in steps two or three. Student focus, engagement and exploration of each concept is essential to the development of personal voice in a paper, and it's worth grading three clearly written assignments over two weeks rather than one incoherent mess. I'm confident that it will save me work in the long run.

I also learned about grading rubrics. I've seen them before in other workshops about teaching effectiveness, but this time I got it. For one thing, I learned that they don't all have to be the same. "Screw it," I said, "This time I'll make a rubric that has as much personality as I expect my student papers to have." I created a rubric that reflects my eccentric expectations, how much value I place on them and why. I use the rubric to explain my pedagogy. The students will know, in no uncertain terms, that writing which reveals no personal stake in their topic will be "unacceptable." It looks very formal, but it reveals my personal voice as a teacher.

There it is in black and white: a clear statement of purpose.

