

Embracing the *Ugly*

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Good teachers do [prepare students]. And I think, good classes that embrace...how do I want to word this...*the ugly*. The things that people don't want to talk about, the things that people don't want to think about...[because], you know, the world out there has teeth and claws.

—Jess, first year student

As a composition instructor, I teach “the ugly”: the subject that is often students’ least favorite or the one they least enjoy doing. Students can step into our classes viewing writing as something they *have* to do instead of something they want to do, or at least want to improve at doing. Their writing experiences are marred by standardized tests and overly strict attention to grammar and represented through a knowledge that’s frequently limited to genres found only in literature—not composition. Ironically, though, many students walk into our classrooms with the attitude that they do not need to learn anything new about writing because they believe they have learned it all already. They believe their prior experiences with writing accurately inform any other writing experience they may encounter. But this Jekyll/Hyde reaction to writing has them part afraid to welcome the new learning while the other part doesn’t believe there’s a need to learn more. Writing with its apparent teeth and claws becomes the students’ “ugly”: they don’t want to talk about it; they don’t want to think about it.

Sometimes life experiences can mirror writing experiences. When I was young, I, like most others, heard the story of the ugly duckling. I often related this story to myself, not in terms of becoming beautiful, but in terms of becoming taller. I figured as a child that, like the ugly duck shedding its shell, I, too, would eventually shed the shortness. Unfortunately that never happened, and I continue to flounce through life well below the average height of a woman. The amount of speculation and discussion that happens because of my height often astounds me. My height has been the topic of conversation many times: men have flatly stated (to me) that they will not date someone under 5’2, and on several occasions airport security officers have questioned my age because of my height, making derogatory comments in doing so. More than a few have joked at my expense about my being tall enough to ride a roller coaster—a joke I’ve never found that funny. And in high school I was nicknamed “Willow” after the movie about little people. People tend to find issue with what is different, or what they cannot understand, and apparently height is something people

can't always understand. Similar to the ugly duckling, it took me a long time realize my "beauty" or rather to realize that I am good just the way I am. My experience with my height mirrors my own experiences with writing as it has taken me awhile to get comfortable in my own *writing* skin, and it has involved many ups and downs to get to place where I am confident in my writerly identity. Much like my own students, I struggled to embrace my ugly.

Sometimes writing experiences are ugly. Last year, during the first week of classes, I decided to try a new approach to the "introduce yourself" exercises instructors commonly use to break the ice within a new classroom. Normally I ask students to respond to five questions using traditional questions such as what's your name, where are you from, and what makes you uniquely you, or something similar. This time, instead, I asked each student to tell a story about a good and/or solid writing experience. In my "First Year Experience" course, with 15 students, 97% of the students began their story with the preface, "I'm not really a good writer" or "I don't like to write" or "I had a really hard time thinking of one" suggesting that their prior experiences with writing have resulted in a negative outlook. And the stories told from my FSEM course *all* dealt with either receiving a "good" grade or being recognized somehow for their writing. Not one student told a story that didn't have some form of positive reinforcement as the end result. It appears these ducklings have been stunted, not evolving, and they came into my classroom ready to wallow around in their prior "ugly" experiences.

So, how can we work with these prior experiences? How can we help students embrace both the "ugly" side of their

writing experiences as well as embrace the possibility of becoming a better writer? As instructors, we need to do three things:

- (1) We need to structure our writing assignments in a way where students can see and understand the different rhetorical strategies they are responding to. For example, any and all classes I teach, whether FSEM or WRIT, my writing assignments always include three categories: (1) genre; (2) audience; and (3) rhetorical situation. These categories go into detail with the purpose of the assignment, but they are there to show students that no matter the writing situation, all respond, in some way or another, to these rhetorical concepts. Throughout the quarter, we discuss the importance of these concepts and how they can later apply to different writing situations.
- (2) We need to encourage students to have confidence so that they can get to a point of accepting who they are as writers: to embrace that they do, in fact, have a writerly identity. Just as the ugly duckling takes time to realize his beauty, so, too, can students take the time to realize their potential as writers. To do this, we need to create assignments that encourage the recognition of past experiences, but that also asks students to build upon the prior experiences and create new knowledge. We can do this through different types of reflective activities in the

classroom where students are asked to write for 20-30 minutes drawing connections between past and present experiences. We can't discount what students walk into our classrooms with, but we can also ask them to expand upon it.

- (3) We need to be explicit in our teaching practices, and we need to continue to have conversations across the university so that we are promoting similar rhetorical concepts and practices. Prior experiences with writing create barriers for students—even if these experiences were all positive—and they often struggle to get past them. If we work together to show students that writing practices *do and can transfer*, then we give students a knowledge that will grow and mature as they grow and mature as writers throughout their academic careers, and as importantly, a knowledge that they can carry forward to other writing sites and that will help them succeed in those sites.

One thing I like to encourage my students with: writing is not going anywhere. It's a practice that will follow them into any career they might have, so learning key rhetorical concepts becomes pivotal. To reinforce this idea, most quarters, I play a game with my students that begins the first week and continues until the last week. In this game, which they initially see as an easy win for them, I ask them to find a career or a job that does not require any amount of writing. Students confront this challenge with many different answers ranging from the

unusual to the traditional jobs. At the beginning, I'm the one responding back showing how the different careers do, in fact, have some need for writing. But as the semester progresses the students take up the challenge and join me in connecting the writing they are learning about to the careers they'll enjoy and lives they will lead. The end result is never to prove or disprove that writing is a part of any and all careers, but rather to show students the many different ways that writing operates within different communities and even the world: to show students the need to embrace, at least in some part, writing as essential to their identity.

Sometimes though writing is the ugly duckling. Writing, no matter how we, as composition instructors, pretty it up, can be ugly for students often because they come into our classrooms ready and willing to simply blow it off as something they have to suffer through to graduate. And as many scholars have pointed out, we only have a limited time with students, a semester or a quarter, to try and shift their thinking—to try and teach them a knowledge about writing that they can carry forward. My goal, my hope every semester is to challenge students to embrace, or at least suffer gladly, the ugly—embrace the writing—if only for the moment, to see the possibilities, so they can mature into their own writerly identity. Likewise as I've matured and embraced my height, I've come to realize that being shorter than the vast majority of people is okay.

With luck the ducklings do embrace *the ugly* and by embracing it, figure out that the ugly is okay. In fact, they become who they are, in part, because of it.