

TEACHING WRITING ABOUT WORK: A HUMANISTIC PEDAGOGY

JAMES M. CAHALAN

About seven years ago I found myself faced with every English teacher's perennial challenge—the need to do something new in my composition course—and was struck by several polarized approaches among college composition courses. These polarities in pedagogy have not disappeared in the years since then. First, an old school of teachers still felt that Literature-with-a-capital-L was the proper domain of the composition course and that good writing was to be based on imitation of the Great Models; at an opposite extreme, new teachers of technical writing sought to teach their students to write as people actually do at work—that is to say, in The Real World. There were those who viewed English 101 as the original humanities core course and those who saw it more as preparation for the outside world after college. Furthermore, there were (and are) the reactionaries who had their students writing only out of grammar workbooks and only on narrowly assigned topics; in reaction against them, a number of libertarians had abandoned textbooks altogether and told their students to write about anything that interested them. Yet perhaps the most serious problem I saw among composition courses of every ideological stripe was that they lacked a clear, developing sense of direction in terms of the content of the writing students were asked to do: “This week write an argumentative essay about topic A; next week write a descriptive essay about topic B; then write about anything at all.” Each student's writing was a loose collection of papers rather than a developing body of work. Yet neither we, the teachers, nor any of the world's good writers work that way: We affix ourselves to a topic and work on it until we're satisfied with what

we've written. Why should our students be prevented from doing the same?

So, seeking to resolve this problem and to steer a middle course between the polarities that I observed, I worked up a course that was aimed at the working world but sought to answer some important humanistic questions, allowing students freedom but challenging them and providing a sense of direction. Its outline is as follows:

(1) Students are asked to choose a career that interests them and make it the focus of all their writing in the course, beginning with a personal essay explaining their choice. How did they get interested in that career? Do they know much about it or not? What is their definition of a "good job" and how would this one fulfill it? What specific areas, current controversies, and new developments in that career most interest them? In preparation for this essay, we discuss a number of essays, both old and new, about work, values, and finding one's way in the world.

(2) Next, students write an essay defining the career: What does that kind of worker do, according to the student, the government (in the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*), and others? How did the career get its name, how long has it existed, and what are the highlights of its history? What is a current issue or new development of interest to the student, what are people saying about that issue or development, and how does it help define the field? I introduce students to useful library materials—the *Encyclopedia of Careers*, relevant periodical indexes—and direct them to begin talking to knowledgeable people: career counselors, who are valuable resource persons and always eager to help, and friends and relatives working in the career. In more advanced courses, the research part of the course includes the student's compilation of an annotated bibliography, complete with commentary on how each source they find is or is not useful to the student's particular project.

(3) Having read about and written about the career, the student interviews a person working in it with a tape recorder and writes a report on the interview in essay form, not providing a question-and-answer transcript but using several exact quotations from the interview. I usually schedule this part of the course around a late-term holiday—Thanksgiving or Easter—in order to allow students extra time to write up the interview or to hold it, especially

since they may be able to interview someone they can't see while at school. I encourage them to seek out specifically expert strangers rather than friends or relatives who may work in the career but not be knowledgeable about the particular issue or development chosen by the student. The interview is held after quite a bit of reading in Studs Terkel's book *Working*, discussion of interviewing strategies, and preparation of questions about both the interviewee and the career.

(4) The course culminates in a final paper: in basic courses, a "What Did I Learn?" essay; in more advanced courses, a formal research paper. In every case, the focus is on fusing the student's personal feelings about the job with objective information about it. Students end the paper, the project, and the course by explaining their conclusions about the career and their own future direction—whether to pursue or not to pursue it. They present their conclusions both in this final essay and in the form of an oral report to the class.

This project has proven to be successful in a variety of different settings. I've taught it at three fairly different universities: Northeastern University, a huge, private, urban institution; the University of Massachusetts—Boston, which shares Northeastern's location but is state-run and not as large; and Indiana University of Pennsylvania, also state-run and about the same size as UMass—Boston but located in a small-town setting. Even more divergent are the kinds of students I've taught: The two Boston schools are both urban, open-admissions universities, but the typical Northeastern freshman is straight out of high school and attracted by the university's cooperative work program as a ticket to a good job, while the average UMass—Boston student is 27 years old, returning to school, and unemployed or dissatisfied with a current or previous job; the typical IUP freshman has just left high school and a small town and is somewhat more conservative and pleased to be attending perhaps Pennsylvania's most competitive state university, to which about half of its applicants are admitted. *All* of these students, however, like students nationwide, are greatly concerned with the whole idea of *career*, although the older UMass—Boston student is often more knowledgeable and realistic about that topic than others—more aware, for example, of the importance of writing in the work world. Partly because of this concern on the part of students, I've found that the writing-about-

careers project has succeeded well with the considerably varied kinds of students I've known, as it has with those of several of my colleagues who have taught it at these and other schools. And it has been effective in a variety of different courses: Basic Writing, English 101 and 102, a Freshman Honors Seminar, and Intermediate Composition. I believe that a version of my project would succeed well in a high-school course, too, serving for example as an excellent senior-year preparation for a decision about a college major. The teacher needs to change only the emphasis and ambition of the project, not its basic shape, from course to course—but this assumes that my readers agree with me that basic writers do not need to do *different* kinds of writing but rather simply *more* of it. Each course allows a different variation of the project; in my honors seminar, for example, I introduced the project through reading and discussion of Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* and John Updike's *Rabbit Run*, two novels which allowed us to compare female and male experiences as well as success and failure in *career*, broadly considered as the problem of finding one's way in life, before turning to students' own aspirations.

My course draws on some of the traditional modes and assignments: the personal essay, the definition essay, and the research paper. These are taught in the context of the student's own discovery and exploration of a career, though not in isolation as arbitrary forms imposed on students. I also teach some classic essays, but again as factors in the student's own search rather than models for imitation. The primary goals and values of my course are humanistic, not technical. We explore the real world of work, but not in order to serve it by seeking to satisfy employer, associate, or customer—as most assignments in technical-writing and business-writing courses and texts do—but as part of the student's own quest for meaning and direction as well as a living. Some of the best projects have been done by students who have decided at the end *not* to pursue the career they investigated, by students who knew little about a job at the beginning but were curious about it, and by students who explored generally unprofitable occupations such as street magic and fiction writing. At the same time, many students decided to enter their chosen career and a number of them have since done so; one of them dropped my course and left the university when her interview resulted in an offer of a well-paying job in marketing.

My students have written on everything from accountancy to zoology; the project offers variety not only for the student but for the teacher, who instead of being faced with an exhausting series of inadequate readings of a single literary text, for example, is able to read earnest writing about a variety of occupations other than her own, learning something new with each one.

Students value the project because it is of use well beyond the English classroom. Over and over again I've seen that realization dawn in students who were unconvinced at the beginning but whose interest grew with the project. The opening personal essay allows them to consider themselves and what they're looking for before they explore and write about the career itself. They experience the library and the careers office as sources of information important to them—for example, "What is the average salary of the career I'm considering?"—instead of places that matter only to an English teacher. Their research paper becomes a source worth keeping after the end of the course rather than another useless and discarded Freshman essay.

When focused on one's desired career, definition can become an intimate, powerful mode of discourse, not the dull, lifeless thing it is when taught in isolation. Here, for example, is part of what Idi Jawar'Akim of Boston wrote for me about jazz:

Jazz is a form of art that allows the creative musicians to express themselves directly in the framework of their compositions. The performers have different styles corresponding to the influences of their own time and the maturation of their personality. The listeners' ears are just as important as the actual music being played by the performer. It's not a one-way street. It is the responsibility of the hearer to understand the music. But before one can understand the music, one must really love it. Listeners can develop their taste and sensitivity by intelligent practice. That means unprejudiced listening to the music of all schools and periods. Jazz is freedom.

Generally students—sometimes even teachers—perceive the research paper as the most impersonal kind of writing, but that need not be true when it is the culmination of a project of personal importance. Sarah Luria began her research paper for me this way:

My mother gave me only one directive for my life: be a writer. Her conviction came from the flood of letters I wrote home from camp. I welcomed it—imagine being paid to write funny letters! As long as there was a pen in my hand, I was God. All the world was translated into the sound of my own voice, which I thought had the loveliest sound. Even when life grew dark and complex as I sank into adolescence, writing remained useful. Camp was over; the funny letters stopped. I started to keep a journal which my mother would never read. No longer was it her approval I was after but rather a definition of myself. By luck my adolescence coincided with the second wave of feminism and I was exposed to the novels of Virginia Woolf. Like other feminists, I too considered myself her great-granddaughter and had her poster on my wall to prove it. I wanted to be a great woman writer who wrote great feminist novels. Of course I was aware that this is not exactly what my mother had in mind.

I have always been terrified of boredom. So much of life is spent in a fog—riding the subway, staring out the classroom window—Virginia Woolf called it “a kind of non-descript cotton wool.” Days pass, broken into little pieces that leave no lasting impression. But Woolf said that in writing there is “a great delight to put the severed pieces together. . . Behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern.”¹ Writing is the only technique I know for piercing the fog.

The interview and the interview report have been invariably the most exciting part of the whole project. Students find talking to an experienced person working in a career of interest to them to be a unique and invaluable experience, and the process of arranging and conducting an interview is a confidence-booster for them. They get to talk to an authority figure other than their teacher, one who will not be grading them and who is almost always glad to be sought out as an expert. The task of preparing for and doing the interview teaches important oral communication skills included in speech courses and sometimes in high-school classes but rarely in a college composition course. After that, getting from tape to paper, from the interview itself to the report on it, is a most interesting challenge. It makes the differences between spoken and written English that college English teachers like to talk about—dialect versus standard English—real. Students

have to figure out how to get some of the interviewee's speech on paper, observing written conventions (putting in all those commas and thus learning what a comma is all about) but also remaining faithful to the interviewee's speech (changing syntax or diction is not permitted). Yet the bulk of the report has to be the student's own writing, not quotation, and so they learn how to introduce, effectively incorporate, and often paraphrase quotations. And they learn description, again not as an isolated, imposed mode of discourse, but as part of communicating the whole interview experience to the reader. Barbara Fiola, for example, who became so interested in her project that she interviewed *two* travel agents (and now works as a travel agent herself), began her report like this:

The offices of the two different travel agents were strikingly similar. Both were small offices located near a shopping district, and both had at least two desks and two other agents in the office. Racks of brightly colored pamphlets lined the walls, seductively luring the would-be traveler. Phones kept ringing. There the similarity ended.

I feel that writing like this works not only because Barbara, like the other students, was interested in the career she was writing about, but because she was allowed to develop her writing on a single topic over an extended period of time. We ourselves, the teachers, learn well and write well when we stay with one topic; why are Freshman writers in college given only short periods of time to write about one topic? Not that I don't believe in deadlines: my courses are full of fairly strictly enforced ones. But, while I structure my courses carefully and teach traditional skills in the context of the students' own writing, often focusing on just one or two of those skills at any one time, the chief idea I want my students to learn is *process*—not only within one assignment but as we move from one assignment to the next.

While the course I have outlined is not a technical-writing course, technical-writing and business-writing components can be added to it. In Intermediate Composition courses I also have students compile a résumé and write a letter of application for an advertised opening in the field, a manual-styled report explaining a specific procedure on the job, and a memorandum advocating a particular course of action in the field. But the chief focus of my project is on writing about careers, not writing on the job.

Assignments such as the ones outlined above are not unique to my courses, not do I wish to appear to be claiming the origin or monopoly of them. I was heartened to read Philip Snyder's "Working 100-2: A Theme Course for Freshman Composition," in which he outlines a project informed by much the same spirit but taking quite a different shape, in *College Composition and Communication*, 33, no. 3 (October 1982), 315-17. And Lea Masiello's text *Writing in Action*, forthcoming from Bobbs-Merrill in Indianapolis, contains a section on writing about work. Although I have found that the theme of work succeeds particularly well, I do not believe that it is the only theme that can serve a composition course. Indeed, I would like to read more about other themes that fellow teachers have found successful. Composition journals are full of articles about the processes and products of student writing, but beyond a growing literature about writing-across-the-curriculum projects, there isn't much to read about the content of successful assignments and the shape of effective courses. Most of us now agree about *how* students can best write—they need to engage in a *process* just as we do—but there is little information about *what* students can write most effectively about, beyond what textbooks and students themselves suggest.

Lester Faigley and Thomas P. Miller have told us about "What We Learn from Writing on the Job" in *College English* (44, no. 6 [October 1982], 557-69) and several articles on writing in the outside world and the world of work were published in the October 1982 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. But what can we do for our students *before* they enter the work world? How can we best prepare them for that world without abandoning our aims and ideals as humanists? Listening to my students talk in my classrooms for the past few years about their career aspirations and watching their writing come alive as they put those thoughts on paper, I have become convinced that my project offers one way to meet that humanistic and practical goal. Since I'm just about ready to meet that perennial challenge again—time for another new course!—I would be most interested to read about other ways.

James M. Cahalan is Assistant Professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is both a teacher of writing and a literary scholar specializing in Irish literature. His *Great Hatred, Little Room: the Irish Historical Novel* was published in 1983 by Syracuse University Press.