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An Encomium for Community College Students in Five Scenes

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An Encomium for Community College Students in Five Scenes

Jamey Gallagher

Scene 1: The Committee

Books start arriving at my apartment by the boxful. As part of the committee judging the CCCC Outstanding Book Contest, I am inundated with books, and I am excited to get down to reading them. I feel like a graduate student all over again, reading things I would never read if I weren't "made" to (New Materialisms, anyone?). Most of the books excite me and make me think about how I can move forward as a teacher of first year writing. Some of them hurt my brain. Some of them annoy me.

But what I'm most struck by is the fact that almost all of the books, monographs and collections, feature writing that situates students as traditional— just coming out of high school. Almost all of this writing is coming from folks in four-year universities. Writing students are depicted as young, embarking on adult life but not quite there yet. The books have some relevance to what I'm doing at the community college, but I am struck, again and again, by how much these folks are missing.

What happens when we define our students as young, as young adults, as nascent, as inexperienced? We lose the good that adult students bring to the classroom with them.

Scene 2: The Online Literature Class

I have taken over an online Brit Lit II class for a colleague on leave. I change things in the course minimally— replacing *Hard Times* with *Mrs. Dalloway*— knowing there is only so much I can do, given the constraints of "Quality Matters" and...time. (I teach 5/5.) I have taught two literature classes since arriving at my institution ten years ago, but those classes were very small and comprised almost exclusively students that had been in my classes previously and knew what to expect from me.

This is a whole new ballgame.

I notice a difference right away, even before the class has officially started, when one student starts his introduction with the word: "Salutations!" Again, before the class has even started, students are emailing me about the broken links to a Wordsworth documentary. Are they actually going to *watch* that, I wonder?

Ah, I think, *so this is what some of my colleagues want*. They want students who, like them, are serious and delight in language. A certain kind of challenge.

I prefer my students turning shit in late and questioning why we're doing what we're doing. I prefer the question "*Why* are we doing this again?" (a question I got last night) to a full embrace of the academic venture. I prefer a different kind of challenge.

I teach the Brit Lit II class to the best of my ability, but I have no desire to repeat the experience.

Scene 3: Placement

I read thousands of responses that were written for our self-directed placement tool, as I'm working on an article about the reading practices of incoming "returning" students. "Returning" students are defined in this case as over 30. Is there a good term for these students? "Adult learners?" "Returning students?" Nothing quite captures it.

People.

I am amazed and impressed by what I read. Some of these in-coming students write about their love for urban fiction and religious literature. They talk about reading to improve their lives and their communities. They write about who they want to come back to school for: themselves, their children, their communities.

I learn more about these students through their responses than some of my colleagues learn in their classes. I am convinced of that. The personal histories of these students are kept hidden in many classes, like in my own Brit Lit class. We don't allow our students to bring their lives into the classroom with them— not often enough, at least. In turn, we don't make it possible to get the best, most engaged work from these students.

Scene 4: The Faculty Meeting

There is trouble in the English Department (is there ever *not* trouble in the English Department?). We meet in a large room to hammer out a "mission statement." There are more than forty of us in the room (pre-Covid, of course). We get into groups to discuss. The "reporting back" gets contentious.

A colleague claims that our students don't have any passion anymore. Where is their passion? I respond by talking about the self-directed writing projects my students do and how much passion I see every semester.

But what about the humanities, he replies, what about English majors?

Another colleague tells a story about a young man who didn't like *Jane Eyre*. I keep waiting for the story to shift, to change, for some character development, but that's the whole story: she is surprised that this student didn't like *Jane Eyre*.

And I realize: maybe some of my colleagues can only see passion on their own terms.

Scene 5: The Classroom

Let me tell you, things are not always easy in my classroom. Sometimes it is a place of great tension. I yelled for the first time in eighteen years in class last fall semester. There is sometimes a whole lot of tension in classes, especially wildly diverse classrooms with students of all ages.

But, damn, people are bringing themselves to the classroom. Once you open them up, things can happen.

In the community college, we are serving all kinds of people. I considered having a list here of some of the students I have this semester, but I don't want to minimize them, shrink them down to ages, ethnicities, races, jobs, responsibilities. Suffice it to say: they

have all kinds of identities. They are working just as hard or harder than most of us who have become PhDs and teachers.

There is one thing that I know for sure: these are not the students that scholars in my discipline are writing about, and they are not the students that some of my colleagues recognize as passionate. But these students are driving forward what we're doing in interesting ways, by asking those questions about why our courses and their writing matter. They know what matters. They bring reading histories we too often ignore. They are in the "real world," however we want to define it.

They can tell us a lot. If we listen.

grading

i, too, dislike it: there are things that are enjoyable beyond all this shuffling.
doing it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in
it after all, a place for the splendid
paragraphs that can cohere, theses
that can control, conclusions that can persuade
if they must, these things are important not because a

letter grade can be assigned to them but because they are
useful. when they become so unintelligible as to become unreadable,
the same thing may be said by all of us, that we
cannot admire what
we cannot understand: the phrase
dangling at the beginning of a sentence or in search of something to
modify, fragments languishing, a naked quote dropped in, a cliched introduction
to start off, the misreading student twitching with glee like an eager cross-
examiner, the passive-
voice fan, the late turn-in—
nor should we exclude
the “throughout histories” and
“debated topic todays”; all these phenomena we mark.
one must make a distinction
however: when dragged into an essay by half effort, the result is not an a
nor till the students we teach can be
ciceronians of
the current day--beyond
five paragraphs and can present
for inspection, convincing essays with real thought in them, shall we enjoy
it. in the meantime, if you look for on the one hand
the raw thinking of freshmen in
all its rawness and
that which on the other hand is
genuine, you are interested in grading.

—Naomi Gades