

English Department Philosophy

Cuyamaca College English Department

“Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit. My great teachers did not tell—they catalyzed a burning desire to know. Under their influence, the horizons sprung wide and fear went away and the unknown became knowable. But most important of all, the truth, that dangerous stuff, became beautiful and very precious.”

—John Steinbeck

“Just what are we trying to accomplish here?” is a vital question for us in the English department at Cuyamaca College! We believe that without a consensus of purpose, the goals of any department remain too vague or too general—and being unformed, most likely unobtainable. As a consequence, the teaching-learning process is not linked, unless haphazardly, to the overriding purposes and goals of the department and the college.

It is our contention that we must define our department philosophy of teaching, of literature, and of composition if we are to bond a strong link between our purpose and our actions. This document sets forth those beliefs that we hold, but we value the process at arriving at this general agreement as much as the consensus. Yearly, we must continue our discussions with one another to confirm and redefine our goals; and in that light, we want to start a tradition of an annual “social” in which one book is commonly shared and reviewed by every individual in the department!

We see this philosophy as a means to improving ourselves, even though we are in accord with a wonderful insight by Robert Scholes, Brown University: “We English teachers, it seems, have apprenticed ourselves to a discipline we can never hope to master—which means that we must learn to enjoy reducing the clumsiness and ignorance without ever hoping to be perfectly graceful and wise. We must learn to enjoy the state of becoming, for we will never fully and perfectly be English teachers.”

The mission of the community college is diverse; our task is likewise multifaceted. Our goal is to have students achieve content and skills, and to develop the ability to use them productively together. Today some still talk about vocational education (with vocational instructors) and academic education (with academic instructors) as though they exist in separate worlds. It is an age old dichotomy. Plato favored the concept of “a classical subject-matter education” while Aristotle sided more toward the “practical, problem-oriented” approach. We favor a blend of both. The education which we propose chooses academic rigor (knowledge) and contextual learning (application) as well. We need to disseminate knowledge and to develop the intellectual proficiencies while nurturing in students an understanding of how knowledge may be applied to real-life situations. We want to provide experiences that will enable students to connect knowledge with life experiences that constitute a part of living. Competencies acquired in schools must affect life. We support looking at what is to be taught to what is to be learned. Material “covered” in classrooms and not incorporated into the lives of students simply fades away.

Great teachers throughout history have known this. Therefore, they have placed heavy emphasis on the search for meaning, have motivated their students by relating ideas and knowledge with the practical realities of daily life, and have encouraged them to learn through hands-on, practical experience. We want the same. We want students to see meaning and to make as many connections as possible:

- between information and experience,
- between the classroom and the world,

- between one subject matter discipline and another,
- between their past knowledge and present challenges, and
- between their present challenges and future responsibilities.

We must help all students develop the competencies of being a knowledgeable, skillful, and critical thinker, since these are the progressive skills required to be lifelong learners, lifelong readers and writers, thinking workers, discerning citizens, wise consumers, responsible family members, and participants in the aesthetic aspects of life. Better reading and better writing go hand in hand.

It is our hope that a clear vision of what we are supposed to be accomplishing in English—our department philosophy—will allow us to function efficiently so that our students learn effectively. □

TENETS AND VALUES FOR TEACHING LITERATURE

□ Literature is in itself eminently and absolutely valuable. Literature is central in education, “higher” and otherwise. We could try to justify our existence on strictly utilitarian grounds; literature, after all, contains much practical knowledge helpful in other academic fields. A recent Supreme Court justice stated that the best preparation for law school is to study poetry, and a current trend in industry is to hire literature majors because they have been exposed to seeing the world from another person’s point of view. Without literature, one may suffer from the failure of imagination necessary for success in any profession.

However, like history, art, and music, literature may be taught for its inherent humanistic value. We value this, and encourage the teaching of literature because it is both useful and enjoyable. The study of literature is to increase one’s sense of life and one’s vision of life regardless of one’s field of study or work. The aim of literary study is to awaken oneself, to be alive, and to intensify one’s capacity for pleasure, for sympathy, and for understanding.

□ Literature provides the cultural basis for cohesion in a fragmented society. Shakespeare’s plays have rarely been out of production in over 400 years, and he is today the most frequently produced playwright in China. Real literature touches everybody, regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, nationality, etc. This is because literature aims to make sense of the randomness of everybody’s life. Furthermore, common literary experience can be an ingredient in the cultural glue holding a nation, a world, together.

In that light, we encourage teaching literature written in different literary periods and cultures, canonical and non-canonical, as well as in different modes and literary genres including novels, short stories, poetry, and drama.

□ Literature is what we know best how to teach. Our degrees are in literature, and that’s what we can teach best. Classroom discussions exclusively on criminal justice, racism, date rape sidestep the inherent value of literature. We want to guard against requiring more and more knowledge about secondary texts. Instead, we encourage the direct experience of the primary text. To know literature thoroughly is to know it as art—to be sensitive to the life it expresses, to understand the kind of truth

than can be said in words, and to be wise to the kind of beauty language can create. Simply put, we encourage close reading.

William Faulkner is identified, naturally, with the South, since with few exceptions his great fiction has a Southern setting. Excessive emphasis upon that identification, however, can be misleading, because his themes concern universal human issues and his characters have a relevance to basic humanity. Faulkner's literature may concern characters in Mississippi, but it reveals universal human characteristics to the world. We do not read Melville primarily to learn about whaling, and we do not read Momaday primarily to learn about native Americans. We read authors of diverse backgrounds to learn about being human.

□ Literature must be an integral part of everyone's life. Through the selections we teach and the discussions we hold, we must emphasize to every student this importance, and we must show how literature relates to everyone in our classrooms, not just the ones heading for a four year institution and not just the English majors. We must awaken (or reawaken) a love of literature in our students. This can be accomplished in the following:

We need to create student centered classrooms where student opinions and ideas are highly valued and the emphasis is on what they think and their interpretations. We want to move away from the teacher as an all knowing font of knowledge to someone who has had more experience with literature and can guide and move discussions in interesting and enlightening ways.

We need to make our students feel comfortable with and not intimidated by literature. This does not mean that we "spoon feed" them; it means that we create a classroom where, as with writing, we build on what we have taught and move students from the simpler to the more and most complex as the semester progresses.

We need to challenge our students in literature classes in all ways. We often engage in thought provoking discussions of literature, but we must also emphasize writing in our literature courses. Students need to write essay tests and papers to help themselves explore and discover what they think about what they have read. Students must see that any interpretation is valid, as long as there is evidence to support a claim. □

TENETS AND VALUES FOR TEACHING COMPOSITION

□ Writing is a lifelong endeavor; so one goal of any undergraduate writing course is to learn to write more effectively in school and out of school. Emphasizing "writing as product" encourages the use of models so that writers through analysis and replication will write effectively and will polish until the product is "finished." Emphasizing "writing as process" focuses upon the act of writing so that our students invent, write, evaluate, revise, and edit. We feel that a blend of product and process ensures the effectiveness of a writing course to promote writing as a lifelong endeavor. The ability to write well in a range of expressive modes is a central concern and goal of all composition classes at Cuyamaca College, as it ought to be.

□ Teaching composition must promote the recursive nature of writing. A writer invents, writes, evaluates, revises, edits, and rewrites over and over again until the piece satisfies; letting students experience this implies many drafts, which is contrary to the practice of assigning a topic on

Monday, collecting the paper on Wednesday, and returning the graded essay on Friday, and then beginning the process over again the next week. In our opinion, teaching writing as process does not allow for a student to write an assignment once mere hours before it's due and to hand it in. We believe that one piece written many times provides a better learning experience than many pieces written one time. At the same time, however, writing upon demand is a practical and necessary skill, and one which we wish to emphasize. Writing as it occurs in other academic fields, writing to reveal skill competencies or placement, and writing on the internet all require the ability to compose "on the spot," and we would be remiss if we ignored that ability. Therefore, we encourage a "healthy" blend of in-class and out-of-class writings.

□ We encourage writing as thinking. Our belief that students learn best when they are active makers of meaning, not passive receivers of information encourages us to shift the classroom from strictly a lecture hall toward being a workshop. Our composition classes must clearly be courses that allow students to learn actively. Students need to analyze readings, generate topics, discuss purpose and audience alternatives, write, and respond to drafts of others; such activities are best done in groups. In no way are we suggesting that composition teachers downplay their own authority as readers and writers more expert than their students. What is implied is that composition can not be taught like many community college classes in which the teacher lectures for 55 minutes three times per week.

□ To teach well, we must diminish the fear of taking risks. Most of the time, in the lives of both students and faculty, when we write, the writing is not directly about ourselves, or even about something that we already know entirely, but is directed toward the boundaries of our knowledge where discoveries may be made. It should be obvious that such journeys may not always find successful destinations. But learning occurs regardless. So, what ever is necessary to alleviate this hindrance should be mandatory.

□ We want to make motivation for writing highly evident. Teachers will come closest to producing motivation when the learning is fun and fascinating, when evaluation is frequent and contains honesty and praise, when learners are aware of changes in their behavior / skills, and when the subject matter is initially and constantly justified. Maybe we can not actually teach writing, but we indeed believe that we can help people improve as writers if they desire such improvement. The key to that desire is for students to understand the intention of classroom and homework actions. Gifted teachers frequently convey the enthusiasm that initially drew them to the subject matter.

□ We want our students to write frequently and frequently to see good student writings. We learn to do something by doing it, rather than listening to someone tell us about it. Writing must occur often, and good writing should be celebrated in its being made "public."

□ We believe that we should write, too. Because, writing (a sweet agony) is exultation! And besides, lots of good ideas for teaching writing evolve from our writing. □