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Back to the Future? Writing Instruction in the 21st Century Liberal Arts

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Editor's Introduction

Jesse Swan, "Editor's Introduction"

A buffoonish court administrator of early modern Elsinore was once portrayed as asking a brilliant college fellow home on a sort of family leave, "What do you read, my Lord?" The brilliant college fellow, made confident not only by the new learning he'd been absorbing at Wittenberg, where there was a reputation for fervent liberations, rebirths and reformations through humane learning, especially through the activity of reading, theses as much as scripture as much as classics, but also by his social standing in Elsinore, responded, not entirely or only sarcastically, "Words, words, words."

Of course, the court administrator isn't interested in what the college fellow is reading, anymore than the college fellow is interested in the court administrator or the administrator's actual interests in addressing him, and such is what is dramatically rendered, in better performances of the scene. Nonetheless, spectators and especially readers of this exchange have been keenly interested in the college fellow and particularly in his love of reading and, if not writing, then composing, as in the play he crafts in order to test his late father's brother, who is suspected of fratricide. The college fellow's girlfriend at home loves him also, like many readers do, for being an ardent reader, even as it is his incisive reading of the girlfriend that drives her to suicide. Readers and spectators respond quite variously to the depiction of the relationship of reading, life and death, and many of these varied responses are best developed in writing, often to be read by a liberal arts professor interested in cultivating the reading and writing talents of brilliant college fellows. How this sort of cultivation is done, or might be done, at UNI, is the focus of this issue of *UNIVERSITAS*.

Addressing obstacles to teaching writing, **Back to the Future? Writing Instruction in the 21st Century Liberal Arts** is comprised of an extended essay by David Grant and several responses. Grant's inspiring essay touches upon much, and among the important topics developed include the issue of some institutional obstacles that seem to preclude the productive interplay among freedom, writing, and social provisions, provisions that appear to be required for the development of the freedom expressed by the liberal arts, including that of the art of composition. To confound the impediments, a kind of specialization is advanced. This specialization needs to assume the reach of an art, the essay suggests, in order to effect the desired advancements. Responses question many of the topics addressed by Grant, sometimes to challenge Grant, but more often to elaborate one or more of the topics. Some questions are raised about the need to subordinate other specializations and the actual efficacy of specialized writing instruction, leading to observations concerning the slipperiness that comes from privileging parochial forms of humanity over the many and various global expressions of humanity. Other responses wonder about the marginalization of grammar, the emphasis on manipulation over expression, and the conception of writing as a part of intellectual activity rather than as a form of intellectual activity. These responses are complemented by others that question the conceptualization of students, the predictability

of results for engaging any given theory or practice, including those practices from the past seen to have been efficacious. Further along these lines, responses question the actual possibility for personal choice that is permitted by contemporary, mainstream US culture, the supposed difference propagated between people known as “teachers” and those known as “students,” and the efficacy of instruction in composition in words without vision. Finally, other responses include questioning the value of having the discussion of these matters typically being led by experts, wondering about the value of separating skills, methods, and content in the promotion of writing, discouraging the habit of thinking about writing instruction separated from the specifics of students and various cohorts of students, and advocating the exploration of alternatives to time-consuming methods of assessing writing or to rubrics, even as both the time-consuming methods and the more time-efficient rubrics have their obvious value.

Understanding that words are stable only for a stabilizing mind and that the same word can be put to multiple uses, certainly over time and space, but even at the same time and in the same place, **Submitting to the Disciplines of Liberation: A Second Look at Mark Van Doren's *Liberal Education*** develops some implications of the thought of one of the most celebrated liberal arts academics from the rural and farming Midwest. For several decades a professor and one of the most acclaimed humane teachers at Columbia University, Van Doren was reared in rural Illinois. With some others of his generation, including several of his contemporaries at UNI, Van Doren fostered an expansive, humane education for wider and wider proportions of American society. Bill Koch understands this and wonders about the continued possibilities of such liberation in education, especially for the have-less, if not, anymore, for the have-nots. Moving between exposition and lyricism, Koch presents a report of sorts. This kind of essay is a style of writing currently explored by some of those developing a new mode of academic knowledge and writing, sometimes called the scholarship of teaching. For practitioners who feel that writing instruction can be more of a civilizing cultivation of subjectivity, a subjectivity able to contribute to a democratic society, than a skills training imposition productive of a subjectivity ready to serve supervisors and the masters of global capitalism, **Submitting to the Disciplines of Liberation** will be rewarding. Indeed, responses to Koch's foundational report suggest the pleasure such practitioners have experienced, even as there are some remarkable misgivings. Some discontent is with the cultural environment, an environment that seems to be toxic for liberal learning as the environment manufactures the smog and sludge of intellectual stupor, emotional irritability, impatience and vending machine training and credentialing. The artfulness of words is celebrated by respondents as it is by Koch, even when respondents note the evacuation of the intelligent, freedom-enabling artfulness of language by way of for-profit technology, a technology that encourages the have-less to avoid liberation, even to be hostile to it, as the have-less dispose themselves into a subjectivity of mechanical production and reproduction. Even with mechanically reproduced subjectivities, students, perhaps particularly those considered most rudimentary, can be drawn along, other responses suggest, by cultivating the sense of familiarity and belonging of Koch's essay in the current, present classroom. One way of doing this, in addition to those outlined by Koch's essay, one respondent indicates, is to acknowledge student hostility and to work from that to shift negative past experiences with words to current positive experiences suggestive of future possibilities.

There is hardly any resolution, in this issue's dual consideration of writing and the liberal arts, yet that is the nature of the liberal arts, to have unending vibrancy rather than eternal resolution. It is also the nature of the arts, in this case the arts of the word, to be able to perform mutually incompatible tasks simultaneously, so that our collaboratively produced consideration of writing and the contemporary liberal arts can give rise to celebration and hope as well as lamentation and a sort of despair. In the end,

it is the reader who will decide how to proceed. We hope that “the reader,” that is, “the readership,” can be understood to be both a collective noun and a liberally educated collective. In this way, we can have, with the brilliant college fellow that has drawn so much interest for centuries, the “Words, words, words” of a proper, humane and even Shakespearean accomplishment.

Jesse Swan
Professor and Editor



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