

UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

Volume 6
Number 2 *Forum Theme 1: Back to the Future?*
& *Forum Theme 2: Submitting to the Disciplines of Liberation*

Article 4

9-2010

A Response to Back to the Future?

Xavier Escandell
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2010 Xavier Escandell

Recommended Citation

Escandell, Xavier (2010) "A Response to Back to the Future?," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*. Vol. 6 : No. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol6/iss2/4>

This Forum Theme 1 is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.



A Response to Back to the Future?

Xavier Escandell

“Muddled writing is muddled thinking,” wrote my professor, challenging me to revise one of my first essays in graduate school. Indeed, the process of reconciling writing and thinking is a lifelong challenge for writers. The challenge is even more daunting as you try to teach others how to communicate ideas effectively on paper. As I grade my student papers, I am continuously pondering how I can encourage my students to engage their sociological imagination, encourage them to be mindfully skeptical citizens, while addressing the ‘correctness’ and ‘basic skills’ of writing. Grant argues for the need to re-couple writing to its more rhetorical/analytical traditions. That is, to appreciate writing as more than a composition of grammatically correct sentences and paragraphs, taught in mandatory writing courses, but rather, as bound up to “contingencies of audience, purpose and context” (p.1). Grant defines rhetoric “as effective use of language, irrespective of whether or not it is grammatically proper or correct” (p.6). This is music to the ears of those of us who see writing (and re-writing) as an intimate intellectual process, but also as a contextual skill that can be learned. It is also very relevant for those who have had to relearn the craft in a second language or as part of one’s professional development as one acquires the language of a new discipline.

I commend Grant’s piece for outlining how a rhetorical approach to writing embraces “diversity, tolerance, community involvement, [and] the interconnectedness of knowledge” (p.11). As a scholar interested in social inequalities and giving a more salient voice to those who feel dis-empowered, I would further emphasize that communicating effectively can be seen as a form of resistance: whether this is through writing, oral presentations, blogging, or through visual media. For me, teaching is about convincing people that they have something important to say, that their perspectives matter and that we are listening and learning with them. The recognition of student identities and diverse social backgrounds as well as identifying what they are passionate about is a critical first step. Within any given class, it means setting a tone of inclusion in the classroom where students from different backgrounds are encouraged to critically reflect on how their life experiences shape how they read and write. It means including in our course syllabi readings that expose multiple perspectives on any given topic (even those that we may not agree with intellectually). It means assigning non-conventional writing assignments in conventional settings, challenging students to write letters to the editor, film reviews, journal entries, or to role play and write from the perspective of another actor. It means to incorporate into our classes a greater process of peer review, so students can learn from one another’s writings. True learning, whether you come from a position of privilege or not, whether you are a professor or a student, often entails leaving your own comfort zones and challenging your own beliefs. Thus, reminding students that a class assignment is an opportunity for meaningful reflection and /or a chance to make connections between their experiences, other classes they take and what they read is a valuable learning tool.



Writing is embedded into a larger project of thinking coherently and critically, producing knowledge and ultimately creating informed citizens. Furthermore, to illuminate for students the ways their thoughts can be developed into a larger thesis or may be worth publishing is not necessarily unrealistic but requires institutional support.

Our educational institutions need to find ways to offer a more holistic view of writing and learning: encouraging students to make connections between the classes they take and the events occurring around them in society at large. Avenues to foster collaborations across fields entail not only challenging students but also faculty to establish meaningful partnerships. The more obvious of these partnerships is through co-teaching a class. Another less daunting approach is to enable occasional group encounters between courses already offered in the curriculum. For example, students enrolled in a class on race and ethnicity could meet with a class on post-colonial literature. By reading a common text, students can explore the conventions and effectiveness of how each discipline approaches processes of “othering.”

As institutions of higher education think about their Liberal Arts core curriculum, they face societal pressures to provide students with more vocational and technical skills. David Grant’s endorsement of *progymnasmata*, as a call to refocus the process of learning and writing away from the end product of a “well-written” discipline-specific essay towards a more holistic inter-disciplinary process is very well timed. Without resources and coordination, however, inter-disciplinarity can run the risk of becoming, what sociologist Joel Best calls, “another institutional fad.”