

# Composition Weekly



October 3, 2011

## Creating a “Third” Space for the Alienated, Apathetic Student

I’ve become increasingly interested in student publications and bridging academia to everyday life and “glocal” concerns. Ideally, academia’s purpose is to teach a now fairly significant portion of the population how to think critically about the “real” world and how to go about contributing to it – thereby encouraging student citizens to challenge the way social mores make them think, while simultaneously training them how to make societal progressions. In reality, many students are pursuing four-year degrees in order to secure their own futures. As composition theorist Jonathon Mauk states in his essay “Location, Location, Location: The “Real” (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking in Composition,” obtaining a four-year degree has become an “economic imperative” for students who wish to be financially “set” in a capitalist society.

Because this is a fairly general attitude students have in regards to higher education, I think this is where a large portion of our apathy as a society comes from. If you’re wondering how society has become apathetic, think about why Gruening was designed the way it was in the 70’s (to deter students/staff/faculty from overtaking buildings) and compare it to our behavior now – we all laugh about those “radicals” from the ivory-painted rooms of the eighth floor.

Let me clarify: students feel like they have to pursue a degree in order to be successful, and it’s not necessarily something they want to do. This is very alienating for students because many of them are no longer making a choice to go to college. It further makes them view academia as separate from their “real” lives

– reinforcing the notion I invoked a few sentences ago: academia is the ivory tower removed from society. They don’t see individual classes as assisting in their intellectual growth and development as a person. They see the certificate that they receive at the end of their degree as the thing that proves they have grown and developed intellectually, because that is what their future employers care about. On a macro level, students focus too much on the end goal, and overlook the



importance of the individual class. On a more micro level, students care more about the grade they receive rather than what they learn.

I realize that this is quite unfair to those students who do see every class as a milestone in their path to becoming informed and caring citizens. These

students are sparse though, and I do not blame the students who simply want to “get by;” rather, I believe that it is the highly competitive nature of the university (modeled after society) that is to blame for student alienation and apathy. This later extends to societal apathy, as I mentioned above, because it is during the college experience that students begin to take on the fallacious attitude “I am a \_\_\_\_\_ major, not an English major,” thereby dismissing the importance of their core classes by placing more importance on their major’s classes.

Although this perspective encourages student possession and ownership of their major (which helps build their identity as scholars), it also promotes the self-serving citizen who only cares about what directly affects himself/herself. This can also be seen in the departmental aspects of the university, which have compartmentalized and sectioned off interdisciplinary studies at the undergraduate level so drastically that students struggle in transferring knowledge and skills from discipline to discipline and “academia” to “real” life. (I’ve interviewed many professors from the social and natural sciences on

campus who have stated that student writing is a problem – they still don’t teach the genre of writing within their own fields though)

However, it is not because students do not have the capability of transferring skills; rather, it is because students aren’t asked to practice these skills, but are somehow expected to know how to do it. Unfortunately, some composition teachers still teach the composition class as an English course – having their students respond to literary texts rather than trying to bridge whatever is going on “out there” to what is going on “in here.” Fortunately, this works for some teachers and their classrooms; however, imitation can only carry a few students throughout life, while other students can only succeed at it within the writing classroom.

In Mauk’s article, he describes this dislocation he witnesses his community-college students experiencing and attributes it to the layout of the community-college campus and the biases associated with the two-year degree. He observes that there is no space on campus for his students to occupy intellectually other than the classrooms, and that many of his students have

significantly established their lives outside of school – either as parents, laborers/employees, etc.

Mauk proposes that locations – or spaces that students can potentially possess – are more than just real, tangible places, but that they also involve the imagination or “ideals” of a place. Hence, Mauk suggests that by prompting our students to create their own “third” space through writing assignments that bridge “the real and the imagined” (or, politics/experience/etc. with abstract, academic concepts), students will finally be able to “situate themselves in the [academic] institution.” Mauk admits that this is something that pertains to traditional students at traditional universities as well. (For those of you Lacanian fans out there – you can relate Mauk’s yoking of the “real” and the “imagined” as necessary components for entering into the “symbolic,” or, your students’ abilities to construct language/an extended written argument) By drawing students from the outside world into the academic world, Mauk argues that students can glean understandings and critical thinking skills through their examination of how they experience the world.



Before I propose a practice that might complement this theory, I must voice two opinions: 1.) that the term “academic” is problematic in itself (when used around the student at the core-class level) because it simultaneously connotes something abstract/foreign (scary) and a “snooty” mentality that students wish to distance themselves from; 2.) a third space can potentially be more alienating to your students, so make sure you run your ideas by other teachers before bringing them into the classroom. (I once had a composition teacher who tried to create a third space for us by prompting us to talk to one

of our older relatives about how sexuality was viewed when they were our age – and then compare and contrast the similarities and differences. It was awkward, and many students distanced themselves from the assignment.)

As I am continually designing my next class, I came up with an analysis unit where students would do the following over the span of a few weeks: learn logical fallacies, find fallacies in the News-miner's letters to the editor, study the genre of the letter to the editor, write a letter to the editor over a local issue, and try to submit it for publication. Lo and behold, as I was asking Christopher Miles about how he used letters to the editor in his classroom, he described my exact analysis unit. Although my idea (or, perhaps, our idea – along with Sarah Doetschman) was not as original as I thought it was, it is nevertheless an excellent and applicable way to create a third space for student citizens. Not only does it bridge the academic to the real, but it also gives students a sense of the rhetorical situation, audience, publication, community, and genres. Moreover, it provides an opportunity to teach students how to avoid logical fallacies and how to write analytical, thesis-driven papers. (For publication, students would have to cut the length of their paper down)

If this is something you'd like to try with your class, Proposition 2 – the Healthy Air Protection Act – is currently a fairly contentious issue in Fairbanks. Students can educate themselves from newspapers, online blogs, public debates, and even flyers in coffee shops. The plethora of information out there can be found in many places, and by encouraging your students to research what stances other people are taking, not only are you making them occupy the places where the information can be found, but you are also motivating them to get involved with a local issue.

Mauk's article:

Mauk, Jonathon. "Location, Location, Location: The "Real" (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking in Composition." *Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers*. Ed. Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2006. 198+. Print.



## Brown Bag Reminder

The next brown bag will take place this Friday, October 7, from 3-4PM in the Kayak room of the library. We will be discussing Geoffrey Sirc's "Writing Classroom as Factory," which was sent out last week via email. If you did not receive that email and need a copy of the article please contact me.