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Exposition Exposé

Teaching a College Writing Course Is a Kind of Sentence

By RICH PLISKIN

I RECENTLY finished a hitch teaching writing at a large state university between New York and Philadelphia. Because I may want to teach there again someday — albeit in the distant future, under circumstances so fantastic and remote I can't possibly even imagine them — let's just call the place Flutgers.

You don't teach for the money, which for Flutgers adjuncts works out to a cool 12 Euros a semester, about enough to cover the cost of gas and Pringles.

No, I did it for the personal satisfaction — of giving back to the community, of transferring knowledge to the next generation, of helping young writers unlock their intellects and explore their creativity.

On the other hand, the Euro's kind of a fun currency, don't you think?

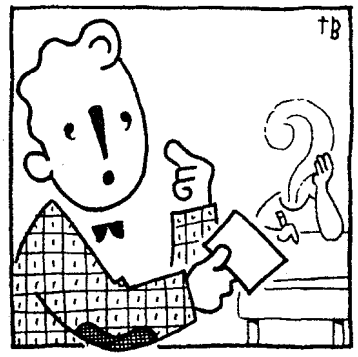
Profitable or not, I took it seriously. I even dusted off "The Elements of Style" by Strunk and White before my job interview, just in case I was to be quizzed on comma splices, participles and the other grammar hooey I never bothered to learn as a student but now felt qualified to teach at the college level.

I faded on Strunk and White after page 4, but it hardly mattered. Though my credentials got me the interview, I'm pretty sure I got the job because of a clean criminal record, inoffensive breath and a pulse rate.

Flutgers has a sprawling writing program, and Expository Writing 101 — Expos 101 to all — is legendary among undergrads for being difficult. You have to pass it to receive a bachelor's degree, and many students have taken it term after term, year after year, epoch upon epoch in a tragic quest for a required credit. One poor student told me she had taken and failed 101 six times.

I taught evenings, and my students included a few in their 20's and 30's who had returned to campus to finally muscle through their remaining credits. Most, though, were college-age regulars who wound up in an evening class either because they had to work days for tuition money, or because out of dread they had waited too long to get into a daytime section.

None of us were prepared for the



Tom Bloom

actual torpor of the thing. By 7:30 p.m., most students were spent and sullen. Many had already put in a full workday, dinner had come and gone, and yawns popped around the room like long, slow flashbulbs. There was a lot of scratching.

I discovered that for many students, writing is a mystery up there with the virgin birth, only without any payoff. Instead of joy and revelation, these poor mugs got a pummeling: readings so obscure they could make an angel beg for death; a breathless writing schedule; and my handwritten feedback, which was so extensive and messy you couldn't read it if you wanted to. And you never wanted to.

The readings, a collection of social science essays, were — how you say — just plain awful, for example, Peter Drucker's utopian maunderings on "the rise of the knowledge worker." Penetrating and profound, and dry as a burlap bag.

At first, I assumed I could skip the basics, like sentence fragments and pronoun-antecedent agreement. Sure enough, by the end of the term i had delivered lectures on "Your Friend the Verb," "Make Big Letters Work for You!" and "The Semicolon; It's Too Complex to Get into Here, So Leave It Alone."

To keep people motivated, I also started out writing comments like, "Hi, Ted. Your font selection is excellent! Keep it up!! Rich." Weeks later, this had become: "Ted. You suck as a writer. RP."

Cruel? Sure. But look at the provocation, like the student who spent 16 weeks researching child abuse only to conclude: "Putting an child into heated oven is very disturbing fact." And vanilla, he might have added, is very popular flavor really liked a lot.

In the end, I think you're either programmed for writing or you're not. Add to this the fact that most people are in a fog until long after college, and you'll know what a university is up against.

Which is why the unsung heroes of the Flutgers writing program deserve combat bonuses — the directors, the advisers, the staff. And I don't say that just because I may someday, in the distant future under circumstances so fantastic and remote that I can't even imagine them, want to teach again.

Looking back, I hope my work mattered — that one day a former student, writing an important office memo on, say, a new pickling process, will come to a nonessential clause, recognize it as such, and suddenly Get It: she'll insert a comma in the right place.

Or, she'll paste in a template, run it through grammar check, scan in a signature, and have a good guffaw at Expos 101.

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