You Can Always Teach

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SOMETIMES A QUESTION HAS BEEN ANswered in so many creative ways that we overlook the assumptions underlying such responses. When students ask, "What can I do with a degree in literature?" the answers suggest that instructors hear a second, unasked part of the question: "—besides a career in teaching." That *PMLA* has reserved space to address a related question—"Why major in literature—what do we tell our students?"—suggests a professional interest not merely in the careers available to literature majors but more broadly in testing what MLA members say about our profession. One answer is that literature majors, like other majors in the liberal arts and humanities, have a wide selection of career choices. The knowledge students gain from modern and classical languages, history, social and political sciences, philosophy, and literature serves graduates by giving them a breadth of experiences and ideas, by developing creative thinking, and by providing skills in communication that make BAs and MAs attractive to employers in business, technology, industry, government, and research, to name a few. But these options omit the one career, sometimes considered a clichéd choice, often left unsaid: literature majors make—or ought to make—excellent teachers.

When students learn how to understand fiction, drama, and poetry, engage in characters' lives, and ask questions about the worlds authors create, they very often ask questions about their own lives and the lives and issues they encounter. To make such connections is what writers have been asking readers to do since authors started telling stories. More important, when students make comparisons, they embark on a lifelong journey of evaluation and critical thinking that makes their lives rich and rewarding.

When we teach literature and engage our students in discussions, we enact a public mechanism that brings disparate perspectives to bear on a common task. Recently, the citizens of Chicago shared the experience of reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Kinzer). The collective action by a large portion of a city's population of working through a text that still makes sense to this country, of discussing this text with others, of having a common bond through literature—all these positive effects should remind us that literature is a salient force in the world of ideas and in its contribution to a civic, democratic ethos.

We know that reading is essential to language acquisition. Simply put, literacy rises when people read. Vocabulary, sentence structures, and patterns of organization offer readers many points from which to learn or to broaden understanding, where some of the bare-bones elements of reading and writing are available for scrutiny and for adoption. Many of us have become good writers by reading the works of good writers; we have learned to speak well because we have read well-written sentence. Our well-read literature majors should be encouraged to play a vital role in the education of others, as excellent teachers and as advocates for education.

An important learning experience that helped me make the connection between literature, literacy, and teaching was my participation in the Penn-Edison Partnership, an ongoing program that brings University of Pennsylvania undergraduate English majors and graduate students to Edison-Fareira High School in North Philadelphia. This urban high school of about 2,700 students had a very high dropout rate (nearly seventy percent) from ninth grade to twelfth grade ("Edison-Fareira High School").[1] In 1992 Evelyn Bender, the high school's librarian, and Al Filreis, a newly tenured professor of

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English at Penn, created the partnership as a modest program of semiweekly tutoring at the high school. The Edison students discuss reading and writing assignments, and the college tutors work individually and in groups with these students to explore ideas and act as models for college-level learning and discussion. The Edison students also visit the Penn campus, attending classes with their mentors, watching and learning the daily business of being college students. This successful project gives high schoolers the sense that they can, after all, hold their own in a college setting.[2] Equally important, the Penn-Edison Partnership has produced excellent teachers and made a clear impression among Penn students that teaching is a community responsibility.

"Why major in literature?" is an especially good question to ask now, when most people agree that a college education is a prerequisite for almost any career and when many colleges and universities are preparing for an increase in high school graduates, returning students, and "lifelong learners."[3] Our literature majors need to be trained as excellent teachers not only because their good critical thinking and communication skills will serve them well in the world of education but also because they will need to defend our education system against threats that would weaken its mission. Influential local, state, and national political interests criticize schools for turning out undereducated and poorly prepared graduates, and politicians often try to impose "standards" and "accountability" on education systems, typically in the form of statewide or national proficiency tests. These efforts, not wholly wrongheaded, hope to provide some measurable level of competency, with rewards (or an absence of punishment) for schools that meet or surpass the norm. This description may sound familiar to educators at public schools, and indeed it is well-traveled ground in almost every urban district, where education funding is in short supply and "at risk" schools can be forced to improve their scores or have even more funding withheld (illogical as that may seem).

But public universities, too, are feeling the effect of standards imposed by noneducators and non–faculty members, and financial starvation is the punishment for failure to cooperate. This is on top of the already deleterious effect of years of political policy that argues against government support for education and that seeks very often to cut costs in education before other areas. Funds seem always to be drying up, even in good financial times, and when the economy turns down, education sustains budget cuts that are rarely restored once the crisis passes.[4]

What we should tell literature majors is that without their active participation in education they will witness a continued depreciation of the power of a college degree. As faculty-determined standards give way to state or even national "minimum scores" or "basic outcomes," the general effect is for education to sink to those minimal levels. Meanwhile, in the world outside the academy, expectations of competency in many careers rise, requiring more education—beyond four years and beyond just one degree. Instead of receiving a quality education in a few years, students may find themselves staying in school longer or having to return to reach employer expectations and to further their careers. Our students' children may require a much more expensive education than our students' parents are paying for now.

As an important step toward changing the minds of many Americans about the role of education over the next generation and about what that role may require financially and politically, we should tell more of our literature majors to become teachers. They possess the skills to build knowledge in future students and to educate future students' parents about the vitality of education and the need to keep it vital.

Notes

[1] These statistics come from a grant proposal written in the mid-1990s; however, the dropout rates for urban public

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high schools across the nation are similar. See Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* 29–30, 45, 52, 54, 57–58, 106, 112–13, 118, 149, 229–30. As Kozol sees it, urban public schools replicate the conditions of segregated schools before the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954.

[2] The partnership has operated continuously since 1992 and in 1997 received long-term funding through a gift from a Penn alumnus.

[3] According to Annette Kolodny, "[I]nstitutions of higher education will be called upon to play a variety of unprecedented roles in a transnational information age. [. . . T]he new information technologies will make higher education both more necessary *and* ongoing, if only because learning to make connections and to reason rigorously across and between the disciplines is a lifelong process requiring sensitive tutelage. The twenty-first century, in other words, will be a century in which people are constantly 'going back to school' in one form or another" (34–35).

[4] Kozol notes, in a single, crushing paragraph, the extensive losses to the New York City schools during times of financial distress. These cuts have never been restored during economic expansions (*Ordinary Resurrections* 280). Kolodny describes the effects of budget cuts on academic planning at the University of Arizona (17–18, 20–21).

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Being in Love

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Recently, a gifted undergraduate came to me with some urgent questions: Should he major in literature? And if he did, what practical benefits might he realize? I asked one question: "Are you in love?" By this I meant, "Are you in love with literature?" Then I inquired, "Does your heart skip a beat when you encounter your love? Do you ache when the two of you are separated? Do you resent anything that intrudes on you and your love?"

Had the answer to any of these questions—and especially the first one—been no, I would have counseled the student against majoring in literature. In my experience, studies motivated by anything short of passionate love will not have a happy outcome.

Since my specialty, Yiddish literature, is not an undergraduate major at UCLA, I am rarely called on to offer advice concerning this question. But I do teach undergraduates, mostly English majors, and I see the difference between those who are besotted with the subject and those who are not. The ones who are in love will be fired up, positively or negatively, about almost any work: they are engaged, perhaps enraptured, perhaps enraged, but hardly ever neutral. The ones who are not in love may be equally intelligent and talented, but they remain more distant.

Once the love has been established, I feel free to talk to the student about the particular satisfactions of studying literature in depth. For me, the heart of the matter is at the level of lan-

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