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Last Word: Something to Say

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T he subject under discussion in our freshman writing class was the distinction between code ethics and situation ethics. Once they got the idea, the students came up with a variety of examples: code ethicists, who apply a rigid rule, might oppose abortion under any circumstances, while situation ethicists, being more flexible, would take into account such specific factors as rape, incest, the mother's age. Attitudes toward military service were considered: the code ethicist believes that he must always fight when ordered to do so or, as a conscientious objector, refuse to fight at all, while the situation ethicist would evaluate the justness of each war on its own merits. One student, Mark, cited as an example of situation ethics Huckleberry Finn’s decision to help the slave, Jim, escape. Mark explained that although Huck doesn’t explicitly reject the code he was brought up with, the belief that slaves are the lawful property of their owners, his moral decision-making is guided by his instinctive respect and affection for a particular slave, Jim.

Mark’s response was unusual, because freshman writing students are often reluctant to admit to having read any books not specifically assigned in the course. Perhaps they once read Huckleberry Finn, but that was long ago, for another teacher and another class. To see a connection between situation ethics and Huck’s decision requires that Twain’s novel be active in the memory, that Huck’s experiences be somehow interwoven with our own and assimilated into the reasoned ideas through which we understand the world. Mark had looked through the eyes of a poor boy living in a small midwestern river town 100 years ago. He had given serious thought to the kind of conflicts that could arise in a society which took slavery for granted and regarded black people as less than human.

Although I was impressed by Mark’s comment about Huck Finn and situation ethics, his remark that he had taken American Literature the previous semester also summoned forth other, less pleasurable reflections: from the murky depths of my academic unconscious the words “course prerequisites” emerged, followed by “Successful completion of EN 101, EN 102 (or their equivalent) is a prerequisite to all other English courses.”

After class, I asked Mark how he had happened to take American Literature before completing Writing II. “I never liked writing very much,” he admitted, “so I kept putting it off. This is my last semester, so I can’t put it off any more. To tell you the truth, though, I’m finding writing easier now that I have something to say.”

Here was an advisor’s nightmare, a violation of all the rules of orderly academic sequence. Writing in college is generally thought of as one of the “essential academic skills” that students will need in preparation for their more advanced work. In theory, they are to master the writing skills first and then, over the next four years, acquire the body of knowledge they will use the skill on.

This sequence — learning the skill or technique first and then using it — has some descriptive validity when the tasks are relatively simple. If we first learn how to beat egg whites until they are stiff, how to fold gently, without deflating them, into a thick chocolate goo, then we can put these skills together to make a souffle. If we first learn how to shift gears, apply brakes and use directional signals, then we can drive a car. But writing doesn’t work quite this way, because writing is a more complex activity: if a writer has nothing to write about, he is engaging in an empty exercise. The beater of egg whites and the student driver can see what their skill is to be used for, why it is worth having. But the beginning writer can’t know why she is learning about thesis statements or commas or run on sentences unless there is something she wants to say.

Recalling Mark’s work during the course of the semester confirmed my impression that he did have something to say. His essays had explored a range of ideas and had made some imaginative connections between our reading and concepts drawn from anthropology, political science, history, psychology — courses he had taken during his college years. For so many freshmen, the first question about a writing assignment is “How long does this have to be?” — their principal purpose seems to be to fill a predetermined number of typed pages. Mark’s four years of reading and thinking in a variety of courses had enriched his writing and given him what so many entering freshmen lack — an authentic purpose.

I don’t mean to recommend that all students postpone taking Writing I and II. Nonetheless, it may be worth re-thinking our attitude towards prerequisites and course sequences. The habits of thoughtful reading and reflection which many students develop during their college years can spill over into required courses in unexpected ways.