

Why Johnny Still Can't Write

by Samuel Hux (June 2016)



It is a common lament that most American college students don't write very well. (It was a common lament fifty years ago—but believe me, it didn't mean the same thing.) I wish this were their major problem. It has become apparent that their level of cultural sophistication would shame a junior-high student of sixty years ago. Maybe he's a myth, the Ivy-League student who wanted to know who Malcolm the Tenth was; my students who think Noah and Abraham were Christians certainly aren't fictions, nor those who can't place the Civil War in the correct century, nor the one who dismissed evolution on the grounds that no one can convince her that her cat can turn into a dog. Isn't it time we put two and two together?

E.D. Hirsch had been arguing long before *Cultural Literacy* (1987) that you can't write if you don't have anything to say: if you don't have any substance for sentences to *be* about and compel their sequels. Absolutely true. But let's understand what this means. It does *not* mean that if students develop some knowledge they can use the "composition skills" they've been taught to display it. It means that the ability to write (to conceive and organize an essay in readable style with competent grammar—certainly not an extraordinary achievement) is not a mere "skill" to be acquired (learning to manipulate certain signs, grammatical constants, and organizational techniques); it is, rather, a *mysterious cultural acquisition*. Few in the academy now believe this. That's because they forget how *they* learned to write, or, remembering, think themselves exceptions. One learns to write, one picks up the habit, at the same time, interactively, that one learns the *joys of curiosity*, or one doesn't. . . and then one doesn't. But why is it so difficult for so many to make even a patchwork approximation of the cultural acquisition now if they did not acquire the legitimate thing when younger? Because both the assumptions of faculty and the disposition of students conspire to make it so.

The greatest enemy to the understanding of the failings of higher education now—after the faculty-inspired failings engendered by the academic revolution of

the Sixties and Seventies—is the tendency to sentimentalize “the kids.” (As in “Say what you like about their deficiencies, but they’re a lively bunch of kids,” etc.) Students, by and large, do not study to acquire knowledge, to sate curiosity. They study to pass. Let me repeat that: *Students, by and large, do not study to acquire knowledge, to sate curiosity. They study to pass.* Examinations they see as obstacles to be overcome and a course as a series of examinations: “Will this be on the exam?” When a student says “I passed the course,” you can usually understand that to mean “That course is now past; I can forget it.” It matters little whether the obstacle was Franz Josef’s accommodation with the Hungarians, the economic paradox of value, or subject-verb agreement in the present tense (yes, that one still remain a problem). The exception to this immediate-goal-oriented view of education happens in the student’s “major.” For he or she knows that the major is not really passed (or past) until its completion leads to the goal for which it was chosen in the first place: graduate school or job. Where does this view come from? The question hardly bears asking in a goal-oriented society. But surely faculties can offer a sort of resistance? Well. . . .

A recent memory interrupts. A commencement speaker at my college, a graduate of the college in fact, now a mid-level academic administrator, is congratulating the graduating class on their achievement. Achievement of what, exactly? Their achieved mental improvement, cultivation, intellectual sophistication, in a word knowledge? Not at all, not in the least. He congratulates them on getting past all the obstacles. “From now on you no longer have to worry about composition. You don’t have to worry about biology. You don’t have to worry about history”—and on and on. Each sentence is rewarded with cackling appreciation from the newly minted Bachelors of Art and Bachelors of Science. Of course this speaker was not exactly “faculty.” He was just a highly symbolic damned fool. So I repeat, surely faculties can offer a sort of resistance. . . .

Professors are primarily interested in the disciplines they profess. But of course they know students ought to study other things as well, for the sake of, you know. . . . well-roundedness. Given this imitation of conviction, the requirements at American universities, with very few exceptions, say to students something on this order:

“You must have a major and pass a few required courses: English composition,

math, that sort of thing. Beyond that and some free electives that fit your schedule, there are certain 'distribution' credits: say nine courses equally distributed among Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences. Which nine doesn't (don't?) matter all that much. But the whole thing has to add up to 120 credits." Students get the message: The major counts; the rest is a four-year obstacle course.

Now, while faculty are primarily concerned with their own disciplines, there is one matter they all get exercised about: composition. "Why, if they've passed English 101, can't they write in my course?" asks, let's say, a political scientist—who doesn't ask, however, "How can your student not know what a rider to a bill is? We *examined* them on that in Poli Sci 101!" So he's happy to see an English 102 (Comp II) added—and why not a Comp III as well? The English Department is generally willing to comply: "If we can only have them a couple more semesters!" The only questions will be about how to handle an essentially "how-to" course. Shall we have "skills" taught blatantly (lectures on, let's say, techniques of organization—"techniques of thinking," the same thing, would sound silly even to the instructor-technician—and exercises in organizing banalities) or shall Comp be submerged in a literary subject matter? Etc.? I have witnessed some nasty fights over such questions. But it won't matter all that much, for two reasons.

One: Comp II and possibly III will mean a couple more obstacles-to-be-overcome. Organize them how you will, students will know they're "how-to," and how-to is more easily forgotten once the obstacle is passed/past. (Indeed, it may be more difficult to forget the nature of Franz Josef's Dual Monarchy, since there's no exact question about it to be easily forgotten.)

Two: The justification for any college course, when you come right down to it, is that it covers a subject a reasonably intelligent and committed college student cannot reasonably be expected to master without instruction or at least a push in the right direction. When we have semester after semester of basic composition instruction we are really saying that writing in the national language of common discourse is more difficult, by God, than any subject one might write about. . . but don't worry, we'll see that you get there. The student gets this message too. (A colleague tells me of a "nice kid" in his social science course who for the first time has no Comp course and is frightened to death and feeling abandoned. My colleague's recommendation: more

Comp courses.) Result: passivity, a kind of extended adolescence.

Put the two together—passivity and immediate-goal-orientation—and you have a contradictory but lethal combination.

So what would I propose? What I gave up proposing years ago to an impatient audience: Replace the distribution of obstacles in “Hum., Soc. Sci., Nat. Sci.” with an across-the-board required, extensive four-year sequence in the liberal arts and sciences, coherently designed to be as interdependent as possible—which would have the virtue of making immediate-goal-orientation and its consequent passing-and-forgetting-since-the-obstacle-is-past absolutely *suicidal!* Make it clear through commitment of credits, through status of participating teachers (not a job for grad assistants and part-timers), that this total immersion in the world of cultural and historical discourse, without which the majors and electives are mere isolate fragments, is the heart of undergraduate education. How likely are such reforms?

I have to restrain myself from bursting out laughing at that question. I have seen too much in the years since I came to a new college in an expanding City University of New York. When my college began it had a general curriculum which, while not what I fantasize about in the previous paragraph, was at least in the direction of its spirit. There was a two-semester required course in Philosophy called Ideas and Methods, inspired by some curricular ideas of Professor Richard McKeon of the University of Chicago. There were a two-semester sequence of integrated Natural Science, a two-semester History sequence, a two-semester Literature sequence, and so on and so on. (The Social Science faculty however saw the future by imposing the past and offered choices between the usual social suspects: *either* Sociology *or* Psychology *or* Poli Sci *or* Eco, etc.) This beginning never reached adulthood, however, as within two or three years the Natural Science faculty hated the integrated course so much (imagine the indignity of chemists for instance having to talk about basic physics!) that they imitated the Social Scientists. The Philosophy discipline, small naturally, did not have the political clout to keep the Ideas and Methods requirement. Not co-incidentally, the academic “Revolution” was under way, with its anarchists’ hatred of universal requirements and Euro-centric standards. And so on and on until soon we had the ordinary old uninspired “Chinese Menu” (selections from Column A, from Column B, etc.). Nonetheless, by the 1990s ageing *nouveaux gauches* must have fallen asleep because a few conspirators (yours truly among

them) somehow got past the college curriculum committee a required course in Western Civilization focusing on selected readings from monuments such as Biblical texts, Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Luther, Shakespeare, Newton, Locke, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and so on. However, "Western Civ" was not a college-wide requirement for long. The newer *nouveaux gauches*, who had been too young for the fun of the '60s and '70s, and a few old-timers who had never grown up, successfully objected to this "privileging" of the West. Western Civ survived as one choice in a sub-Menu called "Cultural Diversity." So students could take it or, say, Asian Civilization. . . but not both. How likely is a reversal of this downward trend, how likely a reinstatement to significance of Western Civ? About as likely as the following reform.

Take all "Remedial English" courses out of the credit-bearing curriculum. Remedial English is already (usually) non-credit bearing? Not quite so. For, let's face it, *all* basic Comp instruction in college is remedial. "Remedial" (although "compensatory" and "developmental" are now the preferred euphemisms) *has* to refer to instruction in what one could reasonably be expected to have achieved proficiency in *before* matriculation—such as the ability to conceive and organize an essay in readable style with competent grammar. Then clearly colleges should not say to students, through proliferation of Comp courses, "Basically grammatical and organized writing is such an extraordinarily difficult task, so far beyond a reasonably intelligent and committed college student's capacity, that it cannot be done without constant and repetitive expert instruction." Put in their proper place, Comp courses could be a great deal less damaging. How likely is this reform? About as likely as the previous reforms that were as likely as this. Why? Once again I have to restrain myself from breaking out laughing. Just try to imagine English professors, who have diminishing literary work to do as the once-popular English major is avoided like the plague and humanities requirements become skeletal at best. . . just imagine them releasing their grasp on the only reliable source of bodies to justify their tenure.

Samuel Hux is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at York College of the City University of New York. He has published in *Dissent*, *The New Republic*, *Saturday Review*, *Moment*, *Antioch Review*, *Commonweal*, *New Oxford Review*, *Midstream*, *Commentary*, *Modern Age*, *Worldview*, *The New Criterion* and many others.

[To comment on this essay, please click](#)