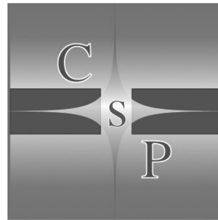
Florida Studies

Florida Studies
Proceedings of the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Florida College English Association

Edited by

Claudia Slate, General Editor, FSC

Steve Glassman, Executive Editor, ERAU



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To Charles Smires, Florida Community College, Jacksonville,
FCEA President 1990-1991

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So many individuals share responsibility for the successful 2006 Annual Meeting of the Florida College English Association (FCEA) in Lakeland, Florida. Keith Huneycutt deserves a great deal of credit for organizing the conference sessions and making the local arrangements at the Imperial Swan Hotel; Florida Southern College English department office administrator Vicky Luffman made sure that all those plans ran smoothly. Thanks to FSC President Anne Kerr and Vice President for Academic Affairs Susan Conner, who contributed the space and resources for the conference's culminating luncheon. Waite Willis and Mike Denham were other generous FSC contributors. Steve Brahlek and Palm Beach Community College hosted a hospitality suite. In addition, FCEA board members, in immeasurable ways, contributed to the planning and execution of the conference. Of course, credit is due to over 115 presenters and panelists who were vital to this stimulating, well-attended, and thoroughly enjoyable conference. The energy and enthusiasm of April Van Camp as organizer for the FCEA 2007 Meeting at Indian River Community College in Fort Pierce bodes well for this upcoming event.

FCEA President Steve Glassman presided admirably over the 2006 Proceedings, and he is responsible for the genesis of an FCEA Proceedings volume. He has been essential to this endeavor. Without him, we would not have last year's anthology of essays nor this one. Associate Editor Karen Tolchin, from Gulf Coast University, functioned as a tireless reviewer, sounding board, and creative force in this process. Florida Southern College enabled me to dedicate time and energy to this project and provided me with production assistant Shay Lessman, who realized that not only is "the devil in the details," but there lies a professional final product as well. Light and love to my husband Risdon Slate, a professor himself, who encouraged me to take on this project and cheered me on when I doubted my decision.

PREFACE

As general editor of this second Florida Studies Proceedings of the Florida College English Association, I have been impressed with the breadth and depth of knowledge exhibited by the contributors. I trust you will be as well. A bit of information about the process leading up to this volume—dozens of FCEA 2006 Meeting participants formatted their papers to the template provided on the FCEA website and submitted them for consideration. Some of the authors expanded on their papers while others stayed with the original length. After review by at least two scholars, the final 28 selections were made, further edited, polished for publication, and organized into several categories. Some of the papers fell naturally into these divisions, while others took some creative shoving. For example, two essays in the Old Florida section actually compare literary works from old Florida and contemporary Florida.

The first section, Pedagogy, includes essays that focus on what all of our research and scholarship informs and on how we spend a great deal of our professional life—teaching. Two of these essays are written from the professor's side of the desk while the other employs a graduate student's perspective.

The next three sections analyze many aspects of Florida, including its literature, folklore, murals, journalism, and natural elements. Old Florida begins with an essay about Atala (1801), the first Florida novel, and then continues with an essay comparing two works of literature written 450 years apart and in different languages. Several essays in Old Florida focus on the humor and Cracker culture in the works of the state's well-known author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, while another essay in that section compares Rawlings and Harry Crews as "Strange Bedfellows." The last two essays in the first section shed light on the abundance of Florida small town murals and on the warning of one of Hemingway's characters about Florida tourism. Contemporary Florida contains essays on the work of Florida authors Peter Matthiessen, Connie May Fowler, and Russell Banks. Another topic in this section is librarian heroes, and the section concludes with a cutting edge exposé on the fate of a family-owned Florida newspaper, the Daytona News-Journal. Natural Florida seems a "natural" for a state so blessed, and sometimes cursed, with nature's bounty. The essays in that section highlight the works of naturalists, such as Archie Carr, William Bartram, and Bill Belleville. The last essay in Natural Florida tackles literature that uses hurricanes as subject matter.

The inclusion of Creative Showcase, the final section, is the bright idea of associate editor Karen Tolchin, who is herself a creative writer. The poetic selections are products of the Poets Reading Their Work of the FCEA 2006 Meeting. These poems give perspectives on fatherhood, lovers, and the natural landscape. The last work is an excerpt from an upcoming book of memoirs, Redneck Palaces.

We hope that these selections will not only reveal the wealth of topics that the state of Florida offers, but will also provide you with ideas for future teaching techniques, scholarly research, and academic presentations.

Claudia Slate, editor

Karen Tolchin, associate editor

Pedagogy

The Villain No More: Mechanics with Meaning in Writing Programs Using APA Editorial Writing Style

E. Stone Shiflet

Teachers throughout our culture are used to hearing the moans and groans that come with the announcement that grammar and punctuation will be addressed in class. In fact, such student resistance to these local categories seems to be a cultural norm in our society. Since the 1970s, when the College Conference on Composition and Communication spearheaded the move in our field to process-driven writing, we've experienced a move away from the grammar and punctuation drills of old. We've moved away from sentence diagramming and moved more to holistic approaches for teaching the local writing issues.

As the debate on whether or not this move is right-minded continues, I'm struck by a recent press release from the National Council of the Teachers of English entitled "NCTE's Position Unchanged: Isolated Grammar Drills Do Not Produce Good Writers." This October 24th proclamation bases the title's conclusion on a recent report from the Carnegie Corporation that found in grammar drills, "students are spending more time underlining random parts of speech or diagramming sentences than actually composing" ("NCTE's Position Unchanged," para. 2). The President of NCTE goes on to state, "Teaching how language works is the basis for good grammar instruction." Chalk one up for the comprehension-based model of writing instruction—the model that pushes giving students the big picture, then offering guided practice to allow the students to internalize the material within their own lexicons.

In fairness, I must disclose that I am both a process-driven teacher and a comprehension-based teacher. I focused on this Press Release, perhaps, because it mirrors what I believe and how I teach. With my disclosure on the table, I state that the NCTE position has been policy for a while, and the latest studies cited indicate that comprehension-based pedagogies are here to stay.

With those points established, where do process-driven approaches to grammar and punctuation exercises come from? Through the ideas shared on panels like the one we're enjoying today. We're all here because we want to

help our students get over the fears often associated with local concerns. We want to put the power of choice for using these tools back in the hands of the students we teach, right?

When I submitted my proposal last spring, I was an instructor at the University of South Florida, and I was teaching multiple sections of Professional and Technical Writing at a bricks and mortar institution. Since that time, I have become the Writing Program Director for Northcentral University in Prescott, Arizona. I represent a growing number of Florida English teachers who are working remotely for Distance Learning Institutions around the world. This position allows me to maintain teaching connections all over the world, while maintaining my venue for exchanging ideas with fellow Florida residents who teach English through increasingly diverse and unique mediums. I represent the new face of the Florida English teacher—the virtual facilitator. My current institution is completely online, and we service writers from Undergraduate through Doctoral in the disciplines of Education, Psychology, and Business. When I accepted the NCU position, I wanted to focus on a model for teaching grammar and punctuation that would make learning those local concerns the demon no more, much as I had worked to do at my bricks and mortar institution. So while my teaching platform changed, my pedagogical approach did not.

There are many commonalities in teaching writing in brick and mortar and distance learning classrooms. In both arenas, I found most of my students eager to deal with such global concerns as refining the Focus, adding to Development, and reworking Organizational strategies to improve clarity, but consistently, I seemed to lose them when I addressed issues like Editorial Style, Grammar, and Punctuation. At Northcentral, all of our disciplines (Business, Education, and Psychology), use APA (American Psychological Association) format, but the issues that writers faced with APA are the same issues I'd seen with all Editorial Styles. Over and over again, I'd see the writers focusing so hard on getting internal citations in place that they would neglect to read the sentence again to make sure that it made sense. At Northcentral, in their focus on the looming APA, student writers repeatedly ignored the logic I tried to impart about punctuation rules. Frustrated and concerned, and, frankly, wanting to break this cycle, a cycle I'd seen in both brick and mortar and distance learning classrooms, I started my first collaborations with the Northcentral Writing Center Coordinator by discussing what was causing this recurring pattern. While I didn't know where to go, I did know that we had to find a way to reduce the fear of APA and put the focus back on comprehending the logic behind all local concerns, from APA to grammar to punctuation.

After several collaborative phone calls and comparisons of like experiences with the Writing Center Coordinator, we landed on a commonality. These

writers were seeing local concerns as a category with definite answers, much like an algebra equation. We know that assumption is not true. They had learned that misapplication of APA can lead to allegations of plagiarism, and they were afraid, some even terrified, of making a mistake. That fear is triggering neglect of the other local concerns like grammar and punctuation. Those who do engage in asking questions about these local concerns seem to think that there's some formula that I have to give them that will take all of these problems out of their writing.

As teachers of writing, we know that issues like tense and punctuation initiate in the writer's mind. Those issues are the writer's choice. I suggest that many writers, in their haste to get APA "right," don't understand that the choice for local concerns belongs within them, not from the pages of some conventions textbook.

So here we were, the Writing Center Coordinator and the Writing Program Director, sitting on the realization that fear of APA had made grammar and punctuation something not even visible anymore to an increasing body of students. This realization led to revisiting the terms that we used to talk about the local concerns. We found an answer, an answer seemingly simple on the surface, despite the fact that it took me some time to realize it.

We decided to divide these local concerns into two separate categories. The first category covers Voice and APA Editorial Style. Once writers have gotten their Focus in place, their Development detailed and crafted, their Organizational Strategies strong and visible, we decided to address what it means to have an APA Editorial Style and Voice before addressing citation and punctuation and grammar.

In our discussions on Voice and APA Editorial Style, we talk about the importance of making sure that the reader knows who is speaking, the writer or a source. We introduce the concept of what we call "Signal Phrases," like "according to…the author goes on to note…the author continues by stating." We talk about seeing APA as a bilingual form of communication. At Northcentral, to use APA, you must incorporate both English and APA formatting. Getting the English in place first makes spotting the areas in need of internal citation much easier. Getting the English in place first also makes the concept of citing all ideas that belong to others much easier to see, as one can use the English language to "signal" when another voice enters the conversation, much as quotation marks work in a play dialogue. Getting this message out before tackling the ins and outs of grammar and punctuation eases the plagiarism anxiety in the writer. Before the grammar and punctuation are addressed, the writer is already in control of the citations using a language with which most are comfortable: English.

Once the first language "signals" are in place (the use of English to separate ideas) and the writer has included all necessary internal citations, the writer is ready to engage in the last leg of the race, Grammar, and Punctuation. But at this point—having traveled through Focus, making sure that is polished…then on to Development, making sure that is well-detailed…then on to Organization…making sure the reader can track the logic…then on to APA…making sure that the writer's voice is separate from the sources—the fifth and final revision of the paper constitutes only the most local of concerns: Grammar, and Punctuation. Imagine the relief in knowing that for the final revision, there is only one main goal. At this final stage of the process, the teacher can focus on patterns of grammar errors in the early stages of the text. With only one focus, the teacher then guides the writer to handouts and modules addressing problematic grammar and punctuation issues. These materials are instructional tools designed to give student writers the access to taking ownership of his or her own writing process.

As we know, implementing grammar changes takes time, but with Northcentral's standardized writing process vocabulary, the writer will be guided through this five-category process again and again. The first journey through the local concerns may be difficult, but we see it as the first big step to writing growth—growth that continues through all courses and programs, as all faculty members are being trained to approach writing in this systematic way. These grammar materials aren't drills; instead, they are explanations of rules and conventions that include several examples. For each writing project, grammar and punctuation are addressed in isolation in the final stages of revision. Thus, work on grammar and punctuation is separated from APA Style and the rest of the writing process. Working on grammar and punctuation has its own time slot, guaranteed, within each assignment.

These materials are driven by the notion that the student writer reads the support materials, sees the differing choices that are possible, then implements the choices that work best in the way he or she naturally writes and speaks. This notion of choice is so helpful for both Native Speakers and English Language Learners, as the writers are not encouraged to learn a "right way"; they are encouraged to find "their" way and to implement that way over a period of time. With grammar in place, all that's left to address is the choice of punctuation. Again, writers at NCU are guided to the standardized vocabulary about punctuation. Punctuation is the choice of the writer. Does he or she use a semicolon to connect two ideas that share a relationship, or does he or she go with a period to show that a new, non-related idea will follow? Or, does he or she use a comma and a coordinating conjunction to tie two ideas together with a specific word like "and" or "but" that better guides the reader to their intended meaning? All of these choices belong to the writer, an empowering notion to a

writer who has felt at the mercy of an evaluator who held some kind of formula with all of the right answers.

With all of these elements now in place, and with the writer in control of all local concern choices, little details like putting the period after the internal citation seem to make sense. The period goes after the citation because in the bilingual world of APA, the citation is as much a part of the sentence as the written words are. For formatting, the reasons for including page or paragraph numbers are also explained in our APA formatting materials, so the writer understands the logic behind the convention, while also experiencing the power of choosing which formatting convention suits the citation at hand.

As I conclude this detailed explanation of the NCU standardized writing process, one grounded in multiple stages—all driven by writer choice—I understand that it may seem lengthy and involved. It is. It is meant to be. As NCTE and other expert voices in our field continue to indicate, teaching local concerns in isolation just does not advance the fluency of the writer. Advancing fluency requires advancing the writer's comprehension both of the conventions and of the power in making choices through comprehension. As my experience in the field of writing instruction continues to indicate, giving tools without an explanation compounds the problems faced by growing writers. Keeping local concerns isolated and grouped under big terms doesn't promote student engagement; explanation and modeling promote student engagement.

This is the first public presentation of NCU's model, and I'm proud to be able to share it with you today. In fact, as I present this paper, Northcentral is in the process of adopting a standardized grading rubric for all courses in all schools that is divided into five categories reflecting the NCU Writing Process. The decision was based on the early successes we witnessed, as an institution, through making conventions learnable skills, not demons to avoid. As we prepare to launch this system in a series of new writing courses, from undergraduate through doctoral, I'll conclude by saying that we've received resounding support from all schools and departments. Every dean, research professor, and instructor we spoke with had experienced the student writer so afraid of APA that he or she had lost perspective on the total package of later order concerns. Everyone was aware of the cult of grammar and punctuation as the demon that academic writers hesitated to tackle in their rush to get APA right. Each department embraced the notion of a holistic, writing-based rubric that would guide writers to handouts and modules that address local concerns in the way that I've outlined for you here today.

Each school has also signed off on faculty development modules designed to instruct faculty in these standardized terms and the standardized writing process. I plan to return to the FCEA next year with an update on the changes that our writers have experienced through this standardized, university-wide approach to

putting the power of punctuation and grammar back in the hands of the writers—writers who comprehend the logic behind these conventions. Finally, I hope that my message will encourage others to try my process-driven comprehension model in Florida classrooms across the state and throughout the world-wide web.

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Re-entry Crisis: One Non-Traditional Student's Journey

Linda M. Campbell

In his masterpiece *The Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot writes, "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" (39). Beginning a Masters program in English involves a similar journey of exploration and discovery for both the student and the program. It was my great privilege to arrive at Florida Gulf Coast University just as the M. A. in English was being developed, and we have been sharing growing pains ever since. Like any space flight, our initial course was set for the stars, but it was not long before we found ourselves on a return trip to reality. And like all re-entries, we have had to consider speed, pressure, and trajectory while navigating mutual destinations.

I arrived at FGCU with a background in secondary school teaching and an emerging commitment to creative writing. I am proof that it is never too late to decide what to be when we grow up. With a goal to teach university composition and to continue my studies in creative writing, I needed a program that would prepare me to do both. After my acceptance into FGCU's Masters program, my advisors and I planned related coursework, discovering together some of the benefits and limitations of a terminal degree program. In every way, the journey for me began with a re-entry crisis.

During re-entry, a spacecraft's speed generates tremendous heat, burning off its protective outer shields. Non-traditional students face similar vulnerability as their outdated training and perceptions collide with modern-day curricula. As we re-enter academia, the first thing we learn is that English is not what it used to be. The literary canons of the past have been restructured to reflect shifting social paradigms. As a result, non-traditional students often feel disoriented as they lament former literary friends and navigate new depths of critical theories. Nevertheless, non-traditional students enrich our programs by reminding us of the traditional voices that founded our profession, voices still reflected among the cultures of many global communities. Today's profession is at a crossroads. Future success requires that we weigh the merits of where we have been against

the opportunities of where we are going, a key focus of FGCU's Masters in English program.

Our program explores this delicate balance through its required course in the role of literature and language in society. Taught as an open forum, it focuses on relevant professional issues, such as debates over the literary canon and evolving critical theories. It offers non-traditional students an essential bridge to current trends within the profession, but its primary challenge has been to orient without overwhelming. Terminal Masters graduates are projected to obtain employment within secondary or early post-secondary education, where curriculum focuses on survey level courses. Graduates who will teach within this framework should have a working knowledge of deconstruction, but they do not need mastery over every signature left by Jacques Derrida. Such delights should be reserved for in-depth theory courses, which doctoral candidates can pursue to their hearts' content.

Similarly, although terminal Masters graduates should understand literary periods from Old English to Contemporary, their knowledge base must be broad rather than focused, better equipping them for the survey courses they will one day teach. Graduate programs will better serve these students by prioritizing survey courses over courses that focus on specific authors or individual critical theories. Focused courses, although intriguing, better suit the needs of doctoral candidates, so when course options must be limited, universities should reserve these more specialized courses for independent study, on an as-needed basis only.

This issue has been an ongoing challenge within the program at FGCU, with budget considerations and limited faculty positions resulting in fewer course options and curriculum that often prioritizes faculty interests over the learning objectives of terminal students. Last year, this imbalance was offset through independent studies and cross-listed undergraduate courses. Both options offered advantages, but in the end, neither proved fully workable.

Cross-listed courses overloaded already taxed faculty, who had to juggle separate syllabi and evaluation criteria within the same course. Graduate students benefited from the broader selection these courses provided, but they found that courses shared with undergraduates often proved restrictive. We gained insight into undergraduate pedagogies, but we experienced frustration over the more superficial analysis of related texts. Attempts to bridge these gaps with out-of-class seminars further increased faculty burdens and interfered with student time needed for independent research.

Independent study courses also produced questionable outcomes. Independent study can facilitate directed research, but it also limits faculty availability for teaching other courses. Concentrated faculty efforts end up benefiting only one student, a choice that is difficult to justify within existing

limitations and which raises issues of relevancy and fairness among faculty and students alike.

Although our professors demonstrated amazing sleight-of-hand while juggling these conflicting demands, their expertise could not prevent adverse effects upon some student enrollment needs. Nevertheless, their efforts to straddle these challenges indicated their commitment to developing a competitive graduate program. Although the trend in graduate study is moving toward a terminal Masters focus, universities must not overlook the ongoing demand for doctoral preparation, even when students will pursue that doctoral study elsewhere. The advanced scholarship relative to doctoral level research and publication helps establish a university's academic reputation, a vital consideration among competitive academic markets. To be competitive, universities must offer both specialized and generalized graduate courses. A broad base of faculty positions must be established to fulfill this requirement, and faculty must receive additional credit for cross-listed courses to compensate for their additional time spent in supplemental graduate instruction.

Along with these considerations, a competitive program must also address the issue of creative writing. When I decided to pursue graduate study, I was drawn to the M. A. program then being developed at FGCU because it included creative writing electives, as well as faculty with M. F. A. backgrounds. I was given initial assurances of elective opportunities in creative writing, but these assurances have since been modified to accommodate limited faculty positions and administrative reluctance to prioritize creative writing options. On a personal level, these realities have been disappointing, but they indicate more alarming issues when measured against the needs of incoming college freshmen.

The growing illiteracy of high school and college students has become a cliché within education circles. Attempts to unravel this trend lead to ongoing attitudes of trickle-down accountability: College professors disparage high school instruction; high school teachers dismiss the instructional focus of middle schools; and middle school teachers blame elementary schools for failing to establish basic language skills. Reality, however, is quite different. In my experiences as both a teacher and substitute teacher, I have witnessed elementary and secondary school faculty devoting considerable curricular time to basic writing instruction, while post-secondary schools scramble to teach needed basics against strictures to avoid remediation. Masters programs must prepare their graduates to meet these teaching challenges; otherwise, the consequences could be as devastating as military deploying soldiers without weapons or ammunition. Such shortsightedness will only escalate an already existing crisis.

A progressive Masters program must include courses in creative writing, along with its present focus on composition pedagogy. Both writing categories

offer unique approaches for meeting diverse student needs. As a beginning university, FGCU occupies an enviable position. Its focus on innovation and cutting-edge research offsets the customary entrenchment of more established institutions. As a result, FGCU stands poised to impact these issues in significant ways. Innovative writing programs, which can address the needs of all disciplines, should be at the core of these pioneering opportunities.

At present, FGCU's Masters program specifies a required course in composition pedagogy, as well as listing electives in creative and expository writing. Our present faculty resources are sufficient to staff additional creative writing courses, but alternate teaching assignments have limited faculty availability. During the past year, only one creative writing elective has been offered at the graduate level, and that was a cross-listed expository course. My own goals in creative writing have been restricted by this lack of graduate level instruction and related workshops. To offset this deficiency, my advisors have enabled me to pursue a creative writing thesis, an option I greatly appreciate. They have also facilitated my participation in FGCU's first Sanibel Island Writer's Conference, where I benefited from exposure to intensive workshops under the guidance of professional writers. I have drawn upon these experiences to expand my writing skills, as well as to enrich my instruction of beginning composition.

The writing deficiencies of incoming freshmen raise additional concerns over the limited creative writing emphasis of the Masters program. Both creative and expository writing strategies are essential to composition instruction. Masters students should be prepared to implement these strategies within the composition courses many of them will teach, both during and after graduate study. As a teaching assistant, I have found composition students quite receptive to creative writing approaches. Creative techniques enable them to approach writing without thinking of it as a mandated chore, an attitude change reflected in the improved quality of their subsequent papers. Creative writing, through its focus on the senses and its varied approaches to expression, offers effective alternatives for students with diverse learning styles. In addition, students often find creative expression a welcome change from the more rigid styles of academic writing, a significant factor when students have limited writing backgrounds. Creative writing remains an untapped resource in addressing these ongoing challenges of student literacy.

These challenges cannot be met within isolated classrooms. Today's profession requires extensive collaboration among its members as technologies proliferate and fields of study expand. The Masters program at FGCU has been exemplary in offering its graduate students opportunities to collaborate at all levels of the academic arena. From the beginning, our faculty has welcomed us as peers and has invited us to participate in their departmental responsibilities.

Graduate students have served as consultants in the Writing Center and as teaching assistants in composition courses. We have participated in search committees and have been mentored through conference presentations and journal publications. In every possible way, our professors have offered us unlimited access to their talents, their expertise, and their insights, greatly enriching us in the process.

These experiences have been essential to our success amid the pressures of graduate study. Just as in space flight, pressure is a major consideration. When a spacecraft re-enters Earth's atmosphere, the pull of gravity slows its speed, intensifying external pressures. Similar pressures build for graduate students within concurrent demands of deadlines and work loads. For students who return to college after long absences, each day presents a mine field of fears and doubts: Can we keep up? Is our talent competitive? Can we survive? The drive to prove ourselves leads to unrealistic expectations and moments of panic. Our department chair often calls us "compulsive overachievers," an opinion derived, no doubt, from his firsthand mediation of our ongoing challenges[1] He and the rest of our faculty have demonstrated empathy befitting Mother Teresa, wisdom suitable to Socrates, and motivation skills worthy of Olympic coaches while navigating our moments of crisis.

My own turning point resulted from just such a moment last year. During a cross-listed literature course, my assignment was to prepare a working bibliography on Joan Didion as a resource for undergraduate research. Still mesmerized from my first exposure to Didion's writings, I welcomed the assignment with enthusiasm, which soon proved short-lived. In a series of missteps, I first assumed that graduate ethics required that I read each source listed on my bibliography. I next assumed that my working bibliography should include any publication even remotely related to Didion. And finally, I assumed that proving my competency meant I could not ask for clarification, an unfortunate lack of foresight.

I am here to assure you that the domino effect is a true principle. A month later, I knew more about Joan Didion than she did, but my missteps had derailed my entire semester, leading to a meltdown in our department chair's office and my offer to withdraw from the program to save everyone the embarrassment of my participation. I am here as a witness that the chair of our department is the best fisherman I know. Through a powerful example of holistic teaching, he fished me from my pond of despair with the assurance that I had learned something pivotal. He corrected my misperceptions of graduate level research, and then, with the nonchalance of a true *aficionado*, he threw me right back into the deep end of the program. Not only did I learn how to navigate challenging assignments, but I also learned the value of faculty who prioritize people over programs. Now, a year later, I still tread occasional ponds of discouragement,

but I have gained proficiency at resurfacing when thrown back into the never-ending deep end!

A subsequent moment of resurfacing occurred during my first round of research papers, when I needed additional support for a key argument. As I turned to the library for relevant texts, I still remember my shock at approaching the related area and being confronted with row upon row of texts, spanning an entire length of bookcases. This experience was my wake-up call in pulling back from the thought that I had to know everything about a subject before I could enter the conversation arena. As a pivotal moment, it taught me that expertise develops over time and derives from the combined efforts of academic colleagues. I realized that my contribution, however limited, could still be a worthy addition to an existing discourse. This insight helped me become more realistic and less perfection driven. Even more, I learned that graduate study is all about process: the process of critical analysis, the process of academic scholarship, and the process of ongoing course correction to ensure arrival at our destination.

Re-entry requires accurate trajectory – aligning directions to coincide with learning objectives. At FGCU, our professors model this process by listening, assimilating, and adapting. They seek ongoing feedback at all levels of the program and have often modified syllabi and objectives to facilitate program goals. For example, several initial graduate courses required weekly written analyses of assigned texts, besides the usual research papers and presentations. Although supplemental assignments can ensure undergraduate accountability, they remain busywork at the graduate level, duplicating habits already intrinsic to graduate study and, consequently, robbing essential time for more scholarly endeavors. When we voiced these objections, our professors welcomed the feedback and adapted assignments accordingly. As a result, outcomes remained positive, and this year's beginning students benefited from the subsequent course modifications.

Our faculty's willingness to serve as role models has helped us learn how to be teachers ourselves. They have shown us that it is acceptable to be less than perfect, and that learning is an ongoing process, even among professionals. Their impact upon us resembles the teaching style of our program coordinator, who teaches the way he writes – as a poet.[2] Quiet and unassuming, his classroom influences seem nearly invisible, almost like a window, until we realize that he has magnified each text with his style of prism-like analysis. In a similar fashion, our graduate professors magnify our learning through their examples. Our faculty love what they do, and that quality is strongly communicated within each of their classrooms.

They also exemplify the importance of revision by the way they respond to what is happening in front of them. One faculty member, a noted scholar in her

field, holds the bar exceptionally high for graduate students, yet she goes out of her way to facilitate every step of our achievement.[3] When our recent research papers fell short of scholarly criteria, she recognized our need to learn more advanced levels of critical analysis. Instead of finalizing our evaluations, she offered us the opportunity to revise toward more rigorous academic standards. She facilitated this growth through preliminary feedback on our writing, multiple research models, and the assignment of an additional week for achieving these goals. Not only did we learn the necessary scholarship, but we also experienced the benefits from establishing conversations among colleagues.

Our faculty shares a commitment to giving their best to the tasks at hand. This year's teaching assistants found an apt role model for this quality in our teaching mentor.[4] Not only did she seek the dubious honor of supervising us, but throughout the year, she has shared time and resources well beyond defined responsibilities. She alleviates our concerns through ongoing encouragement and an open-door style of support. Drawing upon her characteristic fervor and enthusiasm, she established a weekly teaching cell where we could collaborate for support and feedback. Over the course of the semester, she has proven both her unfailing patience and her willing availability in unexpected moments of crisis. She remains our most fervent cheerleader, whose dedicated mentoring facilitates our ongoing teaching successes.

Encouragement toward success often comes from unexpected directions, as I was reminded from a friend's recollection of his experience in medical school. As a struggling student, he once supplemented his income by working as a research assistant in a lab. One evening, while working unsupervised, he made a mistake that blew up part of the lab. Since this was not his first mistake, he feared that both his medical career and his job were about to come to a swift end. His supervisor, however, was more enlightened. First, he assured my friend that "It takes a lot of mistakes to become wise." Then, after surveying the damage, he predicted, "One day, you are going to be very wise." My friend has since practiced medicine for many years, and is today regarded in both his profession and his community as someone of great empathy and exceptional degrees of wisdom.

I draw encouragement from his example that we must persist in order to achieve our goals. I still carry the Drop/Add Form that I once brought to my department chair's office during that first semester meltdown. All last year, I kept it in my notebook, just in case I could not measure up to the program's expectations, a possibility that always seemed imminent. This year, I keep it with me as evidence of my progress. One day, I plan to post it next to my degree, as a constant reminder to my students and to me that we must never give up.

This quality of endurance has informed the trajectory of each of our graduate journeys. As we near the completion of our studies, we find that we have returned to the beginning point of our learning. Only now, we have the tools necessary for replicating our journeys. In last year's course on literature and language in society, we learned that a text is added to the canon only after it has proven its capacity to contaminate society over an extended period of time. At first, contamination seemed too pejorative a term for such a pivotal influence. Yet, within our graduate experience, we have found this an accurate description. As graduate students, we have undergone a similar contamination – of being changed in irrevocable ways.

For me, this change originated with my first creative writing course several years ago, taught by a professor with the rare ability to light others' lamps without diminishing his own.[5] His teaching awakened me to new perceptions and to the possibility of graduate study. Now, as I near the end of the program that he once recommended, I recognize a similar gift for teaching among our other faculty, as well. Their guidance and examples have changed each of us in irrevocable ways. Because of them, we have re-entered the academic atmosphere and are poised for touchdown, recognizing that within our destination lies the starting point for our future learning.

Notes

[1] Joe Wisdom, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English and Chair, Department of Language and Literature, College of Arts and Sciences.
[2] James Brock, M.F.A., Ph.D., Associate Professor of English and Coordinator, M.A. Program in English.
[3] Rebecca Totaro, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English.
[4] Karen R. Tolchin, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of English.
[5] Jesse Millner, M.F.A., Instructor of English.

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LIVING THE LIFE OF THE DIRTY

ALISON WATKINS WITH JIM WATKINS

When Nelson Mandela said, "One of our strongest weapons is dialogue," (Föllmi 298), he could have been speaking directly to Carlos, a sixteen-year-old self-proclaimed street ninja, who lives with his mother, two sisters, and newborn niece in a two-bedroom house in the projects in Florida. Carlos is one of a number of project kids who are in the juvenile justice system, though to this day, I don't know what he did to place himself in the system. I have not asked. He was adjudicated to attend an alternative school, the Gulf Coast Marine Institute in Palmetto, Florida.

GCMI, as it is called, provides a sheltered and locked-down environment for youthful offenders, as well as for kids who have been suspended from school for being too disruptive in mainstream classrooms. Some of these minors have committed serious criminal offenses, often drug- and/or gang-related, including murder, but are too young to be served well by the adult penal system. The typical length of stay for youth adjudicated to this program is six months.

The daily habit of the GCMI student is to be at school by 9 a.m. and to remain there until taken home to parents between 4:30 and 6:00 in the afternoon. The adjudicated minor may then be outside with friends until 7:30 p.m. in the evening, at which time he or she must again go into lockdown mode with one of his or her parents for the rest of the night at home.

Since Carlos's mother worked two jobs and was absent from the home during the weekday evening hours, Carlos often went to the nearby house of his friend Ty to spend the evening hours. He and Ty were collaborators, freestylers, practicing their beatboxing skills every opportunity they could. Ty had the sound studio equipment needed to make electronic beats, and to record their sessions. As is convention among freestylers, Carlos and Ty created a number of different names for themselves, some self-tagged, others the attributions of friends. His friends often called Carlos "Ghost" because he was habitually invisible, slipping in and out without anyone noticing him. Carlos also went by the self-appointed tag "Murk Ninja" because, as he explained, one has to be a "warrior of the streets" in order just to survive. Carlos was also called "Sleepy Hollow" because like a hollow bullet, he said, "he's often "buckin' a semi-auto." But I believe Carlos favors the name "Ghost," and like the *Invisible Man* that

Ralph Ellison immortalized half a century ago, Carlos is one of many black male adolescents today who are virtually invisible to society.

When my brother Jim, who teaches at GCMI, first invited me to hear Carlos rap, I must say I was a bit skeptical; however, I offered to bring my video cam along, and to tape and edit a short demo-DVD for Carlos, so that he could send it out to various hip-hop venues. In exchange, I asked if I could share with him a few of his artistic contemporaries, who themselves have been on the outside of society, and who have done well in spite of it. Although I had in mind a rather long list of artists that I imagined we'd be discussing, in fact, what I was able to present in the two months of meetings with Carlos included samples of only two of the artists I hoped to share: the poet Saul Williams, who is from the projects in a small town in upstate New York; and the painter Purvis Young, from the Overtown neighborhood in Miami.

Carlos himself is from Philly. When in his lyrics Carlos complains that he's "all alone" down here, he is referring to the fact that his brothers and father remained up north while he and his mother and two sisters moved to Florida a number of years ago. He laments the recognition that he has no male role models here from whom to learn. On the other hand, Carlos described his father as a "crack-dealing, street thug" who disrespected his mother. In the midst of all the "drama" of his home life, Carlos emerges as a quintessential self-taught, young black adolescent, with extraordinary potential, yet ill-equipped to deal with the environment he is born into. When the Miami artist Purvis Young said in a film clip that Carlos, Jim, and I watched, "The street is real life; you come out here and feel the workings of the world—that's all you need to be an artist" *(Purvis Young)*, his words resonated with Carlos.

Purvis was himself a painter who lived in one of the poorer sections of Miami, though it wasn't as an artist, but rather as a former prison inmate, that he made the observation which most interested Carlos. Gesturing through the bars on the window to people in the street, Purvis observed:

> You wake up and see the same things every day. I’m tired of seeing the same thing every day, all my life in Miami. These are some guys, you know, waking up every day talking about the same thing. I've been seeing 'em all my life and my eyes are getting to me now, and something tells me, learn how to master these, these people you know. Something tells me don't run from it. Learn how to master it. Something tells me, don't run from that stuff. *(Purvis Young)*.

The second artist we had a chance to consider was a young black poet from the projects in upstate New York, Saul Williams. Saul's early break was as a "Slam" poet, a hotly contested team sport that treats poetry as a blend of oral performance and word-play entertainment. As a New York slammer, Saul had robust elements of freestyling in his roots, as well as in his observable creative