

The Wonder of Writing Across the Curriculum

Art Young

*Campbell Professor of Technical Communication,
Clemson University*

*Transcript of the keynote speech presented by the
Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing*

Speaker Series

No. 3 ♦ 1993

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Preface

On February 12-13, 1993, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing held its fourth annual colloquium, “Improving Writing across the University Curriculum: Practices, Programs, Possibilities.” For University of Minnesota faculty new to the concepts of writing across the curriculum (WAC), the colloquium was intended as an introduction to the philosophy and possibilities of WAC; for those already familiar with WAC, the colloquium was intended as an opportunity to reflect on both the successes and problems of WAC. We invited Art Young, Campbell Professor of Technical Communication and Coordinator for the Communications across the Curriculum Program at Clemson University, to coordinate a faculty workshop and deliver the keynote address published here.

Active in writing-across-the-curriculum theory and research throughout the United States, Professor Young has co-authored, with Toby Fulwiler, several important books in the writing-across-the curriculum movement: *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum* (1982), *Writing Across the Disciplines: Research into Practice* (1986), and *Programs that Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum* (1990). Professor Young’s keynote address, *The Wonder of Writing Across the Curriculum*, traces the development of WAC from its early years, addresses the difficulties facing WAC, and concludes with a personal example of how the movement sustains creative, effective teaching.

The colloquium and the publication of Professor Young’s speech continue the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing’s commitment to improving undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. Along with colloquia, conferences, publications, and other outreach activities, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- characteristics of writing across the University's curriculum;
- status reports on students' writing ability at the University;
- the connections between writing and learning in all fields;
- the characteristics of writing beyond the academy;
- the effects of ethnicity, race, class, and gender on writing; and
- curricular reform through writing-intensive instruction.

We are pleased to present Professor Young's keynote address as part of the ongoing discussion about writing across the curriculum and the connections between writing and learning.

One of the goals of all the Center publications is to encourage conversations about writing; we invite you to contact the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing about this publication or for information about other publications or the Center activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Mark Olson, Editor
February 1994

The Wonder of Writing Across the Curriculum

The main reason I got involved with writing across the curriculum fifteen years ago was administrative and related to campus politics. The main reason I have stayed actively involved in writing across the curriculum for fifteen years is personal and related to my teaching. Quite simply, I am a better teacher because of writing across the curriculum. So while motivations and intentions are messy things to characterize, for me the combination of administrative and teaching responsibilities and personal and public desires have led to most of my professorial life being engaged in writing across the curriculum—in my own classroom and on my college campuses—first at Michigan Tech and now for six years at Clemson University.

Fifteen years ago, as a new department head, I was called into the office of my even newer provost and given a charge: do something about the lack of communication skills exhibited by Michigan Tech engineering students and recent graduates. I returned to my department, symbolically located, I thought, on the other end of campus, and met with colleagues to decide what to do.

Doing something about the communication skills of engineering students was not at that time the battle cry of my fledgling departmental administration. We had established our own internal priorities around more traditional goals of creating a new undergraduate degree and thereby attracting more majors and of starting a graduate program. It was as if Bill Clinton, on being ushered into power on the promise to build an economically strong America, had been told that his first priority would be to build an even stronger Germany and Japan—to aid aggressive competitors in campus politics for market share and funding priorities. And not only to help them to achieve a better product, a more marketable engineering graduate, but to help them in an area that they themselves didn't deem very important to their mission or worthy of their time—

an area that they saw as a secondary one—communication skills. Kind of like the Japanese or Germans wanted U.S. advice on fashions—what to wear to a corporate dinner. Or so we thought. In some sense, very early on, we saw the provost’s charge as an opportunity, but to recognize how big an opportunity it really was took time, experience, and a new way of thinking about university priorities, about colleagues across disciplines, and about what being a teacher was really all about. So after about a year of study and discussion, a writing-across-the-curriculum project was launched at Michigan Tech.

Now, I hope you don’t mind if I use the abbreviation “WAC” for “writing across the curriculum.” It has become a staple of my vocabulary, like GM, IBM, or GE. In fact, as long as I am drawing analogies to market competition, I might share an experience I had earlier this year. Conducting the second day of a faculty workshop at St. Thomas University in New Brunswick, Canada, I arrived to find an overhead transparency projected onto the screen:

WAC MAN

THE RETURN

It was a newspaper ad from a local electronics store in Fredericton—appropriately, perhaps, named “Wacky’s.” I will spare you the rest of the extended analogy I wrote about obtaining a WAC—Mobile so that the brief—cased crusader could battle sentence fragments and comma splices in a never-ending battle against language corruption.

What I have found in fifteen years as a WAC Man is that being involved with WAC has kept the focus of my professional life on teaching. I realize that my teaching suffers if I allow myself to become isolated and to drop out of the WAC community of teachers at my school, that I lose the reality check on my own teaching and forgo the opportunities for further growth as a teacher. That is why WAC, for me, is both a personal and an institutional matter. For WAC to

work, it needs both the commitment of individual teachers and a supportive interdisciplinary community and institutional commitment to nurture it. Thus, my remarks today will have these twin focuses, the individual and the communal, the personal and the public, the teacher and the institutions that support teaching.

It has not been enough for me to get some good ideas about teaching at a conference or a faculty workshop and then drop the conversation—go into my classroom and shut the door behind me. I need to find ways to sustain the conversation—with my own students as junior colleagues in the enterprise of teaching and learning—and with each of you. I need them and I need you to keep the teaching conversation going within me, and together we must find ways to keep the faculty workshop going—with long breaks and good food, of course—but a continuing workshop nonetheless.

Writing across the curriculum, when it works well and thrives, conceives of students, teachers, our various disciplines, and our administrative programs as one interrelated system (Herrington and Moran ix). This is something I could not or did not imagine sixteen years ago when I viewed faculty in different disciplines as competitors for market share—ones who talked a disciplinary language I could not understand and did not want to understand.

Writing across the curriculum has its beginnings, for me, in the important work of James Britton, Nancy Martin, and their colleagues at the University of London's Schools Council Project. There was a major effort to integrate and then study "language across the curriculum" in English schools in the 1960s and 70s. Their work demonstrated in theory and in practice that language was integral to learning as well as to communication in all disciplines. Most WAC projects in the U.S. in the late 70s, such as the one at Michigan Tech, were motivated by a desire to enhance student abilities in these two areas. First, they were concerned with students' abilities

to communicate, what was often called student literacy—functional literacy, critical literacy, academic literacy. Teachers, administrators, and funding agencies wanted students to read and write better than they did. Second, they were concerned with students' abilities as learners—they wanted students to become more active and engaged learners, critical thinkers, and problem-solvers—and they believed that providing students with increased opportunities to use writing as a tool for learning would help meet these goals. In some sense, we might say that first-generation WAC programs founded on these premises focused on the cognitive development of individual students. They encouraged writing in all disciplines to enable students to become astute learners, critical thinkers, and effective communicators.

In the 1980s, teachers explored the social dimensions of written communication; an exploration that gradually shifted WAC theory and practice away from cognitive emphasis to a more socially based perspective on writing. This shift paralleled WAC's move from the individual classroom into the wider social arena of campus-wide and statewide programs.

Thus, to the first two premises for WAC programs, a third and fourth were added. Third, writing is a social activity; it takes place in a social context. If we want students to be effective communicators, to be successful engineers and historians, then we cannot separate form from content, writing from knowledge, action from context. We should not teach writing generically, in a vacuum, as if it were a skill unconnected to purpose or context. Student writers need to join a community of learners engaged in generating knowledge and solving problems, to join, even as novices, disciplinary conversations and public-policy discussion. WAC programs, therefore, began to stress the role of collaboration in learning, the role of audience in communication, and the role of social context in learning to write and writing to learn. Each new context makes different demands on a writer and requires different understandings about what is valued as

expressions of knowledge in particular communities. Teachers began to change the social environments of their individual classrooms to nurture and challenge student writers, and they began to lobby for the institutionalization of WAC within their school or college.

A fourth premise, then, is that writing is social action; writers are advocates who write to further personal and social goals. If we want students to be effective communicators, we cannot continually ask them to practice at writing separate from any social or disciplinary community of shared knowledge and interests. Writers write to change their perceptions of the world and to change others' perceptions of the world. Thus, WAC programs have added advocacy writing to their repertoire: students writing to audiences beyond the classroom to audiences who want to hear what they know and what they think about what they know; writing on electronic networks to understand, monitor, and solve global as well as local problems; and writing "where language can lead to action in the world" (Dunlap 213).

As we move through the decade of the 1990s toward the twenty-first century, WAC proponents understand more and more what is to be done. We do not replace the cognitive dimension of writing with the social dimension, but rather we continue to build on the knowledge and experience of others in both areas. Today, mature WAC programs attempt to use all four underlying premises as a way of empowering students as active learners and effective communicators: writing to learn, writing to communicate, writing as social process, writing as social action. Certainly, there are tensions and conflicts between teachers and scholars who prefer either cognitively or socially-based instructional strategies, but the stance of most WAC programs is to welcome competing viewpoints on such matters, to see WAC as an inclusive and evolving movement, one which seeks to encourage conversations about significant educational issues by teachers and other interested parties, and then to listen for opportunities that may lead

to communal action and educational renewal based on consensus. [The preceding four paragraphs are adapted from Gere, Farrell, and my “Introduction” to a forthcoming book from Boynton/Cook.]

But as we all know, when we try to start and sustain WAC programs, things do not always run this smoothly in practice. About four years ago, Toby Fulwiler and I were editing a book on this subject—*Programs That Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum*. We were just about finished, and it became time to write the introduction—an overview of the book and a response to the most frequently asked questions about implementing and running a WAC program. But something was bothering me. I knew from my personal experience, as well as the experiences of the cross-disciplinary faculty represented in the fourteen chapters before me, that something was wrong. We knew that WAC programs create a better academic environment for both students and faculty to learn and excel as teachers and learners, and yet we also knew that most WAC programs remain difficult to initiate, difficult to fund, difficult to sustain, difficult to institutionalize, difficult to integrate into the central role of the school or university. WAC “is still an adjunct program on most campuses, still on tenuous budgetary footing, still without administrative positioning within the academy, still, as it were, operating on the fringe of academic respectability” (287). Even though our book contained descriptions of fourteen exemplary and apparently healthy programs, I thought we needed to confront this darker reality. So Toby and I did what we often do when we don’t quite understand what the other is talking about: he went his way to write the first draft of the “Introduction,” and I went my way to write the first draft of what was to become the “Afterword” to the book—with the ominous title “The Enemies of Writing Across the Curriculum.”

I elaborated on a long list of attitudes and practices that subvert WAC and its effort to improve education, what I called “enemies of WAC and institutionalizing WAC”—a list familiar to most of you, I’m sure:

- Academic institutions are organized by disciplinary departments, and thus interdisciplinary programs, such as WAC, fall through the cracks of the academy, along with many of our students.
- WAC is identified as a remedial program, as a quick-fix, as something temporary, so that once the students again write better, as in the good old days, the program will be phased out.
- Unstable leadership: writing faculty, often the most knowledgeable leaders of WAC on campus, are often adjuncts, part-timers, graduate teaching assistants, non-tenure track—subject to being rolled over and turned out every few years.
- Resistance from English departments has many forms as well: reluctance to share responsibility for teaching writing with untrained faculty in other disciplines; reluctance to water down the main mission of the department, the literature program; and reluctance to tenure and promote faculty in composition.
- The pressure at many colleges is for even larger classes, more students, but also more research. With large classes come standardized tests and the belief that such tests are objective and preferable to subjective writing assignments. This reinforces the myth that writing in educational settings should be used primarily to test students’ knowledge rather than as opportunities to learn subject matter. In the nation’s primary and secondary schools the situation is even worse. Not only are students labeled with a standardized test score, but so are teachers, schools, school districts,

- and states. Teaching to such tests subverts innovative teaching—and WAC thrives on innovation, just as mediocrity thrives on standardization.
- At the college level, the traditional reward system devalues undergraduate teaching and primarily rewards research, publications, and grants. It also assumes that the teacher's job is to disseminate knowledge and that the student's job is to memorize what the teacher disseminates. If such a model is accurate, it makes perfect sense to videotape the professor's lectures, show them to ten or fifteen classes of students at the same time—or watch them in the library if you miss class—and have graduate students administer scan-tron tests to measure how much the students remember from the video lectures. It certainly does free up faculty research time, especially if the videotapes only need revising once or twice a decade (or a career?).
 - The fear of student resistance is another key enemy: everyone knows that students hate to write, so why turn them off and risk getting lower student evaluations at the end of the term? Teaching students to write about physics or horticulture is someone else's responsibility anyway. Our system of education has trained students to be like Skinnerian pigeons—to prefer things simple. Tell us what to say, when to say it, how to say it, and then give us our reward. But as every WAC teacher knows, students are not pigeons, and when given the opportunity, most prefer not to be treated as pigeons. Faculty new to WAC are often pleasantly surprised when student evaluations actually go up.
 - And the final enemy, I noted, is faculty resistance: some faculty are apathetic, others insecure, others downright hostile to any program that offers to assist them with their teaching. They see such efforts as a subtle indictment of their current teaching and

feel threatened by any attempt at collaboration centered on teaching. They believe that teaching is a matter between teacher and students, and any organized attempt to change their teaching strategies is an attack on academic freedom. At colleges, faculty have an even greater reason to resist—it is against their own self-interest.

Time spent improving teaching is time robbed from research. (287-294)

This is a depressing litany, isn't it? And this from a guy who is generally upbeat, optimistic, idealistic, forward looking. The WAC Man. Fifteen years as a WAC advocate. I don't know what got into me—some mid-life episode I assume. My “enemies” essay has now been out for a couple of years, and it has been interesting to see some of the critical reaction from teachers in other places. Mostly, the reaction has been favorable, favorable in the sense that they concede that I commonsensically summarized a depressing situation. Some scholars have been more perceptive and have constructed arguments about how I missed the boat on such things as faculty resistance. Faculty resistance is actually a good thing, they claim, because out of such resistance comes the creative tension that engenders change. The postmodernist paradox: the need to be part of a community with stable traditions and conventions and the concomitant need for dynamic change and resistance within that same community (Howard 49). For some reason, these arguments did not immediately lift my spirits from their mid-life depths.

And then I read an article by William E. Coles, Jr., of the University of Pittsburgh, with the engaging title “Writing Across the Curriculum: Why Bother?” After summarizing my list of enemies and the struggles that WAC programs face, he writes: “The real wonder is not that the program has enemies. The wonder is that it has gathered so many friends” (23). Reading Coles' essay, my spirits began to soar. Thus the title of my talk today on the *wonder* of writing across the curriculum. Coles goes on to conclude his essay in this way:

Why bother to work at writing across the curriculum? Finally, I suppose, because the student, as it turns out, is not the only focus of the process. For teachers, no less than for students, writing across the curriculum—given its insistence that one ask real rather than loaded questions, the way it takes for granted the importance of dialogue and revisions as part of the writing process, and its emphasis on teachers rather than the supremacy of the Teacher—can be an expression of faith that can keep faith itself alive, faith in this case that real growth, real development, real change, are possible, even in an educational institution. This does, of course, demand a commitment of time and energy, but an unreasonable one only if I forget that very simply, I'm a better teacher, a better student, a better person, when I act as though I had that kind of faith. (25)

And thus the conversations we have at workshops, at colloquia like this one, and in print (like the one I had with William Coles), continue to work their magic for me. So with no apologies whatsoever, I'd like to turn to share with you one writing and learning process I have been using in an upper-level Victorian literature class I teach, and thereby share with you the joy I experience in teaching, a joy continually renewed not only by my interaction with students but also with faculty colleagues who *bother* about writing across the curriculum.

I use writing to help students learn Victorian literature (the subject matter I teach), learn to read difficult texts, learn to talk and write about them, learn to pose questions that need asking, learn to make meaning in such a way that it is indeed meaningful to them and to others. Although our subject matter changes depending on our discipline, whether accounting or zoology, these are common goals among WAC teachers, ones we can adapt to the unique circumstances of our own teaching. By way of introduction, let me say that I learned about this strategy I'm going to share with you from an engineering colleague, Dan McAuliff, who used it in an electrical engineering course. It has been adapted and used by teachers at Clemson in various disciplines, including Melanie Cooper in chemistry and Robert Jamison in mathematics. Unless I am mistaken, all three of these teachers used it before I did. We learned about it from each other in our faculty workshops—which over four hundred Clemson faculty have now participated in—and through articles we wrote for our local WAC newsletter. Although my

Victorian literature class enrolls about thirty-five students per section, it should be noted that Melanie Cooper's first-year Chemistry course enrolls about two hundred students per section.

The focus in this assignment is on a series of notes or letters pairs of students write to each other. They first write to a partner about the problems they've encountered in interpreting a difficult text—they construct and contextualize questions about it—and they write a return letter to their partner suggesting possible answers and perhaps raising other issues to be discussed. In writing, they often surprise themselves with what they learn, and they are often gratified to help someone else understand—to make a difference through written communication.

Let me give you the context for this assignment: this was the last of six writing assignments students were required to do in this course, in addition to a midterm and final exam. Two of the other assignments were formal critical essays on the literature, and three were more informal creative assignments, like writing a poem in the dramatic monologue form of Robert Browning. Students kept their writing in a portfolio, which was read and assessed by them and by me about midterm and at the course conclusion. For this final assignment, students had one week to read the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, to read the critical introduction to the novel by Cedric Watts, and to read a scholarly essay by Chinua Achebe, who argues that the novel is racist. Part 1 of this assignment, the first letter, was written before the novel was discussed in class; it could be handwritten and be about two hundred words long; and Part 2, the response letter, was written following the week's class discussion and needed to be typed and about five hundred words long. Students knew as well that there would be a final exam question on *Heart of Darkness*. (The appendix includes a copy of the assignment and three pairs of student letters.)

I share one letter of inquiry and one letter of response from the exchange between Emily and Alyson—as a way of centering our attention on student texts.

Alyson,

On page 149, Marlow makes a general statement about women after having a conversation with his aunt, saying, “It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up, it would go to pieces before the first sunset.” After reading the novel, I could see how Marlow would think that Kurtz’s Intended fit into this stereotype. She did really seem to be totally out of touch with reality, and she didn’t seem to have a clue about the man she loved. The question I want to ask is whether the African woman described near the end of the novel on page 226 fits into this stereotype. Actually, I would like to know where and how she fits into the novel at all, beyond the insinuations of being Kurtz’s mistress. I think this woman must be symbolic of something, although I am not exactly sure of what. Is she a living, breathing human embodiment of the “heart of darkness,” the wilderness of the African Congo, as seems to be indicated on page 226?

Emily

Emily,

In class, we discussed the possibility that *Heart of Darkness* is a masculine novel. This idea seems supported by the narrator’s reliance on patriarchal assumptions and Marlow’s unsympathetic view of women and perhaps, by the subject matter which focuses on plotting, murder, intrigue and male adventure. Based on these assumptions,

the savage woman's role can be explained as a symbolic representation of the things to which this man feels alternately attracted and repulsed—woman and Africa.

Before the trip, Marlow has, as you mentioned, stated his demeaning and subordinating attitude towards women (that they're out of touch with truth). But that description fits his Aunt and the Intended specifically, while this savage woman seems a striking deviation from this stereotype. When considering the savage woman in the context of Marlow's stereotype, I came up with several possibilities.

Some possibilities for the purpose of this woman were suggested briefly by Achebe. He believes that she serves as a direct contrast or opposite to the Intended. If so, I wonder why Conrad would deliberately draw this contrast with his own view of woman who is embodied in the Intended? When you consider the dichotomies presented (Thames/Congo, Africa/England, civilized/savage, good/evil), this contrast of the powerful, wild savage with the civilized, naive Intended is a fitting echo of the division being made by Marlow. But does Marlow's image of women represent what he wants them to be? I think it does because he willfully hides the truth from the Intended by lying about Kurtz's last words.

Yet I think it's important that, to Marlow, truth is available to men only. It is a masculine concern. So if the woman represents Africa, which he suggests is the case by such comments as "... the whole sorrowful land...seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (76), then she has a strong connection with truth. As I see it, the primitive and savage is the vehicle for truth in *Heart of Darkness*; therefore, this woman conveys, or threatens to convey, truth...

However, another purpose this woman serves is to help explain Kurtz. The implication that she was his mistress makes Marlow and the reader consider her as a real woman, one who is capable of having a relationship with a white man. It's interesting to consider whether Conrad created her to represent how savage Kurtz had become or to show us that our kinship with Africa is real. I think an important question is whether she represents a positive alternative to the deluded, meek Intended or whether she represents the darkness, which lured Kurtz into madness. That question asks, I think, a major decision to be made about the novel.

Alyson

As I read the exchange of student letters, the first thing that struck me was the quality of the talk about literature exhibited in the letters: the questions and issues that were thoughtfully raised, the insight and agility with the process of literary interpretation, the quality of the writing and thinking, the impressive array of intellectual skills that was brought to bear in assisting another to understand the novel—analysis, synthesis, inference and speculation, integration of primary and secondary sources.

Why was I surprised by such engagement and sophistication by my students? Because these letters contrasted markedly with the two formal critical essays they had written previously for me and to me in the course—essays that were not coherent or insightful, essays that were not a joy to read. Many of you know the kinds of critical essays I mean. I began to question what might have caused the difference. The shift in audience from teacher as primary to fellow student as primary with teacher as secondary? The shift in context, from a topic or question the teacher concocted to a question raised by a fellow student? The shift from the form and language of my profession—the specialized language of literary analysis in the critical essay, a language many students must do their best to invent since it is not the language of their

profession or their experience—to the form and language of notes and letters, at once personal and familiar to the students?

Some other questions I muse about when I study and interpret this student writing:

- Why did the students claim to enjoy and learn more from the letters they wrote and received rather than the formal critical essays they wrote?
- Why did many students write inept and “just playing the game” critical essays and insightful and sincere letters about *Heart of Darkness*? And was I just playing the game when I earlier in the course assigned a critical essay on the role of love and marriage in Oscar Wilde’s play *The Important of Being Earnest*?
- Why did the students complain about the restrictions on their creativity and their interpretative ability when I assigned the broad topic of love in Wilde’s play for their critical essay and not complain at all about writing a letter to a fellow student on a much narrower topic (such as the “role of the African woman” in *Heart of Darkness*, who appears for only a couple of pages)?
- How come the students so easily integrated primary and secondary sources into the flow of their letters, while quotes from such sources in their critical essays resembled patchwork quilts?
- And why, at the end of the class, did numerous students comment on the student evaluation form that the letters were the most difficult and the most time consuming writing assignment of the term, and yet the one they found most valuable and learned the most from?

I assigned these essays last semester—only three months ago—so I’m still musing. I don’t have answers to these and other questions. But I do have some initial observations that I’m

willing to share with you in the hopes that you will give me your ideas about these issues as we chat in the discussion period following this talk.

First, I think the social nature of the assignment was important. The students had interpreted my “critical essay” assignment as the familiar school assignment: show the teacher that you read the novel and can write some things about it—show the teacher you can think. You are not really helping the teacher understand the novel any better—because the teacher has read and taught the novel several times, read many professional books and essays about it, and you have spent a week reading the novel while taking four or five other classes at the same time. The advantage of the letters is that they are written for a specific individual, a peer, who is asking real questions, asking for help, and for whom you can play the role of colleague and of teacher. The letters demonstrate students communicating to a real audience rather than practicing at communicating for a pretend audience: professional scholars who read and write essays about *Heart of Darkness*. In addition, the letters are contextualized within the classroom community. As you can see from Alyson’s response letter—and this was true of most letters—that the classroom lectures, discussions, and readings are integrated into the letter writing. Students synthesize and make sense of what they heard and read in class. The formal critical essays were written in a vacuum, as if to mention that you got some of your ideas from classmates and class discussion was a form of cheating. The letter assignment, I believe, was vital to the knowledge students were making, while the critical essay was perceived as an “add-on assignment”—an “out of class” project—and became, in practice, an isolated and isolating task.

Second, I think the problem-posing nature of the assignment was important. The students learned as much in writing Part I of the assignment as they did in writing the longer and more formal (it had to be typed) Part II. Fundamental to every discipline is figuring out how to ask

important and germane questions that continue the advancement of knowledge within that field. You've got to know a lot to ask good questions (and I found out that my students know a lot), and good questions beget good responses. The person writing back to you knows that superficial generalities or a string of quotes from secondary sources will not do, will not answer your questions and address your confusion, will not help you understand a little more about the *Heart of Darkness*, will not help at all. It asks the writer to take seriously the responsibilities of a writer. It places responsibility on the writer of Part II—an obligation to teach, an obligation to be sincere and honest. Reading this student writing made me question if I was being honest when I earlier asked students to write a critical essay on love and marriage in *The Importance of Being Earnest* when I already knew most of the answers. I also note that Alyson, in responding to Emily, responds by asking several important questions herself—and that these questions and the remarkable conclusion to her essay become an invitation to continue the conversation—not an attempt to provide definitive answers and thus end it.

In reading my students' writing—both the critical essays and the letter exchange—I not only learn about the students, about Oscar Wilde and Joseph Conrad, but also, and maybe most importantly, I learn about myself as a teacher, who and what I value in teaching. I now realize I prefer my mirrored reflection, my own self image, as it is represented in the student letters, rather than the image of me I see represented in their critical essays. It makes me eager to read the writing my students are generating this semester in an entirely different course. And it makes me eager to listen to each of you talk about your teaching—in the hallways and in the workshop sessions over the next two days of this colloquia. For, doing these things, quite simply, makes me a better teacher.

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Appendix

**Instructions for Writing Assignment #6 from English 417: “The Victorian Period”
and Three sets of student responses**

English 417: The Victorian Period. Art Young. Fall. 1992

Writing Assignment #6. Due in Two Parts, November 18 and November 25.

You will have a final exam question on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Assignment #6 is designed to enhance your understanding of this novel in collaboration with a classmate. The assignment follows:

1. Reflect on your reading of *Heart of Darkness* and then write a 200-300 word note (legible handwriting is okay) to a classmate in which you describe some aspect of the novel that you are having trouble understanding—a specific area you are having difficulty interpreting or fully comprehending. You should make distinctions where you can—that is, describe what you do understand and what you don't understand. You should refer to one or more particular passages in the novel where you are experiencing difficulty. Don't just say, "I don't understand the passage beginning on line ten of page 227." Provide a context for what you don't understand—so your reader can see your difficulties and thereby give you some assistance. I hope this exercise will help you clarify your thinking about Conrad's novel as well as describe a particular problem(s) to a classmate that you really want to know more about. **This brief writing is due Wednesday, November 18, in two copies—one for your classmate and one for me.**
2. Take the note a classmate has given you and consider it carefully, review *Heart of Darkness* and our class discussions about it, and then respond to your classmate with a thoughtful note of explanation and exploration. Explain where you can, and where you are not sure of particular aspects yourself, explore reasonable possibilities. Again, my hope from this assignment is that you will not only help your classmate understand and gain a better critical appreciation of *Heart of Darkness*, but that in constructing your response you will learn more about the novel as well.

This note should be 400-500 words long and typed. Due November 25 in two copies—one for your classmate and one for me.

If you are absent November 16, you are responsible for exchanging notes with your partners at the earliest possible time thereafter—but not later than November 20. Partners follow:

The three sets of letters below were exchanged by students during Fall Semester, 1992, in English 417: “Victorian Literature, “at Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634-1503.

Art Young, Instructor.

The letters are reproduced as written.

Emily—Alyson

Alyson,

On page 149, Marlow makes a general statement about women after having a conversation with his aunt, saying, “It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up, it would go to pieces before the first sunset.” After reading the novel, I could see how Marlow would think that Kurtz’s Intended fit into this stereotype. She did really seem to be totally out of touch with reality, and she didn’t seem to have a clue about the man she loved. The question I want to ask is whether the African woman described near the end of the novel on page 226 fits into this stereotype. Actually, I would like to know where and how she fits into the novel at all, beyond the insinuations of being Kurtz’s mistress. I think this woman must be symbolic of something, although I am not exactly sure of what. Is she a living, breathing human embodiment of the “heart of darkness,” the wilderness of the African Congo, as seems to be indicated on page 226?

Emily

Emily,

In class, we discussed that possibility that *Heart of Darkness* is a masculine novel. This idea seems supported by the narrator's reliance on patriarchal assumptions and Marlow's unsympathetic view of women and perhaps, by the subject matter which focuses on plotting, murder, intrigue and male adventure. Based on these assumptions, the savage woman's role can be explained as a symbolic representation of the things to which this man feels alternately attracted and repulsed—woman and Africa.

Before the trip, Marlow has, as you mentioned, stated his demeaning and subordinating attitude towards women (that they're out of touch with truth). But that description fits his Aunt and the Intended specifically, while this savage woman seems a striking deviation from this stereotype. When considering the savage woman in the context of Marlow's stereotype, I came up with several possibilities.

Some possibilities for the purpose of this woman were suggested briefly by Achebe. He believes that she serves as a direct contrast or opposite to the Intended. So, I wonder why Conrad would deliberately draw this contrast with his own view of woman who is embodied in the Intended? When you consider the dichotomies presented (Thames/Congo, Africa/England, civilized/savage, good/evil), this contrast of the powerful, wild savage with the civilized, naïve Intended is a fitting echo of the division being made by Marlow. But does Marlow's image of women represent what he wants them to be? I think it does because he willfully hides the truth from the Intended by lying about Kurtz's last words.

Yet I think it's important that, to Marlow, truth is available to men only. It is a masculine concern. So if the woman represents Africa, which he suggests is the case by such comments as "...the whole sorrowful land...seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (76), then she has a strong connection with

truth. As I see it, the primitive and savage is the vehicle for truth in *Heart of Darkness*; therefore, this woman conveys, or threatens to convey, truth.

She is a threatening image, although we never hear what Marlow's feelings are about her.

But his description of her includes words of awe, mystery and dread. He is uneasy and is quieted by her "ominous" progress, and the "tragic" and "fierce" expressions on her face. Although Achebe believes that Marlow "approves" of her because she is in her place, I sense that he fears her while being simultaneously attracted to her. He acknowledges that she is "gorgeous" and "superb" as well as "barbarous" and "savage." So could her purpose in the novel be to reinforce and symbolize his feelings about Africa and the truth that is found there? I think that's a strong possibility because there is a sense in which all women in Marlow's tale are symbols—perhaps symbols of his fears and inadequacies. Because he obviously holds chauvinistic attitudes, it makes sense that (using our modern perspective of Freudian analysis) he fears them. Therefore, his masculine tale to his group of male friends reduces women to symbols. For example, the women knitting wool, who are said to be associated with the Fates, represent his fear of his fate on this journey. However, I'm not sure how his Aunt or the laundress would fit into this interpretation. In any case, he sees the savage woman as the jungle. Like Africa, this woman is dark, mysterious, wild, and powerful. As such, she is everything he believes a woman is not or should not be.

However, another purpose this woman serves is to help explain Kurtz. The implication that she was his mistress makes Marlow and the reader consider her as a real woman, one who is capable of having a relationship with a white man. It's interesting to consider whether Conrad created her to represent how savage Kurtz had become or to show us that our kinship with Africa is real. I think an important question is whether she represents a positive alternative to the

deluded, meek Intended or whether she represents the darkness, which lured Kurtz into madness. That question asks, I think, a major decision to be made about the novel.

Hope this helps,

Alyson

Rosemary—Scott

Dear Scott,

I've always thought it interesting that the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* is not the one who has the main story—rather, Marlow does. Why not have the whole story written from Marlow's point of view, instead of having the narrator repeat all that Marlow said? The conclusion that I came to was that Conrad, in letting us view Marlow from the outside through the narrator, is giving us the opportunity to judge Marlow, just as Marlow has judged Kurtz. My question is, How should we judge Marlow? I'd specifically like to figure out what Marlow's motive was in traveling into the heart of darkness—were his intentions noble?—and whether in remaining loyal to Kurtz he somehow corrupted himself.

In Marlow's prelude to the tale, he says that what redeems the conquest of the earth is the idea only, an unselfish belief in the idea. This passage especially interests me now that I have a background of the Victorian sense of duty, the white man's burden, etc. Was this why Marlow was going? I can't really tell, because before he even departed, he realized that something was not quite right about it all. When he says that it appeared to others that he would be an emissary of light, a lower sort of apostle, he sounds sarcastic, but could that just be hindsight at work? Once on his journey, he encounters people who consider the natives to be enemies and who "hate the savages," but what does Marlow think? I think it may be telling that towards the end of the story, when Marlow describes Kurtz's madness, Marlow says that because of his own sins, he had to go through the ordeal of looking into Kurtz's mad soul himself.

So. Are we led to judge Marlow? If not, why not, and if so, how should we judge him?

Rosemary

Dear Rosemary,

I think Marlow was a kind of Buddha figure, a sage and wise man, but he represented the wisdom of the *worldly* Victorian, which is one of his major distinctions: for the most part, the Victorian characters with whom we have been made familiar have, for the most part been wholly ignorant of and often willfully disdainful of culture, knowledge, and wisdom originating outside of the European circle of enlightenment. It is, was, a creeping form of Euro-centrism that can be narrowed further to a kind of Victorian-centrism. They were not unjustified—as far as Marlow and the rest of the Victorians had any ken, theirs was the best and brightest civilization of the Earth: industry, standards of living, education, democracy, happiness (how unique), and prosperity for all could be a concern. Ah, there it is, that wonderful part of the idealistic pie; they believed that because they were happy with their civilization/culture, that every other human being would be just as happy given the same circumstances. So I guess, in their own narrow way, they could “jolly well feel good about civilizing those bloody savages” because, from their own perceived position at the top, it would be beneficial to the abyres to be civilized by/for the “Motherly auspices of the Crown.”

You know, Conrad himself was not a Victorian...he was a thoroughly displaced Pole, forced to speak Russian, then German, French, and finally English. He spent eight years wandering the ocean with the British merchant navy. He was not born Victorian or raised/accltured Victorian. He was the ultimate outsider to the culture. Though, bitter about his own culture (the destruction thereof), his viewpoint and life could afford him an overview of British culture that none of its inhabitants could achieve.

Perhaps this is why Conrad felt that he could so easily remove himself from Marlow, in narration and spirit, because to Conrad, Marlow was a Victorian. In a way, Conrad is generous to Marlow by not attributing malice to Marlow's own prejudices, few though they seem. Marlow is, in more ways, Conrad himself; a voyager adrift in the real world, absorbing everything in order to make sense of himself and his own world, carrying with him his unconscious values and prejudices *without forcing them onto the people or world around him*. There is the judgment of Marlow: he carries the value/idea "Victorian" around with him, but he does not force the world to conform to his ideas. Kurtz is/was the embodiment of those ideas that Marlow holds, his own hero. Witnessing the actual implementations of those ideas and finally watching Kurtz's decline and facing his Intended is what brought Marlow to fully question those ideas, to face their actual lack of enlightenment; to return to England and face the actual heart of darkness.

Yours Truly,

Scott

Cookie—Kelly

Dear Kelly,

My first question comes from the end of the story where Conrad writes that the Thames "seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." What do you think he's talking about exactly? "Heart of darkness" usually refers to Africa, I know, the Dark Continent as well as the dark forces dormant in men's souls. To me, the story seems to be about discovering those forces as we are taken out of civilization, so isn't it ironic that he uses this reference now when the story is back in civilization? I ask this because at the beginning of the story he uses as much dark imagery describing London as he does for Africa. It doesn't seem to be that they are leaving the

lighted safe city for the dark jungle so much as they are going from a place where “darkness” is underneath to where it comes to the surface.

This brings me to my second question—do you think they go to Africa and learn to be corrupt or that they are corrupt and use Africa as the excuse? (Their passions run wild because they expect them to.) At one point, Marlow runs down the city as corrupt when he is talking about first going to sign up for the job, but then he goes to find the same forces at work where he thought he would escape them. Is the darkness there out of civilization, or do they bring it with them.

Cookie

Dear Cookie:

In his introduction to *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, Cedric Watts writes “the darkness of the book’s title refers to many kinds of darkness: moral corruption, primitive savagery, night, death/ignorance, and that encompassing obscurity of the pre-rational which words seek to colonize and illuminate” (xvii). The last line of *Heart of Darkness*, “seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness,” corresponds with Marlow’s comments only pages into the novel when he says of England—“and this also has been one of the darkest places of the earth.” Here Marlow seems to use dark imagery to describe land in its primitive state, as it is used to describe the Belgium Congo. Yet I believe that the more important implication of the imagery of darkness is the corruption and evil in every man. This evil is found in all men, but lies dormant, controlled by civilization. That Marlow begins by saying that England was once dark and concludes by saying it is still dark reveals that he believes that it is not simply the land which is dark, or that civilization ends darkness, but that the darkness remains a part of each man on the continent. Marlow describes “the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the

hearts of wild men” as if the wilderness is removed by civilization (140). But the actions of the English men belie his belief that efficiency has saved them and removed the darkness. The moral corruption that seems to exist in Africa also exists in England; it is merely kept underground, only whispered about.

Several examples of corruption in England are present in the novel. It is in England that the Ivory Company makes its plans to send Englishmen to Africa to “enlighten” the Africans with Christianity.

In England, one steps “delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums” (206). Although men are corrupt with evil urges and desires, society prevents them from being acted on most of the time by threatening with hangings or confinement. “When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness” (206).

In Africa, the English men are not more corrupt than they were in England. Instead, the power of strength they hold over the Africans and the lack of societal constraints enables their corruption to shine more brightly. The men are internally corrupt and being in Africa simply allows their corruptness to manifest itself externally as well. The men no longer have to whisper. Because they are more powerful than the Africans, due to weapons and explosives, they are able to pry on them without fear of reprisal.

Your friend,

Kelly