

UNF's

*Occasional
Papers*

TWENTY-EIGHTH
ANNUAL FALL
CONVOCATION
REMARKS

by

Richard B. Bizot

1999 Distinguished Professor

August 27, 1999

OFFICE OF
ACADEMIC
AFFAIRS

Number 3,
September 1999

*5/17 - must
be one color*

N UNIVERSITY OF
NORTH
FLORIDA
JACKSONVILLE

The Teaching of Writing at UNF

My remarks today concern what we are doing in the lower division writing courses offered by the Department of English and Foreign Languages. Faculty in many disciplines assist students in the development of writing skills, and that is as it should be. But the university's main and most concerted effort in writing instruction, impacting well over 2000 students a term, comes in the courses I am talking about.

When I speak of "writing courses," that is shorthand for courses which stress critical thinking and critical reading, and introduce research methods, all in conjunction with writing. For writing is not a skill which can be taught in isolation; writing is the final stage in the thinking process. "*Mal écrire est mal penser*," Pascal said; and he was correct: to write badly is to think badly. If one cannot find and assemble the words to express an idea, with clarity and precision, the idea does not fully exist. The teaching of writing necessarily engages the entire process of thinking. That is why it is so crucial. That is why the teaching of writing, as the Conference on College Composition and Communication has asserted, is "the academy's most serious mission." It is the foundation stone which bears the weight of subsequent learning.

Therefore, though I speak of one department, the issues I raise are of general concern. The students of every department, every major, every minor on campus pass through my department's writing courses. Our successes are your successes; our failures are your failures; our problems are yours as well.

Let me tell you about the conditions under which my department's lower division writing courses are taught. This fall we are offering 98 sections of these courses, 88 of them capped at 27 students apiece, the other 10 (for students whose writing needs extra attention) capped at 15. I salute the university for forming these smaller sections in order to provide intensive care where it is needed. It is the first time we have created limited enrollment sections for these writing courses, and it is a very positive step. It should contribute to the success rate of such students, hence to our retention rate; it is academically and morally the right thing to do.

The enrollment caps of 27 in the other 88 sections, on the other hand, ought to be a source of embarrassment to us all. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (4 Cs), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and the Association of Departments of English (ADE) all agree that, ideally, all college writing courses should be limited to 15 students and that in no case should enrollments in college writing courses be allowed to exceed 20. Our caps nearly double the ideal and are 35% higher than what all the professional guidelines say should be the absolute maximum.

These guidelines are not arbitrary and do not represent wishful thinking; they are grounded in practical experience of just how labor-intensive the teaching of writing is. Writing classes *do* meet as groups, and some aspects of writing instruction can be accomplished in groups; but in its essence the teaching of writing is a one-on-one activity: a teacher confronts one student's paper at a time, and a dialogue begins, with the teacher's comments and questions in the margins. The dialogue continues when the student reads these and applies them in a rewrite, which extends the dialogue; and then the teacher reads the rewrite and the dialogue goes on. Interspersed in this process are face-to-face meetings between student and teacher, in classroom, hallway, teacher's office, as well as—nowadays—virtual face-to-face meetings through e-mail.

Last week I spoke with James R. Papp, Assistant Director of English Programs with the MLA and the ADE, to confirm his associations'

guidelines. When I told him that we have been capping our writing courses at 27 his response was, "I don't think I have *ever* heard of that many in a composition class. Once in awhile I hear of caps of 25, and *that's* abusive." He added, "I can't imagine teaching a section of *more* than 25 with *any* standard of quality." I said, "May I quote you?" and he said, "You bet!"

The NCTE, the Four Cs, the MLA and the ADE also agree that "No English faculty members should teach more than 60 writing students a term." At UNF, in the term we have just begun, more than a dozen faculty have in excess of 60 writing students in their classes. In fact, they exceed that limit by, on the average, more than 50%! That is, on the average, they have more than 90 writing students each! And the numbers I am giving you are from figures I gathered 11 days ago; needless to say, enrollments have gone up since then.

Let me tell you how we staff our lower division writing courses. Of the 98 sections offered this fall, almost 88% are staffed by faculty who are neither tenured nor in a tenure track—that is, they are staffed by visiting faculty, instructors and adjunct faculty. By far the majority, 68%, are being taught by adjunct faculty. In the crucial introductory course, ENC 1101, nearly 80% of the sections are staffed by adjunct faculty and only 5 out of 52 sections, less than 10%, by tenured or tenure-track faculty.

There are 16 tenured or tenure-track English faculty in my department, not counting two on administrative assignments. But these 16 make up only one-third of the UNF English faculty this fall, because there are 32 others: 3 instructors, 4 visiting faculty, and 25 (!) adjunct faculty. Do these sound like good proportions to you? In your program is a sentence that reads, "When Bizot was at Notre Dame he was one member of a 45-member literature faculty." That is true—and the total enrollment at Notre Dame in those days was about 8000. I do not have a formula for how many tenured and tenure-track English faculty there ought to be in a university with over 12,000 students—but I can tell you that 16 is a ridiculously low number.

Let me tell you what the professional organizations say about a department so constituted. In a landmark “Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing,” the Conference on College Composition and Communication condemned the creation of an “academic underclass” composed principally of college and university teachers of writing, who “work without job security, often without benefits, and for wages far below what their full-time colleagues are paid per course.” Such “working conditions undermine the capacities of teachers to teach and of students to learn. These conditions constitute a crisis in higher education, one which dramatically affects the public interest.” This “Statement of Principles and Standards” was published in October 1989; and in the decade since then many colleges and universities have taken significant steps to reform their exploitative and educationally unsound practices in the teaching of writing.

UNF has taken some steps itself. Surely the creation of the Writing Center is a good first step, and the appointment of Kathy Hassall as its Interim Director is a brilliant second step. It remains to be seen, however, what kind of support the university will give to the Center and its director.

Two years ago at the fall convocation Allen Tilley spoke eloquently about the need for us to reform our utilization and our treatment of adjunct faculty. This past March, the Committee on Adjunct Affairs, which Allen chaired, issued its report. There have been some small signs during these two years that the university may have the will to effect reform. Certainly, one gets the impression that key administrators (1) understand the problems and (2) are committed to making improvements. So far, however, few actual improvements have been made.

The UNF catalog claims that our academic programs “reflect UNF’s commitment to the highest intellectual and scholarly standards. Instructional quality is maintained by striving for relatively small classes.” Well, that is fine language and the sentiments are admirable; but we have a long way to go before any of that can be said with a straight face about UNF’s commitment to its writing program.

“Tell me what you like,” said John Ruskin, “and I’ll tell you what you are.” What we would like to think of our university is articulated in catalog copy. What we in fact value—what, in Ruskin’s terms, we are—tends to express itself silently, but far more candidly, in how we distribute resources. What does it say of our values that we entrust “the academy’s most serious mission” to an underclass of underpaid, overworked adjunct faculty? We pay most of our adjunct faculty \$1500 to teach writing for 15 weeks to 27 students, each required to write 6000 words. If they do their job conscientiously—and, God bless them, our adjunct faculty do!—what do you think that comes to, figured on an hourly basis? I have worked out the math, and it is less than minimum wage! We value their services less than McDonald’s values its lowest paid sweeper of floors. With values like that, what does that make us?

The conditions I have described were not created by our current academic administrators; they inherited those conditions. The conditions I have described are most assuredly not ones my department has ever approved. If time permitted, I could tell you what I know about how we got to where we are today, during the 15 years since we added a lower division to the university. I could say: here is where we went wrong, and here, and here. But perhaps it is just as well that I do not have time to do that. What we need most now is not to look back, except to be sure that we do not make the same mistakes again; the real need now is to look forward, to figure out how and at what rate to correct those mistakes.

The challenge of effecting reform is great; the need for effecting reform is greater still. Current academic administrators did not create the conditions I have described—the class sizes, the teaching loads, the over-dependence on adjunct faculty, the under-payment of adjunct faculty, the stunted growth of the tenure-track English faculty—but they will be judged according to whether or not they bring meaningful reform to the teaching of writing at UNF. We all have a stake in how well they meet this challenge.

Richard B. Bizot

1999 Distinguished Professor

Dr. Richard Bizot is the 22nd faculty member and 15th from the College of Arts and Sciences to receive the University of North Florida Distinguished Professor Award.

Bizot came to UNF in July of 1972 from the University of Notre Dame where he had taught for seven years. He became a professor at UNF in 1977 in the Department of

Language and Literature, now Department of English and Foreign Languages. Bizot was chairman of the department from 1984 to 1986 and graduate coordinator from 1992 to 1996. He is currently coordinator of UNF's Irish Studies Program.

Although Bizot was exposed to Irish heritage at Notre Dame, his interest in Irish Studies started even earlier. His master's thesis at the University of Virginia was on William Butler Yeats. He also received his Ph.D. in English from the University of Virginia. Most of Bizot's recent scholarly work also has been in the area of Irish Studies. In May he presented the fifth in a series of papers at the national meeting of the American Conference for Irish Studies. His papers have explored ways in which Irish literature has been politically, socially and culturally subversive. (He is President of the Southern region of the American Conference for Irish Studies and serves on its national Executive Committee.)

When Bizot was at Notre Dame he was one member of a 45-member literature faculty. When he first came to UNF, he was one of four literature faculty. He admits today that the experience made it possible for him to develop and teach a much wider variety of courses than would have been possible elsewhere. "Teaching at UNF has been wonderful for someone who loves to explore new subjects, connect diverse bodies of knowledge and develop courses and teaching methods for sharing such knowledge," he says.

In his teaching, he has always been fascinated with the relationships between literature and the other arts such as music, painting, sculpture, cinema and dance. Relationships between the arts are apparent in the Irish Studies Program. Bizot organized the John Francis Reilly Irish Studies Performance and Lecture Series in 1995. The program has been responsible for bringing some of Ireland's most noteworthy writers, artists and musicians to the UNF campus.

Bizot was last year's runner-up for the Distinguished Professor Award. He and his wife Joyce have two sons (Jack and Rick) and three grandsons (Ray, Ben and Sam).

