

Dr. Larry Beason's
Workshop for Freshman Composition, Fall 2006
University of South Alabama
16 August (Wednesday)

2:30-3:00 Dr. Moira Amado Miller
"Better Writers: How the Myth of the Perfect Teacher Can Sabatoge
Effective Writing Pedagogy"

.....**Not necessarily better writing**.....

- But isn't that what the rest of the university is expecting us to do?
YES – but that doesn't mean this happens in a semester or "even" two
YES – but we've got lots of, or should have, partners in this endeavor
YES – but what that means is that we help students become better writers
YES – but service courses are also expected to deliver much more

- So, what are the hallmarks of better writers?
BETTER WRITERS know what to ask. Mainly: the rhetorical context—
what's the purpose of the writing? who's going to read it? What is to come
before it and after it? What sort of effect do I want it to have?).
BETTER WRITERS know where to look for help (dictionaries,
thesauruses, style guides, textbooks, examples).
BETTER WRITERS know and employ the writing process.
BETTER WRITERS don't consider their writing an extension of their
souls, or at least not the *only* extension of their souls!
BETTER WRITERS know the tricks of the trade:
 - find good places to write (even when they change often or
occasionally)
 - start early
 - set writing aside for a week, and then pick it up to edit
 - have a, or a set of reliable readers
 - attack the work in "chunks" (sections)
 - understand the value, and even the philosophical
complications, of summarizing
 - don't think some folks "can just write;" it's all hard work

- Don't think you're the writing fairy, or Robin Williams, or Julia Roberts, or
whichever hero-teacher you most identify with! But it's not just these celluloid
characters we have to contend with, it's the little hero-teacher image we have
inside when we imagine ourselves in the classroom [perhaps even more distinctly
when you begin to deal with the postmodern, post-colonial, feminist contributions
to Composition Theory – where the social construction of the student and the text
becomes important to your thinking about what it means to write the world. But,
this, for another day].

- Composition theory tells us:
 - Since folks began writing histories of this profession, tracking the development of Composition Studies as a distinct discipline with its own research agendas, we know that there's really nothing different about the first year writers you'll have in your classes, and those enrolled at Harvard, Irvine, Johns Hopkins... [Brereton's your text here].
 - Writers can only absorb so many corrections at one time [Summer Smith – minimal marking].
 - Better readers make better writers.
 - Students emerge from the schools with very little idea of what will be expected of them as a university writer.
 - Students are learning a completely new *discourse* when they enter the scholarly community.
 - Students write better when they care about the material. [allow choice whenever possible].
 - WRITERS ONLY GET BETTER OVER TIME.

- If you do imagine yourself as a hero figure or as a fairy godmother:
 - You will be continually frustrated with repetitious errors (IDEA: keep a log in each student's file).
 - You'll think that your lot is peculiar to USA and completely untenable (IDEA: read the first chapters of Brereton.)
 - You won't know what to do when a really good writer comes along, and you think you can't help them (IDEA: LISTEN – find other writing from their course work that you can help with; be flexible).
 - You'll resist failing students because you'll see it as a sign of your own inadequacy. (IDEA: It's not such a horrible fate to have to retake it; some folks come in with a “try it out” sort of mode;
 - You'll not allow students to be architects of their own education, since you're supposed to have the market on all the good ideas (IDEA: Don't think you have the answer to every question; in fact, fake lack of knowledge sometimes; allow students to come up with their own “code of ethics” for peer review groups).
 - You'll think everything is a “skill” to be taught and absorbed, and will miss the fact that if students can't see a context, they can't learn to negotiate it. (IDEA: Prepare for the library visit – talk about scholarship – they have no idea what an “academic journal” even is, no matter if you say the words over and over, and more importantly, they don't know WHY academic journals!? IDEA: explain why summarizing is key – thinking is the “great summarizing act,” all of scholarship is summary in one way or another.

