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The Intricacies of English Studies

Who decides what constitutes good writing? How important is grammar? Whose job is it to teach writing? Questions such as these continuously circulate within the field of English Studies. With many different styles of writing, people have a difficult time nailing down exactly what the field of English Studies encompasses. Some initially view the field as literature and analysis with creativity sprinkled in if one has the abilities (which is where I sat for quite some time), while others see it as a complex interweaving of writing, literature, grammar, content, and the list continues. As I dive deeper into the English Studies and learn what the field entails, I am realizing that it is more than a complex web of ideas that somehow come together to make up a larger field. While it is intricate, English Studies includes information and skills which are vital for human communication and understanding. It is not just a field of study, but an insight into the interworking's of the human life, which depend highly on language, both verbal and written. In the following paragraphs, the relationships (and lack thereof) between Literature, Creativity, Second Language Studies (SLS), Rhetoric and Composition, and Professional Writing will be explored further to see both the similarities and contrasts that exist within the multifaceted field of English Studies.

Two areas of English Studies that commonly come to mind when pondering the field are creative writing and literature. Both are vital to English Studies and play important roles in laying foundations and developing writing skills. One major aspect that ties creative writing and

literature together is the importance of reading. Reading allows writers and readers to experience different styles of writing and exposes them to potentially unfamiliar works, which broadens the scope for authors and pushes them to write daringly. Additionally, to fully understand creative writing, one must also have a grasp on what literature is. Creativity seeps into the literature realm just as learning to analyze and critically think about different works of literature lends itself well to adventuring with creative writing. Creative writing and literature complement each other and push writers out of their comfort zones to experiment with new styles of writing.

Creative writing and literature do not just share commonalities; differences emerge as well. A major aspect of literature includes theories and criticisms such as new historicism, deconstruction, and many others. Instructors and writers often utilize such lenses to examine and analyze material. Contrastingly, a large debate in creative writing surrounds the best way to teach the subfield as a whole. Many different methods have been attempted including the inspiration method, the workshop method, and the techniques method. Some are more popular than others, but the goal in each is to push students to express creativity in their writing. Though I lay out two seemingly different matters within the two subfields, they correlate in the sense that both are concerned with how students learn about writing and important aspects within the field of English Studies. If proper instruction and tools are not given to students, they may not be well-equipped for writing and analyzing work. Thus, creative writing and literature, though different, offer students important skills and are vital areas within the field of English Studies.

A large debate regarding the importance of grammar and content is present in multiple subfields of English Studies. One major area in which grammar is contemplated lies in Second Language Studies (SLS). SLS programs are present at a vast array of schools both at the elementary and secondary levels as well as at colleges and universities. These programs are

designed to offer support for and assist students in learning and becoming well equipped in their second language, (which in the case of this essay and on the attached concept map, the second language referred to will be English). However, the notion that students are to become competent in a language brings up larger questions of societal conventions and who decides which components of English are important to teach. For students whom are learning a language, many question whether it is more important to focus on nailing down the mechanics, or if a higher priority should be placed on understanding and articulating the content. Robert Kaplan writes about the fallacy in assuming writers can write as effectively in their second language as they can in their first in his article *Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education*. He points out that a rise in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs has been seen at colleges throughout the country showing a need for working with ESL and SLS students. Kaplan also explains that these students do not necessarily write to the standards, which he states are societal conventions in themselves: “foreign students who have mastered syntactic structures have still demonstrated the inability to compose adequate themes, term papers, theses, and dissertations” (13). While some have the ability to write with proper grammar, others are able to effectively communicate the content of a piece. Regardless, instructors and learners are left to contemplate which is more important, or if one trumps the other, when thinking about effective writing.

The importance of grammar as well as the debate surrounding content are displayed through the concept map attached. Both literature and creative writing wrestle with similar issues about the emphasis on content and grammar within writing. Technical writers may also question societal conventions as they determine who their audience is. Especially when dealing with high-stakes material such as medical writing, it may be beneficial to conform to the conventions of the society in which the material will be released as well as to write with proper grammar to avoid

potentially harmful misunderstandings. Such arguments relate to a larger issue of appropriation, which is present especially in SLS programs, but also impact all areas of writing. Similar to the other subfields, technical writers may wrestle with who decides what content is important and how grammar fits into that in the context of audience. As like most debates, they are on-going and a solution has not been determined within any of the presented subfields, including SLS and ELS programs, and it appears to be an issue that will cause struggle for years to come.

The field of English Studies is in seemingly constant motion, which is present in all subfields. Nothing remains stationary, but instead brings up debates, issues, and developments. A matter that arises from teaching English are the questions of what the standards are and who decides them. As mentioned earlier, Kaplan points out that all writing standards are conventions created by society. These ideals are then enforced by those in the working and teaching world and instilled in young writers. However, as can be seen in all subfields and disciplines, conventions are not necessarily a good or helpful tool. Instead, they may hinder students' ability to express themselves. Tying it back to creative writing, worrying about the mechanics of a piece may leave little room for movement or creativity, which then limits the freedom of the brain. Countering the argument that conventions can be harmful is Kessler and MacDonald who say that students must know the rules before they can break them in chapter two of their book. They stress that grammar and conventions are important, but once writers have a firm foundation, they can stray from the standard and add in their own creative flare (17). Their stance implies that regardless of societal conventions or not, grammar is fundamental to good writing. The degree to which others view this as important varies from subject to subject, and causes people to contemplate audience before starting a piece.

In order to help students develop and improve their writing, programs have been implemented at many colleges and universities. Such programs are called Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). These fall into the category of rhetoric and composition, another branch of English studies that is focused on writing instruction and research. WAC programs look different based on the structure of the English department as well as the school as a whole, but each have a similar goal in mind: portray writing as a tool for learning rather than simply a wrap-up assignment. Condon and Rutz describe four different stages of WAC programs. The criteria they put forth deals with funding, organization, goals and the like (362). The final stage entails writing becoming an institutional change agent and an integral part of the university. Connecting this back to English Studies, some see it as vital that students learn to write well during their college years so they are ready for their future career, whether that be working directly with writing or pursuing another focus. Again, an issue arises regarding what does it mean to write well and who decided the standards. Additionally, are said standards different for SLS students than they are for students writing in their first language? Such questions bring in another debate within the field of English Studies and demonstrate both the connectedness of the subfields, as well as the divide that emerges if said standards are different. Regardless, WAC programs attempt to teach as they see fit for the students they reach, which once again brings up the reality of audience. Not only is audience important in the writing itself, but also during instruction. WAC programs look at writing from an administrative lens and contemplate the many different facets writing and English Studies as a whole. When executed well, such programs can be vital in developing the writing skills and mindset for students so they have the tools to succeed in other areas of writing and professional work.

Professional writing is often seen as a mundane activity for people who do not like much action. However, the reality of professional writing is much different. Unlike some of the other forms of writing, professional writing tends to be high stakes. This type of writing often includes giving directions, whether that be for a medical professional or another person. The information given must be clear and understandable so that readers can comprehend the directions or goal of the piece and how to interact with it. Professional writing also tends to be more structured than other forms of writing, which coincides with its higher stakes. Contrasting ELL writers, professional writers often have more control over their word choice. Because much of what they write goes out to a diverse and sometimes unfamiliar audience, it is important for their work to sound professional and intelligent.

Despite the difference in grammatical conventions, professional writing and SLS share a major commonality: the issue of social justice. For teachers working with ELL students, it is important to consider what is just when conversing with someone or about something in your class. The question of justice can present itself in several forms including the organizational strategies instructors use when placing students in groups or classes. Often ESL students are clumped together, which may not serve each individual's needs in the best way. In turn, students can be deprived of the opportunity to master all areas of a language because their needs do not match those of their classmates. Social justice comes into play when people begin thinking about why the information that is being taught, is taught. Is one area emphasized over another to prepare for the working world, or is one pushed in order to truly to grow in competency? Within professional writing, social justice becomes a concern when the audience is questioned. Godwin Agboka shared an example in his article *Participatory Localization: A Social Justice Approach to Navigating Unenfranchised/Disenfranchised Cultural Sites* about the necessary steps that need

to be taken when a product with writing on it is shipped to a non-English speaking country. Questions arise regarding who is responsible for the translation. After explaining the general difficulties users experienced, Agboka states in his article, “the original documentation satisfied some of the legal requirements for labeling foreign products, but it missed key information as well, that potentially presented usability challenges for users” (37). Agboka states that some of the necessary information was lost in translation, out of context, or unreadable (38). Not only were users presented with information that was confusing, but it had the potential to impact them on a personal level, which shows how writing can have a tremendous impact and create debates regarding social justice. Both ESL writers and professional writers are often asked to question the justice of a situation, and consider how their writing or teaching will affect the audience.

The different organizational techniques call to mind the ways used within the creative writing subfield, and a similar topic is present in the other four subfields as well. Many consider how students should be arranged within the classroom itself: who should sit with who, what students will push the others to improve their skills, as well as how written work should be organized. Within creative writing, instructors explore how to group the students in order for them to help them get the most out of their writing experience. One such way is to put together writing communities, or small groups of people who focus on giving feedback and improving their writing skills and those of their group-mates. From a rhetoric and composition stance, WAC and English program directors explore how to present their information and which strategies they desire to implement in order to do so. As previously stated, such programs look different depending on the environment of the school, so those in administrative positions need to determine how to organize their programs to meet their students’ needs. From a professional writing standpoint, it is important to consider how organization can affect the outcome of a

piece. Many aspects come into play when considering organization within writing itself such as word choice, sentence structure, and numerous other factors. Again, the continuous interweaving of English Studies is present as organization also brings up the question of audience, which has come up several other times throughout the course of this essay. Organization within the classroom or environment, as well as in the writing itself are important factors in the outcome of a piece.

Writers can benefit tremendously from being in community with and relying on others to assist them in their writing. As mentioned above, organization can cause instructors to develop writing communities or put together groups of writers who will assist and push each other. Thus, they welcome a community aspect into their program, classroom, or environment. When considering professional writing, community does not appear to be a major factor in the field. However, it is extremely beneficial for professional writers to work with each other, and to be in community with other members within the workspace. By surrounding themselves with both writers and co-workers, professional writers can gather a ideas regarding what the environment feels like and how to tailor writing within the context of said environment, which again corresponds to the audience. For those in literature, being in a communal setting can cause writers and analyzers to feed off of and learn from one another in order to gain new insight into a text. Community settings are beneficial because they expose people to new ideas, ways of looking at a piece, and how different authors write, which can improve the writing of an individual. They also offer support for writers and encourage them in their writing skills and ability.

The field of English Studies is a complex web, which can be seen by the intricate concept map attached. The visual does not illustrate the extent to which English Studies is an

interweaving area of study, but it is a feeble attempt to demonstrate just how complex the field can be. From content versus grammar and organization skills to gaining new insight through reading and community, English Studies is a field of movement and teaches vital skills that penetrate an abundance of areas and pushes individuals to grasp the value and power of language.

