

## PAIRING ENGLISH COMPOSITION WITH WORLD HISTORY

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The growing emphasis on what is called "writing across the curriculum" encouraged several of us at Kennesaw State College to experiment with the pairing of History 112, the second part of World Civilizations (1650 to the Present), and English 101, the first basic composition course. This attempt resulted in what might be the subtitle of this paper: "How to get more work out of the students without increasing the course requirements." The ideas covered in this paper are divided into three sections. First, practical aspects such as the dreaded Registrar's office, scheduling, and other things faculty members like to ignore. Second, what might be called the philosophical and pedagogical reasons for combining the two courses. And finally, how all of this is implemented in the classroom.

### The Practical Aspects

The pairing of English composition and the second part of the History of World Civilizations means exactly that. Our survey history sections traditionally have fifty students while the normal English composition course contains only twenty-four. Thus, we match one History 112 survey with two English 101 sections. The two English classes meet during the same time period--in our case Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 9:20-10:45. The professors determine whether they want their classes to meet separately or jointly. Usually they meet together when discussing a novel, other common requirements, or basic ideas. Joint class meetings occur when one of the English professors needs to be absent for whatever reason. I try to attend all combined English sessions. The history course meets immediately following the English classes. It lasts from 11:00 to 12:25.

Our campus contains a number of rooms separated by moveable partitions. These "walls" are "folded in" for the combined English classes and my history course. They are "put back up" when the English classes meet separately. This insures that one of our goals is accomplished. All three classes meet in the same location. To keep the students alert, we have been known to switch times--history meeting first and then English.

This type effort requires close cooperation between the Departments of English and History and, of course, the Registrar's Office. Students who take either of the two English courses are required to enroll in my "paired" section of History 112 and vice versa. This demands careful monitoring of scheduling, room assignments, and students during the registration process. The idea that

you must take the "paired" courses the same quarter is further emphasized by requiring any student who wishes to drop one of the "paired" classes to withdraw from both of them. The most important administrative factor involved in this project is to make it clear to the students that they are dealing with courses which *must* be taken and completed the same quarter.

### The Philosophical Aspect

It is generally accepted that one of the most effective ways to remember something is to transfer it from mind to paper. For that reason, I use short identifications and longer discussion or essay type questions on my tests. But in a freshman/sophomore class, you get many different levels of writing skills. In fact, while remedial reading students are not allowed in introductory history courses, remedial writing students are. Since no one is allowed to be remedial in reading or writing when taking English 101, this problem is eliminated in my "paired" history course.

English composition teaches exposition, summary, critique, description, and attempts to develop effective writing with clear central ideas, good organization, coherence, and unity. In essence, it tries to impart all those things we hope a student will know, but which they are frequently unfamiliar with. As the quarter progresses, skills learned in the composition class are reflected in the student's performance in my history course. Their writing is better, their thoughts clearer, and they are better able to understand what they are reading and learning.

A logical question here is what benefit can this possibly be to a course in composition? The answer is that it gives the English classes substantive material to use for essays and other written assignments rather than having to depend on "what I did on summer vacation" or trying to understand a novel without knowing its historical context. Other disciplines can also be paired with English. For example, we also have been successful in pairing biology with English composition.

### How the "Pairing" System Works

Our composition courses usually require that four to six papers be written during the quarter. These projects are designed to teach writing skills, the use of sources, familiarity with the library, and other capabilities. Fiction frequently provides the content for these papers. Working together my English colleagues and I have selected three novels which are very effective in both English 101 and History 112. An examination of each work shows how it relates to my history course.

History 112 starts with the Ages of Absolutism and the Enlightenment in Europe so the first novel used is Voltaire's *Candide*. Once the basic historical background is explained, *Candide* is great fun and gives an easily understood view of Voltaire's ideas and of the age itself. Think how effective the following passage is in explaining the Enlightenment view of organized religion:

The University of Coimbra had pronounced that the sight of a few people ceremoniously burned alive before a slow fire was an infallible prescription for preventing earthquakes; so when the earthquake had subsided after destroying three-quarters of Lisbon the authorities of that country could find no surer means of avoiding total ruin than by giving the people a magnificent auto-da-fe'.<sup>1</sup>

There is no question that discussing the novel in the English class while simultaneously examining the Enlightenment period in the history course gives the students a much better picture of the age.

The second novel requires more explanation because we use it to demonstrate the many different sources a person can use in the study of history and it reflects one of my major interests which is military history. The book is Erich Marie Remarque's anti-war novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It tells an excellent story, gives a good picture of the "other side" in World War I, and shows an aspect of combat difficult to depict in the classroom.

This section consists of lectures on military history, terminology and method, the military structures of the warring powers, and an overview of the western front including subjects like trenches, barbed wire, machine guns, and airplanes. The student's knowledge is then expanded by reading and discussing *All Quiet on the Western Front*. To add further understanding and introduce students to a historical source not usually viewed as such, we give the class a collection of World War I poems such as "I have a Rendezvous with Death" and Wilfred Owen's magnificent "Dulce et Decorum Est" which ends with these lines: "The Old Lie: Dulce et Decorum Est/Pro patria mori." This Latin quotation from the Roman poet Horace is used by the school teacher in *All Quiet on the Western Front* to persuade Paul and his friends to join the army. As another example, compare these two very different samples of World War I poetry:

A Mademoiselle from Armentieres  
Sold herself for souvenirs  
Hinky, dinky, Par-lez-vous<sup>2</sup>

and

"Good morning; good morning!" the General said  
When we met him last week on our way to the line.  
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead  
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.  
"He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack  
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.  
But he did for them both with his plan of attack.<sup>3</sup>

We conclude this section with a piece of 20th century culture usable as a historical tool. The students watch the 1930 academy award winning film, "All Quiet on the Western Front." Only in film can some ideas be demonstrated as, for example, the scene when the German trench is invaded by thousands of rats many of which the troops beat to death with their rifle butts. This is followed by a scene when the German trench is invaded by British soldiers many of whom the troops also beat to death with their rifle butts. Should we have time, I also like to show the documentary, "The Guns of August," because it covers the royal families, society, and the war. I should mention that several quarters ago we found an unexpected problem with film. One student was talking to the English professor after we had watched a film and, when asked what it was about, responded: "I don't know, it was in black and white."

The key to this part of my course is not so much that students gain a detailed knowledge of World War I as it is that they realize historical study can use many different sources some of which are normally associated with other disciplines. Of course, a deeper study of the war also encourages an increased interest in history among the military "buffs" such as R.O.T.C. students. As a matter of fact, my military history classes have picked up a number of students this way.

The last part of the combined reading we use is related to imperialism and the third world. Our first choice and one we still use is *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya, an Indian author. This has the dual result of introducing a non-western and a non-male writer to the class. Last term we tried Joseph Conrad's, *Heart of Darkness*. It is a great novel with an excellent depiction of Social Darwinism and the moral degeneration that can result, but the author is western so we are not using it this quarter. Instead, this quarter we are trying *The River Between* by Ngugi wa Thiang'o, an African. One of my English colleagues likes it because the book discusses strange tribal and sexual practices. My other partner in this undertaking is using Markandaya and

we hope that a combined discussion on the two novels will give the students the best of both. Going against tradition in most English courses, we will use the third novel to introduce students to non-western writers and non-western ideas.

We have tried different types of finals as another method of tying our two courses together. One technique is to grade the final test essay in the history course and return it to the students. They then expand and develop it for the English final. This method requires that the students take the history final before they take the English final and it also demands some fast grading on the history instructor's part. I am indebted to my English colleagues for the second method and think it is probably better. In it, the English students are given theme topics which relate to information they have covered in my history course. The following are examples of essay topics that can be used on the English final:

1. To what extent is *Candide* a typical product of the Enlightenment?
2. Consider the views on World War I and its origins expressed by some of the characters in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Discuss these attitudes in light of what you know about the war and its causes.

### Conclusions

A number of key points must be kept in mind for anyone planning to pair English and history courses as we have at Kennesaw. (1) There must be close cooperation between the English and History Departments and the Registrar's Office. (2) The faculty involved must pre-plan and work closely together. (3) A paired course does increase the workload by approximately one-third. The history and English faculty must attend each other's classes. (4) The students must understand from the beginning that the courses are combined; they cannot be taken or treated separately.

We have not been able to do a reliable study on how this method of teaching influences students' grades. In fact, such a study may be impossible. However, a few inferences can be drawn. The amount of historical knowledge students acquire seems to be what I would normally expect in a traditional class. At the same time, I suspect their depth of knowledge and long term retention are better. Student writing skills are improved enough to raise their grades slightly. My feeling is that my charges' performance is enhanced about half a letter grade in most of the history classes. Many of the students who have

taken these courses can probably be classified as average if there is such a thing "as an average student." So the improvement is worthwhile.

Evaluations suggest that most of the people who have taken the paired sequence enjoy this type of course structure, although students over the traditional age seem to be the most responsive. There is some discussion of using this format for honors courses, but this has not happened yet.

All of this leads to the primary reason why we have continued the program and why I consider it to have the greatest value. How many times have you heard the statement: "I thought this was a history class not an English course." The pairing approach has demonstrated clearly that courses and disciplines are interrelated. They don't exist in a vacuum, although I should indicate we are careful to maintain discipline integrity. If we can make students appreciate the relationships between the various academic disciplines, the entire program is worthwhile.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Voltaire, *Candide*, (Penguin Books, New York, N.Y.: 1984), p. 36

<sup>2</sup>This was a favorite World War I song and probably had more verses than any other song ever developed.

<sup>3</sup>This masterpiece of a short satirical poem was written by Siegfried Sassons.