To C or Not to C?: Connections between Culture and Composition  
By Danielle McWhorter

As an avid reader of books, listener of music, viewer of television, and teacher of writing, I frequently see connections between composition class and life. I see writing as a necessary skill set that all should have, but my students see composition as just another hurdle to cross while sprinting to their chosen degree. I try to make the connections for them, but I constantly hear the phrase “I hate writing.” I have tried to incorporate popular culture as a vehicle for the connection between composition as a skill of language and something in which they are familiar. Words like “analyze” or “critical thinking” belong to a foreign language for most of my students, so I attempt to use pop culture to bridge the gap and make them realize that these are skills they use on a daily basis.

I wonder, at times, if by using this non-academic avenue, I am diluting the essence of what it is to be an academic. I can balance my guilty pleasure of South Park and defend it with a scholarly argument on cultural relevance, but are my students making an academic connection? Or do they simply think Mrs. McWhorter’s class is fun because she quotes Family Guy, completely missing its relevance to analytical and critical thought? I understand that incorporating pop culture for some is unpopular because at times it can be a distraction in the classroom, but I hypothesize this problem may occur because it is so rare for a student to hear something like a reference to Family Guy in a class. This reaction will only dissipate if we gradually incorporate popular culture references into our lessons.

What do academics do when they are struggling with a concept or a question like incorporating pop culture into academia? We consult other scholars through research. I found an article...
entitled “Too Cool for School? Composition as Cultural Studies and Reflective Practice” by Christine Farris. Farris dissolves the worries of dilution and disruption by laying out an argument for the use of popular culture in the composition classroom. She discusses the benefits of incorporating familiar materials with that of the unfamiliar composition class to gain a level playing field for new scholars: “Our use of popular media as primary texts has leveled the playing field for analysis at the same time that our use of essays about popular culture as critical lenses has made it possible for our students to try on the moves of academic and professional discourse.” This article is helpful because it gives credence to the idea that through the familiar, pop-culture, I can connect otherwise abstract theories to something relevant and understandable.

Farris also discusses the problematic nature of this forward thinking because it deviates from the canon. However, I believe that, with the new trend in cultural studies as part of graduate school, the transition to incorporate pop culture is becoming less difficult because the “live and die by the canon” attitude is becoming less dominant.

Recently, I had the task of teaching logical fallacies, which can be incredibly difficult due to their abstract definitions, mirrored meanings, and not to mention Latin titles. I decided I would experiment with pop-culture as a tool to teach the concepts of logical fallacies. I used a number of pop-culture references; I began with the definition of logic and argument through the “witch argument” from the film Monty Python and the Holy Grail, followed by a slew of quotes from South Park, Family Guy, Twitter, and Facebook to teach the fallacies. To my chagrin, I grossly overestimated the contemporaneity of Monty Python, but my students still seemed to understand the importance of stacking individual logical statements to create an argument that is both valid and sound. After our fallacy discussion using different modes of pop culture, the true victory occurred when my students were able to detect fallacies in an article from their textbook. I count this as a win, because in previous semesters, after covering fallacies with a more traditional approach, my more pointed students grasped the concepts but other students could not bridge the gap between the abstract concept and the concrete use. By using popular culture, in this instance, I was able to reach a larger number of students.

It seems to be successful in teaching composition, with most of their communication happening over the internet or cell phone, it is crucial to keep composition less archaic by bringing it in to the modern constructs of pop culture and technology. It is interesting that we are in a kind of composition renaissance with blogging, tweeting, text
Getting to Know Libby Jones  
By Matt Crutchfield

Libby Jones was recently awarded the Teaching Excellence Award for Part-Time Teachers, which recognizes the contributions of part-time instructors, particularly in regards to teaching composition.

Libby was born and raised in Mobile, Alabama and remained in the area throughout her undergraduate and graduate degrees. She graduated with her Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in English from the University of South Alabama. Though Libby taught numerous workshops while working in the University Library at South Alabama, she began her teaching career as a doctoral student at Auburn University. This experience led to her involvement at South, where she currently teaches composition and literature survey courses.

In her seven years of experience as a classroom instructor, Libby has noticed certain challenges facing freshman composition students, primarily a tendency to remain in a high school mindset that expects authority figures to make decisions for the student. This dependency often limits students’ personal responsibility and minimizes their initiative to learn. In order to combat these mental habits, Libby urges students to develop an “intellectual curiosity” that will compel them to pursue a personal interest in their education, rather than remaining passive in the learning process.

She also encourages students to see the strong connection between composition skills and professional habits, telling her students, “You are developing skills that will enhance your professional ability to compete in the workplace.” Libby uses her extensive experience in technical writing to demonstrate the necessity for clear, concise language. This prior knowledge offers “a professional perspective on writing” that connects with students and shows them the application of unfamiliar concepts to familiar, professional objectives.

Though firm in her beliefs regarding the importance of composition skills, Libby remains patient with students new to the college experience, which can often be intimidating for them. Libby has observed that many students share a fear of writing itself, the terror of “the blank screen,” and she addresses this fear through “a safety net in the form of risk-free writing assignments.” These assignments emphasize the process of writing and the necessity of practice.

In addition to teaching, Libby is currently working on her dissertation entitled, “Reading Renaissance: The Invisible Other as Modern Muse in the Works of John Millington Synge and Jean Toomer.” The project examines the impact of imperialism on the Irish and African American cultures and their resulting literary revivals.

Continued on page 5
Meet Mary Murphy  By Jamie Poole

Mary Murphy loves her job, and it shows. She is often seen walking the English department halls with a smile and a coffee cup. What’s her secret to enthusiasm after over twelve years of teaching English Composition? “I just love what I do,” she explains during an early morning interview between classes. “Helping students reach their goals is important to me.”

Her answers are not unique. We all start the semester with the same ideals, but what about now, just weeks before the semester ends. “How do you address the complacent student? The one who isn’t coming to class or reaching his or her potential?”

“I ask them ‘Why’?” Murphy explains matter-of-factly. “Often just asking them is enough. There’s something about having them put into words the reason why they’re failing that is enough for them to realize that they could and should do more. I don’t talk. I just listen. Truly listen, without judgment, and basically in their explanation they end up saying that they’ll do better. They don’t always do, but sometimes verbalizing things is the first step to improvement.”

Listening, truly listening to students. An idea that we all know but sometimes forget. I recently read an article where a college professor states, “Just because teachers say something at the front of the room doesn’t mean that students learn.” The article pushes professors to look beyond the traditional lecture style teaching. How does Mary Murphy look beyond the lecture to create student interaction? “I ask questions and have them find the answers. They work in groups or work alone. Whatever gets them thinking.”

It’s no longer about standing in front of the room, giving students answers that you’ll look for later on a test, if it ever was about that. But how do you motivate students to look beyond the obvious or “wallow in complexity” as the Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing describes? Murphy says the key is to “get them to talk and get them to think. It’s important for students to know that it’s okay to be uncertain about a topic. In fact, that’s a good thing. Certainty is earned through lots of research. Thinking is the goal, not certainty.”

If thinking is the goal then Murphy has lead by example. “I love literature, especially American Literature.” Indeed she does. She received her undergraduate degree in English from the University of South Alabama and then went on to receive her Masters from the University of Southern Mississippi where she wrote her thesis on women and war, focusing on American author Marge Piercy.

Teaching by example, Murphy is a deep thinker and a writer. Her writing has won her several awards and public recognition, including a poetry reading at the Library of Congress. She has authored a book of poetry published by Negative Capabilities due out this summer. “The book deals with my mom’s battle with Alzheimer’s, among other things. It’s a book of bravery and determination, and touches topics universal to everyone.”

She will hold several book readings and signings this fall at local bookstores and libraries. You can pick up a copy directly from her or meet her there. You can also find her at many of the local writers groups around Mobile. Writing is an integral part of her life, a notion she passes on to her students.

“So how do you tie it all together, Mary? In what ways do you see a connection between the type of writing you’ve done and being a teacher of composition?”

“Well, for one,” she states, half smiling, “I realized that computers really do break.”

“So, don’t be too harsh on others?”

“I’m not saying that. I’m just saying plan ahead.”

“You were named after Murphy’s Law?”

“Something like that.”

“And what’s the second thing you learned?”

“You’re never done revising. I’ve been telling my students that for years, but it’s true. I’ve revised my book for months, and I could keep on revising if I didn’t have a publisher with a deadline.”

Speaking of deadlines, Murphy checks her watch, ready to dash off to an appointment with a student. When I ask her if she has any last words of advice, she says, “No advice, but I’ll leave you with the thing I always leave my students with. I tell them that they are
A Service-Learning Project for 9-11

This fall, Karen Peterson’s EH 102 students are covering the university’s common-read book, *Half the Sky*. While exploring the issue of gender inequality, they have written and discussed the topic as it relates to many different countries. They then determined which issues they wanted to focus on for their project for 9-11 National Day of Service and Remembrance and the kick-off for the common read program. Their prompt for their presentation project was twofold: (1) argue that the issue was an important one their peers needed to be aware of, and (2) show their that they should read *Half the Sky*. The students used both visual and written rhetoric to make their arguments. The teams prepared tri fold displays with visual and written rhetoric. They all had to be prepared to use spoken rhetoric as well to present their arguments to their peers, faculty, and staff who visited the displays. They set up their displays in the atrium of the Student Center where they received a large number of visitors on 9-11.

Service-learning and civic engagement can be a valuable learning initiative for Freshman Composition classes. In spring, students could research the issue of higher education funding from the state legislature. Then the class can go on an all-expense paid trip to Montgomery for Higher Education Day and eat lunch and meet with their state legislators. When students return, they can write an argument letter to their representative arguing for a fair share of the Education Budget for their university. This trip is also a university excused absence for classes that students miss.

Jones Continued:

to get started on a paper and try to convince them that it is rewarding to work on multiple drafts to produce polished work.” Showing students that she is also “immersed in the research process” helps her relate the necessary skills in a genuine and relatable manner.

Scholarly work is not the only experience Libby integrates into the classroom. When not otherwise occupied with academic or professional pursuits, Libby practices the traditional Korean martial art, Soo Bahk Do, in which she is a second-degree dan member. She applies strategies from this training to her role as an instructor, particularly the emphasis on movement from “unconscious incompetence” toward “unconscious competence.” This spectrum relates to the level of awareness regarding personal ability. On one end of the spectrum, the individual remains unaware of his or her weaknesses in a certain skill, while on the other end the individual has achieved such proficiency that success becomes second nature. Libby explains these terms in the classroom in order “to encourage students to think about where they fall on this continuum where their writing is concerned.” She uses this form of self-evaluation at the beginning and end of the semester to allow students to recognize progress and accept responsibility for their success or failure. This acceptance of personal responsibility is another aspect of Soo Bahk Do that Libby brings into the classroom. The inherent discipline in this form of martial arts serves as an effective model for student’s ownership and the role of discipline in achieving personal goals: “I find that freshmen in particular need to be reminded that their success or failure is almost entirely in their hands.”

In those rare moments when she is not working on her dissertation, teaching composition, or practicing martial arts, Libby enjoys reading for pleasure and walking. She loves teaching, and through all of her hard work as an instructor, Libby appreciates the tangible rewards of the profession. One of the most encouraging for her is “when students work hard and reap the rewards of that hard work.”

If there is one thing learned in a conversation with Libby, it is the knowledge that she is quite familiar with hard work and acknowledges her rewards on a daily basis. The English Department is fortunate to employ many incredible part-time instructors, and Libby Jones is