

INTERCHANGE

Kenneth Risdon, University of Minnesota - Duluth responds to Garvin Davenport, "Technical Writing and Liberal Arts" Risdon teaches technical writing at UMD.

In "Technical Writing and Liberal Arts" Garvin Davenport explains what he learned while teaching technical writing and how the cooperation displayed while teaching technical writing helped make a curriculum-wide writing program successful. Basically he discovered that faculty from other departments strongly support teachers of writing and are willing to help and want to be helped in using writing in their classes. However, in order for faculty outside the English Department to be willing to help and be helped, they must be approached with an attitude that seems to have been rare in too many English departments. As Davenport points out, the physics department etc. need to be approached with a willingness to learn. If English faculty go to another department and tell the faculty there what good writing is, the advice will most likely be rejected. What the non-English faculty need to know is how to help their students produce writing that is considered good scientific or technical writing. I have worked with many faculty who don't know what to do when they have students who don't "write well," but I have never had a faculty member tell me that he or she didn't know what good writing is. Unfortunately, what an English teacher considers "good writing" or "bad writing" is not judged the same way by faculty in the sciences. When given two versions of a biology report and asked to pick

the better one, about 125 out of a group of 150 English faculty from across the U.S. picked the version that the biology faculty thought was the inferior report. The group was appropriately embarrassed that few of them knew what scientists considered good writing. They were surprised that it was not what freshman comp texts present as good writing. More English faculty need to join in the type of cooperative effort

Davenport describes. It is one of the better ways to learn about scientific writers.

In his discussion of the usefulness of his association with scientists, Davenport says that he had disassociated himself from the English Department and freshman comp. That such separation is often necessary is a sad comment on the state of the profession. If the faculty in a college or university is so suspicious of freshman composition that to work with them one has to "break" with English and freshman composition, the freshman composition program needs some serious revision. Freshman composition and curriculum-wide writing programs should not be separable; one should support the other. Freshman composition should teach the basics--a sensible writing process, organization, development, outline awareness, levels of formality, etc.--that specialized technical and professional writing courses can build on. If freshman are made aware that they will be expected to use what they learn in freshman composition in courses in their major, they will take freshman composition more seriously. It will be easier to teach and students will learn more.

Davenport's article has an important message, but we have

a long way to go. I'm waiting for the excitement that will be generated when more English departments discover business communication and the school of business.

A MEMORANDUM TO THOSE WHO CHOOSE APPROPRIATE
AFTER DINNER SPEAKERS

TO: MCTE Spring Conference Speaker Selection Committee
FROM: J. Rylander, MCTE Member and 1981 Spring Conference
Banquet Attendee
SUBJECT: Selection of Appropriate Speakers for After Dinner Speeches

In past years at MCTE Spring Conferences, I have often been entertained and enriched by the after dinner addresses. Two such occasions are still alive and lovely in my memory.

The first of these is an after dinner talk by the Elizabethan scholar, Dr. Daniel Fader, author of Hooked on Books. As he spoke to us of the need to love our students, to cherish their uniqueness while encouraging them toward literacy and the fulfillment of their human potential, Dr. Fader made each of us in the audience of 500 or so feel as though he were speaking to us alone, individually. The man and his message were uplifting, challenging and enlightening. The quality of education in Minnesota was enhanced that day.

The other really marvelous MCTE Banquet Speech embedded in my memory is one delivered by the fine contemporary poet, Robert Hayden, in the ballroom of the old Hotel Duluth. As he read his poems and commented on them and his art, all of us in his large audience developed deeper insights into the craft of the artist and the crucible of life from which art is crafted. The poem--those black marks on white paper--gained a

voice, a face, a life--and we were inspired to try to make literature live in our classrooms as it lived for us that evening.

And that brings me to May 1981 and the Hotel de France. I'm glad I have those two exceptionally good memories. I need them as a counterbalance to the fiasco perpetrated by Richard Mitchell, the banquet speaker for our 1981 Spring Conference. Mr. Mitchell, noted for his newsletter, "The Underground Grammarians," proved during his overlengthy performance that he is a master of the underhanded insult, the gratuitous low blow. He also demonstrated his adeptness at setting afire strawmen of his own devising and at belaboring the obvious. His attempts at satire were merely venomous, not instructive. He pilloried a fellow scholar for the pretentiousness of his prose--and certainly the passage adduced was horrible--though the twenty minutes devoted to the attack on both the prose and its author was out of any semblance of proportion of propriety.

And all of this was done in the name of "literacy!" But any encouragement for us to coax, to nudge, to propel ourselves, our colleagues and our students toward greater literacy was buried under this Don Rickles of Academia's avalanche of invective, his miasma of example and metaphor.

So what do we need and deserve from our MCTE Conference Speakers? Truth, of course--but truth tempered with human understanding and compassion. Encouragement, surely--so that we might return to our schools and our classes renewed and rededicated to the difficult job before us. Pettiness and meanness, never. Spare us that in the selection of speakers.

ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

Alice Glarden Brand (8001 Natural Bridge Road St. Louis MO 63121) is an Assistant Professor of English committed to teaching writing. "She has an abiding belief in the power in finding one's own written voice." She would like readers to respond to her thoughts directly or through "Interchange."

Miles Canning (14445 Diamond Path Lane, Rosemount, MN. 55068) admires the reading diagnostician's ability to place children's achieved ability. He's completed his own "writing scales," although they are not yet "bug-free." Canning would like to hear from persons with computer knowledge who might assist him or from persons who have writing assessment systems currently in use.

Geraldine Giebel Chavis (The College of St. Catherine, Saint Paul, Minnesota) has long been interested in interdisciplinary approaches to "literature, psychology, and sociology." She would like to hear from persons who teach courses similar to hers on Aging and Literature or who have experimented with courses involving the three fields noted here.

Darryl Hattenhauer (University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, General College, Nicholson Hall) is a student of cultural history wth a speciality in Rhetoric. He is interested in the "influence of intellectual history on social, political and economic policy."

Joseph Miller (Box 144, Moorhead State University, Moorhead MN 56560) first wrote about the evaluation of Freshman Composition in his Ph.D. (1958) dissertation. He is still attempting to discover what the effects of Freshman Comp. are

on the students and would be interested in hearing from persons engaged in similar studies.

Nancy Hood Stone (1501 Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis, MN. 55403) is a practicing journalist as well as a teacher. She has been a single parent for many years, one reason money outranks, at times, her love of teaching. She would like to hear from kindred spirits who fight battles similar to her own.

Steve Swanson (St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN 55057) would like further suggestions for a Freshman reading list.

Martin C. Wiltgen (Mankato West High School, Mankato, MN.) would like information which might contribute to an understanding of "the motives of a grass roots level of censorship," and accounts of specific instances of censorship carried out in a surreptitious manner.

Nancy Ward (19016 Radford Road, Minnetonka, MN 55343) a certified ESL instructor in the Minnetonka district, would like to know how you handle foreign students in your classroom.