The Moral Subject in College Composition: A Conceptual Framework and the Case of Harvard, 1865-1900

David A. Jolliffe


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It seems well-nigh impossible for most Freshmen to begin a piece of writing at the beginning, and to end at the end; they must rather have an explanatory prologue and a moralizing, interpreting epilogue.

Copeland and Rideout

*Freshman English and Theme-Correcting in Harvard College*

I am curious about the subject matters writers choose to write about, especially college and university students in writing courses not formally linked to any specific content area—the courses, in other words, that most students are required to take and that usually fall under the rubrics of general composition, expository writing, basic communication, and so on. When I see that students in different sections of the same general composition course at a university can and do write about such diverse topics as "How to Choose an Ideal Pet" and "The Philosophical Assumptions of the Federalist Papers," I have to ask myself, "Now why do you suppose a student would want to write about that?" Or, better yet, "Why do you suppose an instructor would assign such a topic?"

In particular, as I examine students' topics in college writing classes, I am intrigued by the presence—in some cases, the dominance—of a kind of moralizing: either explicitly or by suggestion, students are frequently urged to choose as their subject matter some aspect of contemporary manners or morals, to try to construct some ideological system to account for the phenomenon, and often to urge upon their readers a sense of what they see as their moral obligation for dealing with the issue at hand.

Last year, I asked a number of acquaintances around the country who teach college composition to send me representative topics that students write about in their classes. About forty-five people responded. With this admittedly limited sample, I discovered something my experience had led me to suspect—that college composition is often a course in contemporary ethics. One instructor at a major public university in the Midwest asked students to write their final essays on the topic, "How do you account for love?" At a state university in the

David A. Jolliffe is Director of Composition at the University of Illinois at Chicago and editor of *Advances in Writing Research, Volume 2: Writing in Academic Disciplines* (Ablex, 1988).

*College English, Volume 51, Number 2, February 1989*
Southwest, students were invited to write about the following: "What do you think are the personality qualities needed for survival in today’s world?" Students at an east coast university were asked to write about "What Makes People Happy in the 1980’s?", and at a major private university in the Rockies, students were given the topics, "Hypocrisy Goeth Before a Fall" and "Relate a personal experience that taught you an important moral law." These topics suggest to me at least an invitation, if not a mandate, for students to observe the manners of the world and to turn from their observations to the task of shaping their fellow beings’ moral behavior. Such a rhetorical move might better be termed ethicizing, but what an ungainly term—let’s allow moralizing to serve in this essay.

One could examine this kind of moralizing purely theoretically, seeing it as manifesting an ethical dimension of rhetoric promoted by writers from Plato through Richard Weaver. I want, however, to study this moralizing as a historical pedagogical tradition and to try to determine how assignments that direct students to write about matters of moral obligation became firmly entrenched in curricula during the late nineteenth century, when composition was evolving into a "regular subject" at Harvard College, the institution that most strongly influenced composition instruction at other colleges and universities across the country.

I realize that I suggest a trope common to histories of English studies: as went Harvard’s English program, so went programs at colleges and universities across the country. A number of scholars (Berlin, Connors, Reid, Donald Stewart) have demonstrated that in the nineteenth century, Harvard was the leader in both formation and reform of college instruction in letters, particularly literature and composition. As Albert R. Kitzhaber points out, "From 1875 to 1900, the most influential English program in the United States was Harvard’s" (54).

I do not delve into history merely for its own sake. Underlying my historical perspective is a notion that in composition instruction the past never leaves us—that, despite the changes wrought by the process movement in the past two decades, composition remains a conservative field (see Welch for a similar view), especially when it comes to the kinds of subjects we ask students to write about in composition courses. Before taking this historical view, however, I must muse briefly on a subject that really demands a book-length study, namely the importance of subject-matter knowledge, selection, and treatment in college writing instruction.

Writers and Their Subjects: A Conceptual Framework

It seems self-evident that good writing is always writing about something, yet the bulk of research on writing conducted in the past three decades has largely ignored the question of what writers know about the subjects they write about (Faigley, Cherry, Jolliffe and Skinner 85). There is a good reason for this neglect of subject matters: at first glance, it appears that college composition has no particular subject-matter domain. Despite the traditional association of composition instruction with literary studies and the seemingly innovative move of
writing-across-the-curriculum programs to link composition instruction with studies in the disciplines (Harvard was doing so a century ago), much college composition instruction—if I may so personify it—must plead guilty to Socrates' indictment of the sophists in Plato's *Gorgias*: composition seems to have no field of knowledge. As Paul Kameen points out, this apparent independence of subject matter has worked to the institutional benefit of composition instruction, especially when one links composition with the more honorific term, rhetoric. Composition/rhetoric remains strong in the academy primarily because it seems to have no particular subject matter. Kameen writes,

> It matters not, from an Aristotelian point of view, upon what turf/ground/territory rhetoric situates itself; it can pitch its tent, build its arena, inscribe its "field" almost anywhere. It matters only that it finds a vantage point from which it can view the various "games" that the rest of the arts and sciences play, the structures of which are its interest and its business to measure and appreciate. (218)

College composition's seeming independence of subject matters, however, is deceptive. As James Berlin suggests in his two-volume history of college writing instruction, the domains of acceptable subject matters for compositions are sanctioned in part by the rhetorical systems that support instruction. Because, as Berlin notes, "every rhetorical system is based on epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality, the nature of the knower, and the rules governing the discovery and communication of the known" (*Rhetoric* 4), students quickly learn what kinds of subject matters they are expected to write about and what methods of treating those subject matters they are allowed to employ.

Whether a student comes to a writing class with a subject, finds one in the midst of the class, or has one foisted upon him, the subject matter must fit, as Stephen Witte and Lester Faigley suggest, within five contexts, all of which both operate independently and interact with each other. First, a subject matter must be acceptable within the cultural and social context: it almost always must be something that people deem it fitting that a theme or essay be about, often a serious subject with ethical implications. Stories of American instructors teaching writing in foreign countries (e.g., Matalene) are rife with instances in which the instructors assigned topics that were clearly not acceptable within the culture. Second, it must fit within the institutional context: legislative and executive officials of colleges and universities, either faculty on committees or administrators, give tacit approval to the kind of intellectual operation they want writing instruction to embody—and, thus, to the subjects students write about—simply by sponsoring writing courses, by choosing in some instances to make such courses required and to link them to other courses in the curriculum, and by approving the kinds of people who are hired to supervise writing programs and teach writing courses. Third, a subject must pass muster within a particular writing program's structure and administration: program administrators or composition committees can exert a strong influence on what students write about by hiring, observing, and evaluating instructors and by adopting textbooks. Fourth, it must fit within the curriculum, the material that is actually taught in composition classes. Finally, a subject must be acceptable within the particular instructional context: in specific interactions with the instructor and peers, students learn
what are considered acceptable choices and treatments of subject matters (Witte and Faigley 40).

As the forces of these five contexts emerge and interact to shape instruction, students develop—often subconsciously—an ideology of acceptable subject matters, what Kenneth Burke describes as a "nodus of beliefs and judgments which the artist [here, read writer] can exploit for his effects" (161).

This conceptual framework—the individual and interactive forces of the five contexts combining to shape an ideology of acceptable subject matters—provides a lens through which we can examine the kinds of subjects students choose to write about and the methods they employ to develop those subjects, either in the past or in our own time. As a background for contemporary concerns, I will use the framework to examine the kind of earnestly moral topics that students were encouraged to write about at Harvard in the late nineteenth century and that still emerge in college writing instruction today.

The Moralizing Influence at Harvard, 1865-1900

Collected in the Harvard Archives is a treasure house of materials for studying the history of English studies in American higher education. The archives holds literally thousands of graded themes, examinations, theses, and student notebooks for Harvard literature and composition classes from the earliest years of the College through the twentieth century. In addition, the archives has the teaching plans and notebooks of several professors of rhetoric, oratory, literature, and composition, including those of Adams Sherman Hill, the man most responsible for developing English A, true progenitor of freshman composition, and Barrett Wendell, his most distinguished successor.

The growth of English, especially composition, at Harvard has long been a focus of inquiry, but previous scholars (e.g., Kitzhaber, Reid, Berlin, Connors) have chosen to examine the Harvard program as it is represented in secondary sources—histories of the university, professors' memoirs, textbooks, and so on. No one has yet examined the primary sources, the students' papers. As Mina Shaughnessy pointed out, textbooks are not the content of composition courses, the students' own texts are. Over the years, the archivists have had no systematic way to secure students' papers, and the collection comprises only those papers that alumni have chosen to donate to it. Thus, the collected papers in the Harvard Archives may represent a skewed data set, but it is the only data we have access to.

Previous histories of English studies in American colleges have even examined composition subjects, arguing that although topics became increasingly less abstract and more personal in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the epistemology underlying instruction mandated that students treat their subject matters in the mechanistic, positivistic fashion associated with "current-traditional rhetoric." Kitzhaber's dissertation demonstrates clearly the shift in subject matters from the 1850s, 60s, and 70s, when students might be required to write about such abstract topics as "Evanescence of Pleasure," "Curiosity," and "Youth, Mammon, and Old Age" (170), to the 1890s and 1900s, when students
might be asked to write about “Our newsboy,” “How I learned to like good music,” and “Condition of the roads in this neighborhood” (175). As Kitzhaber points out, “All the topics in the books after 1893 showed that an effort was being made to ask of the student only what he knew or could reasonably find out through limited observation” (175). Robert J. Connors correctly identifies the source of this increasing personalization of topics in the “proto-romanticism” of eighteenth-century British rhetoric (“Personal Writing” 169) and shows that, even by the 1870s, most topics in composition textbooks clearly called for reports of the student writer’s personal observation and experience.

But even while acknowledging the rise of this personal element in subject-matter selection, scholars who examine the growth of what has been labeled “current-traditional” rhetoric in the middle and late nineteenth century see the epistemology underlying composition instruction as squeezing the student writer’s personal involvement with his topic. As Berlin writes, in current-traditional rhetoric, "The role of the observer is to be as “objective” as possible, necessitating the abandonment of social, psychological, and historical preconceptions that might interfere with the response of the faculties to the external world. The responsibility of the observer, then, is to engage in an innocent reaction to sense impression, examining it without allowing any distortion to occur. (Rhetoric 8)

Berlin argues further that while current-traditional rhetoric has its source in the eighteenth-century rhetoricians Campbell, Blair, and Whately, whose “concern for the role of emotion . . . saved it from being purely mechanistic,” “[i]n the hands of A. S. Hill and Barrett Wendell of Harvard and John F. Genung of Amherst . . . this rhetoric abandoned concern for the ethical as it became completely positivistic in intent” (Rhetoric 8).

The papers produced by the Harvard students do not universally support these assertions. To try to determine what subjects students were writing about, and how they were developing those subjects when college composition was coming into being, I examined all the available themes and forensics written between 1865, a date before composition was a regular subject in the Harvard curriculum, and 1900, by which time English A, or freshman composition, was the only required course in the curriculum. The intervening years include several benchmarks: 1872, the year that Adams Sherman Hill joined the Harvard faculty; 1874, the year the Harvard overseers began to require a composition entrance examination; 1876, when Francis James Child became a professor of English and left composition to Hill; 1884, the founding of the Modern Language Association, signaling the genesis of “English” as a bona fide academic field; 1885, the first year of English A; 1890, the year of Barrett Wendell’s lectures on English Composition at the Lowell Institute; 1897, the year a comprehensive study of freshman composition was undertaken by the College. My examination of the themes and forensics uncovered some signs of a highly rational, scientific treatment of subject matter, but I noticed strong, recurrent evidence as well of another kind of subject matter treatment, one that in no way requires students to abandon “social preconceptions” or a “concern for the ethical” as they observe
and respond to the external world. A great many students not only chose abstract topics, but also moralized on the spectacles they observed.

The students' moral earnestness is suggested even by many of the Harvard theme titles. Intermixed with topics suggesting the current-traditional epistemology, such as "Foot Ball" and "A Bicycle Trip to Monadnock," and literary topics, such as "Jane Austen" and "The Young Man in Fiction: David Copperfield," are such topics as, from 1866, "Whether Rank, Fame, and Fortune Contribute to Real Happiness"; from 1877, "May We Rightly Indulge in Luxuries While Our Fellow Men Are in Want?"; and from 1881, "Liberty, by Tempting the Cerebral Forces to Easy Discharge, is the Cruelest Enemy of Ideas."

The titles alone, however, don't fully display the moralizing influence. To see the promotion of moral obligation, one needs to turn to the themes themselves. Consider, for example, the notion Frederic H. Viaux proposes, in an 1866 theme entitled "Respect for Women." In the midst of a long discussion about whether a man ought to relinquish his seat to a woman on the streetcar—Viaux acknowledges he always does, no matter the circumstances—he offers the following:

Respect for woman is one of the great secrets of civilization, as according as that respectful feeling increases, so in like proportion does our civilization. Woman exerts a softening influence over man. She counteracts the effects of grim War. Consequently, should we suffer our feelings of respect for her to die out, we should very rapidly lapse into barbarism.

The theme is marked "good" by the instructor, presumably Francis James Child.

Some of the themes launch right into their moral improvement program from the beginning, as does an 1880 one entitled "The Duty of Rich Americans" by Frank G. Cook:

Man's responsibility, both to God and to society, increases in proportion to his possessions, whether these consist of life, health, wealth, knowledge, power, genius, or any other of the innumerable gifts received by him. We may consider this the working capital of mankind, for any one or all of which a return is required, sufficient to renumerate [sic] the investment. Besides, we know, by our own instincts, as well as by the teaching of divine revelation, that this capital is to be applied by us, not only upon ourselves, but upon our fellow-men. It is expected that the powerful will strengthen the weak; that the educated will enlighten the ignorant; in short, that he, who has, will give to him, who has not. Selfishness is a sin.

Others save their fervor for the peroration. George L. Cheney, in his 1877 senior forensic entitled "Are there any features in modern civilization which are likely to preserve the nations enlightened by it from sinking into the barbarism which was the ultimate fate of all the refined nations in antiquity," argues that because modern civilization has more tolerance for different forms of government, more humane methods of waging war, and better international communication, we are not far away from a return to Eden:

Society is yet imperfect, but it is rapidly drawing nearer and nearer to perfection; and we may fairly believe that it is impossible for civilization again to lose its hold on the nations which it enlightens.
A curious subset of papers exists within the generally moralizing themes and forensics. Several papers suggest that the writers felt a moral obligation to foster a vision of "culture" that seems drawn directly from the works of Matthew Arnold. These themes sometimes even use language that resembles the Victorian sage's. Consider, for example, the thoughts of T. C. Williams, a sophomore in 1873 who wrote a theme entitled, "Why Am I in College?:"

I shall confine my observations to that general culture, which is the object of higher courses of study, exclusive of technical, bread-getting education, which is quite another matter. If intellectual culture is good in itself, then why is not systematic intellectual training not good for all, and not a privilege of which comparatively few care to avail themselves? Nay more, if to be wiser is, as I believe, to be better; if true education makes a man a better citizen; if a clear comprehension of principles enables men to conform more accurately to them in special cases; if more enlarged views of life make men more moral and patriotic;—is not education or anything else that tends to create such views, not merely desirable, but necessary for every class in the community from the highest to the lowest? Undoubtedly.

W. S. Merrill, in a sophomore theme from 1885 entitled "A Word of Protest," complains about what he sees as the collapse of faith in favor of science on the part of many of his classmates, and asserts in language that almost seems stolen from *Culture and Anarchy*.

The university, as the immediate fitting school for active life, has resting upon it the obligation to carry on the student, as far as lies in its power, along the road of harmonious development, towards the ultimate goal of a rounded and perfect cultivation. . . . Our business, as students, earnest and intelligent, is culture.

Evidently, one of the more common theme topics in the 90s was to ask students to evaluate each others' themes, and this practice could be turned into an Arnoldian exercise. Listen to the echo of Arnold's refrain, "seeing things the way they are," in this evaluation offered by Major G. Seelig in an 1893 theme, "One of the Unfit":

The theme read to us today, taken as a whole, is an extremely well written story, but it is far from being perfect. There is a spirit of pessimism throughout the whole story that causes me to think the writer was a misanthropic being. Were the writer a little more disposed to see life as it is and not look through smoked glasses, his theme would be just as forcible and at the same time more pleasant to read.

Specific references to Arnold himself are rare, but nonetheless present. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, for example, in his daily theme for Thursday, March 1, 1900, refers to Matthew Arnold as "one of the greatest influences in this century for better thought" and paraphrases Book III of *Culture and Anarchy*.

Now why do students at Harvard in the last third of the nineteenth century want to write about topics like these? Better yet, why do instructors feel compelled to assign such topics? I think an examination of the ways the five contexts operate and interact will show that the students' themes were simply making manifest the ideology of acceptable subject matters that the contexts forged.

First and most generally, the cultural and social context taught the Harvard writers that, since their themes looked an awful lot like the genre called the
essay, they were expected to choose and develop subject matters in the ways similar to those employed by famous essayists of English and American society in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—Addison and Steele, Lamb, Hazlitt, Irving, and so on. From the time of Montaigne on, Europeans and Americans considered the essay an essentially moral form, a genre that allowed the writer to observe everyday occurrences and to suggest how those occurrences reflected the ethical nature of the entire society (Bensmaia). “Respect for Women,” for example, does precisely the same thing.

But more specifically, the cultural and social context taught the Harvard men that their themes were exercises in cultural criticism and, as pieces of art, must have a moral dimension. That is, the themes reflected the idea of a “moral aesthetic” incorporated in rhetorical and belles-lettres education by such influential pedagogical authorities as Hugh Blair but prevalent generally in English and American society. Blair’s influence in the subject-matter selection and treatment in the Harvard papers is not surprising. Both Kitzhaber and Warren Guthrie note the popularity of the Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783), not only at Harvard but at colleges across the United States throughout the nineteenth century. In the lectures, Blair teaches students to choose as their great subject “the philosophy of human nature”: the realm of rhetoric and belles lettres contains “[a]ll that relates to beauty, harmony, grandeur, and elegance; all that can soothe [sic] the mind, gratify the fancy, or move the affections” (34).

To Blair, exercises in rhetoric are critical endeavors—“[l]ogical and ethical disquisitions” that “move in a higher sphere”: “They point out to man the improvement of his nature as an intelligent being; and his duties as the subject of moral obligation” (34).

And moralizing did not fall solely within the domain of rhetoric and criticism in the students’ cultural and social milieu. In setting out the moral and ethical dimension of rhetoric and belles lettres, Blair prefigures the development of a moral aesthetic that Jerom Buckel sees as dominating Scottish and English thought about art and society as a whole in the mid-nineteenth century. According to Buckley, such critics as David Ramsay Hay and John G. Macvicar in Edinburgh, and Charles Kingsley and John Ruskin in England, were unified in their conviction that if “art was to mirror a larger totality, its function . . . must be at least implicitly ‘moral’; the picture or the poem, the play or the statue was to edify as well as to delight by its reflection of an immutable design” (143). “Though few could explain the exact processes by which art was to accomplish its religious mission,” Buckley writes, “none questioned its ultimate relevance to the ethical needs of an aspiring people” (144).

As Raymond Williams has argued, this cultural linkage of art and morality was promulgated most influentially by the essays of Matthew Arnold, and many scholars (Eagleton, Graff, Berlin) have documented Arnold’s role in the growth of university English studies in general. Arnold’s influence figured significantly in the growth of the Harvard English program, as both primary and secondary sources show. Adams Sherman Hill’s notebook of theme subjects and readings for English 5, an advanced composition course, from 1877 (a year after he was elevated to the Boylston Professorship) to 1884 shows that students in the
1878-79 term were assigned to write a theme on "The Culture of the Imagination"; they were assigned essays by Arnold to read in the 1879-80 and 1881-82 terms. In 1884-85, the English department invited students to write a forensic on the topic, "Is Mr. Matthew Arnold's definition of poetry correct?" As Arthur Applebee explains, after the 1867 publication of *Culture and Anarchy*, American educators looked to New England, and particularly to Boston, for sources of the kind of Arnoldian culture which could be infused into schools. And of course the dominant cultural institution in New England—indeed, probably in the country—in the middle and late nineteenth century was Harvard.

Arnold's presence in the readings of Hill's composition classes and in the students' themes shows clearly how aspects of the cultural and social context influenced curriculum and instruction. Undoubtedly there were other influences at the institutional, curricular, and instructional levels that led the students to demonstrate the importance of moral obligation in their papers. During the last third of the century, many students who were writing freshman and sophomore themes were also taking a course in moral philosophy, using a textbook entitled *The Philosophy and Active Powers of Man* written by the Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart and edited by James Walker, president of Harvard from 1853 to 1860 (Morison). It is conceivable that much of what the students learned about Stewart's notion of man's innate moral faculty made its way into their themes. Moreover, historians of Harvard (Morison, Adams) report with great affection how, from 1883 to 1890, LeBaron Russell Briggs, an English A instructor and later dean of the college, would gather groups of freshmen for evening or Saturday morning sessions to discuss matters of moral obligation and improvement. When your English instructor is also your moral preceptor, it's difficult to avoid moralizing in your themes.

At our century's remove from the Harvard themes and forensics, it might be easy for us to see the students' moral earnestness either as precious or overblown. But examining the action and interaction of the five contexts suggests that the students' selection and treatment of subject matters were nothing extraordinary. The students were merely giving voice to the ideology that the contextual influences shaped.

It would be the undertaking of another essay to speculate why, during this period of increasing capitalism and social conflict in America, the Harvard men apparently felt such a need to reaffirm the essential idealism of their country and their university. A particularly interesting focus in such a study would be on the year 1886, when Harvard celebrated its 250th anniversary, the idealized spirit of which seems best captured in Oliver Wendell Holmes' celebratory verse:

As once of old from Ida's lofty height  
The flaming signal flashed across the night,  
So Harvard's beacon sheds it unspent rays  
Till every watch-tower shows its kindling blaze.  
(qtd. in Morison 362)

A study like this could be undertaken simply to flesh out the history of our profession. But I hope it would serve another purpose as well: it might remind us that our own students' selection and treatment of subjects are still shaped by
contexts ranging from the social and cultural through the instructional. It might help us to think clearly about the resources our students have available when we ask them to write in college.

Works Cited


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