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Doing your 'Bit' - Because You Can:¹ English Composition Meets Accounting

By Meg Freeling

Introduction

"To know one's place in history and find and do one's bit... To discuss the same issues that others discuss..., but to come from a different picture of the human being in the world." – Christopher Houghton Budd

"In my composition class I learned... that finding your purpose in life takes a lot of soul searching. My biggest take-away from this class is that even though talking about what you want to do in life is simple, you must put in work to turn your goals into accomplishments.... I think that my 'true' self is now more confident, patient and happy: more confident because I'm not afraid to chase after my dreams no matter what the circumstances hold for me; more patient because I can take time to make my dreams come true and become accomplishments; and more happy because I was taught in this class to use critical thinking about my purpose in life, and even though it was hard, I did learn how to start my own destiny path toward my 'bit'."
– A student.

In the fall of 2016, I worked with twenty-three high school students who signed up for my College English Composition class not only to see what they could learn about writing, but also to explore what it is like to be in college. They were part of a dual credit arrangement between Columbus State Community College (Ohio) and area high schools to keep young people challenged and make college more accessible. Those who passed the class would earn both high school and college credits.

¹ The title phrase, "Doing your 'bit' – because you can," is taken from a lecture by economic historian Christopher Houghton Budd, author of *Finance at the Threshold: Rethinking the Real and Financial Economies* (2011), at a conference held in Folkestone, England in June, 2016.

As an employee of the college, I am asked to focus on certain course requirements, including four major essays that meet college standards for written communication. These became the framework from which the course content emerged. My hope was that, based on the quality of student engagement, a sequence of gradual awakenings could emerge that would give participants the confidence to take on a kind of coming-of-age challenge at the end.²

The four major essays grew out of each other. The vital thread that tied them together was the question, “What does it mean to be a human being?”. And more pertinent to this group, the focus became, “What does it mean to be a human being when one is an adolescent?”

We started the course with an image and a verse. The image was a sketch of the human being in three parts: at the bottom was a concave, upward-directed “mirror” that represented the physical body as a reflector of what was going on above it in the higher parts of the self; next, a middle part represented the soul where thinking, feeling and willing connect the person to the world and to what one calls oneself, i.e. to one’s name; and at the top, a star represented one’s spirit, purpose and reason for being here, i.e. one’s “bit” to do in life. The verse was offered to help us remember what being human actually entails.

*To wonder at beauty
Stand guard over truth
Look up to the noble
Decide for the good
Leads us on our journey
To goals for our lives
To right in our doing
To peace in our feeling
To light in our thought
It teaches us trust in the guidance of God
In all that there is in the world-wide all
In the soul’s deep soil*

Rudolf Steiner³

These two pieces served as reminders for what could live behind our work together to strengthen our sense of purpose as to *why* we would want to learn to write and communicate with others, *what* was living in each of us that was striving to come out, and *how* this might be recognized and received so we could do our ‘bit’ in the world.

² The CSCC English Department requires a total of 5,000 words of student writing that meets the standards of academic English in order to earn credit for this Composition I semester course.

³ Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), author, lecturer, spiritual scientist, economist, educator, and founder of the Waldorf Schools Movement in Stuttgart, Germany in 1919, gave this verse to teachers in the school as a morning recitation for upper (high) school students.

The key themes we took up began as specific individual experiences, and then became the core content for the four major essays required for this English course.

Four essays in a nutshell

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| I. Observation Paper | Make an intentional, direct contact with the natural world. Put it into words. |
| II. Descriptive Language | Discover and use the 12 senses to explore and describe the world -- and the ways an author observes and experiences it. ⁴ |
| III. Three Interviews | Talk to three adults about their purpose in life and how they awoke to it. Write up the interviews plus a self-portrait of what you learned about yourself and your search for your own "bit" in life. |
| IV. Walk Your Talk | Create a business that serves others by doing something you love and are good at. Charge money. Track the accounting. Write it up. Integrate this learning with highlights from the rest of the course. |

In brief, Phase I (Observation) was designed to give students confidence in their own ability to perceive the natural world instead of taking it for granted through secondhand images created by someone else. Phase II (Descriptive Language) was designed to help them experience the twelve human senses and translate their expanded sensory experiences into consciously crafted words and phrases, using the descriptions of respected, published authors as models. Phase III (Three Interviews) was designed to give them an opportunity for focused conversations with adults about how the adults pursued their purpose in life and found their special "bit" to do in the world. Phase IV (Walk Your Talk) was designed to give students a direct experience of starting their own business as a way to try out something that relates to their current sense of purpose and how they could serve others through something they themselves already knew how to do – a step toward their "bit" to do in the world.

By being asked to have five to seven monetary transactions and track the finances of their projects, they became responsible for their own accounts. Through this project, they were able to move from "thinking about" something "out there" to actually doing a task that they determined was meaningful enough to follow through on here and now. This exercise put teeth into the question, "What does it mean to be a human being?", because it brought the thought from the realm of idea, through the realm of feelings and relationships,

⁴ The familiar five senses are sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. The additional seven senses are balance, sense of life/health, self-movement (proprioception), warmth (temperature), word sense (speech/language), concept sense (thought) and ego sense (sense for the 'I' of the other). John Davy, "On Coming to Our Senses" (1983).

and into the realm of – using Aristotle’s term – “fine deeds.”⁵ After accomplishing this “fine deed,” students could walk away with a much more specific first-hand experience and confidence-building understanding of what it means to be a human being.

Learning from the Observation Essay

Given the wide array of current educational and developmental theories and practices, students come to each new educational opportunity with various assumptions based on the expectations of the adults they have been exposed to, the media that reinforces certain values and desires, and their own experiences over the course of their young lives. To create a class into a cohesive and vibrant learning community, students need a memorable beginning experience that grounds them in reality. Whether they engaged with a squirrel, a maple tree, a blue jay or a wasp, through the Observation Exercise students reported feeling more connected and engaged with life. They described what they observed with attentive awareness, interest, accuracy and a deepening sense of wonder. When some of their stories were shared, there was a sense of awe in the room, both for the experience of the connection being described and for the ability of the writer to describe it so engagingly. Students were learning from each other while being reinforced in their own efforts in the process.

Learning from the Descriptive Language Essay

Because the implications of having twelve senses was quite new to most of the students, we approached it slowly. We read articles rich in sensory descriptions and probed them to identify which senses the author was using to describe specific situations and events in the article. Students could recognize that it was not just the sense of hearing at work when one author described five different Spanish “languages” that she spoke, but it was actually a sense for the word, for speech itself that she had developed. And it was through his sense of balance that another author was able to climb the tallest fir tree and “ride it out” through a windstorm. The sense of touch gave another author the important research information about the bear cub he was holding, and it was a sense for the other person’s “I,” their genuine self, that allowed a grandmother to respond in just the right way to the troubled child. In this way, the senses and descriptive language came to life.

What I learned from doing the Three Interviews project

Building on the first two components of the course, students had some awakenings during their interviews with adults about how the adults discovered their purpose and their “bit” to do in life. Once their initial trepidation was overcome, the interviews were an opportunity

⁵ Aristotle is recognized as the “father of economics” in the stream of thinking called associative economics and is mentioned as such in a number of publications offered for study. Associative economics starts from the premise that, because humanity is now part of a one-world economy, the challenge is to reach an understanding of economics that all can own. It is based on the idea that economic life is the shared responsibility of all human beings and it strives to work in a non-partisan way to achieve this great task. Associative economics recognizes its debt to Rudolf Steiner, whose insights make a valuable contribution to the work of developing a modern humanity-wide economy.

for meaningful engagement with the world in a way that took the stories beyond the familiar to discover the “inside story” of another person’s biography and as a result, their own self-portraits had real substance as they compared their own lives to the stories, experiences and insights of those they interviewed. The following reports convey something of this mood:

“Interviewing these three people really gave me a new outlook on life. It made me re-evaluate who I am and what I really care about. I never really thought about the little things in life that make me happy or sad. I can learn from the things these people taught me.”

“One woman told me about hearing a young millionaire say, ‘Two things are most important when you are trying to figure out what you want to do. One is to identify something you would do even if you weren’t being paid for it. The other is to identify something that comes easy to you and is very hard for others.’”

“I was intrigued by what would stop someone from pursuing their ‘bit’. I learned that one could stop oneself with a self-imposed sense of duty to others. Financial issues and money-making ‘obligations’ to one’s family can also leave one entrenched on a road leading away from their ‘bit’. But then I learned that finding and doing your ‘bit’ is actually possible through hard work and perseverance.”

What I learned from doing the Walk Your Talk project

The purpose of this fourth and final Essay was to demonstrate that you can “walk your talk” – and then be able to describe it in the two languages of (1) English and (2) money-as-bookkeeping (accounting), including at least 5-7 transactions that involve an exchange of values; there should be money exchanged for a product or service – or some variation thereof. Show these transactions in double-entry ‘T’ accounts and then use them to create a budget based on an Income & Expense Statement and a Balance Sheet.

Student-created businesses included: handmade holiday soaps, hair braiding, customized make-up, handmade hair oils, handmade Christmas cards, origami and macrame ornaments, home-made cookies, dog-washing, dog-walking, pots of lavender seedlings, fall garden preparation service, tutoring service for classmates.

Four themes emerged from students comments about their Walk Your Talk projects: Personal Discoveries; Financial and Business Insights; Societal Issues and Social Responsibility; and Helping Others and Cooperation. Again, samples of their own words best convey their experience.

Personal Discoveries

“From this experience, I am more optimistic about the future and free from the burden of uncertainty because I have a better imagination of what is possible in the economic world.”

"I believe that I am now a little freer, as if my outlook and imagination of what could be possible has tremendously expanded."

Financial and Business Insights

"I learned to create double entries and make a financial plan. I also learned that it is easy to sell items that people are into or have a desire for."

"I have discovered a lens that lets me see where money is coming from and where it is going."

Societal Issues and Social Responsibility

"I compare what I did with what small business people are up against and I am now trying to help small businesses like 'Barber Zone' as they try to fight off the large barber shop companies like 'Great Clips'".

"I learned that an economy based on interdependent success is the kind of economy that is worthy of being a part of. My sale often led to me purchasing their product, which created a cycle of intertwined prosperity."

Helping Others and Cooperation

"I found that helping others is what I enjoy and what I plan to continue to do."

"It felt very strange to be participating in a form of business that was not centered on the ideology of creating the most profit, but was actually based on creating and maintaining relationships that mean something."

The learning outcomes exemplified in these student comments focus on developing thinking and writing skills through an engagement with economic realities. By taking on the Walk Your Talk project, students experienced the emergence of meaning, self-initiative, imagination, a sense of responsibility, practical knowledge, an appreciation for the needs and values of others, interdependence and an accomplishment-based confidence in both themselves and the other participants in their projects. Because these values had to be effectively communicated both orally and in writing, and backed up with properly formatted financial evidence (no small achievement for this age group), the overall experience was whole, alive and potentially memorable. These results were hoped for at the beginning (by me), but could not be demanded – only coaxed. The fact that they emerged at the end confirms that these students chose to take up the challenge and prove themselves able to learn the life lessons that were placed before them.



English Composition students celebrate the completion of their business initiatives.

What I learned from the course as a whole

Five major areas emerged from the students' comments and insights from the course as a whole: The Joy of Exploring, Deep Level Learning, Learning from Stories, An Expanded View of the World, and Acknowledging Personal Limitations. Once again, the students tell their own story best.

The Joy of Exploring

"I learned that I shouldn't limit myself to doing just one thing in life, but instead, explore all of my interests, because who knows, one of them may end up changing the world."

Deep Level Learning

"One of the main lessons... is not about writing at all, but about not caring so much about ourselves but to look out into the world and care about other people."

"I have learned that as a person, there are more 'me's' to discover... I have learned from all of these projects that I, myself, play an important role in life."

"I have also learned to be more compassionate and understanding... These lessons have become a part of me that I will never lose."

Learning from Stories

"The interview project made me look into my 'bit', and let me hear stories from others about how they had to work hard to get things done and not let anything stop them."

"I learned that no matter how big or small, everyone has a purpose to serve in this world and when they discover it they become a crucial part involved in many lives."

An Expanded View of the World

"I realized how each person and their purpose play an important part in the world. ... I realized how I, as a consumer, can control the economy."

My first semester of college has been a memorable experience because of this class. It has widened my view of nature and the people around me.”
“The ‘Walk Your Talk’ project broadened my viewpoint of the economy and its importance to society, while also permanently shifting the way I think about business.”

Acknowledging Personal Limitations

“My main problem with myself that I’ve realized during this class is that I spend way too much time thinking about and speculating about what I’m going to do.”
“This class showed me that I don’t think I’m ready to be an adult. I learned that I shouldn’t procrastinate or take a nap, and that you can’t run from your problems that way.”

The learning outcomes seen in these student responses revealed significant inner movement that was happening through interactions with key ideas, the world of nature and the world of people. Students were moving from passive acquiescence to active self-initiative, from rote learning to grappling with meaning, and from self alone to self in relation to others toward a common good. While their (overall high) grades continued to be based on an institutional rubric, life learning took a seat at the table and was encouraged to speak.

Conclusion

This course was an experiment in integrating the teaching of English with the teaching of how a human being makes meaning and brings it into the world through real projects that require an accounting component to make them concrete and doable. It is based on some assumptions gleaned from colleagues and fellow travelers I have had the good fortune to meet and work with along the way. A few of the assumptions are my own.

I now know from my own experience that the following can be done: to teach English Composition – the art of writing – to students in such a way that they meet up with accounting as an inevitable next step in their thinking process. In the context of discovering what it means to be a human being, a person can pursue their purpose, their “bit”, for meeting the needs of others and find themselves creating not only a good essay, but also a financial plan that brings their ideas into reality. The experience with this group of students demonstrated that it can be done; it was done as completely as the circumstances allowed; and this article is the documentation. There is no imperative that others should take it up with corresponding deeds or activities, for that is their freedom. I simply proceeded to act in such a way that no one can say it cannot be done.

To take this up is to give students the background, the writing skills and the experiences they need so they can create a plan and take an initiative to do something meaningful in a concrete and practical way. This inevitably requires transactions with others and the exchange of values. Thus, one must become financially literate. This is how the will is activated and new inner forces that attract what is needed to carry out the plan come forward – if the intent is clear and the need one perceives is genuine.

Insofar as the person's specific initiative is linked to their deeper purpose in life and is motivated by the needs of others, it then becomes essential to be literate in two ways: (1) one must be able to write up one's initiative effectively so it comes alive for others who read it; and (2) one must be able to account for the specific expenses, income and future financial flows to create one's business plan as a tool to turn the initiative into reality. In this sense, we find ourselves linked to two languages that, at this time in history, are truly universal. The language of English and the language of accounting are already in use all over the world and, when wisely put together, could easily be recognized as a new and much needed version of "bilingual education" that can give students the fundamentals for living a free, responsible and truly meaningful life in today's society.

Author

Meg Freeling is a life-long student of the human learning process and has studied it in many forms and settings. She currently teaches English composition to students at Columbus State Community College (Ohio) and teaches piano to children and adults. She has created small schools in Ohio, California and Illinois. Her career has included the design and implementation of employee-directed learning programs and the creation of job-specific learning materials for local companies. Meg's ongoing research focuses on ways for teachers to develop new levels of professional sovereignty through self-education in accounting and the emerging field of associative economics. She states: "As teachers, we need to awaken our economic selves so we can represent our educational ideas, ideals and capacities in the language of accounting. This is how we can take hold of our sleeping will and, with courage and grace, describe to the world in concrete economic terms what it will take to teach its children."

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