

Telling Truths: Depth Writing as Service

Boston College – PL 262 – Spring 2009

Kathleen Hirsch, professor
Phone: 617-983-5087
e-mail: KHirsch72@comcast.net

** ***** **

“Reverence thyself...Schweitzer’s Reverence for Life, the recognition of oneself as life that wants to live among other forms of life that want to live. This recognition is indissoluble, reciprocal, and dual. There can be no self-respect without respect for others, no love and reverence for others without love and reverence for oneself; and no recognition of others is possible without imagination. The imagination of what it is to be those other forms of life that want to live is the only way to recognition; and it is that imaginative recognition that brings compassion to birth. Man’s capacity for evil, then, is less a positive capacity, for all its horrendous activity, than a failure to develop man’s most human function, the imagination, to its fullest, and consequently a failure to develop compassion.”

Origins of a Poem
Denise Levertov

“Language permits us to see. Without words, we are all blind.”

Carlos Fuentes, The Old Gringo

This course will give you the chance to explore a social justice problem in depth for a full semester, and to devote yourself to a semester-long writing project based on your off-campus field work. You’ll have the chance to observe the workings of social injustices in the larger community, as well as current efforts to ameliorate them. Writing from these discoveries, you will experience what it is to be a witness in the service of truth.

Some of you may seek out best practices for justice work in your subject. Some may decide to vividly evoke a marginal “world” and the denizens who occupy it. Others will try their hand at persuasion aimed at changing the way we think about a social issue. We will read examples of works in a variety of genres as models for your own writing. Class time will be spent in workshop mode, discovering these texts, learning how to be good readers, offering each other constructive criticism of peers’ projects. By the end of the semester, you will have created a polished document: a magazine article, an essay, or a chapter on the topic of your choice.

PULSE placements are strongly recommended in this course.

Course Procedures:

Attendance: We meet only 13 times during the semester, every Wednesday from 3 to 5 p.m. This is very few class sessions, relative to other B.C. courses. Attendance is part of your participation grade, and absences will be deducted from that grade. If you must be absent due to illness or a family crisis, please notify me BEFORE the class in question. If you are ill enough to miss class, please provide documentation.

Assignments: A good number of our class sessions will involve sharing your work. Please come prepared with the requisite number of copies when it is your turn to share.

1. **Written Assignments –**

Journals: Students need to keep a regular writer's journal. Entries will include observations from their PULSE placement experiences, reflections on course reading assignments, and any newspaper or magazine items, or personal thoughts that relate to our evolving class discussions. The Journals will be invaluable material for many of your writing assignments.

Course Writing Assignment:

A full length (15-20 page) polished work of prose

2. **Reading:** Students will be expected to thoroughly read the assigned texts. In addition, each week, they will be expected to **read independently** one non-fiction article or essay from either The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Harper's, The New York Times Magazine or The Boston Globe Magazine, and come to class prepared to discuss what they have read.
3. **Discussion/Presentations:** Each student will spend part of one class period presenting the work of an author who has influenced their own thought and writing. These presentations will include: an introduction and overview of the author's life and work (subject matter, approach, and impact); an analysis of what makes it memorable and important, and one example provided to the class to read.

Class participation will be considered one of the most important aspects of student performance in the course.

Texts:

TBA

The New Yorker, Harper's, The New York Times, The Atlantic
Telling True Stories, Mark Kramer and Wendy Call, eds.

Course Calendar and Reading Assignments:

January 14: What is Truth? An introduction to literary modes of truth-telling
Writing: Field Notes (2 pg.)

January 21: Finding a Subject
Writing: 20 questions
“Weaving Basra” (handout)

January 28: Choosing a Genre
Write a precise of your project (genre, elements, schedule)

February 4: Observation as a Writer’s tool
Writing: Intensive log

February 11: Arriving at your Thesis/
Designing your Research

February 18: Research and Character: The Feature

February 25: Conferences

March 4: Spring Break

March 11: Structuring an Argument: Persuasion
Writing: Social context and background
“The Afterlife of Cellphones” (handout)

March 18: The Art of Prophecy
Writing: Endings
Reading: “Tomorrow is Another Day,” (handout)

March 25: No class; work on essays

April 1: Writing the End, Absolute Truth vs. Social Truth
Writing: Outlines
Mosaic Essay, (handout)

April 8: Structure: Options
Reading: Student work

April 15: Student presentations
Homework: revise, revise
Reading: Student work

April 22: Student presentations
Homework: Revise, revise

April 29: Afterwords.....