

No, seriously, what are you going to do with that degree?

Amelia Mercado

Junior, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

I hereby affirm that this is an original essay and my own work.

Friday, February 18, 2011

I am a junior at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing. This is the part where you ask, “So, what are you going to do with *that* degree?” I say ‘creative writing’, and I see people’s minds condemning me to a life of the coffee shop academic, name dropping my personal array of the underappreciated literary greats as I feverishly scratch down verses to my next spoken word poem. There is a sad assumption that we have to be reduced to our declared majors, that I have pigeonholed myself into an occupational corner by choosing to study a field that doesn’t seem to overtly reap practical value. You can write a pretty poem and make up funny stories, but what are you going to *do* with that?

In these moments of forced self-reflection, my future greets my present with a cold slap in the face. What *am* I going to do with that? I’ve heard there isn’t too great a market for people to analyze sexual undertones in Chaucerian text or to produce rapid-fire limericks. So, this slap of blatant reality undoubtedly strikes a pang of fear about what actually will happen after graduation.

Something else that has recently struck fear in my heart: 10 year olds.

I work part-time as a fourth grade teacher’s assistant for a public school in Milwaukee. Almost every job I’ve held has involved working with kids, mostly babysitting or tutoring, a few in the classroom setting, but never with a class of 30. Thirty young, impressionable minds, thirty pairs of anxious eyes and readily listening ears. Thirty attitudes, thirty screaming opinions, thirty ‘*But, Miss Mia, I didn’t do anything’s*’. These fourth graders most likely wouldn’t be impressed by my knowledge of 18th century literature. They don’t want to know the contents of my writing portfolio. At face value, my studies in creative writing seem irrelevant to helping educate elementary school

students. It's been since, well, fourth grade that I've really thought about how to explain long division or the importance of simple machines. I began approaching each raised hand with caution, wondering if my explanations would cause more questions than they answered. A few students latched on to my improvised explanations, some became more confused, most continued to ignore anything that came out of my mouth. I encased myself in irony while I sat in my own classes, thinking more about how I could get my fourth graders to listen to my lessons and less about what the professor at the front of the class was writing on the board. My frustration grew with my students' as the help I tried giving did everything but.

Sitting in my course on Chaucer, I was awestruck by my professor's ability to hold the attention of the class. Here was a teacher who could captivate an audience of 45 college students, analyzing language that was essentially foreign in a manner that we could actually comprehend, and doing it with a sense of humor. I was the teacher's assistant to a class of 10 year olds who couldn't get her students to properly read a map. I wanted to know what my professor knew. What was she doing that I wasn't? I had never read Chaucer or any sort of Middle English text, and yet my professor had me, along with the rest of the students, giggling as we decoded the innuendos imbedded in the text. That professor understood that most every college students loves the double entendre. She knew how to speak our language.

That was my problem. There was a language barrier between me and my fourth graders. I needed to translate the way I understood things to a way they could better understand. There is no college course dedicated specifically to long division teaching strategies or the most effect analogies for an English major to apply to a fourth grade

classroom—at least none I’m familiar with. As much as I’d like to wish it true, there will not be a three-credit class for every aspect of my life. But there doesn’t need to be.

Despite my original dismissal, my understanding of Chaucer and Shakespeare has everything to do with how I help my fourth graders decode their science books. Understanding a text’s language, whether it is foreign in literal or scientific terms, is essential to understanding its information. Being a student, I experience first hand what does and doesn’t work in a classroom. “Dumbing down” material rather than translating it is the difference between condescending and comprehensible. The difference between teaching and merely telling is often hard to distinguish, but incredibly significant. Last week, I stood at the blackboard trying to work the fourth graders’ through their line graphing problems. After exhaustively explaining the same mathematical rules, half the class still had their hand raised in confusion. I put down my chalk and simply said “The mode is the most. The median is the middle.” I evoked my inner poet and channeled my rapper alter ego and had the class chanting the mathematical rule like it was their new favorite song. I’ve never been so proud of an impromptu poem.

As a writer, I’ve often heard the advice “Write what you know.” The problem this statement poses lies in the limitations it suggests. What we know entails much more than we often credit ourselves for. It’s unlikely the software I worked with during my computer-animated writing class will be a program I work with in the future. However, my understanding of how to use a medium to its potential – knowing how to think in terms of what I can create within that form that I couldn’t in another – will be applicable to all genres of my writing. Filling general education requirements may initially seem for naught, in fact rather tedious. But it is in learning how to read a map of the constellations

during Astronomy 101 that I was able to teach one of my students how to read a world map. Education is not limited to mere information. What I've learned in my college courses has hopefully helped bring at least one elementary student closer to their college degree. And when someone asks what my student plans on doing with *that* degree, he or she won't need a definitive answer, because the education achieved will not be exclusive or limited but all-encompassing.

Professional marketability relies on more than just how good you can make yourself look on a piece of paper. I am not defined solely by the contents of my résumé, and my education will not be confined to the title printed on my degree. So, when I step into an interview with a nervous excitement similar to the kind I felt at the front of the fourth grade classroom, I can declare I have a BA in English. But I can say with confidence that I majored in my academic passion and minored in the field of possibilities. And there is little to doubt about the practicality of having that kind potential.