

University of Pittsburgh

HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
ENGLISH



**Edwin Peterson and Writing at Pitt:
A Conversation with Andrew Welsh (BA, 1959; PhD, 1969)**

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David Bartholomae:

I believe you knew Edwin Peterson. (My memory is that you were in the photograph, sitting at the table with all this teaching assistants in the Early American Room.) What was he like? What was his relationship to Charles Crow?

I'm trying to trace the line from Percival Hunt through Peterson. It seems like a time when writing was writing rather than Creative Writing or Composition. Do you know why Peterson was attracted to the "magic lantern" and the large lectures?

From what I've read, it seems to mark a moment when he was producing or participating in a separation of creating writing and composition. And then he was quick to retire. At about this time Lawrence Lee began to refuse to teach writing courses and only taught literature. Something was happening to the way "writing" was conceived and taught. I'm trying to think my way into that moment.

Andy Welsh:

When I was an undergraduate at Pitt, it was still a private university and most courses were two-semester courses. My freshman English course was the only honors section of composition, and it was numbered "English 3" and "English 4" (rather than "English 1" and "English 2"). It met in the Scottish Room and was taught by Dorothy O'Connor, who was probably a full-time instructor. We had at least one book, an anthology of essays and probably some short fiction as well, and we used it: reading was central to the course. I still remember the impact of a few of the essays, though I don't remember the authors. One was about the beauty of the desert—a concept that had never occurred to a boy from western Pennsylvania, but I had it in mind when I traveled through the Southwest more than a dozen years later. Another was about statistics, but it verged on theological speculation about freedom and destiny ("we can say how many people will jump off the Brooklyn Bridge in a year, but we can say nothing about who they will be, or if you will be one of them.")

We also read Willa Cather's story "Paul's Case," which became vibrantly alive for all of us because we were sitting right across the street from Carnegie Music Hall and the Schenley Hotel, both important to the story. The readings were without doubt examples of good writing, but beyond that they also seemed designed to teach us new things, new ideas worth hearing about, and in that way confirmed that we were indeed university students now, adults learning like adults. Miss O'Connor was a very good teacher, a little formidable to a teen-aged country boy, perhaps, but committed to good writing—especially our good writing. (I mention this in particular because I still remember a colleague telling me years later, "I don't know what 'good writing' is.") Peter Beagle was in the same class, and he was devoted to her all through his undergraduate days at Pitt, often calling her at home in the evenings to talk.

The second semester was much the same, though we now had the added burden of a massive (as it seemed) "research paper" to work on. That work included all the standard stages: taking notes on note cards, submitting outlines and drafts, making footnotes and bibliography cards. . . . With the permission of both instructors, I was able to write a research paper

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on the British physicist Ernest Rutherford that served for both the English course and a five-credit physics course I was taking. Those skills, such as they were, were kept alive for me by research papers required in later undergraduate courses in history, art history, and history of religion—all taken to satisfy Pitt's core curriculum requirement. I think the "WAC" label, or Writing Across the Curriculum, hadn't been invented yet, but the idea seems to have been there in the structure of the undergraduate program.

The following year I took "Introduction to Literature" (English 21 & 22), a requirement, again, for all School of Liberal Arts students. My section met in the English Room, and the literature I was introduced to, as far as I recall, was all English literature. The teacher was a quiet man named Sidney Kneebone, and I think he, too, was a full-time instructor. I don't know if all sections had a common curriculum—probably not—but they all had six weeks in the second semester devoted to a book of Browning poems, a book I still have. By the end of that semester I felt, somewhat to my surprise, that I had learned to read poetry. And that's how I ended up in Lawrence Lee's "World Poetry" course a year later.

It wasn't long after that that both Dorothy O'Connor and Sidney Kneebone left Pitt, along with other talented instructors in English and in other departments. Chancellor Edward Litchfield was making a strong and multifaceted effort to upgrade Pitt's standing as a major research university, and my guess is that full-time faculty with just an M.A., no matter how seasoned as teachers, were just not part of his vision. Many of them were not interested in a PhD, and so they had to go. Dorothy O'Connor married a man in the Theater Department and went with him to Penn State (Pete Beagle was devastated), and I think Sidney Kneebone became a librarian. This did not mean that freshman and sophomore classes were now staffed with PhDs, which some of us naively assumed was the point of forcing out full-time instructors. It meant they were staffed by graduate students, who now had more opportunity for support.

Finally we come to Ed Peterson. In the Fall '57-Spring '58 academic year I took Monty Culver's course in "Description and Narration" (English 25 & 26). The following year I took "Fiction Writing" (English 185 & 186). It was usually taught by Peterson, but he went on leave for that year and Culver took it over. The year after that I took English 189 and (presumably) 190 with Peterson. The course isn't on my transcript and I probably made some kind of informal arrangement with Peterson, because I was starting the M.A. program and making up English literature courses to become a fully accepted graduate student. The picture of Peterson's office you remember is from that year; it's in the 1960 yearbook.

I don't know when Peterson first became interested in teaching composition, but it probably was about that time (1959-60) or just a year or two later. I don't think he would have disagreed with your sense of a time when "writing was writing" rather than separated into creative writing and composition. But once he got into it there must have been practical demands that made him revise, and perhaps compromise, that ideal of the fundamental unity of all kinds of writing.

In his fiction writing classes Peterson always emphasized the importance of writing about something you know or have observed closely. This of course didn't prevent a writer from learning a subject he wanted to write about. But my guess is that when that orientation was imported into freshman composition it became much simplified, so that Peterson's lectures and assignments in the freshman course focused almost exclusively on the "personal experience" essay—especially in the first semester. In fact, they focused on the "personal experience" paragraph, one a week for most of the semester. That may be one reason he liked the overhead projector: you could put most, if not all, of a student paragraph up in front of the class and edit it right there, with everyone watching. Today we might use PowerPoint to do the same thing, but Peterson's presentations were quite effective and beautifully clear as he worked on sharpening up a passage by cutting words, drawing arrows to move a phrase, changing an adjective—all in his clear longhand. You had the feeling that you, the student, were Thomas Wolfe watching Maxwell Perkins put your genius into shape.

I don't remember much about the second semester, particularly Peterson's role in it. (I only taught the freshman composition course once; after that, my TA assignment was to serve as an assistant and reader for large introductory literature courses.) I think I remember that there were four longer papers—one personal experience, one explanatory, one critical, and one research—and four books to read. The TAs could choose the books for their own sections, and I taught "Portrait of the Artist," "Lucky Jim," "The Plumed Serpent," and something else. The books were not well integrated into the paper assignments, except perhaps for the critical paper.

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I don't know if Peterson had any relationship with Charles Crow, or with anyone else on the faculty except Monty (who was his former student). His office in the Early American Room was the place to find him, not the English Department, and I had the feeling that its isolation was his preference. He had his writing students out to his home once for a picnic. His house was in what was then a fairly remote location, out by North Park, back a long dirt driveway and by itself in the middle of several acres of untended fields. Students don't usually know much, or care much, about faculty relationships, but Peterson gave one a definite impression that he was not much interested in his colleagues who taught literature. He once told us that the ideal college education for would-be writers would be no requirements at all, and particularly no required literature courses; students would read and learn on their own, guided by their interests in writing, and in that way would get a better education than they do under the present system. We did feel—and this may be student legend-making—that he was in contact with all kinds of publishers and editors in New York. It is true, though perhaps not connected, that the commencement speaker at my graduation was the Edward A. Weeks, the long-time editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Why did he become interested in composition teaching in the first place? The creative writing program at Pitt was of long standing and well known; it seems that running that would have been enough to do. It may be that he felt that good instruction in writing is so basic to a liberal arts education that he took up the cause purely for that admirable—if utopian—reason. A more practical reason might have been that the change from having composition taught by experienced full-time instructors to having it taught by graduate students in literature demanded that someone be in charge—yes, a Writing Program Director—and that he was persuaded to do it by someone (such as the Chair) telling him, “Well, if you won't do it imagine who will.” (An argument Tom Van Laan used often when he was Chair [at Rutgers].) The lecture/recitation format of his composition course probably was modeled on the science courses, and the English Department was experimenting with it (though without the recitation sections) in its introductory literature courses, too. The courses I was TA for (Crow's “Introduction to Poetry,” Mooney's “Introduction to Fiction,” Gale's “Survey of American Literature”) could have as many as 200 students in them. But this is all speculation. I didn't know Peterson well at all, or what he had in mind when he created his “Peterson Method” of teaching composition. I do remember him saying, however, that it was a method good enough for 90% of most writing, and for nearly all the writing most students would need to do after college.