Why All College Students Should Be English Majors

By Victor Lana | Tuesday, August 13, 2013

The new school year looms ominously—and believe me when the calendar turned to August my children got upset, and now they are shivering their timbers every time they see a “back to school” advertisement on TV or in the stores. No matter how much they worry, for them the course of study is elementary, my dear Watsons; they are young enough to have a scholastic year already planned out for them. However, for those students who are embarking on their college careers—or even those who have not yet declared a major, I would suggest rethinking the philosophy, sociology, business, or even education major in favor of becoming an English major. There, I said it, whew!

Okay, I may seem to have a vested interest here with my doctorate in English and years spent as a teacher of writing and reading (at least I have two of the three r’s well covered). The truth is though that I am not advocating that people dive in and get their graduate degrees in English, but I fervently believe that every undergraduate student should be required to be an English major.

The reason why is fairly simple and salient—now, more than ever before, writing and writing well is essential in all subject areas, in future careers, and in life in general. Being able to communicate in writing—and to do it very well—is clearly a way to delineate those who will make the greatest strives in this century. And despite texts, tweets, and emails with horrid grammar and spelling, I know that everyone has an inner editor just waiting to emerge from the cocoon. The best way I know for students to blossom as prolific writing butterflies is for them to be English majors. Now, this is not to say that there are not many other subject areas worthy of major status. I recognize this, and that is why I believe all colleges and universities should mandate that every student declare a dual major—English and something else of their choice. Being English majors will make these students better majors in any and every other subject area.

Besides the most essential writing factor that comes along with being an English major, there are many other benefits for the student. English majors will not only get the grammar, punctuation, and spelling that they probably did not get in high school, but the added bonus here is that they are forced to become true readers—and not (and here is the greatest dividend) of just magazines, online minutiae, and text messages: they will find it necessary and compelling to read great works of literature, to be able to respond critically to these readings, and write research papers with essential works cited and not randomly cut and pasted fodder from the Internet. In short being an English major as an undergraduate prepares you for the real world because one day you will have to be able to generate ideas of your own in response to concepts and assignments from bosses and clients. Of course, back in high school students always wanted to know why they would need to know anything about Hamlet or Jane Eyre or Leaves of Grass in “real life,” but in college it is the instructor’s great pleasure to elucidate a simple and undeniable fact—these works are life itself. Students will recognize all the jealousies, the conflicts, and the rage of today in times past; they will also discover that literature opens a door or window to an awareness they may have never realized they had of self.

Of course, many of a certain age can remember Woody Allen’s line in Annie Hall about never taking a course with Beowulf on the reading list, but I would contend that the Woodster probably had the wrong teacher who perhaps used the wrong translation of that fine old work. Many other adults will recall English classes with grunts and groans, but that is mostly because of a similar problem. With the right teachers who love the material and teach it with great enthusiasm, students will become enthralled by even more difficult works such as Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury or James Joyce’s Ulysses.

As a student I never really understood the world—the real world—until I got sucked into fictional worlds where problems were faced, conflicts were heightened, and situations were resolved. Most importantly, human nature was explored in all its deep and wonderful complexity. I fervently believe you can get more about psychology from reading the stories of Edgar Allan Poe than you could from any boring three hundred pound textbook. You can certainly learn and understand more about the American Civil War whilst reading Stephen Crane’s Red Badge of Courage, and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby can teach more deeply about the Roaring 20s than a student would get in a history book.
The most crucial dimension that literature has over textbooks is the human connection. Life is not just an examination of facts and figures but rather an exploration of the soul. We learn from literature that life is worth living through various lenses, that aspects of human nature, even the most repugnant, require deep thought and analysis. It is simply not enough to read a story once and be done with it, and English majors will learn that it is only upon multiple readings that the literary onion can be sufficiently peeled to get to the things that matter.

Students have always been amazed when I start talking about a book (like Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*) and reveal that I have probably read it fifty or more times. I explain that I always read a book again before I start to talk about it in a course, and with every new reading I find something else. I usually compare this to a movie (some students have seen their favorite one hundreds of times) and how, upon multiple viewings, that you will see something that you missed. I note that this is when we learn to truly appreciate the craft of the writer or director or actor, realizing the depth of effort associated with creating something.

Because of this exploration of depths and appreciation of craft, English majors can find many open doors when they are done with college. Whether the students wish to go into law, medicine, business, or teaching, they are already armed with what matters most: an understanding about life, a unique way to perceive and interpret human behavior, and an ability to write and read well. If nothing else, the communication factor will be the greatest asset for English majors. These days communication is the fiber that connects the fabric of the world, and they will be able to compete in any arena and interact with others with confidence and acuity.

We have to remember that “art” (this includes painting, music, performance, and literature) is not just the stuff that dreams are made from, but is the essence of life. Appreciation of art elevates the soul, brings us to heights never dreamt of if our feet had never left the ground but because of the enjoyment provided by the work. By understanding art and appreciating it, students open themselves to the most important aspects of living a full and meaningful life.

The great painter Pablo Picasso once said, “Art is the lie that tells the truth.” I have always used this line with my students as an opening day writing response. Amazingly, over the years many students have been more on target than you would imagine. Many understood that the “lie” is the fiction and the “truth” is the awareness gained.

Students have written beautiful responses even about “art” in their own lives, how being either a ballerina or a cellist helped them reach understandings they could never have accomplished without the “art” factor.

So, as your college students start talking about what “major” to pursue this fall, why not nudge them to consider English. Yes, there are a lot of books to read and papers to write, but they should know that nothing worthwhile is easy. One day when they have to fill out a job application or do a project for their bosses, they will look back and thank their English professors for the “lie” that unexpectedly will lead them to the greatest of all truths – being able to read deeply and write well will be the gift that keeps on giving for the rest of their lives.

**About Victor Lana**

Victor Lana has published numerous stories, articles, and poems in literary magazines and online. His books *In a Dark Time* (1994), *A Death in Prague* (2002), *Move* (2003), *The Savage Quiet September Sun: A Collection of 9/11 Stories* (2005) and *Like a Passing Shadow* (2009) are available online and as e-books. He has won the National Arts Club Award for Poetry, but has concentrated mostly on fiction and non-fiction prose in recent years. He has worked as faculty advisor to school literary magazines and enjoys the creative process as a writer, editor, and collaborator. He has been with Blogcritics since July 2005, has edited many articles, was co-head sports editor with Charley Doherty, and now is a Culture and Society editor. He views Blogcritics as one of most exciting, fresh, and meaningful opportunities in his writing life.