

Early Days

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When I came to LaGuardia in 1974, the English area was part of a mega department called Language and Culture. Our founder, Joseph Shenker thought it best to make everything bureaucratic at LaGuardia slightly awry—the grades were Excellent, Good, Pass and No Credit, Evening Classes were Extended Day and departments didn't fit traditional subject-based models. He wanted to mark clearly that we were different from every other college. Experimentation was highly regarded, funded and rewarded.

George Groman was the chair of Language and Culture. He was a brilliant, mercurial, moody, crafty man with a mantle of psychic armor impossible to penetrate. His rages were legendary. Still, he had a gift for making shrewd choices in hiring. He told me once that he liked to try to ignore what people were telling him in interviews, block them out as much as he could. If they succeeded in making an impression on him, then probably they were effective teachers. He also said that LaGuardia was a very bad place to discover who you are. I think he meant that people with strong, fully formed personalities, people like Flora Mancuso, Roberta Matthews and Gil Muller would do well here, while others would flounder under the intense pressure.

Harvey Wiener was the Coordinator of the English Area, the Director of Composition. We used his text—*Creating Compositions*—in LCE 101. He stressed process: a student would learn how to build a paragraph and then expand it into a longer essay. Harvey went on to a long career writing textbooks, many in collaboration with colleagues of ours like Gil Muller and Nora Eisenberg. Over my teaching career I have used process as the centerpiece of my approach to teaching writing. His book was important to me because our literary studies had trained us how to take an already finished piece apart not show a student how to put one together.

Our Basic Skills course—LCE100—seemed to me to have a grammar-based focus. We counted errors in exit exams—the students were allowed no more than eight of any sort and no more than two could be run-ons or comma splices, so we all had to learn what run-ons and comma splices were. Mechanical as this may seem, to our credit, from the very beginning we had the Appeals Process which gave colleagues a chance to discuss how the student was doing overall not in just one all-or-nothing exit essay.

While LaGuardia and the department were stimulating and at times fun, there was tremendous pressure to live up to the institutionally created myth of the super-teacher. Years later, John Hyland, my colleague on the college-wide P&B and a new chair, described a candidate for tenure as a “good teacher.” He then had to spend the next *hour* fighting off probing, demanding questions, as he tried to explain there was nothing wrong with the man’s teaching. I told him later that at LaGuardia, “good” meant “not good enough,” while “outstanding” was okay. I think this attitude got in the way of our development as teachers and as a department, no matter how wonderful we thought we were at the time. What we do now in the writing classroom is so much better than what we did then. I think we would have gotten here sooner if there had been more of a value placed on risk taking and bolder approaches to evaluating student writing. But failure was never an option if you wanted to survive the tenure process, so we stuck to counting errors for far too long.

In those early days, students were placed in writing classes based on their performance on entrance reading tests. Then the first week of classes was given over to the big job of giving diagnostic essays and shuffling large numbers of students into and out of LCE 100 and 101. We convinced the Administration that we should have our own writing samples to smooth out the first week. These were a great success. Later they were replaced with the WAT, the University’s Writing Assessment Test, which also did a fairly good job as a placement instrument (and, like all such, was entirely unsuited as an exit test, as I so testified in court in the Bronx when Hostos students

sued the University for denying them graduation because they hadn't passed their WAT re-test.)

In those early years one of the most striking figures in the department was Alan Berman, who died all too young. He was a brilliant man, gifted with an almost eidetic memory for texts and music, a voluble, unstoppable, *torrential* speaker, filled with passion for an endless variety of subjects—politics, history, literature, labor law. His students were in awe of him, while the observers urged that he let the students get a word in once in a while. He was a committed man of the left. A former marine with a Harvard Ph. D., he went to Biafra on his own when famine struck that rebellious province to see what he could do. He had absolutely not one iota of social sense or the dynamics of the moment. One of the secretaries told me he drove her home after a departmental party, and she invited him in for a cup of coffee. He started talking while she nodded off. An hour later, she woke up and he was still going on about the relative merits of Rubenstein and Horowitz or the Wagner Act or something else she had no interest in. He chain smoked cigarettes and self medicated. He keeled over from a heart attack while marking essays. He was our soul—because he put his immense talents at the service of our students and loved his fellow teachers—and I miss him every day.

Our English Department is a very special place and I have been thinking about the reasons: We are very, very smart. We know an awful lot about literature and art, but also we are adept at making changes, at re-inventing ourselves when we need to, while keeping what is best. We have always placed the students first. Not only that, we like them, and we like teaching them. Over the years, I noticed that those who placed themselves first generally moved on. We have no factions. Some departments have even had fist fights at meetings or are divided by deep fissures, but we have been able to hang together. We are mutually supportive, not competitive. Academic departments are notorious for backbiting, calumny, envy and slander—read any novel set in academe ever written—but we have largely escaped that because, in the end, we all do the same work, and

we know how hard it is to write a book (or even read one) while grading piles of essays. So we take joy in each other's accomplishments.

Because we are 1) smart 2) good writers 3) dedicated to our students and the college, we have spread out through LaGuardia to first serve on, then run its committees and task forces. Our influence is immense (though not uncriticized, see backbiting etc. above) and this has helped us gain important victories in any number of areas, such as tenure and promotions, funding, curriculum, and most importantly, our jealously guarded independence. As we grow and adapt and meet the endless challenges that life, our students and the city offer us, we will keep this good thing—this English Department of ours—going because talented people join us every year, and they know a good thing when they see it.