

## Teaching Writing in Troubled Times

By Clay Rooks

If you teach composition or creative writing at a college or university, especially at an inner city school, you will occasionally receive student papers that will have troubling content. This was recently pointed up in the tragic shootings at Virginia Tech by a student identify as an English major who had written some disturbing stories. Rarely are such student writings anything more than a student venting some frustration or emulating some graphic novel, movie or video game. However, sometimes you have to decide if it's fiction or not.

I teach at an innercity college in California. I remember receiving a paper once that seemingly described, and was a tacit confession of, a serious crime by either the student or a relative. It was clear from the essay that someone had been seriously harmed or killed. This story bothered me enough that I finally decided to have a talk with the student, and he was able to convince me that he had made it all up, borrowing the plot from a TV show.

Another time I had a young woman turn it a paper that had a rather graphic description of a gang beating. The victim and all of the participants were young women. She admitted it was a real incident that had happened years ago as an initiation into a girl gang of which she had once been a part. Supposedly the victim was a willing victim.

A few years ago we received a short story submitted to the student literary magazine, when I was an editor, in which a character in the story used very degrading language toward women. We asked him to clean up the language, but he chose not to. After consultation, the editors rejected the story for publication. This student became very upset, but he was not violent. Instead he wrote an editorial about being censored by the college, which the local newspaper was pleased to print without ever checking with the editors to find out if what he said was true or why the story was refused.

As teachers, there isn't much we can do more than what the teachers at Virginia Tech did. We can voice our concern to the administration and we can suggest that the student receive counseling, but the student can claim free speech and privacy rights, and he can refuse counseling, unless compelled by the court. We are limited by what the law allows. Unless the student actually does something illegal, threatening, or violent, there's not much else we can do, and perhaps that is tragic as well.

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Clay Rooks is Letters Department Chair at Fresno City College where he teaches English, creative writing, and critical thinking.