

Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater

University of North Carolina at Greensboro



Every semester, Dr. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater stands before groups of college students in her composition classes and responds to the inevitable argument that writing is an innate talent: either you have it or you don't.

"I tell students that's simply not true," she says. "Students think that it's a talent because that means if they don't have it, then they don't have to do it. It's much harder for them to realize that it's more than a talent, and they have to put a lot of energy into it. There are some gifted writers that we all know are gifted writers, but they spend a lot of time perfecting their craft."

As an example for her hesitant students, she cites the famous suspense and horror author Stephen King. "If they read a book like Stephen King's 'On Writing,' they will see that that man wrote all of his life. He wrote and he wrote and he wrote. He got rejected and rejected and rejected. It's not like he started out with talent; he developed it."

Chiseri-Strater, an English professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro since 1993, has mastered the teaching of writing during her 12-year career as a college instructor. In fact, from 1997 to 2002, she served as the Director of Composition at UNCG. Writing and looking at writing through the lens of culture has become a significant part of her life. She talks enthusiastically about writing, about teaching writing and about her students, particularly those who share her enthusiasm.

"I like to teach composition in a number of ways," she says, relaxing in her small office in the McIver Building, the English Department's home at UNCG. "This semester, my students are doing field work where they go out and look at subcultures and learn about the language, the rituals and behaviors of those subcultures. They learn how to observe and the art of reflection, looking at what you see and why you see it that way, and reflecting that back on yourself." This observational approach, she notes, teaches students much about themselves as they practice their writing craft.

Chiseri-Strater's interest in teaching composition blossomed long before she began teaching university students. During her early career as a teacher in an all-black school in New York City, she realized that she enjoyed teaching writing more than teaching literature "because then I could get some product from these kids and look at it and understand them better," she recalls. It was then, too, that she discovered the relevance of culture to teaching

and writing. “The more you know about their culture and history, the better you’ll be as a teacher,” she explains. “It’s not an us-and-them kind of thing; most kids really want to learn, no matter how tough their exterior is or what kind of show they put on. So I learned more about their music, and I began to revise my work so that I learned about black poetry. I taught ‘Black Like Me,’ and they wrote essays called ‘White Like Him.’”

She taught those “crazy, wonderful” kids for four years. She taught for another year in New Hampshire and then began teaching at a rural school in Maine, an area that initially reminded her of her upbringing in the small Ohio town of Zanesville. “I think I felt like I could connect with them, but I was much more distanced from them, having come from New York City and having been embedded in cultural activities. These kids were just isolated; they were interested in dirt bikes and cheerleading and stuff that I really didn’t like. I only lasted there for a year. I wasn’t a very good teacher; I wasn’t engaged with that group of kids.” The experience left such an impression on her that she later wrote an essay about it for a book titled “Oops: What We Learn When Our Teaching Fails,” edited by Brenda Miller Power and Ruth Shagoury Hubbard.

With two master’s degrees to her credit, Chiseri-Strater then decided to go back to school for her Ph.D. She learned of an interdisciplinary program that combined studies in anthropology, education and English at the University of New Hampshire and was asked to be part of the first group of students to participate in the program. “I found I really liked posing questions and trying to find the answers,” she says. “Part of my incentive to go back to school had to do with my desire to do research.”

Her interest in cultures developed during her Ph.D. program when she discovered ethnography the study of cultures as a way to look at literacy. Her own experiences with different cultures had begun much earlier, however.

From an early age, she recognized the cultural differences between what she perceived as the dreary life of a housewife and what she dreamed would be the sparkling life of an actress. She knew that life in Zanesville could never compare to the glamour of life in New York City.

“I just had this feeling that if I stayed in Ohio, I was never going to get out,” she says. “But I always liked New York; I thought it was glamorous, and I wanted to be an actress.” She pauses to interject that she suspects many teachers secretly, or not so secretly, want to be actors. Then she continues, “I went as quickly as I could to New York City.” She even majored in drama at New York University. She discovered – and loved – the cultural richness and diversity of New York. Through her teaching jobs (which began when she realized she “wasn’t going to be an actress and a star and a queen”), she learned even more about cultures and subcultures.

To complete her Ph.D., Chiseri-Strater wrote a dissertation titled, "Academic Discourse: An Ethnography of the Public and Private Literacies of University Students." As a writing teacher, she was interested in "whether anything you taught students ever stuck with them when they left." From a composition class that was similar to her own, she selected eight students to follow through their majors. "I was interested in those intersections," she says. "What mattered in the Russian class or the economics class, the art history class? What writing was like what we did in freshman English and what was different?" She discovered that while there were overlaps, many other disciplines did not seem to be interested in the student himself, only in what he learned.

"In art history, they didn't care what she brought into the class with her," she says. "She was a blank slate and they were going to teach her how to be an art historian. Whereas in English Studies, we're very interested in the person who's learning." In her dissertation, she suggested more acknowledgement of what the student's life his or her culture can bring to writing and reading assignments. "Get to know who they are and what they have brought to the classroom," she explains. "I think it's interesting to have kids in your class that you think you're doing a good job with but then you come to find out that this kid knows all this other stuff that you haven't even really accounted for. All that interested me. Every kid has so much to offer, and we just sit there like a sea of faces so often." Chiseri-Strater later published a book detailing her findings, a book that remains a staple in university classes.

To find out more about her students, Chiseri-Strater encourages her students to do field work by looking at subcultures (she's fascinated by the work of a student who's currently observing the subculture of a cigar shop), and she assigns various types of writing, including personal narratives.

"I don't think that's the only kind of writing you should do, nor do I think it's the easiest kind of writing," she says. "In fact, sometimes it's the hardest. Sometimes I put it at the end of the semester because that's when they're actually ready to explore themselves more." Although she encourages personal writing, she also believes that literature has a place in composition classes. Her students don't spend time analyzing literature for symbolism, but rather use books as a way of talking about writing.

"I want my students to have not only the power of writing as expression, but also the power of writing as rhetoric, as a way of getting things done in the world so that they understand the importance of audience, the speaker and the writer and the content, the information that goes into a rhetorical triangle," she says. "I would say that most people teaching writing today, who are good at it, do a kind of blended approach of rhetorical theory and composition theory."

Because she encourages self-expressive and reflective writing, her teaching style, she says, could be considered “expressivist,” but she argues that she’s “really much more of a social constructionist who looks at language and rituals and behavior as socially constructive.”

This look at language, rituals and behavior, combined with her extensive knowledge of effective teaching strategies, has been the impetus for Chiseri-Strater’s two published books and numerous publications, as well as her many conference presentations. Her first book, *Academic Literacies: The Public and Private Discourse of College Students*, was published in 1991 with a second printing in 2000. Her second book, a collaborative work with Bonnie Sunstein, is titled, *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research*, published in 1997, with a second edition published in 2001.

Through her work she has discovered and rejected many of the stereotypes she had held. Still, she discovered one more, a stereotype that led to her current research project, “Stopping Out.”

“When my daughter wanted to drop out of school for a semester, I thought it was the end of the world,” she says. “So I became interested in it because I realized I had all these stereotypes about kids who leave school.” What she has discovered in her ethnographic interviews with students who take time off from school is that they learn much about themselves in the process. She hopes the research will be her third book.

“I hope it might even be a book that will appeal to a parent,” she says. “You know, if my kid wants to take time off from school, that’s not the worst thing that could happen; it might be the best thing they ever did. They can get a minimum wage job and learn how to balance their checkbook and get to work on time and pay their own car insurance.”

Not all of her cultural discoveries have come as a result of academia. In 1993, she discovered Southern culture after moving to Greensboro.

“I think the South has more culture than probably any place else in the United States,” she says. “I’ve loved looking at the language here. I’ve loved the food, the rituals of Southern life. My mother always read Southern novels and secretly wanted to be a southern belle.” She believes, too, that Southern people are better listeners and that they are very polite.

“The first year I taught here, I didn’t think I was going to get anyone to talk to me,” she says. “The students would just sit there, waiting for you, and I really had to jiggle them around to get them to open up a little bit. Sometimes in that politeness, there’s a withholding, and I think that’s a very hard thing to get past. You have to just hang in there till they know you better.”

The only difficult transition, she says, has been the summer heat. “The first August I was here, I just went from my house to school and back. I didn’t know how anybody could

function," she says. To alleviate that problem, she accepted a summer teaching job at Martha's Vineyard, where each summer she instructs master's level students from Northeastern University in teacher research. While there, she visits old friends, and enjoys her summers a safe distance from the oppressive Southern heat and humidity.

When she returns each autumn, she prepares again for new groups of composition students and the inevitable, flawed argument that "you can't teach writing." She anticipates hearing that question only a few more years, as retirement is on the horizon. When that time comes, she plans to travel.

"Last year, I had my first sabbatical," she says. "I went to Italy and rented an apartment in Florence. My family came to visit me, but I was alone a lot, which was very important to me, in terms of being an older woman and knowing that I could travel and be by myself and be very happy, and fill up every single day with things to do." Her destinations of choice include Africa, Portugal, Spain, Greece, China and India, among others. Apparently, old habits die hard, for even in retirement, Chiseri-Strater will be a student of culture.