
Regional

Johnson teaches, researches the English language

Ask many educators what is the major problem with today's students and you will oftentimes get the same answer: They don't write well. One person who is working on correcting this problem is Matthew Johnson, an assistant professor in the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Johnson grew up outside Chicago. He received undergraduate degrees in history and English, a master's in English and a doctorate also in English from Indiana University at Bloomington. While he started out to become an investment banker, he discovered soon after arriving at college that English was his true passion.

"I was so heavily influenced by what they (my professors) were doing – textual analysis, cultural analysis, trying to find meaning – that I wanted to abandon business altogether," said Johnson.

As someone who teaches students who come right out of high school he has strong opinions about their preparation in English. "They are not prepared for what it is that I am asking them to do as college writers. The writing that we do is not just a continuum; it is not a linear development from junior high to high school to college," Johnson explained. "I think that college writing is something that is new and it should be treated like that with them. It is a new subject." One issue that has concerned some educators and parents alike is the possible effect on writing of students' use of electronic media.

"I don't think that handwriting and writing on paper is quite as foreign to students as many people think," Johnson said. "Doing small surveys in classes reveals that they do quite a bit of handwriting. It might not be these lengthy drafts that they are writing out page upon page but they are still note taking, they are still brainstorming on paper. So I am not sure that there is such a difference there. As for the final product, well, when I reintroduce class writing, usually small activities, I do see that there is less of a mastery of things like spelling. Perhaps the computer and word processing has changed the way that they are spelling and going about writing at the surface level."

Johnson published a paper titled, "Teasing out Everyday Culture: 'Why Simple Questions are Worth Asking.'" Have people lost interest in asking the simple

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

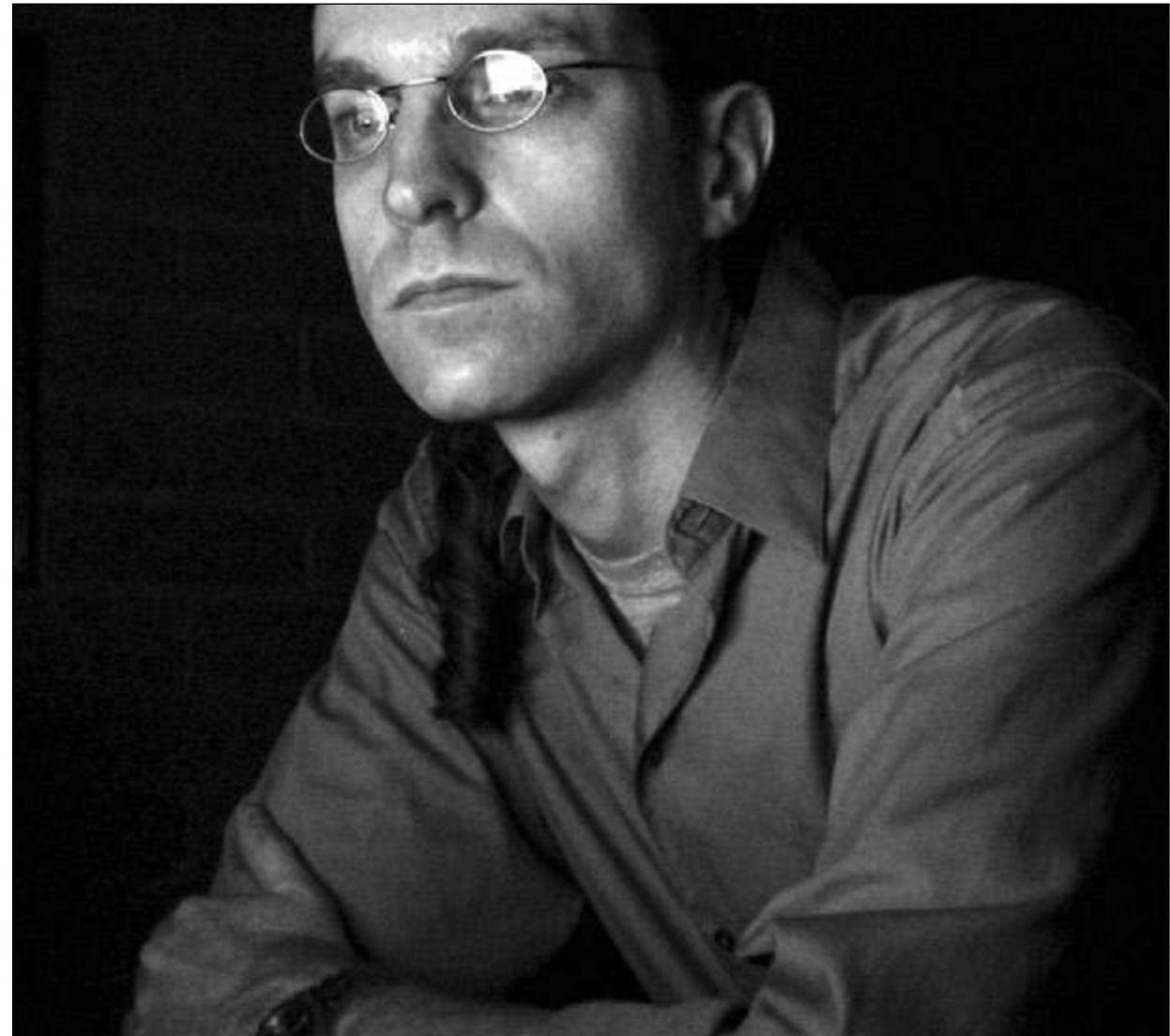
questions?

"I don't (think so), although I suppose all professors are terrified of sounding stupid," he said. "And frequently when students aren't responding we either think the question is too hard, in which case we can break it apart, or too easy and they won't bother to respond." In response to this problem, Johnson goes beyond just analyzing his students' writing. "Something as simple as the procedure that they inherently know about raising hands comes up for analysis, something interesting to explore. But if we think about something simple like that we start to realize, of course, that it is much more complex, which is why I like simple questions."

Johnson said that he also examines other behaviors of his students in order to create a dynamic that can help all of them become more engaged in discussions. "When a student hasn't spoken in a while, or hasn't spoken at all, well that person is going to get the floor," he said. "And so it is a power dynamic which means that there is shared power there, that the students actually can manipulate the situation to their own advantages."

For Johnson, simple questions like "Why do we raise our hands in class?" can bring about complex answers. "So it seems like it is a simple question and indeed it is, but the answers to those simple questions get very much complex and I think they reveal something meaningful about what it is that we might emphasize," Johnson said. "And once they have raised their hand and said something in class, they are manipulating and persuading me. They are influencing the decision that I might make, the question that I might ask next or the response that my students might offer next."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



Dr. Matthew Johnson in a self portrait.