

English Education and the Teaching of Literature

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For a while now, I have been wondering about how literature gets taught in English classes at the university, and, specifically, about what goes on in literature classes at my university; I am curious about whether there is a current set of “best practices” for literature classrooms (and, if so, what they are); I worry whether future university teachers, as part of their Ph.D. programs, receive any training in the teaching of literature, and I want to know how individual instructors, English departments, and/or literature programs review and revise what they do pedagogically in their course offerings. I wonder and worry, am curious and want to know because I am an English educator. I prepare undergraduates to teach English in the secondary school; I am not part of my department’s literature faculty. Yet my students, secondary English teacher candidates, spend a great deal of time in literature classes (they complete English coursework equivalent to an English major, although they receive a degree through our university’s college of education), and my responsibilities in English methods classes include teaching the teaching of literature.

As an English educator, I know very well how I teach future secondary school teachers to teach literature, and I believe I have an accurate sense of the current theoretical view of the subject from my field, English education. But, as James Marshall notes, “it is not the custom to think of courses in English as courses in teacher preparation” (380), and I wonder if there is any explicit conversation in these literature classes about pedagogy or pedagogical issues. There is

certainly teaching present in these courses, and, as Marshall asserts, “by sitting in classrooms where literature is taught, we not only learn about literature, we also learn about teaching literature” (381). What if, then, literature instructors in university classrooms are not teaching literature as future secondary teachers are taught to teach it? What if my students, teacher candidates, are encountering models of teaching in literature classes that undermine what they are learning in methods courses?

Perhaps a more productive way to articulate my wondering and worrying is to note that because teacher candidates complete, essentially, an English major and because the literature class is a place where the teaching of literature is taught (albeit in unacknowledged and non-explicit ways), that there is an opportunity for English educators and literature professors to support one another’s work, to provide pedagogical models that enrich both English majors’ and English education majors’ classroom experiences and supplement their learning. Failure to provide pedagogical training for English graduate students, failure to cultivate a storehouse of “best practices,” failure to exemplify a rich, student-centered pedagogical practice limits the learning of all the students who enroll in English classes. Attention to pedagogical questions and issues can support the experiences English education students are having in their methods classes and can introduce English majors to an area of English Studies that has been historically resisted, ignored, and unacknowledged and produced, as a result, an impoverished discipline. As an English department, all of us, including us English educators, have not been concerned enough with and have not been talking enough about how to teach literature. My own ignorance regarding the state of teaching in the university English classroom, our collective failure to model best practices, and our lack of attention to teaching points to an opportunity for the

disciplinary territories of English education and literary studies to communicate with and inform one another about teaching, an activity central to both fields and beneficial to students in both territories. “Ironically,” Lad Tobin writes, “the materials and methods in composition and pedagogy grow directly out of and into literary studies and critical theory; that is, teaching is a way of reading and writing” (71). And so we are already well-prepared for such disciplinary conversations.

In English methods classes, I work toward creating a reflective teacher, a teacher who is a resourceful planner, a wise chooser of curricula and teaching practices, and a careful evaluator. I prioritize constructivist teaching practices, practices consistent with the theoretical notion that knowledge is made not found, that learning occurs when students are actively engaged, and that learning should be made explicit to students through metacognitive routines and overt talk about the processes of knowledge production. Making the work of the classroom subject to discussion, laying bare learning objectives and curricular goals, and exploring how we learn are concepts teaching candidates struggle to make material as they imagine their future classrooms. The struggle to visualize what this theoretical approach to teaching looks like in practice is the result, partly, of having failed to experience this kind of teaching as a student—in both secondary and post-secondary classrooms. While the scarcity of constructivist teaching practices in secondary schools remains a significant obstacle to future teachers learning how to teach in constructivist ways, I want to focus for a moment on the scarcity of constructivist practices in university English classrooms because these classrooms offer an experience in the study of literature at a moment concurrent to explicit instruction in the teaching of English. In other words, there seems to me to be an opportunity, while future teachers are enrolled in university classrooms, for

English education and literary studies to better align pedagogically to the benefit of these students. To illustrate the pedagogical difference two areas of English Studies present to students regarding the teaching of literature, let me tell a story from the classroom.

Teach Process Not Product When Teaching Reading, Too

My curiosity about what happens in the university literature class was sparked when working with a group of future English teachers in a methods class. I had planned to model a lesson about reading process, about identifying and talking about the strategies we use when we attempt to interpret literature. I chose a poem, T.S. Eliot's *Preludes*, and invited my future teachers to read it and then talk about what they saw in the poem and what they thought it meant. Then, I intended to list and talk about the reading strategies we used to understand the poem and discuss further how you might teach those strategies to high school students.

I chose Eliot's poem because it is both a beautiful and difficult poem, difficult especially because of the ambiguity of the poem's last few lines. My students found the poem difficult, too. They had trouble understanding who the characters were and what they were doing; they weren't even sure where the action of the poem—if there was any action—was taking place. For this reason, we began going through the poem line-by-line to sort this information out, and this took a lot longer than I had planned. So, by the time we got to the end of the poem, they were a bit restless, ready for a break (ours was a two and a half hour class, which we divided into two halves). As a result, when I asked questions about the poem's ending, about what the last few lines meant and why they were significant, they offered few answers. When I then said, "Let's take a break," they surprisingly spoke up. What do the last lines mean, they wanted to know.

“You mean, you’re not going to tell us what the poem means?” they said. “I don’t know,” I finally offered. And that brought groans and cackles. “You brought in a poem, and you don’t know what it means?” they asked incredulously. They couldn’t imagine why a teacher might do such a thing.

It was obvious to me, of course, that a teacher might choose to teach a poem he doesn’t fully understand in order to talk about the process of understanding, to talk about how to read and develop an interpretation of not only this one text but any text. That was the point of my lesson, a point that obviously failed to reach my students, which tells me, by the way, that I wasn’t being explicit about my goals and activities. The incident, though, suggested, too, that there was a significant difference between my students’ expectations for this lesson and my own, a difference emphasized perhaps by these future teachers still thinking like students and their teacher assuming they would easily shift to think like teachers. Why were they so sure that I was going to tell them what the poem meant by the end of our discussion? I asked myself afterwards. Because teachers always did that, I concluded. That’s how discussions of literature went in university English classes.

That my own students—future teachers—remained passive, waiting for me to tell them the meaning of the poem disappointed me; that I hadn’t planned activities for my students to do to facilitate the interpretative process and fell back so easily into a traditional teacher-led discussion of the poem was, additionally, an error on my part. After all, my goal was to show them how to teach interpretative processes; I did not want to pass along an interpretative product they could capture in a notebook to pass subsequently along to their future students. In fact, a large part of my work as an English educator is to shift my students’ perspectives of teaching

from product to process, and, in general, I find that it is usually pretty easy to get teaching candidates to see the value of a process approach. When I ask students to reflect on their own schooling, to think about their previous teachers, to remember a moment when they could say they learned something, they almost always report that they learn most memorably from doing. They remember very little of the information passed on to them by previous teachers. They enter my classroom having already experienced the power of a constructivist approach; they just don't have a theoretical frame for the experience. Because the value of constructivism aligns with the lessons of their experience, they support, theoretically, what I do in a methods course.

However, theoretical support for a pedagogical approach does not ensure a teaching practice consistent with that approach. The hard part, pedagogically, in teacher preparation courses, is helping teacher candidates find the teaching practices to support a constructivist philosophy. Prospective teachers do not easily generate constructivist teaching practices because few experience them as students. In addition, the teaching practices we do experience create expectations about appropriate teacher behavior, about what students do in classrooms, about what learning is, and about what teaching looks like; these expectations limit our ability to think of alternatives. As Tobin reports, a university instructor almost always proceeds “the way she had always proceeded (and presumably the way she had been taught herself) with very little recognition of the assumptions and implications of (or alternatives to) a particular technique or method” (75). As a result, we can't imagine teaching a poem we don't fully understand because we subconsciously expect teachers to illuminate the meaning of text for students, a meaning we believe a teacher should know fully. To find alternative teaching practices, then, we must disrupt

our own expectations for teaching and learning and, in the process, welcome the discomfort that will initially come along with that disruption.

To get teaching candidates to experience the value of a class discussion that prioritizes the interpretative process, for example, requires that English educators not only create a lesson that speaks to the reading process but also confronts expectations about what we do in school when we talk about literature and acknowledges the created discomfort. In other words, you can't have a conversation about process unless you also have a conversation about product, and the fact that students will fare much better talking about product means that they need to have more, albeit potentially impoverished, conversations about process. The objective is not to abandon what students know—how to talk about the product of their reading—but to use that to move them more comfortably to learning about process. The fact that students talk more productively about product means that they have too little experience talking about process. Why? Why haven't students experienced process pedagogy when studying literature? Why hasn't process pedagogy found its way into the university or secondary literature classroom? It is, after all, commonplace to see process work in introductory composition and in secondary writing classrooms. Process pedagogy is foundational to the English education classroom (at least theoretically; I am guessing though that too few English education courses are actually taught day in and day out using constructivist pedagogy). Is the literature classroom still too bound to its history, to the mythology of the great lecturer unlocking the secrets of a master text?

In *The Literature Workshop*, Sheridan Blau reflects on his earliest experiences teaching literature at the university to note that what he learned by preparing to teach a particular literary text to a particular group of students was exactly the kind of thing that his students should learn

about that text and that what needed to be replicated in the classroom wasn't the information Blau gathered but the process that Blau utilized to learn what he learned. Blau writes, "The intellectual work I was doing as a teacher was teaching me more than anything I could do for my students would teach them! If my job was to ensure that my students were learning as much as possible, then I had to find ways to switch roles with them, to have them take the kind of responsibility for such tasks as making sense of texts and figuring out textual and conceptual problems I regularly undertook in my role as the teacher" (2). Perhaps literature instructors especially are reticent to give up the role of the teacher; perhaps they just don't know how. Maybe they are like the future teachers that I teach in methods courses in that they understand the potential value of a constructivist approach to teaching literature but can't generate the teaching practices to carry it out. In any case, the problem, Blau argues, is that "as long as I was engaged in the task of teaching them what my efforts to construct meaning had yielded for me, all I could do was show them what I had learned. . . . The experience of learning was mine, not theirs" (2). Blau's language, too, is telling: "teaching them what ... show ... mine." If ultimately, we want students to possess knowledge, we need to think of knowledge as know-how; we want students to possess knowledge of how to learn. We can show them those processes, or, better, we can teach them how to use them.

But let me leave this point momentarily and tell you the story of another recent experience.

Teach Teaching Because You're Teaching It Anyway

At a special meeting of the English department led by our assessment committee, we begin by reviewing our learning outcomes. It is the very first outcome that gives me trouble, that I think represents the gap in our understanding between what literature majors require of the department and what English education majors require. The learning outcome reads: *English majors will deploy varied strategies for engaging with literature on the levels of words, appropriate parts of texts, whole texts, contexts, and criticism.* This learning outcome was written for a department that offers majors in journalism, professional writing and editing, and language and literature. The English education major is bestowed by our college of education; English education students, though, are required to take 19 courses offered by the English department, more courses than they are required to take in education. Do we even want, the assessment committee asks, to take these English education students into account when we assess our program? If so, then how should we do it?

The questions provoked by this meeting are good ones, but still I leave the meeting feeling uneasy. I learn that my English department colleagues care about making their courses responsive to the needs of English education students. Still I leave the meeting feeling as if they do not fully understand what it means to teach future teachers, as if they do not understand pedagogically what it means to be a critically reflective practitioner. And it is that first learning outcome that leaves me with these feelings.

Yes, English education students need to know how to deploy varied strategies for engaging with literature, but—apparently unlike literature majors—they also have to know how they deploy them. Teachers must reflect on their own use of reading strategies and use those

strategies with a level of self-consciousness so that they can teach others to use them successfully. Teachers need not only to be able to use reading strategies but to know why they use them, and they need to be able to articulate why they use them to their own students and to their workplace supervisors. (And wouldn't this also be useful knowledge for an English major?)

Teaching English education students this—this what they need to be able to do; that is, this know-how—and how to exercise it is my responsibility, to be sure, and I don't write to shirk that responsibility or to pass it to others. I write to ask, what kind of support is appropriate for literature classes to offer toward that goal? How can literature classes better serve English education students—without, of course, alienating the other student populations those courses serve?

One way to respond to that question is to suggest that literature teachers learn to share the metacognitive aspects of their courses. What I mean is that literature teachers share with their students the rationale behind their teaching practices. This is what I take James Marshall to be saying in “Closely Reading Ourselves: Teaching English and the Education of Teachers” when he writes, “As linguist James Paul Gee has argued, those discourses that we learn without fully knowing that we are learning them—that are learned in our lived-in environment while we think we are doing other things—are, like mother tongues, the discourses that we learn best. Teaching English is such a discourse, and we teach it everytime we teach English” (381). Because we teach how to teach every time we teach, future teachers benefit when they gain access to pedagogical thinking about text selection, assignment making, grading, etc. And so do English majors. Some of whom will go on to teach literature. Because an English education student is

still functioning as a student, it is difficult for him or her, while still in that role, to think like a teacher. If more instructors modeled the kind of thinking teachers do, the thinking associated with teacher work, we would, as a profession, provide students with more ways to imagine doing that work. For the literature teacher, specifically, this means explaining why one selects a “coverage model” for teaching the 18th Century or why one takes a thematic approach to the Modern period. It means explaining why students will write critical analyses and not poems in response to texts. It means explaining why you think students need to be told about the historical context of a text before they begin reading it. It means, in short, explaining almost every instructional and preparatory decision a teacher makes when teaching a class. I know this sounds like an enormous project, but I don’t think it has to steal time away from the other things we talk about in class; rather it should enhance them. Simply put, explanations of why we do teacher work as we do it ought to be available in a class that serves future teachers. (And, again, would this type of discussion hurt an English major?).

Lad Tobin narrates his own experience as a student in an English class where a professor did just that—explained why he handed papers to every individual student instead of giving the appropriate number to the first person in each row, explained why he dressed as he did, explained why he wrote comments on student papers as he did. Tobin argues that “by letting us in on his thinking, he was helping us to understand the profession that we wanted to enter”; further, “by demonstrating a way to read the classroom, he was helping us to make sense of pedagogical theory” (74). That benefit is as productive for an English major as it is for an English education major.

Sometimes our students will demand this information from us; they will ask, “Why are we doing this?” or “Why do we have to read that?” I use the verb “demand” intentionally; these questions are often asked inappropriately, put forth as a challenge to a teacher’s authority. The question is seen as a challenge exactly because a teacher’s authority for years has been built on what he or she knows, on his or her ability to illuminate a text’s secrets. What kind of classroom environment would make such a question a commonplace? Could we imagine a teacher’s sense of authority being grounded in know-how, derived from one’s ability to manage a community of inquiry? Imagining alternatives requires simply a shift in expectation. Marshall argues “that all teaching is about teaching—just as all writing is about writing—and that every class that enrolls prospective teachers is a class in teacher preparation” (380-381). If you are persuaded, then your English class, because it also enrolls English education students, is also an English education class, and your responsibilities then include the pedagogical.

But let’s move on to an occasion or two that may help us begin sorting through the problems I am laying bare here.

Inheriting and Disinheriting Teaching Genres

For as long as I have been an academic, I have been invested in trying to more effectively describe the work of teaching. I agree with Marshall when he says “we need to know more about how and why we teach as we do” (389). My sense is that if we can more accurately describe what we do when we teach, we can learn to do it better (and we can also define for the public what it is we do, articulate why teaching is intellectual work, and explain why educators should have more of a say about what happens to education in this country). An obstacle to such

a project, though, is that “Teacher knowledge is not abstract or generalized,” as Richard Murphy notes in *The Calculus of Intimacy*, “but embedded in actual school experience” (83). Teacher knowledge is singular, context-dependent, and personal. We know that what works in one classroom for one group of students may not necessarily work in another classroom with a different group of students. We know that to convey knowledge about teaching we often have to rely on story, to evoke context, to intimate what we have learned. We become vulnerable to anxiety about what we can generalize out of highly particular and often personal stories. We deal in the singular not the general.

Except that, as Robert Scholes points out, a discipline like English is also “a generic concept, an epistemic institution or apparatus that limits and enables the specific manifestations of ‘English’” (3). In other words, our singular behavior participates in what is also a shared practice; it is enabled by institutions, like teaching, and our teaching is recognized because it is delivered in common form or in a form that resembles a common form. Teaching is a genre, and genres are social. In addition, as James Slevin has noted, “every course we teach . . . proposes at its core a system of generic norms into which students are expected to grow. Such growth will depend on their capacity to question as well as to understand our norms” (19). It is crucial, then, when we teach teachers, that we explicitly talk about teaching as an inherited genre and question, critique, and subsequently revise that inheritance, even if it means telling very individualized stories. When we teach literature, we have remained especially reluctant to let go of inherited teaching practice—to the detriment of our students. Part of that reluctance to let go of certain teaching practices is due to the fact that we have no alternates. We don’t know what else to do.

In English education courses, I work initially on students' teaching philosophies, on their beliefs about how we learn best and about how we specifically learn to read and write. As I noted above, students do not testify to the lasting power of lecture, of the transmission model of teaching. They don't believe that they learned to write by being told of the differences between a complex and compound sentence; they say they learned to write by practicing. They don't know how to enact the kind of learning represented by the idea of practice in the classroom, though. I didn't either. I didn't learn teaching practices consistent with constructivism before I began actively touting a constructivist approach in my classes. It is only once I began touting constructivism, as a professor, that I realized that I wasn't clearly demonstrating via my teaching practice this theoretical approach to teaching. It was then that I began collecting appropriate teaching practices to go along with the philosophy. And "collecting" is the right word; my teaching practices are more borrowed than borne. I didn't create most of what I do; I found things to do in books.

Currently, that process of finding things to do in classrooms is what intrigues me. I can list points on the professional map that represent that intellectual journey for me—David Bartholomae's essays "Wanderings," "Inventing the University," and "Writing Assignments"; Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?"; Stanley Fish's "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One"; Robert Scholes proclamation in *Textual Power* that we must no longer study literature but texts, a proclamation that echoes the final sentence of Bartholomae's "Wanderings": "What we must finally concern ourselves with is not what is in the text but in ways of producing the text. And for this reason, a reading course is necessarily a writing course and a writing course must be a course in reading" (116). It is interesting to note that this process for me began in

composition studies; this is not surprising, for, as John Knapp notes, “literary teachers/scholars have a long way to go to catch up with colleagues in composition studies—who began a generation ago to explore the educational components of *their* discipline” (52-53). Still, Scholes urged his colleagues to attend to how they were teaching literature in 1985!

The complimentary thread in this journey for me focused on teaching practices and galvanized around the question, asked after reading Bartholomae’s work, what does this look like in the classroom? Locations on that map include Bartholomae and Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading* and, more importantly, the instructor’s companion, *Teaching With Ways of Reading* where Bartholomae reprints a syllabus from his introductory composition course; then all other locations come from the territory of English education: Carol Booth Olson’s *Reading/Writing Connection*, Kylene Beers’ *When Kids Can’t Read*, Sheridan Blau’s *The Literature Workshop*, and Nancie Atwell’s *In the Middle*. It is this journey that I try to duplicate in the teacher preparation courses that I teach. Not that I require my students to memorize and testify to my learning—that is as dull as watching someone else’s vacation video—but that they embark on a journey of their own. As Tobin urges, we must offer ourselves as models, not to “be held up as exemplary but rather as instructive” (83).

Just the other day, I went out to observe a student teacher. This student teacher was a student in my methods class, and I had observed her teaching previously in pre-service fieldwork. This day she was teaching Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative in an 11th grade American literature class. I didn’t know this student teacher to be a rich source of knowledge about early American literature. I don’t mean that comment to represent anything other than my own not fully-formed expectations for this class. What I saw when she taught was a poised and

composed teacher, one who knew the material, including the biblical allusions. What I want to convey is that I was surprised by the way this class played out. What I saw was a teacher-centered lesson, where the teacher asked every question, acknowledged whether responses were right or wrong, and emphasized what she defined as significant about Rowlandson's text. The students played along.

When I talked with the student teacher afterwards, she communicated her concerns about the class by fretting about how long it took students to answer what she characterized as questions whose answers were readily available in the text. It didn't take us long to say why we thought students were sometimes reluctant to answer. The problem, we concluded, was that in a classroom where all the knowledge is teacher-owned there's a very real risk of being wrong and, as a result, embarrassed. The student teacher came to admit that this is what really bugged her about the class, that they weren't having genuine conversations about the text—or even very interesting ones. A further problem, as any student teaching supervisor knows too well, is that the cooperating teacher was encouraging this kind of classroom; the student teacher didn't feel as if she could just do whatever she wanted.

What I think English educators finally need from English professors is help for a situation exactly like this one. The student teacher is teaching a text and can think to do so only in very traditional ways—as a knowledge transfer—and is feeling some pressure to approach texts in this way. The student teacher prepares for lessons like this by recalling what he or she was told about Mary Rowlandson in his or her own English classes. As an English educator, I need this student teacher's memories to fall back on an alternative classroom, one closer to Robert Scholes' model of studying texts because I think then that she might be able to focus the

discussion not on the text but on ways of producing the text, to paraphrase David Bartholomae, on the kinds of questions Foucault asks at the end of “What is an Author?” about how discourse functions, how it is controlled and circulated. I need a literature course that teaches students to ask a different set of questions of texts, questions about how texts are borne, how they endure, how they are used, questions that can be asked of all texts not just of this text. In other words, I think this student teacher should ask students what they learn about the captivity narrative as a genre by reading Rowlandson. I think they should characterize the features of this genre. I think they should make a list of features that they can call stylistic, belonging to Mary Rowlandson’s style. I think they need to ask, “Why is this text significant to American literature and what’s its relationship to other texts written before and after it?” I need English professors to focus on the means of production in their classes, not the products of those means. Why did Rowlandson choose to communicate her story in this way? What was its reception? What are the conventions of the genre and her style? What aspects of her writing are produced by her culture? In what ways is her text already written? In what ways is she writing against the grain of what her audience expects of her? An approach to teaching literature that is represented by these kinds of questions is what I need from English professors to support what I am doing in English education. And an approach to teaching literature that is represented by these kinds of questions helps English majors too learn how to read and learn from literature. It’s a journey that will prove valuable to all students in English classrooms.

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