

COACHING THE WRITING VOICE OF THE NON-READER: TEACHING LITERARY ANALYSIS THROUGH A STUDENT'S LIFE

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In many introductory literature courses on college campuses, instructors encounter students who willingly self-identify as non-readers; these are often the same students who are not only uninterested in reading literature but also assume they have very little to say about it, who are fairly certain their opinions about it are of no interest to their instructor, and who often find no relevance in studying literature or contributing to classroom discussions about it. As Gerald Graff observes, professors can “tacitly assume that everyone knows the justification for the [literary] analysis, a situation that can widen the gap between students who eagerly talk the talk of literary analysis and students who remain silent, bored, and alienated” (1). At small universities such as ours that emphasize career preparation—most of our students are majoring in the health care fields—non-readers can be the most common student in the classroom, taking the course as an elective that fits their schedule, with little motivation in reading literature and less in analyzing it or understanding why others do. A semester-long class of such students can seem interminable, when previously successful classroom strategies fall flat. Even approaching only a six-week summer course, *The Short Story*, I anticipated a possible lack of interest and engagement from the students who would arrive in my classroom and considered that I would be grading the kind of writing that reflects such reading apathy. It was time to shift strategies again.

After twenty nine years of teaching literature and writing, I know that one effective teaching strategy is to design an assignment that students do not expect, where neither the instructor nor the student can anticipate what may follow. The goal is to make the professor and the students feel invested, activated, and engaged together in the classroom and its discoveries; consequently, I designed assignments that made learning the elements of literary analysis personal, as if the students' own lives were short stories. This essay explains the process by which a literature course can elicit good prose writing from students who write about their own lives *first* and literary analysis *second*, culminating with their assignments in a writing portfolio. The final literary analysis essay and self-assessment piece incorporate the students' reflections of themselves as more aware writers and readers, and the experience of teaching with this method certainly can generate the same for the instructor.

The results were gratifying beyond my expectations; in fact, it confirmed for me that when the issues in students' lives connect with the academic subject and task at hand, their genuine writing voices can come through powerfully, and that experience can vindicate the instruction of writing, as well as transform the students' conception of deep learning through literature.

Student Expectations and Engagement

In a typical introductory literature course like this one, assignments usually focus on analyzing literature to find meaning in the experience of a text, a skill that is transferable to analyzing other complex works of art and expression. However, knowing that I might be walking into an assemblage of reluctant readers and writers, I decided to shift my focus from analytical writing assignments on the short stories to analytical description and definition pieces about the literary elements of the students' own lives first: setting, symbolism, character, and dialogue. These terms we repeat so blithely can rest like stones under the stream of our students' thoughts about literature—overheard from teachers for years—with little understanding of their impact within a story,

poem, or play. Surprisingly, I discovered that if students read short stories, discuss one literary element of the story in class, and then focus on that element in the “short stories” of their own lives—a significant setting in their recent week, for example—they can become much more engaged in the momentum of the short story at hand and, more important, in the identity of themselves as writers.

By writing about their own lives instead of initially about the literature itself, students can comprehend better the complexity of literature, such as which details writers choose in order to deepen the meaning and experience of a work of literature. In my class about the short story, the students became invested in writing effectively about their lives because they wanted to have a great impact on their readers—the other class members and me. In short, they became more invested writers.

Compositionists such as Peter Elbow and Patricia Bizzell have long discussed “both the institutional and pedagogical split between literature and composition that sees writing and reading as opposed activities,” while also trying to “stress the linkage between reading and writing,” as Phoebe Jackson notes. In applying Elbow’s contention that giving “more centrality to writing” would enable students to see “how meaning is slowly constructed, negotiated, and changed,” Jackson assigns low-stakes writing exercises in her Introduction to Literature course, which require students to identify with characters and put themselves in the story, such as with Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (Elbow 280; Jackson 112). Jackson reports that her goal was achieved: the writing exercise “worked to destabilize students’ initial thoughts about the play,” and “they began the first step of discovering how to generate meaning about a text through writing” (112). Elbow explains in a later essay that compositionists and literature people could benefit by merging their “cultures”: “I wish the culture of literary studies gave more honor to the courage of just sitting with, attending to, or contemplating a text” and adds, “what do I wish people in composition could learn from the culture of literature? More honoring of style, playfulness, fun, pleasure, humor” (“The

Cultures” 543). The methods of both Elbow and Jackson develop essentially what often takes place in a class discussion about literature: students insinuate themselves into the work of literature at hand and move inside the characters and setting, discovering what it could feel like from their own perspective. Gayle Whittier uses similar strategies in her course, *Alternative Responses to Literature*, in which one assignment asks students to compose thoughts about “literature and space”; her main aim of the course was “to restore pleasure to reading and writing in a college setting through shared enthusiasm” (170). These are effective ways to write about literature, but these assignments do not, in my opinion, displace students’ expectations enough. Students can still think that their own lives and the stories of the characters’ lives are completely unconnected.

More recently, James Seitz argues that “The Secret to a Good Writing Assignment” is being less focused on simply declaring a thesis and finding supporting evidence and more focused on “a way to inquire into a problem, to seek out and multiply possibilities for addressing that problem, instead of rushing to an ill-informed conclusion before [the students] even recognize the depth of the questions before them”; he explains, “I’m suggesting we might reconsider our obsessive attachment to the thesis, to argument, in our writing assignments” (52). Seitz makes a good case, and his kind of writing assignment could be quite successful especially for courses with a variety of readings, across the genres; however, it also may require more class instruction regarding strategies to approach such an assignment. Seitz’s suggestion is a relevant one, and such an assignment is worth considering as a bridge between a composition course and a literature survey course. Unfortunately, for the typical non-readers in a literature course, they have no questions to pose because they see the creative piece at hand as complete and remote, requiring nothing of them; they know it will be considered good literature no matter what their input about it is, and their curiosity about it remains dormant.

Elbow’s desire for the pedagogies of the composition and literature cultures to merge is a convergence that can benefit both,

especially if the emphasis can turn first toward the student instead of the literature. My assignments in The Short Story course continue this convergence but with a distinct difference: in class we analyze the short stories in our discussion, but, aside from a response paragraph about the readings for each class meeting, the students' longer writing assignments focus *first* only on their own lives, not on the short story. After that, they explore that element either in a reading response or as part of the essay on the Midterm or Final Exam, culminating in a literary analysis final essay. For example, they are directed first to analyze a literary element, such as setting, from their own experience: to explain and describe a setting that is significant to them and their families. An important distinction to make is that this is no artificial exercise for which writing about their lives is merely a brief stopping point, but rather their description of this element, such as setting, can be an end in itself: to explore the impact of their true voice on their fellow classroom readers (shared in peer review workshops). In this case, the reading response on setting in the short story assignment that follows begins a parallel study of the literary elements that will comprise their portfolio: defining setting in their lives and comparing it with the setting in a short story we read. With this kind of syllabus, I have found students to be more enthused about their writing, enjoying the exercise of describing their favorite environments, symbols in their home, or the characters of friends and family members; this enthusiasm can transfer quite smoothly to their analysis of the literary readings, and my enthusiasm for reading their portfolios also increases.

The Student's World and the Academic Voice

Besides attaining confidence about the subject, our classroom writers can thrive on assignments that bring others into their world: their families, their history, their heritage, their communities. Students in my course share sections of their portfolios with each other and explain their choice of topics and details. Kim Brian Lovejoy observes that when students “write for different purposes and audiences, they learn that language need not be as rigid as they

might have thought,” that “students learn about language as a dynamic cultural entity” (85). In writing about significant matters of their daily lives, students extend the language of their intimate world into the language of the classroom and academic world. Lovejoy’s observation about the fluidity of language is an important one; it affirms for students that they can communicate in effective ways already and that it is the job of writers to communicate their world to the reader who is not part of that. By language, I mean not only diction but also syntax, tone, clarity, and the choice of details—all that generates a coherent momentum for the reader. Almost all student writers bring something of this language into their academic discourse, and we professors must be on guard not to allow the student’s voice to evaporate in the process of completing our assignments. Asking students to write about their lives, their issues, their college and personal environment is most successful when the intention goes beyond a gesture to inspire confidence and carries with it an intention to inspire empowerment. Empowerment is achieved when students merge their worlds with the academic world. And an empowered student is a compelling writer.

Grading as an Interested Reader Again

Every writing teacher knows the dreaded mental wall one faces when grading essays with predictable content, including Rebecca Gemmell, of the San Diego Area Writing Project, who identifies “robot writing” as the kind that students produce from years of responding to directions that ask them to analyze common literary elements. These are the kind of essays that any student can find online for a fee, the kind that any student anywhere could have written; such writing is bland and uninspired, and the student’s distinctive voice is nowhere within it. Consequently, Gemmell shifted tactics and asked her students to write a response to an essay about the death of poetry. In response, she “got more passionate and convincing arguments from students” than ever before, and she followed that with a short, reflective writing practice that required students’ opinions not necessarily about Macbeth himself, for

example, but about the definition of a hero in today's society (64). One result was that when the students got around to writing more about the literary work at hand, they wrote "thesis statements that presented a clear stance," among other improvements (67). She was much more interested in grading assignments in which the students had invested something of their experiences and opinions, rather than the mechanically written essays they had previously submitted to her. In truth, the key is to involve the students on a level where their thoughts go more deeply into their lives, go beyond an intellectual exercise.

I was curious to see what my students had written when sitting down to grade the first writing assignment in my course; that curiosity alone was an indication that I, too, was more engaged and ready to experience the pleasure of being a reader of their work and not only a grader. I was not disappointed—nor was I bored, distracted, frustrated, or mentally exhausted, all of which we can experience in grading student writing. Rather, I was drawn into the momentum of their descriptive settings and characters, touched by the details of their narratives, encouraged by the depth of their observations. In response to the assignment to write on the element of dialogue in their lives, one student shared a particularly poignant conversation she overheard between her parents in the hospital about her brother, who was dying. Her analysis of their word choice, tone, and responsiveness to one another's comments was as thorough and insightful as any I have read by a student. Another wrote about the conversation she had with her mother upon returning to a childhood home. Writing about their lives through the focus of literary elements does not automatically make students good writers, but it does illuminate for them that the literary elements worth analyzing in a work of literature are relevant in understanding what the author is saying about being human. And grading their assignments certainly made me a more involved reader than I would have expected to be in this course.

Syllabus and Writing Assignments

My syllabus for The Short Story required writing assignments of five hundred words each on four topics: a significant setting in students' present or past experience, a symbol important to their family, a character (real person, living or not) in their lives who has impacted them deeply, and a dialogue they found meaningful (see Appendix A). Students had to describe and analyze each element; subsequent readings responses about the short stories then explored that element in the literature. Other graded work included midterm and final exams (quotation identification, short answer, and essay), a quiz on each short story, and an essay analyzing at least two elements of a story from the syllabus (with an academic journal article for support), incorporating also into the essay a reflection paragraph about their reason for choosing the particular author they did, as well as a self-assessment essay (300 words) reflecting on their writing in the course. The final grades ranged from an *A* to a *C+*, which is fairly typical of this class, but the enthusiasm for writing about the stories was much more robust than I have usually observed in a course taken by non-English majors to fulfill an elective.

To deal with the long in-class hours (3-hour class meeting, twice a week for a summer course), I used the computer lab to keep the writing momentum moving forward, beginning with a simple writing prompt for the pieces that would make up their portfolio (see Appendix B). In short, for this literature class, I wanted to catch the students off guard, since I believe they were expecting exactly what I could have assigned and what they likely were assigned the last time they studied short stories, perhaps in high school. There are good reasons to focus on the standard elements of fiction with the literature, and we include a careful study of them in this class, but not immediately or specifically in the writing assignments. So at our second meeting, when I directed them to write about a setting that they knew well and that they could describe in rich detail to someone who had never been there, the students were surprised, but not one of them hesitated to begin. Their writing did not disappoint—me or them.

The Students' Emerging Voices

In ensuing days in the writing lab, students wrote about their family's favorite vacation place, about the characters of their friends, about the dialogue between sisters. Some were more serious than others, but I found myself very much looking forward to reading what the students had written that week. Initiating new sorts of writing tasks can be the difference between engaging a student with little interest in literature or writing and one who feels fully involved; I was genuinely interested in reading what they knew well, and they responded to my interest. The most compelling pieces of writing were often about topics the students had not previously thought worth writing about, involving difficult experiences. This was demonstrated by my student Shannon's thoughts about writers who explored the dynamics of the family. She wrote,

Having a support system that consists of family members is essential to a person's well being. In Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use," she dramatizes the negative effects on a person that result due to poor family relationships. Maggie is shown as a meek, nearly silent character who stands in the shadow of her older sister Dee. Walker illustrates how the lack of support from a family results in a person becoming withdrawn, isolated and alone. My family is very close, so when my mother fell ill, we relied on each other heavily. We were used to sitting in hospitals and listening to the beeping of monitors. We all sat around my mother's bedside calmly while other families would have been hysterical. In the span of a few months, those trips had become the norm. My mother had been severely sick for over a year and the experience put our family through trying times. We had to plan our schedules around doctors appointments and turn down invitations to spend time with family friends. We sat in waiting rooms, at doctors' offices, and through consultations. We were shown models of the body as doctors and surgeons explained each new theory on what was wrong (see Appendix C for full story).

When we professors declare that the universality of human experience can be found in literature, we assume that students accept that claim, but that idea is never made more relevant than when students explore challenges in their own experience through a study of the literature we teach.

Significantly, I did not procrastinate in grading these pieces, since they were a continual discovery to me. Because I learned more about my students' own family characters, settings, and lives, I understood them and their ways of learning more deeply. For example, what details do they notice in a natural setting? What do they see when they walk into their living room? How do they listen to their grandmother? We translated these to their habits of reading: What descriptive passages do they think are most significant? What is the impact of certain word choices in the characters' dialogue? Why do they miss certain points of the plot? How do they hear a dialogue inside their own head when reading? All of these are worthy of close study in any course that involves readers analyzing a literary text, and the more they wrote, the better my students saw the connections we were making.

"Each of you is living within your own series of short stories," I declared more than once and then explained that until they understood the settings, characters, plots, and dialogues in their own lives, they could not well appreciate and enjoy the stories that authors wrote. After weeks of these kinds of writing exercises and discussing both their writing and the short stories in relation to the elements of fiction, one student wrote in a final self-assessment: *"Through our class discussions, I discovered parts of the story and their relationship to the plot that I would have missed otherwise,"* and these insights *"helped me to see that authors put their heart and soul into their work and that the most minute details are written with a purpose and are vital to the story."* She added, *"Our class essays helped me to find my voice as a writer. . . . I developed a clear sense of self in my writing, and have more confidence in my writing."* One of the most compelling pieces she wrote was about the dialogue between her troubled brother and her father, which she overheard. Our students see and experience stories in their lives that are equally as compelling as the stories we

read together in any course; our responses to their disclosure of these details can demonstrate to them that all good writing is about communicating as clearly as possible from one's own perspective, one's genuine voice. Maura Stetson underscores this in her analysis of discerning a student's "institutional voice" versus an authentic one when she notes that "[v]oice is developed through the students' individually discovering and gaining confidence in what they have to say," adding that "[a]uthenticity in writing can't be taught, but it can be encouraged" (74). Introducing writing tasks that incorporate different aspects of students' lives, aspects that can be aligned to literary elements, inspires students' confidence in their ability to communicate and define their own voice; such tasks feel more immediate to the student and more responsive to the act of writing itself.

By inviting students to write about their lives as short stories, an instructor can help a non-English major or a non-reader discover abilities and methods of learning that the student has not previously considered. New methods of writing can stimulate the interest of both student and professor, and the center of that place is the best kind of writing to achieve, often that which changes the student and his reader in the process. One of my students, Chris, wrote a piece that I could not put down, entitled, "Fallujah." Here is an excerpt:

It is a bright moonlit night, the full moon reflecting off the slightly corroded railroad ties. The stars are brilliant when viewed northward, but to the south the lights of the city mask their beauty. A gentle breeze slightly caresses my face through the ballistic eyewear and protective gear that is unwantedly carried. There are far off sounds of mortars and RPG'S (rocket-propelled grenades) echoing over the berm yet again. Another night of dogs howling, these grotesque, four legged, disease ridden, creatures that never shut the hell up. It is the beginning of a three-day mission to the soy field near the Jolan district on the outskirts of Fallujah, and the insurgents know we are coming. I hate night missions because you never know whether your next step will be your last, due to the dark. Gratefully it's bright, so I won't step on anything; on the other hand, they can see me walking

along that berm, the only safe place to walk on a night like this. Rocks, rocks, rocks, a never ending cascade of rocks that twist, tweak, and roll ankles, knees and hips, like that of a small dinghy in the ocean. Miles behind us, miles to go, we are half way now, over the foul smelling, murky, and almost gelatinous stream that feeds the Euphrates (see Appendix D for full story).

The intensity of this piece is one possible kind of result that an instructor could expect in an initiative to write about students' experiences. In such cases, the instructor can approach the method of feedback from several perspectives. As mentioned above, I first responded to the impact of his writing on me as a reader; in our conversation after class, the student was astonished that I found his piece so fascinating. An Iraq war veteran returning to college, Chris was pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing and did not consider himself to be a writer at all. But something changed him in the process of studying short story writers alongside the stories and settings of his own life. As he wrote in his self-assessment, weeks later:

As I am not a writer by any stretch of the imagination, I was a little apprehensive in the idea of taking a short story course as an elective. However, in the short time that I was in the course I came to realize that I identified with one author in particular, Ernest Hemingway. He wrote in a manner that spoke to me. He was honest and blunt. Writing is now not just a chore for school, but a gratifying hobby that has helped me heal, explore, understand, and become enlightened like no other outlet has. I am grateful for the blessing bestowed upon me to be able to put my words on paper in such a manner that can heal and inspire.

As the student discovered, this experience was more than simply learning how to write effectively in college; in short, this writing experience deserves a quality of feedback from the instructor that is as genuine as the voice of the student writer, respectful of his testimonial. As with all my students, I wanted Chris to understand

that narrative writing, especially in the writing of a memoir, as one psychologist articulates, “can help individuals move forward and become transformed and empowered during and after the writing process” (Raab 200). When we encounter non-English major students or non-readers in our courses, we have an opportunity to introduce them to forms of writing they do not expect, with results that they cannot anticipate. Chris is now considering a study of psychology and possibly moving into a job that could help other veterans who share the post-traumatic stress disorder that he is working daily to manage. Writing has helped him realize that his writing voice—his perspective, his experience, and his analysis—can empower him as a college student, a life-long learner, a writer, a citizen.

Conclusion

I continue to use the strategies of applying literary elements to students’ lives in all my literature courses; in taking part, students discover that writing affords them an opportunity to order, analyze, and evaluate the dynamics of their lives, whatever their ages. In this way, they become more aware of the impact of their own stories on themselves and are able find a more intimate as well as intellectual stance within which to experience a work of literature. These students truly have arrived in my academic community, receptive to the experience of creative work and empowered to establish themselves in a literate society by their own written word.

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APPENDIX A

Portfolio consists of:

- Four 500-word essays on the literary elements in relation to their lives;
- first drafts of the above essays, including peer workshop comments from students;
- reading responses (12-15 typed lines) analyzing an element in the short story/stories assigned for each class meeting;
- first and final draft of a 1,000-word essay on two or more of the four elements (below) in analyzing a short story from our syllabus (with an academic journal article for support), incorporating also into the essay a paragraph about their reason for choosing the particular author they did; and
- a self-assessment essay (300 words) reflecting on their writing in the course.

APPENDIX B

Writing Prompts for essays on the literary elements in their lives:

Setting—"One of my family's favorite places to be together is. . ."

- Character—“Someone not related to me who has impacted my life in a meaningful way is. . . .” [or “someone I have admired most of my life. . . .”]
- Symbol—“This object is an important symbol in my life; it has a history that you could not imagine and makes it especially meaningful for me.”
- Dialogue—“Sometimes a conversation stays with a person for a long time; that was the case with this conversation and what happened afterward.”

APPENDIX C

The rest of Shannon’s story

Eventually it was discovered that she had acute pancreatitis caused by a tumor the size of the tip of a pen on her pancreas. My father waited alone through an eight hour surgery in the cold, sterile waiting room. Surgeons removed half of my mother’s pancreas and her spleen in late July, 2010. During this harrowing experience, my family stayed strong because of each other. We made sure that each of us was there to comfort one another. We made spending time together and talking about what was on our minds a priority. It was especially difficult for my brother, Tyler. He was young, and did not quite understand that the hospitals, doctors, and IV lines were there to help our mother get better. Without the close relationship my family has, it would have made this time even more difficult for all of us. We knew to take care of each other and to not hide what we were feeling about the situation. My family is comprised only of myself, my brother and our parents; we did not have any other relatives to give their support. It was up to us to support each other through this difficult time.

APPENDIX D

The rest of Chris’s story

Please don’t slip, please don’t fall, PLEASE DON’T DROWN; the weight of my gear will pull me under and hold me there like an anchor, let me die anywhere else. I made it, but my buddy is not so fortunate: he slips, thankfully at the edge and we grab him, just in time. Forty degrees outside and he is soaked, you can see the steam rolling off him like the fog of San Francisco. He begins to shake almost to point of convulsions. All stop. We take over a house, it’s a beautiful little home with nobody inside, must have been abandoned since the initial push into the city, there are bullet holes and a large hole from a rocket launcher facing south, not the best place for a large open hole to be facing. He has changed his clothes and on we go. . . . Those damn dogs won’t shut up; any louder or any more of them and they will find us for sure. So much for the element of surprise. I hate these damn dogs. They make so much work for me. The incessant barking causes firefights that in turn causes death and dismemberment. We made it. The disgusting hovel that the last platoon left for us, holds trash, shit, empty brass from firefights, and the smell of cordite still engrained in the mud walls. Oh, did I forget to mention the overwhelming smell of chlorine that invades every orifice of your body? I hate this damn country, more specifically this city. I hope it is all worth it.