Revising the Literature Curriculum for a Pluralist Society

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In my first year of teaching, my spouse called my attention to a disturbing problem about an anthology I was using with my eighth-grade class: all the short-story selections were by white male writers with one exception—Langston Hughes’s “Thank You Ma’am.” During my second year, I corrected this “oversight” by including females and minorities, giving students the opportunity to compare and contrast such works as John Steinbeck’s “The Gift” and Jessamyn West’s Cress Delahanty. I went even so far as to add such writers as Ursula K. Le Guin, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston to the departmental reading list.

Although I had begun unconsciously to question the canon, I continued to rely on the “works of literature” and the “classics” found in our anthologies and our departmental bookroom as items for common reading. Had someone asked me for reasons other than their physical accessibility, had someone probed me for my philosophy behind the teaching of literature, for a definition of literature itself, I most probably would have fallen back on a humanist tradition that views such works as having inherent values that transcend time and cultures or a critical tradition that views the classics as richly embedded with multiple meanings and values.

After graduate studies, I returned to teaching consciously questioning those assumptions about the nature of literary value. Influenced by reader response and feminist criticism on the one hand and research on the interconnections among reading, writing, speaking, and listening on the other I reorganized my literature classes.

Creating a Sense of Community
Stanley Fish reminds us that within the literary community there are subcommunities. . ., and within any community the boundaries of the acceptable are continually being redrawn (1980, 343). Likewise, teachers, who are members of the interlocking communities, and subcommunities that make up public education, must recognize the similar, competing, and shifting interests of those groups. English teachers, in fact, must see themselves as mediators between their own interests and those of their students, their students’ parents, their colleagues, their administrators, their state curriculum specialists, and their legislators.

After searching our own interests and those of the groups outside our classrooms, we might
begin the first day of class by exploring the concept of community, helping our students see themselves as members of several interlocking communities. Then, if we are truly interested in fostering a sense of community within our classroom, we must empower our students to make decisions about both how the class should be managed and what they should study. An initial discussion over denotations, connotations, and types of communities will lead them to consider the rules of the current administration. Those standards in mind, students have a context within which to design their own rules for classroom management. Given some power to make decisions about rules, they enthusiastically help design the curriculum of their English classroom.

Moreover, teachers who engage their students in a discussion of what should constitute an English curriculum quickly discover that their pupils are able to reduce the contents of their class to the learning of the four language arts skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Many students are disturbed not over having to engage in these activities but over having little or usually no input in the content of what they read, write, listen to, and talk about. Therefore, after sharing with them the concerns and interests of the other communities in the education culture, we must use their suggestions, making them participating members of the classroom.

**Independent Reading in a Freshman Honors Class**

From my students’ suggestions and my own perceptions of the concerns of the other communities that make up education, I developed the following unit on the novel for my ninth-grade honors class. Recalling “that composing and comprehending are process-oriented thinking skills which are basically interrelated” (Squire 1983, 581), I wanted to engage my students in both discussions and writings about their novels. The unit reflected outside concerns for teaching the traditional canon but also provided students with a literature appealing to their interests and reflecting our cultural diversity as a pluralist society. Thus, where possible, I pair together canonical and non-canonical works, novels by men and women and by members of minority groups. Students selected from such pairs as the following.

1. The nature of evil; the conflict between good and evil: Stephen King, *Salem’s Lot* Bram Stoker, *Dracula*


3. Dystopian/utopian novels George Orwell, *1984*

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The Choices We Offer: Canon Formation

Ursula K. Le Guin, The Dispossessed
George Orwell, Animal Farm
Richard Adams, Watership Down

4. Adolescent perspectives on death and friendship
Paul Zindel, The Pigman
Madeline L’Engle, A Ring of Endless Light

5. White and black perspectives on race
Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird
Richard Wright, Black Boy

6. Males and females on the black experience
Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man,
Alice Walker, The Color Purple
James Baldwin, Go Tell It On the Mountain

7. Different perspectives on slavery
Margaret Walker, Jubilee
Margaret Mitchell, Gone With the Wind
Frederick Douglass , Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
Linda Brent, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

8. The runaway
Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Cynthia Voigt, Homecoming

9. Initiation stories
Piers Anthony, A Spell for Chameleon
Charles Dickens, Great Expectations
J. R. R Tolkien, Fellowship of the Ring
Ursula K. Le Guin, A Wizard of Earthsea

Beginning with the premise that the “books that we remember. . . are those we have talked or written about” (Squire 382), I engaged my students in daily class discussions and journal writings. At the opening of each class, they wrote responses in their journals to the following questions:

1. What happened in your last reading? Could you relate it to personal experience or to

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Students then spent most of the period alternating between reading and writing about their novels. They used the next set of questions to analyze and synthesize what they were reading:

1. Choose one of the following and respond:
   a. How are the characters developing? Compare and contrast with your last novel.
   b. How is the plot developing? Are patterns of events emerging? Compare and contrast with the plot of your last novel.
   c. What recurring themes, ideas, images, or symbols have you encountered in your reading? Compare and contrast with those in your last novel.

2. Describe, if necessary, one or more problems this novel poses for you. What seems strange, confusing, or misleading? Is there something in the previous novel that might help you solve this problem?

While they were engaged in this work, I circulated among them for individual conferences, listening to their questions, reading journal entries, and posing new queries to challenge them.

Fridays, we broke from reading to discuss problems encountered in the novels so that class members might offer solutions or suggest strategies for interpretation. Students gathered into groups of four or five persons, all of whom were reading the same novels or ones comparable in perspective and theme. They began by writing about problems and from there, proceeded to discuss issues, offering and debating possible solutions. Thus, a student unsure about whether Dicey’s mother would be able to abandon her children in Voigt’s *Homecoming* might be persuaded to consider possible motives. After these discussions, students returned to their journals to write about their reflections.

Alternating among reading, writing, speaking, and listening gave students opportunities to reflect on the literature they were reading and provided them plenty of prewriting material in their journal commentaries. By the end of the unit, students were more than ready to write comparison/contrast essays. For my students, not only had “reading and writing join[ed] hands . . . and . . . become distinguishable only as two names for the same activity” (Tompkins 1980, x), but all of the communication processes had blurred together; most important, my students had experienced a diversity of interests and concerns through sharing each others novels. Moreover, I had mediated among the values of the subcommunities that comprise education: teachers, students, parents, administrators, curriculum specialists, and legislators.

**Adolescent Literature as Academic and Emotional Therapy**
The literature we select for our students should serve their interests as they perceive them.
While my freshmen honors students perceived value in the reading and writing processes, my intermediate level sophomores did not. To approach them initially with canonical literature often foreign to their language and cultural experience would not serve them nor encourage them to read.

Using literature for independent reading was and is important for reaching the interests of these sophomores, but also I felt that using a single "adolescent problem novel" as common reading might tap their interests and foster a sense of community. Recommending adolescent fiction as a means of therapy, William Palmer (1987) discusses how reading and writing about such novels can provide lessons in creative problem solving and thus help students emotionally and academically.

After testing my students for their appropriate reading levels and surveying them for interests, concerns, and problems, I selected Virginia Hamilton's *A Little Love*. Her novel focuses on some of the following topics: adolescents relationships with parents and grandparents, relationships between boyfriends and girlfriends, attitudes about old age and death, the problem of being abandoned by a parent, and problems at school.

My past experience in using literary journals with my nonacademic students had taught me to change one format of the sentence "lead-ins" I was using. Instead of having students relate the experiences in the novel only to their own lives or the lives of others they knew, I also had them relate those experiences to other books they had read as well as television programs and films they had seen. In that way, students who had complained that they had no experience pertinent to the novel now could draw on more experiences or write with anonymity by attributing their comments to something they had seen or read. Thus, many of my sentence lead-ins read as follows:

1. I remember a time in my life (in another book I read, or in a film or television program I saw) similar to the situation in the story. It occurred when . . .
2. I know (have read about, seen on film or television) persons just like . . .

Using the journals as students had in the honors class, my sophomores alternated between writing and reading on a daily basis; once more, I circulated around the class, engaging students in discussions to check progress and address problems with the novel. Fridays were used this time as whole-class discussion days. Before the discussions, students would write about either of two kinds of problems: such technical problems as dialect, syntax, and vocabulary or substantive issues or topics raised by the novel. After the discussions, students returned to their journals to respond to solutions to their problems or to comment on the discussion itself.

In one particular session, some students brought up the problem of reading the black dialect and the stream of consciousness narrative. Other students offered help in interpreting
difficult expressions and passages, arguing that although the language was difficult at times, both the dialect and the type of narrative made the novel more believable. In another instance, a student was puzzled by the main character’s desire to see the father who had abandoned her at birth. A classmate whose father had abandoned his family responded by suggesting possible motives; moreover, he helped himself emotionally by having the opportunity to articulate his own feelings.

Once engaged in these kinds of writing, reading, speaking, and listening activities, my sophomores began to perceive value in them. Having experienced academic and emotional therapy in these activities, my students were enthusiastic about the class. Because I was not misled by “modernist critical principles” of thematic and structural complexity that raise canonical literature above such works as adolescent fiction, I did not miss the opportunity to use a literature they found valuable, that is, useful (Tompkins 1985, 200).

Conclusion
Depreciation of noncanonical literature, because it may not embody formalist values, ignores the reader-response “opposition to the belief that meaning inheres completely and exclusively in the literary text” (Tompkins 1980, 201). Twentieth-century critics applying a psychological approach to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” do so not because of what text embodies but because in valuing psychological depth, modern readers “re-write” the text; in fact, the text read by Hawthorne’s contemporaries differs sharply from ours because their context for understanding creates an entirely different meaning for them (Tompkins 1985, 12-13). Moreover, stories like his achieve canonical status not because they embody fixed, universal values transcending time and cultures but because in the change of values from generation to generation, new readers rewrite the text. In the complex sociopolitical process of canonization, then, the longer a work is taught in classes, included in booklists, written about, physically reprinted for bookstores and libraries, and informally discussed at parties, the greater the likelihood new generations will perceive it as a “classic” (Smith 1983, 27-28).

We English teachers must recognize our role in perpetuating such canonical traditions, being careful to avoid depreciating literature of other communities, standing ready to mediate among culturally diverse values. Therefore the content of the literature curriculum must reflect the diversity of our pluralist society. I cannot teach only the “classics” because to do so would mean excluding many persons--male and female, European and non-European--whose works do not meet the rigid conceptions of the “White European Male Literary Tradition” (Goodman 1988, 5A). Furthermore, my experience with students who have not found value in reading, writing, speaking, and listening has taught me that our priority as English teachers is to help students find value in these learning processes.

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Although we may not agree definitely “on a central core of knowledge in a society that is pluralist in its information as well as its population” (Goodman 5A), we can, as Chris Anson suggests, find agreement in the learning process itself (1988, 18). Given our current understanding of reading and its relationship with the other communication skills, the reader-response view of texts as dynamic, changing entities and the attention of feminist criticism to expanding the canon, English teachers should revise the curriculum to reflect an understanding of literature more open to change than previous understandings.

Works Cited


Fish, Stanley E. 1980. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.


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