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Teaching philosophy

Since I begin with the basic assumption that my students *want to learn*, it is then my responsibility to identify what it is that would be useful for them to learn. The bulk of my teaching experience has been in introductory writing and language courses, and while I hope some of my students will continue in the fields of language or literature, I know that most of them will pursue different career paths, so I try to ensure that they take something from my courses that will help them wherever they may find themselves later. I believe that the discipline of Comparative Literature has several valuable and transferable skills to offer students, such as close reading, critical awareness, and of course, comparative thinking. My goals when I teach involve not only practicing these skills on literary texts but also broadening for my students the definition of “text” itself, thus pointing them toward a more general application of these same skills beyond the literature classroom.

When my students perform close readings of a text, I want them to go beyond *what* the text is saying to *how* it is saying it. If the text is persuasive, they should consider not only whether or not they are convinced but also why. In order to do this, the students will need to examine the text from a variety of angles: voice, perspective, style, language, rhetorical devices. I insist that this textual exploration not stop at mere identification of textual features; students should also attempt to explain the effect of these features on the reader. I urge my students toward deeper analysis by constantly asking the question, So what?<sup>1</sup> Upton Sinclair includes some dialogue in Lithuanian in his novel *The Jungle*—so what? Barbara Ehrenreich actually works a minimum-wage job rather than just researching lower-class labor practices—so what? During discussions, I like to choose a passage or two from the text for a close class reading. Temporarily restricting the discussion to a short excerpt allows me to demonstrate how detailed a close reading can be and how one piece of the text can lead to greater insights into the whole.

Since close reading requires students to engage minutely with the text, it prepares them to engage critically with it as well. If students can describe how a text works, then they have earned some authority to say where it doesn’t work, or at least where it doesn’t work for them. The “so what” question plays an important role here. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe includes slaves in a description of the *things*, not *people*, in a room—so what? Asking “so what” at moments like these pushes students to question the assumptions about what the text is doing, in spite of the intentions, spoken or unspoken, of the author. This type of skill can serve students well when they begin to consider other types of discourse as texts that can be analyzed critically. For this reason, I’ve included materials like the popular film *Office Space* in my courses. Comparative Literature is particularly well-suited to this type of move because its very nature goes against a monolithic, monolingual idea of literary canon.

My training as a comparatist has led me to see the value in putting various texts in conversation with one another, and this is a lesson I aim to teach my students as well. I prefer to choose readings that give students diverse perspectives around a similar theme, such as work or cultural conflict and understanding. To reinforce this, in course materials I often favor readers or coursepacks that enable my students to easily bring past reading assignments to class every day so that we can continue to refer to them in discussion. My intention is that my students develop an openness to different viewpoints expressed not only in a range of texts but also by a range of

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve adopted the use of the “so what?” question from David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen’s *Writing Analytically* (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth).

people, which in the classroom setting is their fellow students. I emphasize to my students that we are making meaning together—no single one of us has the “right” answer, including me. Thus sometimes when a student asks me a question, I redirect it out to the rest of the class. I have also encouraged students to see the value in their peers’ opinions through activities such as having them exchange their writing at the start of class and then be responsible for presenting not their own point of view but that of their partner during discussion.

As students come to appreciate their peers’ viewpoints, they contribute to the construction of a considerate and inclusive environment in which they, like myself, respect the intelligence, diverse capabilities, and attitude of everyone in the classroom. For example, one observer to my French class was surprised that during a chain activity in which each member of the class asked the next a question—a potentially tedious activity—that my students listened carefully to what each of their peers had to say, concentrated on mistakes and corrections, were careful not to repeat answers, and did not stop paying attention the moment their turn had passed. Sometimes students have clashing personalities or personal histories, which can make such an open environment difficult to achieve, but here again I find that students are more committed to the learning process than we often give them credit for. I recently had a student with an attention disorder who made frequent digressions during class discussion. I worried that my reactions to this behavior could make him feel that I was shutting him down, but after taking the time to talk with him outside of class, I found that rather than being offended by reminders to stay on track, he welcomed them.

Having determined what I want students to learn and having taken steps to create an environment conducive to learning it, I then need to assess what learning is actually being achieved. Written assignments reflect my learning objectives such that I ask students to critically compare two or more texts or concepts, using close reading as a means to construct their arguments and provide support. The work that I require progresses from shorter, narrow tasks—such as describing, writing introductions, or gathering evidence—to longer essays. Because the assignments build on the skills I aim to develop, the students should feel prepared to tackle them and I can gauge to what extent those skills have been developed. In close reading, students learn to scrutinize how a text works, and they can apply this knowledge to the texts that they themselves are producing. Since, as readers, I ask them to focus on the effect of different aspects of the text, I emphasize this same point in their own writing. There is no “correct” type of essay—writing is about choices, but students need to be aware of what effect their choices may have on their readers.

My job as an instructor, then, is to evaluate the choices they make in regards to a particular prompt as well as the success with which they execute those choices. When I assess their writing, I also ask myself the “so what?” question, and I direct them to ask themselves “so what?” before they’ve turned in the final draft. This question pushes students to fulfill their own expectations for themselves because it forces them to take a stand in their paper and place it in a larger context. Perhaps a student has found in a comparison of *Germinal* and *The Grapes of Wrath* an importance bestowed in both texts on the theme of land and ownership. So what can the treatment of this theme tell us? I expect that in trying to answer this question, my student aims for more than just an A; he or she also seeks to make meaning for themselves and their readers outside the text and the classroom.