Teaching Humanities Skills: A Pedagogical Philosophy

Amanda L. French, Ph.D.

One of the usual justifications for humanities programs and courses is to "teach critical thinking skills." I have to say that I no longer subscribe (if I ever did) to the theory that this is what humanities courses do; I believe strongly that all undergraduate students--all human adults, in fact--are already perfectly capable of critical thinking. What matters is context, context and content. A student who argues with close reasoning on the topic of who the Texas Longhorns should pick in the draft might not care enough, or know enough background information, to apply the same skills to a debate of whether Oscar Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol" fully abandons Aestheticism for realism. The respectful premise that students are critical thinkers already, without my intervention, is the first plank in my teaching philosophy.

The second plank follows naturally: in order to educe students' critical thinking capabilities in an unfamiliar domain of knowledge, I must do two things: get them interested and give them the facts. The best way to accomplish both these tasks at once, the most natural and human way, is to tell them stories. Therefore, I don't shy away from the lecture format in my literature classes, even in smaller classes, and I will ruthlessly resort to any and all rhetorical tools at my disposal, including video, images, sounds, and even objects. I enjoy illustrating my lectures with the wealth of material to be found online, and I also enjoy augmenting the virtual with the physical, as I did in the *Victorian Period* class that I taught in spring 2007 by simply passing around Victorian editions of interesting books obtained from the library stacks.

I don't only tell them stories, however; naturally, I also like to hear from them, and I like them to hear from each other. I host class discussions in the usual manner in small courses, but I also think it's extremely important that the class discussion be conducted by means of writing, as

well. I don't like the "many-to-one" model in which all students give their paper only to the teacher, a solitary reader who makes solitary comments. Although it can be logistically difficult, I try to have most writing assignments be part of a relentlessly public conversation, a classroom discourse community. Technology is also helpful here: blogs, wikis, various course management systems, even e-mail can all help students share their work with one another easily, although when necessary I will resort to the photocopier. Increasingly, moreover, I find that it's helpful to specify that these not be "workshops" in which students critique one another's execution of the paper; rather, I ask that students respond only to the ideas expressed.

There is a classic tension in teaching writing between idea and execution, thesis and mechanics, of course, and I've tangled with that problem for years. What to emphasize? How? On the one hand I notice that undergraduate students are hungry for skills, consciously hungry to be taught spelling and grammar and mechanics and vocabulary. On the other hand, they find it dull and difficult, and in any case in a literature class such skills cannot, I believe, be the focus. My solution to this is still evolving, but so far what has worked best is to dismiss mechanical issues altogether from literature classes and to teach mechanical skills in writing classes, or else individually. For instance, in a discussion section of an undergraduate survey of English literature for majors, I had students write weekly one-page "close readings" rather than two or three longer papers in formal prose, and those papers were startlingly interesting to me as well as to the students. In writing classes, I think the best plan is to teach skills in this order: first, research skills; second, honest expression in natural language; third, formal English standards, with the latter skills taught mostly in tutorials and personalized exercises rather than to the class as a whole.

In both literature and writing classes I believe that it is crucial to teach research skills. Technology has made it both easier and harder to do research, and one of my strengths is teaching students to navigate the often-confusing universe of information. I also find that once students are comfortable with *how* to do research, they are much more likely to become interested in the research itself. I like to give research assignments that span a semester, so that students will have plenty of time to explore a subject of their choice very thoroughly using the research skills I give them. I have taught undergraduate and graduate courses that focus almost exclusively on research, in fact, and in those courses as well as others I have encouraged the natural excitement that comes from saying, "Guess what I found out!"

Some skills, of course, are needed only by English majors and graduate students: such students are often aware that they lack the ability to scan, for instance. To my mind, the best reason for teaching such a skill is that many of the poets we study were themselves masters of prosody and trope, and therefore their work can be far more deeply understood by acquiring what are often admittedly outdated terms of art. The trick to teaching prosody and rhetorical figures, I think, is to teach them one at a time, in depth, rather than in a shallow overview, and to tie them very carefully to actual works. Elizabeth Bishop's “Anaphora,” for instance, is a marvelous entry into that figure, and when students are asked to locate other writings by other writers that make use of the anaphora, they begin to understand both the figure and Bishop's poem more deeply. I find that students much appreciate being thoroughly grounded in an authoritative trade vocabulary, especially when such grounding involves play, as I always try to make sure it does. I often ask students to write verses using particular figures or forms or in imitation of a particular author's technique, and these assignments are always both fun and successful.

Finally, grading. Grading to me always seems inimical to teaching; I would prefer the

British model in which students are taught by some and formally evaluated by others. But since I must grade as well as teach, I grade carefully. I create rubrics for every writing assignment, and I make use of objective assessment tools such as reading quizzes. Recently I have begun to wonder whether I might use the very discourse community that I like to create in the classroom as an evaluation tool; if, for instance, the goal of an essay is to convince, couldn't I ask the other students in the class whether the essay convinced them? Wouldn't using that data to assess the essay be better than even my expert judgment as to whether the essay is "convincing"? I'm influenced in my thinking on this by Web 2.0 "wisdom of crowds" practices; group evaluation is a commonplace now on the Web and provides a welcome counterpoint to authoritative judgment, though it does not replace it.

For both graduate and undergraduate courses, for both literature courses and writing courses, I do not "teach" students to think critically; I give them time and encouragement and a new intellectual domain in which to *practice* thinking critically. I tell stories. I give students stories, vocabulary, and concrete skills that help them make and share their own intellectual discoveries. And that is all. To attempt to do more would be futile; to claim to do more would be arrogant.