Andrew Weeks, Kelsey Forkner, Susan George, Josette Lorig

Making Ends Meet: Literature Pedagogy, Faculty-Graduate Student Teamwork, and Undergraduate Literacy

Discussions of best teaching practices often presuppose optimal circumstances. But real courses are usually implemented under conditions which are given rather than chosen. Learning how to reconcile the conflicting ends of an actual course can help build confidence and develop strategies for future use. In this article, we—a project group of three graduate assistant teachers and one professor—describe and evaluate strategies and techniques for implementing a large multipurpose lecture-discussion literature course taught to non-literature majors in the General Education sequence of a middle-sized state university. We will discuss 1. the contingencies of the course, 2. sources of guidance consulted, 3. the practical methods or devices we developed, and 4. the lessons we learned not only about teaching literature but also about student literacy, which is defined here as advanced skill in reading and writing, as well as an understanding of literature and the language in which it is expressed or discussed.

I. Contingencies

The course called Literary Narrative combines the format of a large lecture for 150-250 students (the size is determined by auditorium availability) with break-out discussion sections of no more than twenty-five each. The lecture is delivered by the professor, the break-out sessions taught by the professor and the graduate assistants (one section by the former, two each by the latter). The course is intended to serve multiple purposes. We read literature in chronological

sequence while introducing a framework of background information in lectures. The works and contexts range from the late Middle Ages to the mid Twentieth Century and include tales from Boccacccio's *Decameron* (the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance with passing attention to the Reformation), Voltaire's *Candide* (Enlightenment), Leo Tolstoy's *The Cossacks* (Russian Realism), Gustave Flaubert's *A Simple Heart* (French Realism), G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (arguably a precursor of Modernism), and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (subject matter of racism and imperialism). In addition to the works and the outline of literary and cultural history, we pose the question with reference to these works, *What is the role of disaster or inhumanity in human life and world history (the plague, the Lisbon earthquake, imperialism, terrorism, or ignorance and deprivation)?* The course therefore has a narrative or chronological structure as well as an argumentative or thematic focus centered on the question of how humanity responds to calamities. Despite a heavy load of "Classics of Western Literature," *Literary Narrative* has never been considered controversial or insensitive. *Heart of Darkness,* accompanied by a lecture based on Adam Hochschild's[1] account of imperialist genocide in the Belgian Congo, offers an opportunity to discuss Chinua Achebe's indictment for racism as well as the furor caused by the internet film *Kony 2012*. Conrad's novel is perceived as difficult, not as offensive. *Literary Narrative* is challenging both for students and those who teach it.

It can be especially demanding for students whose major and interests are not literature. These students enter a general education literature course with peculiar instructional needs and preconceptions. Their experience reading, writing, and thinking critically is untested and often proves limited. They frequently lack a broad range of vocabulary and adept control of language, deficiencies that go unacknowledged by the institution and the students themselves. This doesn't

mean that they can't benefit from a writing-intensive literature course. They can benefit greatly. But the instructor has to recognize their needs and develop suitable strategies for meeting them.

The demands are increased by the multiple purposes of Literary Narrative. It is classified in the General Education masterplan as a writing-intensive course, which means that five major writing assignments are expected. The traditional venue for introducing students to academic writing, freshman English Composition, has been converted into a course devoted to media and genres of writing. Whatever the merits of the shift, it transfers a great deal of the responsibility for educating students in basic composition to middle-level writing-intensive courses such as ours, a restructuring sometimes associated with the concept of "writing across the curriculum." While teaching literature, we work with students who have written relatively little, if anything, at the college level. We train them to formulate a thesis and organize evidence in its support.

Between the lecture and the discussion classes, our group of four graduate assistants and one professor met for extended weekly planning sessions. These sessions combined elements of an advanced literature seminar, a planning session for class discussions and course management, and a professional development research project with lab exercises. Fortunately, these purposes can be combined effectively. Communicability or teachability is a valid criterion for assessing an interpretation of literature. An actively acquired interpretation is an effective preparation for conducting a class discussion of literature. Professional training calls for a theoretical command of the material and practical implementation. Our weekly meetings were assigned independent study credit and in effect served as a parallel seminar.

Involvement in the process is time-consuming. Doing it right prevents conflicts that can degenerate into class breakdowns, but doing it right is not easy. The challenge of making ends meet is a matter of simple arithmetic. In a discussion section with twenty-five, an unstructured

conversation leaves the majority passive on the sidelines. While a few speak out eagerly, others daydream. Even calling on students row by row or alphabetically, a poor strategy for stimulating a conversation, would permit only three minutes per exchange. When we engage with one eager student, we exclude others more reticent. When we entertain digressions, the unprepared raise a smoke screen of irrelevancy. Lack of preparation adds to the burden of instruction. Frustration can transform the conscientious teacher into a railing prosecutor of student fecklessness.

The truth is that student participation is also a product of the arithmetic of relative gains and losses. If the course offers no benefit or satisfaction, its demands on time are insupportable. Textbooks cost money. Students may simply choose to buy none, dodging discussion questions and writing bloviated essay responses that flatter the instructor, whose insecurity promises an avoidance of conflict in assigning final grades. This happens more often than we care to admit. And why not, if the participant senses that it's what others are doing, if diversionary comments are taken seriously by an instructor who is easily manipulated, while the serious but reticent student is left on the side-lines?

Finally, there is the arithmetic of gains and losses for the professor and graduate students. Their unspoken calculations will govern the large lecture class and its discussion sections. The professor is teaching outside her area of specialization and collaborating with graduate students to whom she may have no long-term commitment. Her professional standing will not depend on the effectiveness of her teaching a general education course outside her field. Opportunism will go unnoticed. Conscientiousness may incur the punishment of wasted time and perhaps scathing end-of-semester student evaluations.

But this is only one side of the balance sheet. On the other side, the teaching done by the graduate assistants is cost-effective. More than that. Motivated by their creativity and desire for

mastery, graduate students will disregard contractual limits on their working hours and perhaps neglect their own studies in order to teach as effectively as possible. Administrators will pay lip service to respecting contractual limits, but no one doubts that these fresh cadres can be counted on to do their duty on the teaching front. In many cases, this is their initiation into professional employment. It can seem like a matter of do or die in the classroom. What is in it for them?

Their first challenge is to surmount anxiety. For graduate students, this is the anxiety of the novice facing a class for the first time. Faculty tend to ignore this psychological burden, but even the seasoned graduate teacher or faculty lecturer can experience anxiety and loss of sleep. The chemistry of each class is unique. The decline of reading skills and absence of interest in the liberal arts can be disheartening. A physics teacher might be challenged pedagogically; but for the teacher of literature, the authority of the subject matter itself is almost always at stake.

Not only the senior lecturer but the graduate assistants who are closer to their students in age and experience are often surprised at the cultural gap separating them from undergraduates. This gap is conditioned not only by the pace of technological change but by differences in the depth and breadth of reading. Themes that might seem universal and unchanging are perceived in new, anachronistic ways. Undergraduates asked to characterise the blind devotion of a lover who lingers under the balcony of his beloved might call it stalking. Technological changes and shifting sensibilities are creating cultural disparities between generations only a few years apart. Our project group which doubled as a planning session and an independent study in literature pedagogy sought sources of guidance and experimented with teaching strategies.

II. Sources of guidance

An initial research objective of our independent study project in literature pedagogy was to compile and evaluate materials for teaching literature to serve us and those who might follow our lead in the future. We wanted to try out and adapt ideas drawn from research. We would put together a collection of materials on literature pedagogy to be tried, improved, and augmented by future groups.

When our group began searching for helpful materials, we found an interesting variety but surprisingly little of immediate practical application to the task of teaching literature under the peculiar conditions of our course. We found consistent shortcomings in the literature about teaching literature. The most helpful sources were often those that pinpointed what was missing. Some of the best literature pedagogy focuses on specific authors or texts with little information of a practical nature. Among the sources we researched, the most interesting were the journal *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* and the *Approaching to Teaching* series published by the Modern Language Association.

The journal *Pedagogy* has provided some of the more perceptive calls for improving the teaching of literature. In "Preparing Graduate Students to Teach Literature: Composition Studies as a Possible Foundation," John Schilb states the problem well by proposing that, while training in literature pedagogy may be minimal, it exists and can be improved. Schilb provides support for the approach of our project group by arguing that, "having a chance to teach literature is not the same as having a chance to reflect on the process. Ideally, graduate students would meet regularly with veteran faculty to ponder issues and challenges that the teaching of literature involves."[2] Most graduate assistants begin their career as teachers in the field of composition, where substantial scholarship on pedagogy already exists, which Schilb attributes to the fact that "composition studies has been more willing than literary studies to see pedagogy as a real

subject, worthy of serious analysis in its own right."[3] The approaches to literature presented to teachers new and old are usually based on what is called "close reading," which Schilb labels a "catachresis, a placeholder, substituting for a more exact description of interpretive strategies."[4] The elusive concept of close reading occurs with such frequency that it is evidently prescribed to students and teachers alike as a cure for all interpretive ills.

Similarly, Joanne Diaz comments on close reading's ubiquitous presence in "The Digital Archive as a Tool for Close Reading in the Undergraduate Literature Course."[5] Diaz identifies close reading as institutionalized and invisible and considers the ways "our actual language surrounding close reading, which is often quite vague, might fuel this invisibility." When she uses the phrase with students, she wants them to "recognize a text's formal appearance and the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual import of that form . . . . My idea of close reading, then, does not stop at the borders of the page, but necessarily questions how a literary text gathers meaning over time, across various manifestations."[6] It seems that the negotiation of meaning between students and teacher is at the heart of good teaching in literature.

In "Teaching Literature like a Foreign Language; or, What I Learned When I Switched Departments," Catherine Mainland adds a new dimension to the perennial area of close reading by observing that, "placing so much emphasis on the students' own contributions means that the instructor needs to be very flexible and well prepared in order to be able to keep up with where the class discussion goes; we essentially need to be prepared to lecture but also willing to accept that those lectures may never see the light of day."[7] Mainland calls for shifting the emphasis from giving answers to asking questions. This approach which is not uncommon in the literature classroom empowers students as co-teachers, inviting them to join the discourse and preparing them to act alongside their classmates as colleagues whose goal is scholarship on a small scale.

The goal is laudable, but it begs certain questions. How can graduate students who lack training involve their students in collaborative teaching? By the same token, the focus on close reading may provide a particular understanding of the text, but not necessarily the insight to clarify and disseminate it for a class while maintaining attention and teaching students the skills they need. Close reading tends to be what we know and they don't. Nevertheless, Mainland's comparison with foreign language pedagogy is intriguing. Teaching literature in a foreign language forces an instructor to recognize and address limits imposed by language mastery itself.

The limits of teaching are taken as a given when Michael Bérubé in "Teaching to the Six" concedes that only the "best" students, those who come into a literature class already possessing the skills to do close reading and analysis, get something out of the class.[8] Bérubé admits that in a typical literature class, "It was a challenge getting even those relatively advanced students, let alone the other thirty, to understand what is at stake." Bérubé endeavored to extend the dialogue in the classroom further, but he acknowledges that, "On my bad days I was teaching to the six—the six (or five or seven) students who came to class already caring about literature, criticism, narrative, and history. Of the other thirty, about twelve were intermittently engaged by the course and will probably remember it fondly for some time, and the remaining eighteen were by turns surprised, stimulated, puzzled, and bored."[9] Bérubé concludes that we know the students passing through our classrooms for only a short time and must accept that we can only provide impulses, not know their final outcome. While this assertion is true as far as it goes, it overlooks the importance of improving one's approach to teaching. Our project group was familiar with the tendency toward "the six," but we asked what could be done to reach more students with a useful takeaway for all. We were after a literature pedagogy that could help us teach a more balanced class without pandering or oversimplifying.

Kim Hensley Owens' "Teaching 'the Six'—and Beyond"[10] indicated to us that others had been seeking a practical and inclusive approach. Owens' strategy is based on Lev Vygotsky's concept of "scaffolding," a staple concept in teaching elementary grades. Scaffolding enables a teacher to craft assignments and activities that build on one another in layered stages. It allows students to acquire skills or improve those they possess. Scaffolding is suggested by Owens as an auxiliary approach for literature teachers who "carefully select readings and exude optimism about their students' engagement with the material, [yet] may offer inadequate guidance and support for students' writing."[11] Our group was led to inquire whether scaffolding might apply not only to writing but to teaching literature.

Scott Miller's article, "History on the Cheap: Using the Online Archive to Make Historicists out of Undergrads," offers an approach for incorporating student negotiation and input.[12] Miller again points out that, "close reading gets anyone only so far" and cautions against formulaic approaches or prompts in teaching writing, explaining that one "reason why students can't write the kind of essay I would like to see is that many of their professors (me included) often trick them into writing something else by providing them with a sheet of paper upon which are inscribed three or four questions-in-the-form-of-a-paragraph." Miller turns to searchable archives to spark student interest and academic creativity. Here again reading is a given.

Miller's method presupposes an effective communication with students in a functioning community. Joanna Wolfe considers how a community is developed in "A Method for Teaching Invention in the Gateway Literature Class." Wolfe writes that when trying to transfer methods from teaching composition—including peer review, audience analysis, intensive revision, and writing conferences—into the literature class, "The result was a disaster. Strategies that had elicited thoughtful revision from my rhetoric students fell flat in the literature classroom."[13]

Wolfe attributes this failure to her students' fixation on "relatively minor issues of syntax while ignoring differences in the complexity and sophistication of the theses." Our understanding of literary analysis contrasts with students' understanding. Since "literary interpretation is often subtle, contingent, and multifaceted, it can be hard to discern common values and conventions across different literary arguments."[14] The teacher and students therefore need to establish a community of understanding of relevant terms and practices. Wolfe created a set of analytical tools and definitions and introduced them to her students as a way to understand how meaning in literature is negotiated, as a means to partaking in the negotiation. As with scaffolding, Wolfe's recommended definitions and tools pointed our project group beyond the impasse of "teaching to the six" and beyond an elusive "close reading," self-evident to those in the know but not to those in need of instruction. What our group took away from our canvassing of the journal *Pedagogy* was first of all a problematization of the nostrum of close reading and, second, a measure of the need for concrete classroom practices to build a community of understanding through activities that mediate between individual reading and the negotiated consensus of interpretation.

We turned to another likely source of practical teaching advice: the Modern Language Association's (MLA) series *Approaches to Teaching World Literature*. The series has over 124 volumes in print covering a wide range of literary texts. We consulted the available volumes specific to the authors and texts covered in our course, namely *Approaches to Teaching Boccaccio's* Decameron,[15] *Approaches to Teaching Conrad's* Heart of Darnkess,[16] *Approaches to Teaching Voltaire's* Candide,[17] and *Approaches to Teaching Kafka's Short Fiction*.[18] Here again, we found little of the practice-oriented explanation of teaching methods we were looking for. Here too, close reading was usually taken for granted, not taught or regarded as a skill to be mastered.

What do the essays do? The *MLA Approaches* books are broken down into two sections: materials and approaches. The materials section includes an extensive list of recommended readings, reference works, biographies and biographical works, critical studies, essays, articles, and audio and electronic resources. While we do not doubt that the materials section is a valuable asset to instructors and students of literature, the nature of our survey course taught to non-major undergraduates did not accommodate the use of extensive supplemental materials in class or the assignment of extensive secondary reading. We incorporated video clips and audio recordings of works into a few discussion classes. However, with at most two discussion periods devoted to the discussion of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* or Voltaire's *Candide*, it would have made little sense to survey the schools of interpretation. Students were struggling to get a grip on the text and its context. Offering students the resources reference list of the materials section might have aided their final research-based essay; but then we wanted them to find and evaluate academic sources on their own and to familiarize themselves with the library's research databases and collections.

The "approaches" section includes a series of essays from different contributors that, on the whole, tended to provide literary analyses, historical background, bibliographical information about authors, references to supplemental reading, and descriptions of how specific instructors situated and analyzed a text or author through a specific school of criticism or ideology. The most practical teaching material was a breakdown of the way instructors prepared and conducted their in-class discussions, the way groups were composed, which outside readings were assigned, what historical and bibliographical information was discussed, what textual excepts were chosen, what questions were posed to students about the texts, and the ways in which students responded to those critical questions. Even unmentioned, close reading was an undiscussed given, beyond which the contributors typically sought to stimulate a relatively advanced research or writing.

We did not underestimate the value of the biographical material for Kafka or Conrad. An essay such as Regina's Psaki's "Women in the *Decameron*" would help guide students interested in medieval gender roles. Yet the series served mainly to enhance knowledge of a particular text, author, or period, opening the way to advanced research, while ignoring pedagogical nitty-gritty. By the *Approaches* standard, our goals were remedial. Our objectives were to help students with no background in literature to develop basic analytical skills which are already in the possession of more accomplished readers, writers, and English majors, while also helping graduate students to develop pedagogical skills appropriate for the lower, non-major courses which tenured faculty and senior professors of literature prefer to leave to others.

In our broad search for helpful materials we also consulted an additional area that might have been expected to yield practical advice: literature textbooks. But a literature textbook is in reality less a text than an anthology of works selected according to the tastes and discretion of its editors. It can contain any number of canonical or non-canonical texts and can change and grow with each edition (witness the girth of *Norton*). Of course the prevailing view is that such texts are for the erudite professors who will teach them and not for the pedagogical apprenticeship of graduate students. But if an institutional continuity between learning and teaching is desirable, literature textbooks should be a pedagogical resource for the graduate students who have learned from them. Moreover, it is worth considering that other textbooks, notably in foreign languages, have long since adopted the practice of offering model syllabi and detailed classroom advice.

Our tentative survey suggested that, even as the publishers grow and consolidate, their textbooks retain a standard form in the major publishing houses. In editorial terms, *The Norton Anthology of Literature* has remained formally much the same. The editors imagine freshmen having the ability (and freedom) to use the textbook as they choose. They imagine a generalized,

experienced and skilled, instructor teaching a variety of courses from survey to seminar, bearing full responsibility for adapting the book effectively to her own methods. Any suggestion of how to teach using the text is implicit in the organization and context of the background information. The guidance, such as it is, embodies one of two assumptions, either: *This textbook will allow you to teach a certain kind of student to become a more mature, receptive reader of canonical texts*; or *Teaching and learning styles are so varied that it would be unwise to offer advice to anyone, so use the textbook as you see fit*. Again there is a failure to consider the needs of the pedagogical beginner or graduate teacher.

A few academics have now begun to think systematically about the theory and practice of teaching literature under conditions of our type. The *ADE Bulletin* and the *ADFL Bulletin*, as well as *Profession* published by the MLA, offer some relevant articles. Here too, it is not easy to fit the tactical and theoretical advice into a strategic plan for implementing a course such as ours. Though several other books were worth consulting for ideas to insert into the larger strategic outline which we set out to develop,[19] our initial objective of a structured collection of materials was frustrated by the sporadic multiplicity of voices with little reference to our practical context.

Our project group did find relevant topics in Kimberly A. Nance, *Teaching Literature in the Language: Expanding the Literary Circle Through Student Engagement*.[20] Though the focus is on the special problems of teaching literature in the foreign languages, there is considerable overlap. We also surveyed manuals that spoke to classroom techniques and teaching in general, namely John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas*,[21] Linda Nilson's *Teaching at Its Best*,[22] and Wilbert J. McKeachie's *Teaching Tips*.[23] Oriented toward the practical, these books lay out strategies for classroom management, for discussion and writing activities, grading and assessment, and for getting students to read. In *Engaging Ideas*, Bean suggests showing students how instructors

read texts; explaining how they do this for various purposes, detailing the ways of taking notes, and encouraging students to use the dictionary. Bean proposes a number of in-class activities to promote fruitful reading practices. These include reading responses, summary writing, imagined interviews with the authors, and requiring students to write their own "translations" of assigned texts.[24] In *Teaching At Its Best*, Nilson suggests showing students their teachers' marked texts and helping them identify the particular verbal signals which point toward important content.[25]

While these manuals are broadly conceived and do not address the peculiar challenges of teaching literature, they are realistic in acknowledging the basic hurdles of reading. Somewhat closer to home, the challenges of teaching in the humanities to non-specialized undergraduates are addressed in Seven P. Arvidson's *Teaching Non Majors Advice for Liberal Arts Professors*.[26] Though directed neither to literature classes nor to the needs of teaching assistants, Arvidson's book covers lectures, discussions, homework, assessment, and general matters of comportment and the adjustment of the level of instruction to that of the non-major student. In another vein, literature pedagogy for high school teachers offers interesting models that can be helpful insofar as they do not presuppose the distinct learning environment of the school.[27] We invited a local high school literature teacher to meet with our group and discuss his techniques for stimulating interest in reading literature. We also located videotaped teaching demonstrations produced for secondary education students, of potential value for our future training sessions.

Yet despite these valuable exceptions, we were aware of more problems than solutions. At the university, as opposed to the high school, there is a long tradition of neglecting literature pedagogy. We had found no solutions to the challenges of involving students in learning under our particular circumstances: our vexing task of "making ends meet" under the conditions of a large multipurpose literature course. When it came to the most daunting challenge of teaching—

what to do in the classroom—the results were especially bleak. If we had been dependent solely on our researches, we would have been like apprentice pilots, entering the cockpit with little more than aeronautical theories, handbook guidelines, and personal anecdotes to go on—with scarcely a clue how to get off the ground and fly without crashing and burning.

III. Practical approaches and techniques

Alongside our source research, our group attempted to anticipate problems and develop strategies for coming to terms with them. The problems foreseen fell into two categories: how could we get students to fulfill the terms of the syllabus (attendance, participation, reading, and writing); and how could we assure that they got a return on investment? More generally, how should we define success? Finally, how could the lessons of our research contribute to present or future practices of teaching literature? Our first practical measures were for orienting students to keep pace with course requirements.

The first task we addressed in our weekly meetings was the challenge of seeing to it that students attended regularly and prepared their assignments. Since the lectures were scheduled for 8 a.m., we extended the use of quizzes covering reading assignments and the content of the lectures to each class period, lectures and discussion sections alike. Attendance was checked by means of quizzes given at the end of the lecture and anytime during the discussion class. Since the allotted credit for these quizzes was nearly half the total number of points, the effect was not insignificant. Approximately 45 % of course credit was assigned for doing the reading, attending class, listening to lectures, and taking part in discussion. The reading was given the most weight within the quizzes.

While recognizing the drawbacks of this enforcement, including student resentment, we considered it defensible. For a variety of reasons that include weak reading skills and injudicious choices in allocating time, students neglect or postpone assignments which are the foundation of everything else in the course and without which nothing else can function. If a critical mass of 60-70 % of the participants have read the assignment with care and attention, lectures are easier to communicate, discussion more meaningful, and writing better informed. Without testing, the number can drop well below 30 % in which case discussion and writing decline as well, trending toward evasive nebulosity. The midterm and final exams are 50 % objective question (usually multiple-choice) and 50 % essay. With the exception of a few students who perform poorly on the objective section but do well on the essays, the correlation is reliable. Poor in facts means, unsurprisingly, vague and evasive in writing; strong in facts means strong in essay content with less bloviated padding. Quizzes or exams taken or handed back can provide a springboard for discussion. Though we adopted our strategy as a necessary evil, a recent study indicates that the practice of daily quizzes "increases both attendance and overall performance." This effect is "particularly strong in students from lower-income households."[28]

Since for many students, Literary Narrative is the first college-level composition course, we learned to pick our battles in teaching writing. Unlike writing assignments that invent a topic and ask students to defend one side or the other, our "scaffolded" tasks stressed the dual virtues of objectivity and relevance. Students needed to learn to summarize a story in a way that is both objective and relevant, avoiding "this is just how I feel" on the one hand and pointless rehashing on the other. Any science and most professional or personal relationships require knowing how to come to the point and to distinguish between a subjective sense and what actually happened, between our point of view and the other person's, or our values and those of another culture or

age. Prevalent defects in students' writing on literature are inflated sententiousness and plodding pointlessness. What these apparent opposites have in common is inaccuracy. A first antidote is to embrace the role of the reporter or trial witness by getting it right instead of sounding good or slogging to the required length. Rhetoric goes beyond facts to perfect the art of persuasiveness, but one way to persuade—and perhaps not the worst—is by writing true things that we mean.

Our sequencing of writing assignments permitted students to rework material previously submitted, with revisions for value added. We considered other avenues for increasing writing practice. Although we made some use of online evaluation, we wanted to limit and segregate the time spent in preparation and grading. The course would not be allowed to take up time required for graduate study or research. Pedagogical experiment offers too many examples of techniques that only work well with inordinate time and resources. We concluded that student reading logs or position papers would either demand too much grading time; or, if the grading were neglected, as most commonly happens, the rare students who poured their energies and imagination into the task and deserved a serious response would be deprived of one.

Since we did not have time to mentor students through the stages of a composition, we built our feedback into the sequence of writing assignments. Students were urged to consult us directly about papers in progress, but some of us discouraged drafts submitted in the hope of our editing them into final shape. Respondents were expected to bring in their work and read a thesis or draft aloud. Students hearing themselves read their work often became aware of its problems. Where feasible, we submitted advice and criticism in writing to document students' problems and lay out the criteria of improvement. Students were given a range of topics with an option of devising and submitting their own for approval. Those unable to decide were assigned a topic before the deadline. Repeated reminders to stay on track were indispensable.

One method for helping students to stay on track with their writing was a standardized peer review designed to combat typical discomfort with the practice. Peer reviewers were given charts and questionnaires to fill out. Instead of compiling a list of spelling errors or pronouncing everything "good," they were familiarized with practical points of peer review. A questionnaire requiring specific positive or negative answers helped them organize their inchoate reactions to writing. Boxes asked for specific answers: "Where do you notice concise language? Where is the language confusing or unclear?" "Which terms are defined and clear? Which are undefined or vague?" The procedure rendered feedback more organized and meaningful. It required the student to examine the merits of a paper and recognize inconsistencies in a faulty one without pressure to be nice or to avoid being hurtful. With the questionnaire, students could get beyond subjective opinion. Writing and editing were made less daunting for the beginner.

Aside from lectures, the most challenging and stressful task was planning and conducting discussion sessions. For graduate students, this was the hurdle that sometimes caused anxiety to the point of physical illness (though fortunately the anxiety tends to vanish as soon as the teacher is in front of her class). What about the opposing demands of structure and flexibility? What could be done about the apparent impossibility of conducting unstructured discussions in which every student with something to say had an opportunity to take part? The demands raised by the number of students are multiplied by the volume and difficulty of the material. Without structure, topics as well as student involvement get short shrift. The overextended instructor gives up and lets the discussion dissipate. The poorly prepared are relieved, while the better prepared draw cynical conclusions for the future. With these contingencies in mind, we sought an approach for addressing more than "the six." We were determined to engage the whole class in finding a way to get beyond unreflective reading to constructive interpretation.

In planning class discussions, our group found its greatest opportunities for creativity and mutual support. At best, this was an extension of our group literary analysis. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, though relatively appealing to students, is complicated by disguises, shifting identities, and rapid changes of setting. Graduate students reading the novel for the first time recognize its trickiness more readily than a repetition-numbed lecturer. We devised a quiz game for matching the literary character with the visual motive or verbal aperçu. We constructed maps to chart Gabriel Syme's itinerary. This served as a prelude for discussing the significance of disguise, paradox, and circularity. What does it mean that anarchy is sown by order and good by evil? What is the point of the circular trajectory of Syme's quest?

The quandary of involving the greatest number in covering the broadest scope of material in a limited time was solved by what we now recognized as "scaffolded" structures that drew the individual into a group discussion and the group into a full-class discussion. For example, the situation was such that the class had only one hour to finish its discussion of Voltaire's *Candide*. How could the instructor involve as many students as possible in covering as much material as possible in a way that pertained as clearly as possible to the overarching meaning of the work? The twenty-four students present were divided up into six groups of four each. They could either choose their spokesperson or share the task. On the board, a grid was laid out: horizontally, the life situations of Candide were listed: 1. his prelapsarian life at the Baron's; 2. his fall from grace and expulsion from paradise; 3. the Lisbon episode; 4. the El Dorado episode; 5. the encounter with the Noble Venetian; and 6. the final reunion in the conclusion.

The groups were asked to consult among themselves for ten minutes and then state and explain their verdict: *Which is the best of all possible life situations? Which is the worst?* The instructor then filled out the grid with plus and minus signs. The groups defended their choices,

thereby implicating their notion of the good. At stake was whether it is better to enjoy ignorant bliss (the implication of choosing the initial episode) or to recognize the truth and come to terms with it (the implication of the ending). Does El Dorado show that social well being and scientific advancement are the highest good? And how do Voltaire's characters exemplify the good? Why does he give us James the Anabaptist and why does the altruistic James not survive for long?

By using the grid and the scaffolded pyramid of discussion, we were able to involve more students with fewer inhibitions and fewer conversation stoppers caused by the instructor's having to tell students they were simply wrong. The structures served the purposes of focus, debate, and class self-correction. At best, this procedure modeled the path from a diligent reading, attentive to details, to the sort of close reading which is already an interpretation. Directing the activities of the class toward a meaningful consensus could reaffirm the authority of the instructor and the objectivity of the material. By proceeding from a naive first reaction to a critical examination of the details to a re-assessment and re-evaluation, our scaffolded exercises followed the trajectory of a hierarchy of writing assignments that proceeded from a pointed summary focused on select details to an elaboration of context and finally to an interpretive or evaluative paper. For our purposes, close reading meant in effect examining the initial response to a story in the critical light of context. By articulating this process, the student works toward an interpretive paper.

The grid and pyramid could be made to work by beginning with the simplest questions and working toward context. In the time allotted for discussing *Decameron* selections, several stories with female protagonists needed to be covered. We placed them on the grid and asked, *which is least and which is most relevant to our own time?* This opened the door to spontaneous but useful feeling-based responses, while also setting the stage for recognizing how Boccaccio's world differs from ours. The results in one discussion class appeared as follows on the board:

Story	Group I	II	III	IV	V	VI
2.6 (Madam Beritola and her sons)					+	-
2.9 (Bernabo and his wife Zinevra)	-		+	+		+
5.1 (Ifigenia and the power of love)	+	-				
10.10 (Gualtiere and Griselda)		+	-	-	-	

Those who opted for Zinevra, a veritable action-movie superheroine, were recognized as consensus-setters. But was there not another side to her? Zinevra forgives Bernabo for trying to kill her: she is a strong woman who practices a wifely submission that we find inconceivable. Is this why Griselda, an abused woman and passive opposite of Zinevra, was so widely admired by Boccaccio's readers? Is Griselda's forbearance, which we regard as excessive, a religious ideal? Does this explain the saintly aura of Madam Beritola, another bereaved mother of lost sons? Are they perhaps modeled on the sorrowing Mother of God whose image was ubiquitous? If so, why does Boccaccio avoid overt expressions of religion? Does either bereaved mother pray or invest hope in divine intervention? Does the eclipse of religious expression reflect the influence of the plague described in Boccaccio's introduction? The trajectory of these questions proceeds from a simple comparison of subjective impressions, to a critique of those same impressions, to a search for resolution in the larger work, and finally to the conflict-inducing context of epidemic disaster.

The grid-based division of labor accompanied by synthesis was used in other ways. In the pre-discussion lecture on Tolstoy's *Cossacks*, students were told to think about the assigned chapters as material for a film adaptation. Since an adaptation must select and highlight certain

essential elements of the dialog and imagery, which verbal exchanges should be foregrounded? Which objects would occupy the focus of the camera?

Though there are no absolute right or wrong answers, there are more or less convincing explanations of choices. Here is how the story board looked for several of the selected chapters:

	Chapter 1	Chapter 2	Chapter 7	Chapter 8
	Scene: Moscow at night	Olenin in sleigh	Hut at the outpost	Riverbank
	Episode: party from the vantage of the servants	Close up of the dreaming Olenin	As Cossacks prepare dinner, Nazarka fears killing the pheasant.	Luk. up close taking aim
	Dialog: "a new life..."	Dream of adventure.	Lukashka: "Let me!"	Luk: "In the name of the Father. . ."
	Action: Olenin departs.	Olenin wakes up.	Pheasant bleeds out.	Luk. fires.

The film adaptation focused attention on the importance of details of setting and dialog. Without calling student choices wrong, the instructor could offer other options: *I see your point, but here is what I would suggest ...* Anyone who had read the material could propose an option. What purposes would the choice serve? Does the camera position in the first scene enable us to observe the self-indulgent young aristocrats through the eyes of their exhausted servants? In the second scene, how could we show that Olenin is waking up in a double sense? How should we photograph his first full-scale view of the Caucasus mountains in the distance to show that they effect another awakening? What is the point of the close up of the pheasant Lukashka has killed

for his squeamish comrade Nazarka, or the "prayer" uttered by the Cossack when he fires at his enemy? The cinematic hypothesis can pay attention to Tolstoy's symbolic realism without the implicit one-right-answer-only questions which intimidate and discourage students. Moreover, once a scene has been vividly evoked for all, the instructor can hypothesize. What if we were to focus on another detail? What if we shot the scene from the perspective of the Chechen warrior crossing the river to his death? Point-of-view and the use of symbols are important for Tolstoy's interpretation of life experience. What about our students? What did the open road symbolize to them the first time they set off alone in the driver's seat? What does darkness mean to us all?

Discussion classes require so much preparation that it makes sense to share the burden, if only by dividing up or rotating the preparation of discussion questions; but, at best, collaboration can serve as a lab for developing, testing, and revising teaching techniques. In combination with our researches, we experimented with audio recordings as an adjunct to the reading assignments. We noticed that some students had difficulty recognizing the ironic tone of *Candide*'s narrator or finding their way through the intricacies of Conrad's framing tale in *Heart of Darkness*. Would voice inflection accentuate the irony? Would the audible word help readers navigate Conrad's flowing sentences with their shifting points of view, their ambiguous symbols and ironic value judgments? Our *ad hoc* experiment performed on short notice did not yield conclusive results, but the experience of carrying it out inspired some of us to experiment further with listening or reading techniques and report the results to the group.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

Not only have the problems of method and classroom management in teaching literature been neglected. Our changing—some would say vanishing—culture of reading is creating new

problems. While we are aware that there are conflicting opinions about the decline of reading, ranging from a national survey which urged action to journalistic claims that young people are reading more all the time, our experience led us to recognize that problems of basic literacy did have an impact on the goals of our teaching.[29] We were made poignantly aware of this on more than one occasion. Once we were in the lecture hall proctoring the midterm. During the exam, several students came forward individually with the same entreaty. They didn't understand one of the options of a multiple-choice question. Ludwig Tieck's Romantic fairy tale tells how the knight Eckbert is driven by his longing for intimate friendship to persuade his wife to tell an old family friend their secret, thereby setting the plot in motion toward their inevitable doom. The question—an intended giveaway for anyone who had read the first page of the story—went like this: "The human impulse which launches the narration in *Eckbert the Fair* is A. greed, B. terror, C. desire for solitude, D. desire for intimacy." The students who came forward assured us that they had read the story and could answer the question, if not for one unfamiliar word which was throwing them off. What was the word? It was "solitude."

On another occasion in the discussion of *Heart of Darkness*, students were asked to read one sentence each from the most famous passage of the novel: Kurtz's death aboard the steamer. The idea was to give this pivotal scene dramatic presence, while coming to terms with its dense language and symbolism. The activity exposed widespread, fundamental deficiencies in reading skill. Only two students read their sentence with confidence. The others manoeuvred skittishly through the dialogue, guessing how to pronounce unfamiliar words. Their awareness of where to pause at commas, dashes, or semicolons was no less uncertain. Words such as "impenetrable," "precipice," "tremulously," or "somber" were stumbling blocks. The exercise was not intended to humiliate students, but inadvertently it had confronted them with their limitations as readers.

In our research, we had encountered Mainland's thesis that literature pedagogy can learn from foreign language instruction. Here we had an indication that English literary language was itself somewhat foreign to English-speaking students. Students who had only mastered a spoken or simplified version of their own language could hardly be expected to write it with facility and articulation. We were confronted with something more serious than internecine power struggles between composition and literature instructors in English departments. By any standard, higher education entails skills of advanced reading and writing with ease and clarity. Written language is learned by reading it, and writing mastered through practice. If less literature is read and less writing is practiced in freshman composition courses, then more will have to be read and written elsewhere. The burden of grading papers can be shifted, but it won't vanish in the shuffle.

We encourage others to set aside untested generalizations and assumptions about student reading and writing skills and to conduct a diagnosis early in each semester. It is not difficult to devise a measure to determine whether students are familiar with key words in any text, fictional or otherwise, or to estimate whether the level of reading comprehension correlates with problems in discussion and writing. If our experience of challenged literacy is not replicated, so much the better. But if our experience is typical, how can we ignore the consequences? To pretend that respect for our students requires that we ignore their unfamiliarity with words such as "solitude" or "impenetrable" is like asserting that respect for the patient requires the physician to disregard the symptoms of some undignified but potentially curable ailment. Academics who consider it beneath their pay grade to concern themselves with remedial reading skills should consider what students are paying for their education. Medical professionals are not relieved of responsibility because their patients' maladies happen to be new or unedifying.

If our perception of diminished student literacy is accurate, then the teaching of literature must begin with closer attention to written language, its more precise vocabulary, more complex structures, and less direct ways of communicating through irony, metaphor, or subtle insinuation. A quiz on Voltaire's *Candide* might incorporate objective questions on the basic lexical sense of the "*genealogical* tree" of Candide or the Baron's "family *oracle*" Pangloss. Questions on plot might inquire about the precise nature of the "lesson in experimental natural philosophy" given by Pangloss to the chamber-maid. This in turn could serve as a springboard for a discussion of the irony of the narrator. Instruction needs to meet students where they are, by focusing on the vocabulary of the text, providing necessary concepts, and leading students from one stage to the next. Participants must be comfortable with moral and analytical terms if they are to discuss the meaning of Voltaire's novel. How is "hypocrisy" defined and why is it reprehensible? "Close reading" assumes an awareness of the meaning of key words, a recognition of the role of irony, and finally an openness to and interest in the outcome of the tale and the scope of its moral and philosophical implications. Quizzes, in-class exercises, lesson plans, writing assignments, and exams should be designed to emphasize the continuity of language mastery, basic reading, close reading, interpretation, and writing. Without requisite vocabulary, no sort of reading is possible. Conversely, recognition of basic content and tone facilitates the grasp of key problems posed by the text, providing a foundation for formulating informed and perceptive responses. The greater the continuity from basic to close reading to the more complex tasks of term papers and exams, the greater the student's confidence in the purpose and efficacy of the course.

A second continuity, embodied in our research project, integrates the study of literature with the teaching of it in a pedagogy informed by theory and practice. This was the purpose of our independent study and our weekly meetings. More than one hour per week was needed and

taken for our objectives. A two-hour seminar with the discussion class serving as a third hour, with weekly assignments submitted and time reserved for visiting classes, would be optimal. A course such as ours could provide a valid framework for research projects aimed at designing and implementing classroom exercises, producing supplementary materials for textbooks and online teaching modules, or developing diagnostic instruments for assessing the correlation of reading and writing, as well as students' improvement in these skills.[30] A lecture-discussion course with hundreds of participants offers a statistically significant pool. Break-out sections could be deployed as sub-groups for comparing the efficacy of teaching techniques.

In recent decades, popular books have addressed the culture, history, psychology, and even neurobiology of reading.[31] An activity which once seemed as rudimentary as breathing or eating is beginning to seem more like new terrain exposed by a melting glacier. We referred to the demands imposed on teaching assistants and asked, *What is in it for them?* What is in it for us all is an improved culture of literacy. A long neglected field of pedagogy is changing because of the evolving reading habits of students and the rise of MOOCs,[32] hybrid courses,[33] and media of on-line instruction that are more familiar to graduate students than to their aging mentors. We can do our best to make educational ends meet by coordinating literature pedagogy with faculty-graduate-student teamwork in order to strengthen academic literacy and train future teachers.

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[2] John Schilb, "Preparing Graduate Students to Teach Literature: Composition Studies as a Possible Foundation," *Pedagogy* 1, no. 3 (2001): 507-525, citation to 507.

[3] Schilb, 508.

[4] Schilb, 513.

[5] Joanne Diaz. "The Digital Archive as a Tool for Close Reading in the Undergraduate Literature Course," *Pedagogy* 12, no.3 (2012): 425-447, citation to 427.

[6] Diaz, 428.

[7] Catherine Mainland. "Teaching Literature like a Foreign Language; or, What I Learned When I Switched Departments," *Pedagogy* 13, no. 1 (2013): 145-148, citation to 147.

[8] Michael Bérubé. "Teaching to the Six," *Pedagogy* 2, no. 1 (2002): 3-15, citation to 11.

[9] Bérubé, 12.

[10] Kim Hensley Owens. "Teaching 'the Six' — and Beyond," *Pedagogy* 9, no. 3 (2009): 389-397, citation to 391.

[11] Owens, 393.

[12] Scott Miller. "History on the Cheap: Using the Online Archive to Make Historicists out of Undergrads," *Pedagogy* 5, no. 1 (2005): 97-101, citation to 98.

[13] Joanna Wolfe, "A Method for Teaching Invention in the Gateway Literature Class," *Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2003): 399-425, citation to 399.

[14] Wolfe, 400.

[15] James H. McGregor (ed.), *Approaches to Teaching Boccaccio's* Decameron. Approaches to Teaching World Literature Series (New York: MLA, 2000).

[16] Hunt Hawkins and Brian W. Shaffer (eds.), *Approaches to Teaching Conrad's* Heart of Darkness *and* The Secret Sharer. Approaches to Teaching World Literature Series (New York: MLA, 2002).

[17] Renée Waldinger (ed.), *Approaches to Teaching Voltaire's* Candide. Approaches to Teaching World Literature Series (New York: MLA, 1987).

[18] Richard T. Gray (ed.), *Approaches to Teaching Kafka's Short Fiction*. Approaches to Teaching World Literature Series (New York: MLA, 1995).

[19] Elaine Showalter, *Teaching Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); Kostas Myrsiades and Linda S. Myrsiades (ed.), *Margins in the Classroom: Teaching Literature* in *Pedagogy and Cultural Practice* 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Tanya Agathocleous and Ann C. Dean, *Teaching Literature: A Companion* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Kathleen Blake Yancey, *Teaching Literature as Reflective Practice* (Urbana, Il.: National Council of Teachers of English, 2004); Ian Lancashire (ed.), *Teaching Literature and Language Online* (New York: MLA, 2009).

[20] Kimberly A. Nance, *Teaching Literature in the Language : Expanding the Literary Circle Through Student Engagement* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010).

[21] John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, 2nd edition, foreword by Maryellen Weimer (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

[22] Linda Burzotta Nilson, *Teaching At Its Best: A Research-Based Guide for College Instructors*, 3rd edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

[23] Wilbert J. McKeachie and Marilla Svinicki, *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers,* 14th edition (Stanford, CT: Cengage, 2014).

[24] Bean, 133-146.

[25] Nilson, 216.

[26] Seven P. Arvidson, *Teaching Non Majors Advice for Liberal Arts Professors* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

[27] For some interesting suggestions developed for high school literature instruction, see Jerry Sullivan and John Hurley, *Teaching Literature Inductively* (Anaheim: Canterbury, 1982).

[28] James W. Pennebaker, Samuel D. Gosling, and James D. Farell, "Daily Online Testing in Large Classes: Boosting College Performance while Reducing Achievement Gaps," *PLOS One* (20 November 2013); cited in *New York Times* (21 November 2013), A18.

[29] Since it would transcend the confines of this article to do full justice to the debate over the decline of reading, we will refer here to the main positions taken in the public debate. The alarm was sounded by "Study Links Drop in Test Scores to a Decline in Time Spent Reading," New York Times, 19 November, 2007, B1 (the results of the National Endowment for the Arts survey, "To Read or Not to Read"). On the related drop in reading skill, see the previous article, "Literacy Falls For Graduates From College, Testing Finds," New York Times, 16 December 2005, A28: "When the [National Assessment of Adult Literacy test] was last administered in 1992, 40 percent of the nation's college graduates scored at the proficient level, meaning that they were able to read lengthy, complex English texts and draw complicated inferences. But on the 2003 test, only 31 percent of the graduates demonstrated those high-level skills" (see http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/ToRead.pdf). One of the most polemical assertions of the decline of reading has been formulated by Mark Bauerlein, in his *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008). Some arguments for the opposing conclusion that there is no crisis of reading are found at the following: http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/04/the-next-time-someone-says-the-internet-killed-reading-books-show-them-this-chart/255572/; * http://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/young-people-are-reading-more-than-you; * http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2012/12/20/reading-habits-in-different-communities, * http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/06/25/part-1-a-portrait-of-younger-americans-reading-habits-and-technology-use/ * In reality, there is no contradiction between the contrary positions that reading skills are in decline, yet that young people are perhaps reading more. Reading skills depend on the nature and difficulty of what is read. Those who are uncertain that this is possible are encouraged to assess the level of non-text book popular literature most commonly sold by their university bookstore, or simply ask students for the titles of books they have read for pleasure.

[30] The College Board has developed techniques for reliably evaluating essays. In a class such as *Literary Narrative* with hundreds of participants, it should be possible to construct an exam that measures reading comprehension and writing facility in order to assess their correlation. By developing two variants of the exam with distinct but parallel reading components, it should be possible to administer one variant to half the class and one variant to the other half at the beginning of the semester. By obtaining a quotient for the respective difficulty of the reading sections and then switching exam variants at the end of the semester, it

should be possible to measure not only the correlation of reading and writing skills but also the degree of improvement in either skill during the semester.

[31] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1996); Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Random House, 1994); Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008). Also noteworthy are Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading* (New York: Viking, 1996) and David Denby, *Great Books: My Adventures With Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

[32] MOOCs (massive open online courses) and hybrid courses will not solve all problems. The available evidence suggests that MOOCs are not diminishing the need for face-to-face instruction but perhaps the opposite. "MOOC Students Scored Higher With Offline Help," in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 21 June 2013, A13 ("One of the first things researchers have learned about student success in massive open online courses is that in-person, one-on-one teaching still matters").

[33] In our research project, we looked at hybrid courses with interest. Of particular relevance was Tracey M. Gau, "Combining Tradition with Technology: Redesigning a Literature Course," in *Blended Learning: Across the Disciplines, Across the Academy*, ed. Francine S. Glazer (Sterling VA: Stylus [National Teaching and Learning Forum], 2012), 87-114.