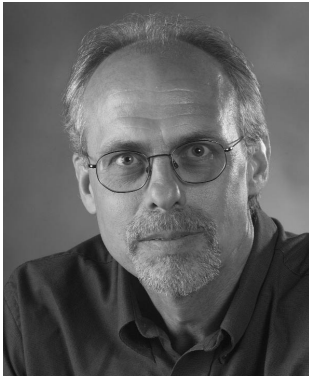


MINDS IN THE ACT OF FINDING



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TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

I teach classes in Modern and Contemporary Poetry, American Literature, and Close Reading. Poems, I believe, are intricate acts of thinking and feeling which the read-

er must enact in order for the poem to come fully alive. Over my 23 years of teaching at Virginia Tech, I've developed a number of ways to bring students to the point where they feel as if they are able to read "from inside" a poem—engaging the same problem or dilemma as the poet, and following, even anticipating her imaginative moves:

- 1) I teach almost entirely by directed discussion, asking for responses and then leading the class by means of those responses into deeper and deeper textual complications.
- 2) I attempt to acknowledge, extend, challenge, and reformulate their initial impressions into a growing but unified whole, calling attention throughout the session to the way the different parts of a poem, a class period, a semester, or even the culture continually come clear, shift, and then fit themselves together again.
- 3) I encourage students to tap into and articulate the various intellectual and imaginative tensions that arise as they think and write in response to my questions, wanting them to understand that great art works by means of such tensions.
- 4) I spend a significant amount of time reading and commenting on student work and discussing their ideas in my office. I teach life-changing skills, ones that come only with practice and coaching.

THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

I'm a poet and I write about poetry, so it's probably no surprise most of my thinking about teaching focuses on metaphors. Over the years, two primary metaphors have guided my work in the classroom. For about a decade, culminating in a Diggs Teaching Scholar talk I gave in 1994 and a Fulbright address to the Faculty of the University of Helsinki in 1996, I used the metaphor of *conversation* to describe the ungrounded give-and-take, going on between readers and poems, I was inviting my students to enter. Think of what goes on in a good conversation, I often say. You're not trying to exchange or elicit information. Rather, you're trying to build on or extend or reapply another person's words or insights or energies. The point of a conversation is the exchange itself, the shape two of you make on a certain day under certain pressures.

I tell my students literature works in the same way: Great poems often respond to other poems, whole literatures respond to other literatures or philosophies or found-

ing texts. To read well, you need to hear that conversation and know what silent voices have prompted the literary response you are reading. In the classroom, then, I try to orchestrate just such ungrounded conversations—between myself and my students, between one student and another, and between all of us and the texts we are reading. We think, I argue, by listening hard and letting the energy from a text, a teacher, or another student draw something new out of us.

Recently, I've been thinking about the metaphor of *enactment* as a second description of what goes on in a literature classroom. In poetry, this would be the idea that a poem offers what Wallace Stevens calls a “mind in the act of finding what will suffice”—a mind searching for what would count as order or clarity, or a place where we can pause for a moment and get our bearings. To read such a poem, the reader must enter it and perform its act of finding. He or she must try to imagine, for example, what prompted a poem's initial starting position, what went through the writer's mind in the gaps or breaks in the text, what pressures generated the poem's various turns, what phrases or images eventually led the poet toward a resting point. To read in such a manner, students need to notice details in the text they are working with and then be able to locate within themselves the different emotions and ideas called up by and connecting those details.

An example I sometimes use to demonstrate this way of thinking is a poem by the contemporary writer Elizabeth Bishop called, simply, “Poem.” In it, Bishop “reads” an old, small painting left to her by a family member. It's just a sketch, she remarks, a cheap thing nobody has much bothered to look at. But then she looks closely and discovers that certain details—the colors of houses, the shade of the sky—identify the scene as Nova Scotia, where she grew up. Looking even closer, she suddenly remarks that she “recognizes the place, [she] knows it!” The great uncle who had painted the scene had been standing in a place she too had once stood in.

While looking at the painting, she simultaneously goes into her memories and finds that very meadow, a barn that rested across it, a farmer's house, a church. Having visualized these things, she sees that certain tiny dabs and wisps in the painting are actually particular steeples and houses whose owners or names she knows. She “reads” the painting by unfolding its details within herself, testing it against her own experience and thereby bringing it to life.

That's exactly what we do when we read, I argue. As we enact a poem's turns and details, drawing from our own experiences and emotions to bring its details to life, we perform a deeply human activity, one that transcends differences and unites us at some profound level. Once learned, this interpretive skill proves valuable far beyond the classroom.

I've recently had the chance to work with this idea in a different setting. Patty Raun of Theatre Arts was my inspiration for this. Together, in 2004, in collaboration with ten student actors, we created a play entitled "Ear, and I, and Silence." Through dance, dialogue, and the sort of continually-deepening questions we employ in class, the play unfolded six poems I regularly teach. It made the enactment metaphor visible in a more powerful way than I had thought possible before. A central figure—we called her "The Poet"—brought up the poems and thought about them, prompted by the nine other actors who functioned as a sort of chorus, asking her questions, challenging her, and forcing her to draw on her own body and memories rather than just her analytical abilities. The chorus, that is, pushed her to enact the poems at a deeper and deeper level, "recognizing" (as Bishop would put it) her place in them. What pleased me the most was the depth of the audience's response, which told me again that what goes on in the classroom is in fact a deeply human activity, one in which many people, of many ages, are still eager to share.

THOUGHTS FOR NEW TEACHERS

Preparation

For most discussions, I typically prepare three to five poems, or some portion of a novel or play. I force myself to work out, as carefully as I can, a path through the material, making sure I understand all of the details and can articulate how they connect and what central problem or dilemma calls them into play. I usually write out all of this in complete sentences. But I rarely look at this script in the classroom, because the first question usually generates a set of issues I hadn't quite formulated on my own. But as I improvise a reading, connecting these new ideas to those I brought to the class, I'm able to think on my feet because of that preparation. None of the preparation is wasted. Knowing "a way home" gives me the freedom to consider carefully all the new ideas that come up.

Discussions

When you ask a question, listen very hard to the answer. Don't just dismiss it if it goes in an unusual direction, and don't just assent to it if it seems more or less reasonable. Listen hard and ask a follow-up question, trying to get students to think on their feet as well. Re-state the answer in terms of the ongoing discussion, linking it in some way to the deeper issues of the class period. Check with the student about

that re-statement. Often you'll get it slightly wrong and the slight nudge from the original speaker will push the discussion along. Be willing to change your mind or deepen your position, and say so when it happens.

Think about the dynamics of the class itself. Often, when a class falls silent or explodes in wonder or frustration, something in the poem elicits those emotions and it's possible to "read" those emotions as a way of getting deeper into the text. Remember, your job is to connect the different parts of a discussion together. And it's also your job to be the initial energy source for the class. It doesn't matter if everyone wants to be outside on a nice spring day, or they are all sniffing and seem exhausted. If you pour energy into the hour, energy will pour back. But you have to be the one who starts the flow of energy.

Goals

I've found it important to continually remind myself I am teaching a way of thinking, not just presenting information. So I select material for discussion that forces our minds to move in new ways. Week by week, I keep raising the level of difficulty or complexity. Often, simply expecting students to think hard calls it out of them. And once someone begins engaging the material in a deeper way, I look to reinforce that by a comment on a paper or a remark in class. I'll often write "This is your best sentence" at some point in a student's essay. It's surprising how powerful such a simple affirmation can be.

Have fun

Teaching is the part of my day when I feel most alive. There's really nothing quite like it.

MEMORABLE STUDENT COMMENT:

Learning to think through these poems tapped into a new part of my brain I wasn't aware of before. Poetry is now something I would like to study for a career and hopefully I will be able to do it. The care you took in grading the papers was the most helpful thing to me, especially when you underlined my phrases that worked so that I could understand when I was being the most lucid.

