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Engaging Students’ Preexisting Competencies in the Introductory Literature Course

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IT HAS been nearly fifteen years since I taught my first introductory literature course in Spanish, and by now I have taught that course more frequently than any other in our department’s curriculum. In 1994 I published an article on developing students’ “sense of literature” in such classes (Nance). Nevertheless, in many ways that sixth-semester offering remains the most challenging of my teaching assignments. In contrast to the graduate seminars, where enrollees have made a positive choice to study literature, nearly all the twenty-five or so students in the typical introductory literature class acknowledge that they are there to meet a requirement. In contrast to language skills courses such as grammar, conversation, and composition, where the students usually report feeling reasonably competent and likely to succeed, responses from introductory literature students to my first-day questionnaire indicate that most feel overwhelmed and anxious. With only sixteen weeks in which to become conversant with the genres of narrative, poetry, drama, and essay and the major writers and literary movements in Spain and Spanish America from the Middle Ages to the present, it is small wonder that students experience anxiety, but it is not only the quantity of material that they find daunting. When it comes to literature, many students enter my class firmly convinced of their incompetence.

Lev Vygotsky discusses the optimum environment for learning as a zo-ped, a “zone of proximal development” in which the learner’s “empirically rich but disorganized spontaneous concepts ‘meet’ the systematicity and logic” fostered by the instructor (xxxv). Here learners are encouraged to stretch their competency to accomplish a task that is neither unchallenging nor impossible, a task that is calibrated to be just within reach of their best efforts. In the introductory literature classroom, locating that zone and drawing the students into it present unusual challenges, since many of those students routinely fail to employ an entire set of competencies that they do possess. The preexisting “empirically rich” competencies that go untapped in many literature courses include a broad store of connotative and cultural knowledge along with varying degrees of expertise in the use of words and images to influence other people. Although today’s students are fairly sophisticated users of images and irony, most of them will check those competencies at the door of the literature classroom unless teachers take care to make students’ own knowledge and skills visible.

Having observed children’s interactions with books and words, I have become convinced that university students’ belief in their own literary incompetence is much like any other prejudice. It has to be carefully taught, because they haven’t always felt this way. Preschoolers make up and repeat rhymes for the sheer fun of it and demand to read and reread the same books to the limits of their parents’ patience. Elementary and junior high school students write letters in elaborate visual forms. High school students signal their knowledge of the romantic conventions of film and video with arch comments on cliché. But somewhere along the line, my students have learned counterproductive lessons about literature and about themselves.

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Not that those lessons are intentional. For the most part they are incidental and unintended consequences, but the result is the same. The sense of literary incompetence has been effectively if unwittingly taught. Previous experience with literature in high school has convinced most of my students that literary analysis is a spectator event, where the teacher is a sort of literary magician who pulls symbols out of a hat. The lesson that literature is inscrutable is taught even more thoroughly in foreign language classes when high school teachers who themselves love literature assign material that is far too difficult for their students. Every year I see students with only rudimentary reading skills who report that they read Don Quijote in high school Spanish. On closer questioning, it develops that they were sent home with assignments, but that nobody could understand them so each day the teacher went over the material in English and explained it to them. Such misplaced acts of love for literature teach one lesson very effectively—reading literature and talking about it are not within reach of the average student. Of course, these are the extreme cases. If none of the students understand the assignment, eventually most teachers modify their lessons plans. However, if a few students manage to come in ready to talk about the assignment, many teachers will talk with those precious few while the others watch. For the spectators, the lesson remains the same. Literature is for an elite.

As a result, very few students enter the literature classroom with the expectation of full participation. Equally few professors expect that everyone in the literature class will participate at all, let alone every day. In language departments, this diminished expectation contrasts strikingly with those of beginning and intermediate language and skills courses. Many of the same professors who find it obvious that everyone needs to participate in a conversation class, since “how else will they acquire the skill?,” report that in a good literature class of twenty there might be five or six active participants. Given such expectations, professors often compromise by turning participation grades into tallies of class attendance, if only to avoid assigning failing grades to all the spectators. Practice masks the problem, and students learn that in literature courses it is legitimate and acceptable to be a nonparticipant. They incorporate this knowledge into their self-descriptions: “I’m just not a talker, so I don’t speak much in class.” Not once have I heard a student claim, “I’m just not a writer, so I don’t write the essays or the term paper.” They have learned what is required of them—and what is not.

Not only does professors’ acceptance of this lack of general participation confirm most students’ sense that literature is not for the average student, it also widens the gap between those students and the few who are already comfortable discussing literature. In these classrooms, the ones who feel comfortable enjoy a virtual tutorial in literary analysis, while other students are left to plunge into term papers and exams without the analytical skills and the confidence that develop through daily participation in guided discussion.

Separating knowledge into academic and nonacademic spheres is another obstacle to making use of preexisting competence. Sometimes students really do not know what they know, because they do not see the link between an item of their own knowledge and the matters that we address in the literature classroom. I first became aware of the degree of this disjunction when I asked what seemed to me a simple question. I had intended to start the discussion of a poem with something that anyone could answer: “What emotions are traditionally associated with the color red?” Obviously uncomfortable, the student whom I had asked responded, “I don’t know. I don’t think we’ve had any other poems where red was mentioned.” Her premise was clear. Poetry was a hermetic field, unrelated to anything outside itself. If we had already “had” a similar poem, then she would have known the answer. Within that conceptual framework, my question was inappropriate. I had mistaken her for someone who knew something about poetry and in the process had given her new evidence that questions in literature classes could be arbitrary and unfair.

There is the bad news, and the degree to which such diminished expectations and severed connections prevent students in the literature classroom from using what they do know should not be underestimated. The good news is that when such obstacles are removed, progress can be surprisingly rapid. Unlike the acquisition of new skills in reading and writing, which often comes slowly, here students can gain access to an established body of preexistent knowledge. There is nothing new to memorize—it’s just “there.” To remove the barriers that stand between students and their own knowledge, students must be convinced of a new set of premises regarding their relation to literature. They need to see literature as a plausible field of study for ordinary students, a class where everyone is expected to participate routinely, and one where they can succeed. They need to see that they do have useful knowledge, and they need to learn how to apply it to literary readings. Fostering such confidence in our students can have a profound influence on their success in introductory and subsequent literature classes. Moreover, evidence of their own competence in a class that most students initially perceive as difficult (and if there were a foreign language student Barbie, developers would have made her say, “Literature class is hard”) is especially effective in building confidence. A first task is to begin to demystify the subject matter, to convince students that the work before them is both finite and possible.

To accomplish this, we need to attend to issues of difficulty and to the sequencing of activities in the literature classroom just as we do in language classes, considering whether our students are prepared for the texts we plan to assign and for the questions we plan to ask. It seems
obvious, but on more than one occasion I have heard professors agree that a literary task or text was too difficult for students at the end of the prerequisite course and then expect that students at the beginning of the next course in the sequence could handle those same tasks and texts, as if the very act of enrollment in an introductory literature course would somehow confer a new level of linguistic and cognitive skill. This expectation can become conveniently self-fulfilling when all but the top students in a program begin to avoid literature courses, but then no one should be surprised when interest and enrollment in literature diminishes. If we expect all our students to study literature, we need to take responsibility for teaching all of them, and not only the ones who can fill in on their own the gaps between what we have taught them in the prerequisites and what they need to know for our literature classes.

Students need a framework in which to situate new knowledge and a sense of where the class is going. I spend the first class period sketching all the major literary movements (obviously in very broad strokes), mapping them on the board so that students can envision the trajectory of the entire course at once. From my “a thousand years of literature in Spanish in fifty minutes” lecture, students can see where we will be going this semester. The remaining forty-seven class hours, I assure them, will be devoted to filling in the details. Over the course of the semester, I preface discussion of each new movement by asking students to retrace briefly the trajectory to date. The reproduction of that outline of literary history becomes second nature, helping to situate each writer, demonstrating to students that literary development is a process of accumulation as well as epiphany, and—perhaps more important—offering students many chances to answer questions with a sense of mastery over the material. By the second day, everyone has some preexisting (if only by a day) knowledge to contribute to the discussion. They know precisely what it is that I am asking for and they know they have the correct answer. I write their answer on the board. Initially I had planned to have students recapitulate the trajectory of major literary movements only until it was clear that they had memorized it, but over time it became apparent that the familiar beginning served other purposes. Each class began with a two-minute reminder that every student knew something about literature really well, so well that it would cost nothing to volunteer if I did not happen to ask first.

At this stage, the point is to build an expectation of universal participation. Establishing this habit prepares for the next challenge—getting students to draw on their own share of cultural knowledge in the course of reading, literary analysis, and discussion. During this next class, after the recitation of literary movements, I talk about the mechanisms of such changes in literature over time. Usually I approach this matter indirectly by asking students about another area of human creativity, one in which they already feel well-informed—fashion. How do new fashions come about, and how does fashion change over time? Working in groups, they usually offer observations about individual creativity through modification of older forms and the occasional invention of new ones, the phenomenon of knockoffs and copying, the boredom that sets in after a new item is everywhere, and the desire for something new. With prompting they become aware of reactions against the immediate past, of revivals of elements from more distant periods, and of the effects of social context (economics of fashion, clothing as symbol and protest, the effects of new materials and manufacturing processes). This brief excursion into the familiar shows the students that they have in their possession a useful set of concepts to apply to the new field. Literary history comes to seem less mysterious and more human.

As the semester progresses and after the recitation of literary movements, I elaborate on the sociohistorical context, conventions, and commonplaces of the period that houses the work that we are studying that day. If we are studying a poem, I often ask students to leave the book closed and to comment on the associations of a list of images. I ask them to draw on their own experience, from films and music and television as well as from books, and also to include associations that they “just know” even if they cannot pinpoint where they learned them. I start the ball rolling with a few commonplaces, along with any culturally specific associations that they might not know. All these associations go on the board. At that point we are not discussing how the images are deployed in the poem—and the book remains closed—but rather taking the preliminary step of reestablishing the students’ own connections between words and the world. On the day we studied Gabriela Mistral’s “Pan,” the board was filled with facts and folk expressions about bread. For teachers, this tracing of common connotations may seem painfully obvious at first, but making students’ own knowledge visible in the classroom is critical to demonstrating to them that they do have something to bring to the table. When no one can think of any more associations, I label the list “Connotaciones,” a step that I have learned to take only after the list is composed. On occasions when I have forgotten and written the heading first, students have nearly always offered fewer ideas. Apparently a technical heading still causes some of them to search under the mental category “What do I know about connotations?” as opposed to “What do I know about bread?” At least at the beginning, it is worth making certain that students understand a concept before offering a literary term. With judicious prompting and visible results, students start to develop confidence in what they know.

But what about what they don’t know? Over time, I’ve learned the limits of even the most skillful and patient Socratic questioning. I harbor no romantic illusions that students already know all that they need to know if they could only recall it, and it is hardly lost on my students...
that I know a great deal that they do not. When one of them comments on that fact, I do my best to demystify my knowledge. I remind them that this is my job and that I've been at it a lot longer than they have. When there are key stylistic, historical, connotative, or cultural associations that the students are unlikely to know, I offer that information at the outset. I explain how I learned the material that I am offering and how they might go about investigating, say, culturally specific connotations of colors, animals, or plants. In this regard the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) are an invaluable resource. A collection of carefully indexed anthropological and ethnographic data on nearly every world culture, it allows students to acquire a good deal of cultural background relatively quickly. As the class progresses, I sometimes assign each person a different item to investigate ahead of class. From time to time, everyone gets a turn to discover that key element that seems to make the rest of the poem fall into place and then bring it to the class. As opposed to dazzling students with our own performance, equipping them to become the experts themselves, even on a small scale, helps counter the idea that literary analysis is an experience reserved for a select few. After students have opened the book and applied their newly discovered knowledge in our group analysis of the poem, I pose one final task, reviewing the characteristics of the movement and asking them, in groups, to explain whether this poem is typical or not. By the second or third baroque poem, students begin to notice patterns and differences unprompted.

While all these strategies can encourage students to participate, accountability is also critical. Students take their cues as to what is important in our classes by how we assign the grades. As apparent from the following excerpt, my syllabus makes clear the weight and expectations of class participation.

**Class discussion** Contribution to class discussion is essential and can easily make a difference in your overall course grade. You will be assigned a grade at the end of each genre unit, with 10 points possible each time, assigned as follows:

10 Outstanding participant. Always well prepared when called on and often volunteers. Encourages others to participate, emerging as a leader in small-group discussion. Helps keep group focused.

9 Excellent participant. Always well prepared, often volunteers. Active group participant.

8.5 Above-average participant. Generally well prepared, sometimes volunteers. Active group participant.

7.5 Average participant. Sometimes unprepared when called on. Rarely volunteers. Usually participates in group but sometimes just listens.

6.5 Minimal participant. Frequently unprepared. Does not volunteer. Rarely contributes to group discussion but does not use English or interrupt group activity with off-task comments.

Lower grades will be assigned for nonparticipation or for consistent off-task comments in discussions.

If a student is absent, he/she is leaving his/her point of view unrepresented in discussion. Each student is permitted two unexcused absences per semester without penalty in class discussion (this does not apply to tests and quizzes). After the two absences have been used, one point will be deducted from the final discussion grade for each additional absence.

Nonetheless, some students are surprised at their first grade. Self-described nontalkers protest, “But how can I be getting such a low grade? I was here every day.” One set of rubrics, however explicit, cannot always overcome the lessons of experience. Now I give an unrecorded sample grade after the first two weeks, so that any grade shock occurs while there is still time to reread the rubric and improve participation.

After the two absences have been used, one point will be deducted from the final discussion grade for each additional absence.

A final stage in the demonstration of students’ knowledge to themselves comes with the exams, where I always include as a last section at least one poem, story, play, or essay that we have not discussed at all in class. I hand out a copy one class ahead of the exam and announce that while they are welcome to look up words, research the text, and discuss it with their classmates, I will not say anything about that text until after the exam. I tell them that to prepare, they should recall the kinds of questions we ask in class and be ready to respond to any of them at the exam, where they will find a fresh copy of the text and a set of specific questions (not announced in advance). Initially some students stated their intent to “look up everything about this poem,” but they soon reported that critical articles, while sometimes interesting, rarely treated the sort of basic questions that we worked on in the introductory literature class. This section of the exam offers students definitive proof that they can understand literature outside the classroom and without the teacher.

Besides cultural and connotative knowledge, many students possess another sort of empirical awareness—experience at using words to influence people. Many more report that they would like to be able to do so. Both this skill and the desire to do more things with words can be incorporated as sources of motivation to engage in literary analysis, when the work of the literature classroom is defined as the consideration of language as cause and effect and as the examination of how certain patterns of words produce certain impressions on readers. When possible, I try to reestablish students’ lost links with literature by reminding them of their own prelapsarian literary past, when they might have worn out a favorite book, written secret poems (which I do not require them to admit, much less to share), read and reread a message in an attempt to decipher the state of a relationship, or written
and rewritten one in an attempt to communicate it. For most students who do not see themselves as literary, the notion that the class can help them be more savvy users and consumers of language can be an alternative source of engagement. On the first page of my syllabus is a quote from Robert Scholes's *Textual Power* on the ways in which the study of literature can help students recognize how others use language to manipulate them and how they can use language to achieve ends of their own choosing:

> What students need [...] is the kind of knowledge and skill that will enable them to make sense of their worlds, to determine their own interests, both individual and collective, to see through the manipulations of all sorts of texts in all sorts of media, and to express their views in some appropriate manner. (15)

Scholes's description of the collateral benefits of literary study appeals to the pragmatism of many of my students, those who want to know why they should study literature when they aren’t literary types.

Of course, the engagement of all our students' preexisting skills and motivations in the introductory literature classroom is no panacea. The identification of social and cultural connotations is no substitute for long-term and patient practice on the specifics of literary analysis. Nonetheless, until we can make all our students' knowledge and skill visible to them, most of them are likely to remain on the sidelines of the literary arena. In the second of “Two English Poems,” Jorge Luis Borges writes, “I offer you explanations of yourself, theories / about yourself, authentic and surprising news / of yourself” (77). With care and patience, the introductory literature class can offer our students news about themselves that helps them unlearn unproductive lessons so that they can begin to draw on all their capacities.

**Works Cited**


What are the competencies students need to succeed now and in the future? Which competencies have been most widely accepted by international education thought leaders, scholars, labour market experts, and education jurisdictions? Which methods of classifying the competencies contribute most to our understanding of teaching and learning? Digital tools and resources can support the process of critical thinking, particularly when used to create authentic and relevant learning experiences that allow students to discover, create, and use new knowledge (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 35).