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Think More Deeply, Enjoy More Fully

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At some point in the mid 1990s, and inspired by my readings in postcolonial literary theory, I came up with the idea of "decolonizing the classroom." In teaching literature, I wanted some overarching and guiding theory towards giving students a greater sense of autonomy over and responsibility for their own learning, and this seemed like an apt metaphor for the kind of processes that I wanted to encourage.

At the same time, the metaphor needed various implementation strategies. One can't, after all, march in on opening day and announce: "All right, you oppressed natives! I hereby declare this classroom to be decolonized. Throw off the chains of your colonizers and learn free from this point forward!"

So how to implement? I'll sketch out a couple of limited role-playing strategies that encouraged individual class sessions in that direction. After that, I'll describe an approach to classroom discussions and to assignments that served me well for close to twenty years.

In one of the role-playing strategies, I created a fictional evil twin, Prof. Darkh Hallway. Students understood that I was going to play that particular role and then direct a class discussion accordingly. Prof. Hallway might advance interpretations of literary texts that seemed, on the surface, to be cantankerous or unlikely. Students in turn felt empowered to argue back at Prof.

Hallway, since they weren't actually challenging the "real" classroom instructor. They could thus play their own roles, perhaps even taking on their own cantankerous elements.

In another role-playing strategy, I would tell students that we would work from the assumption that I had simply never read the assigned literary texts for that day. Their job was then to explain these texts to me, not just the basic factual information but also the interpretive elements within which this information made sense. Again, students readily assumed their own role as the ones with that day's expertise for that material.

Both of these approaches seemed consistently valuable at generating lively class discussions. But I also wondered, might these be simply role-playing gimmicks? In any case, they were both still overly teacher centered, continuing to rely for their success upon the methods of the manipulating colonizer. They thus didn't seem like approaches capable of a significant transfer of the responsibility for learning from me to the students. How could the classroom become more student centered while still advancing students towards the learning outcomes for a particular course?

In other words, how to balance out these various needs without replicating the system of the colonizer?

Out of this context, I developed the concept of the Interpretive Problem (IP). I defined it as a question that we might wrestle with or disagree about as readers; to that extent, puzzling out the solution to an IP might enhance the aesthetic experience of reading that text and open up new insights.

I further described IPs as "points of weirdness" in a literary text. You're reading along and you encounter something puzzling. Why did the author choose that word? Why did this character act in that bizarre way? Where did this image come from? When you're reading, you

typically just swerve around puzzling points and keep going, meanwhile hoping that they don't

show up on a pop quiz.

Resist that impulse to swerve, I told my students. Instead, stop and wonder. Puzzle it out.

Solve the problem.

IPs served as ways to structure class discussions, exercises for small groups, or major

assignments. An essay based on an IP could later expand into a research paper considering how

published scholars might have turned up material relevant to better understanding that IP.

The IP approach seems relevant for a variety of other disciplines and not just literature.

Scholars of all stripes, after all, continually grapple with problems and puzzles. One line,

frequently attributed to Isaac Asimov, got right to the heart of the IP assignments: "The most

exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not Eureka! (I found

it!) but rather, 'hmm…that's funny…'"

Since the IP – and problem-solving assignments generally – seemed new to many

students, we also spent class time discussing appropriate strategies. Students might complain, for

instance: "I couldn't find a single IP in this short story! Where are they?" I would explain that

the IP isn't inherent to the text but rather arises out of the experience of a particular reader with

that text. Different readers will thus "find" different IPs within the same text.

I also advised students to think of themselves as teachers: in an essay, their task was to

lead their reader through the process of discovery that they themselves had followed in

responding to an IP.

Over time, I developed an array of web materials for my students regarding the IP and

various ways of thinking about related assignments (Hall, n.d.a). My course evaluations

suggested pretty clearly that students appreciated and also benefitted from IP assignments (Hall, n.d.b).

In 2013, almost twenty years after I'd begun working with the IP as a learning structure, I gained further reassurance from Carol Geary Schneider, at that time the president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities:

> The real key to high-quality learning is the student's mastery of the capacities fundamental to evidence-based inquiry and reasoning: identifying and framing a significant question, organizing the analysis, generating and evaluating evidence, developing an argument, taking into account the likely objections, and then subjecting one's own judgment to the verdict of others. (Schneider, 2013)

Yes, I thought, the IP can accommodate and facilitate all of that.

Even more reassuring, though, was a statement from Ms. Tabetha Cloke, a student in a first-year seminar in 2013. In describing her experiences with the IP approach in her end-of-semester reflections, Ms. Cloke noted that it "forces the reader to think more deeply into the passage, to get at the whys of things rather than just accept them for what they seem to be." Ms. Cloke felt that this approach "allowed me to enjoy writing again" (Hall, n.d.b).

Yes, I think, she should get the last word here.

References

Hall, W. E. (n.d.a). Interpretive Problems. Retrieved July 25, 2018, from

https://chalkdot.wordpress.com/interpretive-problems/. Since my retirement in May

2014, the free version of Wordpress as a platform has begun selecting and generating

advertising. My old sites are thus considerably messier than back when I was still using

them for course materials.

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Schneider, C. G. (2013). Losing Our Way on the Meanings of Student Success. *Liberal

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research/periodicals/losing-our-way-meanings-student-success.