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A Tale of an Introductory Literature Class Gone Well
(with practical ideas for use in any literature-based class!)

Teaching introductory-level English courses has many positive and negative aspects for the instructor. The obvious positives include working with students who haven't yet become disillusioned with the system, the ability to work from the most basic skills and then witness students turn those skills into successful mastery of the learning outcomes, and the sheer joy that one witnesses when students start to make significant connections between their coursework and their own voices. The greatest obstacle in all this is to establish with the student the value of the humanities, and to get the students to see the value of the skills learned in an introductory course. I have always taken this charge very seriously.

I recently had the opportunity to teach an introduction to literature course. Out of thirty students, only three were humanities majors. I knew I had my work cut out for me. How was I going to engage the 27 students who were sitting in the seats impatient to check off a requirement to graduate? The answer was clear: I was going to need to step outside my comfort level and try some new things. By the end of the semester I had them reading poetry to each other.

The first thing I did was reevaluate the importance of sticking to the canon. An introduction to literature course, by its very nature, must cover some traditional content. It would be shameful for the students to not be exposed to many of the canonized writers that have defined the academic study of the humanities. I dutifully required and taught *The Norton Introduction to Literature* so I could expose the students to the great Faulkner, Carver, Chopin, Poe, O'Connor. We focused on the important skills of purposeful reading and how to articulate a response to literature. Then my syllabus took a detour from tradition. I decided to teach a modern novel that had received a lot of press and had been used by several well-respected universities for the common read. I chose *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline.

Ready Player One is a dystopic novel that takes place in 2044. The basic premise of the novel is that the world is in ruins and most people "live" in the virtual world. Cutting edge technology has made the virtual world so wonderful and perfect that most people don't ever leave it. The book opens with the creator of this virtual world dying and leaving his massive fortune to the lucky person who can win an elaborate video game that he created before dying. The complicating factor is that all of the clues and levels that must be achieved in order to win "the game" are based on eighties pop culture. The book follows several main characters as they attempt to master the game, to stay alive, to save the virtual world, and ultimately, to learn how to live in the real world again.

The book was a hit from the start. First of all, it appealed to the many gamers that filled the seats in front of me. They couldn't believe that we were devoting time to discussing the value of Pac Man, Atari, and Dungeons and Dragons. Any serious gamer knows a little about

the history of video games. Suddenly, these "gamers" had something to contribute to class that they were experts in! Secondly, the book covers topics that are immediately relevant and interesting to the millennial generation. It allows discussions to emerge that cover the future of technology in our lives, possible over-reliance on technology, our need for human interaction, uncontrolled capitalism, materialism, and the purpose for art and literature in the real world. And thirdly, the inclusion of pop culture allowed me to incorporate some really fun stuff into the class period. As I mentioned, the book has a heavy 80's influence. We watched big hair band videos in class. We watched YouTube videos of old video games. We engaged in 80's history that fascinated the class. They started drawing connections between historical events, trends, and the humanities that were well beyond the scope of the book. We discussed the Cold War. The Challenger Explosion. Rubik's Cubes. Leg Warmers. The first Apple Computer. I'll never forget the day I played "It's a Dead Man's Party" by Oingo Boingo. The students literally got up and danced through the video. Then they engaged in one of the most insightful and profound discussions of the role of literature I have had the privilege of facilitating.

By the end of the novel unit, we had a well-established respect for the value of literature. Now it was time to move into the dangerous territory of poetry. At this point in the semester, the students had bought into what I was trying to accomplish. Most of them had learned that participating was expected, and *Ready Player One* had allowed them to confidently use their voices in discussion. More importantly, they were having fun with the class. And so was I.

I started the poetry unit by announcing a Poetry Slam that we were going to hold in class on the last day of the unit. The rules were simple: You could submit as many poems as you wanted, but you had to be able to identify the type of poem (only one free verse allowed per student), it had to be original, and you had to read it in front of the class. Then we dove in. I started with Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Instead of reading it aloud, however, we "watched" it. I had found a version of the poem that was illustrated by Gustave Dore and was set to some crazy old pipe organ music. The students sat in full attention for the entire poem. Then we discussed it from a historical perspective. We used the anthology to read a lot of different poems. I always had eager volunteers to read the poems aloud. They took turns trying to show each other up in their dramatic readings of the poetry. I challenged them to interpret the poems. I watched them struggle, have an insight into meaning, and high-five each other as they dissected what the poetry might mean. We studied numerous forms of poetry, and I encouraged them to try writing poems in the different forms. Sometimes we read them in class; sometimes they tucked the poems away in their books. The point is this: They were engaging in the poetry at a level that I hadn't seen before in an introductory literature course of mostly non-humanities majors.

This all culminated in the Poetry Slam. I had never used class time for this type of activity, and I had made it completely voluntary. Would enough students participate to make it interesting? Would the poems be any good? I'd been to many poetry readings where I desperately wished myself elsewhere. I hoped that this wouldn't kill the fun vibe we had

created for the class. The greatest obstacle was that this particular class period was a 2-4 p.m. course, and the Poetry Slam was scheduled for Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving Break. How many kids would even show up to class?

I walked into class that afternoon unsure of what to expect, but I can honestly write that I never in my wildest dreams expected what I experienced. The classroom was full. Only three students had decided to skip the class to get a jump on vacation. The sign-up on the board was filled with over half of the students' names. Beside each name was the poetry form that the student had chosen to use. Once everything was organized and ground rules were established (respectful listening, thoughtful feedback, etc.), the first student took the "stage" and read her poem about growing up in a home filled with domestic violence. The next student read his ballad about exchanging athletics for academics. There were poems about horses and poems about date rapes. Students laughed, and they cried. Even as I type this now, my arms fill with goose bumps as I recall the authenticity and vulnerability that was displayed in that classroom that snowy afternoon. I knew beyond doubt that the study of literature had changed these students in ways that none of us had ever imagined.

Over the course of the semester, I had accomplished something new in my teaching: I had allowed myself to have fun! I found pleasure in the material, tested the rigid boundaries and expectations of teaching the canon, and engaged all the students. The learning objectives were met. The students' stretched their minds, and I found that it's as important for me to use my "voice" when teaching as it for the students to find theirs.

The moral of the tale? Teaching an introductory literature course is a serious endeavor, but that doesn't mean it has to be all serious. Shake it up a little bit.

Resources for creating some room for fun in your own classrooms

Poetry:

The most important thing you can do when teaching a literature course is to read a lot of poetry out loud. When I'm teaching any literature course, I start every single class period with a reading of a poem. I like to mix it up and bring in poetry from all forms and all time periods. It helps to familiarize students with poetry, and it helps some of them get past the immediate "I hate poetry" reaction that can inhibit their appreciation of poetry during the actual poetry unit.

If you are teaching a poetry unit, the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel L. Coleridge is a great piece. I like to introduce it to my students by telling them that we are going to be studying zombies in the poem (Part 5). At first, they don't believe me. Zombies? In an 18th century poem? Really?! Still, zombies or not, they are initially put off by the difficult English structure. To overcome this, I find that when the poem is read aloud after they've been assigned to read it, they understand it far better. I came across a YouTube video that is a reading of the poem by Orson Welles and is illustrated by Gustave Dore. It has great pipe organ music that pipes in for emphasis. Overall, it's a bit campy, but the students love it. It really helps to make the poem accessible. This resource can be used in several ways. This

link {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRGnoFf2cZQ} provides a full 40:36 version of the entire poem. If you don't want to devote that much time to it, there are also separate videos available of each individual part. If you want to grab their attention with the zombies, watch only Part 5 (here is the link for the poem broken down into individual videos: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=rime+of+the+ancient+mariner+-+orson+welles%2C+larry+jordan+part+5).

Another fun exercise for teaching poetry is through a poetry exercise I created called "Who's the Better Poet?" The purpose of this exercise is to help students learn the different meters of poetry and the different rhyming schemes. The secret objective is to get the students actually writing poetry. Once they try their hand at the craft, they start to see it as less of an inaccessible genre. The game is simple. Break the class into pairs. Ask them to name three nouns and two verbs. Write these on the board. Then ask for a color (or some other modifier). Write this on the board. Now tell them to write a poem that includes all of those words, is four lines long, has iambic pentameter, and an a/b/a/b rhyming scheme. Give them a couple of minutes to write the poem and then share with their partners. Each set of partners determines who "wins" the round with the best poem. Repeat the exercise with new words and new guidelines, more difficult forms (I love throwing in a Shakespearean sonnet). If you have time, repeat the exercise a third and fourth time, but at this point, let each group set its own rules. Ask for volunteers to share their best poems. I'm always impressed by how eager students are to share their work after their partners have given them positive feedback on their poems.

The last exercise I recommend is the Poetry Slam. Establish the rules that work with the tenor of the class, but set high expectations. You won't be disappointed.

The Novel:

Many instructors make the mistake of teaching only canonized novels or of teaching their personal favorite. I encourage you to choose your novel title based on what you think the students will find interesting and accessible. It should have literary merit, of course, but the idea is to think about what will best help the students reach the learning outcomes from the novel unit. The bottom line is simple: If the students aren't interested in the novel you've chosen, no matter how much the instructor loves the book, the students aren't likely to actually read it. This translates into awkward class discussions, frustration for the instructor, and learning objectives left unmet.

Here is a very short list of novels I've taught that have had enthusiastic responses from the students.

Ready Player One by Ernest Cline. There is so much you can do with the 80's pop culture component. Find some Hair Band videos to use at the start of class. Share examples of earlier arcade games (you can google images online and show comparisons). Bring in "artifacts" from the 1980's. Use your imagination, but the key is to create connections outside the book so the students can make stronger connections inside the book.

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien. This is an eye-opening novel for the millennials who have only known modern wars with few casualties. As we work through the novel, I interject mini-history lessons and geography lessons to illustrate the authenticity of the story. I spend a lot of content time on the difference between memoir, non-fiction, and historical fiction. This novel lends itself easily to having the students do an in-depth character analysis. I like to give the students two options for their analysis: 1) Choose five key characters from the book. Choose one key action for each of those characters. What motivates the soldier's action? What are the results of said action for each character? What does that action tell you about the kind of person he or she is? or 2) Describe 3 actions that lead to deadly consequences and explain how the characters involved are affected by those actions. To wrap the unit up, we watch an episode of "Tour of Duty" – a television show from the late 1980s. Typically, the class discussion that follows is intense as students are forced to grapple with the images from the book, the images from the show, and their own perceptions of what "real" war looks like.

Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston. This is a memoir of a Chinese-American girl struggling to find her voice and her place in a world where her parent's expectations and society's expectations are often at odds. It's a piece that many of the first-generation American students really enjoy because they identify very deeply with the main character. I love to teach it because it is rich in myth and storytelling. I start the novel with an explanation of how *Woman Warrior* is a dream-like collection of recollections, legends, and folk tales retold in a linear progression of real events from Kingston's life. I point out how the legends and myths are intended to teach about China's history, religious instruction, and social rules. Then I break the class into groups of 2 and charge them with the task of writing a story/myth/legend that explains something important to our modern society. The task is outlined as such: The myth needs a hero, a villain, and a moralistic outcome (i.e. the hero learns something about life or self). They can be as outrageous as they want as long as they meet the requirements of having a strong lesson. I then list several possible topics on the board (being too greedy, not working hard enough, working too hard, always wanting what you don't have, being content, finding true happiness). The length of the myth is dependent on how much time you want to devote to the activity. This activity helps engage the students with the memoir because it illustrates Kingston's use of storytelling to tell her story. The added bonus is that it offers a creative outlet for the students.

When teaching any literature course, challenge yourself to think outside the immediate genre you are teaching and consider how other genre can supplement your teaching. The students love it when you mix it up. And who knows? You might find yourself having a great time along the way!