

September, 2007 - John Walsh, English

In my English literature courses, both core and elective, I stress close reading of texts, because I see it as the most productive and rewarding approach, the one most likely to lead students away from vague generalized responses to what they read and towards a realization of the concreteness and specificity that is the essence of imaginative literature. At the same time I try to demystify the practice of literary criticism by stressing that it is much like many other disciplines in that it involves assessment or evaluation of the material at hand and requires that the assessment or evaluation be supported by evidence. The primary evidence is the actual words of the work under consideration.

The approach takes time. Lyric poems are analyzed virtually line-by-line; for longer forms (plays, stories, novels) one needs to be more selective, identifying those scenes or passages that are central and then applying to them the same rigorous attention to detail. I repeatedly remind students that my examinations are based almost entirely on our class discussions. They will be expected to recognize passages we have analyzed together and to explain the various ways in which each is important to the work from which it comes. Of course this method of testing is and has long been widely used in literature classes.

Several years ago, however, I made a simple but important change in the way we review the test when I give the papers back to the students. Formerly I would simply tell them what points they should have been able to recall about each of the passages (not, of course, with absolute completeness or exactitude—if I can see seven or eight things to be said about a given passage, an answer that includes four or five of them will receive full credit, or nearly). But now when I finish grading a set of exams I go back over them to identify for each passage one or two students who have dealt with it successfully, and I have the authors read their answers aloud in class, pointing out first that anyone whose answer on any given passage did not earn full credit should listen carefully to see what is missing from his or her answer. Thus the students, not I, conduct the review.

This is perhaps a fairly obvious strategy that I ought to have stumbled to earlier in my teaching career. But I confess that when it first occurred to me I had mixed feelings about it, in part because it would surely take more class time than my former approach. More important, I was uncomfortable because the change was partly motivated by defensiveness; I had the impression that as the educational times changed, a growing number of students were finding my expectations excessive even if they did not level the charge in so many words. Insofar as the new strategy would be indirectly a way of refuting that charge by demonstrating that there were students in the room who could and did meet my expectations, the strategy itself seemed somehow adversarial, the right deed for the wrong reason, as it were. And what if it back-fired in some way? Might some of them intuit the element of defensiveness? Or would the weaker students simply resent

being “shown up” by the stronger ones? Well, I thought, if it doesn’t work I can drop it.