

Teaching American Literature: Encountering Challenges

Nazmi Al-Shalabi, Assistant Professor, Hashemite University, Jordan

American literature has been taught in Jordan since the early 1960s. At the Hashemite University where I teach, this course has been offered since 1995, and is a compulsory course for the students of the English Department. It is designed to give support to English language and literature courses and provide students with cultural awareness, an important component of the process of the acquisition of the language they are learning. I have been teaching literature classes in general and American literature in particular for fifteen years running, wrestling with many problems related to students' competence, the material to be taught, textbooks, etc. Despite these problems, my goal is to change students for the better by helping them with learning English and arming them with the skills needed.

To achieve the aforementioned objective, I have decided to make the classroom different. This difference does not lie in its appearance or furniture. Rather, it lies in its becoming the place where students willingly practice writing, raise questions related to the material discussed, and make as many comments as they want. The classroom also becomes a training field where students learn to speak English well, which prepares them for their future careers as teachers of English. To emphasize this difference and enable students to experience it, I have been tirelessly trying to meet a number of challenges, such as deciding what to teach. Shall I cover American literature from the beginnings until about 1865? Who shall I begin with: the Pilgrims? Columbus? Native American legends? Where shall I stop? Shall I limit myself to the old traditional authors such as Franklin, Emerson, Thoreau, Whiteman, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Frost? Shall I try including forgotten or marginalized authors such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Kate Chopin? Shall I include new writers such as Rita Dove?

All these queries suggest the variety and richness of the subject, which keeps me continually intrigued and drives me to constantly tinker with my syllabus to "fully represent the diversity of American authors and genres" (Poling). Bearing this diversity in mind, I make my own anthology for students, since classes cannot "afford the time required to cover all" the "materials available" (Mulford, "Recovering") in an anthology similar, for instance, to *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, or *Concise Anthology of American Literature*. I have a variety of options for my mini-anthology. One option is to cover Anglo-American issues, starting with Capt. J. Smith and go into the Enlightenment by way of W. Byrd. Another option is to treat women's studies, focusing on selections by women writers. A third option is to talk about class systems as represented in the selections from the Puritans, Virginia Colony, William Byrd, Sarah K. Knight, and John Leacock. A fourth option is to teach "19th -Century American Literature," emphasizing Irving, Bryant, Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Poe, Thoreau, and Melville. A fifth option is to teach "Twentieth-Century American Literature," with emphasis on Twain, James, Frost, Stevens, Eliot, and Steinbeck.

The second challenge is to make learning enjoyable and interesting. Before discussing the material, I usually take some time out to discuss two key issues that always come up during the semester: the issues of language use and aesthetics. These issues keep coming up and are worthy of being handled. By language use, I mean simply "the way we say things" (Mulford, *Teaching* 3), which is a serious problem because students still have trouble with using the grammatical rules of English. Regarding the other issue, aesthetics, it is "the way we sometimes study texts" (Mulford, *Teaching* 3). I make it clear to students that texts are not studied to be learnt by heart. Rather, they are studied to be understood, built on, and evaluated.

Furthermore, studying these texts is certain not only to teach students a number of lessons that help them with leading their lives but also to provide them with the consolation and pleasure they have been

denied. I advise students to raise as many questions as they can while reading, and to try answering them on their own. The more questions they answer, the better. These questions are related to the writer's thesis, moral, tools, and message. They are also related to the relevance of the work examined to the world where we live. These questions arouse students' interests and keep them involved. I arrange for keeping students involved and making learning enjoyable by allowing students to make comments on the material read and raise any relevant questions.

This method of instruction that takes students' interests into account is the focus of the student-centered approach that revolves around "the questions, concerns/ interests of the students" (Goldman). My role is "to create a structured environment that encourages student curiosity" (Goldman) where I enliven students' minds to "their moral obligations as citizens" (Kennedy) in a society, and teach them to make informed decisions related to their actions and stemming from an "awareness of their place" (Kennedy) in society while channeling it towards the larger ends of the course. In other words, I am a facilitator of the classroom energy, and students play a significant role in each class I teach.

This is the third challenge that I have to face. Traditionally, students have not been allowed to make any remarks in class; the result is that they have lost their self-confidence, and don't feel like talking in class. I advise them to make comments on the material discussed, promising to give them more marks. However hard I try persuading them of the value of contributing to class discussion, few listen and respond, and many maintain their reluctance and silence. I keep urging students to respond to the arguments made by writers, and while listening to them, I do not respond in a threatening way. I praise students urging them to go on with making their remarks. I often pick a glaring mistake occurring in students' remarks and comment on it to help students with learning the language through mastering its

grammatical rules. Besides, I help students with pronouncing words correctly.

As far as remarks are concerned, I have noticed that students have trouble with responding and voicing their opinions. This trouble that students have springs from their lacking "confidence in the validity of their own ideas or opinions" (Appleman), being reluctant "to express their response in the classroom, particularly in large-group discussions" (Appleman), being helpless "to explore alternative perspectives" (Appleman), and feeling afraid of being mocked by their mates. In respect of the first difficulty related to lacking confidence, students have been denied the chance for expressing their own minds, and this denial has become the vogue in many courses. Therefore, students have been adversely impacted by this behavior, and some of them see nothing wrong with their being tongue-tied and claiming that they have no response, no opinion at all. Regarding the reluctance to express their opinions in the classroom, students, being frustrated and overcome with fear and helplessness, demonstrate their unwillingness and unreadiness to talk in large groups. This unreadiness of students is due to their realizing that they cannot compete with others whom they hold to be superior to them. This feeling persists as long as these students lack the skills that empower them and help them with regaining the self-confidence central not only to changing their own views of themselves but also maintaining their psychological health.

The fourth challenge is that students sometimes feel puzzled at the extent to which all that they have learnt cannot serve them in a discussion and evaluation of an American literary work. The students' confusion springs from their exposure to new ways of thinking and their having to read the familiar differently. I help students by telling them that they are not to blame, that they haven't been allowed to talk in class, that they haven't been permitted to raise questions about the material, and that I myself will be certainly pleased to hear from them. Students go on with rejecting my calls for responding, ascribing their silence to their being shy and trying to get around the course

requirements by claiming that they are too shy to talk in class and that their mates may laugh at them. I make it clear to them that those who make remarks and do reports will be rewarded, and that those who don't will be penalized. Upon hearing that, the many respond, but the few don't, arguing that they are just beginners, and that they are not in a position to make presentations.

At the institution where I teach, the students who enroll for the American literature class are many. Most of these students are sophomores, but some of them are juniors and seniors. These students probably have no prior knowledge of American authors, but they are remarkably free of prejudices and preconceptions. Sometimes these students seem to be bemused when they come across the negative images Americans hold onto of Arabs and Muslims. The reason underlying students' being stumped is that Americans keep talking about equality and human rights, but forget all about stereotypes that keep Arabs and Muslims in a state of stasis. This discrepancy between claims and actions makes students reject stereotypes holding them to be unjustified. These students also equally reject the societal inequities which are not solved and are "in some ways more insidious than they were before" (Mulford, *Teaching* 3). After reading about stereotypes, students start making remarks reflecting their displeasure and disappointment. In my capacity as a teacher, I advise them to think wisely, not to react this way, and not to forget that Arabs and Muslims themselves are the first to be blamed for these negative images. I tell them that people are judged by all that they say and do, and that objectivity demands that we not let our prejudices and preconceptions sway the judgments we pass, and that we look at others from the perspective of their own culture.

As far as judgment is concerned, I tell students that their responses are judged by specific reasons related to completeness, relevancy, quality, and insightfulness. In this manner, students know well about their own responses and why they are judged in a certain way. Moreover, students know how to improve on their own responses

from the remarks made. Students are urged to speak and to keep doing so, subordinating their concern about mistakes to their overwhelming desire to learn English. I tell these students repeatedly that the more they speak, the better, and that the more students speak the better. Even though the good number of students in class discourages instructors, I personally don't feel so, holding this great number of students to be an asset. The reason for this attitude is that when students speak English, they make mistakes. I myself pick the glaring mistakes and comment on them, showing students what is right and what is wrong. So, when many students speak English in class, they make many mistakes of which I choose a few to set right. The repetition of this action on a daily basis does students good and facilitates learning. Students who learn from the mistakes set right become more confident of themselves, more involved in discussion, and more interested in learning. More importantly, these students realize that they are included in class, which makes a hill of difference.

Difference is made for two reasons. Firstly, I make up my mind to be different from others and act in accordance with this decision. Secondly, I keep urging students to be different, clarifying the significance of this difference. The result is that students accept my advice, abide by it, and become different from others. I add up to this difference by connecting the literary work I teach with the real life happenings, forgetting Shakespeare's conviction that art's purpose is to hold " a mirror up to nature" (*Hamlet* III.ii.22). The value of this connection is that it familiarizes students with the material under discussion, makes class interesting, and enables students to apply what they are learning. This difference is furthered by my asking students to reflect on what they have learnt in the whole course. I ask them to write about their favorite work and their reasons for holding it to be so. I may also ask them about their own opinions of a certain author, a character, and an argument. Besides, I ask them about the lessons they learn, for instance, from a poem, a short story, a play, an

essay, etc. Thus, the students' writing skills as well as the skill of formulating their opinions of the material discussed will be developed.

In addition to all that has been said, I advise my students to get as much information as they can from the internet, bring it to class, read it, and share it with their mates, who, in turn, respond to it making a few comments, which I clarify and connect with the material read and discussed. I may also arrange for the students' watching a movie related to the syllabus, watching this movie with them, commenting on the director's approach, lighting, costumes, music, shots, and transitions.

I'd like to say that students learning American literature this way leads to their discovering themselves as well as discovering the pleasures of great literary works. As for professors, they discover the number of challenges they have to face, and the efforts they have to exert to make the American literature class not only interesting but also useful.

Works Cited

- Appleman, Deborah, Richard Beach, Susan Hynds, and Jeffrey Wilhelm. "Assessing and Evaluating Students' Learning: How Do I Know What They've Learned?" *Teaching Literature Companion Web Site*. 2004. Web. 2010.
- Goldman, Eric. Teaching Portfolio. *English 2201W: American Literature Forms of Freedom and Captivity*. Web. 2010.
- Grandfield, Kristen J. Teaching Voice through Latina and African American Literature. *Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute*. 2005. Web. 2010.
- Kennedy, Brian. "Making Space for Absent Others: Towards a Multicultural Pedagogy." *Faculty Dialogue* 25 (Fall 1995). Web. 2010.
- Lauter (ed.) *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 5th Edition. Vol. A: Colonial Period to 1800. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- McMichael, George (ed.) *Concise Anthology of American Literature*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1974.
- Mulford, Carla. "Recovering the Colonial, Beginning Again: Toward Multiculturalism in the Teaching of Early American Studies." *Essays on Teaching the American Literatures: Heath Anthology Newsletter*. Web. 2010.
- . (Ed.) *Teaching the Literatures of Early America*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1999.

Poling, Steven. *Making American Literatures*. 1997. Web. 2010.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins. Croatia: Thomson Learning, 2001.

Nazmi Al-Shalabi is a graduate of East Tennessee State University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He has been working at the Hashemite University in Jordan for nine years and has published a number of articles in peer-reviewed journals in Jordan, Syria, the United Kingdom, Azerbaijan, and the United States. Al-Shalabi has also published book and film reviews in the United Kingdom and translated several English short stories into classical Arabic. His current project is a translation of Marwan Obeidat's *American Literature and Orientalism* into Arabic. His areas of interest are American literature and culture, film criticism, translation, and the East-West relationship.