

A More Informed Democracy?: Strategies for Teaching Content within a  
Student- Focused Pedagogy

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**Introduction**

Since I began teaching first-year writing and American literature courses a decade ago, I have defined my teaching philosophy as first and foremost focused on my students' voices and skills, rather than on any shared content that I'm trying to convey to them. That focus has had a number of specific, tangible, and lasting effects on my teaching practices. In grading a writing paper, for example, I focus very fully on the student's work with skills like the use and analysis of evidence and the construction of and movement across paragraphs, so that a thesis-driven paper that reads a short story entirely differently than I myself would can still receive an A if it develops every aspect of that argument (from the thesis itself down to the use and analysis of individual quotes and everything in between) effectively and thoroughly. Similarly, in planning and running a discussion of a novel in an upper-level literature seminar, I tend to use tools such as email journals or Blackboard posts to help the students articulate their initial ideas, and then to drive the discussion by asking them to share and elaborate on those ideas; that often means that we do not get to discuss at length (or even at all) particular moments or aspects

of a text on which my own reading might focus, but does I believe allow the students to develop their own readings (both individually and communally) more fully.

In my ongoing work with both of those kinds of courses, I remain convinced that this student-focused philosophy is the most effective. Whatever the particular readings or content of a first-year writing course, after all, the course's overarching goals are entirely connected to helping each student strengthen his or her writing and the many related skills of analysis, reading, discussion, and revision (among others). While an upper-level literature seminar on (to cite a current class of mine) Henry James might seem much more closely tied to its content, I would argue instead that such a course's most important outcome would be a group of students who have taken their analytical, reading, and writing skills to another level, and there again what might constitute my vision of a thorough understanding of *The Bostonians* (1886) remains secondary to creating a space in which students can develop, articulate, and support their own understandings of the text. This is, I would add, a matter of emphasis rather than absolutism: in neither of these types of courses is the content unimportant or absent, but it is very much secondary to the students' voices and skills; and if and when I have to make a choice between emphasizing one thing or the other, I choose the voices and skills each and every time.

There is, however, a third type of course, the survey, in between these two, and it is in my American literature surveys that I have begun over the past few years to revise this philosophy to a significant degree. On one level the surveys, at least as they exist at my institution (Fitchburg State University), would seem very much to parallel the first-year writing courses: the majority of the 28 students in every survey I have taught have been non-English majors, taking what is often their only literature course (and at best usually one of two) for their Liberal Arts & Sciences core requirements, and so helping them strengthen their skills would seem more beneficial than communicating any particular details about Nathaniel Hawthorne or the Harlem Renaissance (or even perhaps about all of American literary and cultural history put together). Yet the more I have taught and thought about these survey courses, the more it has seemed to me that their fundamental goals are indeed more balanced than the other types, that if they are doing their job they have not only to strengthen students' voices and skills but also to communicate precisely such content at the same time. That's perhaps especially true for the Education majors (and English Secondary Education ones, since that's a separate but parallel group at FSU) who need such content for their teacher tests and careers, but for me this objective remains uniquely significant for every constituency in a survey course.

The question with which I have begun to grapple, then, and the question on which I am focused in this essay, is how best to create that

balance, how to bring content into my survey courses in more consistent and thorough ways without swinging the pendulum too far in the other direction and turning the courses (or even some of the class meetings within them) into lectures. In my own undergraduate experience I took the kinds of auditorium-sized (100+ student) survey courses in which main lectures delivered by the professor, paired with smaller weekly discussion sections led by graduate students, were perhaps the only logical structure. But again, at Fitchburg State the literature courses (including the surveys) cap at 28 students, and I cannot imagine myself ever delivering hour-long lectures in that setting and feeling as if I am not doing a significant disservice to the students and to the very rationales for keeping classes at that smaller size.

For a while, though, my main strategy for adding content into my survey courses did involve using modified mini-lectures, delivered every few classes in order to highlight certain aspects of the content that I believed were important for the students to have in mind as they developed their specific readings and ideas. So, for example, at the start of a unit (which I structure around time periods in both American Literature I and II) I would lecture for about fifteen minutes, highlighting a few key contexts (one each in categories like historical, cultural, and literary) to which our readings will connect in one way or another; I would then try to come back to those contexts more briefly in the final few minutes of the last class in the unit, to complete the circle of our conversations through

that lens. I think such mini-lectures have their role, and will probably continue including versions of them in my surveys, but it also has seemed clear to me that much of what I discuss in these lectures is not registering in any meaningful (or at least a sufficiently meaningful) way with many of the students; if I write keywords on the board while I lecture they will certainly write them down, but if and when we come back to the contexts later it seems in many cases that the words themselves have registered without any particular engagement from the students with the issues or questions to which they refer. To put it another way, for many of the students these contexts seem important because I'm highlighting them and writing them down, and so they will do the same and will try to refer to them in a subsequent paper or exam answer; but they're often doing so because I said them, not because they have any particular ideas of their own about them or what they might help us to understand or analyze, an outcome that to my mind does move too far in the direction of a dictatorial rather than a democratic classroom space.

So how do I introduce content in a more democratic way, help the students develop and strengthen their voices and skills not only alongside the teaching of such content but in fact in connection with it? I've thought a lot about that over my last two years (and seven survey courses, split about evenly between American Literature I and II), and have so far developed four different strategies for doing so, each of which I now employ in each survey course I teach. I'll highlight and discuss (with some

specific examples) each of them here, and then end both by coming back to what I see as the broader stakes (for other disciplines as well as English) and by expressing my earnest hope that everybody (again in any discipline) who reads this can share their own perspectives and ideas, definitely with me by email (WITHHELD FOR ANONYMITY FOR NOW) but also perhaps in a *Currents* listserv conversation or the like.

### **Strategies**

#### 1) Through Presentations:

I've used individual student presentations in my survey courses since I began teaching them, and almost every class discussion of a particular text begins with such a student introduction. But I tended to think of the presentations as first and foremost another way of helping the students develop their voices and ideas, and so the main thing I asked them to do was to choose a passage from the text to highlight and begin analyzing; that would nicely give us a starting point for our communal conversations, and often gives the presenting students potential focal points for papers down the road as well, and is something I would never cut from the presentations for those and other reasons.

In the last couple years, however, I've created new structures for the presentations, ones that balance the analytical starting points with discussion of a couple of contextual details (about the author, about the text itself, about one or another historical or cultural issues or events to which they might be connected) that the students have found through a bit

of outside research. I purposefully make clear, both in the presentation guidelines and in my discussion of them when we go through the syllabus, that the presenter is not expected to—and in fact should not—provide a full biography of the author, or any such comprehensive information; the goal of this element of the presentation, that is, is not to document every possible bit of contextual content, but rather to highlight a couple that the student has found particularly interesting or relevant, say something about why they seem worth highlighting, and put them all in front of us as we begin our communal conversations. In almost every case I have found that the presenters highlight interesting combinations of the most prominent and more obscure but individually interesting contexts, leading to presentations that communicate both significant communal information and each person's perspective. One Mark Twain presenter, for example, highlighted both biographical details of Samuel Clemens' creation of this new identity and historical contexts related to Twain's forcible critiques of America's late 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialist expansion into the Philippines; the latter contexts were especially interesting to this presenter because he was a Filipino American history major, but they unquestionably likewise added to the class's communal perspective on Twain, both in terms of his social and satirical writings and in complicated combination with the details about the Twain persona and the humorous uses to which he often put it.

Besides making sure that every discussion thus begins with a student's individual perspective on at least a couple such contextual connections, I have found two other valuable effects to extending the presentations' scope in this way. For one thing, I believe it helps make clear to the students that content, like analysis, is something that they can and should own as individual thinkers and responders, rather than simply something that they will hear from me; moreover, because every student is asked to do this once in the course of the semester, I believe that they pay particular attention to each others' presentations, and so learn more from this introduction of the content than they might if I were simply lecturing about it. And yet, paradoxically but significantly, this aspect of the presentations has also allowed me to sneak in a bit of mini-lecture with a very different feel: I can follow up each presentation for a couple of minutes, highlighting (and again writing on the board) a couple of the main threads that the presenter has included, amplifying them slightly with one or another of my own focal points, and so helping to communicate both what that presenter has nicely found and what it can help us remember as we move into that subsequent discussion.

Besides serving these communal purposes, the presentations also allow—and indeed require—every student to learn at least a bit about some of these content areas, and one aspect with which I'm still struggling is how I can help them carry that knowledge forward. I do respond to every presentation with some email feedback and a grade, and so have

an opportunity there to comment on what they've found and what it might contribute to their ideas. I do likewise ask them, as I'll detail in strategy #4 below, to perform more extended research as part of their longest, final paper in the course, although I hesitate to require that they do so in any direct relation to their presentation (since I like to give them the opportunity to choose any texts on which to focus in their papers). But at the very least the presentation is a model for that later work with contexts and content, and so offers individual as well as communal value for sure.

2) Through Supplemental Materials:

There are obvious and irrefutable advantages to using an anthology in a survey class, and I do so when I teach American Literature I; there are similar arguments to be made for using the least expensive and most bare-bones versions of novels and longer works, and in my American Literature II course, where we read a number of longer works as our main texts, I do try to find and order precisely those versions (and to make clear to students that they are also welcome to find any other editions of our readings, including older ones in libraries and the like). Cost and efficiency matter a great deal to Fitchburg State students—as I'm sure they rightly do to all students, these days even more than usual—and all of these practices hopefully help them to have access to all of our class texts in the most cost- and time-effective ways possible.

None of those versions of a text—anthologized, in a bare-bones or an older/library edition—are likely to offer the kinds of supplemental,

contextual and content resources of (for example) a Norton Critical Edition or the like. And so I will admit that for my first few years of teaching surveys I did not ask students to look at any materials other than the texts themselves, which added another significant barrier to having content in front of us as a community. But in the last couple years, with the aid of the vast and growing body of materials archived somewhere online, I have worked hard to find examples of contextual content that I can ask the students to look at and respond to in focused and hopefully productive ways; I have utilized two different methods of doing so, and will highlight one example of each that has worked well in its first iteration.

With supplemental materials that are directly tied to a particular text and that students can examine quickly and easily, I will ask them to look at such materials ahead of a particular, often culminating class discussion. So, before our fourth and final American Literature II class discussion of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), I ask the students to look at some of the Edward Kemble illustrations that were included in the original edition and that Professor Stephen Railton has collected and annotated on his Mark Twain website here: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/huckfinn/hucillhp.html>. I will usually give the students a very specific direction for outside work like this—such as finding one illustration that stands out to them for any reason—and, if we have a Twain presentation on that final day, will likewise ask the presenter to focus on materials on this site for his or her content portion. And then

we will make some of what the students have seen and taken away from these materials part of our focus in that culminating conversation, both on its own terms and in conjunction with related content questions such as the historical and contemporary controversies over the novel and its depictions of race (for more on content in such culminating discussions, see #3 below). While this strategy does require the students to do a bit of extra work, and certainly not all of them will do so ahead of time, I have found that they generally enjoy (and are good at) looking at web materials like these; and of course I can project the images on the screen during our discussion, so even students who were not able to look prior to class can and do take part in our conversation there.

With supplemental materials that are less closely connected to a single reading and/or less easily or quickly viewed ahead of time, I have begun working to find occasion to similarly project them during our discussion and so make them a part of our communal engagement with a text and its contexts. When the American Literature I students read Emerson's "Nature" (1836), for example, I don't want to give them any additional materials to view ahead of time; the essay alone is more than long and dense enough, and I know that they will already at best come to that class discussion with starting points, moments or details or questions on which we'll try to build as a community. But the last two times I taught this course I began that discussion, before we got to such starting points, by projecting images of a couple Hudson River School paintings, visions of

nature (in this distinct medium) produced by a group of artists who were rough contemporaries of Emerson's. I then asked the students to talk a bit about what they noticed in these paintings (making clear that we're not an art history course and that I don't expect or need them to use or worry about accurate or exact terminology), and built a first set of ideas about nature and its representations before we turned to Emerson's very distinct but not unrelated examination of the topic. This use of supplemental material is of course a very partial and minimal one, but it can nonetheless both introduce a contextual content area (such as nature painting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century) and help the students develop their ideas about the class reading at the same time.

Every text and author in both surveys could be contextualized with one or both of these kinds of supplemental materials and student engagements; while I might at some future point find myself doing so for each and every class meeting, to this point I would say that I use outside materials such as the *Huck* illustrations about once every three or four weeks, and in-class materials such as the paintings about once every two. Partly that's because I have just begun investigating and considering possibilities for such materials, and don't want to use something just to use it. But partly I do feel that, as with any of these strategies, balance is a key, and that if any kind of work becomes too constant it runs the risk of feeling more like busy work or a lecture by another name, or otherwise losing student interest and engagement. And in any case my work in

finding such materials has also allowed me to better recognize what materials are available online, and I can definitely foresee providing lists of such sites and archives to the students as starting points for both their presentations and the final, research-driven papers, whether we end up using aspects of the materials in our communal conversations or not.

3) Through Culminating Conversations:

As I alluded to in discussing the *Huck* illustrations, I have found that culminating class discussions present another opportunity to engage with contextual and content-based questions and issues without losing an emphasis on the students' voices and perspectives. In the course of such conversations I can, I have found, provide some such contextual information without it feeling quite like a first day's mini-lecture, both because the students have now had time and opportunity to develop ideas of their own and because my information is being provided in direct response to such ideas. So, for example, on that final day with *Huck*, we can segue from discussing the novel's concluding chapters and the Kemble illustrations to broader conversations about whether the text is racist, challenges racism, and so on; for the bulk of that discussion I still ask for and depend on student perspectives and responses, but as we talk I can add in details about (among other possible content areas) the end of Reconstruction and the rise of the Black Codes in the era during which Twain wrote the novel and the educational and scholarly controversies and debates over the novel during the last few decades. Such content

would, in a first day's mini-lecture, have existed entirely separately from the text and so likely have felt as if it were coming entirely from me, but by the last day, I hope and believe, it feels as if it relates directly to what they've read and are discussing, and so can perhaps still resonate with them much more as a result. (Similarly, I have found that I can more successfully highlight the literary genres of the *bildungsroman* and the *picaresque* on the last day of *Huck* conversations, to follow up discussion by the students of whether Huck has fundamentally changed or remained largely the same from the beginning to the end of the novel.)

I have tried to implement a parallel but even more complex example of such culminating conversations in the final day of our American Literature II discussions of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). Much of our prior three conversations about the novel has focused in one way or another on questions of the influences, presence and absence, and meanings of Native American identity: for the novel's mixed-race protagonist Tayo; within the larger communities of family, peers, and reservation to which he is connected throughout the text; in the identities of other significant and complex characters such as his uncle Josiah and the mixed-race, modern medicine man Betonie; and in the novel's own postmodern style, which includes stream-of-consciousness narration sections alongside bits of Laguna Pueblo mythology (structured and formatted as works of poetry). Having talked about such elements throughout those three prior days, the students are much better prepared

than they would otherwise have been to discuss in the culminating conversation some of the most difficult questions related to identity, such as: Is this a Native American novel? Is it instead a post-war American novel? What do those two categories even mean, and what's at stake in answering one or another way (or developing a different answer)? Of course we don't come up with any definitive answers to those questions, but again the students have been prepared by their prior discussions to think about how they might answer them, and as they do so I can find ways to work in contextual content such as the Native American (literary) Renaissance of the 1970s, the American Indian Movement of the same period, identity politics, and political and philosophical concepts of sovereignty and authenticity.

In my American Literature I survey, where we read a different author and text (from an anthology) for each class, such multi-day discussions cannot happen in precisely the same way, but I have found a parallel opportunity in the final day of discussions in a particular, time period-based Unit. So, for example, by the time we come to the final day of our three weeks of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century/Revolutionary unit, we will have read (among other authors and texts) canonical Revolutionary figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, women's Revolutionary perspectives like those of Judith Sargent Murray, Annis Boudinot Stockton, and Abigail Adams, and African American voices such as Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano. To follow up and attempt to connect

those weeks and voices, I set aside the final half of that culminating Unit discussion to have the students respond to a question like: If you had to pick one of these authors and/or texts to exemplify the Revolutionary era, which would you choose and why? Or I might ask them to talk a bit about their prior conceptions of the Revolution and founding and whether these readings have cemented, challenged, or otherwise impacted such notions. In both cases, while the focus remains once again on the students articulating their own takes, this culminating discussion provides an excellent opportunity for me to introduce historical, political, and literary contexts and content, including slave petitions that made use of the Declaration's rhetoric, the Federalist and Anti-Federalist debates over the Constitution and the future of the nation, and the images of American history and identity contained in the works of the Prospect Poets; as with my other examples, I find that even brief mentions of such contextual content through the lens of what the students are responding to and highlighting in their perspectives on the Unit makes it much more likely for the content to feel meaningful and relevant than had I highlighted it in a Unit-introducing mini-lecture or the equivalent.

4) Through Research-Driven Final Papers:

I've long struggled to find, in my survey courses' final, longest and most involved papers, a balance that parallels that between emphasizing student voices and including content: the balance between offering them a space to develop their ideas most fully and requiring them to find and

incorporate outside sources in one way or another. I don't ever intend (in any course) to assign a pure research paper or report; my interest will always be first and foremost in what the students have to say, rather than in what they can find. But as I've moved in these other ways toward including content more fully, I've likewise made my peace with the fact that a research-driven final paper (especially one that follows a couple of shorter papers that have explicitly asked the students only to develop their own ideas about course texts, which no outside sources allowed) offers a space in which they can find and include contextual and content materials in their individual work as well.

The basic assignment that I have utilized for that final paper has become pretty similar in both survey courses: I ask the students to link any two readings from any one of our Units/time periods, to connect that pairing to one or another contextual/content area (ideally either something that came up in one or another of the aforementioned content moments—individual presentations, supplemental materials, culminating conversations—or an area in which they have an interest and would like to find out and analyze a bit more), and to do some focused research into it, with the ultimate goal of finding a couple of helpful sources (whether primary or secondary) through engagement with which they can develop their main idea about and analyses of the paired class texts. As part of the work on this paper (which in each course takes place over many more weeks than the prior papers), I require that the students either come see

me in my office or send me a somewhat detailed email update on their ideas and progress, to make sure both that we're on the same page about their focus and plans and that I can provide some feedback and continuing direction from my own knowledge of the content areas, the possible and available kinds and locations of sources, and the like.

By far the most significant potential downsides to such a paper, in my experiences anyway, entail two different ways that the research component can go wrong. For one thing, it is easy for a paper like this to turn into, at least in sections, precisely the kind of research report or summary that I expressly hope to avoid; to that end, I both stress repeatedly the need for analysis, for every piece of information to be framed and responded to with their own ideas, and note that they should not include the research information in separate paragraphs of the paper, but should instead find ways to incorporate it into paragraphs focused on their ideas about the readings. For another thing, it is likewise far too easy with this paper for plagiarism to occur—not so much the blatant lifting or buying an entire paper off the web kind (which I have encountered only a couple of times in my decade of teaching), but rather the kind where the student finds a few sentences on a website that seem perfectly to sum up what he or she wants to say about the Harlem Renaissance and cuts and pastes those sentences into a larger paragraph where he or she is analyzing African American community in Langston Hughes and Nella Larsen. There's no absolute way to stave off this latter problem, but

explicitly mentioning it, and how easy it is to notice and catch, in class is certainly important; I have also found that requiring the students to check in with me in person or by email helps make sure that they don't try to write the entire paper the night before it's due (which greatly increases the attractiveness of those perfect sentences).

In any case, the number of final papers that have gone wrong in one or another way has been far smaller to this point than those that have gone right, and when they do they provide a perfect illustration of how content can become part of a course without diminishing the students' developing voices and ideas. Sometimes those ideas follow understandably expected and (to me) familiar lines, as with an American Literature I final paper that paired Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs and researched male and female voices in and on the abolitionist movement; while the student's focus may not have been revolutionary in that case, he learned a great deal about abolitionism and, more importantly, was able to apply that new knowledge to a very convincing and complex analysis of these two class authors and the excerpts of their personal narratives which we had read. And at least as frequently, those ideas have taken content areas in directions I could never have anticipated and would never have been able to highlight in a mini-lecture or the like, as with an American Literature II final paper that paired Leslie Marmon Silko and Jhumpa Lahiri, researched psychological and sociological work on second and third generation immigrant/ethnic

American children's identities and perspectives, and developed an argument for a new version of the American Dream as it is constructed, critiqued, and ultimately and hopefully embraced in both of those complex novels. Not only did the individual student learn a great deal from her work on that paper, but so did I, and the next time I taught American Literature II I incorporated a bit of her findings (citing her, of course!) into our culminating conversation of Lahiri's novel and the late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century Unit overall.

### Conclusion

Many of the details of these strategies, or at least of how I have worked to implement them into my courses, are I am sure specific to literature courses or to English as a discipline. Moreover, I know that in many if not most other disciplines, content is more firmly ensconced at the center of classroom work: even in a close parallel course like an American history survey, the importance of teaching key content areas would seem paramount (even if what those content areas are and include, as well as what kinds of materials can be utilized to teach them, are questions that have certainly evolved and shifted significantly over the last few decades); and in more fully distinct disciplines such as math and the sciences, where there are correct and incorrect answers for much of the work students will be doing, the centrality of content would likely be even more clear and inalterable.

Yet the fact remains that in each of those disciplines, and every other one, helping students develop their voices and skills—as readers of primary documents and evidence, as analyzers of broader trends and narratives, as problem solvers, as experimenters, and as writers in every case—is and will always be a fundamental focus. And so I believe that the questions of balance that I have explored here—of what balance between content and student voices is ideal, and of what strategies can best maintain that balance while emphasizing content in one way or another—cut across any disciplinary boundaries, and concern all of us who seek to teach our subjects and our students as effectively and well as we can. We certainly want our students to leave our courses and institutions more knowledgeable than when they began, but we also want them to be able both to apply that knowledge and to think critically and analytically about the new issues and situations and texts and content areas with which they will continue to come into contact for the rest of their lives. These strategies reflect some of the ways I have worked to inculcate that latter set of skills in my students; I welcome any and all other thoughts and ideas, both by email (WITHHELD FOR ANONYMITY FOR NOW) and in conversations here.

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