

"Engaging Literature: Creative Projects to Promote Discussion"

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Abstract

Literature instructors may be finding it increasingly difficult to compete with communication devices and the entertainment industry for the minds and ambitions of students. A thick anthology of dense writing appears ever less palatable to many students in this age of immediate, ubiquitous, and high definition distraction. However, sustained and stimulating classroom discussion about literature can still trump these virtual entertainments, and I have collected and constructed several activities that prompt students to read and to respond to assigned texts.

Reading Response

I require students to write a response to most texts assigned. These responses are guided by a prompt and are usually 100 words in length, and they must be word processed and submitted at the first of class the day we discuss the text. I ask students to provide an argument in their first sentence, textual evidence in their second, and interpretation of that evidence in the remaining space. I often use these prompts to open the day's discussion, for most students will have an answer to jump start the conversation. Some questions I have used in *American Literature I* are (1) How does the Mayflower Compact exclude the "strangers"? (2) How might Phyllis Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought to Africa to America" have been used to defend and to attack slavery? (3) In the Iroquois creation stories, what is the relationship between the Creator and the beings created?

Reading Response and Group Questions

I sometimes assign students to groups at the end of a class period. I then give each group a different writing prompt and instruct each student to bring a 100-word response to the next session. The next time we meet, I seat them in their respective groups to share their responses with their group members and to organize an oral presentation to deliver to the rest of the class.

Following are questions I have assigned to prompt students to think about the writings of William Bradford:

1. What was the relationship between God and the Pilgrims' daily experiences, and what impact did this relationship have upon their society?
2. What were the hopes and expectations of the Pilgrims?
3. Describe the Pilgrims' relationship with the Native-Americans.
4. How did the Mayflower Compact identify the elect and limit the community's membership?
5. How did the Mayflower Compact contribute to the foundations of democratic government in the New World?
6. How did the realities of the Pilgrims differ from our traditional images of that society?

Reading Response and Creation of Group Questions

I sometimes use students' answers to their daily reading response to organize that day's discussion. First, I prompt the students call out various answers to the reading response question as I list those answers on the board. I then place students in groups and assign each group the task of identifying textual evidence and offering interpretation to support an assigned answer. The groups provide a short oral report of their finds to the rest of the class, and each member is required to offer at least one piece of evidence or interpretation. One class of students when asked how William Apess or his essay "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man" served as a looking glass for white society provided the following answers:

1. It prompted the whites to ask what rights and privileges they wished to be granted as individuals—and then to grant those to the native-Americans.
2. It prompted the whites to analyze their Christian beliefs and their application of those beliefs.
3. It prompted whites to analyze why they believed white skin to be superior.

4. It prompted whites to consider how they were treating the Native Americans.
5. Apess served as an example of Native-Americans who continued to be rejected by white society even though they met the religious and academic demands of that white society.
6. It forced white society to admit that its mistreatment of the Native-Americans was based upon skin color.

Two-Minute Response

I sometimes pause at a key moment in the lecture or discussion to ask students to write a two-minute response to a question about a specific moment in the text. Questions like those listed below prompt students to think critically about such moments.

1. In the Iroquois creation story, why is it significant that the two clay figures created by the bad mind are given souls by the good mind?
2. How does Thomas Paine in the introductory paragraph of "Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs" attempt to appeal to the masses?
3. How is the village of the young Rip Van Winkle described and how might this description reflect Irving's attitude toward pre-Revolutionary America?
4. What details does Bashō use in the opening paragraphs of *The Narrow Road of the Interior* to create his persona?
5. In what ways can Ulysses' (Tennyson) statement "I am become a name" be interpreted?

Grade and Discuss a Quiz in Class

I sometimes open the class with a brief pop quiz. I then have the students grade their papers as we discuss the answers. I gradually reveal that this quiz is a participation grade, and that everyone will receive points if she or he participates, and I sometimes award extra credit to students who answer the more difficult questions correctly. We debate and discuss the answers and make digressions

and connections—some of the best discussions take place when a student is trying to justify an answer! I have also used such quizzes to organize a session's lecture; I ask questions about the points I wish to discuss in lecture, and then I use the grading process as a way to organize and explore the material.

Fast-Forward Connections

I occasionally connect a particular moment in a text with moments in other texts that will be read later in the semester, and I sometimes go a step further and ask students to write a sixty-second response in which they identify a comparable moment from their own lives. Such moments might be when a character pledges to live a better life and fails to do so, when a character probes existential questions, or when a character resists a demand of mainstream culture. The moments quoted below are versions of a moment of rapture—a feeling that several students have experienced and enjoy remembering and sharing.

“And as I was walking there, and looked up on the sky and clouds; there came into my mind, a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express”

Jonathan Edwards “Personal Narrative,” 1740

Go forth under the open sky, and list,
To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air,—
Comes a still voice—

William Cullen Bryant “Thanatopsis,” 1814

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“Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. Almost I fear to think how glad I am.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson *Nature*, 1836

“Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth.”

Walt Whitman "Song of Myself," 1855

Classroom Assessment Techniques

Instructors need to continually assess teaching and learning—and most instructors are required to submit classroom assessment techniques to their assessment committees, so why not use CATS to promote discussion and thought? The following are three favorites:

Minute Paper: During the last few minutes of class, I may ask students to answer “What is the most significant thing you learned today?” or “What idea or concept discussed today remains the least clear to you?” Students’ responses can serve as a great platform from which to launch a discussion the next class period.

Directed Paraphrasing: During the last few minutes of class, I may ask students to explain in writing something they learned during that class period.

Application Cards: After teaching an important theory, principle, or concept, I ask students to write down at least one way they can apply it in their lives.

The Opening Act

In the seventh edition of *Teaching with the Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Bruce Michelson suggests beginning the semester “with some ‘big’ work: major in terms of its sales, its mass-cultural impact, its staying power in the academic mind, and its durable appeal to a larger public” in order to introduce the themes, ideas, and arguments that the semester’s readings will engage¹. The following are texts that I have found work well in this approach.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin/American Literature I

This novel introduces numerous topics that will be on the table throughout the semester, such as race, slavery, religion, civil law vs. moral choice, equality, and the roles of women.

Death of a Salesman/American Literature II

In this play Miller introduces offers competing definitions of success, argues for the value of common people, and questions the values of progress.

“A Modest Proposal”/World Literature I

This essay introduces the debates about the value of logic and emotions, the dangers of social complacency, measures of progress, and numerous other key topics.

Connections to Today

As everyone does, I point out connections between the ideas and themes of assigned readings and contemporary culture. The following are comparisons that have elicited thoughtful discussions about society.

Compare Rousseau's "Confessions" with the confessions of various pop singers, guests on talk shows, or articles in magazines such as *People* or *In Touch*.

Compare the loss of innocence in Blake's "The Lamb" or in e.e. cummings' "in Just" to the loss of innocence as depicted in contemporary cinema.

Compare John Winthrop's ideals in "A Model of Christian Charity" to ethics in the modern business world, in American politics, or in the medical industry.

Compare the Houyhnhnm master's refusal to listen to Gulliver's description of human vice with our society's consumption of vice as delivered by such shows as *CSI: Las Vegas*, and discuss the possible impact such depictions have upon making the bizarre seem normal.

Compare Ben Franklin's observations about the value of education in "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America" with current discussions about the value of liberal and vocational education in colleges and universities.

Compare Ben Franklin's observations about the Native Americans' rules of debate in "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America" with the rules of debate applied on today's news programs.

Faulkner's Nobel Speech

I read William Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech with the class, and then we discuss how a particular piece of literature might meet Faulkner's standard of great writing. We focus especially upon Faulkner's argument that it is

the duty of an author “to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.”

What Do They Have in Common?

Most any student will feel confident in finding ways things are alike, and many times this simple project can lead to a deeper discussion.

1. What do some of the images in “Kubla Kahn” have in common? This question can lead to a discussion of how Coleridge uses metaphors to celebrate the ability to create artistic works.
2. What did the women poets of the American Revolution era have in common? This question can lead to a discussion of the value of good books and good people, the culture of self improvement, the roles and influence of women, and the purpose of poetry.
3. How does the tone of *Common Sense* compare with that of The Declaration of Independence? This question can lead to a discussion about why the authors pursued this tone and who their audiences were.
4. What do Pope’s and Bashō’s views of universal order have in common? This question can lead to a discussion of humans’ place in the universal order and the relationship between belief systems and culture.

Town Meeting

I use the following group project when we study John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity,” and some form of it might be practical when studying any text that presents guidelines for creating a community or ordering a society. Students are asked to bring a 50-100 response to share with their group and to submit to me for five points. At the beginning of the class period, I place students in their assigned groups and give them 5-10 minutes to organize their oral summary of the assigned topic. Each student is required to speak.

Hear Ye! Hear Ye! Town Meeting!

The Committee of Biography and History

This committee welcomes in all humility and selflessness the task of preserving, explaining, and summarizing the life story of our faithful and humble leader, John Winthrop.

The Committee of Giving

This committee welcomes in all humility and selflessness the task of summarizing and explaining the guidelines of giving.

The Committee of Lending

This committee welcomes in all humility and selflessness the task of summarizing and explaining the guidelines of lending.

The Committee of Community in Peril

This committee welcomes in all humility and selflessness the task of summarizing and explaining the guidelines of serving the community in times of trouble and severe distress.

The Committee of Brotherly Love

This committee welcomes in all humility and selflessness the task of summarizing and explaining the manner in which the people of this community are bound together in love.

The Committee of Application in Daily Life

This committee welcomes in all humility and selflessness the task of summarizing and explaining how and why the above tenets should be practiced in our community.

Haiku Contest

During the unit on Bashō's *The Narrow Road of the Interior*, I distribute a handout explaining the basic elements of haiku and some basic advice about writing haiku. I ask the students to write five haiku, and I sponsor a contest to select the Haiku Master of the class. I sometimes submit students' haiku to a haiku journal for publication.

Renga Project

Sometimes when students submit haiku, I choose the best five submissions and distribute them to all of the students for revision. After revision and discussion, the class chooses the single best haiku, and then I give all of the students the task of writing a two-line response to the haiku. The following week, the students produce a haiku in response to the preceding two lines, and so on for the rest of the semester. We continue to write and revise until we have a two-page linked poem.

Cooper on Trial

This project builds off of Mark Twain's essay "The Literary Offences of James Fenimore Cooper" and Jane Tompkins' discussion of Cooper's themes in "No Apologies for the Iroquois: A New Way to Read the Leatherstocking Novels" from her book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. The class puts Cooper on trail for the literary offences mentioned by Twain, and this project can open a discussion about the qualities and purposes of literature. In this project students are assigned roles as judges, attorneys, jury members, and witnesses. The following are some of the witnesses who might be called:

Natty Bumppo; a feminist critic defending Cooper; a feminist critic attacking Cooper; an environmentalist defending Cooper; a Native-American representative defending Cooper; a Native-American

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representative attacking Cooper; Crevecoeur; Thomas Jefferson; Washington Irving; Henry David Thoreau; Sir Walter Scott, Ralph Waldo Emerson; Mark Twain.

Attack and Defend

All authors have their critics, so I often use a key essay that defends, challenges, or attacks an author's work as a spring board to discussion. For example, when assigning selections from *Walden*, I have used E.B. White's "Walden—1954" and James Russell Lowell's "Thoreau." When assigning *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, I have used Toni Morrison's introduction to this novel and David L. Smith's "Huckleberry Finn: Literature or Racist Trash?"

Poster

This must be a free-standing poster presenting information about the life and work of any author in our textbook whose work was not required reading. Students are required to give a 3-5 minute presentation. The following is a grading rubric.

- Free-standing poster measuring at least 22" x 28" (10 pts.)
- Photograph or drawing of author measuring at least 5" x 8" (10 pts.)
- Timeline listing at least 10 major world events happening during author's lifetime (10 pts.)
- A 100-word biography paraphrased from the information in our anthology (20 pts.)
- Timeline listing at least 10 major personal events of author's life (10 pts.)
- Five quotations by critics in reaction to the author's work (10 pts.)
- Four quotations (of at least 15 words each) from the author's work (10 pts.)
- Artistic presentation (20 pts.)

End Notes

¹ Michelson, Bruce Michelson. *Teaching with the Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 7th. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007, 8. Print.

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