This is not a No-Since; Multisensory Approaches to Teaching Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*

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**Abstract:** This article explores innovative pedagogical strategies for teaching students to critically and creatively engage with experimental texts, specifically Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. I illustrate the value of sensory responses to Stein by relating my experiences designing and teaching a first-year composition course called Rendering *Tender Buttons* at the Georgia Institute of Technology. In this article I share my reasons for creating this course, detail its assignments, and demonstrate how performance and re-creative response can enhance students’ critical understanding of the seemingly incomprehensible text, generating levels of critical authority often unmet in undergraduate literary analysis.

Dear Ms. Stein,

I believe that you have most of my contemporary analysts confused. Some believe that you were writing about feminism or sexuality or anything else. But ma’am, I understand you. I think. …"

So begins one student letter to Gertrude Stein after a three-month investigation of *Tender Buttons* at the Georgia Institute of Technology. The course, Rendering *Tender Buttons*, is a first-year literature-based composition course in which I guide a class predominantly composed of
engineering students through a semester-length interaction with Stein's seminal work, taking the opportunity to teach multimodal communication using one of the twentieth century's most challenging literary texts. At the Georgia Institute of Technology, an innovative WOVEN first-year writing curriculum prepares students for academic and professional writing in the digital age. WOVEN is an acronym for Written, Visual, Oral, Electronic, and Non-Verbal communication, a multimodal composition protocol that takes account for the sensory-driven media we navigate in our everyday professional and casual lives. Stein's multisensory writing proves rich material through which to lead multimodal student engagement.

The seed of this course germinated from a question posed to me by a renowned Stein scholar at the 2013 American Literature Association panel on Stein. While discussing our love for the text, she admitted to shying away from Tender Buttons in the college classroom, struggling to elicit meaningful student response to the text. Despite the book's acceptance into the modernist canon, college-level students balk at Stein's onslaught of sensory non-sense. The text instigates a wall of psychological astonishment that teachers have to work to overcome, one of the very benefits I find in teaching Tender Buttons. Like no other book before or after, it challenges the stability of knowledge forcing students to de-synthesize their accumulated learning in favor of discovery. In his article, "Book Was There: Teaching Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons to Young and Old", critic Daniel Kane reflects on his own experimentation with teaching Stein simultaneously to college students and third-graders. Unsurprisingly, he had this to say about the distinction: "the college students reacted with hostility to Stein while the third graders greeted her text with the same unabashed enthusiasm they might express when faced with a stray and harmless puppy
that suddenly appears in their bedroom” (Lenhart 153). Disorientation provokes anger in the minds of "educated" adults, and no text upends students' institutionalized perceptions of learning quite like Tender Buttons. One of my ethical mandates as an educator, specifically a writing instructor, is to help students unlearn their world in order to instigate fresh perspectives. I find Tender Buttons to be an essential tool for such work. Thus, my question is: how can teachers lead "educated" students beyond their emotional barricade to the text and what opportunity does Stein’s barricade present in the process of literary and cultural analysis? I designed my course to take on these questions, exploring how we, as academic scholars, might pleasurably engage literary non-sense like Tender Buttons.

Bridging the gap between sensory reaction and critical awareness has always been an integral if easily overlooked component of the literature classroom. Traditional analysis methods rapidly shift sensory and emotional responses toward their critical origin, encouraging an emotionally distanced lens through which to view the text intellectually. In Tender Buttons, however, Stein broadens the gap between sense and meaning using language in disruptive ways. The more entrenched one is in the mastery of proper English, the more upsetting the reaction to the text. Stein’s disruptive compositional techniques, however, generate delight in other art forms, such as dance, film, music, and theatre, while mature readers of literature remain generally resistant to the suspension of comprehension in favor of imagination. As one student complained directly to Stein, "You took my native language, words I have been using my whole life, and turned it into a foreign language."

Yet today, Stein’s syntax experiments are successfully exploited in other realms of written communication, particularly in the field of contemporary advertising. Tender Buttons’ nonsensical language play mirrors attention-grabbing techniques used in the commercial
jingles and multisensory digital exchanges we make every day. In "Gertrude Stein, Facebook, and the NEFWG," Bruce Fleming explores the relationship between Stein's writing and the staccato daily-diaries found on countless Internet blogs. He claims, "The world is full of individuals writing the story of their own lives on Facebook, as Gertrude Stein did in her thousands upon thousands of stream-of-consciousness "this is my world and it is very interesting" pages. If Al Gore invented the Internet, perhaps we can plausibly say that Gertrude Stein invented Facebook" (Fleming 283). Today's college students accept the cacophony that is a Twitter feed because they are part of its organic development, therein taking part in its domestication. To find pleasure from reading Gertrude Stein requires a willingness to dismantle the notion of Stein's as author and reader as passive consumer. It also requires the surrender of the belief that language is native to one's mind. This upending of language's authority is how cultures keep communication vital, and the constant process of integration and absorption is one way we domestic new vocabulary. Tender Buttons proves a literary text ripe for the challenge of mental domestication. While designing my course, my goals in teaching Tender Buttons for an entire semester were: to generate student responses that foreground the senses in the exploration of literature; to generate learning that favors process of discovery over the search for absolute answers; and, to see what happens when I ask students to endure four months of investigation of a text with no promise of concrete reward. Would the process sustain student curiosity or will a critical rebellion take over?

My penchant for experimentation has left me conflicted with sharing the results of my classroom experiences. Craig Dworkin argues in "Mycopedagogy" that "testimonials about classroom successes always have the feeling of hearing someone tell about their
experiences on drugs (you should have been there, we had these mushrooms and ...". He concludes, "however authentic such experiences may be, and however genuinely important, they are essentially unteachable, unverifiable, and unrepeatable" (604). As an instructor, I don't like repeating my own experiments for the reasons Dworkin outlines above. I do believe, however, there is value in the sharing of experience, not in service to mimicry but in the widening and reframing of each other's pedagogical boundaries. I write not in expectation that other teachers will take to their classrooms, *Tender Buttons* in hand, attempting to recreate my experience. I write, however, in favor of sharing practices that upend traditional modes of communication in the literary classroom, rooting for risk always.

**READING AS PERFORMANCE**

"It looks like a book, but it does not read like one."

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*Figure 2  Student visual interpretation of OBJECTS*

A challenge all literature teachers face is getting their students to read the work, thoughtfully. A challenge for readers of Gertrude Stein is to allow themselves to read the work, non-thoughtfully. By this I do not mean to read without care, but to read with suspended critical judgment. In *Tender Buttons*, Stein purposefully disorders syntax to
disrupt a reader's normal patterns of cognition. Why, then, should one pick up *Tender Buttons* and expect to digest it in literal, traditional fashion? More importantly, why should an instructor ask her students to read it without preparing them for such disruption? Knowing that *Tender Buttons* is going to upend students' cognitive hunting and gathering skills, I find it useful to give my students strict guidelines on how *not* to read Stein's text. I take advantage of my role as academic authority and give my students explicit written instructions on how to approach each reading assignment. Unsettling their expectations of an English course, my initial directions read as follows:

1. Set aside thirty minutes of your day to perform the first section, OBJECTS, aloud.  
2. Read it as though it were written by you and that you already understand it completely.  
3. Do not stop, even if you get stuck, but try and maintain as much confidence and authority as possible during the performance.  
4. I encourage group readings.  
5. I also encourage an audience, real or imaginary.  
6. Once you perform the text, you are free to walk away for a while, and to return later to answer a few questions I provide giving details to the best of your recollection.

The questionnaire that I assign is designed toward compilation of thoughts and responses rather than comprehension of the text. The questions give students the opportunity to jog their memories by jotting down patterns, noting instances of misreading, puns, and repetitions, and considering the tone they developed as they read. Finally, I ask them to describe the reading in the form of a painting or drawing.

Given explicit permission to resist understanding produces interesting results in student written reflections. After indulging their state of confusion for a few sentences, the students begin to track their emotional reactions to very specific words and phrases; their responses to the questions also send them organically into analytical thinking processes.
Because they can only recall bits and pieces and claim to be entirely confused, they begin listing and organizing these pieces on the page in varying ordering strategies. The mind's natural desire to understand begins to work at this stage without the expectation of judgment or argument generation. Another by-product of this assignment is a willingness to be vulnerable - almost every student admits to feeling hopelessly lost. One student eloquently summarized his first experience reading OBJECTS, by stating, "This section of the book made me see a distorted image of what I once so confidently saw to be the world around me." What a fantastic way to teach students to remove judgment and assumption, and to make them conscious of the prior knowledge they bring to any work of literature! Another student stated that he performed the text and thought little of it. Then, he went for a jog and, while running, realized he was taking in his physical surroundings in a rhythm similar to the way he read the text. He realized he was seeing the world in small glimpses that were slowly forming a whole in his mind. It was here that he appreciated what Stein was doing with individual words.

To face the possibility of being lost in one's own vocabulary is a quick way to draw focus on individual words on the page. Most students are able to recall a distinct collection of objects; they are also able to note key stylistic devices, such as repetition, lack of punctuation, harmonic sound, and homophonic use. Tone becomes a guiding force for many, but the observations vary markedly. One student reported, "When I first started reading the material, I generally had a strange sort of authoritative, oratory tone, as though I were a stern professor lecturing. However, as I progressed I noticed that my roommates (and I) would laugh quite a bit at certain bits of the vignettes, and make strange connections or have pleasant reactions to others. I found my tone of reading becoming more playful as
we progressed through the section." This contrasts with another student who claimed, "I progressed from struggling to read it fluidly to reading it as if I were telling someone important information they needed to know."

Other students, at a loss of what the writing is about, are forced to consider the unsettling ways the text is put together and the ways its construction confronts their own conservativism. One student reflected, "at the bottom of p. 17 the sudden use of a 'that' clause literally made me stop reading and stare at the page open-mouthed." By looking back at these written reflections, students are forced to confront the ease through which language disruption rattles their grip on reality. These reflections also provide valuable anchors for discussion, revealing how reading performance released from comprehension foregrounds Stein's use of stylistic, tonal, and content-driven patterns in the reader's mind. Students may not understand the text, but they more easily believe there is a logic to Stein's seeming madness. The foregrounding of patterns provides a framework through which students willingly reenter the text.

![Figure 3 Student Artwork: “In Objects, Stein offers layers of containment: beds, boxes, cups, clocks and even a piano. When examined more closely, the theme of containment and lack of a central harmonic flow in the text are evident.”](image)

**RESPONSE AS RECREATION**

Prior to my course at Georgia Tech, I had assigned the *Tender Buttons* reading strategy outlined above to an advanced literature group of students at the University of Georgia. After initial performances of OBJECTS, these students struggled to move beyond pattern identification derived from the text. They could list common stylistic patterns, but
translating those lists into structural cohesion proved limiting if not fruitless. Of course the slipperiness of Stein's language resists conclusion; breaking her sentences down and rebuilding them logically always leaves the reader with a few extra parts. This is particularly frustrating to English majors. Rather than ask students to wrestle Stein's language into an ill-fitting critical interpretation, in my Tech course I opted to assign creative responses to the text through the visual and performing arts. The purpose of each creative response is to keep the students' minds moving forward toward synthesis while broadening the interpretive possibilities in their minds. Through extended play, students might also learn to trust their innate abilities to translate visual and aural patterns into multidimensional understanding. In an age of fingertip access to GPS and Google, it seems important to teach students how to wander in the world. By resisting the impulse to assign critical responses to the text, essays that might make the students feel more comfortable with the work, I forced the class to work together in engaging Tender Buttons at face value.

OBJECTS contains the most concrete vocabulary of the text and so I capitalized on its visual sensory appeal in my assignment. After reading the section, the students were allowed to work individually or in teams to create a visual artifact that reflects some aspect of the style or content of the section. Students were then asked to compose an artist statement, reflecting on their own compositional choices and their relevance to OBJECTS. The students unveiled their work at a gallery viewing open to the public where they were present to discuss the work with visitors. Responses to the OBJECTS assignment varied widely in medium and intent. Some students focused on Stein's abstract language play, mimicking her cryptic patterns through a variety of media such as a homemade puzzle, abstract drip painting, multimodal collage, and art tiles that can be assembled in myriad

![Figure 4 Student artwork: “A charm a single charm is doubtful.” Glazed, ceramic platter.](image)
ways. Other students focused on topics as disparate as color, issues of power, multiple perspectives, feminism, heartbreak and loss, and the mystery of the human psyche. One inspired team created a multi-vignette film entitled, "The Collective Mind" that interprets a few of Stein's vignettes on camera. In one, an artist draws a cartoon of Mussolini making human sandwiches. This is inspired by, "A TIME TO EAT" in which Stein describes meal times as tyrannical. In the artist statement, the film team claimed that the medium of writing is a stronger cubist medium than the visual arts, as language is equipped to transcend 'reality' and more readily open to layered interpretation. One member of the team observed that they were limited in the medium of film "bound by a certain moment in time." Their intriguing film can be viewed at this link: https://youtu.be/qURN6zGbsuE.

Because the FOOD section enacts a process of linguistic digestion, I challenged the students with a multisensory response that highlights the voice: theater production. But, how to organize the assignment in a way that also enforces a broader understanding of the text as a whole? FOOD opens with what looks at first glance like a faulty table of contents for the poems of the section (see figure 5 below); upon further examination, one can argue that more likely it doubles as a menu. The organization of the food list appears to correspond with the meal names (in bold) assigned to certain times of a day. What begins with an evening meal of roast beef or mutton progresses into the following day's breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I used this logic as a means to break up the text into four segments of those same names. I then broke the class up into four teams of five students, assigning each team the task of writing and producing a play that mirrors some understanding of that particular section of text.
Each team worked independently to close read their assigned section of vignettes, searching for some thematic or aesthetic pattern to translate into performance. They were not permitted to discuss their section with other teams. I let them all work individually with the understanding that the entirety of FOOD would be performed in sequence, i.e. each team would perform their play in sequential order on the same day. The performance of ROASTBEEF or MUTTON was followed by BREAKFAST, LUNCH, and DINNER. This orchestrates into an impromptu four-act play entitled FOOD, with nobody knowing the overarching plot until the performance. Despite being exciting and a potential disaster, the purpose of this exercise is twofold: first, it gives the students the opportunities to work in teams to respond to Stein’s language in manageable sections. Second, we are conducting an experiment to see if the independent team performances might organically progress into a four-act play that might further elucidate Stein’s intentions in the FOOD section of Tender Buttons. Do characters overlap? Is there a plot? Is the play tonally consistent? The results are intriguing.

The titles of the independent acts of my spring student performance were:

Act I: "Why is Lamb Cheaper."
Act II: "A Commentary on Breakfast"
Act III: "Motion"
Act IV: "Go Fish"
Act I and Act IV were performed in stylistically avant-garde manner; both troupes relied heavily on Stein's language, reinforcing patterns of circling, repetition, and the physical enactment of Stein's vocabulary. For example, in Act I, the troupe changed scenes often, directly employing Stein's language to illustrate cultural and gender imbalances at play. They also spoke with cardboard boxes cradling their heads in an orchestrated performance of sound as harmony; their act concluded with the players walking in circles at various heights until they all fell to the floor asleep. The "Go Fish" troupe performed Stein's language through the dynamics of a child's card game. Each student visually represented a prominent color from the text and aurally represented a different literary device used by Stein: individuals spoke in nonstop puns, made historical references, and employed the use of irony and sonic devices such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, and cacophony to reinforce their character. They brought these devices together around a table, representing the section's close at table's center. Both meals at each day's conclusion were depicted with the coming together of distinct sounds and characters in the form of a conclusive and exhaustive circle. The two teams in between, however, took more active interpretations that moved the text forward, breaking down logic through language. These teams also worked toward a controlling metaphor: the Breakfast troupe focused on cultural dynamics at play, putting characters from different socio-economic backgrounds into conflict; an upper class British male character gets into a row
with two lower-class American males as two middle class Australian males attempt to intervene. Ultimately, the discordant individuals converge in a discussion of gender politics and their united confusion over females. The Lunch troupe also picked up on cultural distinctions, putting an American in a Paris hotel at odds with a peculiar set of newlyweds who were cheating on each other during their honeymoon. The performance culminates in the conservative American rethinking his inherited value system; in a closing monologue, he muses:

I didn't come to this cafe looking to get involved in other people's love affairs...But like these dilemmas in life they are unsuspecting, and they take us by surprise. They open our eyes to what we really feel. I suppose the same person, the same routine, the same daily motions can all become boring, make us stale and immobile. Colors can become stagnant, movement is limited, Are our thoughts still free?

Students responded enthusiastically to the performances, which were engaging with strong emphasis on sound and its relationship to meaning. Student feedback also validated the process as valuable critical engagement with the text. One student remarked, "The composition process took me by surprise. I had never expected to be able to make a play out of Stein's abstract work, but the composition process helped my group break down the text into small jigsaw pieces that we eventually put together to assemble a clearer picture." Another stated, "This project added an interesting new facet to an already very complicated analysis of Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons. Now we had to work in groups to form a cohesive plot-driven stage performance. This added a completely new difficulty to overcome when working with Stein's work." Finally, the one student who struggled all semester with Tender Buttons acknowledged how helpful it was to work as a member of a team in dissecting the text. Seeing other students defend interpretations helped him get over his fear of "getting it wrong," a fear that plagued him from the onset of the semester.
After completion of the visual and theatrical responses to OBJECTS and FOODS, I was unprepared for how digestible students found ROOMS to be. The overwhelming response I heard from the class is that ROOMS made complete sense to their ears after only one performed reading. In terms of engagement, I asked that all students visually map sentences they admired, groups of sentences that they felt connected with each other, and individual sentences from which they felt they could derive clear meaning. We held a class discussion on the ways Stein has taught the reader how to read her world in OBJECTS and FOOD, and we considered how our own domestication of Stein’s language-use during performances of OBJECTS and FOOD prepared us for the ease of ingesting ROOMS. One student, reflecting on the process of reading Tender Buttons, put it as such: “The law of entropy says that everything turns more chaotic over time, but Tender Buttons makes me view it in a different perspective: that everything resolves itself."

To see students come to class after reading ROOMS relaxed and prepared to discuss it meaningfully felt, in itself, like a breakthrough. It was at this stage in the course that I allowed students to engage in full critical debate on the text, and to address their critical and creative questions to the author directly. The final creative assignment for ROOMS was a digital letter to the author; I asked students to use the affordances of the Internet to initiate an exchange with
Gertrude Stein, presuming that she truly does live in the 'continuous present' and might conceivably respond to their queries. The purpose of the letter is for each student to try out their working theories on the text using a medium that Stein could never have foreseen: the world wide web. This gives the students a mode of communication that they can playfully exploit in an attempt at understanding Stein's mode of writing. This project provoked responses via Twitter, Reddit, Google Docs, web pages, Instagram, and other tools as students visually, aurally, and critically discussed *Tender Buttons* with the virtually-living author. One student turned in a Google Doc that looked like an unreadable page-long sequence of URL codes. Some were active and clickable, others were not and required cut-and-paste efforts on behalf of the reader to generate a meaningful link. Figure 7 is an example of one his active links that sent the reader to an Instagram page with the body paragraphs of his letter. Another student carried on a conversation between Stein, himself, and two contemporary critics on a Twitter feed, entitled, RuminativeRead. A clever Twitter exchange with one critic reads:

Sianne Ngai in "Critical Inquiry" - there is "something indecently cute about Stein's writing" which seems the opposite of revolutionary

Well, Ngai, lingering lions and chinese chairs are perhaps cute. But who's to say they aren't indicative of a lingering discontent

It is here I should point out a rewarding side effect of this semester-length, playful investigation of *Tender Buttons*: the students, after three months of engagement, felt fully empowered to take on established critical thinkers in debating the merits and themes of Stein's writing, and they did it with enlightened good humor.
The semester's investigations were in fact filled with play. This is not to say that there was no critical thinking in each artifact's preparation. Before students began the construction of their visual and performance pieces, every student had individually and collectively analyzed the text through a number of guided assignments. After the class shared initial responses to their oral performances of each section, the class analyzed the breadth of emotional responses, reflecting individual reading experience and prior knowledge. Among twenty readers, observations on the text's tone were as varied as light, humorous, aggressive, bitter, sarcastic, and melancholy. Students typically traced their responses to key visuals or sounds in the text that had a particular emotional impact on them. Transitioning students from broad, intuitive responses to analysis, I focused early discussions on the tracking and sharing of textual patterns; two tools that I found serviceable here are digital text generators and shared Google Docs. Textual mapping eases the opacity of Tender Buttons and Google documents reinforce the authorial power of the students' ideas while affirming the value of community-based investigation of the text.

To encourage the value of student insights, I turned the classroom community into a shared lab space, using Google Docs to track responses and ideas. Individually, I asked students to dig into to particular moments of interest in the text, often at the level of the sentence or vignette, and then reflect on them in a private document. I reviewed their work and cut-and-paste unique observations made into one document to share with the others in
the class. These "greatest hits" Google Docs became invaluable review tools for the students and the class as a whole. If nobody felt comfortable making a claim in class, I pulled up the document and used their insights to lead the next discussion. By organizing individual ideas into a shared, public document, I not only validated student's roles as writers and thinkers, but as active audience members reading their critical ideas in a published forum. These documents became the raw research data students used in the creative and critical assignments to come.

To parse the density of *Tender Buttons*, I encouraged students to use text generators of their choosing, then led a class discussion guided by broad patterns the students denoted after initial performance and analysis of the text. One student who found OBJECTS to feel particularly argumentative in tone produced insights from her data mining search such as, "the word "no" is used somewhat oddly in the passages. It is used 51 times and often used to show a lack of something. Showing what's not in the picture instead of just focusing on what is in it generates a different perspective on how to view "objects". This might tie in with the "significance" of using the word "necessary." Also it might encourage readers to take a different view on everyday things. Instead of noticing what is there, and what is happening, Stein asks what is not there, and how a situation could be different with different qualities." The student's initial negative reaction deepened with her understanding of how Stein was using the seemingly antagonistic word, no. By using a shared Google Doc for the class, I was able to place that bright student insight alongside this one: "By constructing the images of these objects by filling in their "negative space" it is easier to understand what the object looks like. Sometimes it is easier to see what you are looking for when you are looking right past it."
Whereas OBJECTS exercises exploited the strong visual patterns in *Tender Buttons*, when assigning FOOD, I foregrounded the aural dynamics at play, asking students, after performing the work aloud, to choose some of their favorite moments from the text to perform themselves. I assigned a video response, in which students performed a section that stood out in their memory during initial performance, and then followed with an explanation of how and why this sequence appeals to their senses. Again, students naturally began with the sounds Stein makes before breaking the language down into meaning or sequence of meanings. The analytical process became an organic, rather than forced experience. Speaking about the experience on tape proved easier than writing about it and served as a means of identifying which of the meals the student felt most comfortable working with during the play performance.

**MAKING STEIN-SENSE: COMPOSITION AS EXPLANATION**

After the semester-length creative and critical investigation of *Tender Buttons*, each student designed his or her own critical explanation of the text. It was here that I let students fully engage with other critics, and use their own close reading and creative responses to make a singular claim about the text. This was the first and only formal essay of the semester; the responses were rich and the voices were authoritative, as though each student earned the right to his or her hypothesis on Stein's intentions. As students directly or indirectly engaged Ms. Stein, claims ranged from the universal, such as, "I believe that you want the reader to reject acquiescence to any one paradigm that might be largely accepted" to the more focused as in, "I particularly like the feminist lens on your work
because, as a young woman, I like to imagine that I am multifaceted and capable of more than a patriarchal society would expect from me."

For the most part, however, all students remained open to myriad interpretations. As one student eloquently concluded, "I must take into account that this might not have been your true intended meaning; perhaps you were mainly interested in redefining your subjects for the sake of expanding your readers' mental capacities." And, expanding this particular class of readers' capacities, *Tender Buttons* did.
Works Cited


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