

Maggie McDonnell  
Instructional Strategies  
Journal #2  
September 2005

## Learning Environments

I think that it's difficult to discuss disciplinary context as an English teacher at this level; our students are not necessarily students of literature or language, but are instead from every possible discipline available at our college. At Vanier, this means that my students can be pianists or physicists, sculptors or early childhood educators, veterinary assistants or psychologists (with very different attitudes towards rats, I assume).

Having said that, part of my job as an English teacher is to help my students learn to communicate effectively; regardless of discipline, what I tell them is that "you can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't tell people about these ideas, you may as well not have them." I think that as a group, we English teachers often reflect on how exposure to literature can be presented and approached as "useful" for our students. I also think that for the most part, our aim is not to produce an army of Joycean pundits, but to help our students make the connection between the ability to analyse a poem and the ability to think independently and critically about everything they encounter.

As a student, I always felt that Literature and Composition represented structure and creativity, respectively. In other words, literature was something that was explained to me, while composition was something I got to do on my own. As a teacher, I approach the two aspects of my course content from the reverse position; composition is the area in which I give my students as many tools as possible for strong structure, and literature is where I encourage them to "think outside the box." The structure – the rules, the outlining methods, the editing practices, even the word processing tools – implicit in 'composition' is how my students acquire 'practical' skills which they can use across disciplines. In short, they learn how to plan, write and edit a presentable essay. But when we get to literature, I want my students to go below the surface and beyond the literal. On a really good cake, the icing is just the beginning – so too, a good text. The plot and literal meaning is just a taste of the richness underneath.

In terms of the ubiquitous Bloom, this exploration of textual richness demands some 'lower-order' skills – understanding basic concepts such as 'plot' and 'setting' and so on – but also implies a development of higher-order skills. Students need to become comfortable with textual analysis and evaluation, based on their understanding of those concepts. In introductory courses, my focus tends to be on the initial development of the lower-order skills. Initially, students read texts with a lot of guidance, and a lot of large-group discussion. Gradually, this framework is dismantled, with an aim to make the students capable of basic textual analysis by the end of the term. In post-introductory courses, I move very quickly from that structured analysis – maybe one reading – to small group work. This term I am having a lot of success with small group lesson planning – students work in groups of four to prepare discussion questions for the larger group. I present the large group with a list of areas that need to be addressed, and each group tackles one area. So far, response has been completely positive, and the resulting large-group discussions have been very constructive – and more than once a group has come up with something I would have overlooked if I had been leading the discussion.

I'm really not sure if all this ↑ actually responds to the journal questions. I suspect I have missed the mark. On the other hand, as I said, we English teachers are a special case ☺

I would like to add that I was a little taken aback by Halonen's description of content-centred teachers (McKeachie 318). Halonen claims that content-centred teachers "show limited attention to the process." She then proceeds to extol the virtues of learner-centred teachers, who she says "embrace the responsibility" of changing the way their students think. If we're teaching students how to "be" within our respective disciplines – in other words, if we're teaching them how to be biologists, or musicians, or linguists – then surely we're teaching them "the process." Halonen seems to think that content-centred implies that we're teaching biology, music, or language, with no regard whatsoever for who we're teaching to (or at). But it seems to me that what Halonen is really describing is teacher-centred. Content-centred for me implies that teacher and learner are both engaged in the content – and that means not just the declarative knowledge, but every aspect of the taxonomic knowledge, including the meta-cognitive. Harumph.