

# Literature Instruction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Tolstoi, Dostoevski, Nabokov

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**Abstract**—The study and teaching of literature at the college level has changed remarkably little in the past fifty years, in spite of new finding in pedagogy and new technologies. This paper identifies ways to re-center our focus on student learning utilizing all the available tools.

**Keywords**—literature; new technologies; student centered; learning; flipped-blended classroom

## I. INTRODUCTION

While our knowledge of how students learn and the influx of new technologies have dominated recent discussions of the challenges facing higher education, there has been a marked lack of progression in the traditional literature course. Instructors use either the lecture method, providing whatever elements they deem essential to an understanding of the genre/write/text or engage students in some guided discussion dependent upon the student actually having read the text. Frequently the instructor asks questions leading to already pre-determined answers based on her or his previous knowledge and study. So it was in my undergraduate days at Georgetown and in my graduate studies in Slavic literatures at the University of Kansas.

## II. THE PEDAGOGY

### A. Lecture

Many literature courses, in particular the co-called “survey” courses relied heavily on lectures. Some of these were brilliant, largely the result of the instructor’s talent and passion for the subject. They represented choices made by the instructor as to what elements were important, the history of the national literature, a biographical approach, a close reading of the reading with commentary, application of one or more critical methodologies. Often the tradition was established in the instructor’s own graduate studies and institution and simply propagated to newer generations. The lecture has come under some attack by the emphasis on the “flipped classroom” made popular by Eric Mazur [1] that suggest lectures can be videotaped and viewed prior to class allowing more time for higher level discussions. In fact many MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) follow the lecture format, simply converting classroom lectures into videos. While highly entertaining and informative such courses as *The Introduction to the Theory of*

*Literature* by Yale Professor Paul Fry [2] become to some extent simply a replacement for reading Professor Fry’s *Theory of Literature*.

### B. Discussion

More often encountered in the smaller classes of graduate schools, discussions have been a mainstay of engaging student reactions to the texts. The method, however, depends almost entirely on insuring that students have actually read the text being discussed. Students are notorious for expressing opinions unfounded on any data. But it is clear that actively engaging students to THINK and respond to texts has the advantage of improving retention of the material.

## III. LEARNING OVER TEACHING

Much has been written about the student-centered classroom. Research indicates far greater retention by the learner when s/he is involved in the process of comprehending the material. In the language teaching profession we learned over thirty years ago that knowing something was not equivalent to be able to use it. The “proficiency” or “competency” movement had us measure the ability of students to do something with the language, to perform tasks. This caused a radical revision of prior teaching techniques. Nothing quite like that has occurred for the study of literature.

Yet there are way to incorporate what we have learned and incorporate new technologies to achieve better outcomes with our students. Step one is to identify what we hope our students will have accomplished at the end of a twelve-week semester. I have consistently suggested for the past forty years that the purpose of the literature course was for undergraduate students to read, comprehend, discuss and then communicate their own interpretations of a text to others either orally or in written form. This is not to diminish the value of critical scholarly approaches to a text, but quite simply most undergraduates bring too little background to employ these higher-level skills.

How then does one encourage student learning in the today’s literature course? What follows is an overview of three courses taught in English with translations over the past eighteen months at Middlebury College.

### A. Tolstoi

Before even beginning the course it was evident to me that since I had last taught Tolstoi students have grown unaccustomed to reading the lengthy novels of the Russian literary canon. Consequently I contacted all enrolled students and strongly suggested they read over winter break *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Students welcomed the ability to reread during the course itself these enormous texts.

The class met on one evening a week, tentatively scheduled for three academic hours (usually two hours and forty five minutes), but students were advised that classes might and did run longer. Classroom activities were directed by groups of three students. One was responsible for the historical and biographical background. A second was placed in charge of developing a means to guarantee that all students had read the assignment (this most often was an identification quiz and short essay) followed by leading the discussion. The third student was responsible for monitoring the discussion and then filling in gaps identified in the secondary literature about the work. Each class also had a film viewing (with snacks provided by the three class moderators). Films were particularly valuable in illustrating the dress, manners and *realia* of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, especially as seen in Soviet era films of the great novels. More contemporary films relating to *Anna Karenina* [3] and *The Kreutzer Sonata* [4] gave rise to lively discussions of comparisons and contrasts.

To cap the experience and to have a somewhat lighter reading load in the final week of classes students were required to give a presentation — interpretive reading of one of Tolstoi's plays: *The Power of Darkness*.

By the end of the session each student had "taught" at least one class. This enhanced their oral delivery skills and let them explore presentation software. In addition they were required to dress in business casual as a means of playing the role of a professional presenter.

Student responses to the class were positive with one telling comment. They hoped that I as an instructor with greater knowledge could have participated more in the discussions and insert my expertise where it was germane.

### B. Dostovesky

Building on my success and learning from my mistakes, I once again asked students to read at least *The Brothers Karamazov* over the summer before the start of class. A smaller group of students (12 as supposed to 20 in the Tolstoi class) lead to a different distribution of the work. This time two students were responsible for "teaching" each class. This involved leading the discussion, providing background, examining the lengthy films and selecting excerpts for viewing. Here too students provided snacks for the film screenings.

While there is a wonderful set of Russian made films to accompany the great novels, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, they were television mini-series and each is ten or more hours in length. Thus having students selectively examine just one such series and

then provide excerpts gave depth within each group while providing breadth of presentation for all.

There was no need for checking whether the reading assignment had been completed. The size of the group and intensity of the discussions was proof apparent of full participation.

One fascinating aspect of the discussions was the openness and inclusivity fostered by two young women who lead the discussion one evening. They set a tone that was welcoming and valued each contribution. I was more involved — actually participating in the discussions. This permitted me both to monitor the conversation and to offer comments to guide discussions to include important aspects of the novels.

Students were also required to do a collective project that encompassed the major novels. The result was a Prezi on *The Essential Dostoevsky* [5].

At the beginning of the Internet era I had encouraged students to make public their work, publishing first papers, then websites, later blogs and wiki entries that included reader reaction to texts. But issues of student privacy and the possible effects on one's future career have lead me to keep most student work limited to members of the class. One major exception is a project like the one above that begins with explicit intent to publish in the public domain.

The combination of student centered and orchestrated discussion, the final project, and my own involvement seemed to have worked for student responses were positive and both my literature courses for the spring were oversubscribed.

### C. Nabokov

Vladimir Nabokov occupies a unique role in 20<sup>th</sup> Century literature. At the beginning of his career a Russian writer, recognized in the émigré community, he was never published in his native Russia. He achieved fame for his works in English, primarily the success and publicity surrounding his novel, *Lolita*, and then the Stanley Kubrick's sensationalist film [6]. Recognized as master stylist of the English language, Nabokov's Russian novels are better known in translation into English than in Russia where they were first published only in the 1980s.

Nabokov's prose is complex, multifaceted, engaging, and demanding. The pleasure of the words and their combinations lie at the surface of his artistry and sleight of hand. This makes the reading of his novels or as he would suggest "re-reading" a complicated mental task, not unlike the engagement with a chess problem that he loved and authored.

So the course began with a pre-assignment, to read the lengthy novel *Ada*. Students were also required to submit via e-mail before the first class a reflection on how to read Nabokov. Another component was the request to sign up for a Twitter account to "follow" the course. Each student submitted a tweet (only 140 characters) to summarize the novel. The second class was devoted then to re-reading the novel along with the extensive commentary of Brian Boyd's *Ada Online* [7]. This skillful use of the Internet to provide critical commentary to the

novel relies heavily on text and has already been superseded by newer technologies. Each student chose one chapter of Nabokov's novel and Boyd's commentary and improved upon it utilizing the additional capabilities of graphics, audio and video afforded by today's WWW.

The students were once again broken into groups to present the novels, with biographical and critical commentary and directed discussions. Movies that reflect the novel were also shown along with the customary snacks. One class was devoted to Nabokov's own literary criticism and translations of the works of the Russian classics, Finally students were required to create a modern 21<sup>st</sup> century online companion to the last published novel in his lifetime, *Look at the Harlequins*.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

One of the goals of the "flipped classroom" was to move the traditional lecture onto video for pre-screening by students, thereby freeing up valuable classroom for higher-level discussions and analysis. Does this differ substantially from the traditional reading assignment whether of original texts or secondary literature? Perhaps it is simply a recognition that students today appear to be less capable of sustained reading. By assigning large texts to be read even before the semester begins some of that burden can be removed. Shifting the

workload to the students, holding them responsible for "teaching" the class models the Learning Pyramid [8]. Utilizing video, presentation software, project-based learning can all answer to the new challenges of our day. But at the end of the day, the most essential factor in enhancing the learning experience is to create an atmosphere and environment in which excitement and engagement are the norm. When students themselves take on the mindset of life long learners, responsible for their own progress, we as educators have achieved our goal.

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