Angus Dunstan

Building a Literate Community: Report from an NEH Literature Institute for Teachers

The South Coast Writing Project at U.C. Santa Barbara recently received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to conduct a Literature Institute for Teachers (LIT). The idea was to bring together experienced classroom teachers from all grade levels (K-College) and distinguished literary scholars to explore the theory and practice of teaching literature. We demonstrated successful classroom strategies, wrote responses to primary texts and to literary theory, examined our own reading practices as we tackled several canonical texts (The Tempest, Paradise Lost, and Walden), and considered the implications of recent developments in literary theory for curriculum and pedagogy. We also looked for ways in which a process-oriented approach to writing instruction might be adapted to the teaching of literature. We arrived at a set of working principles to guide our teaching practice, principles which overturned some of our most ingrained and strongly held convictions.

LIT is not yet over. We continue to meet regularly, to read and write together, and to practice our new principles in the laboratory of the classroom. I offer these working principles here in the context of the new California English Language Arts Framework which also calls for a radical rethinking of traditional instruction in reading and literature.

Teach Reading as a Meaning-Making Activity

We begin with the assertion that literary knowledge is not so much a body of facts as a procedure for making meaning. While it is true that a literate person may indeed know all the classical allusions in a poem like "The Waste Land," it is more important that she know how to go about figuring them out, confident that her curiosity is the mark of a sensitive reader rather than evidence of her ignorance. Teaching literature, then, becomes less a matter of passing on the received wisdom of a discipline and more a matter of initiating students into the language and processes of that discipline. It is the difference between teaching about themes, imagery and symbolism as if these were literary facts to be memorized ("a rose means love"), and focusing attention on how to use these terms to address some of the interpretive questions engaged readers raise. This emphasis on meaning-making does not imply that literary history and literary criticism have no place in the teaching of literature. It does suggest that they have occupied center stage in literature classrooms for too long, leaving many students convinced that our literary heritage is inaccessible to them unless they have the service of an "expert."

No single issue addressed in LIT caused greater problems, both at the theoretical level and at the level of personal response, than the changed locus of classroom authority which this view of meaning implies. If teaching literature involves us in acts of meaning-making, the teacher no longer necessarily occupies her former privileged position as arbiter of meaning. If the meaning and significance of literary texts is to be found neither in some Platonic sphere nor in the notes of critics and scholars but in transactions which new readers make with texts, then the classroom has to become a place where students are free to make those transactions, unhin-

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ordered by the sense that the teacher has the correct interpretation. Reading then becomes a potentially liberating activity, requiring conversation and negotiation and carrying the possibility of discovery. As long as meaning is thought to reside primarily in texts and secondarily in the notes of teachers and critics, as many teachers still seem to believe, it can be appropriated by “experts” and passed on, in a more or less benevolently despotic fashion, to students. But when our definition of meaning changes from “something apprehended” to “the result of a transaction made new each time a text is encountered,” the role of the teacher has to change, and with it the traditional role of student as passive receiver of information.

Create a Literate Community in Which Such Meaning-Making Can Occur

Many classrooms are not literate communities at all but knowledge camps where newcomers are told the rules of the literature game. A literate community is one in which the language arts—speaking, listening, reading and writing—are encouraged by being practiced in a setting in which each student’s contributions are valued. A literate community assumes its members have something valuable to contribute. The teacher’s primary role in the creation of a community of readers is to make possible the kind of conversation out of which meaning will emerge. This does not mean that teachers must hide their knowledge and insights but it does require a sense of shared ends and a commitment to share responses. In practical terms this implies a sharp reduction in the delivery of lectures in which texts are explained to students as if they were written in a foreign language, and the establishment of dialogues—student to student and teacher to student—in which interpretations are developed, negotiated and refined. A literate community encourages such sharing because it is founded on the premise that meaning-making is a dynamic process.

In addition to her acquired knowledge about a given text and the accumulation of interpretations she has built up, a good teacher has another, potentially more valuable asset to share with her students—she is a skilled reader. Many students do not know from their non-school experience how an experienced reader works. They may know what quarterbacks do, and what interviewers, nurses and police officers do because they have seen them do their work in real life and on TV. But most reading takes place in silence, in private, so it is critical, particularly for students at risk, that the literature teacher demonstrate reading and interpretation in her classroom.

How can this be done? All too often we spend our time asking questions to which we already know the answers, making up quizzes, lecturing, and making students feel inadequate as readers by explaining the “hidden meaning” of stories and poems. We work on comprehension, one end-product of reading, rather than on the process of reading itself. Instead we might, for example, read in class a poem we have not read before and then demonstrate the way a literate person goes about figuring things out, including the problems that elude us. We might keep our own reading response journals and share them with our students, showing them the questions we cannot answer and our own attempts to grapple with difficult issues. We might listen more carefully to our students’ interpretive problems instead of pre-empting discussion with our own well-formulated views.

What we might try to do, in short, is to make the classroom a place where students learn what it means to entertain fictional worlds, not a place where they have to wait for the answers. We could try to make the discussion in our classrooms more like the kind of talk we engage in with each other when we talk about books. We need to do this so that our students will learn the qualities of attention, openness and tolerance which a literate community demands of its members.

Make the Collaborative Learning Group the Building Block of Your Literate Community

A collaborative learning group is one in which people pool their knowledge and responses to solve some problem and where each member shares responsibility for the task at hand. It is a natural setting for meaning-making activities. Over the last few years the writing response group has become a staple ingredient of many writing classrooms, helping students to generate ideas, revise their thinking, and de-center authority. But in the study of literature, very often the primary modes of delivery are still lectures and large group discussions, which are themselves often simply teacher monologues interrupted by two or three articulate students.

When readers work together in groups to share readings and study problems of interpretation, a number of things can happen, as we discovered when we worked together in this fashion in LIT. We realized that, far from being dispassionate and objective students of literature, we are all situated readers, all written upon by our own worldly experiences in ways that influence our readings dramatically and which incline us to persist in the notion of one correct interpretation. We discovered how hard it is to give up our own interpretations. In writing groups many of us have learned how to collaborate and help our fellow writers say more clearly what they have to say; we can learn to cooperate with them without trying to take control of their discourse from them. But when we read

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and interpret together, we often seem to be in competition for what Sheridan Blau calls the available discursive space, as if interpretations are uneasy existing side by side and must be forever rustling to see who will be privileged.

In order to work effectively we must learn to play what Peter Elbow calls, in Embracing Contraries, the believing game. Most of our literary training, like the rest of our university education, has been in the doubting game, and many of us have become accomplished players. Like Descartes, our intellectual forebear, we learn to doubt everything until it can be irrefutably proved; the whole academic edifice rests on this principle. When it is the only game in town, it is not a game that many students find attractive. A few learn to play it with us but when it is applied to literature, to the exclusion of other approaches, too many of them leave our classes feeling disenfranchised, convinced that reading novels and poetry requires access to some secret code. Learning to play the believing game, in which, instead of immediately attacking or criticizing an apparently deviant reading we look for reasons to believe and reinforce it, can be a healthy antidote to excessive and spiriting doubting.

Adapt What We Know About Process-Oriented Writing Instruction to the Teaching of Reading

In the National Writing Project Network we have found certain formulae useful. We speak, for example, of “Fluency—Form—Correctness,” and of “Pre-writing, Writing, and Rewriting.” I do not need to rehearse here the limitations of such formulae especially when they are transformed from heuristics into algorithms. They can be useful, however, in helping us to think about what we’re doing when we teach writing, and in LIT we found a few formulations about reading similarly helpful: “Reading teachers must read,” for example, “Reading is re-reading,” and “Free-reading builds fluency.”

The first of these injunctions reminds us that our own reading and interpretive processes can be a rich source of inspiration and ideas for our teaching. We are likely to be on intellectually firmer ground if we base our pedagogy on the experiences of actual readers rather than on our memories of past instruction. When we say “Reading is Re-reading,” we might remember how little anyone ever gets from a single reading of a text and how little time our students have to re-read. Imagine what would happen to your reading requirements if you insisted that every novel be read at least twice. The emphasis on “free-reading” might remind us of what we know about oral language acquisition, that fluency develops best in a genuine interactive environment with little or no attention to error. We need strategies to encourage reading widely as well as the reading in depth we usually model when we “analyze” a piece of literature.

Just as we have learned that teacher intervention during the writing process is more helpful to the writer than laborious written comments after a paper is finished, so we need to recognize the importance of our involvement in the student’s reading process before the ubiquitous comprehension test. One way to understand how a student is reading is to have her write about her insights and difficulties as she reads in some kind of reading journal. When she shares these insights and difficulties with her peers or with the teacher she can learn to read better: her insights can be valued and she will see that her difficulties are usually not signs of her failure to see what everyone else sees but genuine responses to interpretive problems in the text. We can best appreciate these problems ourselves if we reflect more on our own reading processes and pay somewhat less attention to our carefully prepared notes on criticism.

I have already suggested that we demonstrate reading and interpretation for our students by showing them how we go about dealing with an entirely new text. But it can go further than this. Many writing teachers now complete (some) assignments along with their students; literature teachers might benefit from reading along with their students. We are in a wonderful position to talk about the way interpretations can change with re-reading, since we are often quite familiar with the text being studied, and can demonstrate from our own experience the ways in which readings can build on one another, the ways in which our responses can change over time, and the ways in which experienced readers try to solve interpretive problems without always requiring closure.

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Finally we need to help students make the connection between reading and writing, help them to use writing as a way of reading better, as a way of addressing issues and problems which their reading may raise. If we think of reading as vicarious experience, and writing as a way of re-shaping experience, then writing about reading can become a way of making sense of experiences which one might not have had otherwise or whose importance one might have overlooked.

Make Time for Reading in the Classroom

Good readers are capable of paying close and careful attention to texts and of sustaining that attention over time. It is this ability to concentrate rather than the mastery of some “read-
ing skills” which characterizes the good reader. Unable to concentrate for long, the poor reader lacks the extensive practice that would make her fluent; frequently what looks like a problem of decoding, comprehension or interpretation is simply a problem of attention. We find a similar problem in the writing classroom; repeated errors are often not the result of ignorance at all but simply a failure to notice.

When they share their own genuine responses and pursue their own questions, students engage in the kind of conversation that constitutes literary discourse.

How can we encourage greater concentration without merely exhorting students to pay attention? It is tempting to blame some students’ short attention span on television; they are used to the pacing of game shows and videos where one image follows another in mind-numbing succession and where commercial breaks make sustained attention unnecessary. But often our own classrooms display the same kind of fragmentation and nervous energy. We move rapidly and not always logically from talk about dangling modifiers to a discussion of theme and metaphor, from due dates to imagery in the assigned poems. We need to slow down and worry less about “covering the ground” and more about engaging students in problems of meaning and interpretation.

Especially in college-prep classes and certainly in college itself, we feel the urge to push on, to read more books, to give our students the received critical ideas and expose them to as much literature as possible. Clearly anything we can do to promote more eclectic reading is to be encouraged, but the literature classroom should also be a place where students learn what it is to dwell on issues, to think through problems, and to savor literary pleasures.

One way to slow down the process is to read aloud as we used to do in elementary school. The pleasure of being read to does not go away, and even though listening to another person read is not the same as reading silently oneself it does provide a model for what one’s own reading might “sound” like. Also, when someone reads aloud in a classroom (either the teacher or a student), one hears more than the mere decoding of words on the page; one hears the beginning of an interpretation. Very often, for example, a poem can be opened up by focusing on the different emphases given by several students to the same line of text. Another strategy we have found helpful is to have students repeat back words, phrases, sentences or larger chunks which they have found especially striking. This “text rendering,” as we call it, keeps our attention on the language itself for a while and allows us to pay attention to what others have noticed in a reading. A classroom in which such reading aloud takes place is a classroom which affirms the importance of the sound of language, which allows language time to work on its readers, and which demonstrates that texts must be sources of pleasure and engagement before they can be objects of literary study.

Give Students a Choice of Writing Tasks

One of the key ingredients in a successful writing program is choice. Students typically do not write well on topics they know little about or have had little time to prepare. Usually these essays have been assigned to test what they are supposed to know or understand rather than to help them find out what they need to know. The practice of assigning topics that seem important to us does not help students come to terms with their own problems of interpretation even though our topics may sometimes prompt important reflections. Instead of spending our time inventing questions for them, we would do better encouraging and training students to formulate their own questions which could then lead, with our encouragement, to a variety of written responses, rather than only to the traditional analysis or interpretive summary. If the only kind of writing about literary texts students do is the critical essay, we can hardly complain when those students fail to see the connections literature might have to their own lives.

Students need the experience of producing their own literary texts if they are fully to understand what is going on in the stories and poems they read. One could not be expected to talk very knowledgeably or intelligently about baseball, for example, without ever having played it or some similar ball game. What one can say, as a mere spectator, is necessarily limited. One can admire the shortstop’s ability to scoop up the half-volley and start a double play, but someone who has tried to play shortstop appreciates the moves so much better, and may also have a greater sense of the beauty of the moment. Our students, especially our advanced students, are seldom asked to render experience into art themselves, only to comment, in a language that often seems opaque, on the artistic productions of others. Writing one’s own poems or short stories, however clumsy or naive they may be, and then reflecting in writing on the process of turning observed experience into fiction, can help students see that though literature does indeed create new worlds, it often does so by rearranging and shaping actual events. Literature does not spring fully clothed from the pens of strange creatures called writers. The shaping, selecting and rearranging which we engage in quite naturally when we gossip and tell our own stories is often where the stories we call literature begin.

Students Need Opportunities to “Frame” Texts for Themselves, to Discover the Ways Their Personal Stories Connect with the Literature They Read

A good deal of traditional literature teaching proceeds from the assumption that students need an instructor both to
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identify significant literary problems for them and to answer them. Texts are thus "framed" by the teacher's pedagogical concerns and prior knowledge and experience so that students have little inducement to relate them to their own experiences. Critical fashions change, however, and what one generation regards as a significant issue may be regarded by the next as a side issue or no issue at all, the product of a limited point of view. The honest responses of engaged readers outlast critical fashions, however, so our emphasis should be on encouraging those responses and then subjecting them to reflection and questioning. When they share their own genuine responses and pursue their own questions, students engage in the kind of conversation that constitutes literary discourse. This approach does not exclude from consideration the teacher's responses and questions; in fact, when teachers are seen to have genuine questions about literary texts themselves, they are often taken more seriously and heard more clearly when they claim to know some answers!

One way of encouraging response to literature is to have students tell their own personal parallel stories. In response to a poem about a car journey taken as a child, for example (John Stone's "Coming Home"), students might be asked to write accounts of their own car journeys. Then the question might be asked, "How did your story help you read the poem and how did the poem help you read your own experience?" Using a piece of literature as an occasion for reflecting on one's own life has the potential both for deepening our understanding of the literature and for re-examining our own experiences in light of what we read.

Building on other people's stories in this way is what we do in ordinary conversation. When we hear someone recount an incident at the dinner table or at a party, we are likely to offer our own similar story in return, partly because that is what we expect in a conversation and partly because we have a natural tendency to look for connections between our own lives and experiences and those of others. This kind of conversation has its own unwritten rules. The person who simply uses my story as an excuse to tell his own, without regard for what my story might mean, will be seen to be self-centered and his contributions are likely to be ignored. Our favorite conversation partners are usually those who listen intently when we speak and then show they understand what we're saying by the appropriateness of the questions they ask and by their own parallel or contrasting stories. We often leave such conversations with a clearer sense of what our own experience has meant as well as a renewed sense of our connectedness to other people. Perhaps we see that our perceptions of some experience really were quite odd! Perhaps we recognize, with relief, that we are not so strange after all, and that others share our interpretive puzzles as we try to figure out why life should be the way it is.

If these "natural interpretive strategies," as I call them, are applied to works of literature, not necessarily to replace more formal analysis but in addition to it, our students might come to feel that literature is not simply an arcane subject accessible only to professors and critics, but something that has relevance for their own lives.

The Goal of Instruction Should Be to Open up Literary Texts Rather Than to Close Them Down Prematurely

The teacher who has taught Hamlet for years and who knows it intimately is sorely tempted to explain it all to students, especially when she sees them getting bogged down in a place where she feels she knows the answer. It is one of the dangers of teaching the same texts year after year. But before we continue our erudite explanations we must ask ourselves why we would want to solve students' problems for them, and whether there might be some other way of sharing our knowledge and expertise without pre-empting students' own necessary struggles. The question is whether teachers see themselves as collaborators with their students in a learning process or whether they see themselves as Freire's bankers, depositing knowledge into empty student accounts. You cannot demand that students get involved in solving meaningful questions if you are in the habit of eventually supplying the "right" answers yourself. Where teachers imply that they are the sources of literary authority, reading simply becomes another version of the game of guessing what the teacher thinks.

Paradoxically, the teacher who demonstrates the collaborative spirit and who does not labor under the mistaken assumption that she has all the answers, has a greater chance of having her own knowledge genuinely valued. She has a chance of being seen as a real expert, someone who has arrived at her "answers" through the same troublesome process as the students, rather than as the result of some epiphany granted to English Teachers in college. When teachers teach interpretation rather than texts, as Scholes puts it, students become more aware of the power of language to shape and reflect meaning, and more respectful of the ways in which individuals make meaning in transaction with the world. Students who understand this will be much more likely to become full participants in the democratic process, far less likely to become the victims of influential interpretations of reality which are simply moves to deprive them of their rights.

Of these principles perhaps the most important is the injunction to turn the classroom itself into a collaborative enter-

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prise. If students are to be convinced that they are meaning-makers and not just note-takers, they need a much more active role than they are given in many literature courses. And it is not simply a matter of lecturing less and providing more time for what is often euphemistically called "class discussion." Students need something better than the Darwinian atmosphere of traditional classroom discussion, in which the most vocal and opinionated speakers prosper, if they are to become full participants. They need built-in occasions to listen to each other. They need to learn to negotiate meaning, to share responsibility for figuring things out, to take account of what other people say. One of the extraordinary by-products of talking about literature with other people is that we learn more about them as well as about the texts we study. The collaborative learning group is a place to do that, an opportunity to break the cycle of isolation and the intellectual free-market chaos that characterizes much of students' learning lives. It offers a place to practice what Bruffee calls the "conversation of mankind."

Angus Dunstan is Co-Director of the South Coast Writing Project and Associate Director of LIT. In Fall 1989, he will be an Assistant Professor of English at California State University, Sacramento.