

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

Ideas for Teaching Literature and Writing

BY SCOTT MONCRIEFF

I taught my first college composition class as an unprepared graduate student, in Andrews University's Haughey Hall, in the winter of 1983. The first day I was so nervous that, after going over the syllabus and collecting a brief in-class writing assignment, I let students out 15 or 20 minutes early—"so you can go get your textbooks at the bookstore." In truth, my mind was racing so fast it wouldn't stop, and I knew I couldn't ad lib another line without cracking. I just wanted class to end. In the 10 years since then, I've had a chance to develop a teaching philosophy that goes beyond "survive the next five minutes"—not to say that I nevermore invoke that dictum.

God intends us to develop our capacities as complete human beings, and the language arts are crucial to that development. Language provides the basis for

communication and reflection and for building relationships with our world, our fellow human beings, and with God. Therefore, learning in the language arts can lead to a more profound understanding of our world, as well as more meaningful interaction with others and our Creator.

As I tell my freshman composition students, learning to use the language arts is particularly important in a society that

discourages reflection and encourages superficial, erroneous thinking. Advertising reduces our idea of a complete argument to the opposition of "tastes great!" and "less filling!" It tells us that today's Chevrolet is "the heartbeat of America," and that women who smoke Virginia Slims have "come a long way, baby." In the society of paradise lost, a 30-something male, fishing in a Rocky Mountain stream with a few buddies, can declare "it just doesn't get any bet-

ter than this!"—unless, unexpectedly, the Swedish women's water-skiing team slaloms up. Without training in the language arts, Christian students may be able to laugh at the rhetoric of the airwaves, but they will be hooked nonetheless.

And where is the time to "stop and think"? Modern society allows for so little reflection and thoughtful writing. We ring in the day with the 6:00 a.m. alarm,

and close away solitude with the TV and car radio (not to mention the ever-present Walkman). Dickens wrote some 7,000 letters in a lifetime; we're lucky if we write seven a year. Today's student, if he or she is to become language proficient, has to swim upstream (with an eye out for unexpected water-skiers).

Enter the Writing Course...

Writing promotes both reflection and the search for truth. As opposed to speech, it has several advantages. It is slower—a disadvantage to those who wish to rush into meaningless phrases, but an aid to those who want to think things through. It is solitary. It allows one to lay out an idea in a much more complex way than does speech, because of its capacity to extend memory. And once the idea is laid out, it can be shaped and refined with infinite flexibility and precision—especially if one is computer literate. Writing is much more than a transcription of thought—writing down “what I already knew.” The writing process itself shapes ideas and leads to discovery. Every writing teacher knows (or ought to know) the old adage, “How can I know what I think until I see what I say?” Writing is more than a record of thoughts and discoveries; it is a discovery process.

Enter the Literature Course...

Imagine curling up on a couch with Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, or *Macbeth*, or the poetry of Emily Dickinson instead of “tastes great!... less filling!” Literature courses provide continuous interaction with great thinkers who use language at the highest level. Superficial and inauthentic rhetoric becomes repellent to one trained to appreciate the best, while those without any higher sense of language's potential remain trapped in their own level.

Enter the Teacher...

Despite the intrinsic value of writing and of reading literature, as argued above,

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many students are not naturally attracted to either subject. These students need a teacher who knows the value of the material and can make its relevance apparent. To the writing student who has never seen writing essays as more than an exercise in guessing what the instructor wants, the skillful instructor can respond in a way that makes the assignment personally meaningful, an exercise in real thinking. To the reluctant literature student who sees every poem as an exercise in symbolic obfuscation, the teacher can, in patient dialogue, tease out the implications of words and lines until the student comes to realize the pleasures of multiple meanings and ambiguities, not to mention how one arrives at them.

I do not subscribe to what Frederick Crews calls the “transfusion” theory of literature,¹ whereby students improve their blood by merely hooking a line between

themselves and King Lear and letting it flow into them. “Great Books” need to be argued about and discussed, not accepted as leather-bound, gilt-edged icons. The skillful teacher brings to life the connection between student and subject. His or her students become more than a receptacle for teacher or textual input. They are actors and producers on the stage of the subject. They are not, in the words of a favorite Maupassant quote,

ones who use their eyes “only with the memory of what other people before us have thought about the object we are looking at.”² Instead, they see for themselves.

Enter the Christian Teacher...

In *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman argues that “knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator.”³ The study of God, and a knowledge of our relation to Him, gives a sense of unity and proportion to the university, and to the individual teacher.

The value of this Christian perspective is particularly evident when one compares a secular attempt to unify the university through the anemic aegis of the philosophy department, as recommended by Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. Within the God-centered academy, college, or university, Christian language arts teachers should have a particular appreciation for multiple meanings of “the word”; the sensitivity to distinguish the moral, philosophical, and aesthetic qualities of writers; and the ability to guide and inspire students through the use of writing, to discover and disseminate truth.

So how does one get students to change from passive to active, from doers to doers? It almost goes without saying that students must be regularly active in the classroom. I say “almost,” because last year I visited an academy literature class where the instructor read from the textbook for most of the 45-minute period. He paused only to ask the class to note a few facts about different authors and

painters, which they were to memorize for an upcoming exam.

It's absolutely necessary to get students involved, and not just as "teacher's helpers." My primary goal in most classes is not to give students a certain body of knowledge that I possess, but to teach them a skill and attitude of critical inquiry that will allow them to develop their own knowledge. For that reason, in-class and out-of-class writing, and small- and large-group discussion form a much greater part of my classes than lecturing.

And I try to argue with my students. Not to intimidate them into accepting my point of view—again, correct "static" knowledge is not the goal and isn't "static" knowledge an oxymoron, anyway?—but to get them to improve their own ability to weigh evidence, to draw and present conclusions, to share them with others.

This pedagogical technique means *no canned experiences*. In other words, I can't package my favorite lessons and put them in recipe form: "Add four cups of Melville over low heat and stir occasionally until you have your class in a rolling boil." On the other hand, it's possible to suggest a few starting places, appropriate for senior high and college students, that generally result in significant student learning and encourage reflection.

1. *Thinking about thinking and learning.* William Golding's "Thinking as a Hobby" goes through various levels of thinking in an interesting way. Even more useful, in some ways, is his use of the *Venus de Milo*, a leopard, and Rodin's *The Thinker* to

represent thought levels. Students can discuss the different thought levels and come up with their own series of images to represent them. Additionally, students can consider how Christian thought could be represented at each of Golding's three levels.

Another good starting point, somewhat more complex than Golding, is Walker Percy's essay, "The Loss of the Creature." Percy talks about how structured forms of acquiring knowledge or enjoying experiences (classrooms, textbooks, cameras, guided tours) block the interaction between viewer and object and actually prevent learning. He gives many simple, yet flexible, examples that will often get students into good discussions about why they see things the way they do, and what is good or bad about their modes of perception.

2. Stories that get writers thinking about the meaning of Christian experience—both others' and their own. Most Adventist literature teachers are probably familiar with Flannery O'Connor's stories,⁴ and aware of their interesting and unusual use of Christian motifs. I generally prefer not to use the ubiquitous "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" as a starter—it may give students an initial distaste for O'Connor, or an appreciation for the wrong reasons. "Good Country People," "Revelation," and "Parker's Back" all stimulate discussion of religious issues in imaginative ways. All these stories would be appropriate for senior-level academy or college students.

Jorge Luis Borges' "The Gospel According to Mark"⁵ works very well, with the right teacher. It's a three-page retelling of the Gospel in modern terms, with surprising results. The story does not itself support Christian faith, but rather serves as a critique. The skillful teacher can get students to discuss the valid points and inadequacies of Borges' allegory rather than simply accepting it or rejecting it.

3. *Using film in the classroom.* A heavy use of film or video can cause students to put their brains in park rather than drive, but an occasional well-chosen and judiciously discussed film can create major intellectual breakthroughs for students, reaching them in a way that a text will not. In *Places in the Heart* imaginative integration of Christian concepts catches the viewer off guard, especially in the moving final sequence. And the Danish film *Babette's Feast* will give Adventist students a much-needed opportunity to tease out the tensions between spiritual and aesthetic values.⁶ T. S. Eliot's essay "Religion and Literature" or C. S. Lewis's "Christianity and Culture" can provide an intellectual background on questions about the relation of the arts to Christianity.

In the years since that first aborted class, I have come to a greater appreciation of the role and value of the Christian language-arts teacher. If I have 15 minutes left at the end of class nowadays, I can usually think of a more creative way to engage students in our study than sending them to the bookstore. Once we start swimming in the sea of language that surrounds us, instead of just floating, we always have something interesting to talk (or write) about.⁶

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Frederick C. Crews, *The Critics Bear It Away: American Fiction and the Academy* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. xiv.
2. Cited in Ann Charters, *The Story and Its Writer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 944.
3. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 99.
4. *The Complete Stories: Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971).
5. Jorge Luis Borges, *Dr. Brodie's Report* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), pp. 3-13.
6. *Babette's Feast* and *Places in the Heart* are available from several video distribution outlets, for about \$20 each. One such outlet is Viewfinder's Uncommon Video (1-800-342-3342).

