Ralph McAdams

Teaching Philosophy

Studying literature should make things messy. As a teacher, I aim to use the prismatic nature of literature—its ability to encompass multiple perspectives and support multiple interpretations—to help students embrace complexity and contradictions, preparing them to thrive in a pluralistic and interconnected world. At the same time, however, messy ideas cannot be approached without clear thinking and sophisticated writing. Thus, I also strive to facilitate the development of the reading and writing skills that prepare students for a variety of careers and empower them to contribute to the central debates of our time. My highest goal as a teacher is to facilitate the process wherein students articulate with increasing precision their increasingly nuanced ideas.

I design my courses to provide students with the scaffolding they need in order to analyze texts in a microscopic manner and to move nimbly between textual arguments on a macroscopic level. For example, in a recent semester, I introduced the principles of close reading by asking students to compare short descriptions from two tourists’ guidebooks of the same gentrifying Chicago neighborhood. Our discussion uncovered subtle but significant differences between the two accounts, suggesting each book’s assumptions about its audience and about urban space. Teaching students to pay careful attention to formal details, to become comfortable with textual ambiguity, and to consider its consequences, this activity modeled the comparative analysis they were asked to perform in a later writing assignment. In an article in *Pedagogy*, written after collaborating to teach our department’s “*Beowulf* to Milton” survey, my co-authors and I demonstrate that assigning students to write frequent short explications gives them the opportunity to practice the analytical techniques of close reading in a low-stakes context before writing formal papers. The guidebook exercise awakens students’ sense that words matter, even outside of literary contexts, training them to be critical readers of news reports and political speeches, as well as advertisements and legal documents.

Students also need to be taught to approach academic writing as both an exploratory and an argumentative genre. In my experience teaching first-year writing courses, I find that students generally arrive in college assuming that their writing has an audience of one: the teacher. Using the approach laid out in Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein’s *They Say, I Say*, I urge students to understand themselves as active participants in ongoing scholarly and civic conversations that have a wide audience. In an introductory writing course focused on travel, I once held an impromptu in-class debate about the controversial practice of slum tourism in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. I divided the students in half, assigning each group a viewpoint. Initially reluctant to take up an assigned position, the students quickly became enthusiastic about the opportunity to debate, working together to mount analytical and impassioned arguments and offering direct, detailed responses to the other side. Afterward, a follow-up discussion revealed that students had developed more nuanced positions on the issue, understanding slum tourism as neither straightforwardly “good” nor “bad,” but rather as a variable and ambivalent practice with uneven consequences for *favela* communities. This activity developed students’ communication skills, but also encouraged them to take seriously others’ beliefs. Free-spirited debate requires an inclusive, respectful environment, and I strive to facilitate exchanges that benefit from students’ different perspectives and learning styles. Frequently, I provide an additional forum for those who are more reticent by requiring students to contribute to a private class blog, which also allows them to practice intellectual communication online.
Because I understand learning as recursive and driven by productive disagreements, I focus on teaching the literary research process. The Internet’s vast expansion of access to academic writing and historical documents has resulted in incredible opportunities for students to engage scholarly conversations, but has also made clear that we need to teach them to make critical judgments about sources. To this end, my courses regularly include activities designed to develop students’ digital literacy. For example, with the help of the librarians at Michigan’s Undergraduate Library, I led a recent class through each step in the process of writing a research paper, including using digital tools to find and evaluate sources. During one-on-one meetings, I helped students craft research topics that followed their interests, giving them latitude as well as guidance in order to help them take ownership over their intellectual work. Their final papers, on Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, changed the way I think about this novel. One sociology major used Émile Durkheim’s On Suicide to illuminate the novel’s final scene (when Dorian stabs the painting and dies), while another student used contemporary reviews she found on a digital database to recontextualize the novel’s seemingly mean-spirited depictions of older women, and a third student challenged the widespread assumption that the novel takes a secular outlook by paying close attention to its references to Christianity.

Training students in the practicalities of academic research resonates with my effort to interrogate how the encounter with literature is shaped by its technological and social contexts. Many students assume that literature provides an escape from the real world into a realm of pure ideas, and certainly I strive to make literary study exciting for the way it raises abstract questions. Yet I see one of the goals of studying English as developing a strong sense of the tension between literature’s ability to inspire imaginative thought and its status as an artifact of material and social conditions. To that end, I plan activities that expose students to the original physical form in which nineteenth-century works appeared, whether by visiting the library’s rare books room or using a digital database, like the freely available Shelley-Godwin Archive. Seeing the way the original parts of Charles Dickens’ Bleak House, for example, were framed by advertisements for household goods, students learn to see texts as profoundly of their time, their composition and dissemination shaped by multiple forces.

Building a classroom that supports students from diverse cultural and intellectual backgrounds is especially important when teaching nineteenth-century British literature. Produced in a culture both constitutive of our own and estranged from it in space and time, this material can feel eerily familiar or intensely foreign to students, whose divergent responses enrich our study. I aim to make nineteenth-century British literature exciting to all students by encouraging them to recognize both similarities and differences between, say, tensions over how to allocate a large charitable bequest in Anthony Trollope’s The Warden (1855) and recent debates about the management of university endowments. Focusing on the way canonical and lesser-known works engage, but also erase, issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability, I encourage students to wrestle with the strange and often problematic assumptions of these texts, while recognizing the historical and cultural contingency of not only these nineteenth-century perspectives but also their own.

This thinking across historical and cultural distance to a past as rich and complicated as our present gives students a new appreciation for what is fundamentally messy about our cultural heritage, while at the same time pushing them to develop clearer and more sophisticated ways to talk and write about it. In fostering these communication skills, I aim to prepare students to be actively engaged citizens whose study of the past informs the way they shape our future.