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Meeting the Challenges of Foreign Language & Literature Teaching: A Kinetic, Cognitive, Phenomenological and Best-of-All Fun Approach

David R Pendery, Dr.

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Meeting the Challenges of Foreign Language & Literature

Teaching: A Kinetic, Cognitive, Phenomenological and Best-of-All Fun Approach

David Pendery (潘大為), Ph.D.
National Taipei College of Business
93551502@nccu.edu.tw

Abstract

This paper will outline teaching methods and classroom methods I have used in Taiwan to teach literature at National Chengchi University and National Taipei College of Business in Taipei recently. I have used these pedagogies to teach American literature, poetry and drama, but they could easily be modified to fit any national literature and other genres. I hope to introduce ideas and approaches to teaching literature in, as my title indicates, kinetic, cognitive, phenomenological and most-of-all fun ways. In this way literature teaching and classrooms can be opened up to new activities and experiences, culminating in richly applicable and pragmatic learning experiences for college students. My goal is to involve students (with the teacher’s assistance and cooperation) in active ways, enabling them to autonomously think, interpret and analyze literature, and to vigorously examine structural, compositional, aesthetic and phenomenal
themes and properties in texts. In these ways, teachers instigate students onto creative, animated academic paths that will test their abilities and elevate their intellectual output in fresh, inventive ways.

Keywords: Literature teaching, American and British Literature, world literature, ethnic literature, woman’s literature, cognitive learning, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, verbal-linguistic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence
Introduction

This paper will outline teaching methods and classroom design I have used in Taiwan to teach literature in recent years. I have generally used these pedagogies to teach American literature, poetry and drama, but they could easily be altered to fit virtually any national literature or genres. My design is currently in the process of being fully developed, and so what I present here is in essence a sketch with ideas that have been experimented with. Other academics may feel free to borrow from, revise and develop these ideas as they design courses appropriate to their students’ levels and needs. I hope to introduce ideas and approaches to teaching literature in, as my title indicates, kinetic, cognitive, phenomenological and most-of-all fun ways. Literature (in Taiwan, and for that matter in many other locales) is too often taught in stilted, sleepy, traditional ways that are dull for students, dampening their interest in what should be the thrill of steeping themselves in great literatures, and harking to hidebound eras that suppressed varied voices and any number of “others” in literature. In those bad old days, literature classes as often as not appealed primarily to the selfish interests of academics who wanted little more than to loftily lecture to dazed students and parade their vaunted specialized theoretical knowledge in the classroom. My aim is to involve students (with the teacher’s contribution and cooperation) in active ways, enabling them to independently think, interpret and analyze, and to vigorously examine structural, compositional, aesthetic and phenomenal themes and properties in texts. In these ways, teachers launch
students onto creative, animated academic paths that will test their abilities and elevate their intellectual output in fresh, inventive ways.

Readers looking for dense and inapplicable theoretical analysis in this essay will be disappointed. My analysis aims at pragmatic, pertinent and I hope useful methods and ideas to help energize literature courses that have for too long been divorced from actual experience and imaginative scholarly application. Mine will not be a doctrinaire approach, though I will refer to certain methodologies and theories to support my ideas—starting with the following:

**Research Methodology**

My analytical approach emerges out of the ideas of John Dewey (1859-1952) and Arthur F. Bentley (1870-1957) who, in their *Knowing and the Known* (1949), proposed an idea I have found to be a useful model for interpretation and analysis. This idea was called by Dewey and Bentley “transaction.” Transactional analysis for Dewey and Bentley allows for “the seeing together, when research requires it, of what before had been seen in separations and held severally apart” (112). The two philosophers wrote that the transactional “systematically proceeds upon the ground that knowing is co-operative and as such is integral with communication” (vi). In this paper the reader will see why I am attracted to transaction, as I too hope to develop a wholly “co-operative” environment in the classroom that is “integral with the communication” of students and teachers. Dewey and Bentley’s postulational, associational, developmental, essentially
creative, very event-centered (phenomenological) philosophy frees our absorption
with some sort of ironclad core disposition and constitution in life and letters—an
approach no doubt the enemy not only of free thought and independent
speculation, but of the catholic hyper/inter-textuality and unfettered significance
of literature itself. My analysis will follow these holistic, “transactive” threads of
communication, meaning and import, which lace together literature, authors,
readers, creativity, genre considerations, theoretical models, and cultural
importance. All of this is done in classrooms teeming with activity and exercises,
enjoining students to participate in learning processes while ensconced in the
heart of literature. Students and teachers become one in this environment, and this
transactivity will be seen in my analysis and conclusions. While this approach is
broad, it opens up the analysis into the essence of literary study, giving a view
onto first, the reading of literature itself, and the intellectual input and focus of
students during this process, and then the understanding of literature in life, and
how it provides windows into experience and behavior that are the best teachers
for students of all ages. Alongside this intellectual approach, I will of course be
examining my own classroom methods in detail, and considering how they impact
student lives—a world in which “knowing is co-operative” as I have noted. I have
not “measured” this impact in a truly methodical or quantitative way, but I
maintain that such phenomenological, observational (subjective, some will say)
methods are acceptable, particularly in a study such as this one.
Literature Review

The first and foremost work we shall consider is, as noted, Knowing and the Known by the John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley. This major philosophical work goes beyond philosophy itself, and offers a somewhat pragmatic view onto experience and behavior that gives a variety of applicable behaviors that can be employed in life itself. The work examines areas of epistemology, communication, knowledge and logic, and ultimately endorses a “common sense” approach in life and thinking that enhances cooperation and communication. The book examines conceptions of “self-action,” and interaction, and moves from there to, as noted, the idea of transaction, without ascription to ultimate, final, or independent entities, essences, or realities. This is the somewhat wide-open view I have referred to already, and which I will employ going forward.

A second important work that will be referred to often in this study is Literature, a method book and text by Alan Duff and Alan Maley. Readers will see in the following analysis how this useful text allows students to engage in communicative/interpretive tasks and activities. At their best the undertakings in this book offer up energetic and exciting pursuits, which engage students in valuable intellectual and collaborative ways. I will go into this book in detail in the following.

Stuart Moulthrop’s “You Say You Want a Revolution? Hypertext and the Laws of Media” is a valuable study of hyper/intertextuality and digital experience, that opens readers’ eyes to the new digital landscapes that are literally
transforming our lives (creating a “reality implosion” and “total uprooting” as Moulthrop says). It’s interesting to ponder how Moulthrop’s rhizomatic hypertextual world and “dynamic read-write” systems look similar in conception to Dewey’s and Bentley’s idea of associative transaction. When Moulthrop writes of “recursive and multiple parallel mapping on to different co-ordinate systems” (2508), it sounds not unlike Dewey’s and Bentley’s conception that transaction “is inquiry which ranges under primary observation across all subjectmatters [sic] that present themselves, and proceeds with freedom toward the re-determination and re-naming of the objects comprised in the system” (122).

Another work I will refer to is Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. This book also examines digital media, and shows how stories and narrative define how we work, play, and interpret our lives. Murray discusses the distinctive properties and gratifications of digital milieus and connects them with the conventional satisfactions of narrative. She analyzes the consummation of “participatory” stories (narrative as a reflection of existence), and how these are taken into the digital world and hyperspace, which in turn offer a reverse world of engagement, agency, and renovation. Again we see a similarity to the works looked at above, with ideas of participation (transactivity) and hypertextuality.

A final work is Eward R. Tufte’s *Visual Explanations*, which not unlike Murray’s book just examined, considers how given “digital” (that is, pictorial/graphic) art can become as narrative, and that these arrangements
“enhance the richness, complexity, resolution, dimensionality, and clarity of the content” of literature and/or literary works (Visual Explanations 9-10). I will look again at Tufte in more detail below.

**Results and Discussion**

And now let me specifically turn to my descriptions of my methods and ideas. In spite of what might seem like bold ideas as I have suggested (and they may become yet more bold in my continued discussion), in fact a good portion of the literature classes I teach is based on fairly standard techniques. Here I first refer to the essential processes of involving students in comparative readings, and the introduction and analysis of the *historical* and *cultural* parameters of literary texts and authors (the important literary trends and historical background of literature, and the social influences on its composition). Assigned readings, skillful lectures, and in-class discussion of these readings and topics (which I, in contrast to most teachers, always actively participate in) are customary classroom pedagogies. We should note here, however, the importance of expanding the range of the readings assigned to students in modern literature courses. Here I refer specifically to the study of American literature (seasoned with a few other points of view), but as noted this idea could be applied to any national literature.
In my American literature classes, I have tried to extend the purview of literatures to include the following:¹

1. Early American/colonial literature, into the 18th century
2. Black American literature, including slave literature and the Harlem Renaissance
3. Literature of the First American Renaissance, 1820-1860
4. Women’s literature
5. Native American literature (an important area virtually unexamined in Taiwan)
7. The American “Southern Renaissance” of the 1920s and 1930s
8. Naturalism/Realism
9. Contemporary literature (more on this, below)
10. Gay and transgender literature
11. Teen and/or children’s literature.²

¹ Note that I am not here including earlier influences on American literature, prior to the 17th century, but teachers could explore these eras and genres.

² Note that within these broader areas, specific genres emerge and can be addressed, including adventure, comic, crime, epistolary, erotic, horror, magical realism, mystery, romance, science fiction, etc.
This is an expansive list, and I doubt that a teacher could include all of these literatures in a semester course, but with careful selection good choices can be made. This range of material, and the percolation of ideas and influence across literatures and eras, to be sure creates a Dewey-esque “transactive” approach to reading, understanding and interpretation. Note for example how students in my literature courses have created exciting cross-cultural thematic analyses by comparing and contrasting native Taiwanese literature to native American literature. I am sure that additional approaches could include looks at other ethnic groups or nationalities in Taiwan. To extend my look here at actual texts, I want to introduce two genres that are very different in theme, content and format, but which have become vitally important to world literature today. I refer here to modern graphic novels and computer hypertexts, which present narrative art in excitingly synergistic permutations and configurations. That these genres are completely overlooked in Taiwanese academia, lodged as it often is in tired conceptual approaches and teaching pedagogies of ages past is a shame, for as Janet H. Murray has written, “We need every available form of [narrative] expression and all the new ones we can muster to help us understand who we are and what we are doing here” (274).

The graphic novel, which has a history extending to the 19th century or even before, has revolutionized novelization and communicative praxis in recent decades, and has emerged as a highly sophisticated genre at the vanguard of literature, addressing issues in visual/narrative ways that cross lines
interconnecting literature, drama, and fine arts. Graphic novels have influenced a variety of other formats and genres, including straightforward linear narrative, film and drama, and these can also be introduced into the class alongside the study of graphic novels proper, creating a rich learning experience for students. The study of graphic novels also touches on important cultural issues, and changing literary tastes as visual narrative has arisen as a major new genre. These works are so dramatic in their presentation that classroom performances and interactive interpretations of the narratives could be considered. Preferred graphic novels include masterworks such as *Watchmen*, *Maus I* and *II*, *V for Vendetta*, *Pride of Baghdad*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. Another exciting method is to combine the reading of graphic novels with the original novels they are based on, such as Paul Auster’s novella *City of Glass* and *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*, and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and the graphic novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (there are only a few examples of such exact combinations, although various graphic novels could be read alongside accompanying narratives; for example, the great *The Dark Knight* could be compared to various written and/or filmed Batman accounts).

Hypertexts have reached new heights in recent years as computer and WWW technologies have improved. Hypertext works are defined as “dynamic read/write systems” comprised of automated cross-references and links that “deliver information dynamically in response to user demands” (Moulthrop 2505,
These narratives are not constrained to confining linear presentations, and are structured into “multiform plot[s] open to the collaborative participation” of readers/interactors (Murray 185). Hypertexts bond themselves to a vast multiverse of other works and data—a veritable dialogism/heteroglossia—and as well they can link with sound and video, yielding a new creative exuberance and reader/author/text interaction that is unprecedented. Admittedly, sometimes these works can be a bit overwhelming, and working with them in Taiwanese classes requires effort to tailor the material to student needs and levels. Nevertheless, that students are now so intuitively involved with these technologies can make working with them easier and more fun. These works have improved steadily since Stuart Moulthrop’s groundbreaking hypertext novel, Victory Garden, appeared in 1992, and currently there is a variety of work available in DVD/CD formats and on the WWW (see especially the Electronic Literature Organization at http://www.eliterature.org).³ Moulthrop has written that hypertext fictions represent “a total uprooting of the old information order” (2506) and, moving beyond the serial and the linear, these works constitute recursive/parallel/re-entry narrative strategies and styles that will “change your head” (Moulthrop 2524).

³ Note that many of the works on this website are non-fiction journalism, documentary, exposé, and the like. However, these works can be valuable in literature courses, with teachers and students examining the links across these two genres/epistemologies (fiction and non-fiction). Literary and fictional methods and aesthetics at work in non-fiction works can be a fascinating area of study that opens new doors in the study of literature, proper, and has become an extremely important area in modern academia and literature studies.
As Moulthrop indicated above, graphic novels and hypertexts can take the reading experience beyond procumbent access to circumscribed, linear “texts” and enter a world of rich “information design.” Edward Tufte writes, as noted above, that pictorial/graphic novelization and narratives “enhance the richness, complexity, resolution, dimensionality, and clarity of the content” of literature (Visual Explanations 9-10). The veritable picturing of narrative enters students into a new textual/visual world, with the final aim “excellence in thinking” (Tufte Visual Explanations 9). Tufte goes so far as to call the combined descriptive/explanatory power of images and text “confections,” and a “multiplicity of image-events” that “combine the real and the imagined” and lead into immersion in the “Ocean of the Streams of Story” (Tufte Visual Explanations 121). These works, in these ways, are truly something students can “get their teeth into.”

As students examine these and other literatures (for no doubt the core of any literature course will remain study of classic authors and works), a standard technique I employ is having students give 20-minute presentations in which they analyze, critique and comment on the works they are reading. These presentations are followed by discussion in class (and I remind teachers to energetically participate in these discussions, providing guidance, input and fresh perspectives for students). In this respect, I would also suggest that teachers encourage students to put a little something “more” into their presentations, and inject them with new vigor and commitment. I try to encourage students to insert panache into their
lectures, dramatizing and bringing to life the themes, plots, environments and characters of their readings. As well, students must be encouraged to bring the highest intellectual level possible to these talks, with strong theoretical support throughout.

Another method I employ in my classes that I think is used by some teachers is the requirement that students (working in conjunction with the teacher) correct and grade each other’s essays, usually in a sequence of correction, review and revision. This cooperative method strengthens student writing skills, bolsters critical abilities, enhances responsible behavior, and connects students to one another in thoughtful, helpful, reflective ways.

The above are essentially standard approaches in literature classes, strengthened I think by a healthy dose of additional emotive energy that teachers should bring to their work. While I am teaching the materials in the ways outlined above, I introduce my principal innovations into the classroom. A key procedure I have adopted is classroom readings of literature and poetry. Students

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4 Note also that I often include a brief study of literary theory in my class, focusing on major movements and theorists, including liberal humanism/new criticism, structuralism, deconstruction/postmodernism, ecocriticism, etc. Probably this would be the norm with most English majors, though I am aware that some departments in Taiwan do not present this material. If a teacher has in his or her class a number of non-English majors, or English minors, he or she might not go into great detail here (though surprisingly I have found that even these students often find this material interesting). Different teacher’s approaches will depend on their students and their aims.
select passages from works they are reading, or materials they select on their own, and read them out loud in class. At their best, these exhibitions can veritably become performance art, and again and again I have seen the entire classroom rapt with attention and interest as a student or students execute these readings in creative ways (and I should be honest and say that I have myself read my own published fiction and poetry in class; I have considered this a good example of a native English speaker for students to observe). Such displays, stemming from the truly oral tradition of narrative, exercise student interpretive skills in appealing, vibrant ways, and connect them in hands-on ways with literary texts. Oral engagement this way is a unique and powerful way to study and absorb literature, and students have fun doing it. I usually do about three readings per semester, and always see improvement each time.

Now I will describe the kinetic, communicative ways I engage students with the literature they are studying. Here I acknowledge that I base my approach on the activities included in the text Literature, by Alan Duff and Alan Maley (Oxford UP, 2007). I have found this book, comprised of communicative/interpretive activities that engage students in collaborative tasks, very useful and inventive. At their best the undertakings in this book, modified by teachers to fit their students levels and needs, offer up fresh energy and exciting mindful activity, with lots of discussion, into any literature class. I will not go into extensive detail into exactly how I conduct these activities—that would be too much detail for this paper—and instead I will in the following give a quick
overview of the aims and some of the content of these interpretive activities, and then suggest ways I think they are helpful, and indicate the intellectual springs in students’ minds they tap. With this in mind, simply note that these tangible communicative activities, revolving around course readings, are structured around the following:

1. Oral interpretation and ensemble work allowing collaborative interpretation and expressive re-tellings, as well as associated listening activities and the study of the unique “sound” of varied texts

2. Areas in which students focus on actual speaking and language skills and ESL development, such as diction and vocabulary, the “physical substance of words” and focus on precise use of language; classification of language features; practice of certain grammatical structures; examination of various idiomatic and cultural uses of language; study of jargon, clichés, and everyday use of language; identification of discourse register; establishment of emphasis and intonation

3. Determination of thematic relevance and contexts across poetry, literature and drama, and study of the ways meaning and signification are structured and conveyed in texts

4. Development of writing/composition skills and summarizing skills

5. Study of linguistic clues to identify text types
6. Discrimination of differences between poetry, prose, non-literary texts, street literature, found poetry, formal and informal writing, etc.

7. Analysis of layout and design and how they reveal clues to textual meaning.

8. Connections between student experience and literature, and attention to social contexts and purposes.

9. Stimulation of visualization skills.

10. Translation activities and approaches.

11. Analysis and composition of character sketches, as well as film adaptations of literature.

We can see in the above just how much these activities have to offer students in phenomenal, epistemological and even ontological ways—and with the creative input of teachers, these practices can be developed into valuable (and fun!) teaching methodologies and practice routines. As noted, teachers will have to modify many of Duff and Maley’s activities and approaches—such as by choosing writing samples that are directly connected to readings in the classroom, rather than the samples in the book (most of which come from British literature)—but after making these efforts I think that teachers will be able to offer students stimulating endeavors that engage them deeply and offer valuable exegetical opportunities.
I think that a key point here is the energetically *kinetic* practices that are being described here. We may link this idea to Howard Gardner’s pioneering work studying “multiple intelligences.” We could in fact link these classroom activities not only to Gardner’s bodily-kinesthetic class of intelligence, but also to verbal-linguistic and interpersonal intelligence. In terms of *kinesthetic learning* (also called tactile learning), students with this facility learn best by engaging in activities, carrying out instructions and actions, and achieving goals. Kinesthetic/tactile learners enjoy acting and performing, which are commonly employed in the activities we have examined. The verbal-linguistic area of intelligence has to do with spoken and written words, and thus the connection to what I have described is obvious. Students with refined linguistic intelligence display a facility with words and language and they are good at reading, writing, telling stories, taking notes, listening, discussing and debating. All of the densely communicative activities in Duff and Maley’s book exercise these skills and propensities. As well, most of the activities I am discussing require interpersonal intelligence, which revolves around communication and cooperation with others. This probably seems obvious in terms of the interactive, discussion-oriented ventures we have referred to. In sum, and above and beyond these theoretical considerations, teachers will simply find that students enjoy the dynamic activity of these classroom activities, and they will be able to lift a class beyond rote lecture or other predictable classroom functions. This no doubt is my principal hope in managing classes in the ways I am describing.
A final scheme that I introduce to my classes has proven to be most enjoyable and successful. I allow students to design and create their own literary conference, modeled on professional literary conferences. Students design the conference for the final day of class, and it becomes the exciting culmination to all we have studied during the semester. Two to four papers are chosen by the teacher (usually final papers written by students, although other work written during the semester could be chosen), and these papers are presented by students at the conference in standard academic formats (it is usually impossible to select more than about 2-4 papers, because of time constraints; however, teachers may want to consider ways around this limit, in order to give more students a chance to speak). The conference is attended by all students in the class, as well as other students and invited guests (I have even had other professors present papers in my conferences!). A highlight can also be the selection of an academic from the school to present a keynote address (as well, teachers could select a student to do this, or do it themselves). For most students this will surely be their first conference presentation, and it can be an important way to gain valuable experience in this area, which will no doubt become a key part of their academic and professional development. Students design the conference name and theme, artwork and other materials that are displayed, conference location and other practical concerns, and a post-conference session with food, drinks and discussion. Simply put, I have found this experience to be thoroughly enjoyable,
and students have energetically participated and found it to be a truly beneficial experience.
Conclusion

This concludes my description of my teaching experience and the design of my literature courses. I have long felt that fresh, updated ideas and methods are needed in literature courses in Taiwan, which are too often predictable and largely dull affairs that do not examine avant-garde genres of literature, innovative ideas and changing perceptions of literary praxis. Nor do they sufficiently inspire students to embark in new directions of learning, insight and knowledge. I hope that readers have found this paper valuable, and that they can adapt and develop these ideas into their own dynamic literature courses in the future. Thank you.
Sources Cited


