

From Whitehall Palace to Burger King: Teaching the Humanities

by Kirsten Dierking

As a teenager, I spent an inordinate amount of time roaming the literary halls of Charles the II's Whitehall Palace, gracing the dais at Hampton Court with Anne Boleyn, following Wellington at Waterloo, and agonizing with Elizabeth Tudor about what to do with that inconvenient cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots. You can imagine how thrilled I was as a college freshman at the prospect of enrolling in a full year of courses titled Introduction to the History of England. I pictured myself intensely discussing Lady Jane Grey's pretensions to the throne, and heatedly debating the Glorious Revolution. The reality proved disappointing; twice a week, our professor entered the classroom, opened a book atop the lectern, and read to us in a gentle monotone about Corn Laws, enclosures, Luddites, and the Battle of Trafalgar. When seventy-five minutes had passed, he softly closed the book and drifted out of the classroom.

Nelson! Trafalgar! How was it possible to make one of the greatest battles of all time sound as commonplace as the common cold? And yet, this type of learning experience reoccurred all too frequently throughout my undergraduate career. Even the most important events and ideas in human history became as dull as a November day when students were simply fed facts without being asked to think creatively or critically about the material, and without being taught why the information was relevant in the first place. As I sat in my student desk, watching the

Kirsten Dierking, an adjunct instructor at Anoka-Ramsey Community College in Coon Rapids, Minnesota, is the author of two books of poetry, *Northern Oracle* and *One Red Eye*, and the recipient of a McKnight Fellowship, a Minnesota State Arts Board Grant, a Loft Literary Center Career Initiative Grant, and a Jerome Foundation Grant, all for poetry. In 2009, she received the Building Bridges Award in Education from the Islamic Resource Group of Minnesota.

hands of the clock crawl tediously through my beloved Stuart era, I resolved that should I ever have the chance to talk to a group about English history, I would do it in such an intriguing fashion, my audience would find history fun.

Oh, be careful what you wish for! I didn't end up teaching English history, but for the last five years I've been teaching introductory western humanities courses at a community college in Minnesota. Over a sequence of courses that begins with the Renaissance and ends in the contemporary world, we study the history of human creative thought and discuss innovations and changes in such

Yes, I was a new teacher. I had no idea how much work went into designing a fun and fascinating course.

wide-ranging fields as literature, painting, philosophy, political thought, and music. Despite the change in subject area, the ideas I brought to the classroom on my first day of work followed quite closely that early teaching philosophy I developed as a bored undergraduate: make the facts interesting and memorable; make the subject relevant to students; and ask students to think creatively and critically. And, of course, do it in the most enjoyable manner possible. Yes, I was a new teacher. I had no idea how much work went into designing a fun and fascinating course.

Using the example provided by many excellent past instructors, and through numerous late-night research sessions, I began to develop techniques and exercises that would help me achieve my goals in the classroom. First, I had long since come to understand that my old history professor was absolutely correct that an understanding of the facts and terminology of a subject are vital. It is impossible to discuss a rococo painting in depth without understanding what constitutes rococo style. But I didn't want to just dish out definitions, I wanted to teach terms and topics in a way that would help students retain the material. I knew from my own student experience that it was entirely possible to study terms and facts the night before a test and forget them as soon as the exam was over. As a teacher, I wanted to help students retain the precepts of a subject for a little longer than the time it takes to fill in a Scantron card.

At the beginning of each class, I write key terms, names, titles, and ideas on the whiteboard. The students understand these are things they must know. I explain each concept or term as clearly as possible, and illustrate abstract concepts with real-life examples when appropriate. Much of my thinking on this is influenced by my previous experience as a corporate trainer. When training new employees, the trainer's work isn't complete until every employee has mastered the

required skills. This requires adjusting teaching methods to different learning styles and making sure trainees have understood the new skill or concept. This approach to teaching works in my community college classrooms as well, where students of disparate ages come from diverse educational backgrounds. Like a company trainee, it is vital for each student to have a strong knowledge base in a subject area in order to progress to more complex issues.

In addition to writing on the whiteboard, I help students assimilate and retain material by weaving the great dramatic stories of humankind into lectures. When talking about rococo art, we discuss Marie Antoinette, the looming French

Proceeding under the assumption that once you argue a viewpoint, you're unlikely to forget it, I often ask students to debate issues we've been studying.

Revolution, and the guillotine. Instead of having to merely memorize rococo art as a movement that emphasized the pleasurable pursuits of the upper classes, they are able to picture it as a reflection of an era which ended with a lot of people losing their heads—a powerful image that remains with students long term and demonstrates the connection between art and society.

Similarly, sharing episodes from an artist's or thinker's personal life stimulates student interest in his or her creative work. They are more attentive to Beethoven's music once they learn of his deafness. They are vastly more interested in Caravaggio's painting after learning about his volatile and violent private life. They remember that Newton had just one close friend his entire lifetime, and this helps them recall that he spent many of those friendless years writing the *Principia* and discovering the principles of celestial mechanics.

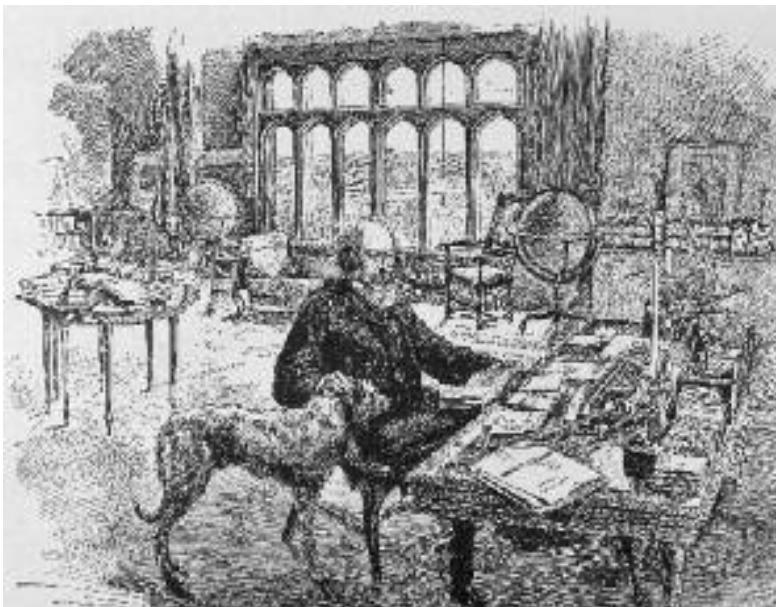
Participating in group activities helps students remember course material. Proceeding under the assumption that once you argue a viewpoint, you're unlikely to forget it, I often ask students to debate issues we've been studying. In a course that covers the Enlightenment era, half the class comes to a "Coffeehouse Debate" with a worksheet they've prepared as a supporter of John Locke's political and social philosophies. The rest of the class comes prepared to support Thomas Hobbes. After organizing students into small debate groups, I present them with various scenarios, and each side must respectfully argue its views as a supporter of its assigned philosopher. The students enjoy participating in these debates, and when it comes to test time, they rarely forget either the view they advocated, or the opposing viewpoint.

Another helpful activity begins, I confess, with my evisceration of old art books from the used book store. On "art gallery" days, I tape up twenty or so repro-

ductions of a particular artist's work on our classroom wall. Students then have the opportunity to walk around the "gallery" and closely examine each work. (I assuage my conscience by telling myself more people are viewing the images now than if I had left them closed up in a book!) While I also use the computer to show art, the "gallery" provides a different experience; students are out of their desks and interacting with others in the class as they compare opinions. Frequently, I place them into groups and ask each group to use their art expertise to recommend one of the paintings for purchase by the college. Passionate discussions erupt as to which work is the best example of a particular style of painting, or which one is a better reflection of the artist's life. And come test time, these gallery sessions make it easier for the class to remember the artists and their work.

A student once told me he felt confident about an upcoming exam because he "pretty much remembered" everything we had covered. He said he "just knew" the material, in the same way he knew how a baseball game was played, and that is exactly what I am aiming for as a teacher. I want students to incorporate what they learn into the body of knowledge they carry with them permanently.

Once the students have a solid grounding in facts, I move towards my second goal, which is to help them realize that what they're learning isn't simply a series of curiosities, relevant only to dead, dusty people. Conversely, I try to impart that what we're learning has shaped their world, and the way they live their lives. On the first day of class, in order to demonstrate how art helps form culture, I talk about the bridge crew of the original Star Trek series. When the show aired on TV in the 1960s, few, if any, American workplaces reflected the diversity of Star Trek's group of bridge officers. Today, our workplaces are much closer to that vision presented on the small screen forty years ago. Star Trek did not create diversity in



America by itself, of course, but the visual images it presented were powerful, as viewers like myself grew up thinking diversity was a normal part of a workplace. Each semester commences, then, with an example of how creative thought may influence such basic things as who you work with, or who sits next to you in a classroom. Art and creativity help mold culture, and students begin to understand why it is an important field of study.

Not long after the recent presidential election, our Renaissance class held a Pico vs. Machiavelli debate. Half the students were assigned to support a 16th century Florentine leader who espoused Pico della Mirandola's optimistic view on

*Art and creativity help mold culture, and
students begin to understand why it is
an important field of study.*

the capabilities of the human race, while the other half of the class argued on behalf of a leader who upheld Machiavelli's rather less complimentary view of humankind. It wasn't long before I heard shouts of laughter as the students found themselves coming very close to discussing viewpoints commonly heard in the recent election. The discussions were good-natured, but quite ardent, and afterwards, several students said "That was really fun!" While the students were unlikely to forget Pico and Machiavelli, they were equally unlikely to forget how their views still permeate our contemporary culture. They also enjoyed themselves while learning—for me, a pedagogical home-run.

When preparing a class on Molière's play *The Misanthrope* for the first time, I remember thinking, how am I going to get the students to like, much less relate to, a 17th century comedy about French aristocrats, written in rhyming couplets? The plan I developed begins with ensuring that students come to Molière's work with a receptive mind. I tell them about the playwright's life, his failures, his perseverance, and his great successes. In particular, I describe how Molière insisted on performing the night he was literally dying because he knew the actors in his company would not be paid if the play was cancelled. The students agree this was a noble and courageous act, and are well-disposed toward Molière as a person before we start to consider his art. We then watch a film of the play, and while the students find themselves caught up in the story and the humor, they generally feel this comedy of manners has little in common with their own contemporary American lives.

So we discuss as a group how much people have really changed since 1666. Do we still have cliques? Do we still have people trying to fit in? Do we still have optimists, pessimists, back-stabbers, and cheating girlfriends? In Molière's time, did they have what we so trendily refer to today as "frenemies"? A student once

remarked “it’s a little like watching an episode of Friends”, and yes, some elements of love and dating remain much the same, whether you’re a 17th century aristocrat, or a contemporary New Yorker. And when, in our culminating activity, I ask students to write an essay on whether *The Misanthrope* is still relevant today, they respond resoundingly, yes.

My third goal is to require each student to think critically and creatively. If we agree that the study of creative thinking is important for students, is it not equally important for students to attempt to add to the body of human creativity and critical thought with their own efforts?

Beginning with our first class, I spend considerable time encouraging students to think carefully about “why they think what they think.”

Beginning with our first class, I spend considerable time encouraging students to think carefully about “why they think what they think.” The students are free to form their own opinions about a story or poem or painting, but they must be specific about what it is in the work that supports their view or analysis. When I ask on an “art gallery” day which painting they find most meaningful, they must say, with some depth, why it is meaningful. Frequently, their comments are profound. One student said he was moved by Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* because it was such a good metaphor for the artist’s life; like sunflowers, which are more highly valued for their seeds once the blooms are dead, Van Gogh’s tremendous talent wasn’t valued by the world until after his death. Simply asking students to say or write something original has produced a myriad of similarly insightful comments.

I ask students to do their own artistic work, both written and visual. Since these are not studio art courses or creative writing classes, they are not graded on their artistic ability, or poetic talent, but rather on the concept and ideas behind their original work. Asking students to design an abstract work in response to Hurricane Katrina, or to write “found” poems, not only requires creative thinking, their work on these projects confers a deeper understanding of the concepts of abstraction and found art. Like the poet W.D. Snodgrass, I believe everyone will appreciate poetry a little more for having tried to write a poem, and likewise, appreciate visual art a little more for having tried to portray his or her unique concepts through visual imagery.

Optimally, I try to design exercises that fulfill my teaching goals. When the class is studying drama, for instance, I often ask students to write a synopsis of a contemporary version of a play we are reading. When the Renaissance class rewrites *Macbeth*, the students must understand the plot and

characters of Macbeth inside and out before they can begin their new version. They are then required to relate the story to their own world by placing the tale in a contemporary setting. They enjoy creating their own character and plot twists—so much so, that although I ask for a two-page synopsis, I frequently get four or five very enthusiastic and detailed pages. Their adaptations are often brilliant; last year, one student set Macbeth in a kindergarten classroom. The child “Macbeth” gained control of the class by serving his most popular peer a carton of milk that had gone sour. “Duncan” is carted off to the school nurse, the equivalent of death in the elementary school world.

*For a few points on a test, I sometimes ask students
what idea, or concept, or artwork, or story
they found most interesting.*

I emphasize how important this creative work is, and how necessary this kind of thinking will be in the future. There are few jobs that don’t demand creative solutions to problems, so building a student’s confidence in his or her ability to innovate is invaluable. I am careful to take their creative ideas seriously, and do my best to encourage creative risk-taking.

After five years of trying to reach my teaching goals, is any of this working? I believe wholeheartedly it is, partly because I frequently ask the students if it’s working. For a few points on a test, I sometimes ask students what idea, or concept, or artwork, or story they found most interesting. They will tell me, almost without exception, that something we studied moved them deeply, or changed their minds about something, or helped them see the world in a way they had never previously considered. One of my favorite comments came from an evening student who was a construction worker during the day. He told me that before we studied Frank Lloyd Wright he had never given a thought to the ideas behind the design of the buildings he was putting together. He said the realization that there was a vision behind what he was helping create made what he did for a living meaningful. Feedback like that is what makes my work meaningful.

In my initial job interview for my current position, I blithely told the dean I thought learning should be fun. I still think that, although considering all the sweat that goes into making a class both instructive and fun, I’m no longer so “blithe” about it. I have a great deal more sympathy for my old history professor than I did when I was sitting in a desk facing the lectern—those carefree days when my only obligation for seventy-five minutes was to sit and take notes.

Yet, the cliché that teaching is a rewarding career is also true. When the number one comment I receive on my student evaluations says something along the

lines of “I thought a humanities class would be really boring, but it turned out to be really interesting!” I feel my efforts have been worthwhile. When students frequently comment “I had no idea so many ideas from the 16th (or 17th or 18th) century play such a big role in my life today,” I feel my work has been worthwhile. When, as an adjunct faculty member, I was a finalist for a student-nominated teacher of the year award last year, I felt I was moving in the right direction. And I felt, well, rewarded, when a young, baseball-capped, former student stopped me in the hall to tell me his local Burger King had rococo prints on the walls. He said he told his friends over Whoppers and fries about Fragonard, which reminded him later to talk to his family about the French Revolution. 