

EXPLORING THE UNFAMILIAR: HOW TO RECLAIM THE JOY OF LEARNING

by Christopher Jon Delogu

In the fall of 2000, I left my position as a teacher at the Mirail campus of the University of Toulouse in France and swapped teaching duties for one semester with Professor Jeffrey Wallen of Hampshire College. Hampshire, a small New England liberal arts school, began as an educational experiment in 1970 in the appropriately named Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts. The exchange offered us an opportunity to compare the traditions and trends of North American and French ideas about the humanities, and especially literary studies. We stole the plot line of British author David Lodge's novel *Changing Places* to give ourselves a break from our home institutions and to experience and experiment in the other person's academic environment.

As it turned out, we each enjoyed a certain heady freedom that we did not feel at home. Since committees, tracking, and tradition in French schools largely determine course content and method for both students and teachers, Jeff had the novel freedom of not having to design his own

Christopher Jon Delogu is an associate professor in the Department of Anglophone Studies at the University of Toulouse, Le Mirail, France. He has been a visiting professor at Connecticut College, Dartmouth College, and Hampshire College. Delogu has published numerous essays on the fantastic, the gothic, and the grotesque, and commentaries on the history and theory of literary studies in Publications of the Modern Language Association, Profession, and The Chronicle of Higher Education.

courses and sell them to students. Instead, he taught the texts he was told to teach simply on their merits. I, on the other hand, enjoyed the possibility of inventing and trying out courses simply because I thought they would be interesting experiments, something I'd rarely had the opportunity to do since coming to France in 1992.

I was curious about the recent trend toward compartmentalization and specialization in American education. During the last 25 years, many institutions have moved away from interdisciplinary programs and

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toward more specialized instruction. The idea of compartmentalizing programs into rigid specialties became more widespread after the boom of expanded participation in post-secondary education from 1950 to 1975.

During this time, the ideal of the well-rounded student or all-around achiever went from being the aim of a select group of mostly Northeastern men to the pursuit of men and women from

an increasingly diverse set of socioeconomic backgrounds. But as the economy slowed down and the pool of 18-year-olds shrunk, college admissions committees looked for new ways to attract students. Many administrators and academics responded by developing niche-marketing techniques to package themselves not as generalists but as specialists offering customized training in a particular area of marketable expertise.

This movement steadily gained ground in the 1970s and 1980s as many schools reduced or dropped foreign language requirements and distributive requirements that had obliged students to show some breadth of knowledge beyond the facts and skills they eventually acquired in their areas of major concentration. Today, such institutions still want to consider themselves liberal arts institutions, but when it comes down to what professors and students are in fact doing and not doing, it is clear that some four-year undergraduate schools have become hardly distinguishable from vocational and professional programs that train students in one and only one discipline.

The fragmentation seen within institutions also can be found within individual departments. Take, for example, U.S. English departments. During the past 25 years, many have developed three distinct areas of activity:

1. composition classes, where basic and advanced techniques of expository writing are taught;
2. creative writing workshops, which focus less on the transactional skills of workaday communication, such as correct grammar, clarity of expression, paragraph unity, and efficient punctuation, and more on the poetic function of language, imagination, and taking the language and the reader in new directions; and
3. the theory or cultural studies industry, where techniques of formalist analysis and hermeneutic speculation are used to study a variety of cultural artifacts and practices of Western and non-Western civilizations.

Although an American student might, at some time during four years of college, take a basic composition class, a course on the rhetoric of autobiography, and also participate in a poetry writing workshop, it is unlikely that Professor Theory will ever team-teach with the Poet-in-Residence, or that either will lead a composition class that focuses on

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socializing students into academic discourse, analyzing audience, and considering purpose or other nuts and bolts of college literacy. In other words, the producers, and by association the consumers, in these three niches easily can ignore each other, and this ignorance can lead to suspicion, condescension, and hostility.

For instance, it is easy for the traditional literary historian, aesthete, or up-to-date theorist to look down at workshops as writing therapy. Meanwhile, the poet or novelist in residence may scoff at his or her intellectualizing or politicized colleagues who might spend little time discussing points of craft and the specifics of literary language. After the letter “p,” the poet, the professor of poetry, and the philosopher of poetics seem to go their separate ways.

Unlike the United States, France has no tradition of liberal arts education. There, generations of students, starting as young as 12 or 13, routinely have been ushered through rigid academic tracking called “formations.” Even today, university students in one discipline can’t easily meet anyone studying other subjects either because major requirements leave little room for outside electives or simply because the students in, say, the social sciences do not even attend class on the same campus as science students or students in arts and letters. Of course, the French university system, as with so much of the modern French state, was not shaped with democratic ideals in mind, but is instead largely the product of the

authoritarian and military mindset of Napoleon.

“Divide and conquer” is the dominant organizational principle behind the system’s 200-year-old history. In France, only a small, homogenous group of administrative guardians is supposed to know what the left hand and the right hand are doing, and often things are murky even at the highest levels of French government.

Although the spirit of the times may not be moving in its favor, I still believe firmly in the intrinsic value of a liberal arts education, its emphasis on developing a broad knowledge base, and the instrumental value such an education plays in the healthy functioning of an openly democratic society. It is therefore distressing to see North American education becoming increasingly Napoleonic on several fronts, especially in this purist trend to abandon hybrid vigor in favor of disciplinary rigor and narrow expertise.

For the past nine years, I have taught in English departments within the French university system. From my insider-outsider perch, I have witnessed the strengths and weaknesses of its Napoleonic educational model. So, when I assumed my post at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, I decided to offer something so conservative and old-fashioned that I imagined today’s American students might think it radical and certainly unusual—a basic reading course in the early European novel.



In a second more deliberately subversive course—an introduction to poetry writing, reading, and criticism for first-year students—I set out to buck the North American trend toward Napoleonic fragmentation and specialization. I hoped to push the students to entertain possibilities for themselves and our classroom that they perhaps had not experienced or ever contemplated. I hoped to get away with these conservative and subversive activities because I was just a one-time visitor from an antique land. Any trouble I might cause could all be smoothed over by Christmas if need be.

It is this second course that I would like to describe in more detail because it turned out to be one of the most exhilarating learning experiences I have ever had.

The course, “Reading Poetry Critically and Creatively,” was designed to question and bridge the communication gap that can open up between composition, creative writing, and theory classes by offering students a hybrid experience. I wanted to encourage

them to become better writers through critical reading and better readers through creative writing. I planned to give students a balanced diet of first-rate poems, important essays about poetry, and ideas for using existing poems to spin off their own original compositions.

The class met Monday and Wednesday mornings for 90 minutes. I devoted the Monday sessions mostly to reading individual poems and focused on more traditional oral reading and group discussion. Often, I started the class by asking students to recite poems or songs that they knew by heart. Two or three students usually volunteered every week. I even did a couple myself. I’ve never seen students so respectful and in awe of what their classmates were doing as when I saw them in rapt attention listening to a Springsteen song spoken aloud from memory, or poems by Milne, Frost, Yeats, and others recited that were obviously intimately a part of someone’s poetry base. After these individual acts of memory and love, we read a poem or two together as a class.

I began with fixed forms and older poems—you never go wrong starting off with a Shakespeare sonnet—and gradually we worked through odes, ballads, sestinas, and villanelles before passing on to different examples of blank and free verse. After five weeks devoted to various modes and forms, we spent several weeks looking at poems composed in some relationship to another poem. Sir Walter Raleigh’s “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd,” which he wrote in response to Christopher

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Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," is a classic example. We looked at a variety of spin-offs such as Wendy Cope's "Lonely Hearts," which makes use of the discourse of personal ads, and poems by George Starbuck and Howard Moss that angle off of poems by Hopkins and Shakespeare respectively.

Our aims in the Monday sessions were fairly basic: understand what each poem was saying and explain how it worked, if it worked, and what made it particularly memorable or striking or flawed and dull. This part of the course might have been a stretch for the student who wanted a workshop on student poems or to simply discuss a favorite poem. But it helped the students build up what Kenneth Koch calls an expanded "poetry base" and develop a greater awareness of the broad range of poetry's themes, forms, and historical contexts.

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In the second half of the semester, I invited students to orient more of

the content and direction of the Monday sessions by letting them suggest poems they wanted to study. Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" and John Updike's "Ex-Basketball Player," for example, gave rise to some stimulating impromptu exchanges as more students felt comfortable and confident leading our poetry discussions.

During the Wednesday sessions, the class discussed critical essays that have been important to the Anglo-American history of poetry studies in the 20th century. We discussed 15 essays, one per week. I led the discussion for the first essay, after which I had students pair off and sign up for a week when they would summarize an essay, assess its approach, strengths, difficulties, and problems, and present their findings to the class. This assignment challenged many and started slowly, partly because many students seemed to have little experience in formal public speaking. I often had to pull the summary and assessment out of the student teams with leading questions.

Sometimes, only a handful of students besides the two-student team seemed committed to reading the weekly essays. But there was marked improvement during the semester. By the end, I think just about all the students realized that the production of poems and the study of poetry were in a push-me-pull-you relationship throughout the 20th century. No class or private reading of a poem takes place naturally devoid of some inherited idea about what reading is, what poetry is, and what the read-

er's focus should be. To this extent, I showed students that poetry composition always has been linked to poetry studies and vice versa.

One week, a rather sensitive student, who clearly was not thrilled about being asked to read Shklovsky, Jakobson, and Wimsatt, organized the most unusual and memorable Wednesday session. I knew this student would have preferred to discuss more poems, including student poems, according to the format of a writing workshop. But, on a particular Wednesday in the second half of the semester, he and his partner were responsible for presenting Dana Gioia's essay on the poetry of Donald Justice, "Tradition and An Individual Talent."¹

Instead of telling us what the essay was about and what they thought of it, the students set out to show us. They demonstrated that Donald Justice's poetry is largely "a collective enterprise," as Gioia puts it, by having us all join in a poetry-making game. The stu-

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dents had their classmates form a circle and asked each of their peers to write down the first line of a prospective poem. Then they asked one person to read his or her line out loud. Other interested students responded to that line by saying what direction they might take if they were to build that one line into a poem. They also shared any associations the line triggered in them that they considered rich in possibilities. After hearing the responses, the line's author gave his or her line to one of the respondents. That student read his or her own opening line and the process began again until all students had read their lines and received an opening line from someone else. The game captivated students.

Thankfully, there still was enough time at the end to hear the two students relate what we had just done to Gioia's essay on Justice. The students illustrated the point that as a "post-modern classicist" (Gioia's term), Justice often has borrowed lines or ideas from other poems or even quotations from newspapers as "generative devices" and worked them into his own "original" compositions, "coaxing out unrealized possibilities," as Gioia says. The two students had given the class a practical illustration of what Gioia and Justice were getting at and perhaps encouraged more of them to read Gioia's essay and Justice's poems. At any rate, I was glad that the two students had accepted the constraint of having to present the essay and happy that I had allowed them to go ahead and do it in a nontraditional way. It was exactly this kind of hybrid, critical-creative

attitude toward poetry that I wanted the students to understand and miraculously it seemed to be happening, at least some of the time.

But we did not just study poems as historical monuments of Western civilization or marvel at them as if they were little shiny pieces of sea glass. In Emersonian fashion, our poetry readings were designed to open students' eyes about their own possibilities as writers of poetry, for this was also a poetry writing class. The students completed four graded assignments during the semester:

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1. a 1,000-word commentary of a poem of their own choosing;
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3. an oral presentation of one of the Wednesday essays; and
4. a personal portfolio of six poems written during the semester.

In recent years, e-mail and class websites have provided rich possibilities for overcoming the time and space constraints of traditional classroom teaching. In our class, these

new technologies allowed me to add the one component I had decided to keep out of the physical classroom—a writing workshop. On the class website, each student received a “room” with his or her name on the “door.” They could post poems in their rooms and visit the rooms of other students and comment on their classmates’ poems.

I believed it was my responsibility to regularly visit the rooms where postings were happening and offer the range of feedback and encouragement that is customary in a typical writing workshop, as well as offer various Ken Koch-inspired poetry ideas to spur more writing. Of course, not everyone took part in the Web workshop. Some were slow to start writing their own poems; for others, a workshop in cyberspace may have been contrary to their more pastoral idea of the life of poetry.

It was gratifying to see that some students who were quiet in the classroom became enthusiastic contributors to the site. Others wrote me e-mail which, as many professors know, has become the expanded venue for exchanges that used to be limited to office hours. I also posted my own humble efforts just to show my students that mere mortals, even professors, could write poems. There was also a general discussion room that served as a place to continue lines of inquiry and debate that came up in class.

When teaching, I often praised a student poem I’d read online or referred to someone’s posted comment on poetry and personal identity

or some other topic as a way to lure more students to the website workshop. Sometimes, with the student's permission, I would copy and paste a personal e-mail communication into the general chat room for others to read and ponder. By the end of the semester, about three-quarters of the students had visited the poetry site. But some never did, and I only discovered their poems at the end of the semester, sometimes chiding them gently in a farewell e-mail for not having shared their work earlier.

Certainly, I was not pleasing all the students all the time. In fact, I was annoying almost all of them at various times with my prodding and suggestions. But on the whole I think the course worked well for several reasons.

There were enough different dimensions to satisfy a variety of learning styles and personal inclinations. The course was plainly an introduction to poetry and poetry studies, and therefore made no grand assumptions about the level

of understanding students had at the outset. Most importantly, the hybrid mix of written assignments and classroom activities forced all the students to at least try their hand at tasks and modes of thinking that they might not have been spontaneously inclined to pursue on their own.

Today, either out of fatigue, intimidation, or for other reasons, many students, parents, teachers, and administrators have fallen into a minimalist mode of going about things that I believe has led to an impoverishment of the educational experience, sometimes to the point where many students have tuned out nearly everything to do with book learning. It seems poetry often is the first to go, lingering only in random scraps of MTV lyrics and ephemeral advertising copy.

Since the days of Saussure and Freud at least, most of us have realized that values arrive and change slowly and conventionally according to laws of custom and habit that transcend individual will. And yet, I believe there is something to be said for teaching students about the special pleasure and knowledge that can be gained from reading and writing poems.

I am not suggesting that a single course or a single professor, no matter how much good will and good fortune he or she might possess, could single-handedly revolutionize the place of poetry or of literary studies in America, or France for that matter. Nevertheless, we should encourage students to accept challenges and study subjects they otherwise might be

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disinclined to pursue, especially subjects that might seem remote and foreign to them. By daring to pursue a truly comparative and interdisciplinary course of study, students and teachers alike can reclaim the joy of learning, of exploring unfamiliar topics, or the familiar ones in unfamiliar combinations and settings, and thus discover new knowledge and talents. They will remember that education is not just about the end result of obtaining a degree. It's about the odd turns, accidents, and the pioneer spirit of the journey one takes to get there. 

ENDNOTE

¹ Gioia, Dana. "Tradition and Individual Talent." *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture*. St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1992.