

# *Adapting to a New Generation of College Students*

*By Richard C. Turner*

In the early 1920s, philosopher and literary critic I.A. Richards—complaining that his students weren't paying attention to the actual language of the Tennyson poems they were studying—developed a pedagogical program that required his students to pay close attention to textual matters before engaging other questions surrounding the study of literature.<sup>1</sup>

This approach, dubbed the New Criticism, dominated literary study from the 1930s through the 1960s. And while few professors in 1999 would describe themselves as “New Critics,” most still begin their conversations about readings in the classroom with a focus on what the text says.<sup>2</sup>

Still, it has become increasingly difficult to conduct conversations about texts in literature classrooms, and, I'm sure, other classrooms as well. Like Richards, many of us — no matter what discipline we teach in — have noticed that

students come to class less and less prepared and less and less willing to engage in the discussions that are crucial to successful learning in humanities classes.<sup>3</sup>

Some students come prepared and willing to talk, some come having read the material but reluctant to talk, some come not having read the assignment, and some do not come at all.

Lately, it seems, in a class of 35 or 40, I usually get four or five students who are prepared and willing to talk in class. But even these students seem to feel some pressure to join their peers in silence, or else, they resent carrying the entire conversational load. The group of those who come and do not talk, and of those who do not come, grows larger.

This lack of commitment is worrisome because it contributes to poor student success. But what brought the matter to a head for me was an increase in class size and the introduction of portfolio assessment.

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Class size was not something I could do anything about. There are very few voices out there crying for English professors to have fewer students. So the challenge of teaching more students rather than less is likely to be with us, and many other disciplines as well, for some time.

The shift to portfolio assessment was more interesting. I made the shift after seeing how effectively portfolio assessment operated in composition classrooms.

Portfolios didn't work nearly as well in my introduction to literature class. In this class, portfolios loomed only vaguely for students in the far distance of semester's end. Facing no immediate negative consequences for nonparticipation in class discussions, not reading the assigned material, or not coming to class at all, students didn't respond very well to the portfolio approach.

The regular pattern of writing and feedback that kept students working in composition classes was missing. Here, in this literature classroom, the primary work was conversation about assigned readings, punctuated occasionally by written assignments.

To address this dilemma, I had to rethink pedagogical approaches I have used in the classroom for over 30 years.

To begin with, I resisted the suggestions that poor student com-

pliance and attendance was caused by defects in student character or debilitating cultural forces such as TV, materialism, the sybaritic delights of extracurricular activities, or, more prevalent on an urban commuter campus, the extraordinary pressures of job and family and the many emergencies that intrude onto a student's ability to succeed in college.

I took the position that students come to the university well-enough prepared to do college work, but without any clear sense of why they should spend the long hours and brutal devotion to disciplined study necessary to succeed in an introductory literature course.

**T**he problem for these students, I decided, was that they didn't yet understand the nature of work in an academic community. So my first task was to make clear the demands of academic work and show my students how to begin to address those tasks.

I accepted the theory that, in these times of increasingly diverse populations on college campuses, colleges needed to spell out clearly what students could expect from them and what they would expect from the students.<sup>4</sup>

Why were students not coming to or not preparing for class? The reasons might result from nothing

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more complex than the fact that no one told them what they were expected to do.

It seemed to me that retention and success in college may have more to do with introducing students to academic citizenship within their courses than with expanded orientations or increased access to information resources.

Using this approach meant taking time within a class to explain things that professors never used to have to explain to students: You must buy the book, you must read it and come to class, you must observe deadlines or make special arrangements when you miss one.

I developed a series of handouts and classroom activities that stressed the roles and responsibilities of members of the academic community, emphasizing what students are expected to do in and can expect from a literature class.

The most prominent piece of this effort is a four-page handout, "Citizenship and Community in L115—Literature for Today: The Seven R's of Academic Discourse in Literary Study." This handout offers a brief discussion of the university as an academic community and suggests that taking seriously membership in this community is as important as citizenship in students' larger local, state, and national communities.

The Seven Rs in this handout — Rights, Responsibilities, Roles, Rewards, Rigor, Routines, Rules — focus on the specific things students need in order to participate fully in the course—and have a chance at succeeding.

These explicit rules make student success a central concern of the course. The rules help convince students that they are integral members of the academic community. An ancillary goal: to increase the student sense of belonging and so improve the likelihood they will do what it takes to persist and succeed in their education.

The impulse to make expectations and assumptions explicit also led me to invest some time and energy into making the inner workings of the discipline of English clear for the students in introductory literature classes.

English pedagogy in the past depended primarily on modeling to convey the values and methods of the discipline. That is, teachers would assign a text — a poem, story, or play — to read for class and then provide some combination of lectures on background or other material relevant to understanding the text, open discussions of the text — "What do you think about this text?" — and make suggestions about the habits and skills of successful critical reading of texts.

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given text was chosen, what students might gain from reading the text, or what connections that text or the subsequent discussion of it had to do with their lives.

These classroom practices grew from the assumptions about literary study shared by members of the discipline. The study of English had a continuity of values and methods that undergirded both research and teaching. Though little of those assumptions surfaced in introductions to literary study, professors assumed that students would “get it” from watching the drift of what happened in literature classrooms.

My experience told me, however, that today’s students needed a more explicit understanding of literary study if they were to invest the time and energy needed to make progress in the understanding and criticism of literary texts.

On the first day of class, I explained to students that the teaching in most universities followed one or the other of two models of teaching developed in 19th-century European universities.

The German model presumed that students learned best from experts who would lecture about what they knew to large groups of students who did not know as much as the expert, but knew enough of the field to at least follow what was said and draw their own conclu-

sions about the merit of the material presented.

The other model, developed at Oxford, presumed that people learned best through intense and informed one-on-one conversations between an expert and a student who had a lot to learn, but who could at least participate in a learned conversation.

Many science classes follow the German model, and many humanities classes follow the Oxford model.

**D**uring the next class, I modeled the Oxford model of one-on-one conversation with a volunteer from the class to show that, in these conversations, the expert sought to draw the novice further and further into a complex consideration of the text. What I hoped also to show was that the expert’s role in a classroom was to get as many people as possible to participate in the complex concerns of interpretation and not to provide a single or defining answer to the questions that literary study raises.

After showing the class how literary study works, I assigned them to groups of three and asked each trio member to choose a role — expert, novice, or observer. (The observer was added to ensure that the expert and the novice kept to their designated roles and that someone could jumpstart the con-

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versation if it got bogged down.)

I distributed a list of suggestions for how students in each of the roles might help each other.

The trio was asked to discuss the meaning of the assigned literary work for 45 minutes or so and be ready at the end of that time to report to the class at large about what they had decided. These reports were then used by the class to arrive collaboratively at a consensus about the meaning and method of a given text.

At the next class meeting, the same three people met to discuss another work. This time each chose a different role from the previous session, again pursuing the meaning of the assigned text and reporting to the larger class

**A**t the following class session, the same three people would meet again to discuss another text, this time adopting the roles they had not yet used. After three class sessions, I assign students to new sets of trios, and they begin the process again.

At first, many students resist the discipline of staying within roles because they feel more comfortable "just talking." But they do get the hang of these structured discussions, and, after two or three trios, become adept at playing the roles.

At this point, the students have

internalized the dynamics of the trio process and, in so doing, possess the habits of literary criticism.

By making the elements of English explicit and accessible through the role-playing, I have engaged students in the active and detailed consideration of literary texts that the discipline seeks for them and that I hope would make I. A. Richards and his heirs smile.

I encourage active participation in the trios by requiring that each student write a brief report at the completion of three trio discussions, presumably after taking a turn at each role, summarizing the trio's discussions.

The trio reports were meant simply as a consequence that would pressure students to take an active part in the trio discussion. If the students have to write a report, then they need to pay close attention to what is said.

I ask students, in addition to reporting on the three sessions, to reflect for a paragraph or two on the trio process itself to encourage an active approach to understanding the dynamics of literary study.

These trios also serve as peer response groups for the critical papers that students write during the semester, as well as for the essays they write toward the end of the semester as introductions to their portfolios.

Another plus: The trio reports

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encourage students to come to class as their peers are depending on them to make up a full discussion. Students soon find out that having a full and sustained discussion over three sessions is the best step toward writing an effective trio report.

Students can improvise with two people if one is absent or join another incomplete trio if two are absent, but these ad hoc discussions never work as well as the series of three discussions with the same people. The result: Students come to class, take an active role in discussing the text, listen to each other's ideas, and pay attention to the continuities from one session to another.

At the end of three discussions, I assign students to different trios so that they will have a wider perspective on how to approach both the trio process and literary study. This also helps them become more comfortable in the classroom by ensuing that they get to meet and work closely with at least eight other students.

By the end of the semester, many students express great satisfaction with the trio sessions because they have something to do at each class they attend. They like the feeling of being a person whose ideas on a text are taken seriously, and they take pride in having mas-

tered a habit of thinking that had them so buffaloed at the beginning of the semester.

My decision to make the assumptions and methods of my discipline explicit and central to the work of the course has solved many of the problems I was facing in my introductory literature courses. Attendance now runs at over 90 percent for most classes—and for the entire semester. More students turn in complete and competitive portfolios, and more students succeed in the course because the assignments are much clearer and more accessible.

I am impressed with the quality of the work and the better understanding of literary study evident in the portfolios, particularly as compared to the work I received under my former approach to classroom teaching.

The four or five bright and eager participants still get the As and A-'s they would have gotten had I conducted the class in my former fashion. What is most encouraging is that I now have five to 10 other A/B students, often shy persons, who would have been reticent in my former teaching model and probably have gotten only Cs or low Bs. These students flourish in a format where everyone talks most of the time and where the writing assignments are fairly accessible.

Students report they have dis-

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covered a lot about themselves and about their connections to learning by engaging in the trio discussions. The student evaluations and the trio reports reveal a widespread enthusiasm about having an opportunity and a responsibility to voice opinions regularly, in a forum where opinions are taken seriously.

The students are impressed by the amount and the quality of the work they have done during the semester. They look forward to having similar opportunities in other college classes.

**W**ell, if I have solved my problems so thoroughly, why am I so anxious about what goes on in my introductory literature course?

My concern lies with whether or not this new version of a freshman literature course does justice to the expectations and values of English as a discipline.

I am confident the readings I assign to the trio groups meet discipline standards, but I am nervous about so much time and so much credit being tied up in relatively easy and accessible report and response writing — while only one critical paper, the industry standard for what constitutes performance in English courses, is required.

I have resolved the problems of attendance, participation, and stu-

dent success, but I may not have retained enough content or rigor to satisfy the requirements of the discipline, however tacit those standards might remain within the theory and practice of English professors.

Let me offer a story as a way of explaining this anxiety.

In one introductory literature class, students were discussing *Hamlet* in small groups, and, when I asked for contributions to the consideration of what the play meant, one group confidently announced that *Hamlet* depicted the decline of family values in 16th-century England.

I had asked them what they thought, and I have worked very hard in my teaching to listen carefully to what students say and take their ideas seriously. But how could I face my profession if I allowed to stand the reduction of a complex and challenging play to what was then a cheap political slogan?

So I did what many literature teachers do to slide off an answer they do not like: I asked them to point to places in the text that might warrant such a theory of the play's meaning. They pointed to a dozen such passages and patterns. I then asked them to consider whether or not "family" in *Hamlet* meant the same thing as it did in the phrase "family values."

They allowed as how "family"

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before the arrival of the industrial era and the nuclear family was a social, political, and cultural entity sufficiently different from what was often meant in the 1990s by the phrase “family values” that this interpretation might be more of a restriction than a contribution to an understanding of the meaning of *Hamlet*.<sup>5</sup>

I had managed to find a way between professional integrity and successful pedagogical practice, but just barely.

So far, I have had only positive feedback from colleagues in the field, but I need to continue making my teaching public and sharable with my colleagues in the field, so that I can maintain a balance between student success and disciplinary standards. I have found two ways to accomplish this.

Student portfolios enable my colleagues to judge this approach in a manner parallel to the evaluation of my research in work submitted for publication.<sup>6</sup>

The other attempt I have made to place my work in this class into a public forum is a regular and detailed rendering of how the work in the course—both mine and the students’—meets various goals and objectives.

On each written assignment and in a letter of introduction to the portfolio, I ask the students to

explain how their work meets course, department, and campus-wide goals.

The statements constitute a large, although somewhat ungainly, record of both my and their achievements in the course that is available to colleagues, university, and public officials who have a stake in evaluating my work.

This process of accountability creates a valuable bond between students and instructor in that—at least in this respect—each of our successes contributes to the other’s.

Students are usually flattered that the department and the campus care enough about their work to want a report on it. In an age of increasing calls for accountability, I am glad to have a means of making my work in the classroom public.

Keeping my responses to the problems I outlined in the beginning of this article in line with my discipline’s conversation about its theory and practices has allowed me to balance the requirements of my discipline and the needs of my students.

Addressing this problem in my classroom has readied me to continue as an effective teacher for a new generation of students, with some assurance that what I teach them reflects the high standards my discipline requires. ■



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richards 1929.

<sup>2</sup> Recent discussions of English as a field include rhetoric and composition studies, linguistics, and the broader concerns of cultural studies along with the teaching of literature as their focus, but the study and teaching of literature still dominates the field's thinking about itself. Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature, An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987) is probably the most comprehensive history of literary study in America. Other, more recent studies suggest the wide range of issues facing English as a field. See especially Peter Elbow, *What Is English?* (The Modern Language Association, 1990); James C. Raymond, ed., *English as a Discipline; Or, Is There a Plot to This Play?* (Alabama, 1996); and Joseph Harris, *A Teaching Subject: Composition since 1966* (Prentice Hall, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Text-based humanities courses are especially sensitive to student readiness because the business of the course depends upon not only shared comprehension of assigned texts, but also some sense of important and excited engagement between the text and its reader. Other disciplines, while not focusing primarily on reader-text interactions, expect that their students are ready and willing to bring such passionate attention to bear upon the texts and other work which are central to the course. The complaints about lack of student commitment crosses many disciplinary lines. Attempts to address the problem such as this one may lead to a wider understanding of the problem, possible solutions, and a renewed consensus about how a university faculty should regard its student population.

<sup>4</sup> The best argument for spelling out expectations in George Kuh, et. al. 1995, "Reasonable Expectations."

<sup>5</sup> A recent class, after discussing *Hamlet* in trios, came together to develop whatever consensus they could about the meaning of the play. The discussion ended up as a focused debate between two voices among the students, one arguing that revenge is an appropriate response for *Hamlet*, or

anyone else whose family had been attacked in some way, and the other taking the position that the play argues for resisting the impulse toward revenge and depending upon public and political institutions to handle matters of justice. I was struck by the return of "family" as a central term in the interpretative concerns of students, but this time they showed me that the concept is an important part of the discussion in the play, something I could not see a few years before. So, even the earlier, problematic appeal to family was worth listening to because it paved the way for my seeing a new aspect of *Hamlet* and thus making me better able to appreciate the shape of the discussion in this recent class.

<sup>6</sup> See Lee Shulman's "Teaching as Community Property: Putting an End to Pedagogical Solitude," *Change* 25, no. 6 (November/December, 1993): 6-7, for a discussion of the importance of making teaching achievements a part of discipline-related discussions and so closer to research interests of the field.

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