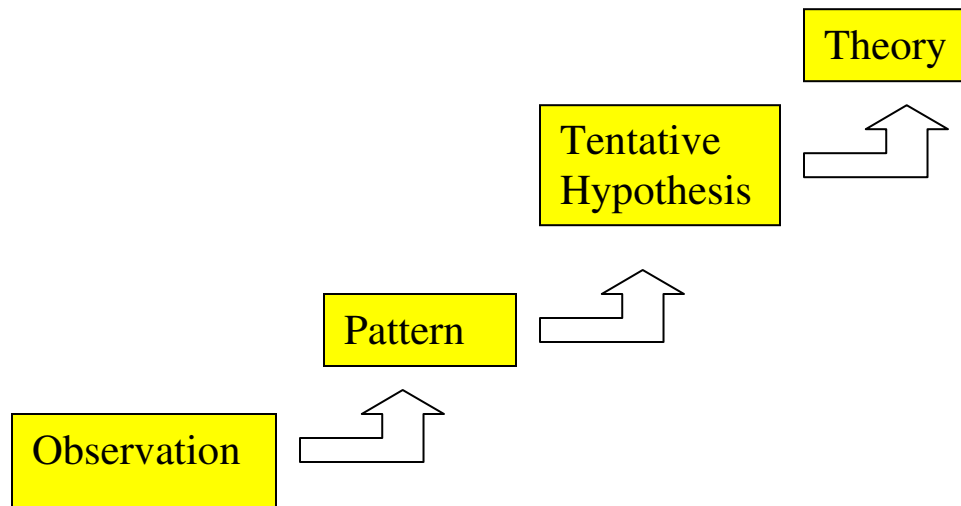


Speed Bumps: The Inductive Study of Literature

I have taught sophomore literature for a number of years; sometimes feeling good about the class at the end of the semester, sometimes wishing I could begin all over again. I have analyzed what makes a successful class as I have tried various active learning techniques: I have experimented with different handouts, reworked my syllabus, or found visual triggers that would help students “see” a short story. I have tried everything from requiring end-of-the-semester portfolios to having groups present a poem through a dramatic rendering of it; I have found that using teamwork allows students to have some hands-on experiences in interpreting literature and that students usually enjoy coming to class when I play the role of facilitator rather than bore them with lectures. Most of these ideas and experiments have proved successful, especially when I have spent a lot of energy at the beginning of the semester convincing the students that they can learn to analyze literature and that literature is worth their effort. However, I have also experienced great disappointment when student essays in the class seemed so terribly identical and bland. My students often simply retold the plot line of a short story but seldom hit the critical issues involved in the story. I decided that either they could not think critically or did not want to think critically. Feeling discouraged, I decided I had to come up with a different method of teaching them to write about literature. I am pleased to announce that I have recently had some small, but important, successes in getting sophomore literature students to write on a deeper level.

The method I will describe here is called the inductive study method. Of course, it is not an original idea. Socrates was using a form of inductive teaching centuries ago. One web site I recently visited describes inductive reasoning in a graphic way, thus:

“inductive reasoning works [the opposite from deductive reasoning], moving from specific observations to broader generalizations” (Trochim).



This graphic representation gives a brief view of the broad outlines of the theory. My introduction to inductive learning began about two years ago when I bought an inductive study Bible for my own personal use. Inside this particular version of the Bible, the authors had incorporated “study helps” with a chart for each book that dealt with the structure of that book, all of the charts featuring key words and suggestions for how the Bible student could study each chapter. The Bible student was encouraged to come up with themes for each chapter and learn how to find important concepts in each book. The Bible also featured “color coding” and symbol marking. The authors had several explanations at the front of the Bible that showed the reader how to mark up the text, how to interact with the text using colored pencils and/or a set of personal symbols. Here is an example of Chapter 1 from Genesis—New American Standard Version—before marking. Here is the same example after I had marked it—Genesis (second view).

After using the Bible for a while and having fun rediscovering Genesis, for instance, it finally occurred to me that many of the same concepts I was using in my own personal study could be applied to the literature my students were studying.

The problem seemed to be that my sophomore literature students were rarely willing to slow down in their reading to interact with a text. They zipped along, skimming the surface, trying to finish the reading in record time. And that seemed fair enough because that is the way most of us read—to get quick information. These students usually read fairly well, but their writing reflected the speed with which they skimmed the stories. I became convinced that they needed reading speed bumps—some way to slow them down or force them to interact more closely with the texts they were reading. That is when I saw how beneficial the inductive method of studying might be in sophomore literature classes. These study tools I had learned to use could become my speed bumps.

I began my course with a general handout about inductive studying. (Handout on Method) The first tool I used as a speed bump was the inductive study chart. The chart broke down the story into parts, becoming a logical, analytical tool from its inception in the classroom. Each chart I made for them simply contained the skeletal outlines of a short story. We took an easy example first—one straight out of their anthology, but one also familiar to some of them from the Bible: the Parable of the Prodigal Son from the book of Luke. (Parable Chart) In this short example, we used the chart as a way into the story—the structure of the story—which then led us into discussion about the three characters—the father, the younger “prodigal” son, and the older son. Further, the chart

seemed to help the visual learners in the class finally begin to understand literary elements, such as plot structure and characterization.

The next inductively visual tool I introduced was color-coding. I requested that students purchase and bring to class 10 to 20 colored pencils. We took another very short story, “Appointment in Samarra” by Somerset Maugham, and color-coded it in class together. I used the overhead projector as I modeled for the students what I wanted them to do with each of their assigned readings. The color-coding was an excellent speed bump. Students saw the benefits of color-coding right away; they saw that details in the story become more telling when they were examining it through the lens of a metaphorical microscope. They were actually using literary terms with some precision, noting how symbols stood out, or how certain characters’ traits became more pronounced when seen through the “color” lens.

I gave the students four or five charts at the beginning of the semester as they got used to how a chart works and began to understand what it did for their analytical skills. In their charts, I usually included key words for each story that a student could find for herself in order to mark them in some fashion. The charts showed the skeleton or the bones of the story and led them into talking about episodes and flashbacks, etc. The charts helped me talk about *plot* as a literary element. And instead of students merely retelling the plot, they began to see how plot functions as structure for the story. Here are two charts I produced for the students: (Chart—Hawthorne: “Young Goodman Brown”). (Chart_Hemingway: “Cat in the Rain”) (“Cat” story with color coding)

In the Hawthorne story, I saw something I had never seen before: sounds vibrate in the forest during Brown’s journey through it. Through my own work of making the

chart, I, too, slowed down enough to focus on something I had never observed. In fact, I would like to investigate the criticism on Hawthorne and see whether or not anyone else has noted the sound imagery that permeates this story. In the Hemingway story (see handout), students saw how the repetition of the words must mean something in the context of the theme.

As the semester progressed, I had each student select a short story that they liked—one not assigned to the class. I asked them to study the story and analyze it. One of the things each individual student had to do with his selected story was to come up with his own inductive chart for the story, along with the story's key words and themes. (Example.) Each student also had to show me his/her color-coded stories.

After they created their own charts and color-coded their individual stories, I found two other inductive exercises for students. These exercises came from Jim Burke's *The English Teacher's Companion: A Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum, and the Profession*. (I have used his book as a textbook for the Explorations in English class I teach to students going into the field of teaching English.) These exercises Quotations Clarified and Synthesis Notes helped students produce some prewriting for their essays. At first I gave these exercises to the groups so that the groups could practice doing them before the individual students had to work through them for their individual short stories. The Quotations Clarified handout asked the group to write down a quote from one of the stories we were reading as a class: "Désirée's Baby" by Kate Chopin. After finding a memorable quote in the story, they had to list three to five questions to help them write about the quotation. Next, they turned the questions into statements. In the fourth step, I asked them to translate the quote into their own words. In the fifth step, they had to

explain the meaning of the quote in the larger context of the story, and finally in stage six, they explained the quote in the context of the story's theme. After the groups had successfully finished the quotation exercise, I then asked the students to work through the same exercise on their own, but this time, they individually adapted the exercise to their own chosen short story.

The second handout I used from Burke's book is called Synthesis Notes. This exercise simply asked students to break down the story into its component parts—all the elements of the short story from title to characters, and from setting to point of view. The handout led students to explain each element's "most important aspect" in the story they were reading. After groups finished the exercise on Chekhov's "Misery," students had to use the same exercise on their own short stories that they were studying as individuals.

The point of these exercises was to get students into analysis; otherwise, most of them would stay stuck in telling the plot details with little or no analysis. They learned from each other during the times when the class worked through questions I gave them to answer on each short story we read as a class, and they also learned from one another during the other group activities. They began to see how quotes could be used in their own papers—a heady moment for most of them. These exercises also functioned as speed bumps. Students really had to examine the stories in order to get through the exercises—no more skimming along.

Before we got into the actual writing of the paper, I asked students to write a memo to me, explaining which story they had selected as "their" story. I then had the students tell me something about each element pertaining to their stories and how that

element played out in their stories. The memo played a pivotal part in their beginning to analyze a short story. (Example)

Before having students launch into the actual writing of a literary analysis, I asked them to write a letter to me responding to the stories they had chosen. I gave the students a handout with instructions to show them the format and also some types of things they could use in the letter. The letter depended on the students becoming analytical readers of “their” story. Reader-response theory formed the basis for the letter. Reader-response theory in literature suggests that in order for a text to have meaning, someone must read it. This hypothetical reader may be an informed reader or an entirely naïve reader. This type of literary criticism suggests that many short story texts are “open” to interpretation and that filling in the gaps is a necessary part of the experience of analyzing a text. For instance, as the students read Chopin’s “*Désirée’s Baby*,” I asked them to make an assumption about one of the characters, but they had to tie their assumptions to evidence from the story; for example, the character, Armand, finds a letter in the back of a drawer at the very close of the story. Some students assumed that Armand previously knew the contents of the letter while other students believed that his finding the letter is just as much a surprise to him as it is to us, the readers. The students chose the interpretation they believed they could support from their reading of the text. By asking students to write about their own responses to the individual stories they were analyzing, I was asking them to interact with the text in a literary way—to situate themselves in the tradition of literary criticism. I wanted to draw out the students’ reactions to the texts they had chosen to analyze, but I also wanted them to learn that their reactions should depend on some kind of textual support for that reaction.

I asked students to “fill in the gaps” by responding to the stories they were reading. When they wrote their letters to me about their stories, I wanted to know the effects the text had on them—on their understanding. I wanted them to bring in their personal experiences, private emotions, and past literary experiences as ways into the texts they wanted to analyze. I asked them to experience the text through an aesthetic reading: a reading based on the various literary elements they could discover in the text, plus a response from their own experiences, etc. The students noted the words, the patterns, etc. that the authors created in their texts. So in a way, students moved from examining a text as an object to becoming a part of the text—to becoming an essential participant in the reading process and in the creation of a text’s meaning to their own audience—the reader of the letter.

Finally on the mid-term exam, I asked the students to analyze a very short story by Thomas Bailey Aldrich. The story has been anthologized a number of times, but I have never found a title for the story, so I asked students to give the story a title in their essay discussions. I also had them choose three major literary elements from a list—setting, symbolism, character, point of view, style—and to discuss the story’s overall theme in light of those choices. The midterm essays were some of the best analytical writing I have had from students. I only had one student who totally failed the essay section. Some essays were not particularly well written, but the content, the analysis, was excellent. (See ideas from exam)

After this experience, I began looking for ways to incorporate more visual activities into these classes. I wanted visual artifacts that would make students begin to connect ideas and see that literature is actually everywhere. To that end, I brought in a

pajama top to my class. I asked the students to give me a “literary” analysis of the pajama top. They had no trouble with that assignment. They have definitely learned how to read the visual, and I can now say that they have learned how to think analytically.

As we move into this century, we will begin to realize that our digital world is increasingly employing visual rhetoric in an effort to present ideas and arguments. It behooves us as rhetoricians and teachers to show our students how to analyze not only words but visual “text.” I have just finished reading an article about how to represent Shakespeare’s play, *Macbeth*, through visual rhetoric.¹ The visual is what our children have been raised in and with. They can use the digital world probably better than some of us can. The digital world is easy for the four-year-old child. He can show his grandmother how to surf the net or how to videotape a television program. Teachers who believe that literary analysis is important to the success of their students must begin to incorporate inductive (parts to whole) methodologies as ways in to understanding literature; showing, not just telling, is what we must learn to do. As we show students, we should also keep in mind that whole books are now being written on how visual rhetoric becomes increasingly necessary in our digital world. And that is another paper.

¹ “Representing *Macbeth*: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric.” Written by Hanno H. J. Ehses, pp. 164-176. *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital World: A Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Carolyn Handa.

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