

I believe teaching, whether in the composition or the literature classroom, is most successful when it involves a collaborative performance between teacher, text, and students. This model arises from an idea presented by William Carlos Williams in his *Autobiography*, where he writes (in reference to his poem *Paterson*) that “The first idea...came alive early: to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me...these isolated observations and experiences needed pulling together to gain ‘profundity.’” Like Williams, I see the classroom as a connective space designed to counter isolation through a process of weaving together a diversity of voices, backgrounds, and ideas. Building on this connective model, I approach learning as a process of observation and investigation, as a quest—not for final solutions—but for a variety of possible “images.”

On the second class session of every semester, I ask students to arrive having read an essay titled “What is Analysis and How Does it Work.” This piece (an excerpt from the book *Writing Analytically*) breaks the process of analysis down into a series of five moves aimed at succinctly leading students through the analytical process by suspending judgment, identifying patterns, defining significant parts and how they relate, making the implicit explicit, and asking and re-asking questions. After a brief review of the reading’s key points, I begin to put theory into practice by showing students ten minutes of the poet/artist/musician George Quasha’s “Poetry is” video series—a collection of speaking portraits where a variety of poets attempt to answer (or evade answering) this foundational question. While viewing, I ask students to “pay attention to what they notice.” Initial observations tend to be general, such as “they have a hard time defining poetry.” As we continue to ask the question, however, responses move from the general to the specific. Students share observations about the camera angle, how they heard a telephone ringing in the background, that multiple respondents emphasized the role of the body in producing writing. They begin to note differences among the respondents in terms of age, race, and gender and to speculate about how these might shape the various responses. We then segue into thinking about the implications of their observations—as one student observed, the closeness of the camera creates a degree of intimacy which is “really off-putting,” leading to a discussion about the viewer’s role in relation to the text. While this exercise often leads to discussions which inform the specific content of a given course, the broader purpose of the exercise is to allow both major and non-major students across a variety of curriculums to model for themselves the fact that they already possess a skill-set for engaging with texts, even “difficult” ones, with the idea of “noticing” and the analytical moves acting as useful additions to their pre-existing critical toolbox.

By attuning themselves to their capacity for observation, students hone their skills for negotiating not only course texts but their positioning within broader social and intellectual communities. As the above scenario demonstrates, I steer students away from what I call the “key model” of reading—where one “correct” interpretation is thought to be hidden in the text, just waiting to be found—and towards an open-ended mode of engagement where students are asked to base their interpretations on the foundations of observation and attention to textual detail. This connective emphasis carries over into other of my classroom activities and course assignments, which are designed to promote a reading and writing process premised on active questioning and collaborative investigation. This approach crosses disciplinary boundaries: a typical class session in both the literature and the

composition classroom (or the upper and lower level course) begins with me putting up a section from the day's reading, or a relevant image, video clip, or other applicable material, and asking students to free-write and note down their initial observations. These observations then go on to become the root of the day's discussion as I ask students to share these thoughts and transcribe them onto the board in order to visually chart the various patterns that begin to emerge.

I extend this idea of collaborative performance beyond the physical space of the classroom through the use of media like course blogs, which ask students to take the lead by granting them a greater degree of ownership over course materials. On a practical level, blogs are also an effective means of providing students who do not feel comfortable speaking in class—whether due to personal preference or language barriers—with a way to engage in the learning community. In a typical blog assignment, students are asked to generate two posts per week. One post is a reflection on that week's reading, where students expand on a passage they found particularly provocative. I stress that they do not need to have all or even any answers—the goal is to ask questions, make hypotheses, and engage others in collaborative meaning-making. The second post asks students to make connections between a primary course text and an outside text or event—such as a painting, news report, or viral YouTube video. In past courses, students have used these posts to compare novelistic structure to mathematical functions, the narrator of Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* to the Beatles' song "Nowhere Man," and Djuna Barnes's dreamy invocations of Parisian nightlife to a study-abroad trip to Paris. Using a diversity of mediums in the classroom—from the "low tech" free-write or small group discussion to the "high tech" blog post also ensures that a diversity of student voices and perspectives are brought to bear on course materials, an essential fact given that my seven years of teaching experience have given me the opportunity to work with students from a wide variety of class, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, not to mention non-traditional students and first generation college students as well as majors at both the lower and the upper level. Finding ways to create connections between different—and occasionally divergent—perspectives has thus been a central challenge and goal of my pedagogy.

In today's increasingly market oriented approach to education, where students often require convincing about the validity of the seemingly "non-practical" engagements afforded by the study of literature, helping students make connections between literary texts and their daily lives, as well as between the process of observational reading and the skills they will need outside of collegiate life, is absolutely essential. Stressing that texts are not hermetically sealed "dead" objects to be mined for the "proper" meaning ensures that students are freed to find their own sources of relevance within each textual encounter, making them active participants in the learning process. As I tell my students, if they can "notice" things about Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* or a print advertisement, then they can notice the important details of any text they encounter, from a court brief to an email from their boss. Successful teaching is, for me, the shaping of a collaborative space where students feel they are connected to both the learning process and the course material, which is in turn intimately enmeshed with the concerns of their daily world—that true "profundity" lies in knitting their diverse experiences and interests together.