

# The CEA Forum

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## AN ARCHITECTURE OF THE LITERATURE SURVEY

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Teaching is even more difficult than learning. We know that; but we rarely think about it. And why is teaching more difficult than learning? Not because the teacher must have a larger store of information, and have it always ready. Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than—learning. His conduct, therefore, often produces the impression that we really learn nothing from him, if by “learning” we now automatically understand merely the procurement of useful information. The teacher is ahead of his apprentices in this alone, that he has still far more to learn than they—he has to learn to let them learn.

— Martin Heidegger

Those of us who have among our duties the teaching of these various literature surveys—and especially surveys required for the English major—are confronted with the unhappy and irreconcilable paradox of a course by nature rather less than representative, and yet rather broad than deep. Using a hybridized, four-pillared seminar-style, I strive to create provocative convergences among primary readings, secondary scholarship, informal student characterizations, formal presentations with designated respondents, and prompted journaling. The result in most instances is a lively, engaged conversation that manages to achieve both breadth and depth, without the pace of a forced march. In the process, my role as seminar leader evolves. During the first several weeks of the course, my role is very much front-and-center as I acquaint students with the various course components and protocols, coaching them through sample assignments. After three to four weeks, however, my role begins to change from instructor to seminar leader. While I most often open class by introducing terms, concepts, and historical context, my role soon evolves from authority to seminar leader, in which capacity my

chief concerns are guidance, assessment, and enrichment. I have used this basic design very successfully with British Literature I and II surveys, but also with surveys of medieval literature, British novels, medieval and modern drama, and epic literature.

I began my experience with survey design in 1998 when, having been awarded a post-doctoral teaching fellowship, I was assigned to teach a variety of literature surveys, including the standard British literature survey from Chaucer to Milton, the poetry survey from Donne to the twentieth century, major British novels, early English Renaissance drama, and modern drama. Such expertise as I could reasonably claim was in Anglo-Saxon Studies in particular and medieval British literature in general. It dawned on me early that I needed a generalizable plan. The plan I currently use, and that I liken to architectural design, has resulted from years of trial-and-error, and from careful consultations with my students and colleagues—accompanied, especially in the early years, by sometimes frenetic self-education about various authors, texts, genres, and periods.

Of course, I am far from prescient in recognizing the pitfalls of surveys, nor am I the first to advance a solution. Lawrence Hussman describes a team-taught approach employed at Wright State University and at the University of Dallas where individual members of the English faculty each in turn lectured the same class regarding the period of their own expertise (Hussman 31). However, the team-taught design, while reportedly popular with students, may enhance rather than counter the effect of a smorgasbord on a fast conveyor belt, and it presents logistical problems as well. Gregory Roper describes the student's experience of the survey as “the literary autobahn,” and identifies four “allegorical beasts” that confront the survey teacher: “Too much, Too long, Too fast, and Too complex” (Roper 49). He likens the students' experience of the survey to “one of those rapid bus tours through the capitals of Europe” in that “students *look* at the texts in the windows as they race by but never really get to see them, so that what is left as they fly home at the end of the semester is a blur and an empty wallet” (Roper 40). His innovation is to divide his students into groups, each of which he then assigns to research and prepare a study guide for a particular period of literature, which guide will then serve the entire class. Roper's plan succeeds as far as involving his students and in deepening their appreciation at least of one era, but may overestimate students' autodidactic skills and organization.

Like Roper, in my own design, I hoped to involve students in the processes of textual interpretation. Toward that end, I appropriated liberally from strategies of my best graduate professors, including the practice of short formal presentations and “convergence readings,” and I acknowledge my debt to Peter Stallybrass and Al Filreis, both highly effective seminar leaders at the University of Pennsylvania.

Thus, in my own survey designs, I hybridize these and other seminar-style approaches, but with the obvious limitations imposed by numbers; that is, my surveys have ranged considerably in enrollment, and what might be possible with fifteen was not so with fifty. For my British Literature I survey (my first assignment), I adopted the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, then the standard in our department. My overall objectives were these:

- 1. To acquaint students with a broad but representative sampling of major British writers in their historical context.**
- 2. To enable them to conceive, argue, support, and correctly format a formal literary critical essay**
- 3. To engage students intellectually and imaginatively with important critical issues in a sampling of those texts, on a sophisticated level;**
- 4. To involve students in the conversation between critics and texts by reading, distilling, and assessing secondary readings**
- 5. To introduce them to pertinent theoretical readings, as applicable to specific texts.**
- 6. To induce them into an authentic seminar—i.e. into a cohesive, cooperative, and authentic**

conversation by means of which they would question, interpret, criticize, and collectively, with my guidance, teach each other about literature and literary history.

My attempts to achieve this last objective are my proper subject here, and I have variously discovered, borrowed, and adapted a number of assignments that help to create an effective seminar. These include the formal presentation paper, judiciously timed secondary readings characterized by students, prompted journals, and timely assessments through questionnaires and conferences.

## I. Presentation Groups / Presentation Papers

The presentation paper is at the center of my design—something like an engine that, once engaged, runs the course. This assignment began as an adaptation of the traditional seminar paper, presented to the class for critique and response. Very early in the term, students are randomly assigned to presentation groups; a class of thirty students might have five such groups, designated by letter. The group assignment, though, has little meaning in terms of group work; rather, group members are united only insofar as they all present critical papers to the class on the same given issue on the same schedule. From student responses to my first implementation of the presentations (when each group was assigned to present three times during the term), I scaled back to two essays each, with each group rotating on the schedule. Thus, Group A members—the first to produce—might be scheduled to present in the third week of class; B group members, in the fifth, and so on. Each group presents twice, so that every student ends up having written and presented two formal, short essays of interpretation on given issues (usually keyed to specific texts, authors, and/or historical matter in our primary readings). Meanwhile, I encourage group members to communicate as needed to minimize overlapping arguments.

I choose the issues with an eye toward potentially rich and certainly arguable ideas in the primary texts, while also connecting with larger literary historical issues.

For example, in a recent Brit Lit I survey, presentation topics included:

**Week 3** / A Group: The Meaning of the Monstrous in *Beowulf*

**Week 4** / B Group: The Faerie World as Liminal Site in *Lanval*

**Week 6** / C Group: Sexuality and Ritual in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

**Week 7** / D Group: Identity as Performance in *The Canterbury Tales*

And so on, through a second cycle.

These presentations will be somewhat informed by my own introductory comments on the text and context, and by class discussions, though I prefer that the presenters operate independently of class discussion. (Some students do ask to delay their presentations until after there has been substantial discussion, but I discourage such dependency. Meanwhile, I work hard to arrange advantageous convergences, through secondary readings, each “characterized” for the class by one or two students.

The presentation assignment, once written, works like this: Students in a particular group prepare critical interpretations of the given issue, supporting their respective arguments with a sampling of the best textual evidence, clearly explicated in service of the thesis and its larger implications.

Perhaps the most demanding feature of the presentation papers is their required brevity: The papers are to be

one single-spaced page, otherwise observing MLA format. Carry-overs onto second pages are removed before grading, and manipulations of margins and typeface are penalized in my grade and comments. Thus, the paper becomes also an exercise in conciseness and critical editing even at the syllabic level, incidentally causing students to become adept at distilling their theses.

By 10 PM on the night before the presentation is due, the writer must send her/his presentation by e-mail attachment to a previously (randomly) designated "respondent," whose task it is to read the essay critically before the next day's class, noting questions, responses, approbations, and/or criticisms.

In that next-day class, each member of the scheduled group "presents" her essay to the class, though this "presentation" is merely a deliberate, audible reading of the essay to the class from the writer's seat. I instruct the rest of the class to jot notes, reactions, and questions as they listen, and to discern, if they can, the writer's thesis and its possible implications. Once the writer has presented, I call randomly on individual students, asking for the essay's argument, checking their perception against the writer's intent. The frequent discrepancy and occasional bafflement between presenter and audient is, by itself, instructive. Students are often awakening to the needs of a real critical audience for the first time. Arguments in the second cycle are noticeably more refined.

Once the argument has been coaxed out into the open, I ask for critical responses. (Here, I tend to keep the designated respondent in momentary abeyance while the class provides spontaneous reactions.) The respondent later provides a somewhat more considered response and we continue our conversation until all who wish to respond have done so. Then I call upon the next presenter, restarting the process. Of course, there are the occasional overlaps and even the rare duplicate argument, but I keep the class focused on difference of emphases in such cases, encouraging attention to nuance. The conversations provoked by each presentation drive the class on these occasions. Any presentations we cannot get to in the allotted time carry over to the next class, while those who have presented turn their essays in, to be evaluated as formal essays.

## **II. Secondary Readings and Characterizations**

Of course, most survey teachers require their students to read some criticism of primary texts, either as part of a formal research assignment or as ancillary readings. I claim no originality in this practice; rather, I emphasize the careful arrangement of weekly secondary readings (all on electronic reserve) so that they inform the presentations and enhance our discussions of the primary readings. The choice and timing of secondary readings requires careful deliberation. My criteria for secondary readings are:

- 1) Currency of the scholarship
- 2) Sophistication of the insight
- 3) Accessibility to undergraduate English majors
- 4) Broad potential to illuminate primary readings and/or cultural context
- 5) Relative brevity (10-20 pages)

Satisfying all these criteria requires some crafty and necessarily quick assessments, especially for those texts, authors, and periods far outside my own expertise. Once I have selected these readings, I weave them into my syllabus' reading schedule, timing them to anticipate larger issues in the primary readings. For example, the same Brit Lit I survey referenced earlier also featured these secondary readings among many others (all on electronic reserve):

### **Week 3:**

Paul Acker, "Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*" (*PMLA* 121.3 (2006): 702-15)

### **Week 5:**

Victoria L. Weiss, "The Play World and the Real World: Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (*Philological Quarterly* 72.4 [1993]: 403-18)

### **Week 8:**

Marshall Leicester, "Of a Fire in the Dark: Public and Private Feminism in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*" (*Women's Studies* 11 [1984]: 157-78)

And so on.

While all students are assigned to prepare both primary and secondary readings, the student or students who have volunteered to "characterize" (my term) the secondary reading are asked to offer, very briefly, 1) a quick distillation of the essay's argument; 2) the characterizer's critical response to that argument; and 3) the reading's relevance to our seminar discussion. Students are forewarned that each of them needs to "volunteer" two or three times during the term. These characterizations, typically summoned *after* a first reaction to the readings and *before* any presentations on the text, serve as a brief recap and a point of departure for the class's application of the critical argument or the theory behind it. These secondary readings, while incidentally informing the presentations, also engage students with current scholarship, so that they might perceive their own critical writing as a *joining in* with the scholarly conversation concerning the given primary text.

## **III. The Weekly Journal**

The third element in my cultivation of the seminar is the weekly journal. I require students to generate about three hundred words of writing each week (starting with week two) on given "prompts." Through these prompted journal entries, students explore what I consider overarching or pervasive themes of a given historical moment or its literature.

For instance, I have posed the following prompts for my Brit Lit II survey:

**Week 3:** What constitutes ideal marriage in *Paradise Lost*? Can you discern any problems or contradictions in Eden?

**Week 6:** To what extent does *Gulliver's Travels* represent eighteenth-century British notions about the unexplored world? About Otherness? What underlying cultural biases and fears do you sense?

**Week 9:** For many readers, Blake's poetry is idiosyncratic—anomalous in the tradition. Which issues or ideas would you identify as Blake's central concerns? What features make his poetry distinctive?

Of course, I sometimes change the prompts as we go, responding to student-identified issues. Note, too, that the prompts must be specific enough to spark response, but broad enough to permit new syntheses of text, context, and criticism. Time permitting, students in each of the presentation groups meet for a few minutes as class begins on the week's first meeting to exchange and discuss their responses. Then, each group shares out its consensus or its disagreement on the prompt.

I have also begun to use the dialogic journal in the survey as a way to prompt pairs (or occasionally triads) of students to engage in a weekly exchange of informal response and counter-response to our course content. In

this model, self-selected pairs of students engage in “conversation” on paper, alternating weekly. Their entries may respond to prompts or pursue course-related issues of their own choosing. I check in with the class often about the status of the journals, and I hear at least one entry from each during our conference. I collect these journals at term's end, grading them according to their apparent degree of substantial engagement and critical sophistication.

Taken together with the presentations, respondents, secondary readings and characterizations, the journal-writing rounds out a rich treatment of several key issues, themes, and perspectives, all while involving students, individually and collectively, in the nuts and bolts of textual interpretation.

#### IV. Assessment and Conferences

While I always urge my students to take advantage of my office hours or to schedule appointments otherwise, I require at least one conference with every student. However, when I happen to be teaching multiple classes with large enrolments and frequent formal writing, I confer with each dialogic pair in tandem, a strategy that greatly reduces the time spent conferring. This conference is, first, an occasion to have students read sample exchanges from the dialogic journal and to comment on their experience with that course component. Also, I try to time the conference so that we can also discuss their respective drafts of an upcoming essay. But the conference is no less importantly an occasion to elicit reactions to the course overall, to note student concerns, and to resolve problems that may have arisen. Further promoting these ends, I make sure, by midterm, to invite student assessment of the course—formally (with an anonymous questionnaire to be completed and returned by the next class) and informally (by soliciting reactions, questions, or problems with the course during conferences, as noted above.)

My essay's title appropriates the architectural analogy to suggest the sort of layered structure of convergent assignments, formal and informal, that together propel something like a true student-driven seminar. The convergence of various readings, journals, characterizations, presentations, and reactions, once built into the syllabus and introduced in class, provides the course with self-generation—a life of its own, if you will. Thus, I think of my course design as *architecture* in the sense of a conceptual, humanistic structure that itself communicates ideas. You will have noticed that I also refer to the design as a *seminar*, thus seeming to mix metaphors between agriculture and structural design. Yet both apply. The seminar as both a figurative seed plot and as a site of cultivation suits my intent in both literal and figurative senses. Seminar in its pedagogical sense which the *OED* gives as both “1) a select group of advanced students associated for special study and original research under the guidance of a professor and 2) a class that meets for systematic study under the direction of a teacher” serves my meaning in both senses (“seminar 2”).

My surveys still feature essay-style midterms and final examinations, wherein students identify, contextualize, and interpret selected passages from our primary readings, and apply critical approaches from the secondary readings. These exams, while providing strong incentive to read carefully, also give me a clear sense of students' ability to apply the very skills and concepts developed in class.

As I note from the beginning, the size of survey classes will most often preclude the seminar style. Yet I have successfully adapted this approach for classes with as many as forty-seven students. Of course, I continue to refresh and redesign aspects of the course each time I teach it—chiefly by listening closely to my students; for example, in the past two years, I have moved to a dialogic (as opposed to monologic) journal—that is, an informal, written conversation between paired students. And, of course, I revisit and update primary and secondary readings and journal prompts, each time I teach. The basic template is remarkably adaptable to a variety of courses, and I have tailored these components for courses on epic, medieval literature, British novels, and modern drama—all with excellent results, both in terms of student evaluations and observable learning.

Aside from engaging students with primary and secondary texts and enhancing learning, the most remarkable

benefit of this design is the de-centering of authority in the classroom. Because the students themselves are so often generating our discussions, and so necessarily engaged in critical response and assessment of various readings, my role evolves as the term unfolds. In the first weeks, I work to acquaint the students with each of the various course components and with the rationale for each. Once students catch on to the day-to-day rhythms of the course, I can attend to individual students' problems, questions, or disinclinations to engage in this modified seminar model. Thus, having worked so meticulously to create convergences between primary and secondary readings, between formal and informal writing, between historical context and individual response, I can appreciate the course as a creative structure—an architectural design.

Student response to the design has been overwhelmingly positive, and the improved quality of their work from beginning to end of term suggests their growing confidence in their own critical voices, as their critical arguments become ever more complex and contentious. And, because they are themselves constructing these informed critiques, they feel a sense of ownership and expertise. By the last weeks of the course, I am become a facilitator and guide, and the students feel themselves engaged in a common enterprise, often producing unpredictable and exhilarating insights. The performance is theirs, not mine.

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