Learning to Teach while Teaching to Learn

Bob Tisdale

Courses I will discuss in this essay:

Growing Up Ironic, Rhetoric and Voices, Modern Poetry, Contemporary Poetry, Hemingway and Faulkner, Melville and Hawthorne, History and Literature of the Vietnam War, Native American Literature, Im/migration, Introduction to Modern Literature

The intent of this essay is to illustrate what, in the process of teaching over a 40 plus year career, I learned about literature and how to teach it—or, really, what reading literature meant to me and what I could make it mean to my students. Each of the following sections focuses on a course I created, some of which were sections of courses our department was required to teach—freshman seminars and writing courses. Because I taught at Carleton College, a private, coed, amazingly egalitarian institution, it was relatively easy for me to convince the English department or the American Studies program and the curriculum committee to let me experiment as I did. I could continue to teach the courses that worked so long as their enrollment was adequate to justify reiteration, they contributed towards an undergraduate’s degree, and satisfied College and departmental requirements.

Following is a sample of courses I taught over four decades. The list also embodies a variety of principles, strategies, or tactics that I learned while teaching at Carleton. Some had already been learned through earning an M.A.T. and five years teaching full time (at two public high schools, a state university, and a small Ivy college) while I completed a Ph.D. in English.

It’s clear from the diversity and number of courses I initiated that my preference was for breadth rather than depth. An older colleague, Owen Jenkins, who had been a whiz kid at Chicago and a natural in graduate school, chose depth. He taught the same courses for decades, updating each of them every year. With each reiteration his scholarly knowledge grew and he had an opportunity to change
his pedagogy subtly or radically—usually the former. He strove to model deep, precise, and detailed knowledge of both text and period and expected his students to emulate him as they wrote on Swift, Pope, Johnson, Austen, or Aristotle and later critics. Annually he added to the thick and exhaustive critical bibliographies he kept of Aristotle’s Poetics and Rhetoric. These notebooks were so comprehensive and valuable to scholars that a distinguished visiting professor in philosophy, Colin Lyas, urged him many times to publish them. Owen preferred to dedicate his time to updating them. Each of his seminars on Jane Austen also incorporated new thinking, and woe to students who did not understand the novels’ plotting and characterization in detail.

My preference for teaching new and untried courses derived mostly from my curiosity, my ignorance, and my tendency to see every new development in English or American literature as an opportunity to learn about life and art more broadly. In talking with Owen I saw that we were both gaining knowledge of literature and our craft of teaching. We were very different in temperament and method, but we both loved literature and took delight in serious students.

Growing Up Ironic

In the Midwest after having taught in the East for eight years it did not take me long to realize that Carleton’s undergraduates did not seem to understand irony—at least not deep down and mordant. Nor had they learned much about the history of racism in the US. Some had not read classics like *Huckleberry Finn* closely, or at all. It was important to me that they learn these things early in their college career. So having the need to create a freshman seminar and the freedom to choose a theme that would engage their interest, require lots of writing, and motivate them to learn more about our culture, I decided to invent a course that would do as many of these things as possible. The new seminar was named in homage to *Growing Up Absurd* but substituted irony, a state usually less dire than absurdity. Irony is a
state of being that any literate American citizen ought to recognize from living marinated in the disparities between our collective alleged ideals and our actual history.

The course was simple enough: reading, discussion of, and thinking about (mostly through writing essays) six to eight major works in ten weeks—works written by authors of undeniable craft and insight that focused on the phenomenon of racism in many of its avatars. I started with Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and moved through Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Faulkner's *Go Down Moses* and Ellison's *Invisible Man*. We usually included Baraka's *Dutchman* and some poetry. We also read other works that changed from year to year. I taught only one such seminar annually, and in truth that was enough, as it demanded some ingenuity to get students deeply involved and much patience, equanimity, and stamina to end the course with satisfaction for us all.

The major principle here involved the importance of content, not form: Focus on excellent literature rather than on composition, rhetoric, or whatever the learning of writing may be called. Students write at their best when strongly motivated, and one cannot figure out what compositional skills they need to learn unless they are doing their best. Dull topics elicit dull papers; and as a wise man once said, “easy writing makes for hard reading.” Once the essays are written they can be critiqued and revised if they are worth revision. At some point in this process they can be shared with other students for both praise and quibbles, questions and comments.

Towards the end of the course it was common for students to ask what the title of the course meant: they had learned about different kinds of irony, but they didn’t quite know what it meant to grow up ironic. They did not always see that the protagonists of these works had experienced the exceptional ironies of the American Experience, and that once they had known those ironies and learned how to deal with them, they had truly grown up. The students had seen the disparities between promise and realization, appearance and reality, knowledge possessed by characters and that possessed by readers. But without experiencing those disparities, they could only observe the ironies, not feel them fully. That is the fate
of readers. If I had been teaching cultural anthropology I might have figured out how to provide them with such experience.

Some of the students in this seminar were students of color--African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, or rarely, Native Americans. They needed no cultural anthropology; they had lived it at home and at Carleton. And to be truthful, many students of color saw the course as redundant, except for the writing experience. That was okay with me—they could enroll or not enroll. There were plenty of other ways to fulfill the freshman seminar requirement.

We always began the course with *Huckleberry Finn*. Its ironies are abundant but not always obvious. For example, in the much criticized last quarter of the book when Tom Sawyer appears, we see what a humbug Huck’s model rascal really is. After Jim is “rescued,” Tom reveals that Jim has been free all the time, emancipated by Miss Watson. Tom thanks and praises Jim for being “prisoner for ...[them] so patient and doing it up so good” and gives Jim forty dollars for his acting—not his trouble. The students may remember (most don’t) that forty dollars has appeared twice before in the novel: once as guilt money passed over the water on a chip of wood to Huck by two slave catchers who refuse to help the alleged victims of smallpox adrift on the Mississippi. The second appearance is the bounty the King is paid for turning Jim over to whites who will sell him back to his owner or down the river. Twain thus tars Tom with the same brush as the pusillanimous slave catchers and the greedy scoundrel, “King.” Twain doesn’t make the dollar amount equal to the notorious thirty pieces of silver, but he’s just a sawbuck short. Tom would, of course, loved to have grown up a lawyer, and perhaps even a politician.

We then progressed to read Hurston’s novel which tells the tale of Janie, a Black woman who, faithful to the wishes of her closest and dearest relative, her grandmother, marries a much older man for what the grandmother considers security. She is trying to “save” Janie from the fate her mother suffered, but in fact condemns her to a marriage of toil and abuse—the first irony. Janie flees, only to seek comfort in the arms of the much older mayor of an all Black town; he has money and power, but so fears his own jealous inadequacy with Janie that all of his effort goes into controlling her and in the process he nearly takes her youth away
from her—the second major irony. Janie manages to regain childhood and grow up when her second husband dies and she goes off with a much younger man of no apparent class or wealth at all. He eventually dies, having been bitten by a rabid dog, but he has handed Janie the keys to heaven.

I taught this as a *Bildungsroman*, the story of a protagonist’s growing up; both male and female versions were explored. One student objected, saying he didn’t think Janie’s life qualified but in rejecting this categorization he saw only what he had been taught before and shut himself off from trying another view.

We moved on through other fictions and ended with *Invisible Man* and *Dutchman*—both versions of the possibilities for young Black men in America. Both works show how little a Black man’s education does to erase white prejudice against him and how vulnerable men of color are to the various seductions and oppressions of the bountiful and apparently liberal North. Following *Invisible Man* with *Dutchman* seemed natural because at a crucial point in *IM* after being treated in a factory hospital for injuries he sustained in an explosion, the narrator/protagonist rides in a subway train and sees a blond young woman eating an apple. He is disoriented, unwell, and the vision seems almost hallucinatory, but that vision is precisely what Amiri Baraka starts his play with—the seductive and dangerous possibilities with which the North provokes Blacks.

The point of this course was to have students reflect on what being an American means to Whites and Blacks, how great a distance there is between our ideals and the realities. In that sense the course succeeded; no student left the course unenlightened. One of the challenges of the course was to focus on the facts and keep white students from indulging in guilt trips. “Only understand” could have been our motto. What all of us do with such knowledge is up to us.

Students’ writing mostly involved interpreting these fictions, arguing for one reading or another. They necessarily became invested in one interpretation that might be challenged by other students, so discussions did not lag.
Conclusion 1:

Choose significant, brilliantly written literature to read, discuss, and write about, and you will not have many problems motivating students to do their best.

But teaching this course did not at first teach me a great deal about the works on the syllabus. I ran on old gas until I used some of the same works with adults in a summer seminar for teachers of AP courses. They deserved as much help with their actual teaching as I could offer, so I worked up assignments and discussion questions, and I learned more about the context of each work. In other words I did the work of a scholar in the service of helping teachers who seldom have the time to do research or to prepare discussions in depth and detail.

Conclusion 2:

Teaching teachers how to improve their teaching of a particular work puts you on your best behavior, forcing you to prepare as never before.

Rhetoric and Voices

A colleague at Dartmouth once informed me that as striplings, Shakespeare and his young peers learned to write by imitation, a very old pedagogy. The Renaissance teacher would assign students a classical text to imitate: either with the same matter but in a different manner, or in the same manner but with different matter. I was faced with the prospect of teaching writing for the rest of my career but I had no natural talent in that area because writing always came easily to me; I honestly don’t know how or why. Often it has seemed as if some generous spirit dictates what I should write. If I had written better I might have called it a muse.

So I had done what most of my colleagues did: I gave topics or questions to write on, I taught structure and grammar, elucidation and persuasion, I used handbooks and made up guidelines of my own. I wrote comments and had conferences. We all mostly hated it. I had some good ideas but I couldn’t build an entire course around them.
Example: Write your paper, save it all; but in a second version, without rereading, delete the first paragraph or page. Do the same with the last paragraph or page. Compare the two versions and submit the better one. (I have read far too many “Five Paragraph Themes”!

Example: Start your paper with an apparently trivial and detailed incident or fact. Be specific and concrete in narrating or describing that incident or fact. Then gradually reveal the significance of your initial statements, and when you have made that clear to the reader, stop. That is your paper, or if the assignment requires greater length, that is the introduction to the body of your paper. (Nearly all the best magazine articles seem to illustrate this technique, and I have read far too many “Five Paragraph Themes”!

Example: The rhetorical success of an essay or speech depends on often moving from the specific and detailed to the general and abstract, or vice versa. Pay special attention to when and how you do this. Avoid excessive generalization. In the margin of many papers I have written “BS.” I have always told students it means “Be Specific.”

Example: If your reader praises a passage, try to construct more of that particular type. Some of the best comments I have seen colleagues make in the margins of student essays ask for “more like that.”

Example: Once you have a draft, highlight or underline all uses of the verb “to be.” Eliminate at least half by rephrasing.

But those words of wisdom, useful in themselves, constitute only tactics, not a strategy. Sometimes an innovation is a renewal, a return to old or even ancient principles and practices. And rather than try something so new that I couldn’t control it or try a practice so high-powered that the students couldn’t understand or follow it, I thought that reverting to the old practice of imitation might work to teach a whole panoply of linguistic and rhetorical skills. I feared, however, that asking students to imitate an author might be beyond some of them with tin ears, so I delayed trying this strategy until Stephen Dunning of the University of Michigan visited and explained a process he had used successfully with middle school and
high school students. He had them imitate poems and essays but he started them with a substitution exercise. If memory serves, he would give them lines of a poem and then delete the nouns; e.g. Richard III’s famous line, “Now is the winter of my discontent made glorious summer by the sun of York,” became “Now is the ______ of my ______ made glorious ______ by the ___ of ____.” He could delete as many nouns—or verbs—as seemed possible, starting with few deletions of various lines and working up to the complete deletion of nouns, as above. Any ten-year old could complete this sort of exercise. Some of their sentences were ludicrous enough to make the class more humorous than any other grammar class they had ever experienced. Some substitutions were brilliant. All were acceptable so long as they fit the parts of speech a passage required and made some sort of sense.

Once I heard what Stephen Dunning had done I had an answer to my own reservations about basing an assignment—or a course—on imitation. Substitution would be the fallback for the frustrated. And as they did more and more substitutions they would move towards the “full Shakespearean,” or “full Quintilian” as I might have called it. [If you wish to go back to the known origins of imitation as a strategy to learn rhetoric, see Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* or Aristotle’s *Rhetoric.*]

The course could also educate students about the amazing history of styles of writing in English. I decided to start with Sir Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici* and Isaak Walton’s *Compleat Angler,* and then Bacon’s essays, thereby giving the class in three works a nearly complete spectrum of diction, syntax, and tone among what they considered the Ancients in English lit. We then moved to Hobbes’ *Leviathan,* an essay by Swift—perhaps “A Modest Proposal,” and so forth right up through the nineteenth century to Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion. I tried to stick to non-fiction, but Jane Austen and Dickens were so attractive that I couldn’t resist.

The course went well enough to last through several avatars. Best of all, we enjoyed it. With far less pain than usual, students learned many tropes and schemes of rhetoric. We discussed the differences between paratactic and hypotactic styles, Latinate and vernacular diction; we identified in their writing various rhetorical
figures like enthymeme, hyperbole, assonance, parallelism, alliteration, oxymoron, metonymy, antistrophe, litotes, paradox, synecdoche, etc. The linguistic details were embedded in and then mined from their own humorous imitations and inventions. They enjoyed the grammatical jargon.

Students shared their weekly writing, and as they progressed I encouraged them to find their own voices—hence the course title. Many students did find an original voice, writing with far more confidence than before; some continued to imitate because it was so much fun. A number of alums wrote me later about the usefulness of the course, noting that once they could imitate Browne and Austen and Didion, they could imitate whatever abominable style their jobs in business or law—or academia—required for their survival.

I looked forward to teaching this course more than any other I ever taught that aimed to improve student writing.

Fact and Fiction: Literature and History of the Vietnam War

This may have been the most memorable course of my career because of the class’s collective emotional involvement in the topic.

By 1983 or 1984 enough films and literature had been written to justify close reading and discussion, so I proposed a course that would provide historical context along with various novels, poems, and plays very recently written. Had I not read Michael Herr’s Dispatches, Philip Caputo’s Rumor of War, and seen the film Coming Home in London I might not have even begun thinking about the course. A term abroad directing the English department’s London Seminar in the early 1980’s gave me some new perspectives on the war and led me to believe that enough first rate literature existed at that point to justify such a course. Later, of course, such books as The Things They Carried and Matterhorn would have made teaching that course irresistible.
As we read Caputo et al. we also worked our way through Stanley Karnow’s *History of the Vietnam War*. One year I added some reading from David Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest*, but mostly we focused on memoirs and fiction.

Most importantly, since the course was scheduled for winter term following a six week break, I asked students to interview someone whose life had been significantly affected by the war—veterans, nurses, Vietnamese immigrants, war resisters, et al. Then they were asked to turn the interview into a monologue which quite expunged themselves, in the manner of, say, the monologues in Ronald Blythe’s *Akenfield*. They submitted this work as their ticket for admission to the course, and we began with a discussion of their experience.

Many, almost a majority of students, said that they had interviewed their Dad or another relative, claiming to the reluctant veteran that they were required to do that interview. They were interviewing people who had never shared their experience with anyone not also a veteran. Students expressed gratitude for being sanctioned and given leverage to find out about that experience. For some it became one of the most significant conversations they had ever had about their parent’s history.

One of the most moving monologues was done by a student whose parents had fled from South Vietnam, been interned in Laos, and finally came to the U.S. The student herself had been an infant with no clear memories of the escape and long journey. After that monologue it became impossible to generalize in class discussion about “the Vietnamese.”

We had visitors—one particularly important, since after being wounded in battle and spending months in a hospital, he returned to civilian life quite fine, thank you very much, and quite skeptical that any of his peers *really* suffered from PTSD. But several years after recuperating he was talked by a friend into attending a conference in Wisconsin on PTSD. Two days of testimonies and medical analyses convinced him that he was wrong, that PTSD had in fact affected a number of soldiers. After that weekend he learned more and became a counselor for those who had suffered the disabling effects of the syndrome.
In World War I a similar phenomenon was called “shell shock,” in World War II it was renamed “battle fatigue,” and during and after Vietnam it gained its current designation. It’s remarkable, given what the medical establishment had learned about “shell shock,” that they were so reluctant to deal with PTSD. Our visitor described working with genuine sufferers and phonies; he told us how he spotted the latter among the former. He showed us slides, most of which were beautiful scenes of jungle and rice paddy with nary a hint of devastation or death. The dissonance between what we saw and what had ensued spoke volumes to the class. How could a place so beautiful be so deadly? How could its hidden deadliness not produce lasting anxiety, hyper-vigilance, frustration, and isolation from those who knew only peace?

At that time Tim O’Brien had published *Going after Cacciato* but not *The Things They Carried*, which would have provided a great entrée into a discussion of memory and personal, historical, and fictional truth. Herr’s *Dispatches* was the wartime equivalent of Tom Wolfe’s psychedelic prose. Etheridge Knight’s poetry also spoke volumes about the lasting effects of Vietnam and our military, especially Black combat veterans. And Ron Glasser’s *365 Days*, the memoir of a doctor who had treated the wounded in Japan, dealt with the terrible dilemma of deciding whether to send a soldier home or back into the war. Paradoxically, unless physically impaired, the soldier was usually sent back in order to prevent guilt and further psychological damage.

My own father had flown in WWI, been hit by flak, downed a number of times in damaged or faulty planes, and returned from France with a full-blown case of PTSD that explained his subsequent breakdown in 1920 and, as late as 1944, his reluctance to stay in town during the fireworks display on the Fourth of July. Learning about PTSD during my research for the course explained a lot about my father’s mental and emotional state during a period of his life about which I had heard some but understood little.

In order to deal with the context of the war, each student was assigned to a group to research and make a presentation on some aspect of topics not directly accessible through our common reading. Some reported on the draft, some on war
resisters, some on the role of the White House, or on the Tet offensive and its effect on public opinion and political policy, etc. Students left the course with considerable knowledge about the war and the many ways it affected individuals of all walks of life. The course failed in that it did not treat the war from the North and South Vietnamese points of view, although they were often implied by or inferred from the literature. But the course only lasted ten weeks, the length of each of Carleton’s three terms.

The course taught me a lot: It overcame my prejudice against grouping students to research and report, although courses I taught later restored some of that prejudice. Student maturity and commitment and the significance of the topic made the difference here. Further, the time was too short and the subject was too vast and complex to permit any individual’s understanding much of any single topic. I still believe that reading and writing at their core are essentially solitary enterprises that group effort only dilutes and dulls. Read any report “written” by a committee.

The course taught me some of my own limits: I could not sustain, year after year, the sort of emotional and spiritual effort it took to teach this one. And other things were happening in my own family life that required stamina and energy, so I could not stay as focused and collected as I needed to be to continue to teach this one.

Mostly, the course taught me how complex and diverse my students’ lives are. You never know when you may strike a nerve or tap a resource, provide nurture and perspective or provoke stress or pain. Sometimes the pain comes with gain for the student and the class; sometimes it overwhelms those most involved.
Contemporary Poetry

Because my dissertation had been on the poetry of Wallace Stevens, I had been hired to teach, among other things, “modern” poetry—roughly 1900 to 1945. I did teach that course for several years until a real poet, Keith Harrison, had been hired, and when he expressed some interest in doing modern poetry, I saw the opportunity to pass the course along and create a new one: “Contemporary Poetry.” I meant by this the poetry written in English from about 1945 to what was then the present: 1975. It seems a short period, like the most active period of English Romantic poets, but encompassed post WWII poems, the flowering of the Beats, the publication of poetry by a significant number of Jews, African Americans, and women, and a move away from the usual uses of rhyme, meter, stanza forms, and the rather impersonal voice of a narrator or hierophant. That period included the seemingly “confessional” poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, et al., about which there was much publicity—and a lot of blather.

I have the impression that most contemporary poetry courses were being taught by publishing poets, but research might prove me wrong. Keith was the published poet, but he preferred teaching Modernist poetry, so the field was clear for me. About that time I began writing poems myself and I had a personal reasons as well for examining closely “the church of what’s happening now.” The self-identified “leaping poetry” of Robert Bly and James Wright, the cool “Zen” poems of Gary Snyder, the clever primitivism of Stevie Smith, and the razor sharp poems of Margaret Atwood especially attracted me. In teaching “Black Literature” I had discovered Amiri Baraka (then named Le Roi Jones) and saw in the poetry of Robert Lowell, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Adrienne Rich the sort of transition from modernist to contemporary that could help the students see a major change in world view, sensibility, and idiom (a trinity of literary phenomena mentioned by Frederick Pottle in his course at Yale on the Romantics and wonderfully useful as categories for understanding tectonic shifts in literary history).
Because of the ten-week term in my previous course, "Modern Poetry," at first I taught only four poets—Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens. Students wrote explications and imitations. For the final they had to memorize one poem which they transcribed and proceeded to put in historical context and one poem which they transcribed and explicated in as close detail as time permitted. Most of them found memorizing two poems worthwhile, as it forced them to find works they could discuss intelligibly, and furnish their minds with something truly memorable. The course seemed to go swimmingly until I decided we needed to pay attention to more poets...and then it all fell apart—too much of a good thing with insufficient time to learn in any real depth. Adding W. H. Auden, Ezra Pound, and Marianne Moore, enriching the course in this way only diluted students’ experience and led to superficial discussion and writing.

This experience made me fear that studying more than four or five poets would similarly dilute the contemporary poetry course—but there were so many of them and all so intriguing. So we read quickly, discussed superficially, and it worked, largely because contemporary poems were much more accessible and seldom needed the scrutiny of lengthy, deep analysis. Even with a poem as long and complex as Ginsburg’s “Howl,” you need not explicate it the way Eliot’s or Stevens’ poems invited or even required.

Once again I asked students to imitate the major work of two poets—their “dominant style,” as I simplistically put it—and do one detailed explication. The imitation exercises were both left- and right-brained because I required that after students did their imitations they were to analyze what strengths of the target poet they were able to capture in their poem and what strengths they could not capture. Some students with good ears and a knack for imitation did well on the first part, some students with analytical ability did well on the second part, and some with talents in both “halves” of the brain did well on both.

As for explication, I confess that I never found a good way of explaining how such an essay is put together. I stumbled around, providing them with examples of good analyses, but could never articulate a process that they could all follow. However, one assignment that meant a lot to students and embodied some
explication was the requirement that they read one poem aloud several ways and explain which reading was the best and why. I had decided that since voice is so important in all of this—understanding tone, tempo, emphasis, etc.—I would have students read their target poem aloud three different ways and then justify their readings. This required them to tape their readings and the essay they had written explaining their choice. When the assignments were submitted I walked home with a bag of tapes and worked through them, sometimes taping my comments. Once again, the novelty of this exercise intrigued them. They found the assignment far more time-consuming and challenging than they anticipated, and sometimes more fun than expected.

The major assignment of the term was to write a “Major Poet Paper” in which students investigated the life and work of one contemporary poet whom they found particularly enjoyable, affecting, or literarily important. Research required extensive reading of the poet’s oeuvre and whatever articles or books were available; an impossible task to impose on students in the “Modern Poetry” course I had been teaching. This big paper presented them with an opportunity to do some original work, since at that time few books or essays had been published on contemporary poets. Students were free to like or dislike, relate poems biography or deny such relations, place the poet among his or her peers, etc. The essay on one poet involved observing any change from early to late style, sensibility, and idiom. They were consuming and digesting the poet’s work from soup to nuts. The heart of the paper had students focusing on a few poems they found particularly significant, discussing them, and explaining why they mattered within the poet’s work or within a wider context. Most of these papers were excellent—a pleasure to read and usually edifying for me. The more often I offered the course the more I learned about the poets from student essays.

I remember that on one of my essays in graduate school my professor had written the marginal comment, “Thanks for this; I hadn’t seen it before reading your essay.” He had admitted a bit of ignorance and expressed gratitude—a model for us all. After seeing some remarkable student work and remembering his comments I tried harder to praise the best work and, in fact, to tell students how good they were
in specific or in general. Many students had unusual talent or promise, and I had been reluctant to single them out for praise, lest I violate Carleton’s egalitarianism. My democratic urges were misplaced, of course—it’s all about opportunity—and from that point on I let students know how good they were, what I believed them really capable of.

Hemingway/Faulkner

In teaching “Introduction to Modern Literature” [in English] I became increasingly frustrated that I could have students read only one work of each of these authors. Some readers clamored for an upper class course in which they could study more of both, so I decided to offer a course that required reading and discussion of several works of each.

Who should go first? The decision presented no real challenge, since I believe that Faulkner is by far the better author, so the only real problem was what fiction to choose. Hemingway's short stories are fine, especially as embodied in In Our Time. Hemingway's late non-fiction work, A Moveable Feast, also represented him at his nasty, acerbic best, so the issue was which novels to focus on. I decided that only Hemingway's first two merited time in such a short course: The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms.

The choices for Faulkner were more difficult, but I finally settled on The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom!, and Go Down, Moses—a collection of short stories about the Mc Caslin family, white and black, that almost has the coherence of a novel.

By beginning with In Our Time the students could see how Hemingway links short stories without needing to provide narrative glue between them. The book also demonstrates how, by alternating stories with vignettes from WWI and after, he creates an implicit timeline that culminates in Nick Adams’ R&R in “The Big Two-Hearted River.” His first story, “Indian Camp,” is crucial because it teaches the
reader how to read. I had students read the story, discuss it in class, and then asked them when the badly wounded father of the woman “trying to have a baby” actually commits suicide. Very seldom could they find that moment in the story, yet Hemingway has planted it.

The narrator says “the Indian rolled over in the top bunk” (where the father has been lying for days while his wife screams in pain below him; we know how much her pain has affected others in the Indian camp by the fact that her neighbors have moved down the road to get away from her screams). Just after that Nick’s father, the doctor who was fetched from a fishing camp to help deliver the baby by caesarian section, is full of post-operative pride that he could perform the operation with only a hunting knife and tapered gut leader, since there were no medical provisions available but what he had with him for fishing. The doctor then says “Let’s see how the proud father has taken this,” and casts his light on the top bunk where the lantern reveals that the father has cut his own throat. Rolling over in the bunk signals that death which the doctor, intent on the mother, misses completely. He is suddenly deflated and aware of the traumatic scene he has put his young son through. Hemingway has caught the doctor and the reader unaware. He will do this often in his best writing, and students need to see how he has prepared his readers to interpret the rest of In Our Time. We are similarly surprised by Mike’s—and Jake’s—character flaws in The Sun Also Rises, and Catherine Barkley’s tragic fate in A Farewell to Arms.

Furthermore, rather than being the swaggering and insensitive, macho misogynist Hemingway has been portrayed by careless readers, Hemingway shows that his male characters often have less courage than the females and often respond to brutal situations by shutting down. They seem to be insensitive, but mostly because they fear acting foolish by showing the strong emotions they feel. Typical men, perhaps, but not at all without feeling.

Faulkner also teaches readers how to interpret his narrative. “The Bear” in Go Down, Moses is all about hunting, but not all of the tracking and traumatic confrontations occur in the Big Woods. In fact, in hindsight the reader of “The Bear” can see that in the book’s first story the Mc Caslin twins are hunting “big game”; they
chase their slave Tommy’s Turl when he runs off to see his lady friend on the Beauchamp’s neighboring plantation. They find him but can’t catch him, a foreshadowing of the inability of all the adult hunters to find and kill the Big Bear of the Delta. In contrast to the men, Sophonsiba Beauchamp successfully hunts and bags Uncle Buck in spite of his best efforts to avoid her.

At every turn the slave owners show their impotence against the forces of desire, social convention, and history. So when readers come to “The Bear” (in its entire five parts) they should be ready for similar surprises. The biggest surprise of what we might call this novella is the grownup Ike’s discovery of miscegenation and incest in his own family. The plantation’s ledger entries sandbag Ike in much the same way that professional single-mindedness and confidence sandbag Nick’s father, Doctor Adams in Hemingway’s “Indian Camp.”

The point of these brief exegeses:
1. Often a text provides its own instructions for reading.
2. Popular views and opinions of authors are often wrong.
3. Simple writing of noted authors can be nuanced, subtle, and is seldom simplistic.

Pairing these two authors—one a “taker-outer” and the other a “putter-inner”—helped students see in a ten-week term the diversity, complexity, and insight provided by “classic” American literary modernism.

Faulkner’s work raised critical issues about slavery and racism as well. He shows slave holders beaten in a variety of ways by their slaves, he shows the amazing intimacy among slaves and slave owners, and he shows the legacy of slavery on those who followed and tried to understand that legacy and fulfill their responsibilities to family and the human beings the families owned. It’s difficult not to venerate Faulkner for his aims and achievements in spite of the often frustrating complexities of his style.
Melville and Hawthorne

As with the course on Hemingway and Faulkner, I was attracted to the possibility of teaching back-to-back two great authors of the same historical period. My questions: Who should go first, how deal with the length and complexity of these oeuvres, and how to convey what the differences in their styles means about ways of representing history, society’s values, and human psychology.

We began with Melville, because, although his novels and stories seem more complex, and significant, they are finally not so satisfying and penetrating as Hawthorne’s apparently simplistic tales. Melville’s subjects are slavery (“Benito Cereno”), theology (Moby Dick and Mardi), injustice (of those who rule in America as seen through the example of the U.S. Navy--White Jacket), racial bigotry (Moby Dick and Typee), etc. Hawthorne seems to deal only with some twisted victims of family history, social mores, and their own neuroses. He picks on the Puritans to convey the consequences of repression, and he tries through some fantastic allegories to plumb the depths of what animates art and science (“Rappacini’s Daughter,” “The Artist of the Beautiful,” The Marble Faun, and other works). His perennial theme seems to be hubris or the search for perfection by men, which humans will never achieve.

Once again, these seem to be books about men, books and stories in which women are dolls, angels, children, or temptresses. In fact, Hawthorne’s stories focus on men’s foibles and deficiencies and how women might redeem the more fortunate of them if only they would truly see or listen. To be sure, what we have here are Nina Baym’s “Melodramas of Beset Manhood,” but at least the women speak truth and try to humanize the men. The women are not dolls, etc., and they do act—or try to. They represent appropriate social norms and values; but they must be scarce, since the stories deal with silly men. Satan is more interesting in Paradise Lost than is God Almighty.

That still doesn’t change the fact that women authors have been deleted from English literature syllabi and hence the intentional teaching and learning of
literature by American students. *Pace,* feminists; I have shared your concern and—really—often done something about it when I could. But this is still lame. I am a child of my times.

Frederick Crews’s ancient book on Hawthorne, *The Sins of the Fathers,* remains for me the most useful, even though Crews later attacked Freudian readings of literature. But Hawthorne knew repression and the consequences thereof; he was a Freudian before Freud. Reverend Dimmesdale’s failure to confess his relationship with Hester Prynne, leaves its mark psychosomatically. The sins of the Pynchon family pervade the lives of generations afterward, like a psychic curse that can only be exorcised by the death of Jaffrey, the chief recent perpetrator.

The problem with encouraging students to read Hawthorne with the lens of psychology is that in this case it may work too well and thereafter be applied to all sorts of fiction. And some students resisted any psychological interpretation on the grounds that Hawthorne focused on figures of an age long gone; to them the problem was the result of Puritan thinking. They thought his allegories were simplistic, as they are at first glance. They didn’t see how delving into those allegories revealed ambiguities and multiple interpretations that contradicted each other and led the reader into deeper and deeper problems and insights. For example, at the conclusion of “My Kinsman Major Molyneux,” the protagonist Robin suddenly learns that the man he relied on for aid and advancement, the eponymous major, has been forcibly deposed from office, tarred and feathered, and is being ridden out of town on a rail. Robin laughs “the loudest laugh” of all. What does the laugh mean? It all seems so simple: Robin has been frustrated in his search for his kinsman and he has finally learned why. The major, as a representative of the Crown, has lost his office to protesting colonists.

Questions remain: Does Robin laugh at himself for his vain hopes of advancement through his kinsman? Does Robin laugh at himself and the major in this remarkable predicament? Does the laugh convey humiliation, scorn, self-rebuke, a desire to gain acceptance in this crowd so hostile to a member of his family? Does the laugh express relief at finally comprehending all the rebuffs he has
suffered during that long day? Some or all of the above? The laugh that seems to conclude the story is really just the beginning.

One could comment similarly on nearly all of Hawthorne’s works—not because he doesn’t tell us what something means but because he tells us too much: a strategy that has been called “discursive symbolism.” It’s a variety of the strategy that Melville uses when he has many members of the Pequod’s crew comment, each in his own way, on the meaning of the doubloon that Captain Ahab nails to the mast as a possible reward for the first man to sight the White Whale. Melville presents us with many different interpretations, each of which makes sense to that particular viewer but no sense to any other crew member. We end with a surfeit of sense and meaning that leaves us in as much of a quandary as if no interpretation had been presented at all.

Hawthorne’s tales baffle us, almost forcing a re-reading; certainly his tales invite further inspection if the reader is game enough to delve deeper.

Native American Literature

It took chutzpah and a damn-the-torpedoes attitude to put this course together. Not being Native American and having read relatively little of the history and literature to be comprehended in this course, I had worked for several years to gain the needed background for properly understanding the texts I chose to include. I was motivated to do the course because the College already had courses in Native American history and Native American religion, but no course on the literature at all, and most whites know Native America only by the literature their talented writers have produced—such writers as Louise Erdrich, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko. By the third time I taught the course I was still learning nightly and still humbled by the task. My students helped me learn, since some came from the West or lived near reservations, some were Native American, and some had done lots of reading on the subject because of a prior interest.
I had to let students know my limits without destroying my authority altogether. I did not admit them to "the Green Room" where I prepared, but I told them to feel free to challenge my view of history or interpretation of text. They typically had difficulty sensing the humor in dialogue or narration. They tended to generalize from one group or historical period to others as they learned the customs, values, and relationships of a given tribe or nation. So the course served, among other things, to teach them to consider tone and cautioned them not to compare different but apparently similar individuals and groups.

In the course they necessarily learned a lot of history and even historiography. In fact I started with Black Elk Speaks in order to show students how some allegedly genuine, historically significant texts had been constructed. For Neihardt, who published the book, Black Elk sat down and spoke to an old friend familiar with many of the events he related. His (actually their) narration was translated by his son and transcribed by John Neihardt’s daughter. Of that transcription Neihardt made the book we have. Many readers suspected or claimed on the basis of notes made from the interviews that the memorable conclusion of the book was never spoken by Black Elk himself but rather constructed as a fitting end to a remarkable life.

The history, mythic origins, and personal experience of a Kiowa tribe member tell a complex tale very briefly in The Way to Rainy Mountain by N. Scott Momaday. Sherman Alexie mixes and mingles murder mystery, critique of whites’ theft of native materials and culture, and personal tragedy transcended by supernatural means in Indian Killer. In other works he continually challenges traditional notions students’ of realism and comedy. Alexie was one of the students’ favorites. But by far the book that most intrigued and pleased the students’ was Louise Erdrich’s Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse. The protagonist is a white woman who, in a hilarious way, becomes a priest and starts ministering to the inhabitants of an Indian village in the North woods. Her terribly underestimated novel says remarkable things about what belonging, acceptance, and help mean. One student planned to buy a copy for her grandmother, another was urging a roommate to read the novel, and so on. Once again, too little time and too many
wonderful books and poems to read. I believe the course worked well but was undersubscribed—perhaps because it was not cross-listed and most English majors failed to notice it at all.

The Im/migrant Experience

This is the only course discussed here that was created by a committee--the result of a decision by members of the American Studies Program to revise our introductory course. Religion Professor Anne Braudy (now at Harvard) and I had attended a week-long set of workshops about issues in American studies at the High Mowing School in Massachusetts. What we heard there spoke to the limitations of Carleton's program and led us to the strategy of inviting the director of a successful ethnic studies program to help us explore how our program might better embody major issues facing the U.S. that we were not adequately addressing. We needed to deal with race and the inability of this country to move towards equal opportunity as well as respectful diversity. This has been a problem for the nation from its very beginnings, and very few institutions seemed to have found a way of teaching its complex issues successfully.

I decided that I would attend the ASA meeting to see if I could identify a scholar or administrator of a truly successful program. At the next American Studies Association meeting I saw and admired the skills of Professor Ramon Gutierrez in several workshops, I invited him to visit Carleton for as much of a week as his schedule as former director and then current provost of U.C. San Diego could afford him—to tell our faculty about their program in Ethnic Studies which had gained national fame for its rigor, breadth, and effectiveness. It dealt with the issues we found lacking in our own program, and in contrast to Berkeley's program in ethnic studies it was notably free of internecine strife. It focused on three themes that the U.C. San Diego faculty had deemed essential to such a program:
immigration, racism, and genocide. In previous years our program faculty had heard about American Studies or American Civilization programs at Tufts and Yale. Members of the program had learned about what other colleges and universities were doing, and UC San Diego seemed to have taken an excellent path.

We chose to focus on immigration in our workshop that December, listening to what Ramon could tell us about the program at UCSD and reading the material he suggested. Several of us then took the next months to plan our introductory course. I insisted on the split title so that we could explicitly include the dispossession and forced moves of Native Americans along with more obvious migrations. The course began with the experience of the Irish and continued with other groups: Italians here and in Argentina, Japanese here and in Brazil, Chinese in the U.S., Native Americans, and finally Latinos, especially Mexican Americans.

The teachers, three co-teaching in each iteration, worked hard to learn about these groups and the varying experiences of first, second, and third generation immigrants. We used texts from history, sociology, literature, economics, and politics to let students see as much of the life of the various immigrants as they could in ten weeks. And that’s the rub: ten weeks for such an ambitious course was too little. The course was not a failure, but I believe it was thin and superficial. But when we dealt with issues in some depth we would lose some students who were interested in, say, literature and history but not politics and economics, and so forth. I never convinced myself that the course really did what we intended. Most students were not so critical; for some, however, it did not meet their expectations.

The payoff, however, was a new introduction that did appeal to a larger audience than before. The faculty learned a great deal, but student papers and exams tended toward the simplistic or the ill defined. How could they have done better in such a wide-ranging course in such a short time? I believe that the course would have worked better if we had focused on at most two immigrant groups, substituting some depth for the diversity of cultures that we see in the nation. A noble attempt, but finally not up to snuff. But a significant reward was that faculty team-taught, which involved a great deal of discussion and learning from each other. For that reason alone, I consider that the course advanced the maturity of our
American Studies program and created some social ties among faculty to facilitate
the intellectual interchanges the course required. The team teaching was borrowed
from Tufts, some content and goals from UCSD, and we did the best we could with a
course created by committee.

Introduction to Modern British and American Literature

I never before had the confidence and fluency in the classroom that I enjoyed
in my last years when I again taught the Introduction to modern British and
American Literature. My previous teaching of many other related upper-class
courses had taught me much, but I didn’t realize how hard I had been working while
teaching new courses or how much I had learned from those courses. When I once
again taught this introduction, I came at it with a much deeper and broader
knowledge.

One of the delights of this course over the years was the presence of senior
physics and math majors who had postponed their arts requirement and decided
that this lit course would not be too unpalatable. They were always among the most
useful and searching students in discussion because they asked the most
fundamental questions—perhaps because some of them were taking the course
“pass/fail’ (not for a grade) but more likely because they were curious and
genuinely wanted to learn how novels and poetry changed in this period. Why the
interest in Eastern culture then? Why did styles diverge so much in the early 20th
century? Why so much irony? Isn’t this a different kind of symbolism from what
you see in Dickens, George Eliot, or Melville? Did WWI cause this change in what
you call world view and sensibility? Why didn’t previous wars cause similar
changes? (Actually the Napoleonic Wars did, I believe, but when I was teaching
there was little exploration in criticism of this). What do you really mean by
“symbolism”? Is the gull in The Sound and the Fury a symbol? Did Faulkner connect
the gull to Gerald Bland’s oars while rowing and to the clock hands—or did you make that up?

I never solved the problem of teaching as much as the students deserved of this period, but I believe that I did manage to sample well. Samples came from some Brits (Forster, Woolf, Auden, T. S. Eliot), Irish (Joyce), Americans (Hemingway, Faulkner, Stevens, Williams, Ellison, Baraka), and others (Atwood and a few European works in translation). Some years I tried to include authors who might win a prize and managed to hit the target, choosing four Nobel writers (before their official selection) over one decade of teaching. Works were read entire—no excerpts. Students wrote three papers, as usual, took a very occasional quiz, and knew the exam questions beforehand. They were encouraged to write imitations with commentary. But the great thing was classroom discussion—some of the best I ever experienced because it contained famous and popular literature and for the reason stated above: the junior and senior science and math majors who took nothing for granted and often challenged an *ex cathedra* statement.

* * * * *

One might suppose that one way to estimate the success of one’s teaching would be to listen to remarks of alumni, or even to solicit them and then analyze results. That strategy is contradicted by the many unsolicited remarks I have received over the years. Many alums have told me that what I did at some point changed their lives, or enriched their lives, or enabled them to graduate, or put them on the path they had followed. No graduates ever took the time to tell me what was wrong with my teaching or how I messed up their lives. Alas, when told of a good outcome and I asked what I had done to make such a difference, I was usually regaled with a story of a conversation I had no memory of, or a decision I had made that I had forgotten, or a simple remark made in class that had no particular significance to me at all. One student, after publishing a memoir and returning to Carleton to read from it volunteered that I had helped make her the writer she is
today. She said that I had told her she not only had to write but that she had to live a writer’s life. I have no memory of this, and I’m not quite sure what she or I meant. Another writer of a well-received novel told me that my willingness to supervise an individual study enabled him to get the credits he needed and to learn something essential about American literature, which he had not read in depth to that point. I don’t remember having taught him at all, least of all in an independent study. It must have been a very independent study, as many were through the years.

To come right down to it, the classroom delights I enjoyed may have had very little to do with critical aspects of my students’ education. I hope I enhanced their enjoyment of literature. Teaching seems to have been for me a rather solipsistic enterprise, based mostly on the students’ good faith and my desire to remedy my own ignorance.

After forty years at Carleton I left classroom teaching as I entered it—an unashamed, unrepentant amateur. Why else would one want to teach at a liberal arts college? Learned and curious colleagues surrounded me, bright and literate students filled the classrooms, and freedom to innovate was granted without a struggle. The last was even approved and supported by Dean Bard Smith’s CRUD grants—money for “Curriculum Research Und Development.” In my estimation Carleton at that time was first among equals for its emphasis on excellence in teaching, and its willingness to tolerate the occasional failure. I presume that the College continues to support such experimentation.

But who is to say? If I had met resistance or outright hostility to my pedagogical impulses, I might have taught better courses and been a true scholar/teacher. As it was, the relative ease with which I mutated from English to American Studies, from modern poetry to multicultural literature, from scholar to teacher of teachers may have kept me from being a better teacher. When teaching American lit I acted the cultural pathologist and when teaching Voices I acted the writer impersonator. All this raises questions of identity and vocation that I am too old to worry about. Sufficient to say that my teaching career was never dull or without genuine enjoyment.
After knowing me for five decades and reflecting on what I was doing with my life, a close friend and colleague, Wayne Carver, finally concluded with some measure of surprise, “you’re really a teacher.” I never asked him what else he had expected.