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Roundtable “Jornada de Enseñanza de Literatura en Inglés 2012”: *Teaching Literature, Teaching Life*

Speaker: Paula Baldwin

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Roundtable “Jornada de Enseñanza de Literatura en Inglés 2012”: *Teaching Literature, Teaching Life*

Speaker: Paula Baldwin Lind
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(I studied here at this university, so I owe much of my first years studying Literature to many of the teachers that taught me here. María Ester Martínez was one of my teachers and she was a really good friend of mine. She taught me many of the things that I know, apart from others that are here: Carola Oyarzún, Beatriz Kase, Susana Bunster and so many others that are not present today.)

My academic life is divided into two different fields. One field is Children’s Literature and everything that has to do with reading motivation, reading engagement, literacy, methodology, introducing children to the pleasure of reading. My other field is related to Literature as such, especially Shakespeare and drama. In fact, Shakespeare is one of my passions, certainly not the only one!

In this brief lecture, I will speak in general about possible approaches to teaching Literature, but also to teach English through Literature. The things I will say will be useful either for school or for university level because I’m convinced that you can adapt these strategies depending on your objectives and on your students. When I teach students that are going to become English teachers at primary school, I adapt my strategies and my methodology to their needs. When I teach students that are studying Literature as a degree, those who are going to become researchers or academics, I use the same basic strategies and methodologies, but I change the degree of analysis or the type of assessment because my objectives are different.

Before getting into practical issues, let me tell you that teaching Literature has been one of the most rewarding experiences in my life. Through it you can get to the heart of life, to the origin of ideas, to the ways in which other people live or have lived. You read, you think, you analyse others’ behaviour, you write about it, and in so doing you reflect upon your own life. In a certain

sense, we all need to read and tell stories because we all live out narratives in our lives that allow us to understand and learn about ourselves and the others. Precisely because Literature is a representation of life, an imitation of it or *mimesis*, as the wise Aristotle stated in his *Poetics*, the teaching of Literature should make reference to life.

I would like to explain briefly what the theoretical basis that supports my teaching is, simply because I think you cannot build teaching strategies without having a “solid ground”. I am convinced that a methodology is useful and meaningful in the classroom only if, first, the teacher is convinced about it, and second, if he/she has a theoretical background to it. A teacher cannot start applying strategies and methodologies before knowing what he/she wants, before have clear in his/her mind what an idea of what Literature is, because there are many ways in which one can teach it. We might teach English literature for a variety of purposes and in a variety of ways, be they cultural, educational, ideological, or exclusively literary. Students might increase their vocabulary or their knowledge of specific periods or authors. They might even repeat passages of a specific play by heart if we are dealing with drama. However, this learning would become meaningful only if students are able to examine human actions and conflicts through them.

Teaching literature as a hermeneutical exercise is decisive. It means to interpret the text starting from the text. In this dynamic, the text serves as a point of departure but also as a point of return; it becomes a raw material, but at the same time a frame and limit from which and with which teachers and students will work to infer, derive or discover a “mirror of life”. The idea is to comprehend the text, its main conflicts, the type and function of the characters.

The text is analysed not as a separate or isolated entity, but as part of an exercise that aims at revealing and discovering the sense that, in a mysterious way, is present in its literality. Teacher and students will work not only to understand the text, but to give it a sense. Students will be able to discuss and share their opinions and views regarding the role of different characters, etc. and some of them might present a final project as part of their assessment. Needless to say, teachers do not carry this exercise from the same position of their students. Having made the exercise before, they will play the role of facilitators or guides in the students’ first discovery or encounter with the text. (Baldwin & Fernández, 2009, p.7)

Thus, in the hermeneutical exercise there will always be a need to infer many things. Some inferences will be more evident than others, and many will directly constitute interpretation options or ‘readings’. Nevertheless, all of them will have to be at least coherent with the frame that the text itself provides. As Martin Wiggins argues, “for the purpose of critical interpretation, we must work

with what we are given: parts of a character that are not visible, or not inferrable, are not there.” (Wiggins, 1994, p.214).

Assessment will need to be approached with similar criteria. Students might write essays about some complex and disputable feature of a play, trying to support their arguments with the text. In other words, the hermeneutical exercise I propose goes from text to theory. Sometimes our students do not read the sources, but the comments that others have made about those texts; therefore, they do not make their own analysis of them.

How do we achieve this in a class of 40 students, for example? Or in a group of students that are non-bilingual? Let me describe briefly what I call the branches of the tree. If, in my perspective, a mimetic hermeneutical exercise is the ground for teaching Literature, the tree is the content, and the branches are your objectives and how your students achieve them. A couple of weeks ago, a professor from Harvard came to Chile. Her name is Jennifer Craig and she works in a programme called “Writing across the curriculum”. According to her, “strong writing is a highly desired student outcome at the university level. Yet those outcomes are difficult to achieve despite our efforts.” (Craig, 2012, p.1). We know that our students are usually not prepared for this task despite their possibly good grades because they may not have written very much at secondary school level.

I do not want to focus on the students’ lack of skills but rather on what we can as teachers. Because writing in the end is linked to reading, to thinking, and often to oral presentation, it is a vital element in the teaching of Literature; moreover, it is like the oxygen in a university. Teaching Literature is not only teaching to read and analyse a text; it is also teaching to think and express your ideas. As Craig points out, our students are probably “doing a lot of reading and writing. Mobile devices, electronic social networks, the Internet, wireless technology, and email, have created a generation of young adults who are always writing or reading. Of course, they are writing with their thumbs on a tiny keyboard and in abbreviated text and what they may think of a “reading” – skimming across screens and clicking through web pages, social networks, ‘tweets’ and text messages – bears very little resemblance to the kind of focused, coherent, lengthy critical reading that is important at university level.” (Craig, 2012, p.3). In short, students usually are beginning writers at a critical developmental stage. They need guidance to improve their basic skills.

Well, these objectives constitute the second element I have in mind when deciding the methodologies I will use in class. In other words, I take methodological decisions that support my

main objectives and that are adequate to the group of students I have and to the literary genre I'm teaching. We need to know our students in order to design our strategies, so that we are able to motivate them and engage them with what we are doing. No matter how creative and well-organised a methodology is, it will not work if it is not appropriate for your students' abilities. In this sense, as I said before, if you are teaching Literature, it is very different to deal with a short story than to analyse a play written in Elizabethan English or a medieval miracle play. Therefore, I propose a shift from lecture-based teaching to a project-based learning which allows students to engage in more 'hands on' learning and provides ample opportunities for writing assignments. Similarly, the regular use of active learning strategies in a classroom offers opportunities to use writing as a tool for learning.

Most of the strategies I will show now were planned with the aid of my assistance, Beatriz Rengifo. They were applied at two levels of teaching: BA in Literature and also in Literature courses for students who will become primary school teachers, so what we did was to change the emphasis in each case. I am going to explain to you, very briefly, some of the strategies that I have used in the last years.

First, we can use discussion seminars. These can be applied at school or at university level. What I do, however, is not the traditional discussion seminar. I give the questions to my students in advance, so, while they read, even if it is a theoretical text, a short story or a play, they have some reading tips and clues. I ask them to pay attention to these ideas, so that when they come to the seminar they know what we are going to discuss about. This is a very basic and typical strategy.

My next strategy is supposedly designed for children, but I have used it with university students and it has worked wonderfully, especially if the texts are long and difficult. This methodology is called Literature Circles. In a few words, a Literature Circle is a group of no more than five students in which each student has got a different a role. You can adapt the roles depending on your class. One is the director, the other one is the word-finder, you have the summarizer, the connector, the artful artist, etc... Students can work with the text even if they have not read it; they can start reading together, but each of them has a different role. The Director writes notes for future questions. The Summarizer starts thinking on how he is going to summarize or report on what they are doing. The one that is the Connector looks for links with real life, or real situations. The Artful Artist tries to represent what they are reading. They can be reading all

together, in silence, or aloud. After that, each of them with their role discusses what they have read and then each group reports to the rest of the class. It is really a good experience.

Last year my class was reading *Waiting for Godot* and it was very hard for them because it belongs to the Theatre of the Absurd. So I did something very simple that was reading aloud in a different way. I photocopied a drawing of a tree and two hats and I pasted them on the whiteboard. Vladimir, one of the main characters, was standing next to Estragon and the tree was the setting. I started calling in front of the class, two students each time who read the part of one character. They read very brief chunks of text and we all commented on them. Questions like: “What did you feel when you read?”, “What did you think about that?”. Classmates interacted with the “readers” or “actors” as well. It was simple, very simple, but it was an excellent experience. Everyone was engaged; they all participated because they all had to read in front of the class at least once.

I have done debates but not the usual ones which might be very complex to do and need a lot of time and work. I have organised several debates that consist basically in dividing the class in groups of no more than four people and giving them questions. In this case, it was a debate between Antigone vs. Oedipus. Some groups represented Antigone, while others were in favour of Oedipus. Part of the debate was based on Aristotle’s *Poetics* and his theory of tragedy which is usually a very difficult text to understand for them. The questions of the debate were about who the best tragic hero is in both tragedies, what the protagonist’s tragic flaw is, which of these tragedies fulfils the three Aristotelian unities better, and so on. One group gave arguments in favour of Antigone, then, the next argued for Oedipus. Students prepared the topics before the day of the debate and they were prepared for discussing. They were absolutely engaged and I am speaking about students who were in their last year of Literature at university level. They worked hard; they wrote essay-type answers and they expressed their ideas in a very entertaining way.

The other thing I have done –and this is great for schools as well– is to introduce technological resources. Teachers sometimes think that introducing all these new strategies is not doing a proper Literature class, that it will not be so deep, or that this is not for Literature, for the humanities or philosophy. Well, it is. I can tell you. We are in a modern world and we need to change the ways in which we teach. Using technological devices does not mean that the students are not going to think or that they are not going to do text analysis; they will do it in a very serious and deep way, but at the same time, in an engaging and motivating way.

The other strategy that I have applied is related to writing assessments. Instead of asking my students to write essays all the time –which they do, 5-page, formal essays–, I have given them the opportunity of a different written assessment that is a brochure. In this case, my experience was again with *Waiting for Godot*. They had to interview one of the characters, they had to write a review of the play, then answer a discussion question, and finally investigate on the biography of the author. Again, it brought excellent results. They were writing as much as they would if they had written an essay and they were absolutely engaged.

Learning centres have also worked quite well. These are useful in case you have a topic that includes many other issues, which is the case of Shakespeare. Teaching Shakespeare includes, among other topics, dealing with Elizabethan theatre, the English historical context, and Shakespeare' style. We divided the class of fifth year university students, in different centres and the final exam was to go through each learning centre, either writing an answer to an essay-type question, defining a concept, or interpreting one of the characters' speeches. One was the reading aloud centre, another was a definition centre, the other one was essay-writing centre. They went to each centre in the moment they wanted within a limit of time; therefore, some students were answering questions, while others were reading aloud, analysing speeches from *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Tempest* and interpreting them orally. I was listening to them with my assistant and it was a very good exercise not only for reading comprehension, but also to learn in a motivating way.

The last activity I will mention today is the design of a blog. Students were complaining all the time that they had too many things to do, that it was too difficult to write, so we decided to divide their writing assessment in smaller chunks. The idea was a blog called “The Drama Teapot”. Each of them had to identify themselves with a teapot and we posted three entries during one month. The first entry had around seven questions from *The Tempest*, act 1 and 2; the second entry included act 3 and 4, and so on. The questions were such that they could interact with their classmates, they could answer the question someone else had answered, they could disagree with their classmate's answer, quoting and providing evidence from the play. They were not just blogging; this was a formal academic assessment.

Finally, for evaluation, I have my personal theory that considers evaluation as a a game. The student should not come to class thinking “Okay, today I've got a test”. My tests are usually activities in which the students have to play with something, either in written form, or, for example,

go to a corner and take a card that has instructions for a specific task. In cases such as oral presentations, I designed rubrics and peer evaluation done by the rest of the students so that while their classmates are presenting, they are evaluating them. At the end we put together all those evaluations, comment on the activity, and then the teacher gives a mark that is very well informed.

I think that, as teachers, we need to think what Literature means to us, how we want to teach it, what our aim is, what approach we will choose, and what the theory behind our methodologies will be. If Literature is about life, a representation of human actions, of human beings, of human problems, and human feelings, the questions we have to ask ourselves are: Where is the presence of life in this text? What do I want to get from this reading? What do I want my students to reflect upon?, Am I motivated with this so as to engage my students?. A teacher that is passionate about Literature will transmit this love of reading to his/her students. It is not a question of enthusiasm, or of a particular personality. We are living in a very pragmatic society and we need to present our students meaningful and interesting tasks that not only provide knowledge, but also help them become better persons, understand themselves and the world that surrounds them. Literature can certainly do this!

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