DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 425 CS 212 865

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TITLE Alternatives to the Anthology: Rethinking an Introductory Literature Course.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Spring Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (Indianapolis, IN, March 14-16, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Anthologies; *Authors; *Fiction; Higher Education; *Introductory Courses; *Literature Appreciation; *Textbook Selection; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS Aesthetic Reading

ABSTRACT

A college educator (trained in composition) encountered some problems when he began teaching an introductory literature course. In the first year of the course, he used a fiction anthology as his textbook. The class examined one story at a time, and attempts to compare readings seemed forced. The teacher realized that anthologies are narrow in scope, including few women writers, African-American writers, experimental writers, etc., and usually only contain one or two pieces by each author. Eventually, the instructor began to use single author collections. While students could then explore fewer cultures and historical periods, they could examine each author more deeply and with more context. Using stories that were less familiar than those commonly found in anthologies allowed the teacher to imagine student questions more easily and to have more meaningful dialogue with students. The reading of single-author collections enabled students to make connections between works of the same author. Students also become more able to describe relationships between authors. If educators want students to continue reading, more interesting, challenging, and vital issues of literary study must be introduced. Teachers must reconsider the kinds of texts that are typically used in introductory literature courses. (SG)

Alternatives to the Anthology: Rethinking an Introductory Literature Course

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I had been teaching English for five years before I was allowed to teach my first literature course, Introduction to Fiction. My graduate school training was in composition, and I had taught nothing but writing courses for five years. The English departments I had studied and worked in had taught me to look at a literature course as something completely separate from a writing course. In that first literature course I taught, my ideas about about process, about audience, about writing in general all went out the window. I ignored much of what I had learned in graduate school, and I ended up teaching a New Critical introductory literature course which resembled the beginning courses I had taken as an undergraduate.

The text I chose for that first Introduction to Fiction course was a huge anthology called Fictions, and I picked it

almost solely because of the range of choices it seemed to offer. I remember when I was trying to put my reading list together, I had no idea of how to structure it. I did end up using one idea from my training in composition theory and that was James Moffett's ladder of abstraction. I organized my course according to the points of view that stories were told in. In the course we moved up the ladder of abstraction from stories in which the teller is close to the tale and close to the audience to stories where the teller is distant from the tale and distant from the audience.

One of the things I thought I was doing with this structure was leading from stories which were less difficult to stories which were more difficult. I quickly discovered that this was a ridiculous notion-- that the point of view often has very little to do with the degree of difficulty of a story. More importantly, I have come to believe that it is impossible to judge the degree of difficulty of a text with any certainty. Whether or not a text is accessible to a group of readers is largely a function of what a teacher is willing to do to help make that text understandable for that particular group. Are we willing to give background information or do a line by line reading or whatever it might take to give our students access? I used to look at other teachers' course outlines and say things like, "How can you possibly expect to teach <u>The Sound and The Fury</u> to college freshmen?" I don't say things like that anymore

because I have seen too many teachers succeed with books that I would find unteachable.

One of the habits I got into in that first course I taught was to present one story in each fifty minute class. That made organizing and planning classes easier, but the problem was, we almost always ended up doing a close reading of one story at a time. With that structure it felt as if I had to force connective thinking by taking a class now and then where I said, "Okay, now let's look at the point of view over the last three stories." If I didn't stop and ask that kind of question, then it seemed as if we were always talking about one text at a time.

With the point of view structure I was using, we might read Edgar Alan Poe, Toni Cade Bambara and James Joyce all in the same week. Obviously, I was presenting very little context or background information about the authors, other than the thumbnail sketches provided by the editors of the anthology. For me, using an anthology resulted in a strongly New Critical approach in which we focussed on individual texts themselves with almost no background or context.

I had two major problems when I taught out of an anthology. One is that anthologies tend to be very light on stories by women writers, African American Writers, Native American writers, third world writers, experimental writers, etc. Many anthologies are getting better about this, but still in most anthologies there is a kind of

tokenism. You always know the particular stories by women and by African Americans that you'll find in the anthology: "The Story of an Hour," "The Yellow Wallpaper," "Sonny's Blues," "Almost a Man."

The other major problem is that anthologies usually only contain one or two pieces by each author. In Textual Power, while trying to describe the ideal introductory literature course, Robert Scholes argues that literature courses should try to give students the tools they need to produce their own readings of texts (25). We often make the mistake of thinking that a smaller piece will be easier to read, when a larger sampling and more background information might enable our students to produce their own readings. For example, whenever I used to teach one Flannery O'Connor story out an anthology, it always turned into a class where I explicated the story. When I used a collection of Flannery O'Connor stories and had students read seven stories, along with some criticism and some biographical information, they were more able to work out the stories on their own. (The first time I taught an O'Connor collection, after we had read three stories, one of my students made what was, up until then, the most perceptive comment I had ever heard a student make about Flannery O'Connor. She said, "I think she takes this believing-in-Christ stuff way too serious.") Robert Scholes says that if we want students to produce their own readings, then, "First we throw away our standard

anthologies because they do not give us a large enough sample of any single writer"(25). For the past three years I have taken Scholes' advice and thrown away my anthologies and used single author collections of poems, plays and stories instead.

One I decided to use single author collections, again, it was difficult to figure out how to structure my course. Now I could only use seven or eight authors. Which authors would they be and how would I put them together? In Textual Power Robert Scholes offers this description of choosing texts for the fiction section of an introductory literature course: "Then we choose perhaps three collections of short stories by writers whose work will offer a good contrast of styles and values: something local, something foreign, something male, something female, something obvious, something subtle, something realistic, something fantastic and so on. One cannot encompass the world in a triangle of writers, but contrast is a basic principle here."

Many introductory literature do try to encompass the world by covering a wide scope of cultures, historical periods, etc. One of the things that happens if you use single author collections is that you deal with fewer authors and therefore you obviously cover fewer cultures and fewer historical periods. What you gain though is that you get to talk about each author in more depth and with more context. For example, this semester I am teaching a book by

Richard Wright called Eight Men. This collection includes a couple of Wright's famous stories, along with some pieces he was unable to place in major magazines. It also contains two radio plays, a section from an unpublished novel and an autobiographical essay. I love this particular collection for many reasons. One is that the autobiographical essay gives the class some context on Wright's life and times. Another nice quality is that, while most anthologies suppose a rigid division between genres, this collection shows how blurry the lines between genres can be. Finally, this collection raises the question of why some pieces get published in major magazines and anthologies and why some do not.

Anthologies tend to be like greatest hits compilations. They give you excerpts, bits and pieces, instead of whole language. I would rather read whole collections of stories and poems, put together in the way that the author intended. Of course, there are some collections where there is filler-- stories and poems that were thrown in to get the collection to book length. But even in those cases, I usually assign some of the filler pieces. It is important for students to read great authors when they are not at their best. When we present students with the anthology, greatest hits version of literature, they get the idea that authors are people who never make mistakes. Collections which contain a couple of thrown-in pieces can help students

to become more critical as readers and more confident as writers.

Another important benefit of breaking away from the anthology is that I don't have to teach "The Lottery" for the sixty-seventh time. I may be confessing to a lack of imagination here, because theoretically there should always be new ways of approaching a text, but after I have taught "The Lottery" sixty-six times, it is hard for me to believe that I will develop any new ideas about it. Once I stopped using an anthology, I ended up teaching a lot more new material. This might sound as if it is more work than relying on the old standards, but the great advantage of bringing a somewhat unfamiliar text into the classroom is that it makes it much easier to imagine what questions students will have on their first reading. When I am teaching a text for the first or second time it is much easier for me to have an actual dialogue with students.

For me, the greatest benefit of using single author collections has been the kind of talk and the kind of writing that tends to occur when we discuss several pieces by one author. I find that my students quickly become adept at making connections between pieces by the same author. And I believe that that connective thinking carries over and enables students to then describe relationships between authors. In my classes we do some close readings, but we also spend at least half of our time talking about the

relationships between the pieces we've read. The work we do with these single author collections feels more connected, more substantial that the work we did when we were jumping from author to author in an anthology.

One of the things that happens when you start to use single author collections is that your course starts to look more like an advanced college course or a graduate seminar; it becomes a course in which you study writers and writing in more depth and with more context. Many introductory level college courses assume that they are laying the foundation for the further study of literature. These courses are based on what Mike Rose calls the canonical orientation-- that is, certain works must be covered <u>before</u> students can engage in serious literary study (235). I do not think that we can afford to teach courses which assume the further study of literature. At the school where I teach (a two year technical college), we often joke that the course title should be changed to Conclusion to Literature. Instead of teaching courses which <u>assume</u> further reading, I think we need to teach courses which will <u>inspire</u> further reading.

I agree with Donald Barthomae and Anthony Petrosky when they say that we should model courses for beginning students on the best kinds of courses we know of. So then beginning courses should resemble honors courses or graduate seminars.

If we want students continue reading, we need to introduce them to the most interesting, challenging and vital issues of literary study-- issues of philosophy, language, culture, class, gender, race, religion, politics. If we are going to going to provide any kind of depth and context while working with these issues, then I think we have to reconsider the kinds of texts that are typically used in introductory literature courses.

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