DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 399 CS 214 423

AUTHOR	Winter, Kathleen R.
TITLE	Learning Theory for Use in the Composition Classroom.
PUB DATE	18 Mar 94
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Techniques; Higher Education; Literature Appreciation; Reader Response; Rhetorical Theory; Undergraduate Students; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	Composition Literature Relationship; Composition Theory; *Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

Teaching "some" literature in a college composition course is important because it offers variety, enlivens classroom discussion, introduces different writing styles, and helps students to understand and study life. The debate over the appropriateness of literature in the composition classroom has been ongoing. Erika Lindemann believes that literature has no place in the teaching of composition because literature is not useful for students to model their essays after or analyze for style. Essays, she argues, are the proper reading material for composition. By contrast, Gary Tate contends that college instructors submitted too quietly to the "rhetoric police" of the 1960s; bothered by the current emphasis on academic discourse, he fears that composition has been turned into a "service course" for all disciplines. This paper describes the use of a reader-response approach, which includes at least one novel in composition classes for many reasons: (1) to expose students to literature and literary terms; (2) to build tolerance of various viewpoints and enhance classroom discussions; (3) to expand the unconscious; (4) to offer students pleasure and joy; (5) to prepare students, as Tate argues, to participate in important conversations outside the academy. Furthermore, few instructors feel equal to the task that rhetoric scholars ask of them: to prepare students for writing in all disciplines. (TB)

Kathleen R. Winter
English Department
Southwest Missouri State University
Springfield, MO 65804

1994 CCCC, Nashville, TN

LEARNING THEORY FOR USE IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

ROUNDTABLE I.1 Fri., March 18, 2:45-4:00 p.m.
Stouffer/Ryman Room South, Level 3

"Redefining the Role of 'Permanent Temps':
Proving Ourselves Professionals"

Kathleen R. Winter
English Department
Southwest Missouri State University
Springfield, MO 65804

ROUNDTABLE I.1: "Redefining the Role of 'Permanent Temps': Proving Ourselves Professionals"

Panelist 2:

"Learning Theory for Use in the Composition Classroom"

Our implied contract means that our "first and foremost responsibilities" are as teachers of composition, often times the only aspect of our jobs recognized by our institutions. We know that this contract also calls on us to keep current in comp-rhetoric theories, and even, possibly, literary theories. To that end, we read College Composition and Communication, College English, Journal for Advanced Composition, as well as other professional journals, and we attend state and national conferences and workshops. We are aware of the comp-rhetoric theories of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, that we still espouse in our classrooms: writing without teachers; freewriting; mapping/clustering; process writing; journals; attention to audience; revision of drafts in the classroom; small group work; CAI; holistic grading; critical thinking; portfolios and assessment.

"Permanent Temps" are also cognitive of some, if not all, literary theories for most have studied at some time in their undergraduate or graduate career under "literary specialists." We know there is an on-going battle of whether to teach literature in the composition classroom or not: articles are often published on this subject,

as are entire books. Two of the more recent articles in the March, 1993, issue of College English (311-321), one by Erika Lindemann and one by Gary Tate, cover the spectrum of arguments used for and against teaching literature in the composition classroom.

Lindemann believes that the comp classroom is "no place for literature," because literature is not useful for students to model their essays after or analyze for style (314). Instead, she believes, teachers of comp should allow the students to study articles and essays from the other academic disciplines so that the Freshman English course can "provide opportunities to master the genres, styles, audiences, and purposes of college writing" (312). "Such courses have as their subject matter the processes whereby writers and readers enter the conversation of the academy and begin to contribute to the making of knowledge" (313). Lindemann gives five seemingly valid reasons for keeping literature out of the composition classroom, or at least to a minimum (313-15).

Tate argues for the place of fiction, poetry, and drama in the comp classroom. He feels that, in the 1960s when the "Rhetoric Police," as he calls them, came into power, many teachers "surrendered" without much fight. True, some teachers who desperately wanted to teach literature "badly misused" the literature in comp classes (CE 317). Tate does not believe that "imaginative literature should be the only kind of reading required of our composition students, nor should it be the only kind of writing they are asked to do" (319). He does suggest that "we need to think seriously about why we are neglecting literature" (319) and wonders if we have been convinced by our own students that, since they have come to college to get a better job, "a college education is primarily job training and that the task of the freshman writing course is to help make that training more effective" (320).

Furthermore, he is "increasingly bothered . . . by the current focus on academic discourse" and states, "I sometimes think that we are very close to turning freshman composition into the ultimate 'service course' for all the other disciplines in the academy. . . . Does the vast apparatus of our discipline . . . exist in the cause of nothing more than better sociology and biology papers? . . . Can we, in a semester or two, really help students function effectively in all the different communities they will be entering as they move from course to course, from discipline to discipline, throughout their four years of college? . . . the task is hopeless" (319).

Since I, too, studied under literature specialists, and do not see college primarily as a "job training" center for my students, I have decided to teach SOME literature in my comp classes. Sometimes we read and listen to a few poems such as Rich's "Prospective Immigrants, Please Note" or Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" or Robinson's "Richard Cory." In addition to reading essays and articles in texts such as Atwan's Our Times/3 or Seyler's The Writer's Stance or Colombo, Cullen, and Lisle's Rereading America, I require that my students read at least one novel from a Reading List that I provide. This list contains books such as The Catcher in the Rye, The Color Purple, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, My Antonia, Fahrenheit 451, and Their Eyes Were Watching God. It is important to limit the number of novels on the Reading List so that as they read and discuss and analyze, they will be working with at least one other student in the class. Small groups of 4-5 often form when students choose the same novel, such as The Catcher in the Rye. If more than five students are in a group, I simply split the group in half or thirds.

Although the students may borrow the book from the library or a friend, I urge them to purchase their own books, mostly out of convenience since we spend several weeks discussing them, free-writing about them, and analyzing them. They must also write an essay using literary terms, such as setting, character, plot, conflict and climax. Some are familiar with these terms but most are not sure of the meanings or how to use them in analysis.

Although we don't follow it strictly, the most lucrative literary theory for this assignment is the reader-response theory as discussed in Guerin, et al. According to Guerin, reader-response theory is the complete opposite of the formalist approach, which "regards a piece of literature as an art object with an existence of its own, independent of or not necessarily related to its author, its readers, the historical time it depicts, or the historical period in which it was written" (331-2).

In the reader-response approach the reader is paramount, and the reader's response is "subjective and relative" (334), often with knowledge of the author's life and the time period when the book was written being taken into account. One of the reader-response theorists, Stanley Fish, "holds that readers actually create a piece of literature as they read it" and that "every reading results in a new interpretation" (341). Reader-response theory, then, allows for "the effect of the literary work on the reader, hence the moral-philosophical-psychological-rhetorical emphases . . . [and] the relegation of the text to secondary importance [with the opinion of the reader] of primary importance" (343).

My purposes for having the students read some poetry and a novel are many:

a. many of the students I have in Comp. 120 have not read many novels, much less "literature" before coming to SMSU; I want to expose them to substantial authors and poets;

b. some of the students have not been exposed to literary terms such as setting, character, plot, and climax, and some who have heard these terms do not know the correct definitions, and some have never used such terms in analyzing the poems, plays, short stories, and novels they themselves have read;

c. ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT: the students like the discussions in class, can relate to some of the characters, and most seem to enjoy analyzing the novels--the discussions and essays that are a result of the reading help promote self-awareness and more open-mindedness from the students and more tolerance for other people's viewpoints, both that of the author and that of their peers;

d. Who knows what healthy debate will happen among peers? Some argue over who the main characters are, some argue over the kind of conflicts present in the novel, and some disagree about the point of climax. These debates provide practice for the students to support their own opinions and give evidence from the novels;

e. literature teaches us ideas and methods and styles of writing but it also can teach us about the concerns, the viewpoints on

certain issues, the foibles of the author and the difficulties she/he had in producing that literature, some of which most of the students (and the teacher!) can relate to;

f. Although we do not use them for "invention" i.e. mimesis (Crowley 17-32) per se, who knows how the writing unconscious will connect and expand from being exposed to the novel, even years from now?

g. Some students want to be creative writers and this does provide them with more reading material to model, solid reading material which we term "literature";

h. as much as the studying and "modeling" of essays, articles and books of other disciplines might help the first-year student as she/he prepares to continue in certain fields and majors (Lindemann, 312-13), I am not adequate to the task of helping ALL of my 90-100 students every semester study and "model" the essays and articles in the appropriate discipline for her/him (Tate, 319). I would not mind BECOMING adequate to this task but I am not at this time.

i. many of the students in their first year do not even know what field or major they will eventually study;

j. I myself love literature and love to discuss it and learn what my students' understanding of the setting, characters, plot, conflicts and climax of a particular novel are;

k. my own sanity: vary the readings, vary the novels (students

choose one book and work with students who have read the same book), vary the class discussions;

l. I firmly believe that literature is an important foundation in an understanding of "life" -- although this may be idealistic, I know from my own experiences how literature has helped me understand myself and my relationships with others and society and the world;

m. Who knows what pleasure and joy one student each semester or each year will have from reading a particular author or novel or poem?

Exposure to literature is paramount in my composition classroom for the above reasons and even more. Although I can appreciate Lindemann's side of tne argument, I agree with Tate wholeheartedly when he says:

> [Besides the academic community] "there is another 'community' that we should be preparing our students to join. . . The 'conversations' I want to help my students join are not the conversations going on in the academy. . . . I much prefer to think of them and treat them as people whose most important conversations will take place outside the academy, as they struggle to figure out how to live their lives--that is, how to vote and love and survive, how to respond to change and diversity and death and oppression and freedom.

"Learning Theory for Use in the Composition Classroom," p. 9

"I am convinced that true education, as opposed to training, is concerned with much more than what we find in the various academic disciplines.

"If I want my students to think and talk and write about human lives outside the academy . . . then I certainly do not want to deny them the resources found in literary works, just as I do not want to deny them the resources found elsewhere. I do not advocate having students read only literary works. But they should not be denied that privilege altogether. They should be denied no resource that can help them." (321)

Our professional role as "Permanent Temps" gives us reason to learn and to apply various theories in the composition classroom, including some literary theories.

I would be glad to speak with anyone after the session about the Lindemann/Tate argument about the use of literature in the composition classroom . . . or any related issues. If you use literature in your classroom, I would like to exchange ideas with you.

THANK YOU.

I.1 REDEFINING THE ROLE OF "PERMANENT TEMPS": PROVING OURSELVES PROFESSIONALS

Kathleen R. Winter
English Department
Southwest Missouri State University
Springfield, MO 65804

"Learning Theory for Use in the Composition Classroom"
CCCC Roundtable, Nashville, March 18, 1994

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Atwan, Robert. Our Times/3: Readings from Recent Periodicals. Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

Bullock, Richard and John Trimbur, eds. The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991.

Colombo, Gary, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle. Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing. 2nd ed. Boston: St. Martin's, 1992.

Crowley, Sharon. "Rhetoric, Literature, and the Dissociation of Invention." JAC, Vol. VI (1985-86): 17-32.

Guerin, Wilfred L., et al. A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Lindemann, Erika. "Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature." CE (March 1993): 311-316.

Nelms, Ben F., ed. Literature in the Classroom: Readers, Texts, and Contexts. NCTE Forum Series. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1988.

Richter, David H. Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature. Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1994.

Seyler, Dorothy U. The Writer's Stance: Reading and Writing in the Disciplines. New York: Random House, 1988.

Tate, Gary. "A Place for Literature in Freshman Composition." CE (March 1993): 317-21.

I.1. "Learning Theory for Use in Composition Classroom"

ADDITIONAL HELPFUL SOURCES:

Caplan, Paula J. Lifting a Ton of Feathers: A Woman's Guide to Surviving in the Academic World. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1993. (Commissioned by the Council of Ontario Universities Committee on the Status of Women).

Miller, Susan. "The Feminization of Composition." In Bullock & Trimbur, 39-53.

---. The Politics of Composition. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1991.