Teaching Documentation
Alan Blackstock

Preface

I recently received an e-mail message from a student who has just graduated:

As this term is coming to a close, I wanted to thank you for being such a great teacher. You made my college experience enjoyable and worthwhile, and I learned so much from you. Thank you for your kindness and understanding when dealing with your students. I appreciate your passion and insight for the material you taught—you made me excited about the topics—and I learned so much from you because of all the hard work and preparation you put into your courses—you are the epitome of a great teacher, and I mean "great" in the most serious sense of the word. Thank you again for everything, for the being the person that you are—I want you to know that you have influenced me for good and I have come away a better person from having known you.

Carrie* graduated with a 4.0 GPA, and though I have met her in person only once, through her writing and her presence on the screen, I feel like I know her as well as any of my face-to-face students. Carrie's words confirm what I have always hoped to achieve as a teacher--not only the imparting of knowledge but the shaping of character. It is always reassuring to receive such personal validation, but Carrie's message has also prompted reflection on why I teach the way I teach, as well as about how I perceive myself and how I wish to be perceived as a teacher. Furthermore, since some of the courses Carrie took grew directly from my scholarship, her comments serve to illustrate how research has informed my teaching. I see research and teaching not as disparate pursuits but reciprocally beneficial activities.

The purpose of the present portfolio is dual: to provide documentation of my teaching, research, and service activities in the event of post-tenure review, and to support a bid for promotion to the rank of professor. In addition, the portfolio is designed to demonstrate how my work contributes to USU's stated mission of "cultivating diversity of thought and culture and serving the public through learning, discovery and engagement."

*Names of students quoted in this portfolio have been altered.
Teaching Background, Methodology, and Innovations

I followed a somewhat unorthodox route to the academic rank I hold today. I have worked as an English instructor and teacher educator in Thailand, China, Indonesia, and the Philippines, I have worked with the Peace Corps and in refugee camps, on Native American reservations, and in urban and rural communities. I have taught literature and rhetoric as well as remedial writing in a variety of settings and modalities. The challenge and opportunity afforded by these heterogeneous teaching situations, then, is to facilitate exchange of these ideas and experiences in a way that promotes respect and understanding and that translates readily into productive writing assignments. And my years of exposure to a wide range of learning and teaching situations have given me a sensitivity to diverse student needs that manifests itself in reading and writing assignments tailored to those needs.

For example, in my English 1010 class students read and respond to an essay titled "I Am Not a Savage," which calls attention to racism in the community of Salmon, Idaho, and proposes means of addressing the problem. My own Native American students can then use this and similar essays as models for addressing problems they face in their own communities. As Brynne, who has a Ute father and a white mother, wrote in her reading response:

I got treated different because I was half white and half Indian, the full Indians didn't like me because I was half white and their parents taught them to hate white. The white people didn't like me because they just thought I was another Indian that got free money and I wasn't going to graduate. Well once i had enough getting treated so bad by natives I singled myself away from them. I told myself I would not drop out of school; I will not do the things they do. So i started hanging out with all the kids that played sports and they see me for who I really am, and they treated me like I belonged because I just wasn't another Indian I wanted to go further. Ever since then some people look at me different not just the Indian that isn't going anywhere.

Brynne was later able to use this response to the reading as the kernel for a powerful narrative essay on her father's role in helping her become "not just the Indian that isn't going anywhere." (See the essay itself in Appendix E.) And I am convinced that my experience with many others who have felt themselves caught between cultures enables me
to recognize such conflicts in students like Brynne and to assist them in coming to terms with these tensions through reading and writing.

**Teaching Philosophy and Objectives**

Pedagogical statements calling for "student centered" and "dialogic" learning suggest that the Socratic method of teaching is still in many ways the standard of measurement. The very etymology of the word "education" attests that the ancients knew as well as we that our job is not so much to cram information into the heads of our students as it is to draw out of them the resources that they bring with them to class but lack the confidence to employ. The principal duty of the teacher, then, is to create a learning atmosphere that builds this confidence and demonstrates that neither reading nor writing is a passive activity, but that both require the full attention, engagement, and interaction of student and teacher alike. And just as Socrates insisted (in the Gorgias) that the true orator "will always fix his mind upon this aim: the engendering of justice in the souls of his fellow citizens and the eradication of injustice, the planting of self-control and the uprooting of uncontrol, the entrance of virtue and the exit of vice," so I believe that education should be similarly transformative.

The principal sources of my own theory and practice of teaching are experience and example. The experience is that which I have gained through teaching English to learners with widely diverse backgrounds and needs, from refugees in need of basic survival English, to typical freshmen just out of high school, to non-traditional students returning to the classroom after years in the work force, to senior undergraduates for whom technical and professional writing is an essential part of their chosen careers, to graduate students studying literature and writing from sheer love of the subject. The examples are those of professors from whom I learned the value of asking the right questions, questions that challenge students to participate in a dialogue with the text and with one another, resulting in the creation of meaning.
Teaching Methodology

My own education as an undergraduate proved to be transformative, and one of the most memorable figures I would encounter in that process was Dr. Adams, a burly ex-Episcopal priest with the demeanor of a drill sergeant, who provided one of my most valuable learning experiences, although his teaching style was diametrically opposed to that of the professors I would one day strive to emulate. Dr. Adams's methodology in teaching the analysis of poetry was to assign each student a poem to be explicated orally for the next class session. When a student offered an interpretation that made it obvious that he had misunderstood even the denotative meaning of the text, Dr. Adams would pound his fist on the table and scream, "No! What's the matter with you—can't you read?!" After witnessing the first such example, I made sure when preparing my explication to read each line of the poem as many times as it took to make it mean something, looking up every word in the dictionary and considering all the possibilities of meaning. I found to my surprise that by dint of such labor, a poem that meant nothing to me on the first reading gradually revealed itself. And despite the terror tactics employed by the professor, the experience was liberating for me: I learned that I did not have to look to some authority to explicate the poem for me, but that through an intense engagement with the text I could make it mine. And so, while the tactics of intimidation have no place in my classroom, I do challenge students by assigning them (individually or in groups) poems that initially appear opaque but from which after several close readings patterns of meaning begin to emerge. What Dr. Adams and I share is a desire that our students strive to expand and deepen their understanding of literature, and indeed their ability to think critically about any text.

One such exercise that has proved successful in my classes is to have each student choose a pair of poems from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* or Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* and give a presentation answering the question, "How do the
paired poems show (as the subtitle of Blake's book announces) 'contrary states of the human soul'?
Kellie, a new English major who struggled with analytical writing at the beginning of my 19th-century British Literature course, gave an initial presentation that demonstrated a limited understanding of the question, and then refined that understanding and her expression of it in a short essay and subsequent revision. Here is the conclusion Kellie reached in her original draft:

The Huntsman was not accustomed to anything being done for free just as the old man in We Are Seven was shocked by the young girls' complete faith. Both poems address adults with years of experience being shocked by the pureness of the young.

Here is the comment I made on Kellie's conclusion:

Ok, so what does that suggest about the relationship between innocence and experience?

And here is Kellie's revised conclusion:

Experience often times makes it hard to see things in the simple pure ways in which they are intended. Both poems address adults with years of experience being shocked by the pureness of the young. Thus, in most cases it would be safe to say that adults tend to lose their innocence with age. Instead of insisting that children see things the adult way, let them be children. Adults should allow children to think how they want and to have different points of view if they choose.

This is perhaps not an especially profound insight, but it represents a genuine evolution in Kellie's understanding of how to read a poem--see Appendix E for before-and-after versions of Kellie's analysis. For a rather more sophisticated example of a critical literary analysis, see the prompt and Carrie's response in Appendix E. Carrie's work originated in an assignment in which I asked students to free-write on the relationship between a key passage from Willa Cather's The Song of the Lark, the painting that gave the novel its title, and Antonin Dvorak's New World Symphony (which students listened to while glancing between the text and a projected image of the painting). Carrie added her own keenly perceptive inquiry into the text and painstaking research to produce the masterful analysis included here (Appendix E). These and similar exercises are designed to stimulate higher-order critical thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and the student work produced amply demonstrates mastery of these skills.
Furthermore, here in the Uintah Basin, as in many Utah communities where extractive industries are a principal source of income, environmentalism is often viewed as a dirty word. The challenge, then, is to create an atmosphere in which students are willing to listen to voices distinct from those they have been hearing all their lives, and the most effective means I have found to achieve this end is a combination of role playing asking students in small groups to debate an issue such as OHV restrictions from the perspective of various constituencies within the local community—and exposure to writing which examines environmental issues by giving voice to a variety of points of view and acknowledging their complexity. These role-playing exercises have resulted in essays that responsibly examine multiple sides of arguments involving use and protection of natural resources, as in this preface and opening paragraph of an essay written by a student employed in the oil industry:

**Preface**

This essay was intended to persuade and show another side of issues in regard to drilling in protected areas. In this paper I will be using Rogerian style argument hoping to establish the fact that no one wants to hurt the environment. I hope to make a strong connection by acknowledging some of the common reasons oil corporations are hated and throughout the paper steer the topic in way that convinces my reader that no finger pointed is needed but rather more involvement from many to continue to enjoy the benefits that this oil can produce.

**Oil Done Responsibly**

The world's natural resources have typically been exploited until there is nothing left but devastation. In man's haste to make a profit, he has ignored warning signs that this was a dangerous path to tread. In today's world technology and knowledge has been able to forecast these situations and given us the opportunity to better avoid this destruction, while still being able to tap into vast natural resources. Oil, in particular has become a major point of controversy.... Although, it can come at a high monetary price to conserve places of natural beauty while tapping into oil reserves, a harmony can be achieved in order to protect the beauty of the environment. This can only be achieved by holding large oil cooperation's to a higher expectation through regulation and adequate supervision of these expectations.

In addition, the peer response groups that are an integral part of the writing process in my classes assist students in recognizing and responding to a variety of viewpoints on any issue or question. (See the full essay and a representative peer response in Appendix E). Both the oil drilling essay and Carrie's essay on Willa Cather represent an integration of my research
interests in the relationship between the natural world and human needs with my desire as a teacher to explore those relationships with my students in the classroom through reading, dialogue, and writing.

**Teaching Innovations**

As part of the self-assessment process involved in post-tenure review and consideration for promotion, I took it upon myself to re-examine Ken Bain's influential book *What the Best College Professors Do* and found that while I have long incorporated a number of Bain's recommended practices as standard features of my pedagogy, my classes might benefit from more conscious or systematic application of others. Bain's study found that the best teachers centered their course planning on "what they could do in the first meeting with students to win devotion to the goals of the class—that is, what intellectual promises they might make" (50). I have been experimenting in my English 1010 classes for the past several semesters with a grading contract approach, inspired by composition guru Peter Elbow, and the use of this approach has had dramatic effects in reducing the fear that often besets novice writers, especially the type of non-traditional students who comprise the majority of learners at USU's regional campuses. (One student in my English 1010 class this semester confessed that she had never written an essay in her life, having dropped out of school in ninth grade and beginning college courses now as a grandmother). Two anonymous comments from student course evaluations illustrate the effectiveness of the grading contract approach:

- I really liked the grading contract. It was nice to know that even though writing doesn't come naturally to me that I could still get a decent grade if I got my assignments in on time and followed the guidelines for those assignments.
- I liked the grading contract system. It made me feel less self-conscious about my writing while at the same time held me accountable for putting forth my best effort.

After I pioneered this approach at the Uintah Basin campus, a colleague began applying it to an
English 1010 class she teaches on the Ute Reservation, with similar success. As a result, we were invited to give a presentation on the use of the grading contract with non-traditional and Native American students at the 2012 National Council of Teachers of English and a follow-up session at the 2013 NCTE convention. The grading contract I have been using is included here as Appendix E.

For the past three years, with the assistance of a grant from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the expertise of the Office of Global Engagement, I have been developing USU's first British Literature study abroad course. The purpose of the course, as stated in the course proposal, is "to enhance student understanding of and appreciation for the geographical, social, historical, and cultural contexts of English literature," and course activities and assignments are designed to explore "the ways in which the native region is revealed in the works of our authors, and how topography might assist in literary understanding." Last summer I took the first group of students to England for two weeks in London, Bath, the Lake District, and Yorkshire, and the trip was an unqualified success, as evidenced by the student comments reproduced in Appendix E. As a result, I have already begun enrolling students in next summer's trip.

I also continue to innovate within the classroom. For example, a recent addition to the Canvas online classroom that accompanies all of my broadcast classes is a program called EtherPad, which I have begun to use to facilitate group discussion in classes that include solo students (students who are alone at their receiving sites). EtherPad allows students to carry on a real-time written discussion, which avoids some of the awkwardness that can arise in attempting to carry on an oral discussion involving multiple sites. Students have responded enthusiastically to our initial experiments with this new technology (see comments in Appendix E), and I am exploring ways of using it in additional classes.
Integration of Teaching and Scholarship

When I first arrived at the Uintah Basin campus, the campus director asked the faculty to submit proposals for summer classes that would combine education and recreation. In response I created, prepared, and have taught repeatedly two intensive summer courses: "Shakespeare on Stage," in which students read the plays and then watch and write about live and filmed performances, and "Writing on Rivers," which includes a raft trip on one of the wildest sections of the Green River. In addition, at the request of the USU-Uintah Basin administration, I have developed and taught GRE and MAT prep courses for potential graduate students, and in response to requests from the US Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Utah Department of Fish and Wildlife have taught courses in professional and technical writing for agency employees.

Both "Writing on Rivers" and other innovative courses I have developed, such as "Only Connect: The Novels of Willa Cather and E.M. Forster" and "Hell's Hymnbooks: Blake, Dickinson, and the Protestant Hymn Tradition" (see the course syllabi in Appendix A) relate directly to my scholarship. "Writing on Rivers" involves an interdisciplinary study of historical and literary accounts of rivers in American history and includes a raft trip on the Green River, before, during, and after which students produce a portfolio of essays and other creative writing inspired by their reading and experiences during the course. Out of my research to identify readings for the course came my first published book, A Green River Reader (U. of Utah P 2005). "Only Connect" grew out of my scholarship on the novels of Willa Cather and ELM. Forster and the atmosphere of "transatlantic liberalism" in which they were produced. The class was well enrolled and well received by students—one commented, "I love the [student] presentations! This class reminds me of a book club, and I also enjoy learning about the
authors!" An article detailing the course has been accepted for publication in the journal Teaching Cather, and I have received permission from the Carrie mentioned in the Preface to this portfolio to use her class presentation in the article as an example of the caliber of work produced by students in the class. (See a draft of the article, including Carrie's presentation, along with the editor's acceptance letter, in Research, Scholarship, and Creative Documentation.)

The article "Hell's Hymnbooks" originated in a presentation for the Emily Dickinson International Society conference in Oxford, England, which developed into an article published in The Emily Dickinson Journal, which then developed into a course that fulfills the objectives of USU's English 4350 ("Studies in Poetry").

Like the articles in The Emily Dickinson Journal and Teaching Cather, my most recent book, The Rhetoric of Redemption: Chesterton, Ethical Criticism, and the Common Man, (Peter Lang Press, 2012) bears a direct relationship to my teaching, A principal focus of the book is the tension between ethical and aesthetic criticism that Chesterton addressed in his day and still resonates in today's literary-critical establishment. Therefore, when I was given the opportunity to teach a graduate class in literary criticism while doing research on the book, I organized the class as an investigation of that critical divide from Plato to contemporary theory. The class proved to be informative for my students and for me, providing an actual audience that allowed me see immediately which of the ideas I was working on were immediately comprehensible and which required further elaboration or sharper elucidation. As a result, both the students and the book gained from their interaction. The following student comments appeared in anonymous course evaluations, in response to the question, "What aspects of the teaching or content of the course do you feel were especially good?":
• I think that criticism, especially the stuff that is remote to us timewise, is difficult to approach and understand. Dr. Blackstock did a good job of getting "into" the material and explaining the key points of the difficult critics and theorists.

• You had extensive knowledge of the subject and it was really nice that you always had answers to our questions. Great class! I really liked it when you gave us a topic and let us discuss it amongst ourselves and with the rest of the class....

The Chesterton book also examines the Aristotelian question of "What promotes human flourishing?" and the changing conception of virtues from Homeric through Athenian through medieval to Enlightenment culture. These questions have long informed my English 3385 course (Literature of the Ancient World), but the research I did while writing the book has allowed me to incorporate them more systematically into the course.

**Grants and Awards**

**Grants**

2012 I applied for and received a competitive $1000 grant from the Textbook and Academic Authors Association to help defray costs incurred in the publication of my book *The Rhetoric of Redemption: Chesterton, Ethical Criticism, and the Common Man*.

2011 I applied for and received a competitive Seed Grant of $4000 from the USU College of Humanities and Social Sciences to develop a summer English study program in England. I used the funds to investigate study sites, accommodations, and logistical details, as well as to make connections with local resources. The course was offered for the first time in summer of 2013, and my hope is that it will become a regular USU summer offering.

2010 I applied for and received a competitive $1000 travel grant from the USU College of Humanities, Arts, and Sciences to travel to England to present a paper at Oxford University. The presentation was later developed into an article and published in a peer-reviewed journal.
**Teaching Awards**

The awards I received as 2012 Regional Campus and Distance Education Instructor of the Year, 2005 Continuing Education Researcher of the Year, and 2004 Continuing Education Instructor of the Year attest to the success with which I have combined the interdependent academic endeavors of teaching and scholarship. Also, my online English 2010 class has been recognized as an Exemplary Online Course, and at our 2012 graduation ceremony I was honored as the USU-Uintah Basin Outstanding Faculty Member. These awards were determined by peer nomination and review and based on the creation and refinement of innovative programs like the summer workshops and British literature study abroad course. (Award documentation is provided in Appendix F.)

**Appendices**

| Appendix A | Select Course Syllabi |
| Appendix B | Teacher/Course Evaluations |
| Appendix C | Peer Evaluations |
| Appendix D | Student Advising and Mentoring |
| Appendix E | Teaching Methodology and Innovations |
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