
Working-class literature: Pedagogy and a course design

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Abstract: Many working students have some skepticism about the worth of studying literature in the university classroom. They assume that the subject matter of literature taught to them doesn't help them, in a certain manner, to connect more to their real life working situations. Compared to their practical way of life, the educational experience of literature in the classroom seems foreign to the experiences of many of them. Therefore, this paper proposes a method for teaching a literature course for the working-class students. The paper also recommends a course design that involves the working culture in the material taught in the classroom. The suggested syllabus includes a number of particular texts to be taught in a literature course for working students.

Keywords: Working-Class Literature, Teaching Literature, Class, Gender, Race

1. Introduction

In the literature classroom, where students wrestle with theories, ideas and experiences, a teacher may encounter some students who would consider these theories, ideas and experiences irrelevant to reality. The genesis of this paper is a similar incident in which I had to teach a bright class of adult, working-class students in the evening studies at the university. They were, however, fairly practical folks; they had certain skepticism that a literature course will be worthwhile for them. Their major assumption was that the subject matter of literature doesn't help them, in a certain manner, to connect to their real life working situations. Compared to the solid, practical values of their lives, the educational experience of literature in the classroom is foreign to their own experiences. The students considered that writers and theorists taught in classroom don't share their own experiences, ideas and voices. Such assumptions raise significant questions that shape the domain of this paper. First, who are the working-class students? Second, is there a working-class pedagogy for literary studies? And finally, what are the proposed texts to be included in a literature course syllabus for working students?

2. The Working-Class Students

Considerations of class, gender and race have been major concerns of literary theory and practice. The three considerations are usually interrelated. "Our understanding of class identity is incomplete without the interplay of these other identities, gender, race, ethnicity, but these other subjectivities cannot be properly studied without a class dimension" (Zandy, 2001, p. xiii). The "class dimension" this paper investigates is the 'working class' rather than the social class. It is necessary to define what is meant by 'working class' here so as not to be mistaken with the Marxist understanding of the 'proletarian' class.

'Working-class students', as a term, refers here to those students who have jobs that sustain and shape their lives. They are, as Paul Lauter suggests, "those who sell their labor for wages" (1980, p.16). This definition includes public sector employees and school teachers who are particularly relevant to this paper. He also includes people "who work in the home, whose labor though not salaried is sold as surely as that of those who work in the mills or the streets" (Lauter, 1980, p.16). Michael Zweig (2000), on the other hand, has his formulations on class that differ from Lauter suggestions and align more with the domain of this paper. Zweig's considerations of the working class revolve largely around issues of power. He writes that when he

talks about the working class he is referring to people who “have little control over the pace and content of their work. They show up, a supervisor shows them the job, and they do it. The job may be skilled or unskilled, white collar or blue collar, in any one of a thousand occupations” (Zweig, 2000, p. 13). Working-class students, then, are made up of people who have little control over the environment, manner, or hours of their work, who have little security and little protection in the face of economic shift, and those people whose incomes can't increase this level of security.

To increase their level of security in life, many of these students see education as a tool for career advancement, or in other words, their motivations for joining evening studies are instrumental motivations. Working-class students often come to college primarily because they want better jobs, better wages, and as a result, better lives for themselves and their families. The critical thinking aspect of college isn't primary among their reasons for attending college, as “Many working-class students value the diploma more than any of the actual content of their education” (Linkon, 1999, p 2). This type of motivation constitutes a challenge to teachers of literature as it would be difficult to convince them that literature will be worthwhile for them.

3. Pedagogy of the Working Class

Working-class students bring to class their own values, interests and tendencies which differ from the interests of regular students. One dares to say that they bring a ‘culture’ of their own to classroom. This culture is usually related to their work and life interests and motivated by a strong sense of career advancement. Work is the fabric of their lives and education is a key to better job security, better job skills, and better salaries. Literature teachers, “instead of responding to their interests, values and motivations, ask them for critical thinking, exploration of the abstraction, and considerations of multiple perspectives” (Rankin, 2007, p. 189). Teachers set them apart from their culture and communities they come from. Teaching working-class students effectively requires understanding the students’ culture and the way they think. The more teachers can recognize and understand working-class culture, the more clearly they can recognize what they need and, most importantly, the better our chances to inspire them and change their attitudes. Larry Smith in his essay “Some General Values of Working-class Culture” states that working-class students have general cultural values including “direct functional communication that is full of stories and humor, strong commitment to the family and the sacrifice of the individual to the needs of the family, a belief in fairness and cooperation and respect for hard work” (as cited in Linkon, 1999, p.5). Ira Shor similarly describes working-class students as hard working and fair minded, but they may have “weak literacy, low bases of information, and unevolved conceptual skills” (Shor, 1987, p. 37). To fully understand our working-class students, Linkon (1999) suggests, we must listen to them, make time for stories in

class, find ways to encourage people who doubt the value of rambling discussion to join in, and find out where they work and how they live. (Linkon, 1999, p.7)

The working-class pedagogy, then, is a way to give students insight into their lives, the society they inhabit and into their experiences. Working-class pedagogy also gives working-class students a space in which to recognize themselves in what they read and what they are asked to write, and asks non-working-class students to give serious thought and attention to working-class issues, life and literature. A vital part of this working-class pedagogy means acknowledging the skills, experiences, talents, difficulties, and differences that working-class students very often bring to the college classroom.

Another important factor to be deeply considered is that a working-class pedagogy should not benefit only working-class students. It may engage the issue of class and put it in conversation with race, gender, ethnicity, etc. Working-class pedagogy should benefit every student in the classroom. Class has to be included as one of many elements that draw the big picture. A narrow definition of working-class pedagogy is not necessary; as Ann Green (1999) writes:

It does not seem as important or necessary to me to define a working-class pedagogy as to acknowledge the erasure of class from most North American pedagogies and to try, with good faith, to teach with all the complexity and reflexivity that we can muster, to hope that our teaching methods work against multiple and intersecting oppressions and reach as many students as possible (Green, 1999, p.16).

Working-class pedagogy, above all, is a critical pedagogy that keeps class in harmony and explores its intersection with other categories of identity and gender.

4. Objectives of Literature for the Working-Class Students

Working-class literature requires instructor to consider his students’ motives, tendencies and practical nature, a task likely ignored in the classroom. Many of the working-class students, for example, used to interrupt the classroom lecture to ask ‘why do we study this?’ or ‘what is the use of this?’ The clear message in these questions is that nobody wants to waste their precious time learning something that will not immediately benefit them in some way. The majority of working students insist on expediency and efficiency in education specially literature and “perceive education as vocational training” (Hapke, 1995, p.143). Teachers have to help them realize that studying literature is not a form of training. If other disciplines train for careers and learning practical skills with “real world”, literature and humanities students simply learn about being a human. By studying literature, a student attempts to recognize himself, gain universal experiences, and reflect it in a form of art. Though it is difficult to explain how

practical literature can be, but, in terms of ‘what is the use of this?’ the answer is that literature is a practical guideline, a manual of living and shaping identities.

One purpose of working-class literature should be to "generate some enthusiasm about novels that challenge rather than celebrate upward mobility in a classroom filled with devotees of such ascension" (Hapke, 1995, p. 145). Working-class literature is a beginning place for changing motivation of the student as stated in the above quotation, “upward mobility,” or in other words, career advancement. Students often join universities looking for a set of skills and a certificate at the end of their studies that will secure them a better job, but teachers of literature should try to do much more than that; to teach them about their own lives and “generate enthusiasm” about it. Work, love, friendship, sadness, grief, and even contentment are better understood in the context of a heartfelt poem or story.

A second major purpose of literature in the working class is to give people tools and insights to help them make choices and change their attitudes not only motives. The vision of education as a tool for social and personal change can be seen in the work of Paulo Freire (2005) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In the first two chapters of the book and while criticizing the existing educational system and recommending the liberty of pedagogy, he sets up three foundations for the working-class pedagogy. Two of these foundations are summarized and paraphrased here because of their relevance to the domain of this paper. First, Freire believes that education can be transformative. Teaching is not sufficient in itself to change society, but the classroom can be a site of cultural challenge through which social change can begin. Second, Freire suggests the importance of pedagogical model that doesn’t position the teacher as the sole authority but rather see students’ interests and culture as the most important focus of study as a starting place for the learning process (Freire, 2005, p. 43 - 70). While the first suggestion of Freire sets up the objective of literature in the working class, that is making change, the second suggestion proposes the methodology of making that change.

5. The Course’s Teaching Approach

Any suggested method for teaching this course has to employ interactive pedagogy; dialogue and the lived experience of participants in order not to position the teacher as the sole authority. Joseph Heathcott (1999) suggests encouraging students to bring their own experiences into the classroom through in-class discussions and sharing personal writings (p.107). The reader-response theory seems to be a good foundation for any teaching method of this course. It assumes that there is no unified theoretical approach for textual analysis, but “meaning emerges by active involvement of the reader into the reading process” (Bressler, 1994, p.50). This principle makes readers’ thoughts, beliefs and experiences shape the meaning of the text. It makes interpretation as a subjective transactional process between the reader and the text. This

would also help students to reflect upon what they study by showing their opinions and attitudes. For example, students can be asked about how much the text agrees or clashes with their views of the world, and what they consider right and wrong. It would not be acceptable from the students to say that the text has nothing to do with them because what humans can write has to do, in some way, with every other human. They can also be asked about what they learnt from the text, and how much their views and opinions were challenged or changed by this text, if at all. It would also be encouraging for the students to ask them to give examples of how their views might have changed or been strengthened, or perhaps, of why the text failed to convince them.

Another suggested technique that would increase the students’ involvement in the interpretation of the text is reflecting intersexuality. Reading process should be a reflection of the reader’s self and life experiences. Students should be asked whether the text addresses things that they, personally, care about and consider important to the world and whether it addresses things that are important to their families, community, ethnic group, economic or social class, or their religious traditions. As long as, the textual analysis must consider both the reader and the text, using quotes from other sources or stories from life to support students’ opinions can be of great importance for students’ involvement into the interpretation of the text.

6. Proposed Contents for the Working-Class Literature Course

Guided by the suggestion of Freires and others, this paper tries to design a literature course for the working-class students that aims at inspiring them and changing their attitudes towards literature and life. A course in this literature should focus on how people can explore new ideas about themselves and their work. It should also bring the working-class culture into the classroom. An important point to be highlighted here is that the working-class students’ culture is not all unified because it differs according to a number of factors, including place, race, gender, politics and so on. Therefore, the material taught and questions discussed in this course should not only address the work issues or culture, but also other questions of class, race, and gender. Accordingly, the literature taught in this course should, as Ingrid von Rosenberg (1982) suggests, “can be regarded as in some way the voice of self-representation of the class” (p.146) that involves or touches on the lives of the working-class people, their gender, and race to enable them to reflect freely on these texts.

A course in this literature would, first, discuss issues and experiences related to both words ‘work’ and ‘class’. Work is, after all, what most of us spend most of our time doing, and “work is the aspect of our lives from which official literature, writing by writers, is the most alienated” (Coles,

1986, p. 669). Therefore; it should be brought into the literature classroom not to be ignored in any syllabus of a working-class literature course. On the contrary, students have to read and discuss a number of texts that are related to their experiences of work, including how work shapes people's identities and relationships. 'Class', particularly 'working-class', on the other hand, should be included in the texts taught as an identification criterion to either the writer of the text or the protagonist of the work or both. When students are aware of class as a shaper of the writer's or the protagonist's perspectives, this may increase their involvement with the text and make them share or abandon such perspectives and attitudes. In short, students are given a chance to align themselves to the perspectives and attitudes reflected by persons of a similar class.

Whether such a literature course is added to the syllabi of the existing courses or provides the material for new courses, it has to cover different literary genres to meet the different tastes of students. This will increase the interaction of different students with the different styles of expression. The following course proposes a design that includes narrative writing (novels, letters, diaries, biographies or journals), poetry, and drama. Literature that is written by both men and women American and British writers is also proposed to be included. Finally, this course is expected to help students improve not only their critical reading but also their writing skills.

For the novel, it is suggested to teach Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, Steinbeck's *Mice and Men*, or Thomas Bell's *Out of This furnace*. These works involve work, class, race and gender as main themes. They also handle the question of human identity and the meaning of one's existence. For example, in *The Prince and the Pauper*, Twain is particularly interested in contrasting the lives of the rich with the lives of the poor, the lives of the nobility with the lives of the lower classes. He also exhibits that a person of noble birth is not essentially different from a person of common birth, even though their lives may seem to be very different. In other words, he wishes to show that a prince dressed in a pauper's clothing will be treated as a prince; in addition, the pauper can do the prince's job very nearly as well as the prince could, if the pauper is given the chance. Another basic idea of the novel proposes that rank is not based on essential differences between people, but on the nature of their jobs which is really silly.

On the other hand, Steinbeck's *Mice and Men* is a parable that tries to explain what it means to be a human. The novel suggests that to be a human is to have a dream. Deep inside all people is a longing for a place in nature to call 'home.' The struggle for such a place is universal, and the success of making your dream come true is uncertain. Characters of the novel work hard in a ranch in miserable conditions while inspired by their own dream of a better reality, but things always don't go the same way they want.

Out of This Furnace tells the story of an immigrant family and its struggle to live in America. It gives the readers a glimpse into the hard work, heart ache, and life

that they or their fathers endured. The novel also touches on the theme of sacrifice for the sake of the family which is important to working-class culture; the novel shows how new immigrants worked, lived and suffered to give their children and grandchildren a better life.

The above suggested novels could be a fertile land for in-class discussions which can be related to the students' own experiences. They also describe the details of hard work experiences, work environment and workers' neighborhood. There is considerable value for the students in seeing their familiar environment as a subject for literature. It moves literature from something that is only to be consumed and criticized to something that may create and participate in. Students read about themselves and can write about themselves as well.

Other forms of narratives that can be taught are autobiographies and non-traditional literature by women like letters, journals and diaries. The reasons behind choosing these types of narratives are what they are standing for and their strong ability to represent the common life that is similar to the students' lives. Marianne Wheelchel (1984) explains the reasons for teaching non-traditional literature by women this way:

Women without the blocks of time and the rooms of their own needed for writing in the traditional genres have spoken in these forms. In them we hear the voices of overworked housewives and mothers, of working and pioneer women, even of illiterate women. Some of these voices we can only hear in nontraditional literature. (p.587)

So, they are chosen because they represent voices of a category of working-class women and their lives. Epistolary of well-known writers like Susan Hale, Margaret Van Horn Dwight and Emily Dickinson is recommended because it reflects aspects of their human lives that are not usually discovered through their poetry or fiction.

As for poetry, Nicholas Coles (1986) suggested for his working class reading "a collection of poetry on the job like Tom Wayman's *Going for Coffee* or one on the singlejack work-narratives like Steve Turner's *Night Shift in a Pickle Factory* is to encourage a literature one could imagine oneself writing" (Coles, 1986, p. 678). Employing similar groups of poems and song about work, job and carrier making seems a good idea. This will encourage students to involve themselves in the experience. Coles elaborates further on the function of poetry that should be taught for the working-class students. He says that "the industrial songs and poems were themselves directly instrumental in the struggles to gain that better world; they attempted not only to represent working-class experience but also to intervene in it" (Coles, 1986, p. 672).

Any reasonably complete course in literature for working students would then need to reach beyond the narratives and poems to include plays. In the drama section of this course, John Osborn's *Look Back in Anger* and

Miller's *Death of a Salesman* seem a good choice to engage literature to students' life. Traditionally, the three main subjects of drama have been love, death, family and man's fall. The above two plays, as well as some others, introduce a fifth major subject that is work. Moreover, they show how a person's attitudes to love, death and family are, in large part, shaped by the kind of daily work he / she does.

Look Back in Anger discusses the anger of the new generation on the establishment because of politics and social injustice. The play shows how protagonist's family life is ruined because he can't find a suitable job opportunity. A university-educated, sweet-stall owner, Jimmy Porter is unable to realize his dreams of a better world because he is not working. In consequence, he is not able to know how much he loves and needs his wife on whom he is angry all the time. Work conditions shape our lives and feelings. This will involve the students' personal experiences and live in literary analysis of this work.

Similarly, *Death of a Salesman* touches on the question of success in life and making a dream come true. The protagonist's emphasis on being 'well-liked' stems from his belief that it, not hard work, will bring him to perfect success. He clings to this idea as if it is a life-preserver, refusing to give it up. He promotes this idea to his sons so effectively that they believe opportunity will fall into their laps because they are handsome and will-liked. Of course, real life is not so generous, and the protagonist witnesses his and his sons' failures. His tragic flaw is in failing to question whether the way to fulfill the dream is valid. His sons never do either; they have embraced their father's attitude. Their familial and social life is ruined because of their inability to understand what the proper way to achieve their dreams is. This text, like the one before, connects students' views of success in life to their own experiences. They can reflect upon the ideas of the text in relation to what they think to be true and possible.

This course can be of greater benefit if students watch movies about the literary texts they study or movies of similar subjects. To make the course more interesting, students can perform the plays studied or acts of it. They can sing the songs in class, individually or in groups, or read their personal poems aloud. They can also make presentations about the movies and plays so as to reflect upon the material they study.

As for writing and research in a working-students literature course, Nancy Mark (2000) suggests making the students' lives the topic in question to be researched and interred through their own reading (p. 61). Representation of students' lives within their own texts has to be open to their control. They should write about topics that value their own identities. They can write stories about family members, work, success or friends. They can also reflect critically upon the texts taught in a form of journals to show their opinions about the texts.

7. Conclusion

Working students, with their life experiences and practical values, may form a challenge for the traditional literature teacher. They may raise many questions about the worth of the material taught in the classroom and show skeptical attitudes towards them. It would be wise to design a course of literature that appeals to their type of thinking and involves them in the experiences taught in the classroom. The contents of such a course have to be selected consciously to relate students to the texts. The teaching method also needs to be considered to engage students' experiences in the reading and analysis process. Although there can be many different readings of a text, a reading in the working students' class room should involve the readers' experiences and responses.

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