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Applying reading and writing theory to cases in composition, this chapter troubleshoots assignments that produced disappointing results and illustrates how the model of the “ill-structured problem” can help writing instructors craft assignments that foster the cognitive and affective maturation essential to college-level literacy.

Fostering Critical Literacy: The Art of Assignment Design

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Four decades ago, Booth (1963) lamented the artificiality of writing pedagogy, with its emphasis on “avoiding mistakes” rather than striving to say something interesting (p. 267). And while the mature Booth was able to sympathize with English teachers who are “bored silly” by piles of stultifying student papers, he argued that the torture was largely “self-inflicted” (p. 268). The remedy Booth suggested was—and is—simple in conception and very complex in practice. The best way to avoid the meaninglessness of typical freshman essays, he said, is to foster intellectual and moral maturation. And the best way to do that, he suggested, is to help students learn to read complex, narratively challenging texts: “We can subject our students to models of genuine narration, with the sharp observation and penetrating critical judgment that underlie all good story telling, whether reportorial or fictional. . . . A steady exposure to such voices is the very thing that will produce the maturity that alone can make our students ashamed of beclouded, commercial, borrowed spectacles for viewing the world” (pp. 503–504).

Central among teaching strategies in all courses that foster what Booth calls “discipline in reasoned argument, and . . . habits of addressing a living audience” (p. 504) is assignment design (Walvoord, 1998; Wiggins and McTighe, 1998). There are no formulas for crafting effective assignments,

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but understanding the subtleties of the reading-writing connection suggested by Booth can help.

In the argument that follows, I hope to illuminate how the conception of an assignment as an “ill-structured problem” can address students’ developmental needs, nurturing better reading and more authentic writing. In so doing, I want to illustrate how our assignments construct, in ways not always evident to us, our students’ interactions with texts as both readers and authors.

The Model of Ill-Structured Problems

At best, the art of designing assignments is an engaging and deliberative process, not much different from the development we hope to nurture in students. It means figuring out how to ask for what we want lest we get what we ask for. Our assignments inevitably offer tacit information about what is worth asking and how one might go about developing answers. Preemptive measures that both anticipate naive approaches and improve the likelihood that students will be prompted to develop responses that expand the boundaries of their habitual thinking are thus worthy of more attention. Our success will depend on the level of awareness we bring to the task of reading selection and assignment design and on the richness of our repertoire for helping students achieve the necessary meld of personal engagement and critical distance. Bean (1996) has aptly summarized the advice of many critical-thinking theorists in asserting that the primary tasks for teachers are to create cognitive dissonance for students, to present knowledge as dynamic and dialogic, and to create opportunities for learning through active problem solving. In this context, he notes the efficacy of developing good “ill-structured” problems for students to wrestle with (p. 3).

Developed by researchers in information processing and, especially, artificial intelligence, the concept of *structure* in problems has been applied to the domain of critical thinking and pedagogy, usually within the context of expert versus novice practices. Ill-structured problems are pedagogically “good”; that is, because they are rooted in uncertainty and, often, ambiguity, they are not mere school exercises that test factual knowledge, but authentic questions, their solutions dependent on the kinds of thought processes that real-world practitioners engage in. Whereas well-structured problems tend to have an implied script or easily applied formula that leads to a particular solution that is testable and replicable, ill-structured ones require evaluation of a number of approaches, careful consideration of evidence, imagination of counterarguments, and the integration of information, concepts, and contexts, including those conditioned by values and attitudes (King and Kitchener, 1994; Petraglia, 1998; Voss, 1989). Different disciplines are interpreted by students as having more or less well-structured problems.

This disciplinary distinction became vividly apparent several years ago in a study I conducted to compare students' expectations with instructors' assumptions in introductory courses. I asked ten instructors to help me administer early in the semester the essay portion of the Measure of Intellectual Development,¹ which asks freshmen to reflect on what they consider their best learning experience in high school, specifying why the selected class worked so well for them. Of the trends that emerged, one is particularly relevant to assignment design: Although all students appreciate instructional strategies that make learning fun and respond to a sense that the teacher cares about them personally, they don't expect the same level of intellectual demand in all disciplines. Students apparently anticipate either well-structured problems (math and science classes) or no real problems in terms of structure (social science and humanities) but rather occasions for expression of opinion as an end in itself.

Student Development and Critical Literacy

The limitations and dangers of student (mis)understanding of disciplinary epistemologies are clear. Influential theorists like Louise Rosenblatt and Peter Elbow, who valorize the affective domain as a source of insight, nonetheless emphasize the importance of achieving mastery of the criteria that shape the "hierarchy of concepts" in disciplines (Elbow, 1986, p. 34). Rosenblatt's focus (1994) on the need for the student to choose a stance in relation to a given text suggests the self-awareness, and the awareness of interpretive strategies, necessary for a critical perspective. Research suggests that in high school, English classes in particular invite students to see the study of literature not as an opportunity for initiation into complex ways of reading and understanding multivocal texts and for the development of criteria for evaluation, but as an occasion for what appears to be deepened self-awareness based on reflexive responses (Langer, 1994).

As Rabinowitz, building on Rosenblatt's analysis, has reminded us, such "insights" remain static and shallow because they allow students to avoid real engagement with the text (Rabinowitz and Smith, 1998). However, as Rabinowitz and Smith have shown, developing teaching strategies that engage students in practicing the rules of the game is not necessarily intuitive, as such development requires a raised consciousness of what, for expert readers, is normally tacit understanding. The consequences of allowing expert practices to remain unarticulated can be significant. Curricula that fail to emphasize the nature of, and methodologies for solving, ill-structured problems appear to reinforce students' perception that complex questions are, or should be, reducible to simple answers and that questions to which there is no clearly right or wrong answer are entirely subject to the force of unexamined individual opinion.

If we view the attitudes expressed by students of high school age through the lens of the scheme developed by Perry in his now classic study

of Harvard undergraduate students, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (1970), we can think more intentionally about how to develop effective literacy pedagogies by focusing on the problem-posing qualities of assignment design. Perry identifies nine “positions,” ranging from a simplistic right-wrong view of knowledge through an acceptance of the contingent nature of understanding and an ability to make intellectual and ethical commitments within a relativist epistemology.² Perry’s scheme posits Dualism—a belief in absolute truth—as epistemologically prior to Multiplicity, but as his own data made clear, these epistemologies usually exist side by side. The student’s reliance on one or the other epistemology will depend on whether the question or problem is perceived to have a single correct answer or solution, that is, whether it is “well-structured.” In the domains where emphasis is on discussion and point of view (what might be called non-problem-solving classes), the democracy of individual opinion generally prevails.

Elbow (1986) and Booth (1998) invoke the importance in critical reading of holding in a productive tension multiple layers of response. Rabinowitz and Smith (1998) emphasize the importance of training students to play the role of both authorial audience (“a hypothetical construction of what the author expects his or her readers to be like”) and the narrative audience (“an imaginative creation by the author—something he or she hopes to convince the readers to pretend to become”) (p. 23). All of these critics agree that, as Rabinowitz puts it, “intelligent reading involves a delicate and complex balancing act” that involves juggling multiple readerly roles (p. 28).

From Reading to Writing

The nature of the text, when read critically as both closed and open, constrained and liberating, affirmative and transformative, is also characteristic of writing assignments conceived as ill-structured problems. As Rosenblatt (1989) has reminded us, the texts our students produce also have implied authors, whose assumptions about their subject and their audience will determine their rhetorical stance. Comparing readers and writers, she points to the need for multiple interactions with one’s own evolving text, including attention to its internal consistency (“a growing but often tacit sense of purpose”) and a sense of its likely effect on a reader who is not the self (p. 167). The construction of a writerly self, like that of a readerly self, requires simultaneous sensitivity to one’s own (developing) identity and an imagined other. In the examples that follow, I hope to illustrate how consciousness of the complexity of the reading-writing connection can help us to unpack our unexamined assumptions regarding how students read not only assigned texts but also the writing prompts aimed at engaging them more fully in those texts.

Example 1. An Ill-Structured Problem with Mixed-Message Instructions. The following prompt was included in a Research Writing course, the second half of the freshman composition sequence, in which a documented paper is required. The assignment elaborates the textbook editor's instructions for developing a conversation with a reading by either countering or extending the writer's argument:

Your second essay is a single-source essay between 500 and 750 words. Choose one of the following three essays from *Writing from Sources* [ed. Brenda Spatt]: Charles Lindholm's "Love as an Experience of Transcendence" (p. 172); Conque Henderson's "Myths of the Unloved" (p. 482); or Benjamin DeMott's "Visions of Black-White Friendship" (p. 531). Next, decide whether your strategy will be to argue against the essay or to develop an essay based on the essay. Both strategies are explained and discussed in *Writing from Sources* in chapter three.

For your audience, imagine that you are writing your essay to be included in an anthology of essays by university students from around the country. In developing your strategy and your thesis, aim for a level of depth and sophistication that will challenge your readers to take a deeper look at the issues and themes presented in your selected essay.

Approximately one-third of your grade for this essay will be based on your use of language: diction, grammar, and punctuation. The remainder of your grade will be determined by how well-organized, thoughtful, and persuasive your essay is—as well as by how you apply your strategy.

To its credit, rather than merely inviting unreflective opinions, this assignment requires, in preparation for research writing, participation in a dialogue with the text. Such a dialogue requires noticing contexts and purposes of the texts being engaged, as well as the meaningfulness of the issues. Thus, this prompt—in requiring selection of an argumentative stance (a "strategy" for response), in referring students to textbook instructions for carrying out the strategy, and in specifying an audience and purpose—has some essential attributes of a good ill-structured problem.

An experienced colleague who read the resulting set of student essays summed up its positive attributes, including its revelation of whether students had digested the original argument: "The assignment does invite and measure the target skills for English composition: college-level reading comprehension, critical thinking about texts, effective marshaling of evidence, engagement. [Moreover,] it sorts out relative student success effectively. . . . The student responses to the assignment break fairly dramatically into two groups. . . . Students who do not understand so as to be able to summarize the focal texts cannot successfully argue against or extend the original argument" (Hoff, letter to the author, July 2001). In fact, five of the twelve responses reflected serious misrepresentations of the chosen article.

Interestingly, all of the relatively unsuccessful student essays appeared to be attempts to extend rather than refute the article's thesis.

Part of the problem seems to have been the instructions offered by the textbook, which, I wish to argue, inadvertently invited the unsatisfactory responses noted above by allowing weaker readers to avoid a serious effort to engage the ideas in the selected text. The textbook's instructions for arguing against the source required a summary as the first step in writing the paper, whereas the instructions for "developing an essay based on the source" had a different emphasis: "This strategy gives you the freedom to develop your own ideas and present your own point of view in an essay that is only loosely linked to the source. Reading an assigned essay helps you to generate ideas and topics and provides you with evidence or information to cite in your own essay; but *the thesis, scope and organization of your essay are entirely your own* (Spatt, 1999, p. 159; emphasis in original).

Although students are asked several pages later to "*strive for an appropriate balance between your own ideas and those of your source*" (p. 165; emphasis in original), they may find the two instructions contradictory and naturally opt for the one that seems to offer more freedom.

Moreover, the guidelines for writing an argument against the source are significantly simpler and fewer (that is, present and analyze the source's view, then present your own position) than the rather elaborate twelve-point list offered for developing a topic based on the source, including the need for brainstorming (a process to which three pages of text are dedicated) to find a topic in the first place. This emphasis encourages students to consider topic-definition to be the main challenge of the extension or development option rather than evidence of engagement with the original argument.

Thus, while the instructor's assignment itself has the marks of a good ill-structured problem, one of the two textbook strategies presented to students contains some potential contradictions and complications that increase the risk of inadequate performance, especially for students whose reading skills are relatively weak. I would suspect that students who choose to develop, rather than counter, the point of an essay would require substantial coaching to begin to establish the kind of partnership that the textbook editor offers as a metaphor for the relationship between the voice of the selected essay and one's own voice: "*All of the important positions in the structure of your essay should be filled by you. . . . On the other hand, the reader should not be allowed to lose sight of the source essay; it should be treated as a form of evidence and cited whenever it is relevant, but always as a context in which to develop your own strategy and assert your own thesis*" (p. 165; emphasis in original). This kind of partnership is precisely the relationship that underlies development of the so-called research paper typically assigned at the end of the freshman year—and most freshman-writing instructors would agree that it is rarely achieved in the way we hope. Hence the importance of composing and supporting

assignments that are ill-structured problems that ask students to practice, holistically, the integrated skill set they need to develop.

The complexity of this skill set is, I believe, often underestimated. In their discussions of critical pedagogies, researchers have reminded us of the many (usually tacit) skills implicit in the reading required for college courses. The following case analysis illustrates how this complex of challenges informs students' responses to a synthesis assignment, how the flaws in the assignment serve to inhibit rather than enhance critical reading and persuasive writing, and what some alternative writing prompts might look like.

Example 2. An “Insoluble” Ill-Structured Problem. Below is the first assignment in a section of Research Writing, the second or third course in a two- to three-semester composition sequence (depending on initial placement). The instructor of this section, a talented graduate student, had already proven to be unusually thoughtful in designing syllabi and prompts, revising and refining them by taking guidance from the qualities of students' responses. Sensitive to students' need for preparation of various kinds, she was always careful to “lay the groundwork for discussions regarding how to write an argument, construct an original and meaningful thesis, [and] synthesize information/ideas from diverse texts” (instructor's course portfolio). In this instance, however, the results were especially disappointing, and it was hard to say why.

The Assignment:

Both Engelmann's “Two Germans” [McCuen and Winkler, 1991, pp. 497–551] and Sophocles' *Antigone* address the necessity of viewing an idea or issue from more than one point of view or perspective. And both works demonstrate the possibly dire effects that can result from persisting in a narrow or one-sided point of view. Drawing upon the stated and implied ideas presented in “Two Germans” and *Antigone*, explore possible reasons for Herr Berger's, Antigone's, and Creon's narrow-mindedness (for example, were their views rooted in any laudable ideal?) and the consequences of their perspective—both to themselves, others, and the community in general. Consider the role that intermediaries like Ismene and the narrator/editor in “Two Germans” play. To what extent, if any, are they able to shape or amend the one-sidedness of others' views?

(“Two Germans” is an anthologized excerpt from a book by journalist Bernt Engelmann, a World War II Luftwaffe radio operator who became a resistor and was imprisoned in Dachau. The book, *In Hitler's Germany* (1985), is based on interviews that detail the German resistance movement. Engelmann's interview with Irene, sole survivor of her family, and with Herr Berger, a former Gestapo agent, comprise the excerpt assigned to the students.)

The Responses. The following representative observations from students' papers suggest the lower level of the Perry scale, mainly Multiplicity

Diffuse—recognition that individuals have “different sides,” that a shift in perspective might lead to a different judgment of a person or an event, that it is ethically admirable to try to see a point of view other than one’s own, and that refusal to do so (“narrow-mindedness” in the terms of the assignment) is a bad quality that is bound to have negative effects. Tellingly, most students appeared to miss or to disregard a crucial hint offered under “Reading Advice” from the editors of the anthology: “That the Gestapo agent has absolutely no compunction about his past is a source of both horror and dramatic tension” (McCuen and Winkler, 1991, p. 498). Neither horror nor tension is at all apparent in students’ responses; instead, they try mightily to be “fair and balanced,” avoiding not only judgmentalism, but judgment of any kind:

Automatically there is a negative opinion of Herr Berger for the simple fact he participated in the Holocaust. However, through the narrator’s words, one can see the other side of the story and another side of a person.

Both stories display an array of opinions that can be sided with either way. Each story has a variation of ideas behind it. They both show people with different beliefs and values.

Herr Berger believes that what he did was right, while Engelmann believes that the lifestyle Berger led was a disgrace. In the end, whose point of view is right and whose is wrong?

In “Two Germans” the narrator is the open-minded one. He tries to look at both sides of the story, and listen to what both characters have to say.

By reading these two works, you learn that not only should a person try to look at other points of view, but also see what the consequences could be if you continue to be selfish in your judgments.

These reactions reveal that the assignment, although it seems to have the complexity and open-endedness of an ill-structured problem, actually has an implicit thesis—that Antigone, Creon, and Herr Berger all manifest a “one-sidedness” or “narrow-mindedness” that results in destructive consequences for themselves and others.

The instructor’s intention was to prompt a consideration of the importance of perspective in the determination of ethical judgments (that is, to complicate the students’ view of right and wrong); however, the terms of the assignment, she could see in retrospect, invited students to assimilate complex ideas to familiar and simplistic ways of thinking. For example, students praised Engelmann for his open-mindedness in listening politely both to the self-justifying Nazi officer and the Holocaust survivor, as if these voices were intended to carry equal moral weight. For these students, “open-mindedness” meant refusing to value commitment to principle in favor of finding the mean between extremes—even when no such compromise is available because the positions are predicated on antithetical value systems and even when one of the extremes is clearly vicious.

Unpacking the Challenges. In an interview on teaching freshman composition, the instructor reflected on the gap between her intentions and students' understanding of their task:

We were reading a background source—*Antigone and Its Moral* by George Eliot and . . . her argument basically said something to the effect that Antigone and Creon represent warring halves of human nature, one that's very much interested in family and pursuing a faith and belief in the gods and another that's more secular and more public-minded, and that, although neither of these viewpoints is wrong, that's what makes *Antigone* such a rich play—they're both right. However, they can't acknowledge or see the other point of view, or if they do realize that it's there, which they do, they choose to ignore it and stand by their own beliefs.

. . . I ended up with somewhat reductive responses from the students in essay form—Creon's narrow-mindedness, etc. And, in many cases they neglected the nuanced point that, in at least Antigone and Creon's case, they're both right as well as both wrong, and not as much was made of that controversy or that tension between the characters themselves and between the belief systems that were being represented. . . . Both Engelmann and Sophocles addressed the necessity of viewing an idea or issue from more than one point of view or perspective and both works demonstrate the possibly dire effects that result if one continues to stand by the one point of view.

Through this reflection, one begins to understand the evolution of the fault lines in the assignment. While one could argue that Antigone and Creon are “both right” (although many students struggled with this ambiguity), one could hardly say the same for the two Germans. But that is what students, based on their reading of the assignment, thought they had to argue.

In pondering the gap between pedagogic intention and student performance, the instructor and I considered the complex of skills students would need to approach the assignment successfully.

Understanding text rhetoric. What *Antigone* demands rhetorically is both an understanding of the tension between two legitimately competing worldviews represented by Antigone and Creon, respectively, and of the enormous difficulty, for one entrusted with the public welfare in wartime, of balancing individual rights with public security. The failure of the public figure to strike the proper balance in response to an emergent occasion results in both personal tragedy and civic disorder.

Engelmann's piece, emerging from a very different context, derives its power from a deeply disturbing trio of voices that defy accommodation: the chillingly detailed testimony of Holocaust survivor Irene Herz; the selective and self-justifying recollections of an SS officer; and the interjected comments of the interviewer, Engelmann, who was himself a key character in the story being witnessed.

The assignment offers insight into the ways it might play into the novice habits of students. If each character is assumed to be “one-sided,” then there is no point in trying to tease out contradictions within them. This model, wrested from the text through a strained analogy with *Antigone*, allows students to see the assignment as a well-structured problem (apply the lessons of *Antigone* to “Two Germans”) and thus to lapse into commonplaces that have little to do with “Two Germans.” Moreover, the implied thesis is itself seductive in its apparent simplicity—compromise is preferable to stubbornness.

Understanding genre. In addition to considering each author’s position in relation to his text, students could be encouraged to see that the two texts demand rather different readerly stances. Such an awareness would “require knowing the genre in which the authorial audience places the text” (Rabinowitz and Smith, 1998, p. 63).

In comparing Sophocles’s text with Engelmann’s, one would need to sense, for example, the difference between, on the one hand, the mythic and ritualistic (hence conservative) aspects of an ancient Greek tragedy performed before an audience that already knows the story and the conventions through which it will be portrayed and, on the other, the subtle, nervous suspense implicit in a journalistic report of a war criminal’s attitude toward an earlier version of himself (in what ways will he evade confronting the moral meanings of this self). Moreover, Engelmann depends on the reader’s automatic recognition of Berger’s revolting capacity for cruelty and his enduring moral hollowness, a quality quite different from the arc through which Sophocles reveals Creon’s character and effects the catharsis of tragedy.

Recognizing Authentic Engagement

Even when we unwittingly craft assignments that tend to lead our students down an undesirable path, we may nonetheless be rewarded by instances of student insight that can give us clues about what we might have done better. In this case, it was gratifying to notice some essays that transcended the boundaries of a reductive reading. Consider, for example, how the student who wrote the following passage redefined the terms of the prompt: “Being narrow-minded or stubborn are two characteristics that may sometimes be viewed as positive if one uses the words ‘focused’ and ‘determined.’ But they may also be dangerous and, therefore, cause many outrageous and negative incidents by being taken too far. The three characters, Antigone, Creon, and Herr Berger, all possess this trait for being single-minded and have to suffer much distress in their lives because of their strong, willful, and unvarying beliefs and values.”

What does it mean to “take [these qualities] too far”? Encouraged to pursue the question, implicit in her own comments, of how commitment can be either “positive” or “dangerous,” depending on underlying values

and contexts, this student might have been led to make some crucial distinctions that are glossed over in her concluding sentence.

Another student revealed her awareness of the incommensurate nature of the two texts by peppering her observations on Berger and his actions with fittingly graphic adjectives—“gruesome,” “hideous,” “horrible,” “inhuman”—demonstrating the opposite of the detached balance and objectivity most of her classmates felt obliged to endorse. Although this student finally argued for the strained analogy apparently required, claiming—to the instructor’s frustration—that Herr Berger and Antigone “exhibit the same characteristics of narrow-mindedness ending in tragedy,” her unflinching judgment of one character’s behavior as barbarous might fuel a useful class discussion.

The Text and “I”

I have been suggesting that although we may not like what we get from students, we need to consider whether what we get is in fact what we have unwittingly asked for and whether some institutionalized pedagogies work at cross-purposes with our goals. Rosenblatt (1989) is, I believe, correct in her assessment that “Many current teaching practices—the kinds of questions asked, the way assignments are phrased, the types of tests given, the atmosphere created in the classroom—counteract the very processes presumably being taught and foster manipulations of empty abstractions” (p. 172). If we are disturbed that the majority of students who chose the Antigone/Engelmann topic appeared to remain so coolly disengaged from the questions it raises, satisfied to respond to an emotionally harrowing narrative with clichés about how “a person should try to look at other points of view,” we might consider the contexts that foster such detachment.

In a comparison of high-school pedagogic philosophy and strategies across four disciplines—biology, physics, history, and literature—Langer (1994) found that only literature classes privileged students’ responses over the course content. While none of the classes included explicit instruction or practice in disciplinary epistemologies, and while all implied somewhat different philosophies in methods of question-posing and problem solving, the English classes were unique in their lack of attention to information and their focus on individual response. Unlike the teachers of the other disciplines, the English teachers “assumed that the essential meaning was in their students, based on the life experiences they had engaged in or witnessed” (p. 96). In one of the literature classes studied, “the students’ responses were often treated as more important than the text” (p. 104).

These findings are consistent with the distinctions among students’ descriptions of their best high school learning experience. In “soft” science or humanities subjects—fields that resist transmission through well-structured problems—the feelings generated by the class (for example, the sense that all opinions are equally valuable, the inclusiveness of open-ended

discussion unbounded by the need to develop criteria for evaluation of one position versus another) can have the effect of relegating the subject matter itself into a shadow zone, with unreflective responses and opinions in the foreground. Somewhat paradoxically (in view of this emphasis), high school students are often instructed to avoid using “I” in their academic essays. It is a striking irony that the same students who feel encouraged to believe that it is their unexamined opinions that matter most are enjoined from identifying their subjectivity when writing a formal essay. The misperception that academic writing is devoid of personal voice is perhaps an effect of the “fact-value” split—the reluctance to assert meaningful criteria for evaluation—discussed by Booth (1988, p. 28).

Most of us would probably accept that the invocation of feeling is not only legitimate but necessary to critical reading. But how many of us remind ourselves that this understanding is counter to the common belief among students that good academic writing maintains a neutral and thus a “fair” stance toward the material? As McCormick (1990) has observed, students who are taught that academic writing necessarily excludes the first person singular often believe “that they can best succeed in school by ignoring rather than developing their ideas” (p. 197). Such “effacement of subjectivity” (Spellmeyer, 1989, p. 265) hinders the development of an authentic voice.

When asked why the use of first-person singular is generally forbidden in formal essays, students cite a range of reasons reflecting their novice position, including the need to avoid the appearance of bias and the reluctance of teachers to grade their students’ point of view. The truth, rarely articulated by teachers, is that students who use “I think,” “I believe,” or—as is commonly the case—“I feel,” are generally producing unprocessed opinions or emotional responses unshaped by analysis or by attention to the constraints of the text or context to which the opinion is a response. The result of the rule, then, is to encourage the surface appearance of academic discourse without fostering the rigorous engagement and consequent conviction that underlie authentic communication.

What to Ask For

What sorts of questions about the Sophocles and Engelmann texts, then, might draw students closer to the worlds of those writers and at the same time help them extend the text into the world of ideas and into the world of their felt experience? Concurring with Jerome Bruner (1996) that “good questions are ones that pose dilemmas, subvert obvious or canonical ‘truths,’ [and] force incongruities upon our attention” (p. 127), I present the following as examples of the kinds of questions likely to encourage engaged reading and authentic writing.

Assignment

Given the following context, write a four-page essay on one of the topics below.

Context: Sophocles’s *Antigone* (an ancient Greek drama performed as part of a theater competition in Athens c. 441 BC) and Bernt Engelmann’s “Two Germans” (an excerpt from a book by a Nazi resister who had been imprisoned in a concentration camp during WWII) each give voice to perspectives that are diametrically opposed to each other, and both portray great violence and suffering as a result of the conflict.

Sample Topics: The virtues of compromise are often touted. When two perspectives clash, is compromise always possible? Is it always desirable? Drawing on the events portrayed in *Antigone* and “Two Germans,” explore the idea of compromise from the perspectives of both practicality and morality. Keep in mind historical contexts, especially realistic options for the various characters in their respective times, places, and social-political situations.

Explore the concept of *guilt* in *Antigone* and “Two Germans” by comparing the nature of Antigone’s and Creon’s behavior with Herr Berger’s. Who is guilty of what and why? In your argument, consider how the author’s presentation and ordering of information affects your evaluation. (Some questions you may find helpful to your thinking: Is the reader encouraged to think that the guilt of the individual in each case is mitigated by circumstance and dependent on perspective or does it seem absolute? In what ways do the individuals assume, or fail to assume, responsibility for their actions? In what ways does the outcome in each case suggest that justice has or has not been served? If not, what would have been a just outcome?)

In asking students to write in response to such topics, we are modeling the kinds of questions we think it is important to ask. The form of the ill-structured problem—a kind of bounded openness—is intended to help students use the tools of the discipline while moving beyond gamesmanship into an authentic response, if not yet a mature commitment. Holding students accountable to the terms of such assignments would not, of course, guarantee excellent results, but it would position students within classic and ongoing conversations about issues that, in the realpolitik that informs civic discourse and policymaking, have concrete consequences for their lives.

Although none of these questions leads to a definitive answer, neither do they allow for equally simplistic open-endedness. The comfortably “democratic” paradigm (Perry’s lower levels of Multiplicity, what Craig E. Nelson (1999, p. 48) has called the “Baskin-Robbins” level of thinking, in which all flavors are good and there is no way to determine that one is “better” than another) simply will not serve when problems like these must be addressed.

Conclusion

Since purposeful assignment design can play an essential role in evoking complex transactions with texts, students benefit when instructors are more attentive to this essential aspect of pedagogy. Usually, the real rules of

engagement—the development of shared criteria for evaluation, an awareness of the constraints imposed by genre, an understanding of how to critique texts while simultaneously being persuaded by them—remain tacit because they are not easily teachable; too often we are sabotaged by our own expertise, crafting assignments that invite, from our novice students, responses counter to our purposes. In my experience as a composition workshop facilitator, collaborative peer review of assignments can yield striking insights, as colleagues help each other see with fresh eyes how the balance between challenge and support might be improved.

In formulating the questions above, I have tried to imagine students both comprehending the texts sufficiently to enjoy them and also being pressured to “resist the very texts from which they derive textual pleasure: to analyze, to dissect, and to oppose,” an expertise that Scholes (1985) considers “the great aim or end of liberal education” (p. 62). While acknowledging with Bartholomae (1995) that students must be instructed in critical reading (p. 65), we must also heed Elbow’s reminder (1995) that effective writing can issue only from someone who has something meaningful to say and feels motivated to say it. Certainly the data underlying my argument are given point by Elbow’s distinction between the role of academic student writer (writing to get it “right,” to please the teacher) and the role of (genuine) writer: “The basic subtext in a piece of student writing is likely to be, ‘Is this okay?’ In contrast to students, the basic subtext in a writer’s text is likely to be, ‘Listen to me, I have something to tell you.’” (p. 81).

This distinction is exemplified in the responses to the Sophocles-Engelmann assignment, in which thoughtful, genuine voices are discernible through the haze of clichés. At these breakthrough moments, authorized reading (Rabinowitz and Smith, 1998) is evident in authorized writing. Pedagogic strategies for enabling this dynamic are, as I have been arguing, neither simple nor especially efficient. Indeed, as all of the critics whose voices I have engaged here would agree, we are confronted with a paradox: In order to nurture authenticity in students’ voices, we need to help them incorporate—through a combination of openness and resistance—other voices first. Since showing them how to do that is itself an ill-structured problem, shouldn’t we be seeking more opportunities to work together on it?

Notes

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2. Perry's scheme has prompted a number of related studies that have helped to refine and extend his theories. Reviewers have found that despite their different emphases, these studies share Perry's view of the "general trend of development" from a view of knowledge as right or wrong to an acceptance of relativism and then to a view of "individuals as active constructors of meaning, able to make judgments and commitments in a relativistic context" (Hofer and Pintrich, 1997, p. 121). See also William S. Moore, "Student and Faculty Epistemology in the College Classroom: The Perry Schema of Intellectual and Ethical Development" (1994).

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