

Making the familiar strange

Yoel Doron

He must have pegged me for a religious fanatic as soon as I walked in the door on the first day of class. That is the only possible explanation. “Let me see...black fedora, beard, *yarmulke* (skullcap)...There is no way that this student could possibly examine literature with an open mind.” I have no other way to explain my professor’s behavior on that day. But before I go on to tell you my opinion of that jerk, let me explain what happened.

As part of my undergraduate major in English, I took a course entitled “The Modern Short Story and Novella.” My professor, a man born during the period of modernism, had the idea that there was only one way in which to interpret a story: his way. Jones¹ would not tolerate other viewpoints, and expected all “critical” essays to interpret the texts we were reading in the same way that he had explained them in class. Deviate from Jones’s explanation of a particular passage in your paper, and do not even dream of getting an “A” in the course, regardless of how well you use examples from the text to support your analysis. If you had an exception to being shot down in flames, you would also not voice your ideas in class if they did not agree with his. We all knew these rules, and followed them to the letter.

On the particular day in question, the class was reading Anton Chekhov’s “Lady With Lapdog.” At one point in the story, the eponymous character, a married woman, is torn as to whether she should sleep with a man that she had just met (Chekhov, 1964). As we were reading this passage, my professor pointed out the complexities involved in her indecision. Thinking that I agreed with him in this case, I said that if the woman were really sure that she did not want to cheat on her husband, she would just tell her suitor that she did not want to have sex with him. As I was saying this, I was sure that my professor would compliment my observation, as I had just stated the “correct” viewpoint: his own.

¹ His name has been changed in this essay.

Forget about my being complimented; he chastised me. Laughing at my suggestion that the character “just say no,” Jones told me that I was not examining Chekhov’s story, but writing my own. He then said that nobody would read my story, as it was too simplistic in its treatment of the human condition. “Why do you even read novels?” he asked me, making it clear that the subtleties of literature were beyond a straight arrow like me. No matter how hard I tried, I could not convince him that I was not passing judgement on Chekhov’s character with my comment; I was just trying to illustrate the very complexities that Jones had mentioned. Trying to get through to the old man was pointless; he only had ears for one opinion. Needless to say, the experience was humiliating.

I learned my lesson. If Jones only wanted “yes” men and women in his class, then that is what I would be. I took careful notes of his interpretations of passages of the short stories and novellas that we read. At the final exam, I parroted it all back to him. I got an “A” in the course, but I did not learn a thing, other than how to conform.

At the time, I was not only personally humiliated; I was professionally outraged. I was teaching English to Years Nine and Ten at a Jewish boys’ high school, and Jones’s behaviour went against everything for which I stood. The first rule of teaching, in my opinion, was that a teacher should never take away his or her students’ dignity. Embarrassing a student can damage that student’s self-esteem, and is therefore out of line. In addition, causing public humiliation to a student can negatively affect the student’s academic performance. If I am incompetent, the student thinks, why should I even bother trying? I do not know what Jones was hoping to achieve by chastising me in front of my classmates, but somehow I get the feeling that it was not a pedagogically sound idea.

Aside from his personal attack on me, I was professionally offended by Jones’s understanding of his job description as a teacher. He clearly subscribed to what Paulo Freire refers to as “the ‘banking’ concept of education,” in which the teacher deposits information into the students, and then withdraws it when he or she tests them (Freire 1993, p. 53). In Jones’s view, it was his job to deposit the information regarding the meaning of the literature that we were studying. He then withdrew that information in

our papers and at the final examination. If what he deposited did not match what he withdrew from a particular student, he would humiliate the student until he got the answer that he wanted.

My view of teaching was radically different from my professor's "banking" system. Having realized that the Hebrew word for teacher, "*melamed*," actually means "one who facilitates learning," I always tried to get my students to draw on their existing knowledge and apply it to the task at hand. On a good day, I "taught" very little in the traditional sense, but instead got my students to work out the answers on their own. Whenever I actually lectured, and this happened more often than I cared to admit, I felt that I was cheating my students. If someone had told me that my job as a teacher was to do what Jones did, I would have opted for a more rewarding line of work, like cleaning the streets with my tongue.

In addition to my outrage at my professor's pedagogical practice, I was annoyed by his approach to literature. For Jones, every word of literature conveyed a single, precise meaning. The task of the reader was then to decode the meaning that the author put forward. I found such an approach stifling at best, ludicrous at worst. What made literature exciting for me was its multiplicity of interpretations. As far as I was concerned, as long as a reader could find textual evidence to support his or her position on what the text meant, the reader was correct, regardless of whether the author actually meant that or not. Reading literature in the way that Jones did, with only one possible interpretation, reduced a pursuit that is so rich into mere translation. When my professor asked why I bothered to read novels, I should have responded, "Why do you?"

Looking back at this experience now that I am receiving formal teacher education, I realize that my instincts were correct. In *Guidelines for the Evaluation of Teacher Education Courses*, a document that I came across as part of my Professional Issues I unit, the Standards Council for the Teaching Profession lists eight criteria that one should meet if one is to consider teaching. Among other characteristics, the Council lists "effective interpersonal communication skills" (3). While the Council does not delineate what it means by "effective," one can safely assume that humiliating one's student because of a misunderstanding does not fall into that category. Furthermore,

the Council lists “patience” as one of the characteristics of a good teacher (3). If one is patient, one does not become frustrated when one’s students do not understand the material, and therefore has no urge to humiliate them. Clearly, I was justified in my outrage at Jones’s attack on me.

When I examined the curriculum documents pertaining to teaching English in particular, my initial feelings regarding the role of English teachers, and teachers in general, were reinforced. *Teachers Know How Students Learn to Be Powerfully Literate*, a statement prepared by Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA), asks that teachers “[teach] their students [...] to share their ideas” (1). In a classroom, students must feel that their teacher will respect their views, or they will never voice them. According to the experts, then, I was correct in my understanding that teachers must create friendly environments that facilitate students’ contributions.

The curriculum statements that I read also supported my approach to literature. According to STELLA, teachers are supposed to “[allow] students to explore the multiple meanings” inherent in a text (4). The reduction of a work of literature to a single message robs it of its richness. Rather than trying to understand what the author meant, readers should explore all of the possible messages that the text can convey. This methodology in reading literature is a far cry from Jones’s single interpretation view.

Not only did my readings in my preservice course support my original outrage, but they pointed out that I had not been outraged enough. I had previously thought that if I had been applying my own moral standards to Chekhov’s character, I would have been unjustified in doing so. The curriculum documents that I am now reading point out that this is not true. In the *Curriculum and Standards Framework II* (CFS II), the Board of Studies (2000) states that English teachers are to show students how “textual interpretation [...] may vary according to cultural, social, and personal differences” (p. 5). Teachers are then to teach students how to “develop reasoned arguments about interpretation and meaning” (Board of Studies 2000, p. 5). Even if I had been expecting that the woman in “The Lady With the Dog” live up to the standards that

my culture demands, Jones's job was not to correct me, but to teach me how to argue my culturally-loaded position from the standpoint of the text.

In the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) literature, the board takes this a step further. Not only can there be different meanings in light of various readers' cultural background, but "meaning is [actually] derived from the interaction between the text, the context in which it was produced and the experience of life[...] that the reader brings to the text" (Verma 1999, p. 7). By ignoring my own cultural experience when reading the short story, I would be missing what the fiction has to offer, as it would have no meaning for me.

Despite the fact that it was an uncomfortable experience, I am glad that Jones cut me down that day. Having been publicly embarrassed by a teacher for taking what he considered to be the wrong approach to literature, I know how it feels. I will therefore take care not to allow myself to treat a student in that way, even if I find that student exasperating. No matter how frustrated I am, I cannot inflict that kind of potential damage on a student. While I always knew this cognitively, Jones helped to make that knowledge up close and personal. Thanks, Professor.

The incident with Jones also forced me to reflect on my own practices as an English teacher. Although I always knew that readers can legitimately approach literature from many different angles, I have often pushed one angle to the exclusion of all others. I am not guilty of having gone so far as to insist that my interpretation was the only valid one for a particular work, but I still feel that I did not make enough room for other explanations. Jones's "my way or the highway" approach made me realize that my own way of teaching literature, while not nearly as extreme as his, could stand to be more democratic.

In addition to what I have learned from the incident with Jones, there are a number of lessons that I have learned from writing this essay. First and foremost, writing a reflective essay helped reinforce my recognition of the importance of detailed reflection. As a beginning teacher, I would often come home from work in a bad mood, complaining that I had had a bad day. Whenever anyone would ask me what had gone wrong, I would have no answer. As I could not pinpoint which parts of my

lessons had not worked, the knowledge that my lessons had not gone well was worse than useless, as it only served to lower my feelings of self-efficacy. Critically unpacking those lessons, as I am now doing with Jones's class on "The Lady With the Dog," would have helped me recognise just what it was that I needed to improve. Throughout my future career as a teacher in Victoria, I hope to periodically reflect on both my effective and my ineffective lessons, so that I can capitalise on my strengths and minimise my weaknesses.

Another thing that I have learned from this experience is the importance of having students include their own experiences in their learning. Not only did my reading of the various curriculum documents help me realize this in a cognitive way, but actually writing this essay drove this lesson home. In creating this piece, I am doing exactly what STELLA suggest and what Jones could not handle: learning by "[making] connections between texts and [my] own knowledge, values, and experiences" (STELLA 2002, P. 4). Actively involved in using my own experiences to make meaning of texts, I am more aware of the necessity of having my students do the same. After all, I learned a heckuva lot from this assignment; I am sure that my students would gain a great deal from this kind of learning, too.

Aside from the lessons that writing this piece taught me about teaching in general, this essay helped me realise a new way of teaching writing. When I taught English in New York, all of the essays that I assigned had definite categories: some were literary analyses; others were persuasive arguments. If I had to classify this particular essay, I could not. It is part autobiography, part textual analysis, part mission statement, and part indictment of a man who was in the wrong business. This exercise helped me realise that teaching students how to write goes beyond demonstrating the structure of the traditional five-paragraph essay. To teach students to write meaningful works, I will have to make space for multifaceted texts, or even those that involve more than one medium.

Geri DeLuca, one of my favourite undergraduate professors, once said that education is about "making the familiar strange." If she is right, then I am definitely getting an education about teaching. I find myself questioning some of the strategies that I have used in seven years of teaching high school. While some of the things that I have

done, such as show respect for my students and their comments, were definitely in order, some of my other practices need improvement. I find myself apprehensive as I view my future, afraid that I will act like Jones, even if on a smaller scale. All I can do to avoid this, I suppose, is to continue to critically reflect on my experiences, and to act accordingly.

Bibliography

- Board of Studies. (2000). *Curriculum and Standards Framework II: English*. Carlton, Victoria: Board of Studies.
- Chekhov, Anton. (1964). "Lady With Lapdog." *Lady With Lapdog and Other Stories*. David Magarshack (Trans.). Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.
- Freire, Paulo. (1993). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Myra Bergman Ramos (Trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- Standards Council for the Teaching Profession. (Last updated in December 1998). *Guidelines for the Evaluation of Teacher Education Courses*. Retrieved 18 March 2005 from <http://www.vit.vic.edu.au/pdfs/Guide99.pdf>
- Standards for Teachers of Language and Literacy in Australia. (2002). *Teachers Know How Students Learn to Be Powerfully Literate*. Retrieved 18 March 2005 from <http://www.stella.org.au/pdf/languagemodes.pdf>
- Verma, S. (Ed.). (1999). *Study Design: Literature*. Carlton, Victoria: Board of Studies.