

Using Inquiry in the American Literature I Survey

Sonya Lancaster

sonyal@ku.edu

Summary: An American literature survey teacher redesigned this course to focus on inquiry as a means of encouraging students to question the context of literature and how a text achieves its purpose rhetorically.

Background

English 320: American Literature I is the first of two American Literature surveys (covering literature from America's beginnings to 1865), and it is required for all English majors. Students in the class are ordinarily English majors who are focusing on literature; those with a creative writing interest; secondary education majors with an English emphasis; and students who are majoring in theatre and film, journalism, or other arts and sciences majors. The class has 35 students. I taught the course in fall 2007 and fall 2008.

Teaching Question: How can I revise course materials to help students more successfully use inquiry?

Course Goals:

By the end of English 320, students should be able to do the following:

- A. Demonstrate a broad background knowledge of American literature from the Colonial period to 1865
 1. Contextualize a text generically and historically/culturally
 2. Inquire into individual and cultural issues explored in these literary texts
 3. Engage confidently in scholarly conversations about texts
- B. Closely engage literary texts
 1. Demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of a text's rhetorical situation
 2. Respond to literature through different writing genres appropriate to the study of English

These goals are structured into the course through discussion preparation assignments and other shorter writings, both of the paper prompts, and the final examination.

Implementation

In class I alternate between a whole class discussion/interactive lecture and small group discussion. I chose these two methods because I wanted to leave room for students to create their own responses to the texts while I provided them with background that aided their thinking about the texts in the context in which they were written.

Discussion Preparation Assignments: When I taught 320 in fall 2007, I had students practice inquiry by discussing in group blogs on Blackboard. They were to come up with interesting questions to research for their inquiry papers through discussing the readings with their classmates, and to encourage this, the inquiry questions they posed for their papers had to come from the discussion. This did not work well for several reasons:

1. I formed the groups for the blogs based on the interests of those in the class (similar majors, outside activities, etc.), but these groups did not have any relation to the discussion groups that worked together during class time. As a result, students did not form a bond with their online group members and they did not really discuss, just posted what they thought they might want to write about.
2. The students did not have enough direction and practice at coming up with questions that would lead to fruitful inquiry. As a result, the papers they wrote were not as successful as they could have been.
3. While the students were very active in their groups in class, it was difficult to get them to post often enough and substantially enough to the blogs. The blogs themselves were very uneven, some being quite interesting and fruitful, others not generative or collaborative.

To remedy these problems and better scaffold the learning activities, in Fall 2008 I replaced the blogs with discussion preparation assignments. These ten, one- to three-page writing assignments took the place of a midterm and were designed to help students question their assumptions about literature in the time period we were studying. They were assigned about once a week for the first half of the semester. Students completed the assignments and brought them to class so that they would have their responses for discussion. These assignments were assessed in the following manner:

5pts: The response engaged the material in the texts and raised interesting questions that could generate discussion.

4pts.: The response demonstrated that the student had read the material but the information gleaned from the reading made statements about the reading that wouldn't lend themselves to fruitful discussion. The questions raised were less thought-provoking and critical.

3pts: The response was mostly summary without raising issues for discussion.

2-1 points: The response didn't fulfill the assigned task, or only partially fulfilled it.

Inquiry Paper Assignment: This paper asked students to pose a complex question that came from their reading of a text in the course and to explore that question through research. In response to my experience teaching this course in fall 2007, I changed the way I prepared students to write their inquiry papers by having them practice coming up with questions for

further study in their discussion groups, showing them examples of inquiry papers, and having individual conferences over their topics and how they might research them. I encouraged students to make concept maps and bring those with them to the conferences. I also changed the due date for the inquiry paper and made it due at midterm rather than having a floating due date (in 2007, students had been able to decide in which of three units they would write the inquiry paper and in which of the three they would write the close reading paper), as the texts in the first half of the semester lend themselves well to inquiry, while texts in the second half of the course lend themselves better to close reading.

Take-home Final Exam: This final exam offered students a chance to demonstrate how they could tie together the texts of the semester by making connections among them in terms of recurring themes that we discovered through our discussions. Many of the issues underlying the course informed the questions students were asked, and they were invited to synthesize their learning over the semester. The exam also gave them a chance to demonstrate what they had learned about literature through their study. The exam was composed of short essay questions, and students could choose six out of ten questions to answer and choose three authors to use for each question.

I designed a rubric for the inquiry paper in fall 2008, and created and used a rubric for the fall 2007 and fall 2008 final exams.

Student Work

Discussion Preparation Assignments: I designed these to help students question their assumptions about literature in the time periods we were studying and help them to prepare for the final exam.

Two questions on the final exam specifically addressed student assumptions about literature in this time period and asked them to respond to their understanding of the use of literary genres to make arguments for social change (2007 and 2008: question 7), and the issues raised by studying texts that have been translated or transcribed (2007: question 5, 2008: question 8). Because these two questions were most clearly related to issues of student assumptions about literature in the 2007 final exam, I included them verbatim in the 2008 final exam.

Final Exam Question: Understanding Literary Genres to Promote Social Change

Final Exam Question	Not Developing	Developing	Competent	Exemplary
2007: Q 7	8%	7%	55%	30%
2008: Q 7	0	0	51%	49%

Final Exam Question: Translated or Transcribed Texts

Final Exam Question	Not Developing	Developing	Competent	Exemplary
2007: Q5	6%	12%	58%	24%
2008: Q8	0	0	65%	35%

Other questions on the exam contained elements that would engage student assumptions about the literature of the time period, but these two questions dealt with the issue most directly. The improvement shown here, along with my general impressions of improvement of their abilities to inquire in class discussion and their writing, make me think that the discussion preparation assignments were successful.

[Click here](#) for full question-by-question matrices for the 2007 and 2008 final exams.

Inquiry Paper Rubric: I did not create the inquiry paper rubric in time to use it on the fall 2007 class, but I did use it on the fall 2008 student papers. Generally, the rubric assesses the major components of the paper, the quality of the question that prompts the student's inquiry, the organization of the paper as a narrative of the writer's research experience, the quality of the research and its integration in to the paper, whether the conclusion connects back to the text that began the inquiry, and the quality of the prose and citation.

In fall 2008 most students chose questions that prompted inquiry, used appropriate academic prose, and correctly cited their sources. [Sample paper 1](#) is an example of a paper based on a good inquiry question. The author clearly tells us how she derived the question from her reading of Samuel Sewall's diary and why it was compelling to her: she wonders about the status of widows in that time period and how anxious they would be to remarry when she reads about a widow's

rejection of Sewall's courtship. Sample paper 4 is an example of a paper that really doesn't present an inquiry question. It has a research agenda, which is to examine various current medical theories of what happened to the girls who accused their neighbors of being witches during the Salem witch trials, but it isn't clear how this research is connected to Cotton Mather's account of the witch trials, the text on which she is basing her inquiry.

Quite a few students had significant problems with narrative organization and the conclusion (especially tying the research they undertook back to the text that prompted the research). Sample paper 2 is an example of a paper with a successful narrative organization and conclusion. The paper begins with the topic the student will explore, is organized around the questions that arise as he researches and explores his topic and refines his search, and concludes by returning to the text that generated the inquiry (William Bradford's *On Plymouth Plantation*) to place his reading of Bradford's text within a spectrum of political ideology that complicates the student's ideas of what Puritan means. Sample paper 5 is an example of a paper that has a problematic narrative structure: in the first half of the paper the student presents a thesis and then she researches to prove the thesis, rather than starting with an open topic and letting her exploration of the research determine what she thinks about it. The second half of the paper comes closer to a narrative organization as she explains how her work with the research into primary texts affects her reading of the captivity narratives.

In the case of some papers, the quality and integration of the research could also use some improvement. Sample paper 3 excels in research as the writer explores both the type of Bible the Puritans would have used and its implications, as well as carefully researching each of the biblical references in the two texts she treats. Sample paper 6 demonstrates problematic research and integration of sources as the student uses a combination of wikipedia-type sources and some general secondary sources on the time period, mostly summarizing them rather than using them for analysis.

In fall 2007, the class had five sophomores, 13 juniors, and 16 seniors. In fall 2008, it had 14 sophomores, 14 juniors, and 6 seniors. When I used the inquiry paper rubric in 2008 to assess the class performance, I divided the students up according to the level of the students. Then, I realized that the sophomores and some juniors were having problems with the narrative structure I asked them to employ (exploring the topic during the paper and delaying the thesis until the end, then returning to how the conclusions affect the student's reading of the text). I did not feel that it was fair for the sophomores to be disadvantaged, so I allowed everyone the opportunity to revise the paper.

For a full matrix of 2008 inquiry paper student performance, [click here](#).

Final Exam Rubric: This rubric assesses three components of each of the questions on the both the fall 2007 and fall 2008 exams: the authors chosen to respond to the topic, the quality of the response to the question, and the quality of the evidence used to support the response. It also assesses the student's choice of exam questions for response to assure that the choices represent a good range of historical period, genre, authors, and types of questions.

This is a comparison of student performance on the final exam in 2007 and 2008:

Final Exam	Not Developing	Developing	Competent	Exemplary
2007	5%	12%	57%	26%
2008	2%	8%	54%	36%

On the fall 2008 exam, questions 1 (and a similar question in 2007 about the European Imagination) and question 4 (and a similar question in 2007 about cultural encounters) asked students to apply materials from early in the semester to works from across the semester, and students did worse on question 1 in 2008 than 2007, and only slightly better on question 4 in 2008 than 2007 (and in both classes few students chose the questions). I will need to refer back to the concepts from early in the course more regularly as we discuss works in the later units to better prepare students for these types of questions. Students also had problems with question 7, which asked them to discuss the use of literary genres to promote social change. We discussed this concept right around Thanksgiving, when fewer students were in class, so I think it would be good to discuss the concept throughout the semester so that students can think of it in terms of the materials in the first and second units, as well as the third.

[Click here](#) for full question-by-question matrices for the 2007 and 2008 final exams.

Reflections

I think that students have benefited from the changes I made to the course, as is evidenced by the improvement of scores on the final exam. Next time I teach the course, I will provide more examples of inquiry papers and institute a peer review of drafts to help students create better narratives and integrate their research. I will also focus on several large issues that can be discussed throughout the semester to help students connect the materials discussed in the first unit to later units better on the final exam.

The process of revising this course has taught me several things that I will take with me as I teach this course again and other classes. These are some of the practices I will adapt for future courses:

- I will continue to construct rubrics to assess the major activities in my courses, because articulating for myself and for my students what I expect has been so useful. It is an unbelievably difficult thing for me to do, but I am hopeful that with experience it might become easier?
- I have created rubrics for other papers I have assigned, and these have helped me to begin to describe the qualities I would look for in literary analysis. I will be teaching a methods course for English majors next fall, and this work will help me to focus on how scholars analyze literature so that I can teach students to analyze, too.
- I will be able, as I compile information about student progress over several years of teaching, to see what improvement they have made and continue to identify factors that could prevent students from being successful so that I can work to counter them.