Book Review


During a recent conversation with a colleague from the applied sciences, I found myself at a cordial but all too familiar impasse. After comparing course loads and learning outcomes, we admitted sheepishly that neither of us had any idea what the other one does all day. My colleague puzzled over my assertion that I could spend half a semester on one Wallace Stevens poem, while I questioned his habit of leaving students to wade through difficult experiments, unaided, for weeks on end. What is it exactly, we both asked, that you teach?

I would have been wise to consult Sherry Linkon's *Literary Learning: Teaching the English Major* before attempting to explain myself, for it provides the kind of grounding, accessible definitions of philosophy and purpose that instructors of English desperately need—particularly now, when pressure to prove the worth of humanities courses is at an all-time high.

*Literary Learning* begins by reminding us of the complexities inherent in teaching and assessing the study of literature. The author describes in detail two essential types of literary learning students must acquire and utilize in any course: Content Knowledge (literary history, theory, form, and so forth) and Strategic Knowledge (analysis, argument, inquiry). Such a distinction may seem obvious, but Linkon’s purpose here is partly to show how intuitive understandings may hinder one’s practice; instructors of literature rarely make explicit those tactics for dealing with a text which come so naturally to them, but frequently elude or befuddle outsiders. Literary learners find it difficult to explain their habits of mind to themselves, let alone to others. Many instructors assume students will develop certain research and argumentation skills through practice alone, offering “too little overt instruction” on acquiring these skills (29)—a conspicuous irony given the energy most English departments put towards rhetoric and composition pedagogies.

Literature complicates thinking; there are no “answers” for test questions, save the basics of form and context, no tidy packages of confirmed truths about a given text or author. Successful students should leave class with more questions than they had when they came in, but confident about their own strategies for forming interpretations. The study of literature is thus unique and unrivaled in its potential to
beget truly liberal minds. Literary learning helps students feel comfortable with the unresolved; they review and interpret what is not said more often than what is. In short, as Linkon puts it, literature courses teach students to take a step back and “read the world,” thereby helping them to navigate it wisely. No small task, and one not easily accomplished in three credits’ worth of sonnet explications.

If the teaching of literature is indeed so essential and inscrutable, then Linkon is ambitious in seeking to refine its methods with one thin volume. Mightier scholars have attempted such a feat, often with deeply confusing results, but the explanations here are clear and precise and will help readers accomplish a great deal. Linkon draws from a well-rounded bibliography and yet forgoes some of the usual discussions of post-structuralism and assorted theories of knowledge. (This seems an altogether conscious and refreshing choice, and one which makes the book easy to follow. Linkon does not reject such scholarship, but clearly wants instructors to do that reading for themselves.)

*Literary Learning* conveys its four interrelated points quite efficiently. First, Linkon argues convincingly that teachers of literature at any institution must define their discourse and unpack the exact ingredients of literary thinking to achieve a common sense of purpose. Linkon helps start that conversation with a deconstruction of the literary mind and how it reads and argues. There are few surprises here, and again, little theoretical hobnobbing, but readers may nonetheless feel jealous that Linkon has said precisely what they have been trying to articulate to deans or administrators for years.

Second, and perhaps best, Linkon advocates for transparency in practice. Chapters One and Two make a compelling argument for rethinking fundamentally literature’s signature pedagogies of lecture and discussion, which rarely teach Strategic Knowledge, or only do so indirectly. Once we determine how expert literary minds work, it is incumbent upon us to tell students precisely how to build and use such a mind. “Many of our students don’t ‘get it’ because we keep ‘it’ hidden,” Linkon argues (32). Modeling, scaffolding, and methods such as *cognitive apprenticeship* can illuminate our analytical processes for students, so that they can not only explain a given period or work, but also demonstrate how such explanations are generated—and challenged.

Chapter Three explains how to restructure courses that go beyond, or beneath, Content Knowledge. Linkon suggests designing syllabi “backwards,” facilitating ways for students to make and follow a map (i.e., a line of inquiry) to effective interpretation. While this tactic may sound convoluted or
arcane, this section is straightforward and specific, interrogating common assignments like research papers and midterm exams and suggesting challenging alternatives. Sample assignments and discussion plans are included.

Lastly, Literary Learning explores options for research. Linkon confesses to being a “geek” for the scholarship of teaching and learning, so Chapter Four delineates several potential literary SoTL projects. Linkon suggests “we can study the texts of learning . . . much as we do literary texts” (109) and details qualitative methods that may interest literature geeks who fear the cold opacity of mathematical assessment. Linkon also demonstrates the added benefit of such research—relevance. Not only can a SoTL study make our classrooms better, but it can also increase awareness of the unique, vital connections between literary learning and student success. Dissecting our discipline and its discourse and achieving transparency in our practice help us succeed in our work and guarantee that others can continue that work in the future.

Thus, teachers in other fields would do well to take a page from Literary Learning; any program can benefit from such dissection. All educators suffer occasionally from Hogarth’s curse of knowledge, or from a bias in our memory of how we acquired our own scholarly toolkits. What habits of mind did you intuit as a budding scholar that you secretly wish you had figured out years prior? You did not always think in the ways you think now; at some point lights came on, or were switched on by mentors as you slowly made sense of your research and other professional tasks. Linkon’s points can help any instructor to be truly thoughtful towards students who struggle as we once did. For anyone seeking new learning-centered pedagogies, Literary Learning offers useful questions and instruments.

During my conversation with my scientist colleague, we found, of course, that while we ask our students to read the world through very different lenses, both approaches have value. But unless we each delve deeply in the ways Literary Learning advocates, neither of us can expect to teach much of anything. The more we both engage in open, constructive examination of our practice, the stronger our institution will be.

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