

Humanities Out There Lesson 6: Bad Boys, Bad Books

The purpose of this lesson is to place students in close contact with Twain's text, giving them a greater familiarity with Huck's narrative voice, which is simultaneously their main barrier to being able to read the book and what is most enjoyable about it. We're also trying to encourage students to consider the personal implications of what they're reading and to foster an open and collaborative relationship within our groups.

Students' prior preparation:

- 1) Unfortunately Ms. Wood, who is otherwise wonderful, hasn't returned my emails since I came back from vacation. So I really have no idea how far the students have read in *Huckleberry Finn*. We'll just take our *Scarlet Letter* approach this week and assume they have very little familiarity with the text.¹
- 2) The students finished *The Scarlet Letter*² and the *Quinceanera* comparison essays. I recommended the following 19th century authors to Ms. Wood to fill in the gaps between Hawthorne and Twain: Emerson, Thoreau, Douglass, Dickinson, Whitman. Regardless of how much of that they did read, they are likely to have revisited these concepts that we broached in November: a) the middle part of the 19th century in the U.S. was a time of great social, political, and philosophical turbulence, and b) poets or authors of fiction often use indirect or allegorical approaches to make social critiques; literature is not political action, for better or worse, but it is deeply influenced by the 'real world' and influential in the 'real world.' We will expand on this in the coming weeks, emphasizing how much has changed in the U.S. of the late 19th-century (industrialization, urbanization, westward expansion, the Civil War aftermath, the commercialization of literature) and how much really hasn't changed (in particular the agrarian economy in the South and its exploitation of black labor).
- 3) Blah, blah. But don't forget the most important concept that we emphasized last quarter in both theory and practice: there is no one correct answer when it comes to literary analysis, but there are indeed wrong answers. Good theories are supported by evidence and refined by the social process of argument and discussion.
- 4) Never assume that SAHS students know facts about U.S. history or culture that you find obvious. The reason you find it obvious is because someone told it to you. On the other hand, don't confuse background knowledge, or lack thereof, with intelligence. Never talk down to a student; you'd be surprised some of the things they do know.
- 5) The students will be far more comfortable with your role in the classroom than they were when we first met them; even if you're a new teacher they're somewhat broken in. Combine that with a book that they will like better and the fact that they now know – after two months since our last session – that they shouldn't take your presence for granted, and you're walking into a pretty great situation. Personally, I'm very excited.

Other things you should know about your students and about teaching them:

- 1) There are no general laws of teaching, only vague patterns with numerous exceptions. The same situation never occurs twice. Every day is a little different, every group dynamic is a little different. Don't give yourself too much credit or blame for anything that happens.

¹ In future weeks I think we will see a major difference in how accessible the themes and language of these two books are to SAHS students.

² Mayhap the cool morn didth see the villagers fruitfully engaged in much rejoicing and merry sport.

- 2) Skill level for reading, writing, speaking, etc. will vary widely from student to student.
- 3) High school students and second language learners *can* figure out difficult concepts, but it will take them more time than it would take you to process and apply them. Be patient. The hardest part of teaching is keeping your mouth shut, as you will see me repeatedly demonstrate by (poor) example in these staff meetings.
- 4) Some students may be insecure or defensive about their school performance and English language aptitude.
- 5) Certain students would rather be quietly obedient than risk embarrassment. Part of this is cultural, part is just personality. This is why establishing a good working relationship is more important than squeezing one more abstract idea into them, and will pay greater dividends in the long run. The main thing to communicate is that it's OK to make guesses and be wrong, and that it's OK, even encouraged, to disagree with you.
- 6) Students will freely associate school concepts to pop culture or personal experience. Many of these associations are quite tenuous and may seem like a waste of time. Just recognize that this is a cognitive process. Look at one of your old notebooks if you still have them; this is how you learned to be a student.
- 7) You are very unlikely to deal with overt misbehavior. The 'worst' from last quarter, as I recall, was students giving sarcastic answers and being distracted by sending text messages or selling candy bars. Remember that our class could well be the most fun thing your students do all day in school. But don't be surprised if students try to test your boundaries in more subtle ways. I'm always available to saunter by "randomly" and snap things back into focus. Indeed the main tension in your group will be between 'on task' vs. 'off task' interactions... there is a productive gray area, and this is ultimately where real learning happens. The main objective of the H.O.T. program is to make students feel more comfortable with a college-style learning environment, with college-level concepts and topics, with college students, and with the idea that there is a realistic chance for them to succeed in college. If they think they are putting one over on you by talking about U.C.I. rather than Mark Twain, please encourage them and save your Dr. Evil laugh for the parking lot.

Where to draw the line if students ask you for personal information:

- 1) They will. They're so good at it that you'll have half the answer out before you realize what's happening.
- 2) Draw the line if it makes you uncomfortable.
- 3) ... if it might make any of your students uncomfortable.
- 4) ... if you think the student doesn't actually care and is just trying to delay the lesson, or if you haven't completed the basic goals of whatever activity you're doing. (Although recall point #7 of the previous section.)

Try not to communicate the following without meaning to:

- 1) H.O.T. is not a charity. It is a shared intellectual enterprise.

- 2) H.O.T. is not a dumbed down version of the U.C.I. college curriculum. We use the same concepts and skills that Aaron uses in teaching literature to college students. We customize them for the particular outlook and interests of S.A.H.S. students.
- 3) We have no sacred knowledge by virtue of being college students that these poor bastards are lucky to have access to. We're not here to free their minds, enlighten them, or save them. We are here to *exchange* knowledge and to guide them in developing their skills. When I wrote this the first time in October, I thought it was partly bullshit, but last quarter made me a true believer in it.

Things you should do to prepare for Wednesday

- 1) Read this packet thoroughly and make sure you are familiar with everything in it. Bring it to the school on Wednesday because you'll need it for cribnotes.
- 2) Read chapters 1-8 of *Huckleberry Finn*. Regardless of the pace the students are taking, we'll aim to finish the book for ourselves in five weeks.
- 3) If you haven't already posted to the noteboard for the week, please do. Multiple posts always welcome: <http://eee.uci.edu/toolbox/noteboard/index.php?board=4854>
- 4) Make sure I gave you your parking pass and your hall pass.
- 5) Make sure that you've got your carpool set up. Being late is not acceptable, but in an emergency call me at 951-203-3126. I'd recommend that new teachers carpool with returning teachers because they know the times and places.

0:00-0:10 Aaron's PowerPoint

The purpose of the PowerPoint is to give students some historical context about how *Huckleberry Finn* came across to readers in the 1880s, and to make a case for the protagonist being identifiable to a Mexican-American teenager. This will take less intellectual somersaults to accomplish than Hester did. I think.

- 1) Morning session will have access to the classroom before school starts. Afternoon session will be wedging in between bells.
- 2) Ms. Wood (a.k.a. Cindyann) will re-introduce us to the students, then I will dim the lights and show a brief PowerPoint slideshow. Usually I preview these for you on a big video screen at the staff meeting. Don't worry, Judge Hathorne is still in full effect.

0:10-0:20 Freewrite & Icebreaker

The goal of this exercise is to build/reestablish the relationship between you and your small group of students. It's also a mnemonic so you can learn their names by associating them with what they say, as well as a way for students to consider the theme of censorship in a way that is closer to their actual interests.

- 1) Following the PowerPoint, each student will freewrite silently for 2-3 minutes.
- 2) Whereupon we will divide into nine groups. This may be somewhat chaotic as it's likely that the groups may have reconfigured somewhat by addition and subtraction. Your group should have either three or four students, and if it doesn't you need to call me over ASAP. They tend to have obstinate but highly variable preferences about where they want the group to work. The classroom is an option as are several outdoor spaces downstairs. Just follow someone who knows where they're going.

- 3) (Re)introduce yourself to your students. Make a note of their names if you get the chance.
- 4) The icebreaker question is on the handout. I'll encourage them to write the first thing that pops into their head rather than answering each sub-question in sequence (which is their habit from standardized testing). So you might want to mix it up when you ask them what they wrote. The most important aspect of the question is obviously the part that asks them to take a parental role and support their judgment in this role. But you can consider this a fairly open discussion, and you should feel free to share your own experiences with them.

Note to new teachers... the tricky part you have to figure out isn't so much how to do the exercises but how to transition between them. You might want to think out a couple of possible transition scenarios. Anything is better than, "uh, it's time to do this now I guess."

0:20-0:50 Close Reading Exercise

This is as vanilla as it gets,³ but last quarter's teachers indicated that it was probably the most helpful thing they did with their students and that we didn't do enough of it. Twain isn't as alienating as Hawthorne, but though it isn't immediately apparent, his language and his symbolism are considerably more complex than Hawthorne's. The goal of this exercise is to familiarize students with reading the dialect(s) in *Huckleberry Finn* and to get them to consider their variance from standard English and their nuanced way of communicating some of Twain's pet themes.

- 1) You don't have to dwell on this part, but I thought it would be worthwhile for the students to have a ready comparison between *Huck* and the didactic children's books that Twain is making fun of. (Albeit subtly repeating, but that's a more esoteric discussion.) Since you're the 'teacher' in this scenario, you can read this part. Read it in a stuffy voice. Thus what you're also doing is making fun of your own role as a quasi-authority figure (albeit subtly being that figure, naturally).
- 2) Take turns reading the start of the book, which I've put mainly intact on the handout. Students read aloud off a page *very* slowly. Try not to look as impatient as you feel. If by some odd chance Ms. Wood has done exactly this same thing earlier in January, I guess you can just skip to the questions and reference back to the text as necessary.
- 3) You might want to read the passage yourself a couple of times and answer my questions. Don't let them see that you have your own answers... we insisted to the students last quarter that literary questions don't have 'correct' answers, but it's still their habit. You could also spend some time figuring out Huck's lingo. Like what's a "sugar-hogshead"? Your students will ask you that.
- 4) I doubt you'll be able to address all the questions I gave you, which is fine. You might want to pick a few that you find more interesting and emphasize those, or ask the students which they are most interested in. (They will always choose the one they think is easier to answer... sometimes they will choose wrong. Bwa ha ha.) Many of the questions encourage the students to draw connections between Huck's experience and their own, so you should be tolerant of digression if the students are getting something out of it.
- 5) Last quarter's teachers discovered that some groups work better discussing questions together first, then answering individually, and some vice versa. Some do better with writing than discussing and vice versa. There are trade-offs... for instance if you insist they write it you often get better responses, but on the other hand they sometimes go into their filling-out-homework-

³ Pedagogical pyrotechnics in future weeks, I promise.

braindead-autopilot mode. If you're new, you'll need to experiment a bit. It helps to be very specific about what you're asking them to do. Try asking "so, um, what do you guys think?" and you'll get nothing but crickets.

Follow Up Exercises for Ms. Wood

- 1) Expand on the icebreaker question.
- 2) Finish the remainder of the close reading questions about the first chapter.
- 3) My sense is that these mostly Mexican-American students are exposed to a particularly didactic strain of advice from their parents, grandparents, and community leaders, and that this advice is often so formulaic and out of touch with their actual lives that they find it rather useless. I'm sure they would be interested to share their thoughts on that, but it's a bit touchy and you might be better at figuring out the right angle. Likewise their thoughts on themselves or certain friends/family members being categorized as poor students or juvenile delinquents.