

Teaching Theorising – not Theory. On Literary Theory in Distance Learning¹

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The students

“In extramural teaching must be created the method, the technique, the atmosphere, which shall give the university a new meaning in democracy. For him [the extra-mural teacher] it is to solve the difficult problems connected with long distance instruction. Their solution has hardly begun. He must be able to do more than correct errors and communicate information. [...] The new type of teacher and the new type of text and instruction are required because we have a new type of student from that in the conventional school. He is generally an adult student. He has a fairly definite idea as to what he needs and wants, and often an almost equally definite idea as to what he does not want. He has to be convinced by logic and experience, and not by rule of order, of the position of the teacher [...] the student makes up his mind quite promptly on an early, if not the first examination of the course as to whether it is worth his while” (Lighty 1915: 83-84).

This statement seems to come straight out of a paper on distance education written just yesterday. In fact it is over 90 years old, written by William Lighty (University of Wisconsin), who identified essential characteristics, requirements and potentials of distance education in the year 1915. Most pertinent to the present discussion seems the idea of distance education as a form of education *sui generis* as Otto Peters called it in 1996 (Peters 1996). That is, the idea of distance education as a form of education, which is based on the adult student’s maturity.

Students who decide to study literature in distance learning are highly motivated for reading, usually strongly interested in the arts, history and culture. One of their typical motives to study literature is to learn more about their own cultural background. In the curricula they expect to find literary history, general information about writers, periods and genres. Usually literary theory is *not* a significant factor in their decision to study literature. Therefore we have to find ways to raise their interest in literary theory and make them aware of the importance of theory for the attainment of scholarly standards.

¹ The first part of my title follows a wording of Peter Barry.

Literary theory in distance education

The framework of distance education makes the imperative to introduce theory in literary study a more poignant one, as it is theory that marks the difference between the study of literature and the individual amateur reading, to which mature students are accustomed.

Literary theory is a discussion of the underlying principles, one might say the tools, by which we attempt to understand literature. All literary interpretation draws on a theoretical basis; theory serves as a justification for very different kinds of critical activity. Literary theory refers to principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts or from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in multiple interpretive situations.

- It is literary theory that formulates the relationship between author and work;
- Literary theory offers varying approaches for understanding the role of historical context in interpretation as well as the relevance of linguistic and unconscious elements of the text.

All critical practice regarding literature depends on an underlying structure of ideas in at least two ways: theory provides

- a rationale for “the literary”, i.e. the subject matter of criticism
- the specific aims of critical practice—the act of interpretation itself.

On the other hand the etymology of the term, which derives from the ancient Greek "theoria", shows the partial nature of theoretical approaches to literature. "Theoria" indicates just one view or perspective of the ancient Greek stage, and literary theory offers precisely the same. Although theories often claim to present a complete system for understanding literature they actually offer just a partial view.

The current state of theory is such that there are many overlapping areas of influence, and older schools of theory continue to exert an influence on the whole. In our days, therefore, literary theory has become an umbrella term for a variety of scholarly approaches to reading texts.

Both views, literary theory as a perspective just of a certain part of the whole stage we call literature and also theory as an umbrella term indicate the special challenge posed by studying and teaching literary theory.

Information - Knowledge – Competence of scientific thinking

The process of knowledge acquisition includes selection, assessment, integration and especially transformation of a huge amount of data into applicable knowledge and skilled performance. The emergence of Knowledge Society, building on the persuasive influence of modern information and communication technologies, is bringing about a fundamental reshaping of teaching and learning.

With the Internet and the open access movement, the potential of knowledge acquisition has grown radically larger. A Google search for the item “Literary theory” provides more than 46,000,000 results. A lot of these WebPages, hosted by members of the academic community, give learned information about theory, well structured with major figures, key terms and further references. As a matter of course our students will use these WebPages as an entry point to literary theory.²

However – what they actually get there is information. In their study of “Representations and enactments of critical theory on the World Wide Web”, Anastasia Natsina and Takis Kayalis examined that field and witnessed a paradoxical situation: “the unprecedented proliferation of information on critical theory goes hand in hand with the more or less casual reduction of theory to its core concepts. This shrinking of theory to sketchy representations of its contents serves its polemical aspects as well as its pragmatic potential.” (Natsina-Kayalis 2005: 4)

Teaching literary theory therefore must be more than giving information about different schools of theory. It is more than presenting basic definitions and key terms of these schools. Deconstruction, for example, cannot be reduced to the correct use of key terms like *Aporia*, *Différance*, *Logocentrism*, *Metaphysics of Presence*, *Supplement*, *Trace*, *Transcendental Signifier*. Teaching literary theory means to answer the question: How does this specific theory affect the understanding of literature? What is “Interpretation” in the context of that theory? What is an argument for that scientific school? To put it in other words, the information students get by using the World Wide Web has to be transformed into applicable knowledge.

Knowledge is often regarded as a product that one does or does not own. This may be true for simple mechanical skills. But even there, one needs three things: theoretical knowledge (to

² To name just a few of these websites: <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/glossary/headerindex.html>; <http://www.kristisiegel.com/theory.htm>; <http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=2718>; <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit/theory.html>; www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70; <30 June 2006>

know *how* something is done), procedural knowledge (to know *when* – or *why* - something is done) and finally the right tool. For instance, you know how to change a tire on your car but you cannot do it, because you have not got the necessary adjustable spanner. If you have the right tool but you are lacking in procedural knowledge you will probably change to snow tires in July. And, of course, literary theory is a much more complicated field of study compared to changing tires.

What can we learn from this little example: Knowledge work (or literary theory) is neither an art, which cannot be taught or learned, nor a collection of rules and procedures, which just have to be applied. Therefore we have to focus on the process of knowledge acquisition and its transformation into cognitive capabilities. Practically usable knowledge in the area of the progression of scientific thinking can be supported effectively by performing this process in detail. That is to say: teach theorising – not theory.

On teaching literary theory

Unlike literary history, which provides general information about writers, periods and genres, courses in literary theory aim to cultivate competence in general theoretical and methodological problems, in other words in scientific thinking. How we can teach that most effectively? First we have to face the question: What mental model is behind our teaching literary theory?

Are we going to teach literary theory in the logic of engineering? That would mean a clearly defined goal that is to be reached by a set of fixed operations. Shouldn't we better apply another approach to scientific knowledge, the mental model of *bricolage* following Claude Levi-Strauss (Levi-Strauss 1962: 19ff)? Organizational theory called that approach “muddling through” (Lindblom 1959). To argue for this proposal, I will compare the two models.

Dimensions	Technical rationality “Engineer”	Muddling through “Bricolage”
focus	the whole system and the purpose of the system	the tool box available, the system and the purpose
orientation	the ‘objective’ reality, the world	the tool box, the actors, the situation
result	generated by the analysis of the problem; should not be changed	not fixed, undergoing a continuous change depending on the actors
means-end orientation	the goal is the priority; the	solution and problems are co-

	solution is subordinated and has to fulfill the purpose	existent; solutions generate new problems
failure	if pre-established end can not reached	goals can be adapted, compromises are allowed
organisation is	a set of fixed relations and their formal connections	a set of social practices which have to be negotiated all the time
evaluation	check if the goal is achieved	one has also to re-examine the goal itself

In the mental model of the engineer one has to follow a certain procedure to get to the solution. The “know how” of these procedures provides the professional knowledge of the specialist. In the mental model of *bricolage*, knowing how is replaced by “to be able to” use the right skill in an actual situation. With this model we keep in mind that understanding literature is not a situation with pre-established goals but a social process, depending on the participants. The result of literary interpretation is undergoing a continuous change depending on the involved actors: therefore goals can be adapted and compromises are allowed. This seems to me the fundamental basis for dealing with methodological controversies between theoretical schools as a kind of social practice in the scientific community.

Finally, I will lay particular emphasis on two prerequisites for effective teaching of literary theory. I will not focus on specific media, for the following seems relevant for teaching literature in distance learning in general - whether we are using printed study-material or Hypertexts in online teaching.

1. Teaching literary theory has to be focused on the person who learns. Curricula should provide knowledge about different methods to analyse a literary text according to certain “schools”. This knowledge should be transformed to applicable knowledge and to competence in scientific thinking for the interpretation of literary texts. As literary theory creates questions, not answers, each specific literary theory creates specific questions. To understand each literary theory, we have to teach students to understand the particular questions it raises.

2. The teacher should be authentic. Teachers should teach theorising, and not theories. The best way to do this is to mark one’s own position and the theoretical premises which lead his/her interpretation. In other words: do not apply theory, but use it. You can cover up and

disguise as a deconstructionist, if you work with hermeneutics at heart – but the students will find it out. And if not, it is even worse, because students may think that literary theory is just a kind of intellectual game with changing rules. Just the opposite should be the aim: Teaching literary theory must engage students in an intellectual activity that makes them try out ideas, reflect, compare and apply critical judgement to the literature they are reading.

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