
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Kennesaw State College graduate English courses are, at present, all service courses to the School of Education. While they are English courses, and should maintain a basic literary content, these courses can also be used to present a broad interdisciplinary approach to teaching for local area public school teachers. What I describe here is one such course, one which could also be a model for interdisciplinary upper-level undergraduate courses as well.

During the summer of 1991 I taught English 601 (a special topics graduate course). Without knowing the backgrounds of the students, I created a tentative syllabus for the course, to which I gave the title "Renaissance Rhetoric and the Individual Consciousness." All thirteen students who signed up for the course, it turned out, were fulfilling the Language Arts component of the M.Ed. degree (for primary or middle grades) or they were renewing teaching certificates. Only one had an undergraduate secondary education degree in English (that student had been working in a school media center and was seeking certification for middle school teaching); the others had training in and were teaching courses in middle school mathematics, science, history, or literature, or they were teaching primary grades. While all the students are currently teaching in the north metro Atlanta area, their undergraduate

institutions are diverse, including Berry College, Florida State University, University of Florida, University of Georgia, Kennesaw State College, West Georgia College, University of Tennessee, and Vanderbilt University. In designing the course, I considered the varied backgrounds and current teaching experiences of the students, and created an interdisciplinary course in "Individual Consciousness" as that consciousness found its expression in "Renaissance Rhetoric." Both "Individual Consciousness" and "Renaissance Rhetoric" required further definition in the interdisciplinary context of the course.

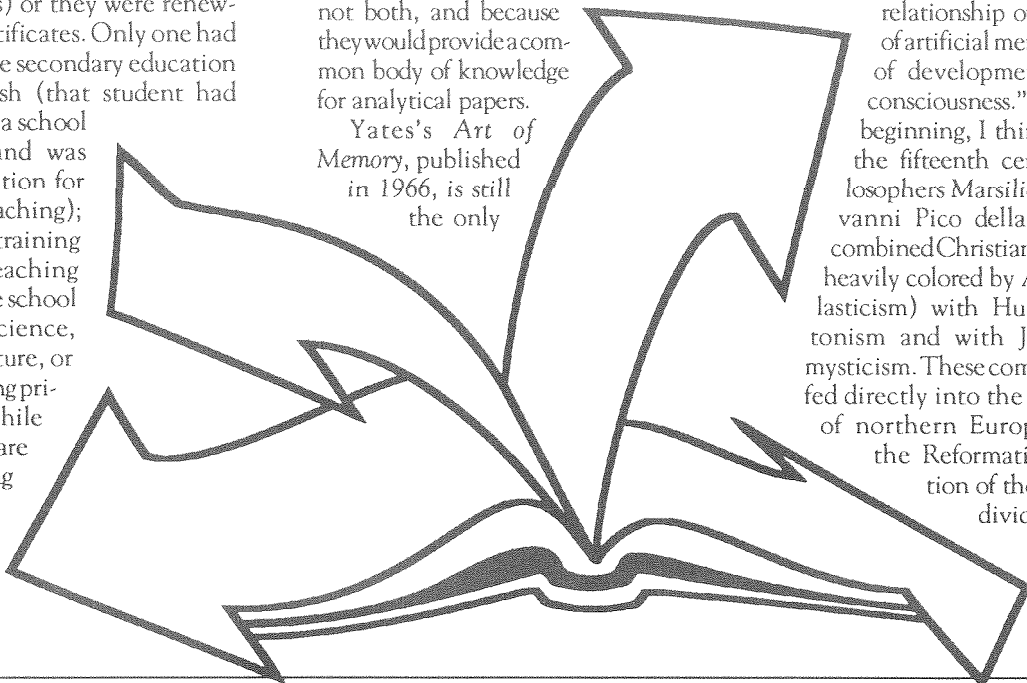
To give a common body of knowledge to the course, I selected one theoretical and two practical textbooks. The basic theoretical textbook on rhetoric was Frances A. Yates' *The Art of Memory*—a complex analysis of systems of natural and artificial memory (a part of ancient rhetoric) in use from ancient Greek times down to the seventeenth century. The practical textbooks were Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. I chose these plays because I expected that all the students would be familiar with one or the other, if not both, and because they would provide a common body of knowledge for analytical papers.

Yates's *Art of Memory*, published in 1966, is still the only

extensive history of memory in print. Natural memory is the memory with which we are familiar, memory by repetition—learning by heart. Artificial memory is a process of association of ideas and of words with real, particular buildings or spaces so that when we recall a particular space we will recall the idea or words which we have associated with that space. While Yates' book begins with the mnemotechnic devices of rhetoric as practiced by ancient Greeks, it investigates also the ways in which memory may be seen in the Renaissance to be a creative act, a mirroring in human terms of ideas and words which have their sources in universal ideas or in the mind of God.

What has remained of the art of memory in our own time is the mnemotechnic artificial memory, the methods still taught in self-help manuals for improving the memory, and which still suggest the association of a person's name with some attribute of the person, or with the place in which a person is commonly to be found. These memory methods are in fact as old as the ancient Greeks, and are just as useful now as they were then.

In this course I wanted to study the relationship of the creative uses of artificial memory with the idea of development of "individual consciousness." That idea has its beginning, I think, in the work of the fifteenth century Italian philosophers Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who combined Christian ideas (themselves heavily colored by Aristotelian Scholasticism) with Humanistic Neoplatonism and with Jewish Cabalistic mysticism. These combinations of ideas fed directly into the religious ferment of northern Europe which led to the Reformation and its assertion of the ability of the individual human being to communicate directly with his or her God.



The theological utility, as Yates shows, perpetuated the mnemotechnic systems of artificial memory; both Dominican and Franciscan preachers used them to memorize their sermons, and philosophers used them to search out the mind of God until the Cabalistic elements became identified with "black magic," and as such were condemned by the sixteenth century Inquisition. In spite of their condemnation in southern Europe, however, this combination of ideas was the basis for the modern sense of "consciousness" or of "personality." In the course, I wanted to examine ways in which all these ideas of consciousness are expressed in two of Shakespeare's plays.

I discovered, to my great surprise, that no one in the class had studied either *Hamlet* or *King Lear* in college courses. Therefore, to have a common body of knowledge, we watched a videotape of each play, then discussed the play as drama and as self-conscious literary artifact. While many people know Shakespeare developed the idea that "All the World's a stage," fewer people know that he also demonstrated the idea that each play on that stage self-consciously creates its own world, that the world of the play is complete and self-contained. That world has a time and space component of its own. Dramatic characters live and move only in that time and in that space on the stage—and they are sometimes conscious that they are doing so. The world of the play is analogous with our world: we are all actors in a play (we are also writer, director, and stage manager for our individual play, as Hamlet perceived). When we speak, we speak our words in time order, one word after another, and another person hears and understands our words in time order. When these words, coming into our minds through the ears, are stored away in memory, they retain the time-order, but they are stored in individual memory spaces, to be called forth from memory when we need them. When we read words from a printed page, the words exist one after the other in both time and space order on the page. The words, after coming into our minds through the eyes, are stored into memory spaces. Shakespeare was one of the earliest writers in English who realized these associations of consciousness and of rhetoric.

At the beginning of her work on memory Yates comments: "Mnemo-

syne," said the Greeks, "is the mother of the Muses; the history of the training of this most basic and elusive of human powers will plunge us into deep waters." In this course, we were immediately concerned with the ways in which the theory and practice of the arts of memory and of rhetoric contribute to an awareness of individual persons as being unique, as being a "personality," and as living and moving in a world that is analogous to the world of the stage.

As a basic project for the course, in addition to the common body of knowledge presented by the videotapes and by the lectures, each student selected a topic for individual research as background to the study of Shakespeare, and prepared a report of thirty minutes length for presentation to the class. These topics included the anthropological (the idea of the hero), the historical (the development of the Tudor myth of kingship), the psychological (deep awareness of time and space, interpersonal relationships including feminist attitudes, attitudes about sexuality, theories of conflict, attitudes about insanity), the theological (conflicts between Catholicism and Protestantism, and between Christian Humanism and Cabalistic mysticism), the musical (forms of musical expression in the Renaissance), and the rhetorical (the forms of Renaissance education and the emphasis which they placed on the rhetorical development of the individual). These are indeed "deep waters."

All the students had, of course, taken undergraduate courses in history, psychology, and political science, but this course gave them an opportunity to read more (and perhaps more recent) books on those and other subjects. They read eagerly, both for an understanding of concepts that were developing during the Renaissance, and for those which developed later but which may be applied in reverse to the Renaissance.

The oral reports on background reading made available to all students the results of reading that each student had done; the individual reading then became the common knowledge of all. The oral reports also provided a background from which each student could write analyses of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Each student wrote an analysis (ap-

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—Yates**

But like the priests of the late Middle Ages, today's academics guard their orthodoxies, and often the privileges that come with entry into the profession, apparently as afraid of "Reaganism" as the old clerisy was of "Galileoism" and the new science. They are in a stronger position than the old clerics were, however, and it is unclear whether the universities will reform themselves under pressure from an ascendent elite as the church did during the Reformation.

D'Souza is not so pessimistic. He suggests three "modest" reforms at the end of his book. These proposals are both consistent with American principles and are ordered to the liberation of the universities from the worst excesses of the recent past. His first reform would modify affirmative action admissions policy by making it non-racially based, directed instead toward underprivileged, but promising, students. The second would have universities discourage the practice of minority self-segregation on campus. The third would institute a course sequence for students which would expose them to the fundamental issues regarding equality and human difference. In these courses, the student would be exposed to classic texts, including non-western texts, which deal substantively with this issue. He insists only that these non-western texts be foundational, or civilizationally representational, and not merely propagate an ideological agenda of a western elite (254-256).

It is this latter suggestion that bears most on our situation at Kennesaw State College. D'Souza would, I suspect, view the recent cosmopolitanizing of the core curriculum at Kennesaw as benign in itself, reflecting a quite proper concern for the internationalizing of the economy as well as the hope that Georgia be at the center of it. On the other hand, he would no doubt see these reforms as the opportunity to do something academically serious on the order of instituting a liberal inquiry into equality and human nature. As Kennesaw State College seeks a common foundation, thread, and capstone to its new core, it would do well to consider D'Souza's suggestion. 🍎

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proximately ten pages) of each play, the analysis limited to the particular approach which the student had taken in background reading. These approaches, as previously noted, were interdisciplinary in nature, the topics being taken from anthropology, history, music, and psychology as well as literary analysis.

Since the specific content of this course was more advanced than the subjects which these teachers would be immediately teaching, I urged them to look at the material in a practical manner, and I required them to write a short report outlining ways in which they might make use of the content material of the course in their own teaching. One student wrote that she would be able to use some of the material on English Renaissance history in her eighth-grade world history course. Another student wrote that she would introduce the idea to her eighth-grade class that words have connotations which reveal personality. Still another student wrote that she would introduce the concept of the play to her fourth-grade class in literature, going from the idea of play to play-acting, and then try to get students to see similarities. They all made conscious efforts to see connections and to imagine ways in which they could use the material in their own classrooms.

Many students made and used charts and other visual aids in their presentations. Since all of the students are also teachers, they enjoyed the opportunity of presenting their ideas and their different methods before their peers; I enjoyed their presentation of ideas, and noted the various teaching techniques which they used. The course was, therefore, an interdisciplinary course for me as well: I was able to play student for a part of the course, and to let them teach me in sessions which were more formal than the usual question and answer format.

This course could be used in a variety of undergraduate disciplines, using psychology, or anthropology, or history as the major component, and literature as one of the interdisciplinary approaches. All of education is, after all, connected. It remains only for us to see and to show the connections. 🍎

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it was inevitable that, sooner or later, the tunnels would meet. Bright people that they were, they should not have been surprised, but they were. When the first two of them met in the center they stood in disbelief, blinking at one another in the beams of their lamps. Then another broke through into the central chamber, and another and another, until all were reunited. And a joyous reunion it was, for their work had taken its toll in loneliness.

What was truly astounding was their discovery about the ore they had been collecting. They had assumed that each vein was unique, but now they saw that they were merely branches of a great mother lode at the center of the mountain. It became clear to them then that their ore samples of knowledge, wisdom, and truth were remarkably similar. "Why were we not sharing our findings with one another all along?" they cried. "Why did you not tell us this to begin with?" they inquired angrily of the Keeper of the Mountain. "Ah," he replied, "This was the greatest treasure to be found, and no one could discover it but you, yourselves."

The scholars returned with great haste to their teaching posts, where nothing was ever the same for them, their colleagues, or their students. For not only did they share the new knowledge, wisdom, and truth about their disciplines, they shared their greatest discovery as well. It caused an academic revolution! English professors teamed up with scientists to offer courses which helped students learn to think and write clearly. Business faculty and philosophers, musicians and computer programmers, political scientists and teacher educators, mathematicians and environmental biologists all found connections between and among disciplines. The students, of course, were the greatest beneficiaries. But the faculty benefitted too. They had a common quest—a calling to fulfill; and though the way was very hard, they worked together, affirmed one another, and were happier than they had ever been. 🍎

