

Experiences Differ: A Reflection on Teaching Literary Studies

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TEACH LITERARY STUDIES AT A UNIVERSITY TODAY?

Whatever form the teaching of literary studies takes where I teach, at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, it clearly takes very different forms elsewhere and has taken very different forms in the past. In *The Teaching Archive*, Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan make an appealing case for the influence that classroom teaching has had, for more than a century, on the development of literary studies as a discipline. Buurma and Heffernan argue that teaching, rather than trailing meekly behind pioneering research, has been essential to the discipline's persistent preoccupations, to its methodological transformations, and to the number and variety of the texts it addresses.

But teaching has not been, for me, the crucible of research. There have seemed to be too many constraints and too many other imperatives. By and large, the courses I have taught have been introductions to the well-established, rather than workshops for new thinking. These courses have been broad in scope, and they have often been far removed from my own specialisation. This is not to say that we don't in these courses wrestle with the discipline's persistent preoccupations and its methodological transformations. We do, and I enjoy introducing our Shakespeare students to distant reading, but I am not a Shakespearean, and it feels

very distant from my work on, say, the historical meanings of poetic technique in modernism.

How distant, exactly? Any and all thinking I do about literature and about the discipline of literary studies whirrs in the background when I research. So do the thoughts I happen to have, as the daily round proceeds, about the public funding of preschools, about jazz in the 1920s, about green space and suburban sprawl. Which is to say that all research is situated, and perhaps not to say much more than that. So the thinking I do in my teaching about literature and about literary studies has not felt tightly, productively connected to my research. My experience does not match the anecdote told by a visiting professor about his graduate seminar, in which he and his students worked closely through the literary and theoretical texts key to the monograph he was writing. At UNSW we have no graduate seminars, and my undergraduate courses are broad and introductory. Fewer staff teach fewer courses to fewer students, and those courses need to appeal as widely as possible. Institutional systems make it difficult to convene specialised courses for small cohorts.

I am fortunate to have a permanent position. Universities in Australia have shifted overwhelmingly to casual employment, and the precarious situation in which casual teachers find themselves—sometimes teaching across multiple courses at multiple institutions, sometimes taking on courses a mere week before classes begin, sometimes having little or no control over the structure and content of those courses—makes a tight, productive connection between teaching and research yet more difficult, if not impossible.

So, experiences differ. Others seem better than I have been at navigating institutional constraints and imperatives, better able to align their teaching with their research. Perhaps there is luck involved: the luck of happening to have a research project with sufficiently broad appeal just when a new course is needed. But really it is not a matter of luck; it depends on the kind of research one pursues. Were I a different sort of scholar, I might set aside the technical arcana of neglected modernist poems and seize the opportunity of teaching Shakespeare to write a new book about the discipline of literary studies in general. There are genuine advantages to looking at a work or a writer from a distance, from outside the circle of scholarly expertise; new things become visible. Better still, I would write about the many and varied poets from across the globe and across the centuries whom I teach in another course, though I am an expert on few if any of those poets.

This is one reason why the question about teaching literary studies today is difficult, and anxious. The question seems to expose a gap between the increasing specialisation of research and the increasing generality of teaching. There seems to be a gap between the obligation to master shelves of existing scholarship on the

writers and works in question, as well as diverse theoretical traditions, and the need to survey as wide a selection of writers and works as possible in order to attract and inspire students, many of whom have no investment in scholarship. Instead, many of my students are invested in learning to teach literature, because they are training to be English teachers at secondary school. Because Shakespeare is ubiquitous at secondary school in New South Wales, we have, in addition to those survey courses, a course dedicated to Shakespeare. The students who take this course are frequently, and with good reason, more interested in how I structure my tutorial exercises than in my arguments about the latest critical monograph, because they will soon be devising exercises for their own classrooms.

But to identify this gap between the specialisation of research on the one hand, and teaching at a broad, introductory level on the other, is to leap from the particular to the general, from my experience to the experience of others at my university and, beyond that, of others at other universities. Clearly, experiences differ; institutional limits and opportunities vary substantially; and whatever I may have heard from friends and colleagues about teaching literary studies in Louisiana or Exeter or Shanghai, confident generalisation seems rash.

It is also rash to characterise a gap between tutorial exercises and critical monographs in this way because, as *The Teaching Archive* makes clear, figures such as Josephine Miles and T. S. Eliot were led to critical innovations precisely through teaching students who had no special investment in scholarship or, for that matter, students who had no very pronounced interest in literature at all. That visiting professor's anecdote about his graduate seminar represents by no means the only way to achieve a tight, productive relation between teaching and research. At the same time, the innovations of Miles and Eliot were very different. Whatever the relation between the classroom and criticism, to generalise about criticism alone is problematic, since criticism takes such a rich variety of forms.

This is a problem with which literary studies wrestles, too. Were I to write a new book about modernist poetry, I might choose four or five case studies to substantiate my argument. I might be careful to choose both canonical and neglected poets and poems; I might be careful to confess early in the book that the story I have to tell is only one of the many possible stories which can be told about modernism. Nevertheless, there that term *modernism* would be, prominently featured on the book's cover, promising a confident claim about a notoriously fraught critical and historical category. *The Teaching Archive* is structured similarly: the book works through a series of case studies, drawn from Britain and the United States, in order to make an argument about the history of literary studies in general. Buurma and Heffernan are careful to choose both critics familiar from earlier histories of the discipline, such as I. A. Richards, and critics

who have not enjoyed such prominence, such as J. Saunders Redding and Simon J. Ortiz. Buurma and Heffernan are also careful to signal in the subtitle of their book that there remain other stories to be told: *A New History for Literary Study*. For this reason, Buurma and Heffernan readily acknowledge that their book is only the beginning of a larger project: the archive of teaching materials is extensive, and it will take a collective effort over many years to draw from this archive a fuller, more accurate history of the discipline.

The very scale of the project is problematic. How can we possibly read all the old lecture notes and teaching notebooks, all the old syllabuses and handouts, even when allowing for the fact that most of these materials have not survived? The problem of scale confronts literary studies, too: how will I ever read all the novels and poems and plays, and then the drafts and letters and essays, not to mention all the other relevant materials, many made newly available online: the newspapers and journals, the rhetorical manuals and political pamphlets and philosophical treatises? One solution to the problem of scale is quantitative analysis, an approach which *The Teaching Archive* addresses in its chapters on Miles and on Spurgeon. But though some of the students in my class enjoy hearing about how Shakespeare's numbers can be crunched, the experience which matters to most students is seeing or reading the plays. Whether they love them or loathe them, most students are invested in their encounter as individuals with individual works.

When we study the plays together, my students are sometimes very willing to generalise. What makes Shakespeare great, one student will say, is the universality or the timelessness of his themes and his characters. We can all recognise the tyranny, violence, and ambition in *Richard III*, and Shakespeare's experiments with gender fluidity in *As You Like It* have never been more relevant. But I am not Prince Hamlet, another student in the same classroom will say, nor am I a Renaissance man. No ghost has come to tell me my uncle murdered my father; Elsinore is nothing like my world of pandemic, climate crisis, and the gig economy.

When we study the plays together, these students talk to each other. Some learn something about themselves by learning something about the other people in the room. This may be more difficult when, under pandemic conditions, the room is virtual, on Teams or Zoom or Blackboard, but it is possible. We find in talking that we have much in common, and that there are differences in taste, language, class, education, race, age, religion, gender, culture. These and other differences need to be negotiated collectively, in order for conversation to prosper. Through this conversation, some students learn to recognise and to question inherited ideas about how literature works and how life works. Whose life?, is a recurring question. When this questioning happens, it happens because the plays present kinds of life which are both like and unlike the students' and my own. There is

usually some impulse to generalise, and just as often there is an urge to specify, to differentiate. Frequently, the plays themselves invite us to identify with characters, or at least to sympathise with them, while also giving those characters their own particular situations and psychologies, which are sometimes very alien. Finally, we ask about the literary. What do verbal invention and generic experiment, the means not just for representing but for making the kinds of life on offer in a literary work, have to do with our conversation's shuttling between the individual and the collective? Does the literary transcend social difference, or is that thought itself, important to some and not to others, an expression of social difference?

But none of this is unique to Shakespeare. It helps that his plays are over four centuries old, but only because few of our students read any other literary works produced before the nineteenth century. Historical distance can sharpen these questions, because historical distance can be alienating. But whomever we are studying, be it Li Bai or Phyllis Wheatley, Hope Mirrlees or Ali Cobby Eckermann, the dialectic of the particular and the general in the literary work involves and energises us, collectively. It brings us face to face.

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