Critical Thinking in the Literature Classroom, Part I: Making Critical Thinking Visible

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Abstract
Literary analysis offers English instructors an ideal vehicle for modeling, practicing, and teaching critical thinking skills. Because literature students must master the skills of analysis, reasoning, evaluation, and argumentation, they would benefit from deliberate and explicit instruction in the concepts and practices of critical thinking in the classroom. Part I of this paper describes strategies to incorporate explicit instruction in the elements of reasoning and the standards of critical thinking described by critical thinking experts Richard Paul, Linda Elder, and Gerald Nosich into the literature classroom. In the companion piece, “Critical Thinking in the Literature Classroom, Part II: Dickens’s Great Expectations and the Emergent Critical Thinker,” (Hiner 2013) a demonstration is given of how protagonists in literary works such as Pip from Dickens’s Great Expectations (1860-61/1996) can be understood and interpreted as literary representations of an individual’s transition from a first-order, unreflective thinker to a second-order, reflective, metacognitive critical thinker, further illuminating the literary texts and further reinforcing students’ understanding of the concepts of critical thinking.

Keywords: critical thinking, Richard Paul, Linda Elder, Gerald Nosich, literary analysis, Great Expectations

I. Introduction

Because I teach both introductory literature courses and required interdisciplinary courses in critical thinking at the college level, I have had the opportunity to reflect on how the concepts of critical thinking and the practices of the critical thinker intersect with the field of literary analysis. This cross-disciplinary position enables me to see the field of English and the practice of literary analysis through the lens of critical thinking; as a result, I have concluded that the practice of literary analysis, as taught in the average college literature classroom, is just as much a sustained practice in the methods of critical thinking as it is an exploration of the content of the literary texts. A literature course’s long list of required novels and poems might suggest that the course will focus solely on learning the elements of narrative and the historical and theoretical contexts surrounding various literary works; however, I have found that what my literature students are really learning, at the most fundamental level, is how to interpret, analyze, contextualize, and synthesize complex systems of information, as well as anticipate outcomes and consequences and evaluate sophisticated written texts. Because literature students must master the skills of analysis, reasoning, evaluation, and argumentation, they would benefit from deliberate and explicit instruction in the concepts and practices of critical thinking, including the application of the “Elements of Reasoning” and the “Standards of Critical Thinking” identified by Richard Paul and Linda Elder (Paul & Elder, 2006) and their colleague, Gerald Nosich (Nosich, 2012), as well as the understanding of the logic of the discipline and its fundamental and powerful concepts.

Part I of this paper demonstrates how English teachers can deliberately and explicitly model and practice the concepts of critical thinking put forward by Paul, Elder, and Nosich. It offers a way to view the discipline as an ideal vehicle for teaching the elements of reasoning and the standards of critical thinking. Additionally, Part II of this paper demonstrates how one novel, in this case Dickens's Great Expectations (1860-61/1996), can be understood and interpreted as a literary representation of an individual’s transition from a first-order, unreflective thinker to a second-order, reflective, metacognitive critical thinker. Using the bildungsroman, or coming of age novel, as a literary representation of the kind of intellectual growth we experience as we begin to practice and perfect the skills of the critical thinker, an English teacher can seamlessly weave together both the explicit and implicit teaching of critical thinking skills into the literature classroom. Students can practice applying the elements of reasoning in their analyses of literary texts, and can also analyze and evaluate the extent to which literary characters in the texts demonstrate the habits, skills, and character traits of the second-order critical thinker. This two-fold approach to teaching critical thinking in the literature classroom exemplifies the development of cross-disciplinary courses in both literary analysis and critical thinking, and it encourages both faculty and students to view the discipline of literary analysis as explicitly and deliberately focused on teaching and strengthening critical thinking skills.
II. The Approach to Critical Thinking: Elements and Standards

A. The Elements of Critical Thinking

Richard Paul and Linda Elder (2006), in particular, define critical thinking as “thinking explicitly aimed at well-founded judgment, utilizing appropriate evaluative standards in an attempt to determine the true worth, merit, or value of something” (p. xxiv). This type of thinking produces practical changes in one’s beliefs, values, and actions, and can result in character traits such as intellectual humility, perseverance, fair-mindedness, autonomy, courage, and empathy. According to Paul and Elder (2006) and Nosich (2012), for thinking to be considered “critical,” or second-order, it must subject experience to analysis using the eight elements of reasoning which they list as (1) purpose, (2) the question at issue, (2) implications and consequences, (3) information, (4) interpretations and inferences, (5) concepts, (6) assumptions, (7) implications and consequences, and (8) point of view. Here is a graphic representation of the elements. Figure 1 with its incorporation of context as a pervasive function/consideration, is from Gerald Nosich (Nosich, 2012).

B. The Standards of Critical Thinking

According to Paul and Elder (2006) and Nosich (2012) “strong sense critical thinking” must also apply standards such as these:

- **Clarity—Understandable, the meaning can be grasped.** Could you elaborate further? Could you give me an example? Could you illustrate what you mean?
- **Accuracy—Free from errors or distortions, true.** How could we check on that? How could we find out if that is true? How could we verify or test that?
- **Precision—Exact to the necessary level of detail.** Could you be more specific? Could you give me more details? Could you be more exact?
- **Relevance—Relating to the matter at hand.** How does that relate to the problem? How does that bear on the question? How does that help us with the issue?
- **Depth—Containing complexities and multiple interrelationships.** What factors make this a difficult problem? What are some of the complexities of this question? What are some of the difficulties we need to deal with?
- **Breadth—Encompassing multiple viewpoints.** Do we need to look at this from another perspective? Do we need to consider another point of view? Do we need to look at this in other ways?
- **Logic—The parts make sense together, no contradictions.** Does all this make sense together? Does your first paragraph fit in with your last? Does what you say follow from the evidence?
- **Significance—Focusing on the important, not trivial.** Is this the most important problem to consider? Is this the central idea to focus on? Which of these facts are most important?

The deliberate consideration of both the Elements of Reasoning and the Standards of Critical Thinking, along with an awareness of common impediments (Nosich, 2012, pp. 16-26), to critical thought, results in conclusions that can be trusted and that accurately reflect the true nature of the world.

III. Critical Thinking and the Literature Course

In the spring of 2011, I taught an introductory, 200-level special topics literature course focused on novels of formation (often referred to as bildung-sromane). Because I taught my novels of formation course while simultaneously teaching several sections of a course in critical thinking, I often found myself indicating those times when our analysis of the assigned literature reflected the type of critical thinking we practice in the required “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing” (CRTW 201) course at our university. The CRTW 201 course pairs Gerald Nosich’s (2012) text *Learning to Think Things Through: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* with a long non-fiction text and multiple shorter texts in order to teach students both the skills and habits of the critical thinker and advanced skills in writing, argumentation, and critical reading. My literature students who had already taken the CRTW course would nod and smile when I would refer to one of the “Elements of Reasoning” or “Standards of Critical Thinking,” while those students who had not yet taken the course would stare blankly at me and look (understandably) confused. I gradually came to several realizations while
teaching the course:
1. the type of literary analysis we were engaged in was really a sophisticated, sustained form of critical thinking;
2. literature students should be frequently told that, while they are learning about literary texts, literary periods, and the elements of fiction, they are also learning and strengthening critical thinking skills in argument analysis and evaluation;
3. making the terminology and concepts of critical thinking more explicit and prominent in the literature course could strengthen and clarify the goals of the course; and finally,
4. many of the protagonists in coming of age novels, wholly engaged in the process of self-determination and identity formation, can best be understood as emergent and developing critical thinkers.

This last conclusion represents, to my knowledge, a unique way to understand and interpret the bildungsroman’s protagonist (Hiner, 2013, forthcoming). Asking students to “see” and interpret literary characters through the lens of the discipline of critical thinking further reinforces the skills and concepts of critical thinking while illuminating the literary works themselves. Interpreting the bildungsroman’s protagonists as emergent critical thinkers also provides an evocative and rich field of exploration, as students can analyze how the protagonists develop in their capacity to make rational judgments, assess their own flaws in reasoning, identify their own biases and filters, and anticipate consequences. Mastering these skills is part of the process of becoming a competent critical thinker, but it is also, interestingly, often part of the process of coming of age, both intellectually and emotionally. Applying the elements of reasoning and the standards of critical thinking in an analysis of the bildungsroman, or coming of age novel, allows students to analyze and evaluate the text through an analytical lens that is clear and accessible to them, thus increasing their comprehension and appreciation of the text. It also enables them to see how these novels’ protagonists can be understood as literary representations of the emergent strong-sense, second-order critical thinker (Paul & Elder, 2006, pp. 2-16), while simultaneously requiring that they engage in reasoned, disciplined analysis (for instance, by insisting that students find and present evidence for their conclusions and assess secondary sources for relevance and accuracy).

Novelist Henry James (1865/1984) noted, when reflecting on Goethe’s seminal bildungsroman Wilhelm Meister’s Apprentice, “Each reader becomes his own Wilhelm Meister, an apprentice, a traveler, on his own account” (p. 947), eventually learning through close association with the protagonist how to create meaning from life, or, in James’s phrase, “how the experience of life may least be wasted, and best be turned to account” (1865/1984, p. 948). Creating meaning from life is the central task of both the bildungsroman’s protagonist and the student of critical thinking, and the genre’s depiction of the internal, intellectual development of a sensitive, introspective, self-reflective hero reflects what Paul and Elder (2006) and Nosich (2012) refer to as “metacognitive, self-reflective thought,” one of the fundamental and necessary traits of second-order, critical analysis. In particular, Part II of this paper characterizes in specific detail the protagonist Pip in Dickens’s bildungsroman Great Expectations as a nascent and developing critical thinker. Great Expectations is an accessible and provocative novel frequently taught in both introductory and upper-level literature courses, and it fundamentally addresses the problem of how to live authentically and successfully in a world which is complex, transitory, paradoxic, and both deeply dissatisfying and astonishingly fulfilling. In doing so, it foregrounds one’s inability to trust assumptions, perceptions, and culturally sanctioned institutions and systems, and functions as a particularly illuminating lens through which to view both literary analysis and critical thinking. In both Great Expectations and in the processes of critical thinking, reason is firmly grounded in the real world: ideas have implications, choices have consequences, and thinking correctly has an ethical and moral component to it.

IV. How Literary Analysis Uses and Refines Critical Thinking Skills and Methods

A. Literary Analysis in the College Classroom

Literary analysis, as practiced in the college classroom, requires the reader to interpret, synthesize, and evaluate fiction, non-fiction, or poetry with a heightened level of attention and intellectual engagement, deliberately applying various analytical lenses and contexts to the work in an attempt to analyze the text through multiple frames. Teachers of literature require students to read, decode, analyze, and sometimes deconstruct sophisticated, multivalent texts with multiple layers of meaning. These tasks often require students to participate in a process of self-correction and self-assessment by comparing various interpretations of the text and by correcting their own interpretations in light of additional evidence from secondary sources. Finally, literature instructors require students to construct thoughtful, rational, written arguments about these texts in which they gather, assemble, and explain the significance of a body of relevant, reliable textual evidence. These written arguments are then evaluated and assessed for accuracy and logic not only by the students’ professors, but often by their peers and by outside professional readers on conference panels and editorial boards for professional journals. The student who can analyze, interpret, evaluate, and construct reasoned arguments about literary texts and their contexts is in effect mastering the mental strategies and developing the intellectual character traits of the critical thinker.

B. The Use of the Elements of Narrative to Prompt Critical Thinking

At the most basic level, a student of literature must distinguish the plot of a narrative from the narrative’s
chronological order of events, perhaps rearranging events in time or understanding the proper placement of events told in narrative flashbacks, in foreshadowing, or in the narrator’s memories. In doing so, the reader must understand and apply concepts such as conflict, rising action, falling action, climax, and conclusion. As Richard Paul and Linda Elder (2006) note, “There is no way to learn a body of content without learning the concepts that define and structure it” (p. 141). Literary analysis is heavily dependent on the understanding and application of a set of fundamental and powerful concepts in the discipline (Nosich, 2012, pp. 101–109), that is, the elements of narrative. These elements include plot, theme, tone, setting, point of view, character, narration, irony, and style. If the student does not understand the way themes, for instance, are developed in a narrative through the manipulation of character, setting, tone, and style, then the student actually misses some of the deeper content of the literary work, content that is not immediately apparent upon a first reading, but which is evident when the text is analyzed perceptively. For instance, when students are directed to consider the role of setting in their analysis of Great Expectations, they soon discover that the heavy mists rise and fall on the marsh in concert with the rise and fall of Pip’s expectations, and that the “ugly, crooked, narrow and dirty” (Dickens, 1860-61/1996, p. 163) streets of Cheapside, London, portend a contraction of Pip’s hopes and dreams. Similarly, a consideration of the complex narrative element of character - with its aspects of round, flat, complex, dynamic, static, simple, reliable, and unreliable - must be applied to a literary text in order to uncover meaning, theme, and significance. Students eventually understand that they are not simply being asked to memorize and apply terms such as “static” and “dynamic”; rather, they are being trained and coached in the application of analytical lenses and complex interpretation of texts and information. The content, significance, and meaning of the literary work cannot be fully discerned without an understanding of how each literary element influences the work as a whole. Rather than teaching the elements of narrative as a random list of “things to know” about the way literature works, instructors can emphasize how these elements actually function as fundamental and powerful concepts, directing, enlarging, and sometimes even limiting possible interpretations of the text. As Nosich (2012) stated, “Learning content is learning to think. If I learn content, but I don’t learn to think in terms of that content, then it’s not content at all. It’s just words, memorized and soon forgotten words” (p.101).

In my special topics literature course, I explicitly incorporated instruction in critical thinking by emphasizing how the elements of narrative function as fundamental and powerful concepts in decoding meaning in literary texts. I began this instruction by asking students during small group discussions to analyze the same section of a novel from the various perspectives of the elements of narrative. One group, for instance, drew conclusions about the set of pages or chapter from the perspective of characterization; another group analyzed the same pages specifically from the perspective of setting; and yet another group examined the same set of pages from the perspective of point of view or tone. Each group was given key information about their element of narrative and was asked to draw conclusions, provide concrete evidence for their conclusions, and anticipate outcomes based on their analysis. The large-group discussions which followed this exercise were particularly enlightening to me and to the students, as we came to understand how the same text could shift dramatically when seen through different analytical lenses provided by attending to different elements of narrative. These discussions, common in literature classes and characteristic of basic formalist analysis of texts, provided an opportunity for me to explain to my literature students how the elements of narrative can function as fundamental and powerful concepts in the field of literature, shaping and changing the way we see and interpret information. I introduced my students to Gerald Nosich’s (2012) definition of a fundamental and powerful concept, in which he stresses the concept’s ability to both “form the foundation of our understanding” of a text and help us to understand “a wide range of questions, problems, and issues” in the text, and asked them to consider how the specific elements of narrative provide deep and broad frameworks for understanding literature (p. 102). In this way I was able to emphasize not just the actual content of the literary text, but the intellectual processes whereby readers derive meanings from literary texts.

C. The Use of the Elements of Reasoning

Complex and often historically-distanced literature challenges and even frightens many college students today. The language of novels written even as recently as the nineteenth century sounds archaic to them, and students often feel insecure about their ability to decode texts, understand meaning, and make sense of sustained and complex narratives. In my novels of formation course, my students often mentioned “giving up” on their assigned reading or feeling “overwhelmed” by novels that may appear to a college instructor to be quite accessible and engaging. I soon found that by introducing the eight elements of reasoning, arranged in the “Circle of Elements” seen earlier (purpose, question at issue, point of view, information, concepts, assumptions, inferences or conclusions, implications or consequences), I could provide students with a clear and systematic way to decode and uncover meaning in written texts. When my students began to falter in class discussions of Dickens’ Great Expectations and shared that they felt intimidated by the density of the prose, I began to provide “reading guides” consisting of a list of questions based on the elements of reasoning for my students to complete as they read the text. The students were given class participation credit for this exercise, which asked them to identify key information, concepts, implications, etc., in an assigned section of the text prior to class. These simple exercises had a positive impact on our class discussions: students seemed much
more confident about their ability to understand the text, had higher levels of verbal participation in class, and were able to support claims about the text with specific evidence from the text. I found that by breaking down an analytical process into distinct and accessible parts, as delineated in the “Circle of the Elements of Reasoning,” my students had a clear pathway to analyze a text in thorough, yet manageable, way. Asking my students to gather basic information about characters and setting allowed them to begin at the most basic level in understanding plot and narrative events. Moving from elements of reasoning such as information or point of view to conclusions or implications deepened their inquiry, shifting them into a more engaged and sophisticated level of analysis, and examining concepts and assumptions often led them directly to an articulation of the literary work’s themes or significance. And a careful, deliberate discussion of point of view sometimes led students toward a more meta-cognitive, self-reflective assessment of the work as they considered ways in which their own perspective differs from those of the work’s narrator.

D. Using Types of Critical Theory to Foster Critical Thinking

In the same way, interpretive lenses such as types of critical theory (New Criticism, New Historicism, deconstructionism, feminist criticism, Marxist/socio-cultural criticism, eco-criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, etc.) function as fundamental and powerful concepts (and contexts) that shape and inform how we interpret and derive meaning from written texts. These lenses illuminate and highlight different information and inevitably force readers to draw widely different conclusions depending upon the theory applied. Some of my in-class reflection writings asked the students to consider how our own assumptions frame our expectations about these concepts as we read the literature, and how the text challenges and perhaps alters these assumptions. Students were also asked to consider how the world we inhabit frames our expectations about what it means to achieve maturity, how our own assumptions limit the ways in which we can interpret and decode texts, how the meaning of a text shifts depending on the literary critical framework applied (feminist, socio-cultural, etc.), and what these shifts reveal about us as readers and thinkers. In a literature class, the constant application of diverse critical lenses to literary texts requires explicit practice in identifying and applying various points of view in an analysis. Literature students who are asked to interpret written texts using various and often widely divergent critical lenses become intellectually flexible thinkers, adept at seeing how context and point of view can cause readers to draw different conclusions about the same text. They begin to resemble the skilled critical thinkers who, in the words of Paul and Elder, “strive to enter [a] point of view and think within it” (2006, p. 84) and understand that conclusions about literary texts are “subject to change in the face of new evidence or better reasoning” (2006, p. 85).

E. Using the Socio-historical Context and the Author’s Background

In addition, literature students often discover that a consideration of the text’s socio-historical context or the author’s biographical background colors and influences the reader’s interpretation of the work. While I frequently provide background material on authors’ biographies and the historical contexts surrounding the production and dissemination of literary texts, I realized when teaching my “novels of formation” course that this information, while interesting, might seem disjointed or unrelated to other texts or literary periods presented in the class. I found that presenting historical background and critical theory within the framework of analytical “contexts” inserted a meta-cognitive approach to our class discussions. I devised an in-class activity called “Picture Frames,” in which I asked students to draw conclusions about a literary text based on excerpts from various scholarly articles about the work and about the author’s biographical or cultural context. (See the Appendix for a description of this and other classroom activities which incorporate critical thinking skills into the literature classroom.) I began asking students not only to consider the information being presented, but to think about and analyze how applying different contexts (“frames”) to a literary work changes our interpretation and understanding of a body of information (in this case, the literary text). This exercise both reinforced student’s understanding of how literary texts are situated in specific cultural and historical contexts and emphasized to students that our own assumptions and priorities as readers determine how we interpret and “see” a text.

V. Beyond Egocentrism toward Strong Sense Critical Thinking

While raising one’s thinking to the level of self-aware consciousness is one of the most significant goals of our required Critical Reading, Thinking, and Writing (CRTW 201) course, literature courses can require the same level of meta-cognition if questions and interpretive tasks are framed in such a way that the reader is asked not only “What does this literary text communicate or suggest?” but also “How do our own biases, backgrounds, and filters cause us to interpret (or misinterpret) the text in various ways?” Imaginative literature is an ideal vehicle for moving students (and instructors) out of their own egocentrism. Literature forces students to see, feel, and experience the world from the perspective of other characters, characters who rarely represent the world and point of view of the reader. In my course on coming of age novels, students vicariously experienced life from the perspective of multiple narrative protagonists, including a young impoverished boy living in rural nineteenth-century England (Great Expectations), a young nineteenth-century African American woman living...
in the American south (Their Eyes Were Watching God), a young twentieth-century Asian American woman living in California (The Woman Warrior), and an orphaned young woman struggling to survive the rigid class hierarchy of Victorian England (Jane Eyre). The various discussions which resulted from the exposure to such diverse points of view led students to see their own life experiences as important, but also as the result of individual circumstances and therefore not necessarily typical.

I often saw in my literature students a noticeable development of critical thinking character traits such as intellectual humility, in which students are willing to listen to and accept the views and thoughts of others; intellectual empathy, in which students place themselves imaginatively in the position of other characters or readers so as to fully understand them; and intellectual fair-mindedness, in which students become more willing to apply to themselves the same standards they apply to other characters and readers (Paul & Elder, 2006, pp. 7-14; Nosich, 2012, pp. 175-176). This shift was evident in their comments during class discussions and in their written responses to texts, in which they sometimes revealed that their opinions of various literary characters shifted when considered within new applied contexts. Paul and Elder (2007) stress the importance of writing as a means of intellectual discovery, stating, “When we take core ideas, ideas of substance, and work them into our minds by developing them on paper they become ideas we can use productively in our lives” (Paul and Elder, 2007, p. 8). The reflection papers commonly assigned in literature courses force students to articulate, assess, and evaluate complex ideas, potentially learning as much about themselves and the way they think as they do about the literary texts themselves.

In my students’ reflection papers on novels as diverse as Jane Eyre, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Great Expectations, and The Woman Warrior, they were able to analyze and assess characters’ actions, motivations, and values, and were able to draw relevant and significant conclusions from the experiences of the characters. One student, for instance, noted of Hurston’s protagonist Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God that “She learned that she wants to make her own decisions. She knows that just being content is not real happiness. She also learned that having freedom and her own voice is very important to her.” This student further reflected, “She went from thinking marriage creates love, to learning that not everything is as it appears on the surface, [to] finally seeing that love is ever changing.” The intellectual empathy required by the process of literary analysis naturally encourages students to apply the conclusions drawn from literature to the real world outside the text. One student, when reflecting on the hardships and abandonment suffered by both Pip and Jane Eyre in childhood, concluded, “both of these novels [show] how abuse and neglect like this can . . . seriously damage . . . character building.” Another student reflected on the remarkable courage required by Kingston’s protagonist in The Woman Warrior to find her voice: “Based on Maxine’s growth as a character, she surprised her mother and [discovered] . . . the very thing her mother tried to destroy: freedom to speak her mind. . . . Maxine’s greatest triumph is discovering what it takes to stop the intense pain in her throat by speaking her mind.” In this case, this student overlooked the narrator’s harsh treatment of a character in the text who also struggles to speak, and instead focused on the intense pain felt by the narrator and the enormity of the task of learning how to function autonomously. (These student comments are taken from reflective reading journals as partial fulfillment of the requirements of my English 200 Special Topics course Coming of Age Novels in British and American Literature, during the spring, 2011 semester at Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC.)

Esteemed political philosopher and social critic Martha C. Nussbaum (1998) eloquently described literature’s power to create compassionate and intellectually empathetic readers in her article “The Literary Imagination in Public Life.” Nussbaum noted that literature can be both politically and socially subversive and deeply moral and ethical, for it “recognizes human needs that transcend boundaries of time, place, class, religion, and ethnicity, and it makes the focus of its moral deliberation the question of their adequate fulfillment” (p. 242). Imaginative literature both engages the mind and provides aesthetic pleasure to the reader; thus “deliberation is nourished by the exuberance of fancy, and moral attitudes are made more generous by the play of the imagination” (Nussbaum, 1998, p. 234). Owning to its richness as intellectual and emotional mimesis, a deeply evocative re-creation of human experience, literature powerfully moves readers toward intellectual empathy and away from egocentrism. Reading statistics on child poverty rates in Victorian England in a history textbook might engage a student’s intellectual interest for a brief moment. However, living through the trials and tribulations of the young orphaned Pip in Great Expectations as he turns his back on the marsh to “make his fortune,” or hearing the young Chimney Sweeper’s plaintive cries in William Blake’s poem by that name (1789, 1794), emphasizes the real human cost of such desperate numbers and invites readers into a place of imaginative “wonder and generosity” (Nussbaum, 1998, p. 246). Those of us who teach literature often take for granted the powerful transformative effect that literature has on readers; if we do mention this trait, we tend to historicize it and contextualize it into discussions about a literary work’s effects on its contemporary culture or readers. Yet compelling research over the last twenty-five years in the field of cognitive psychology conclusively supports what literature instructors have intuitively known all along: reading fictional narratives increases intellectual and emotional empathy and decreases egocentrism. Raymond A. Mar (Mar et al., 2006), Associate Professor of Psychology at York University, Canada, and Keith Oatley (Oatley et al., 2011), cognitive psychologist and Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto, have found that fiction readers display
increased levels of empathy for others, heightened social abilities, and improved measures of “theory-of-mind,” or the ability to place oneself in the perspective of another person (Mar et al., 2006, p. 708; Oatley, 2011, p. 65). The literature classroom, it turns out, is an ideal place to encourage the development of character traits central to critical thinking such as intellectual empathy, humility, and perseverance, and instructors should clearly emphasize and model how those traits are developed and encouraged by the process of literary analysis.

VI. The Power of Writing

Finally, literary analysis culminates in complex, reasoned, well-supported, lengthy written arguments supporting the reader’s interpretation of the text. Though many suppose that such writing is based on subjective “feelings” or “impressions” about the literary work, nothing could be further from the truth. The student of literature functions as a sort of detective or lawyer, sifting through evidence, evaluating the claims of others, carefully analyzing written texts and their contexts, and inductively drawing conclusions. The explicit teaching and application of the standards of critical thinking (clearness, accuracy, relevance, importance, sufficiency, depth, breadth, precision, fairness, and logic) can help literature students assess whether their own arguments and those of others are reasonable and logical. Written literary analyses are carefully-crafted arguments which must adhere to the requirements of argumentation. They must have a clear and logical structure, a compelling and assertive thesis statement, and ample concrete, relevant evidence to support claims. As Katherine O. Acheson (2011) explained in her monograph Writing Essays About Literature: A Brief Guide for University and College Students, “Literary studies is an evidence-based discipline, just like science, law, or medicine” (p. 8). The quality and acceptability of any written literary analysis depends on the degree to which its evidence is relevant, sufficient, compelling, and clearly explained. In teaching critical thinking skills through literary analysis and argument, instructors can spend time in class explaining the subtle differences between information, conclusions, inferences, claims, and reasons. Using the literary text as fodder, instructors can train students to withhold claims which cannot be supported by concrete evidence from the text, and can ask students to assess the degree to which conclusions are reasonable based upon available information.

I often provide students with examples of clear and unclear, precise and imprecise, thesis statements during in-class writing workshops to help students to articulate their ideas in a precise, clear, and assertive way. In addition to evaluating their own claims, students can employ the standards of critical thinking to evaluate the relevance and reliability of secondary sources, an important component of constructing a sound and reasonable written argument (Paul & Elder, 2006, pp. 87–89). English teachers have notoriously - sometimes painfully - high requirements for evidence in papers (ask any college student about this topic), but again, what the students of literature actually learn is not so much information about a particular literary work, but the larger, transferable skill of being able to step back and assess their own arguments and conclusions in order to determine how reasonable and logical they are. The explicit and conscious inclusion of the standards of critical thinking can help literature students assess their own arguments and those of others, and can help them to see where arguments falter because of weaknesses in evidence, clarity, or logic.

VII. Summing Up

Literature teachers want their students to learn how to both read and write in substantive ways. They want students to be able to discover, uncover, assess, and interpret relevant and significant information, to create written texts which are logical, meaningful, and well-supported, and to analyze ideas and claims with depth and intellectual sophistication. It is important to understand that the goals of a literature class cohere with the goals of a course in critical thinking in fundamental ways, and the deliberate inclusion of the terminology and concepts of the discipline of critical thinking can help literature teachers to better achieve these goals. Many of the fundamental concepts of critical thinking, including the elements of reasoning, the standards of critical thinking, the intellectual character traits, and the awareness of one’s own biases and filters, are directly relevant to and necessary for the meaningful and competent analysis of literary texts. And the repeated, consistent practice of these critical thinking skills and methods often creates in the student of literature a disposition, or set of mental habits, that is readily transferable to other contexts. This claim is supported by the authors of the recent Modern Language Association’s Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature (2009), who found that “sustained, deep engagements with literary works and literary language open perceptions of structure, texture, and the layering of meanings that challenge superficial comprehension, expand understanding, and hone analytic skills” (Charon et al., p. 3). Further evidence that critical thinking skills and traits are readily exhibited by humanities majors (including English majors) was presented by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in their ground-breaking study Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses (2011). The authors presented results and data from the 2009 Collegiate Learning Assessment which revealed that higher gains in skills such as written argumentation, interpretation, analysis, and evaluation are correlated to humanities courses which require extensive reading, textual analysis, and writing (Arum & Roksa, 2011, “Table A.3.5”). In teaching and modeling the analysis and evaluation of complex literary texts, English instructors en cultura and cultivate the mental habits of “lifelong thinkers, questioners, and learners who embrace their own intellectual curiosity, approach evidence with healthy skepticism, and evaluate critically their own as-
sumptions and the claims of others” (Hiner, 2012, p. 32).

References


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Appendix: Classroom Activities Incorporating Critical Thinking and the Eight Elements of Reasoning

These in-class activities emphasizing the elements of reasoning are designed to be used in college or high school literature classrooms.

Purpose

Discussion Questions Related to Purpose:

“What is the writer’s main point?”

“Why is this important?”

“What is your goal in this assignment?”

“What does the text seem to require that we understand or believe?”

“How does the protagonist struggle to discover his or her central purpose?”

“What competing (even subversive) purposes are revealed by the narrative?”

In-Class Activities:

· Pair-Share – Have pairs of students write an answer to an open-ended question about a character’s purpose, and then have each member share their answers with each other. They can then reflect in a larger group on how their answers informed or worked against each other.

· Buzz Groups – Have five-to-eight students discuss and answer open-ended questions about the purposes revealed in a text. Each group member must participate.

Question at Issue

Discussion Questions Related to Question at Issue:

“What is the central problem the character faces or question the character must solve?”

“What must the character do (understand, resolve) in order to achieve his or her purpose?”

“What three things would we need to do to solve a problem to achieve his or her purpose?”

“What is the central problem the character faces or question the character must solve?”

“What competing (even subversive) purposes are revealed by the narrative?”

In-Class Activities:

· Student-Generated Questions – Have each student write three discussion central questions at issue evoked by the assigned reading. These should be distributed to other students for in-class group discussion. Later in the semester, you may also have students assess each other’s questions according to the Standards of Reasoning (Clareness, Accuracy, Importance, Relevance, Precision, Depth, Breadth, and Logic).

· Three-Step Interview – In groups of three, have one
student interview the second student, have the second student interview the third student, and then have the third student interview the first student. The questions should be student-generated, but should relate to figuring out the central purpose or point of the assigned text.

**Concepts**

**Discussion Questions Related to Concepts:**
“What’s the ‘big idea’ in this text?”
“How would the character define the concept [X]?”
“How does your concept of [X] affect how you make decisions or judgments?”
“What would you have to believe about the concept [X] in order to make these claims?”
“How does the central conflict in the text, whether internal or external, arise from competing concepts?”

**In-Class Activities:**

- **Role-Playing or Debates** – Assign students two different literary characters in a story, novel, or play, and have them consider how these characters view a central concept (e.g. loyalty, friendship, patriotism, or love) differently. Ask two students to come up to the front of the class and “role play” a conversation or debate each other based upon their character’s understanding of the identified concept. For instance, how would Janie and Tea Cake define the concept of romantic love? How do their different understandings of this concept illuminate the central conflicts in Hurston’s novel?

- **“Top Ten”** – in groups of three to four students, have the students choose the ten most important concepts in a short story or an assigned chapter of a novel. Students must choose one quotation from the chapter that exemplifies each concept discussed. (I borrowed the title for this activity from Professor John Bird, Department of English, Winthrop University.)

**Assumptions**

**Discussion Questions Related to Assumptions:**
“What must the author believe to make these claims?”
“What is fundamentally important to this character, based on his or her claims?”
“How are your own assumptions similar to and different from those of this character?”
“How are the characters’ basic assumptions about [X] similar and different? Do their different assumptions cause the conflict in the narrative? How so?”
“What cultural assumptions about [X] are revealed in the text?”

**In-Class Activities:**

- **In-Class Writing** – As a preparation for class discussion, ask students to identify their own assumptions they have as a student, citizen, son or daughter, or friend. Guide this question so that it relates to the day’s literary discussion topics. For instance, you may ask them to write about the assumptions they have about fighting in a war, about living the Depression-era south, or about the “Roaring Twenties.” Ask them to reflect on their assumptions as preparation for reading a passage in a literary work, and then return to this exercise in a later class discussion, asking students how their assumptions about a topic may have changed based on reading the literary work.

- **Before and After** – Reflect in writing on what your assumptions (previously-held beliefs) were about a specific genre or narrative before you ever had any exposure to the genre or work. Now that you have read the work, evaluate your assumptions. Did they reflect reality? Were you surprised by anything? Have you changed any of your beliefs as a result of reading the text?

**Implications and Consequences**

**Discussion Questions Related to Implications and Consequences:**
“What will our world look like in twenty years if this is true?”
“What consequences will follow for this character as a result of this choice?”
“What would happen in the story if the character were able to forgive (let go, change, etc.)?”
“What are the costs and benefits for the character of this course of action?”
“How do you think this work may have affected public opinion concerning [X] after it was published?”

**In-Class Activities:**

- **“Future-World”** – When discussing a text that speculates about the effects of certain technologies or trends on society, have students create a “Future World” scenario based on the claims in the text. (Dystopian novels are particularly useful for this activity.) Have students sit in groups of three to five, and give them a prompt which asks them to speculate on what our world will look like in forty years if the author’s claims or scenarios should come true. What would our schools be like? What would it be like at the workplace? How would social relationships be impacted? What would families look like? How would the environment be affected? What would a typical day be like in this world? How would what it means to be “human” be different (if at all) in this world? In teaching literary dystopias, ask students to speculate on what would have to happen in order to cause our world to look like the fictional world of the dystopian society.

- **“Predict the Ending”** – When reading a work of fiction with students, stop at a certain point in the narrative and have students write or discuss possible alternative endings for the story. If they don’t know the ending, have them create the most likely ending for the story and defend their choices. If they already know the ending, have them create an alternative ending, and then discuss each element of the story that would have to change to lead to this alternative ending. (For instance, what would have to happen in the play Hamlet for the
protagonist to assume the throne, marry Ophelia, and live happily ever after?) Encourage students to identify the consequences of each movement of the plot.

**Information**

**Discussion Questions Related to Information:**

“What concrete evidence does the author have to support this claim?”

“Where does the author provide specific information in the work (facts, statistics, quotations, etc.)?”

“Is this information, or is this an interpretation of the information?”

“How relevant are these sources to the question at issue?”

“What specific passages in the work support your view or claim about the characters or the work?”

“What details does the author provide in order for us to understand the text’s themes or characters (e.g. visual details of setting, dialogue, imagery, details revealed about characters)?”

**In-Class Activities:**

· “Whose Belief Is It, Anyway??” – In a short reflective writing, ask students to state one belief they hold about a literary work or an author. Then ask them to write down any concrete information they have gathered in order to support or justify this belief. Have them record books or articles they have read, facts or statistics they have gathered, interviews they have conducted, etc. If they are having trouble coming up with specific information to support their belief, ask them to reflect on what this might imply.

· “Treasure Hunt” – In groups of three, assign students possible claims or conclusions about the characters or plot of a narrative, and ask them to go on a “treasure hunt,” searching the text for any concrete evidence that supports their claim. This exercise is more interesting if you assign contradictory or competing claims about the characters or text, and ask students in different groups to find competing evidence for each claim. Then, in a large-group discussion, ask students to compare their evidence and come to a conclusion about the claims or interpretations of the work.

· Pair-Share – In pairs, have students identify all of the significant information in a chapter, and then have them evaluate this information according to the standards of critical thinking. Is the information relevant? Important? Accurate? Precisely stated? Clear? Sufficient? Deep and broad?

**Conclusions**

**Discussion Questions Related to Conclusions:**

“What inference is the author making here?”

“What fundamental conclusions does the novel support?”

“What can we conclude from analyzing this poem within this particular historical context?”

“What have you concluded as a result of reading this?”

“If we analyze this work in relation to what we read last week, what must we conclude?”

“How is this information being interpreted by the character? Is there a possible bias in how it is being interpreted?”

**In-Class Activities:**

· “Picture Frames” – As an in-class or homework writing assignment, ask students to interpret a poem, novel, or short story from the perspective of several different literary theories. Ask students to see the information through different “frames.” What becomes visible or important when the work is seen through the perspective of feminist, new historical, psychoanalytical, Marxist, or new critical “lenses”? What conclusions would you draw if you were interpreting the text using these different analytical perspectives? What pictures emerge when you surround the information with different frames?

**Point of View**

**Discussion Questions Related to Point of View:**

“Identify the literary point of view of this work. How does its point of view affect the reader?”

“What is the narrator’s point of view?”

“How would this issue appear from the point of view of each character in the work?”

“How is Antigone’s point of view on this issue different from that of Haemon? What experiences or beliefs might cause them to view this concept so differently?”

**In-Class Activities:**

· The “Walk a Mile” Activity – Take a literary text you are studying in class, and ask students to figuratively “walk a mile in the shoes” of a character. Ask students to take on the viewpoint of a particular character in a fictional work, and encourage them to engage deeply with this activity, reflecting on what the world looks like or feels like from the perspective of this literary character.

· Buzz Groups – Have students do some simple research on the author of a work, finding out as much as they can about the author’s background, education, life experiences, and beliefs. Then have them reflect on what the author’s point of view might be regarding particular topics. How does the author’s background contribute to a distinct way of seeing the world?