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Author(s): Marshall Gregory

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TURNING WATER INTO WINE

GIVING REMOTE TEXTS FULL FLAVOR FOR THE AUDIENCE OF *FRIENDS*

Marshall Gregory

Abstract. This essay argues that teachers would be more effective at promoting students' willingness to work hard at course content that seems to them remote and abstract if teachers explicitly presented that content to students more as a means to their education rather than as the aim of their education. Teachers should confront the fact that most of the content they teach will be forgotten by students. Once this fact is accepted, then it follows that teaching content that teachers know will be forgotten as if it should never be forgotten is myopic and perhaps dysfunctional. An alternative teaching model is to use course content to stimulate the flourishing of developmental human skills—rationality, language, aesthetic responsiveness, imagination, introspection, moral and ethical deliberation, sociability, and physicality—in the service of a developmental notion of liberal education that can never go out of date and can never be forgotten because its effects become absorbed as developmentally advanced orientations of life, not crammed into short-term memory for the sake of passing tests.

Almost every year, I am privileged to teach my favorite course. It is

Marshall Gregory is the Ice Professor of English, Liberal Education, and Pedagogy at Butler University. He is also an executive editor of College Teaching.

[*gulp*] British Literature Survey I, that old workhorse, one-semester survey that goes from Beowulf to Blake and that includes such formidable authors as the Beowulf poet, Chaucer (in Middle English), Sidney, Shakespeare, Webster, Donne, Mar-

vel, Herrick, Milton, Pope, Swift, Johnson, Gray, Goldsmith, and others. It is my favorite course to teach, but it is also the most challenging course I teach. In what follows, I am going to discuss how my theory of liberal education has helped me improve my pedagogy in Brit Lit I, and I will demonstrate my liberal arts pedagogy by discussing some particular examples of common classroom content, including Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," one of the most daunting poems to teach in my survey literature course.

Brit Lit I is devilishly hard to teach because all of my students—just like most of yours—find such works as "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (or G. M. Trevelyan's *History of England*, Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method*, William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*; examples could go on and on) difficult to read because of the density and complexity of the language, and difficult to "relate to" (one of their favorite phrases) because the issues in these works seem arid, abstract, and emotionally remote. There are many reasons why this is the case—the fact that most of our students have had their minds and emotions shaped by America's media culture instead of by books, for example, and the fact that America's "youth culture" focuses so much on entertainment rather than on development, and many other

reasons as well—but it is not my aim to go down this path of possible explanations. The phenomenon is sufficiently familiar to every college teacher that none of them require explanations for why it exists to know that it does exist.

For whatever reasons, then, we know that our students are used to getting information by means of images and sound bites, and that they have been doing so all of their lives. Their collective brains—all of their perceptual systems—are geared to working this way. Thus, when I ask my students to read pre-nineteenth-century British poetry and to get something valuable out of the experience, I always feel as if I am trying to accomplish two nearly impossible tasks at once: to turn water into wine and simultaneously slip around the ethos of the late-and-lamented *Friends* and *Seinfeld* with sufficient wiliness that my students are left free, at least temporarily, for a serious engagement with an ethos of a vastly different sort from sitcom TV, movies, and computer games.

Most students come to college ready and willing to indulge their teachers' refined and arcane interest in books—to many of them, their teachers' book fetish is just one of the weird, cute traits that makes teachers teacherly—but most students certainly don't take their teachers' interest in books as a compelling or obligatory model for their own lives. Not only are they not used to getting information from books, but they are especially not used to the kind of labor that is required to deal with highly complicated linguistic structures such as literary expression, close argumentation, and dense analysis. Any uses of language more difficult than that of high school textbooks can and often do make trouble for today's students. Contemporary college students are not less intelligent than previous generations of students, but they are certainly less practiced at performing sophisticated language tasks such as adjudicating among competing connotations or analyzing tricky rhetorical and artistic structures. Complex, subtle, allusive, nuanced, artistic, and literary uses of language—the very kinds of language they encounter in Brit Lit I—make tough sledding for many of today's college students.

A good case in point is Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-

yard." This poem does not look any more like the poems our students typically write or study than the typical Victoria's Secret model looks like your typical mother. The language of the poem is self-consciously artistic, meticulously crafted, formal, complex, nuanced, carefully metered and rhymed, and full of literary allusions and personifications that, like a good head fake in basketball, leave students looking helpless as the poem dribbles around them for a slam dunk that they aren't much interested in either analyzing or admiring. Students find it a little off-putting, not motivating, to be faked out of their socks by a poem that's 255 years old.

I used to try to motivate students to enjoy and value Gray's poem by taking them carefully through a descriptive analysis of the poem's artistic and intellectual content, and its historical position as a poem that sits on the fence between neoclassical restraint and Romantic expressiveness. This was all good because I'm reasonably smart and highly trained, and really love this poem. But the truth is that it never worked very well—you can see when students' nostrils flare out as they attempt to stifle that give-away yawn—and after a while I figured out why my approach was not working so well.

In my eager analytical cataloging of the poem's artistic, intellectual, and historical "features," I was giving my students a reason to understand why some people—namely me or other strange persons like me—might find Gray's poem *interesting*, but I was giving them no reasons of their own for finding Gray's poem *important*. I have finally learned that unless I can make a convincing case about why the literature I love is not only interesting but important—and by important I mean two things: important to the concrete students sitting in front of me and important to them now, not in some vague future—then I seldom make much headway merely by showing why that literature interests me. And I have learned not to resent my students' skepticism on this point. Why, indeed, should my interest in Gray's poem become an interest that my twenty-first-century students are obliged to replicate? It's a perfectly wonderful thing for them to do if they choose to, but it's not a contemptible thing for them to choose not to.

They have a right to expect me to be able to tell them what's in it for them if they study this poem with me.

Here is where liberal education theory offers a helpful guide to pedagogy. In my view, the curriculum is a means to an end, not an end in itself, which means that there is no intrinsic reason whatever that says that my students must appreciate the art, ideas, or historical position of Gray's "Elegy." Once students leave my course, it is a fair bet that not a single one of them will ever again have to read or even hear a reference to eighteenth-century British poetry in their whole lives. Should I conclude that those who do not learn to love this poem, or that the unwashed crowds in other courses who will never read it at all, are somehow uneducated slobs? To think that there *is* some intrinsic value in learning about the "Elegy" would be to treat the curriculum as an end, not a means. The idea that anyone ignorant of Gray's "Elegy" is ipso facto uneducated is absurd (or ignorant of any other particular work or author as well: yes, that includes Shakespeare). If maximum coverage is the end of education, then there are *no* educated persons, because even the most deeply educated among us merely scratch at the surface of all there is to know.

One clear implication of my claim that there is no intrinsic educational virtue in knowing Gray's "Elegy" (but that there is great educational virtue in being called on to use a large range of elemental human capacities in order to study it) is that there is also no intrinsic educational virtue in much of the other content we teach in colleges and universities. There is much educational virtue in studying this content, but we who love this content often imply to our students that the content matters for its own sake in a way it seldom, in fact, does matter.

There is no guarantee that learning about ethics will make students ethical; that knowing about science will produce students who think like scientists; that knowing about history will produce students who have solid historical perspective; or that knowing classical Latin will produce students who have Ciceronian common sense. And just as it is the case in my own discipline that no student who goes from my classroom to the world outside academe will ever be asked if she or

he has read Gray's "Elegy" or if she or he can describe the generic features of neo-classical poetry, so no student outside any other discipline will ever be asked if s/he knows the periodical table or Boyle's law or Toynbee's theory of history or Cicero's treatise on friendship. And because of specialization within disciplines, it is even the case that students who stay in those disciplines to become specialists themselves will mostly never have to recall most of the content they learned even in their own disciplines. No mathematician who specializes in recursive functions ever has to think again about the algebra she or he learned in high school and college. No biologist who specializes in DNA sequencing has to remember Linnaeus's system of classification or how to dissect a frog's anatomy. Nor does the historian who specializes in Hegelian notions of history have to know anything about Edward Carr's theory of history.

My point is that teachers who love specific kinds of content often misrepresent the kind of usefulness that content will have for most of their students. Mostly, students do not get educated because they study our beloved content. They get educated because they learn how to study our beloved content, and they carry the how of that learning with them in the world as cognitive and intellectual skills that stick long after the content is forgotten. In short, the curriculum is not an end in itself. Curricular content is a means to human development. The curriculum is the playing ground, the exercise field, for the development of those human capacities that tend to distinguish human beings as such, and the fullest possible development of which defines the true end of a liberal education. One useful way of identifying those capacities is simply to ask ourselves what empirically demonstrable features of human existence mark human beings as such in all times and places and across all cultures, genders, ethnicities, and races.

Clearly, all human beings are marked as human beings by virtue of their universal possession of, first, the capacity for reasoning; second, the capacity for language; third, the capacity for aesthetic responsiveness; fourth, the capacity for imagination; fifth, the capacity for judging human conduct in moral and ethical

terms; sixth, the capacity for social living; seventh, the capacity for introspection; and, finally, the capacity for understanding and experiencing life through the medium of a particular kind of body, brain, and nervous and perceptual system.

If these are the capacities that mark human beings as such, then these are the capacities that students bring to the educational table, and they are also the capacities that the expansion, empowerment, and completion of which constitute the educational end that teachers work toward, or *should* work toward. Since the failure to develop these capacities constitutes a kind of existential deprivation, the same way that blindness or the loss of a limb constitutes a physical deprivation, it is appropriate for teachers and students alike to view the kind of education that focuses primarily on the development of basic human capacities as an existential need, and to view curriculum and pedagogy as the primary means of fulfilling that end or need.

This theory of liberal education, even in this highly sketchy form, yields a systematic approach to the teaching of Gray's "Elegy." The first thing I do is share my liberal arts theory with my students—I call it a "frame" around the course content—so they can see that what I am trying to do is to help them use the poem to understand their lives. I am not trying to indoctrinate them into specialized knowledge that they will never use. I discuss the list of distinctive human capacities in order to give students a sense of how they personally contain and replicate those capacities. Then, collectively, we assess the extent to which a close study of Gray's "Elegy" helps them develop those capacities—and how it helps me also: a liberal arts pedagogy allows me to place myself in the position of a fellow learner without adopting a false persona.

In stanza fourteen, for example, which reads, "Full many a gem of purest ray serene, / The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear: / Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air;" I invite students to see how the poem exercises their rational capacities by forcing them to decode the analogy between the speaker's unfamous forebears and the ocean gems and desert flowers whose beauty never gets seen or appreciated. Further investigation shows

that an implicit moral question is being raised about the fairness of such enforced obscurity on whole communities of people, some members of which might have been born with great talent. Additional inquiry shows the poem cultivating students' sensitivity to subtle language (and their sensitivity to aesthetic craftsmanship) as they learn to notice the alliteration of "born to blush," notice the open vowel sounds of "unfathom'd caves of ocean bear," and notice the poignant emotions in such word choices as "serene" and "waste." The demonstration could continue at length but does not need to. You have the point. A liberal arts pedagogy uses the poem the way body builders use weights: to increase specific powers as varying weights of different densities are lifted in different ways.

When students are coached to view Gray's poem from this perspective—or when they view any other complicated artifact this way—they find that the very features of it that initially made the poem seem remote, arid, and forbidding now seem, if not intimate and rich, at least educational and defensible. Not only does the poem become educational and defensible, but the labor that students exert in studying it also becomes educational and defensible. I do not ask my students to love Gray's poem as I love it. I only help them see that their study of the poem helps them grow on several fronts that are essential to their goal of achieving the fullest possible development they can reach as human beings. A liberal arts pedagogy, in other words, gives students a stake in studying the poem, a stake anchored in their real interest in growth and development not for some as-yet unclaimed and uncertain future but for right now, because their worth as human beings is not tied to future income but to whatever they can make of themselves at any given point of development, including the present moment of this day, in this class, right now.

One of the primary benefits of liberal arts pedagogy is that it relieves students from the diminishing and frustrating feelings of inadequacy that afflict them when they lack the ability to appreciate the poem "at the teacher's level," as they might say. Such feelings of inadequacy and frustration are serious roadblocks to education.

But a curious thing happens once students are relieved of having to feel inadequate in this way, and once they accept the notion that the poem's study is useful to them even if they cannot initially emulate their teacher's enthusiasm for it. Students find themselves liberated to start enjoying the content of the poem on its own terms.

This is when I make another liberal arts move. I remind students that not only do all human beings share certain capacities but that we also share common circumstances such as having to deal with families, going through the stages of youth and maturity and old age, facing an inevitable death, wondering about the origins and endings of things, and, like the young speaker in Gray's "Elegy," trying to understand the extent to which the life-patterns and life-models of our forebears—the kind of lives led by our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents—offer each of us both a prediction about what we might become and a challenge to become something else.

The young speaker in this poem is asking himself the identical questions that all the young students in my class are asking themselves: "Is it enough for me if I become something different from what

my parents and other forebears became? Do the models of my parents and grandparents offer a sufficient container for my ambition? Do I want more? Am I talented enough to deserve more? Even if I am talented enough to deserve more, will luck and circumstances be on my side? What if I live a whole life and no one ever notices? What if I die and no one cares?"

Once students become aware that Gray's "Elegy" is not about iambic pentameter, an a-b-a-b rhyme scheme, its historical position between neoclassicism and Romanticism, or abstract ideas of God and merit, but is in fact about the introspective meditations of a young person who is uncertain about his future, a young man trying to find pertinent clues about his own destiny in the lives of those from his own community who have gone before him, they suddenly see that Gray's "Elegy" is a document that articulates their own concerns and informs their own interests. They suddenly have a justification for being interested in this poem, not because I am interested in it, not because of their grade in the course, not because they might become English majors, and not because some fathead convocation

speaker has told them that reading poetry will make them better commodities traders, but because they share the common existential plight of all human beings who wonder what they might become, and how much of what they might become has already been determined for them by the circumstances of their birth and upbringing.

Whatever "English pedagogy" is, the traditional version of it sticks to formal and intellectual analysis ("Can anyone identify the meter in which this poem is written?"). The nontraditional version of it invites open-ended responsiveness ("What did you think of this poem?") and tries to keep the discussion ball bouncing until the end of class. A liberal arts pedagogy allows teachers to avoid both of these stultifying versions of pedagogy and to root students' study of texts in issues that can be made real for them because they are real: issues of growth and development across a broad range of capacities and circumstances that every human being must deal with to lead an effective, productive, and self-aware life.

Key words: liberal education, pedagogy, liberal arts