

The classroom and its relationship to culture, scholarship, and faculty review: A reflection

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Like all instructors, I am and should be continuously re-evaluating and reconsidering what I teach, whom I teach and how I teach as well as examining the practises of other instructors both in my department and out of it, both within my institution and outside of it. In effect, in a teaching institution, good scholarship starts or should start in the classroom. My classes should inform my thoughts; my students' reactions should inform my instruction, and my research into both the literature I study and teach and the students I teach it to. In English 1202, a first year literature class, I teach Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*. The novel is attractive to me for a variety of reasons. Ondaatje is a Canadian and I am a Canadianist. Besides this, Ondaatje, although a Canadian writer, is not simply writing a novel about Canada, nor does he reflect the old Canadian Radio and Television Commission definition of what constitutes "Canadian content" except, ironically, through the fact that he is both a Canadian citizen and some of his characters in this novel set in India, north Africa, England and Italy happen to be Canadian citizens, interestingly enough, hyphenated Canadian citizens, and, in this case, Italian-Canadians. Indeed, the novel is partly about how the constructs of nation-states distort individuals and how nationalism turns individuals away from one another even though, through propinquity, they are attracted to and attached to one another once they are outside of the constructs of their nation-states. That may not at first seem to have any relevance to the students I teach on the Surrey campus, their view of literature or their understanding of their country, Canada. Yet it has a profound relationship to them and their existence, and that is one of the reasons why I keep returning to the novel: it is both relevant to their understanding of English literature and Canadian Studies, and relevant to their understanding of who they are and what they face in the culture they live in and are in constant negotiation with.

Ondaatje (1992) has his title character comment "I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states" (138). He says this because he believes "We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps" (261). But one of the paradoxes of the novel is that it is a book about an "English patient" who is not English but Hungarian, and although the "English patient" is the title character, it is the narrative thread of Kirpal Singh, a Sikh sapper, that delivers the all important sub-text of the novel. Kirpal is the reason I find the novel appropriate for my students in Surrey.

As with all literature I have taught more than once, *The English Patient* is a novel I will return to not only because it is good literature using Samuel Johnson's litmus test for what good literature is, but also because I learn from teaching it to my students just as much as they learn from having it taught to them. A classroom, ideally, is a forum, an unwieldy forum at times, it is true, but a forum nonetheless, one that should be full of unpredictable twists and turns that members of that forum bring to it. Sometimes those twists and turns take time to be negotiated; sometimes they are more complex than we

think they are when we enter those negotiations. One day this past term, I was trying to encourage my class to expand upon their response to one of the discussion questions I had assigned for the novel. Part of the question read "Kirpal saves Caravaggio from being killed by a fuze box; (208) the English patient says of Kirpal 'he's one of those warrior saints' (209)." In that section of English 1202, there were ten students of south Asian heritage. In trying to get their reaction to the English patient's claim that Kirpal is a Sikh saint, I asked them if they thought that remark was fair. At this point in the discussion, the class's response would not only shape the discussion but also deconstruct another passage in the novel where Hana, who has become involved with Kirpal and whose relation to Kirpal Ondaatje describes with the paradoxical comment "There is the one month in their lives when Hana and Kip sleep beside each other. A formal celibacy between them. Discovering that in lovemaking there can be a whole civilization, a whole country ahead of them" (225-6). Hana also "imagines all of Asia through the gestures of this one man" (217). Not only was I asking the class to negotiate a tough literary passage but also to negotiate a tough inter-cultural problem, one where sharing was fundamental to the class's knowledge of the issues and fundamental to an understanding of the text at the same time. In this discussion, my knowledge was merely a signpost, pointing out some of the possible ways they could share their knowledge, understanding, and point of view.

There are two issues at stake in this illustration. As an instructor, I am interested in how I adapt my approach to material according to my audience. When I direct my attention to one group in the classroom, I have to be aware of how other members of the class perceive that attention and how it is affecting their learning. The task of an instructor is complex, as what works with one class will not necessarily work in another class. How such a negotiation of a text is reflected in student reviews is another factor worthy of consideration. Would I take the same risk in teaching a class if I were working as a sessional instructor who had no job security and whose future employment was dependent upon student reviews? Probably not.

The concepts of scholarship and teaching are very important in our organization, as it moves toward being a centre for teaching excellence. Yet, a centre for teaching excellence can only generate an understanding of both the culture that best exemplifies reflective teaching and best reflects the needs, interests and cultures of its students when it recognizes the elements of teaching as central components of research and supports teaching initiatives. The problem is that if we hold onto the traditional model of post-secondary organizations, these elements of teaching are not valued or rewarded in the same way that traditional academic research is at the departmental level or the organizational level. Traditionally, research is held to be the furthering of the understanding of the subject material of a discipline's field of knowledge. Historically, there has been a rift between what a researcher publishes about his or her research in a field of study and the application of that knowledge in the classroom. The published research is valued; the application is taken for granted. As such, the classroom is not the main focus of a researcher, but a secondary place where findings are disseminated after the research takes place. Because of this, there is a disconnect between what a researcher discovers and how that research becomes manifest in the classroom. Worse than that, in training individuals for the profession, effort goes into making sure

individuals understand their field of study and the critical analysis that is utilized in that field of study, but there is little training to prepare individuals for the experience of communicating an understanding of that field of study. Ironically, once into a teaching position, individuals often have to learn by the seat of their pants. Yet, at the same time, they are faced with rigorous student evaluation systems that judge them on a set of skills they have received no formal training in. Academics then, metaphorically speaking, are marched to the deep end of the pool, knowledge of their field in hand, much like an anchor, and told to jump in and apply that knowledge without an understanding of the tools of application. Ironically, they may know the anatomy of their field of study, but they may not know how to utilize it to keep themselves afloat in the pool into which they have been thrown.

But how does this relate to an organization that is going through major changes, moving from what had been a two year organization to a four year institution and now, potentially, into becoming a regional university? That is the question we have been saddled with in developing our curriculum, defining our culture, coming to an understanding of the expertise we already have, and examining other organizations that have already incurred dramatic periods of growth. What it is easy to forget is that each organization, just like each human being, is unique even though it may share some of the attributes of other organizations. Who we serve and what we have historically built as our strengths are signposts that we need to recognize and embrace. We should reflect on the strengths we have rather than ignoring them. We should realize that we need not emulate something that is not a part of our culture or try to be something we are not. Our own uniqueness is our strength; learning how to utilize our uniqueness and nurture it is our challenge. Just like every other human social unit, we have to learn to place value in what we have and learn how we can adapt our strengths to further serve the people who want to become a part of our culture and our educational experience.

It is fascinating how institutions value other organizations but don't value themselves. Historically, one of the issues that any Canadianist hears from Canadians is that Canada does not have a culture, that it is simply a reflection of the cultures that have influenced it. In her essay "Travels Back" (1982), Margaret Atwood comments that it is easy for Canadians to feel that everything of importance happens elsewhere. But she also comments that she lives in Canada by choice because it is her culture, her place defined by the elements that define her. Just as every person has to come to terms with who he or she is, every institution has to understand and accept its historic roots rather than denying them. As Atwood notes, denying roots is an act of amputation; it is only through coming to terms with who we are that we are able to grow to our full potential. That is the challenge, not simply to ignore or deny the past but to embrace it as a part of who we are, to take the strengths of that past and utilize them as signposts to the future.

How we value what we have done successfully will determine how successfully we mature with growth and change. As we wrestle with examining how to evaluate ourselves collectively and individually, we have to remember what we value in our culture, what is core and central to a definition of what we are. In the classroom, we all know there is no one standard approach to a topic or to teaching; there is no such thing as a standard lesson plan that can be used by all instructors. We know we all teach

differently, but if we trust and respect one another, we should also share what we do, listen to one another, and adopt and adapt what we hear. This is an integral part of any reflective process, whether it be formal or informal. On the formal side of evaluation, we have to ensure we are embracing a wide range of possibilities. The difference between a system that recognizes a range of possibilities and one that does not bespeaks the difference between training and education itself. Just as we have to learn how to be tolerant of different cultures in the general population, we have to learn how to tolerate and embrace the differences within our own academic organization.

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