FLARR Pages #69: Teaching the College Survey of Literature Course

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"Teaching the College Survey of Literature Course," Thomas C. Turner, Moderator and Francie Turner, Recorder, UMM

So, ... just how is it possible to teach a course like this?

The following is a summary, in categorized form, of a discussion which took place at the Fall Conference of FLARR on October 9, 2010 at Concordia College, Moorhead, on the teaching of "the college literature survey course," along with additional information submitted later by e-mail. Some questions to stimulate thinking were distributed initially to the participants (see below—they will still be useful in discipline discussions).

Surveys Within the Curriculum

Among the colleges represented and over time there has a wide variety of survey coverages. One college used four "masterpiece" courses to cover Spanish and Latin American literature, but has changed since to allow more specific topics and electives for students. Professors enjoy those specialized literary topics as well. A possibly more standard approach might be the use of an anthology text: one semester each for the literature of Spain, France, and Germany, the most commonly taught languages, with another semester for literature of "other lands" in those same languages. One of the colleges at the conference offers a survey of French prose alone. Others have given up on such courses ("So, ... just how is it possible to teach a course like this"), preferring genre, thematic, or period approaches. Most courses are spread over time to allow for a historical perspective, however some advised to teach the modern or contemporary courses first to students, because of the difficulty of the language for them and because it is interesting for students to discover the "roots" of some current attitudes.

Aha! ... So that's where that idea came from!

Variety Within the Survey

Variety is valued because it provides opportunity for contrasting and comparing the themes and styles of many authors. It is frustrating because there are so many good authors that it is difficult to choose among them. Some hope was held out that professors would be able to choose their own works/passages for a course and have a unique text printed for sale or rent to students, delivered perhaps electronically, although it was noted that many students would not prefer the electronic forms (interestingly enough, it was noted that electronic reading devices are most popular with women over forty).

Survey courses currently offered, encouraged by goals developed for literature by professional organizations, may make use of other fields of knowledge as well as film to ensure that students have a culturally "connected" view of what is happening at a given time in a period's history, how many forces throughout society coalesce in the development of the "Romantic" hero, for instance. A consideration of the writings of Mariano José de Larra, a 19th century Spanish newspaper essayist, would entail many of the contemporary progressive ideas of Europe in the early 19th Century, which are in turn based on the beliefs and writings of enlightenment political, social, and scientific thinkers of the 18th century. This important background is also of a cross-cultural nature. The broad picture of the development of a period is valuable, its intellectual and emotional coherence is most important.

Canon and/or Subjective Choice of Works

Some professors felt that the choice of works is really a subjective one in our survey courses, although there was some sentiment that a "canon" is still discernible. In any case, it is perhaps best to admit to students that there is some (or considerable) faculty choice involved and what that means might be explained. Editorial choices are both helpful and limiting. Faculty pick literature
that they are passionate about, probably because they are people with particular interests (not everyone will have those interests and such interests may not be fully representative of the interests of the culture, in so far as that can be determined). Recently there has been more care regarding selection of texts on a gender basis and in other important categories which may provide difference in point of view.

There is a difficult problem as well as to how much to read, given that many anthologies contain much more reading that can be adequately done in a semester. There is a certain amount of factual material surrounding the authors' lives and the context of their work which is useful. Typically this information is included in the anthology introduction to an author or a period. How much of this should be required learning? One measure might be what a well-educated person from the culture might know about the author or the period. Most educated Spaniards know that Rocinante is Don Quijote's nag; Babieca is the Cid's horse, Colada and Tizón his swords.

Some professors like to chase a small number of themes occasionally in these courses, perhaps using a piece from another culture as well (one instructor likes to use a short novellete and a play in the target language to explore the theme of jealousy, comparing both the Othello). How do pieces from different periods contrast and compare regarding language as well as theme? Many professors expressed the need for good anthology materials, exercises which make student think and which heighten sensitivity of language and style. One felt that at least the introduction of some rudimentary theory could help students develop thoughtful points of view.

**The Literature Survey Course and the Future Teacher**

The survey of literature course is likely to be included in the packet courses tied to measures of cultural competence. It might be a good idea to point out and have students collect passages of literature that future teachers can use to apprise their students of cultural beliefs. Other passages could be imitated as examples for their appropriate or clever use of language at many levels.

Regarding the actual literature used in survey courses that might appeal to young adults, graphic novels were mentioned. Some were noted to be available in Spain and elsewhere. One college program has discovered that certain traditional German classics are also suitable for younger readers. Some Chicano/Chicana writers would be appropriate.

**Panel Discussion Questions (Use them in discipline discussions)**

- What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of a traditional survey of literature course?
- How/Where do these course fit in programs?
- What should be included in such courses? What are the criteria for a good anthology? What special features should such anthologies have?
- How important is coverage? Depth? Genres? What problems do anthologies present for students? Are there alternatives/ modifications to anthologies?
- What are some techniques used in such courses? Texts are usually arranged historically and/or by period (romanticism, realism, etc). Can they be taught thematically? Can anthologies be combined with other texts to chase themes? What kinds of comparisons and contrasts (i.e. opportunities for such) are possible between authors, periods, etc?
- How might students generate ideas for essays and papers?
- For the purposes of developing different points of view, should some attention be given to very basic literature theory as different authors are introduced?
- How much cultural context should be provided and required (e.g. for testing purposes)? Should students explore historical, political, and social background themes as a major portion of their effort in papers?
- More generally, should the stated outcomes for such courses be narrowly or widely defined? What/How much should tests cover, what writing should be demanded, how should students report and share cultural information as well as paper findings with classmates? Which sources? Can a survey course be taught as a seminar?
- Can such courses be made more useful for future teachers? How should grades be determined (weighting of presentations, objective tests, papers, quizzes)?

**Just look at these beautiful literary clauses in the subjunctive!**