

“I Could Be of Great Use to My Benighted People”:  
Service Learning, Shifting Canons, and Authority

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*Introduction*

When, as a graduate student at Harvard University, I rescued *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said* from literary obscurity, I expected Said’s story to one day receive the same in-classroom attention and permanent fixture status as previously, and famously, rescued literary texts like Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* and the later rediscovered Hannah Crafts’ *The Bondswoman’s Narrative*. These authors, all coevals, had posthumously changed what we knew about the American literary landscape. Said’s book-length autobiography, not to be confused with an earlier ten-page version published in the 1867 *Atlantic Monthly*, is the only known one written by an African-born American Civil War veteran of Muslim heritage. Wilson’s autobiographical novel, when rediscovered, was thought to be the first written by an African American woman in North America. Crafts’ novel, now considered to possibly hold *Our Nig*’s first by an African American woman in North America status, is certainly the only known one written by a female fugitive from slavery.

At the time of my find, I had not yet begun to think about who gets to determine what is literature, and who gets left outside the gates of literary canons, and who is let inside and allowed to “permeate society” and “[shape] everyone’s world view,” and how “literary canons exclude works no matter how selective canon makers are,” considerations author Jordan Bates undertakes, seriously, in *The Daily Nebraskan* article “Literary Canons Exclude Works No Matter How Selective Canon Makers Are” (Bates). So, of course, I had no way of knowing what all of that meant for what I wanted to achieve for Said’s work.

At the time of my find, I was deeply enmeshed in the discipline of religion, and

investigating the autobiography's added value to that field. I hadn't, yet, formally entered the discipline of writing, much less had any fluency in the pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing, including related theories and methods. Had I had that exposure, I most surely would have embraced an authority-conscious pedagogical approach to shifting canons, allowing myself a purposefully multigenre textual and interdisciplinary path forward in placing Said's importance in the greater historical context it deserved and one that would have allowed him his rightful place in literary history and reaching a wider audience, beyond the classroom and beyond study of religion.

I imagine now the teacherly things I could have done to effect change if I had known earlier that which I have gained exposure to during my time in Antioch University Los Angeles's Post-MFA program in the Teaching of Creative Writing. I think of service-learning projects I've become knowledgeable about like that of Professor Argie J. Manolis, at the University of Minnesota, Morris, as described in her article "Writing the Community: Service Learning in Creative Writing"; and that of Professor Philip Zwerling, at the University of Texas Pan American, as described in his article "Right on the Border: Mexican-American Students Write Themselves Into The(ir) World"; and that of a history professor at the State University of New York at Fredonia, as described by Emily E. Straus and Dawn M. Eckenrode in their article "Engaging Past and Present: Service-Learning in the College History Classroom." I think of the understanding I now have of the five elements needed for establishing a natural critical learning environment, as defined by Ken Bain in *What the Best College Teachers Do*: There's the need for "an intriguing question or problem"; the need for educators to be guides in "in helping the students understand the significance of the question" or problem; the need for engaging students in "some high-order intellectual activity: encouraging them to compare, apply, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize, but never only to listen and remember"; the need for a strategy on the educator's part that helps

students to solve the problem or question; and the need for students to leave with a question that can keep moving the learning process forward beyond the classroom (Bain 100-103). And I think of bell hook's appeal for engaged pedagogy that calls for "teaching in uniquely passionate and different ways" (hooks 198); that pushes back against arbitrary boundaries; that transgresses; that is "education as the practice of freedom," as hooks coins it in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.

With knowledge of these things, I would have reached out to the greater American learning community, locally and nationally, and employed an ongoing service-learning project around reintroducing *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said*. I would have engineered this project in partnership with an institution of higher learning. This project would have been in service to the research-identified, community-educating needs of nonprofit libraries, historical societies, archives, and the like. I would have made these moves in a way that could help to build community across seemingly intractable divides *and* enhance critical thinking, reading, writing, and rhet-comp skills—all much needed by the greater citizenry to be able to better communicate and coexist in our greater society. I would have made sure my pedagogical approach helped encourage students connected to the effort "to learn in ways that make sustained, substantial and positive differences in the way they think, act, or feel" (Bain 164).

In a nod to history, this approach would have been true to the legacy of Nicholas Said, as an educator in service to humanity. At one point in his autobiography, Said described what motivated him to make certain decisions as an educator. He had had travelled to one of the most dangerous places in the United States for people of black African descent at the time: the Deep South. Said wrote, "While in Sandusky City, I conceived the idea to go South, where I could be of great use to my benighted people in the capacity of a teacher" (202). Though Said directed his

service specifically toward oppressed people of black African descent in the United States, we could extend that sentiment today to marginalized people in general and it would still be true to the spirit of Said's service-oriented pedagogic determination.

I had done this kind of work to some degree in the field of religion, with my work on the history of Islam in America, creating service-learning-like educational opportunities (though I didn't know to call it that at the time) across Harvard University and in partnership with the wider community in Boston and Cambridge. This had all been self-taught, done out of desperation to learn where opportunities to learn were, back then, surprisingly negligible in my area of academic interest. I had found myself curiously the most knowledgeable on campus on how to bring together the much-needed educational resources and so I employed the natural instinct within me to push forward with knowledge sharing. Unfortunately, when it came to Said's text, I simply didn't have the knowledge-driven confidence of the writing field to make that same kind of leap with literature. Educators with much more authority than I began to direct me on what I was not capable of doing with the find, and began advising me to work with senior scholars, that could, they said, give my project authority, and all this with no guidance on how I would share authority without being swallowed up by the imbalance in the partnership structure. Had I had knowledge of works like *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project*, edited by Anna Leahy, which hadn't yet been published, I would have had such a better understanding of issues of authority in academia in general.

What I longed for, again not yet having a name for what I was seeking, was a constructivist educational approach to advising me that would allow *me* the experience of creating new knowledge without feeling crushed by the weight of power dynamics and whispers of who had the authority to tell whose story and how. I was not yet familiar with how feminist (and/or humanist)

theory could be effectively employed, how it gave a name to much of my struggles as a young scholar, in the ways it approaches “values, ethics and perspective”; “focuses on a larger context having to do with power and authority, entitlement”; and “very much concerns itself with the necessity of conflict to allow all voices to be heard, considered and become part of a construction of a new understanding (a larger understanding).” This definition, related to me by my Antioch mentor, writer-teacher Tammy Lechner, resonated deeply with how I wanted to learn *and* teach.

Yes, it was a professor of English and Black Studies, Dr. Allan D. Austin, who had brought Said’s original 1867 text to the wider public, in the late 20th century. Yes, it was in the collection of the Schomburg Center for Research and Black Culture—named after the great bibliophile and historian of African and German descent, Arturo Alfonso Schomburg—where I first located one of the only four known and extant, rare and forgotten copies of Said’s 1873 autobiography, that copy possibly coming from Mr. Schomburg’s own collection that made up a portion of the center’s first holdings. And, still, those who have taken the most interest in bringing Said’s story to the forefront have been people mostly interested in the history of Islam in America, like me, or the study of religion, like me, but all men, unlike me.

Over many years of continually researching Said, I realize his book-length autobiography’s continued obscurity, even though now rediscovered, is likely also a result of it being seen solely as something on Muslims; or on Africa; or on Arabs, as Said was Arabic speaking (though not Arab), and his original name was Muhammad Ali Ben Said; or too foreign, for large swaths of it covers his life in parts of the world other than the United States; or for what it is not likely seen as: literary. *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said* was not written by the hand of someone writing in his first language nor second language nor third language, nor fourth or fifth, but, rather, many languages down the line, so it does not fit the dominant notion of beautiful writing, though it is a

beautiful human story, which goes to the question of who controls what voices deserve to be heard and when?

Said, recognizing his shortcomings in the mechanics of writing in English, due to unfortunate historical circumstances in which he found himself, writes, “It will be also observed, by the reader, that I have made an indiscriminate use of the present and past tenses in my narrative. This, together with other breaches of the rules of grammar and rhetoric, is attributable to the peculiar circumstances under which I have written” (vii). Though Said recognized his own shortcomings in the mechanics of writing, he did not allow that to overshadow the contributions he was trying to make to improvement of the human condition:

“It is not without a feeling of hesitation and timid apprehension, that I commit these ill-written pages to the great reading public.

As I glance over them, I cannot but be painfully reminded of their intrinsic unworthiness; yet, I offer no apology for their appearance.

My motive in this publication I believe to be good ...” (v).

Said, if placed in his proper historical context, would be a tremendous asset to American literary landscape, given his expansive exposure to the human experience. Imagine the possibilities in bringing together all of the multigenre textual information on him to finish a story that he could not, as so much is left out of his autobiography, such as his Civil War service, presumably for his safety, given he was living in the post-Reconstruction Deep South at the time of his book’s publication.

To pull off something like this, the work that would have to be done would not be too much different than the excavation work done by Manolis’s University of Minnesota, Morris, students who acted as writers of witness, in their service learning project, working with sufferers of

Alzheimer's Disease or a related dementia (ADRD), helping them write "accidental" or "found" poetry, these students thus having an indelible, collaborative hand in shaping history. During a 2014 panel discussion at Harvard University, on "The Intersection of Public Service with Teaching, Learning, and Research at Harvard," Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Victor S. Thomas Professor of History and of African and African American Studies, acknowledged the importance of this kind of work to the field of education. She reasoned, "A curriculum that combines academic study with on-the-ground learning promotes student engagement and infuses theory with real knowledge. It is highly collaborative and interdisciplinary work" ("Connecting Community Service to the Classroom").

Nicholas Said fits right in this type of pedagogical framework. He spoke at least ten languages; he had lived on five continents, having been enslaved in Africa, Asia, and Europe, and had traveled freely in parts of South America and lived freely in antebellum, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction parts of North America; he had been an educator, teaching both French and elementary education in the United States; he had known the life and culture of the American South, North, and the Midwest, having lived quite a peripatetic existence in places like New York City, Detroit, Charleston, Atlanta, and Selma, to name a few; he had been well-versed in politics everywhere he lived and travelled, from Russia to Haiti, and had been singled out by one of his contemporaries of European-American descent as being intellectually superior and politically astute enough to become vice-president of the United States or Foreign Minister to Russia; he had been fascinated with military play as a young child and served in the most deadly war in American history as a young adult, holding the role of private, sergeant, and even clerical aid for a Civil War surgeon; he had known some of the most influential people of his day, across racial, ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds and persuasions, including being the enslaved servant of a Russian



prince. What could students learn from a great mind like this across a variety of disciplines? So much. This calls to mind the brilliance of an exercise University of New Hampshire Professor Bruce Ballenger shares in his chapter “Teaching the Research Paper,” published in *Nuts & Bolts: A Practical Guide to Teaching College Composition*. Ballenger has his students brainstorm a list of things they might be authorities on in order to formulate a way forward for a research topic about which they could be passionate, and thus one in which they could be much more invested (135). The possibilities are myriad that students could enjoy an exercise like this leading up to a collaborative writing and service-learning project on Nicholas Said, given all the twists and turns of Said’s life. Surely, they could find themselves authorities in one topic or another related to him.

However, for Said’s autobiography to make it into the classrooms, in this broader context, someone needed to connect all the dots for the wider audience, like Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, did for *Our Nig* and *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. But the challenge with Said’s text was greater, in that it was hitting up against existing mental models about black identity *and* Muslim identity *and* American identity *and* literary identity and more. You couldn’t put Said in a box—no one group could claim him. In *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, John C. Bean argues that the most powerful transferrable writing skill is “the ability to think rhetorically—to size up a writing situation in terms of audience, purpose, and genre—and then to make appropriate composing decisions based on this analysis” (51). Trying to size up audience, purpose, and genre for next steps in bringing *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said* more fully into public view would require thinking rhetorically in ways many didn’t have the patience for. Even some Muslims expressed frustration because Said had been critical of Islam, where they wanted a clear-cut hero to point to and hold up as a model. Without that, who would be their audience? What would be the purpose of working to push this

text forward? And, there I was in the middle of all that, trying to tell a true story without the proper tools that would empower me to do so and not fully aware of all of the unseen forces holding me back, such as the binaries, creating the center of dominance, shutting me out, instead of bringing my voice forward on my own terms. And too many others, it seemed, after their initial excitement about Said were unwilling or unable to make a way forward for his inclusion in the wider historical context in which he deserved to be.

Consequently, my dealings with Said's text became very much like Julie Jung's second-grade self's curious venture over onto the boys' side of her gender-segregated lunchroom, to sit with them, she all so briefly a disrupter, before all hell broke loose and she ended up back on the side with the girls, never to sit on the boys' side again, all to restore order because disruption of order was all too complicated. Jung tells us, in *Revisionary Rhetoric, Feminist Pedagogy, and Multigenre Texts*:

“In *Permanence and Change*, Kenneth Burke defines metaphor as a process of “putting the wrong words together” (91), a move which reconceives metaphor as a dramatic motive rather than a static trope. It is through such a process, Burke continues, that people are able to attain pliancy in their thinking, a flexibility needed to make room for expanded points of view. In my own work, the insights afforded by Burkean metaphor have come to represent what I mean by *revision*, the jarring consequence of putting those wrong words together is what I mean by *disruption*. I argue that disruption must precede revision if what we seek is a change on the level of attitude.” (Jung 56-57)

The work I needed to do required pliancy of minds. But there I was disrupting, too, in the words of Kenneth Burke, “putting the wrong words together,” like Muslim and African American; like

American Civil War Veteran and Muslim heritage; like African-born and suggested candidate for vice-president of the United States; and on and on. How could I have the authority to tell that complicated narrative all alone? That's wasn't the proper order of how it was done. Where was my doctorate? *Rhetorically asking, of course.*

Said's relevance withers in *being*, when segregated to one field of study, one genre, one box; I wither in being as a scholar, writer, and researcher, and future writer-teacher when segregated to one mental model of how I should proceed with my work. I never want to see any student again feel the way I did about moving forward with creating new knowledge of benefit to the greater society. I realize now that back then I had not yet made enough of the needed disruption. I had not put the wrong words together *and*, at the same time, pushed all the way forward to change the attitude, pushed until there was pliancy. I had to do both. I, instead, had stayed at my table, and, though never stopping moving forward, worked from there. Even with publishing and introducing a new edition of Said's autobiography, the first in 128 years, at the time, I hadn't fully done what I really needed to do.

### *Next Steps*

The introduction portion of this paper has already been a reimagining of what could have been and provides insight into what still *can* be. It's been the beginning of an imaginative case study. In the ensuing pages, I go a step farther with this study, inclusive of a *working draft* of a course design document, titled "course introduction," and a lesson plan. I aim, with this visioning, to create a model for students to reach across genres, disciplines, texts, and the like, with their new educational finds, whatever they may be, because the reality of the world requires it: that we are able to reach across in order to continue to grow and live together as a society. Placing *The*

*Autobiography of Nicholas Said* at the center, this next step of the imaginative case study further demonstrates how a curriculum combining authority-conscious creative writing pedagogy and service-learning projects can guide students into greater access to marginalized voices in American literary history; provide students an active role in excavating and refining related voices in the present that have been all but doomed to literary obscurity; and contribute to students constructing new knowledge in the discipline that not only lessens the injustices of exclusionary canons going forward but also educates the greater American public in ways that bring communities together across seemingly intractable divides and around the power of literature.

*Imaginative Case Study Materials*

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ENGLISH 1863, *Writing the Community, Writing to Effect Change*

COURSE INTRODUCTION

“For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.”

– Aristotle

*Student Learning Outcomes:*

This special topic-based course in reading, research, and writing skills is designed to make each of you a better critical thinker, reader, and writer.

By the end of this fifteen-week course, you will understand how these transferrable skills can serve you well not only in college but throughout life, personally and professionally, in your communities and your communications.

By the end of this semester, you will also have a nuts and bolts understanding of how rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and writing; processes; knowledge of conventions; and composing in electronic environments fit in with what you have learned.

You will know how to use all of this to your benefit: how to identify the best resources for building on what you have learned and how to create new knowledge with what you have learned.

In other words, you will be a full participant in your education throughout this course; you will not be left to trod through the muck and mire of passionless and “passive regurgitation of facts.”

Students who succeed in this course will be able to:

- Demonstrate the ability to think rhetorically and then apply this analysis to composing writing projects across multiple genres.

*Evidence collected of rhetorical knowledge:* final portfolio with writing across multiple genres that responds to the needs of different audiences; online collaboration logs of class revision project of *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said*.

- Demonstrate the ability to “use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating.”

*Evidence collected of critical thinking, reading, and writing skills:* final portfolio with writing across multiple genres that responds to the needs of different audiences; online discussion posts in response to chapter provocation threads for required readings; and online collaboration logs of class revision project of *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said*.

- Demonstrate the ability to use “flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading.”

*Evidence collected of knowledge of processes skills:* final portfolio with writing across multiple genres that responds to the needs of different audiences; online collaboration logs of class revision project of *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said*.

- Demonstrate the ability to “apply citation conventions systematically in their own work.”

*Evidence collected of knowledge of conventions:* proper use of appropriate academic style guides for all relevant portfolio work and online class revision project work.

- Demonstrate the ability to “use electronic environments for drafting, reviewing, revising, editing, and sharing texts.”

*Evidence collected of knowledge of composing in electronic environments:* online discussion posts in response to chapter provocation threads for required readings; online participation, via the course Learning Management System, in revising, editing, and proofreading of *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said*.

(Quoted areas above adapted from “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition.”)

#### *The Setting:*

I chose for this course to be hosted at Wayne State University because it is located in the heart of Detroit, a major factor in the research part of our course. I also chose this university because of its mission to “create and advance knowledge, prepare a diverse student body to thrive, and positively impact local and global communities,” a mission that complements the learning, service, and community-oriented mission of ENGLISH 1863, *Writing the Community, Writing to Effect Change*, and my teaching philosophy.

#### *The Pathway:*

This topic-based reading, research, and writing course is designed around the topic of excavating marginalized voices in literary history. The student learning outcomes for this topic-

based course will be met through active and experiential learning activities, engaging everyone in the class and many in the greater Detroit community, as the literary voices we will be working with are connected to Detroit community history.

One such literary voice is that of Nicholas Said, an African-born American Civil War veteran of Muslims heritage. Said arrived in antebellum America a free man, after having been enslaved and a servant on several continents. Said settled in Detroit when he first arrived in the United States and taught black children in the city before eventually joining the Union Army in 1863.

We will use *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said: A Native of Bornou, Eastern Soudan, Central Africa* as our main textual learning playground, combining our academic learning objectives with a service-learning project in partnership with the Detroit Historical Society, the Detroit Public Library, and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History.

Your main in-class project will be to work collaboratively on a revised edition of *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said* to make the text more accessible to a wider audience, as Said acknowledged himself that the text suffered challenges with grammar and rhetoric skills due to English not being his native language and the stressful condition under which he lived while trying to tell his story.

You will apply the reading, research, and writing skills you are learning in class to your service-learning project activities, producing multigenre writings along the way that will be accessible, in their final draft, as community-building educational resources to the Detroit public.

Depending on the needs of our partners, you may have a hand in the following:

- Writing an exhibit;
- Authoring a short children's book;



- Writing a narrative history for a historical marker application;
- Writing a biographical essay for one of the institutions' websites;
- Writing an op-ed that argues for increased financial support of these institutions so that marginalized voices aren't excluded due to lack of funds for new materials, projects, and etc.

These multigenre deliverables will all have a connection in some way to the story of Nicholas Said.

By the end of the service-learning project, you will have had real world experience with *gaining greater access to marginalized voices* in American literary history; *taking an active role in excavating and refining related voices* in the present that have been all but doomed to literary obscurity; and *contributing to constructing new knowledge*—knowledge that not only lessens the injustices of exclusionary literary canons going forward but also educates the greater American public in ways that bring communities together across seemingly intractable divides and around the power of literature.

Through this project, by the end of this course, you will not only have improved upon transferrable writing skills (such as the critically important ability to think rhetorically), which you can (and will) make great use of throughout your college career and life, but you will also have had firsthand experience in *writing to effect change*.

*Evaluation:*

You will keep all of your creative work in a portfolio throughout the semester. I will check off on each assignment, to track participation, and I will give feedback to aid in your progression but you will not receive any letter grades for this. At the end of the semester, you will receive a letter grade based on your final portfolio and your committed participation throughout the

semester.

You will have the freedom to choose which of your finished pieces you would like to include in your final portfolio. I will evaluate you on the completeness and quality of its contents. You will have had every opportunity to revise the content through your own experiences throughout the semester with revision (one of the important writing processes that make up part of the stated student learning outcomes); through feedback from your classmates, as you will often work collaboratively and make suggestions and comments on each other's work; and through your one-on-one conferencing with me.

On the importance of revision, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver wrote in her book *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry*:

*What you are first able to write on the page, whether the writing comes easily or with difficulty, is not likely to be close to a finished poem. If it has arrived without much effort, so much the better; if it was written with great toil, that does not matter either. What matters is that you consider what you have on the page as an unfinished piece of work that now requires your best conscious and patient appraisal. (109)*

Similarly, what matters to me most in this class, when it comes to your submitted work, is not what you were “first able to write on the page,” but what you have given “your best conscious and patient appraisal.”

### *Is this Course for You?*

This is a special, topic-based writing course, created, in part, with the idea in mind that students learn best when working on topics they are passionate about. So, though this course is

open to any student wanting to improve their reading, writing, and research skills, it might be most appealing to those with a passionate interest in any (or all) of the following: literary writing; community engagement; social justice; history; and the challenges at the intersections of race, religion and culture. Passionate students and teachers can make for the best learning environment.

*Our Required Readings:*

The activities and assignments for every single one of the required readings for this course are designed to improve your critical reading, writing, and thinking skills. Here is a brief note on each required reading so you can understand its place in the coursework:

- 1.) *The main text we will return to again and again to apply all learning throughout the semester, building on new knowledge with every revisit:*

Said, Nicholas. *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said, A Native of Bornou, Eastern Soudan, Central Africa*. Memphis: Shotwell & Co., 1873. Print.

- 2.) *Background on literary canons:*

Bates, Jordan. "Literary Canons Exclude Works No Matter How Selective Canon Makers Are." *The Daily Nebraskan*. N.p., 25 Apr. 2013. Web. 2 Sept. 2017.

- 3.) *Background on service learning:*

"Connecting Community Service to the Classroom." *Harvard Alumni*. Harvard University, 16 Oct. 2014. Web. 03 Dec. 2017.

Manolis, Argie. "Writing the Community: Service Learning in Creative Writing." *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project*. Ed. Anna Leahy. Multilingual Matters, 2005. 141–151. Print.

Straus, Emily E., and Dawn M. Eckenrode. "Engaging Past and Present: Service-Learning in the College History Classroom." *History Teacher* 47.2 (2014): 253–66. Print.

Zwerling, Philip. "Right along the Border: Mexican-American Students Write Themselves into The(ir) World." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, 01 Jan. 2009, pp. 47-54. EBSCOhost, [antioch.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ969281&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://antioch.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ969281&site=ehost-live&scope=site).

4.) *Insight on how to take an active role in your own learning, with Bain addressing education in general, and Bean covering writing specifically:*

Bain, Ken. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004. Print.

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. Second ed. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011. Print.

## SAMPLE LESSON PLAN

Title of lesson:

*You Talkin' to Me?: The Power in Thinking Rhetorically*

Objective of lesson:

To understand the basics of rhetoric and how rhetorical strategies make writing more effective

Activities of lesson:

This two-part lesson must come in the first week of the course because it is designed as a foundational building block for ensuing lessons and assignments on rhetorical strategies as the semester progresses. This lesson is intended to introduce students to how to effectively use the most powerful transferrable writing skill they will ever learn: “the ability to think rhetorically—to size up a writing situation in terms of audience, purpose, and genre—and then to make appropriate composing decisions based on this analysis” (Bean 51).

*Part One:*

The first part of this lesson takes place using a flipped classroom instructional strategy. Students start with viewing and reading the following, in the exact order listed, before the next class: Purdue Online Writing Lab’s “Understanding Writing: The Rhetorical Situation” PowerPoint (13 slides); Purdue Online Writing Lab’s “Introduction to Rhetoric” vidcast (3:26 minutes); the “In Defense of Rhetoric: No Longer Just for Liars” video produced by Clemson University graduate students in the MA in Professional Communication Program (14 minutes); and chapter three, “Helping Writers Think Rhetorically,” in *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s*

*Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* by John C. Bean (12 pages). The viewing and reading items are ordered as such to have a scaffolding effect, where with each new item students are building on knowledge from the material that came before.

In the next step of the first part of this lesson, students must analyze and compare these four different approaches to teaching about thinking rhetorically, taking note of the different genres used to convey the message and concluding with which strategy was most effective, which was least effective, how, and why. Student must post their responses to the online class discussion board. The responses should be no longer than four paragraphs. This step is designed to help students think critically about the material they have viewed and read. The purpose of the Bean reading is to help students have an active role in their own learning, by engaging them in “high-order intellectual activity” about their learning—in this case it is understanding and thinking critically about what the educators are thinking and discussing about hows, whys, and whats of teaching them about the importance of thinking rhetorically.

As a last step in part one, students must post an excerpt from a piece of writing of their choice. It can be from any genre (e.g. letter, magazine article, hip hop lyrics, a scholarly article, op-ed piece, legal brief). The only rule is that student must have chosen it because they believe it uses effective rhetorical strategies to communicate its message. The student must only post the excerpt, not explain why they posted it. Students must then engage in discussion with their classmates about each other’s posted excerpts, to try to determine what about the excerpts’ rhetorical effectiveness might have captured their classmates’ attention. They can respond to as many of their classmates’ posts as they’d like but no less than three. This is meant to be a fun active learning opportunity that will allow students to practice their critical thinking and reading skills.

The flipped classroom instructional strategy for part one of this lesson allows for more time for in-person class discussion and deep learning in part two of the lesson because students have already begun a lot of the critical thinking work and will have more informed questions.

*Part Two:*

The second part of this lesson takes place in the first class meeting after the flipped classroom activities. Students start with silently reading the four-page preface of the *Autobiography of Nicholas Said* for the first time. Next, student volunteers must read the pages aloud, one student volunteer for each page, to get a good feel for the sound of the text. Students must then break into groups of even numbers and for 20 minutes work on the following questions about the rhetorical strategies used in Said's preface. The questions are adapted from chapter three, page 40, in *Engaging Ideas* to fit Nicholas Said's situation:

- Who were Said's intended readers?
- How much do you think those readers already knew and cared about the topic Said is discussing? What was their stance toward his topic?
- What was Said's purpose for writing? What kind of change did he want to bring about in his readers' understanding of his topic? What do you think Said wanted his readers to know, believe, or do once they finished reading his preface?
- Taking into consideration how Said ended his preface, in what genre would you categorize it? Do you think it was the most appropriate choice for Said's context? What are the features and constraints of this genre? What style, level of language, and document design does this genre usually require?

One student from each group must serve as the recorder of the answers but must still fully participate in the group discussion. At the end of the 20 minutes, the recorder from each group

must share the results of their group's work with the entire class and a class discussion of the findings will begin. This will take another 20 minutes of class time. Here again, the idea is to have an active learning opportunity that will allow students to practice their critical thinking and reading skills. From all the steps of part one, to the conclusion of part two, each learning step builds on the one before it, gradually increasing the students' knowledge until they are able to now begin to really dig into the rhetorical strategies in the major text of the course: *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said*.

#### Assessment:

To assess if learning has taken place, students must spend the last 20 minutes of the class engaging in a discussion that can touch on any aspect of the two-part lesson but will begin with two open-ended discussion provocation questions: "What major conclusions did you draw?" "What questions remain in your mind?" (Bain 103). Instead of giving quick answers, the professor will keep the discussion moving by responding to the students' questions with more questions, such as, "If this is true, then why (how, what, where, etc.)...?" "What do you mean by that?" (Bain, 103). Through the vigorous open discussion that follows students will have the opportunity to use their critical thinking skills to arrive at answers. This assessment will allow an opportunity for students and the professor to reflect on where more understanding is needed before moving on to the next lesson. The professor will also have already given the students substantive feedback to their online posts and allowed any direct questions to be posted to the professor and answered in that forum.



Assignment:

This exercise is for students to get a little bit more practice working on the lesson objective. They must complete it before the next class meeting.

*Instructions:*

Consider Bean's argument, in *Engaging Ideas*, that one way to understand purpose, when thinking rhetorically, "is to articulate the kind of change the writer hopes to bring about in the readers' view of his or her topic" (40). With this in my mind, students must brainstorm ten topics of their choice, and that are well known to them, and then complete the before/after exercise detailed on pages 41-42 of *Engaging Ideas*. While only for practice, students must show evidence of their work by posting in their respective folders online. This assignment can be completed at any time before the next class meeting.

Example from page 41:

Before reading my paper, my readers will think this way about my topic: \_\_\_\_\_.

But after reading my paper, my readers will think this different way about my topic \_\_\_\_\_.

Example from page 41:

"Before reading my paper, my readers will think that Hamlet lives in a traditional Christian universe inherited from the Middle Ages. But after reading my paper, my readers will see that Hamlet lives in an absurdist world similar to Sartre's existentialism" (Bean 41).

Lesson Materials:

- Preface from *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said* (handout)
- *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* by John C. Bean, pages 39-51

- Purdue Online Writing Lab's "Understanding Writing: The Rhetorical Situation" PPT
- Purdue Online Writing Lab's "Introduction to Rhetoric" vidcast
- "In Defense of Rhetoric: No Longer Just for Liars" video created by graduate students in the MA in Professional Communication program at Clemson University.
- Instructions for the work to be completed online posted on the course discussion board.

Class Handout for Lesson One

*The Autobiography of Nicholas Said: A Native of Bornou, Eastern Soudan, Central Africa*

Page v

### PREFACE.

IT is not without a feeling of hesitation and timid apprehension, that I commit these ill-written pages to the great reading public.

As I glance over them, I cannot but be painfully reminded of their intrinsic unworthiness; yet, I offer no apology for their appearance.

My motive in this publication I believe to be good: a desire to show the world the possibilities that may be accomplished by the African, and the hope that my humble example may stimulate *some at least* of my people to systematic efforts in the direction of mental culture and improvement.

In common with the rest of mankind, I plead guilty to a spice of egotism in my

Page vi

composition, and I should falsify myself were I to deny a sense of pride in my acquirements, the more especially as I feel that they are entirely due to my own efforts, under the guidance of that Providence which has shaped my fortune.

But I can truly say, that my motive in this publication has been not so much to attract attention to myself as the hope of accomplishing *some* good by its means.

Owing to my uncertainty regarding the exact period of my birth, and the natural carelessness concerning the flight of time incident to youth, I have been unable to define with distinctness the different phases of my early life, and to mark their respective limits of duration. Consequently there is, unavoidably, a certain degree of vagueness connected with the first part of my history. For, be it remembered, I knew nothing whatever of dates until my arrival in Europe.

Page vii

It will be also observed, by the reader, that I have made an indiscriminate use of the present and past tenses in my narrative. This, together with other breaches of the rules of grammar and rhetoric, is attributable to the peculiar circumstances under which I have written. The length of time that has elapsed since the occurrence of many of the incidents related, combined with their want of freshness in my memory, together with the difficulties I have experienced in distinguishing English idioms and modes of expression from those of the other languages with which I am acquainted, and some of which are more familiar to me than the English itself. Pure English can hardly be expected from one who has to choose his words and phrases from

a *mass* of *Kanouri*, (my vernacular), *Mandra*, *Arabic*, *Turkish*, *Russian*, *German*, *Italian* and *French*, and all of them encumbered with the provincialisms necessarily

Page viii

concomitant upon each. In the spelling of proper names, too, I sometimes infringe the rule. This is owing to the fact that, for obvious reasons, particularly in regard to Africa, I had no opportunity of learning the current mode of spelling the names of persons and places; and I have been compelled, in some instances, to adopt the phonetic plan, and used such English letters as nearly corresponded to the sounds of the name as I remember them. I have, as far as possible, refrained from the use of foreign words and phrases, and whenever they do occur, or when the idiom or mode of expression is un-English, it must be attributed to my inability to convey the idea I desired in that language.

Bespeaking leniency in criticism, and a kind reception of my little book,

I am, dear reader, faithfully,

NICHOLAS SAID.

### *Conclusion*

What I have shared in these examples, of the imaginative course design and lesson plan, is not meant, in any way, to be exhaustive. This is just a beginning. There is so much more to build on than can be done in what is required to be a relatively short praxis paper. I wanted to include much more, however, what is presented here can easily be extrapolated into an entire course, meeting additional objectives and innovative course design.

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