Draw Your Own Confusions: Cultivating Ambient Awareness in the Literature Classroom

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At the end of every semester, in addition to my university-mandated evaluations, I provide a detailed, personal set of questions, asking students what they learned, what they liked, and what they recommend to me. Several years ago, one student memorably wrote that she appreciated the class's approach because it allowed her to "draw my own confusions": about the works of literature we studied, about our topics, and about herself. I chuckled—of course, she meant "draw my own conclusions." Her accidental, likely autocorrect-generated malapropism, however, provides a way to demonstrate my hopes for my classes and where I imagine we are heading in the next decade of teaching language arts. With some guidance, students may draw their own confusions, in the best sense, after all.

Perhaps no change over the last decade has been more astounding than the rise and subsequent ubiquity of social media among students. For better and worse, students communicate constantly. But, when considering what's next for teaching, I am less interested in how social media affects students' online relationships than their potential to change students' face-to-face interactions with each other in the classroom. As critics have noted, since Twitter appeared in 2006, individual, discrete posts may not reveal much, with the clichéd complaint that people share unimportant minutia such as what they ate for breakfast. But, over time and taken together, as Clive Thompson describes in *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better*, posts accrue into "a type of ESP": friends no longer "need to ask, 'So, what have you been up to?' because they already knew. Instead, they'd begin discussing something one of the friends posted that afternoon, as if picking up a conversation in the middle" (Thompson 210), a phenomenon social scientists have termed *ambient awareness*.

Ambient awareness can create a new framework for strategies in and out of the classroom, especially since so many classes feature online discussion boards already. What, then, can instructors do to blend face to face time and online components effectively? I want to demonstrate how online discussions, set up with appropriate questions, and followed up with thoughtful instructor comments, can cultivate ambient awareness in ways that develop students' in-class work, using examples from two different literature classes.

In addition, I am particularly interested in reconsidering the ways in which students respond to their own confusion. For me, rather than an obstacle to understanding, confusion can be a class's pathway in; rather than seeing literary ambiguity as a problem to solve, readers may see it as a means to create their own analyses. And using ambient awareness can provide the initial support they need. As the instructor, I know what students are concerned about before we begin our on-ground discussions. We can skip the preliminaries of finding out what students want to understand, and, like online acquaintances, begin with the second (or

third) question. From, not despite, confusion, we can we build understanding, and autonomy.

Example 1: Toni Morrison's short story, "Recitatif"

After establishing the goals and norms of the class on the first day of my African American Literature class, students and I read Toni Morrison's story "Recitatif," and they post their responses to my questions before we meet for our second class. The story traces the relationship of two girls who met during childhood and then interact with each other intermittently over the subsequent decades. The story features temporal elisions and, perhaps more dauntingly, also demands significant realizations: both for its characters, and for its readers, in ways that require students to pose, and then consider, questions that the story implies. Here, then, is my pre-class, online question:

> Is this story confusing? How? Give examples, and quote at least one sentence or passage from the story to exemplify or support your claim. Why would Morrison seemingly try to confuse the reader?

Before class, as part of my lesson planning, I read and take notes on the students' online responses. To me, their posts—that is, the reasons that they found the story confusing—fell into these six categories:
- Time passes quickly: four students
- Memory/recollection/inconsistency: four students
- Choppy style/organization/changing of subject: four students
- The title: two students
- The ending: one student

And, for me, the most significant point of confusion, since the story is ingeniously elusive on this point:

- The girls' specific races are not explicitly revealed: eight students

Before class even begins, then, I already know which aspects of the story specific students find confusing, and why; which passages in the story students have used for examples; how students feel about what they read; and, for this particular story, crucially, whether students even noticed the way in which Morrison has deliberately omitted the race of her main characters, revealing only that the narrator, Twyla, refers to Roberta as "a girl from a whole other race" (361). Students who missed this ambiguity, who were ostensibly *not* confused, were, paradoxically, more confused than the students who in fact professed confusion.

Armed with these insights before class, we can then consider the following questions during class, rather than beginning with the fundamental one I'd posted:
- Why would a writer deliberately withhold important narrative and character information from readers?
- How is the indeterminacy and ambiguity of the characters' race *a part* of the story, yet somehow also *apart* from the story?
- How might the student's own particular confusion, interpretation, perspective, or background affect their understanding of this story?
- How is identity—of the writer, reader, and characters—potentially important or irrelevant to understanding this story, any story, or as in introduction to ways of reading African American literature?

After class, students then reply to each other, and I post a reply to the class overall. Here is an excerpt of my online response:

> I like M--'s phrase "purposeful confusion" and J--'s possibility that it enhanced the story, as well as A--'s, B--'s, L--'s, R--'s, and E--'s possibilities: to show how race is not important; to force the reader to confront his/her stereotypes; to show how the girls'

stereotype *each other*; (ironically?) to show the girls' common ground, not their differences; and to make the reader feel what the character feels, respectively. Yet I wonder if the effect is also to show how race also matters, since the characters' indeterminacy creates, in effect, two different possible stories in one. Perhaps that's part of what Maggie [one of the characters] comes to mean in the end. In class, M-- brought up that Maggie's legs were shaped like "parentheses," and she is, in a sense a parenthetical part of the story. But so is each vignette—parenthetical asides in the lives of the characters and in history itself. And Maggie's own indeterminacy—her race, what happened to her then and now—seems emblematic of the very problems that the main characters grapple with.

By pinpointing the specific sources of their confusion, my students were, in fact, demonstrating their communal *understanding* of the story. These responses lay out a foundation on which our discussion can build. But, as the next example will develop, over time, and in conjunction with student replies as well as my instructor synthesis, the class may begin to approach true ambient awareness—the connections they make, using technology outside of face to face time, become "particularly useful for solving problems" and create the possibility of "spectacular feats of *collective* answering" (Thompson 229-230, my italics). No one student needs to address every possibility. Instead, together, the class jointly raises many possibilities. Setting up online discussions to function like social media, where the single, individual post is less important than the aggregate, has the potential to affect what we do inside and outside of the classroom, before, during, and after face-to-face interaction, allowing both the instructor and other students to know

what everyone else in class is thinking, and finally, leading to different, better conversations and analyses throughout the course.

Example 2: Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

In my Latin American Magical Realism class, students begin with Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a sprawling, multi-generational, frequently non-linear novel that likely looks very different from anything they have likely encountered. Like my question about Toni Morrison's "Recitatif," the question here addresses potential obstacles for the reader rather than asking them to demonstrate immediate understanding. Here is the prompt I give them—the second, this time, after one earlier prompt about our opening stories by Jorge Luis Borges—for their online discussion. They must respond before the next class, again so I, and they, can get a sense of their position in relation to the reading:

Right away, it should be clear that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* raises possible questions, challenges, or problems for the average reader. What, for you, are the most important ones to discuss at the start of the novel and semester? Be sure to include at least one specific quotation from the reading as part of your response.

Again, before class, I read and take notes on students' challenges, cataloging them beforehand for class in this way:

- Setting: three students wanted to understand when and where is this story taking place.
- Plot, structure, and organization: four students wanted to know, what, exactly is the story? Which parts are digressions? Who are all these people? Why don't we know some things but know so much about other things?

- Subject matter and tone: three students questioned the focus on incest, murder, rape, and child sex slavery—and we're only in the second chapter. But it's not just the subjects as much as the possible treatment of those subjects, the tone of the writing when addressing them.
- Style and language: five students observed the long sentences, long paragraphs, occasional possibilities of translation issues, sentences that jump in topic and time.
- Names: two students were concerned about the family tree that the translation includes before the novel proper even begins—so many characters have almost the same names, and we're not even up to the part where Col. Aureliano Buendia has seventeen more sons all named Aureliano.
- Fantasy vs. reality: five students questioned the ghosts, mass insomnia followed by mass amnesia, flying carpets, and more.
- Genre: one student wanted to understand, What kind of novel is this? What are supposed to be our genre expectations of this novel?

Students appreciate that they, not I, mutually generated this list; I just compiled it. During the class, then, students work in groups to develop each of these categories and share their examples and clarifications with the rest of the class. Then, we can pivot from student confusion, which again they may think of an obstacle to discussion, to these follow-up questions:

- How do some of these questions or challenges apply to the opening line and other specific passages?
- The setting—"Macando"—seems unusual in the way students described, yet it can be compared and contrasted with other, more familiar real and fictional worlds.
- Based on the examples students already provided, how can we blend but also divide the magical from the real? What are

students prepared to believe and why? What is a fair mindset when reading the next section of the novel?

After class, as they're instructed, students reply to each other online, and I post a reply to the class overall. Here is an excerpt from my reply, after I summarized and categorized their responses as described above:

These are all good, well-observed points. But they are not obstacles to understanding the story. They *are* your understanding of the story. There is no plot. "Plot" is a mathematical metaphor. There is no "plotline," no "storyline," no keeping events "straight." T-- brought up the image of the labyrinth; like the firing squad, García Márquez alludes to Borges's image of the labyrinth as well. Labyrinths are not straight lines. M-- brought up the name chart in class. It is not only a list of names. It is also the closest thing to a narrative (note, not plot) chart we're going to get. Use it not just to keep track of names and relationships, but to keep track of the story itself. No more plotlines. We've entered the world of the (figurative!) four dimensional narrative—not just plot points, but depth, plus time. The novel's obstacles are also its achievements: they force us to rethink what we know about stories, but also about fantasy, reality, and time itself. But it's also a book, and so we are, in a sense, moving forward, toward an ending, each time you turn the page. The labyrinth has a clear exit, even though there are many points of entry and winding paths.

Students' own replies to each other are crucial to demonstrating engagement and creating a sense of ambient awareness. (After years of trial and error, I've found that the best way to ensure their replies is simple: attach a point value on it.) Early in the semester, their replies tend to be

straightforward and supportive, not unlike many social media replies as well, but even then they demonstrate that they've read each other's work and create an atmosphere conducive to the in-class discussions that follow. As one student replied to another about the above question:

> I agree with that the story is made confusing with the repetition of character names and the how the timeline of the story is constantly moving from the past to the present. I think the repetition in names is supposed to represent the repetition of names in different cultures. I like how you say that this also may represent the idea of how history repeats itself. Overall great job!

Just a few weeks later, however, this same student posted the following reply to the final response for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, this time asking students to reconsider the book's title retroactively based on all we had discussed and finally began to understand:

> [Student's name],
> I totally agree that the parchments are a metaphor for the book itself. The book describes the parchments as written "down to the most trivial of details," almost like the author is hinting at his own writing style. Aureliano even reacts the same as most of us describe in class. How the parchments were so detailed, that he had to skip pages to get through them all.
>
> I felt the ending was perfect for a story like this. While the parchments represent the book we just read, as they are deciphered and Macondo disappears, the story lives on with the readers. Doing exactly what he's done from the beginning, Marquez immerses the reader into a story that blurs the lines between what is magical and real.

While this student still agrees with her peer, this time "totally," she is now modeling her reply on previous, more detailed ones that she's by now read. This reply is longer, uses a quotation from the novel, and develops the initial student's main idea rather than restating it, making it her own. And her reply comes after our class discussion, closing the loop that the initial round of student posts opened—until the next one, when we began our next novel for the class by building upon the foundations of exchange and using their confusions not as obstacles, but as paths.

As we consider what comes next in teaching, in many ways, we will continue to do what we've always done—helping students to read, think, and communicate effectively—but now, with additional tools and opportunities. Here, then, are ways of cultivating students' ambient awareness:

- Assign questions and prompts for material not yet covered in class to push students into critical thinking and applying.
- Have students share and respond to ideas before or outside of class.
- Read student responses before class and shape activities and questions accordingly.
- In class, call on specific students for specific purposes, based on what you already know they've written.
- In class, contrast student ideas, using students' names, to elicit responses and debate.
- Update questions and comments after and between classes, returning to previous ideas throughout the semester.

In doing all of this, students may come to see their ostensible obstacles as not just justified but necessary, and maybe even better than certainty, since it can lead to observations, discussions, and connections. And perhaps, through the ambient awareness cultivated by their online discussions, they

will also think about their and their peers' ideas outside of class in a way that encourages them to see their confusion as a path, rather than an obstacle, to understanding. They may not just draw their own confusions, but, as my student surely intended, draw their own conclusions as well.

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