ASSIGNMENTS IN THE HUMANITIES:
WRITING INTENSIVE COURSE DESIGN

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In May Sarton's *The Small Room*, Lucy Winter faces her first teaching appointment at a small, New England women's college. After grading a batch of freshmen essays, Lucy concludes "she had, apparently, led twenty-five intelligent girls to their first contact with a masterpiece—and simply nothing whatever had taken place to trouble the bland surface of their minds. They managed at best to sound as patronizing toward *The Iliad* as if they had been asked to review a C-grade movie!" When she returns the essays, Lucy reads several to the class, reads them from *The Iliad* for twenty minutes, then:

"This was the material before you, and this is how you honored it," she said, looking at the class with real hostility. "Here is one of the great mysterious works of man, as great and mysterious as a cathedral. And what did you do? You gave it so little of your real selves that you actually achieved boredom. You stood in Chartres cathedral *unmoved*. For the ancients this book was very much what a cathedral became for the people of the Middle Ages, a storehouse of myth, legend, and belief, the great structure where faith was nourished and the values of a civilization depicted . . . and you didn't bother to look at it!"

She picked up another of the dull C papers and read it through. "This is not a matter of grades. You'll slide through all right. It is not bad, it is just flat. It's the sheer poverty of your approach that is horrifying!"
We have all had Lucy Winter Days, exclamation points and all. The special challenge of integrating writing into a humanities classroom is to use sound composition practices as a means for helping students read and write about what they are assigned in a way Lucy Winter yearns for. The special challenge is to develop a unified approach to reading and writing. Unless the two are integrated, the writing assignments made in a humanities course will seem to be “tacked on” to the course, will seem to serve a purpose distinct from that served by reading the assigned works. The most efficient method for truly integrating reading and writing is one which allows students to see parallel purposes in the discourse they read and the writing they do about it. And an appropriate basis for such a unified approach can be found in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.

The first leaf we can take from *The Rhetoric* is Aristotle’s notion of special discourse, because the humanities constitute a special discourse, one with a unique nature and purpose. Perhaps the most obvious feature of the humanities is that they rely upon texts rather than textbooks. It goes almost without saying that the humanities are based upon those works which have shaped Western culture. Moreover, the fundamental texts of the humanities are not valuable to us because they transmit information, but because they awaken our understanding and develop our sense of values. The Polish Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz expresses well this fundamental distinction:

There was a time when only wise books were read  
Helping us to bear our pain and misery  
This, after all, is not quite the same as leafing through  
A thousand works fresh from psychiatric clinics.  
—“Ars Poetica”²

Milosz here reminds us that “wise books” help us understand who we are. Or in Plato’s terms, they help us arrive at self-knowledge. This understanding is qualitatively different from what we obtain when we read clinical reports of the pain and suffering of others. What is unique to the humanities is that they teach us to understand and evaluate so that we might arrive at a clearer self-awareness.

The humanities can be defined, perhaps, as constituting a
special discourse aimed at persuasion about the nature, purpose, and merits of human action. A unified approach to reading and writing in the humanities classroom means, first of all, using writing in a way that helps students read effectively. In addition, it means giving students the kinds of writing assignments which ask them to write the same kind of discourse they read, i.e., discourse aimed at something more than merely transmitting information. This approach asks students not only to understand “wise books,” but to evaluate them as well. By the ability to evaluate, I mean developing in students the ability to see themselves as affected by what they have come to understand and to see that an assessment of “wise books” requires a continuous effort at self-definition or self-knowledge. It is not going too far to say that unless students can demonstrate this ability in their own writing, they cannot be said to have arrived at a true understanding of the unique nature and purpose of what we have asked them to read. I say this because we recognize “wise books” by their ability to present a compelling imperative, one which calls upon us to assent to or reject the vision they offer. They call upon us to understand, respond, and evaluate.

Challenging students to engage in understanding and evaluating a work is challenging them to engage in self-definition and self-knowledge. This is no small task for any of us, and some touchstones and signposts are called for. In meeting this need, I think we can take another leaf from The Rhetoric because Aristotle inextricably links his concern for effect communication with a concern for assessing human values. He rightly assumes that persuasion is predicated on human needs, and he reminds us that we evaluate the worthiness of ideas or actions by judging whether they will promote our pleasure or our happiness. In the humanities classroom, we are concerned first with helping students understand a “wise book,” a work, that is, which has proved consistently persuasive over time. If we agree with Lucy Winter’s complaint to her students that they gave too little of their “real selves” to their reading, then one way to use writing as a mode for learning in the humanities classroom is to ask students to attend to “wise books” in a way that alerts them to what they offer that is pleasurable.

Aristotle defines several kinds of pleasure. Some of them do not apply to what we can obtain from reading in any im-
mediate sense, *e.g.*, the pleasure we derive from honor, reputation, or friendship. But others do apply. Among these are first, the sensory pleasures, which come not only from direct sensory stimulation—including that offered by the sound of a given word or the rhythm of a well-constructed sentence—but from the recollection of past sensory pleasure or the anticipation of it. Thus our imaginative powers are closely tied to sensory pleasure. We also experience intellectual pleasure, delighting in learning what we did not know, including new ideas, new insights into human motivations, or a new awareness of why things work out as they do. Closely related to learning in general is the pleasure we take in noting resemblances, especially in noticing how others or their experiences are like us and our experiences. This pleasure derives not only from natural resemblances, but also from artistic imitation. We delight as well in what is habitual, expected, or repetitive, and in variations from such patterns, in surprises or the unexpected. One such pleasure is the delight we take in the ludicrous. And finally, we take pleasure in observing activity, especially conflicts, contests, or debates and their resolution (1.11.). Contemplating pleasure as one element of persuasion provides us one way to understand what we read, especially if we remember Aristotle’s observation that the pleasures are natural to us, that when we experience pleasure it is “a perceptible settling of (the soul), all at once, into its rightful nature” (1.11.). If we derive pleasure or satisfaction from a “wise book,” it means we have learned what is our natural state of being. Said another way, we have learned who we are. Similarly, if we are repelled by what we read, we have discovered what we are not going to assent to as being characteristically or desirably human.

It is possible to use Aristotle’s treatment of pleasure to generate questions about assigned works, questions which can be used as the basis for regular journal assignments.4

In this passage, to what pleasures does the writer appeal?

—The pleasure we take in observing action?
  What is the scene?
  What is the action?
  Who is the agent?
  By what means does the agent act?
What is the purpose of the action? What is the reaction? Did the action or reaction surprise you? Or did you anticipate one or both? Did the action and reaction remind you of anything you have done? Or of a similar kind of action?

-To sensory pleasure?
Does the writer draw upon those techniques of balance, parallelism, alliteration, assonance, etc., which lead us to delight in the rhythm of language?
Does the writer ask you to recall or envision a past event? To anticipate or imagine a future event? To visualize an image?
Does the writer seek to remind you of a sound, a smell, a taste, or a feeling?
Does the writer try to make you laugh? Or to evoke a more serious response?

-To intellectual pleasure?
Does the writer give you reasons for either accepting or rejecting a prior idea? Does he or she present you with a new idea?
Does the writer explain the motives behind a human action?
Does the writer deal with causality, explaining why things happen as they do?
Did the passage remind you of things you have thought about before?
Were you surprised by the explanations or observations? Or did you anticipate them?
Does the writer present an intellectual debate or conflict between ideas? Does he or she resolve the debate or argument?
Were you surprised by the conflict or the terms of its resolution? Or did you anticipate them? Had you thought about them previously?
From reading this passage, can you decide which kind of pleasure or pleasures are most interesting or important to the author? Are you inclined to agree? Did he or she succeed in persuading you to regard these pleasures as the author does?
Obviously this list is not comprehensive. But it does draw students’ attention to the text in a way that alerts them to its nature and purpose, and to its effect upon them. The questions are intended to stimulate other less predictable questions, while at the same time indicating what kinds of questions we can appropriately ask of a text which partly aims at persuading us to a certain understanding of ourselves.

These questions alone, however, do not move students toward a complete evaluation of the text. They emphasize our alertness to appeals to pleasure and the reader’s response to them. But in addition to defining ourselves in terms of what we find pleasurable, we are also concerned with what will contribute to our happiness. When we focus on pleasure, we focus on ourselves as individuals. Aristotle makes this clear in The Rhetoric, but we do not need a book—even one so wise as his—to know it. We define those things as pleasures which give us immediate gratification or delight. But happiness—at least as defined by Aristotle—carries a social connotation. His definition of happiness in the Rhetoric is a short-hand definition especially when compared with the Ethics. But the definition clearly aims at stating a social good. He says we define happiness as the possession of both personal and external goods, or as “prosperity conjoined with virtue.” He goes on to say that it is also defined as self-sufficiency within a given community or “as the pleasantest life, with secure enjoyment thereof; or as a thriving condition or property and persons, with the ability to take care and make use of them” (1.5).

It might seem here that there is not much difference between pleasure and happiness, but Aristotle’s treatment of the virtues makes the difference clear. He provides a catalogue of the virtues, and in general he means by them actions which benefit others, especially when such actions are habitual (1.9). Happiness, unlike the pleasures, thus involves an awareness not only of our own immediate desires, but of ourselves as contributing members of a society which sustains us over time.

If, then, our aim is to attend to “wise books” because they challenge us to self-knowledge, an evaluation of such works will call upon our attention not only to the appeals made to our sense of pleasure, but also to our interest in achieving happiness as
well. Again, it is possible to use Aristotle's treatment of happiness as a basic human motive to generate questions appropriate for journal entries:

How convinced are you by this writer's sense of what contributes to our happiness?

—Are you convinced by this writer's description of or conclusions about the desirable relationship between the individual and society? The individual and personal responsibility? Does this passage illuminate what factors inhibit or prevent the desirable relationship between the individual and society? Or social stability?

—Does this writer give a compelling treatment of the constituent elements of human happiness?

—Does the passage suggest happiness can be found in material goods? In recognition or fame? In human relations based on romantic love, friendship, the family, or the community? Or upon some other relationship, such as that between the individual and nature? Or the supernatural?

—Does this passage suggest happiness resides in self-sufficiency? In mutual dependence? In self-sacrifice?

—Does this passage suggest happiness resides in virtuous actions, and is virtue defined?

Review your response to the above. Is this writer persuasive? Does he or she present a perception of human nature to which you can assent?

Again, this list does not exhaust the questions we might ask about the elements of happiness. As with the questions about pleasure, these are intended to stimulate others while at the same time indicating what kinds of questions are appropriate.

The use of such questions as part of regular journal assignments meets the first aim of integrating writing into the humanities because the questions provide a way of alerting students to the nature and purpose of "wise books" through regular writing
assignments. The second aim—giving students assignments which call for discourse of a similar nature and purpose—can be achieved not only by asking them to develop essays from their journal entries, but by asking them to comment on one another’s essays as well. Such peer evaluation is an additional way of using sound composition practice to help students gain an understanding of what they read. It also makes explicit what is implicit in the journal questions, i.e., the importance of the writer-reader relationship to any consideration or meaning.

Here is an example which I believe illustrates the point. Students were asked to use the journal questions as guides in critiquing one another’s essays. This is one of several comments written by students on one student’s draft, which was subsequently revised in response to the comments:

You present your argument clearly . . . but your observations are too general and I don’t see any real insight into “The Pardoner’s Tale.” You should have asked more questions of the text. Why did the Pardoner lecture on sin so much before he told the tale? What significance did the old man have? Why were young men used in this tale instead of middle-aged or even old men? What role do the Pardoner’s looks play in our perception of him? You could expand greatly on this paper.

The comment indicates that the critic has had to consider carefully not only the essay, but the text upon which it is based. The critic indicates here that he has come to understand reading as active and engaging, as requiring the reader to ask questions. And the questions he recommends indicate he has developed an ability to see that various features of the text are intended to make specific appeals to our imagination, our senses, and to our rational faculties.

In addition, the critic shows an awareness of the intimate relationship between nature and purpose in discourse. He acknowledges that the student presents his argument clearly, but for the critic this is insufficient because what is said is insubstantial. The critic makes little distinction between “good writing,” “good thinking,” and “good reading.” In advising the writer on how to improve the quality of the essay, he comments not on
the writer but on the need to read more responsively.

Most important, the critic writes here in a way which is similar in its purpose to the works he has been reading. He is engaged in teaching others to ask questions about what they encounter. This clearly is a primary aim of the humanities, and in writing such comments the critic is honing not only his critical faculties, but those of the writer as well. The critic has thus used writing to enhance his own understanding of the assigned reading and to practice in a kind of apprentice role its special purpose. In addition, he has demonstrated an ability to assess not only "wise books" but other kinds of discourse as well.

As for the writer, he has been alerted to the need any writer faces, the need to consider audience. The journal questions focus student attention on how an author has estimated his or her audience and on the elements which make for effective or persuasive discourse. The critic's comments help remind the student writer to attend to these matters when he writes as well.

The critic's comments on the essay seek to move the writer toward a clearer understanding of the text. The following excerpt from a final exam indicates the results of asking students not only to understand but also to evaluate what they read. The exam question asked students to explain whether Aristotle's *Poetics* helped them appreciate *Oedipus Rex*:

For us to truly feel pity and fear, we must be able to believe that what happens to the character could happen to us. . . . Although Oedipus has his differences from me, they actually help, for they allow me to focus completely on the aspects we have in common, which are the only important ones. We are both well-meaning and human. . . . being human means being capable of ignorance. Therefore what happened to Oedipus was, as Aristotle says, "A result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty." I therefore can feel pity for [Oedipus'] being completely ignorant of the horrors of incest and patricide while committing them, because I, too, am capable of such ignorance.

The writer indicates she understands what she has read.
because she begins with careful attention to Aristotle's terms pitiful and fear. But she moves beyond demonstrating an understanding of the Poetics to an evaluation of Oedipus Rex. She places herself in relation to the work, and indicates clearly what she can assent to as true of her own nature. In so doing, she herself writes that kind of discourse which typifies the humanities, because in characterizing her own nature she presents the reader a persuasive characterization of human nature in general, and implicitly challenges the reader to assent to it.

Perhaps now we might summarize some general principles for integrating writing into the humanities. Writing can be used to direct students' attention to the "wise books" they read. This means using writing to help students learn to read for both an understanding and an evaluation of the work. Sound composition practices—such as the use of the journal, peer evaluation, and drafting and revision—can readily be adapted to this special purpose.

Integrating writing into the humanities also allows for using "wise books" as a basis for developing the student's ability to engage in the special discourse such books represent. Just as students learn to apprehend "wise books" as discourse which persuades about the nature, purpose, and merits of human actions, so students can come to write in a way which states persuasively their own assessment of the nature, purpose, and merits of what they read.

Several benefits derive from using these principles to integrate writing with the humanities. For one thing, such an approach allows for a unified, rhetorical approach to reading and writing. A unified approach overcomes the tendency of both professor and students to see writing as an additional requirement, one "tacked on" to the course. It also addresses the students' tendency to write about "wise books" in the way Lucy Winters complains of, as if these works did not impinge on their lives and consciousness. And finally, it helps overcome the insensitivity to language which leads students to "milk" the "wise books" they read for the ideas alone. Students come instead to see the relationship between nature and purpose both in what they read and in what they write.
A unified approach to reading and writing has the additional benefit of providing a meaningful purpose to the accepted methods or techniques of teaching composition. Process-based writing, peer evaluation, and collaborative learning are worthy methods. But to be useful in teaching effective writing, they need to be applied to something, to be used not as ends themselves, but as the means to an end. Students—or any thoughtful writers—need to write about something. Integrating sound composition practice with the reading of “wise books” gives students something to sink their teeth into when they write.

There is one final benefit which I hope derives from an integrated approach to reading and writing in the humanities. It is just possible that in learning to read for both understanding and an assessment of human value, students will develop less of a preference for “leafing through a thousand works fresh from psychiatric clinics” than for reading “wise books” which help “us to bear our pain and misery.”

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NOTES


3 Lane Cooper, trans., The Rhetoric of Aristotle (1932; Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960), I. 10. All subsequent references to this translation.

4 These questions have been used to help students study both fictional and non-fictional narrative works such as those assigned in a humani-
ties course.

5The first five questions are the Pentad of Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1952), p. x and infra. His basic questions have been widely adopted by those interested in offering students guidance in invention. I find the Pentad useful as well, although I fear the way I have listed the basic questions here means I may contribute to the general tendency to oversimplify Burke's use of the terms. When he uses "scene," for instance, he does not mean simply "landscape" or some such thing. The following demonstrates pretty well what he has in mind:

Among the most succinct instances of the scene-act ratio in dialectical materialism in Marx's assertion (cited also by Lenin in *The State and Revolution*), that "Justice can never rise superior to the economic conditions of society and the cultural development conditioned by them." That is, in contrast with those who would place justice as a property of personality (an attribute purely of the agent), the dialectical materialist would place it as a property of the material situation ("economic conditions"), the scene in which justice is to be enacted.

(p. 13)

Using the Pentad requires introducing students to some sophisticated notions of scene (among others). Space does not permit a discussion of such techniques.

6Obviously this question can be used only if students have been introduced to tropes and schema.

7Here and elsewhere when I use the term "assent," I am using it in the context suggested by Wayne C. Booth in *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); i.e., in the sense that assent among a community of individuals indicates shared intentions and values. See esp. pp. 122-123 and infra.