Teaching Literature Rhetorically

Transferable Literacy Skills for 21st Century Students

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CHAPTER ONE

Integrating Skills and Knowledge

Writing transfer is inherently complex. It involves approaching new and unfamiliar writing tasks through applying, remixing, or integrating previous knowledge, skills, strategies, and dispositions.

—JESSIE L. MOORE

Our fondest wish as teachers is that our students will use what we’ve taught them. This is what it means to make a difference—that our work continues to have an impact long after our students have left our classrooms. Much of the time, this impact is obscured from our view; we see our students’ future lives through a glass darkly and can only hope their intellectual journeys proceed along the course we helped to set.

But sometimes we get a clear view of where and how our students apply their learning beyond our classes. A few years ago, I received an e-mail from a former student who went on to become a technical writer for the US Department of Defense:

Dr. Fletcher,

You would not believe what I just did at work today. . . . My team is putting out a “thought paper” to persuade different departments and services (Army, Navy) to use this new technology. I was sent an article about converging technologies.

To the point. I was able to critically analyze the structure of the article, the ebb and flow of ethos/pathos and logos, and even some of the grammatical elements enhancing
the rhetoric. . . . My teammate was very impressed, and now I get to take the lead on the paper.

I just wanted to share this with you because this is exactly what I wanted to get out of the class.

Thank you for the tools.

Cody

Of course, Cody’s e-mail made my day. It also helped me think more intentionally about what students get out of my English classes, that is, what learning they carry with them and where it goes. I wondered: What helped Cody use what I’d taught him? Looking back, I’d say it was the following qualities:

- A mind-set toward connection-making
- An ability to hold onto thinking
- Rhetorical knowledge and skills
- A habit of creative problem solving
- A habit of leveraging prior knowledge

Instead of shaking the dust off his heels when he left my class, Cody lived with his learning for an extended period, saving his skills and knowledge for a fresh opportunity to repurpose them.

Adaptive thinkers like Cody are the “makers” of the educational world, reveling in creative redesigns of existing models. Like the steampunk artist who integrates the old with the new in a fantastic reimagining of Victorian culture, the student who can successfully integrate skills and knowledge acquired in different settings is a master of remix. Prior knowledge becomes a storehouse of novel possibilities—the maker’s inventory of spare parts waiting to be recombined. A student who has developed this mind-set for connection-making leaves a class thinking, What am I going to make out of all this interesting stuff in my brain?

**Fostering Integrative Learning**

Cody’s account of how he transferred rhetorical knowledge and skills acquired through an undergraduate humanities course to his new job working for the military beautifully illustrates the idea of **integrative learning**.

In its Integrative and Applied Learning VALUE Rubric, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACSU) defines **integrative learning** as “an understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections

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1. Kelly Gallagher describes the importance of teaching students to “track their thinking” over time in In the Best Interest of Students. (2015, 148)
CHAPTER ONE: INTEGRATING SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus” (2009; see Appendix 2). Integrative learning is at the heart of the twenty-first-century competencies most educators agree are needed to thrive in a changing world. David N. Perkins, for example, repeatedly stresses the importance of boundary-crossing and connection-making in his discussion of broad educational trends that are “expanding the universe of what’s worth learning,” trends he calls “the six beyonds” (2014, 2). Among these trends, Perkins identifies the following movements toward integrative thinking:

- A movement beyond traditional disciplines toward hybrid disciplines (e.g., bioethics)
- A movement beyond discrete disciplines toward interdisciplinary topics and problems (e.g., reducing poverty or increasing access to clean water)
- A movement beyond regional perspectives toward global systems and studies (2014, 3)

In describing an additional “beyond”—beyond content mastery toward applied learning—Perkins notes that educators are now “encouraging learners not just to master content academically but to also notice where content connects to life situations, yields insights, and prompts productive action” (2014, 3).

Integrating Literature and Rhetoric

A rhetorical approach to literature helps students make meaningful connections. Rhetoric is a powerful tool for seeing the big picture, for moving beyond a silo mentality toward a more interconnected understanding of our world. As Aristotle says, “Rhetoric is not bound up with a single definite class of subjects, but is as universal as dialectic [i.e., reasoned discourse]” (1984, Book 1, Chap. i). Rhetoric is a metadiscipline.

Like a universal decoder ring, rhetoric can thus speak the language of all other approaches to literary analysis, including critical theories such as New Criticism and reader response. In _The Mirror and the Lamp_ ([1953] 1971), literary critic M. H. Abrams identifies the following coordinates of art criticism: the universe, the work, the audience, and the artist (see Figure 1.1).

![Coordinates of Art Criticism](image)

**FIGURE 1.1**
Coordinates of art criticism from _The Mirror and the Lamp_ by M. H. Abrams
Abrams uses these coordinates to identify different critical theories, or lenses, with each lens emphasizing different coordinates. For example, mimetic approaches (such as neoclassicism) foreground the relationship between the work and the universe, while objective theories (such as New Criticism) focus on a close reading of the work itself.

However, a rhetorical approach simultaneously engages the dynamics of all four coordinates. Rhetoric is interested in how all meaning-making agents—text, writer, reader, and context—contribute to the effect of a work. (See Figure 1.2.)

Consider Aristotle’s description of a rhetor’s tasks:

But since rhetoric exists to affect the giving of decisions . . . the orator must not only try to make the argument of his [sic] speech demonstrative and worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look right and put his hearers, who are to decide, into the right frame of mind. (1984, Book II, Chap. i)

In this description of effective speech, we find an even emphasis on three of Abram’s coordinates: the work, the audience, and the artist. Elsewhere in Rhetoric, Aristotle gives equal weight to kairos (the immediate social context) or what Abrams might call “the universe.” Rhetoric, in other words, is a sort of superlens. Because skilled rhetors must understand multiple views and fields simultaneously, rhetoric can serve as a foundational practice on which advanced and portable competencies in other content areas, including literary studies, are built.

Combining literature with rhetoric thus amplifies student learning while enhancing its transferability. Think about the added benefits your students could get from integrating literary and rhetorical approaches to textual analysis, for instance (see Figure 1.3):
If students can analyze a novel’s plot, point of view, and theme, as well as its audience, context, and purpose, they’ll have twice the interpretive power. Bringing together these two ways of knowing gives students the best of both worlds.

**Why Integrative Thinking Matters**

If you want to give your students a quick idea of what we mean by integrative thinking, show them a few screen grabs from films like *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) or *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) and ask them what artifacts and ideas have been creatively combined and repurposed (e.g., cars, trucks, transportation, defense).

The two images in Figure 1.4 also offer intriguing examples of integrative thinking. You can share images like these with your students and ask the following questions: What do you notice about these images? What strikes you as interesting or important? What other examples of repurposed objects, buildings, or things can you think of?

**FIGURE 1.3**

Combining literary analysis with rhetorical analysis

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**FIGURE 1.4A**

A repurposed shipping container now serves as a restaurant.

**FIGURE 1.4B**

Old car parts make a fine fish.
While we hopefully don’t need to prepare our students to survive in a postapocalyptic wasteland, we do need to educate them for a changing world. Whenever we invite students to consider multiple perspectives, engage diverse contexts, explore various modes of inquiry, leverage their prior knowledge, practice real-world problem solving, and communicate rhetorically, we are fostering the integrative thinking central to a flourishing global society. As the AAC&U observes, “Students face a rapidly changing and increasingly connected world where integrative learning becomes not just a benefit... but a necessity” (https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/integrative-learning, 2009).

To see why, we need only look at a couple of real-world examples from our own century. First, a case of failure to practice integrative thinking, with tragic consequences: the Flint, Michigan, water crisis. The interconnections between the environment, the human population, and the economy profoundly affect access to clean water. The crisis that began in Flint in 2014 resulted from ignoring these interconnections. Economic interests eclipsed human and environmental concerns when an emergency city manager, looking to save money, switched the water source from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the Flint River without considering the risks to public health. The corrosive river water stripped lead from the one-hundred-year-old pipes, contaminating the tap water and poisoning the population.

When integrative thinking is effectively practiced, however, the result can be inspiring. For example, Dr. Frank Fish, a researcher at West Chester University in Pennsylvania, looked to the natural world to help solve a problem faced by twenty-first-century humans: the challenge of designing efficient wind turbines that can produce cleaner energy. Fish noticed that the leading edge of a humpback whale’s flipper was bumpy, a fact that seemed to run counter to accepted wisdom on aerodynamic design. The edges of windmill blades and airplane wings had always been straight. Straight edges reduce resistance, right? Yet when Fish applied the humpback whale’s leading bumpy edge design to the blade of a wind
turbine, he found it actually increased the turbine’s efficiency by 20 percent. You can find out why by viewing the video “Whales to Windmills” (2011) at www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpLzI27febM. (See Figure 1.5.)

Dr. Fish’s creative combination of marine biology and aerodynamic technology exemplifies the disposition for making “connections among ideas and experiences and . . . synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus” (AAC&U 2009), —a disposition central to integrative thinking. Integrative thinking helps us see the familiar in new ways. This ability is key to finding innovative solutions to problems.

Take the example I share in the introduction: narrative medicine. Medical schools have found that combining study in literature and science leads to more effective patient care. In a blog for the New York Times, Dr. Richard Panush, a department chair at a major teaching hospital, notes that “studies have repeatedly shown that such literary training can strengthen and support the compassionate instincts of doctors” (2008). Integrative learning helps health care professionals think differently about their work, ultimately resulting in improved quality of care.

Throughout this book, I share strategies for supporting specific acts of transfer made possible by a mind-set for connection-making (Figure 1.6):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRANSFER OF LEARNING FROM . . .</th>
<th>English language arts classes to other content areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reading to writing</td>
<td>high school to college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literary texts to informational texts</td>
<td>school to career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rhetorical analysis to literary analysis</td>
<td>literature to life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>home to school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1.6**

Acts of transfer 2

To use David Perkins’s words, these are “lifeworthy” acts of transfer that are “likely to matter in the lives learners are likely to live” (2014, 8).

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2. Nearly all of these also work in reverse.
Where Do We Start?

All this might sound pretty aspirational. So where do we start? I think we start by fostering a disposition toward connection-making. This is the “spirit of transfer” Haskell writes about that helps students apply their learning to new tasks and contexts (2001). Valuing prior knowledge and seeking creative ways to redeploy it can be a big shift in thinking for adolescent learners. According to Perkins, a problem with some conventional teaching is that it “neglects the dispositional side of learning by not fostering sensitivity and inclination to engage the content and connect it widely” (2014, 112). Many students come to our English language arts classes doubting the relevance of what they already know and can do. They may wait for us to tell them the new “rules” and believe they’re not “allowed” to adapt their prior skills and knowledge to the work they’re doing for our class, especially if they’re used to more formulaic approaches to instruction. Some students may even see bringing together learning from different classes or assignments as a form of cheating, or “double dipping.”

This puts a special obligation on teachers to invite students to integrate their skills and knowledge in meaningful ways. We need to tell students that it’s not only OK but actually a fantastic idea to take their learning beyond traditional academic boundaries. This, in fact, is the pathway to deeper understandings and more transferable competencies. We also need to help students develop the situational awareness and rhetorical sensitivity necessary to adapt and apply their learning appropriately, so that they don’t think we’re simply asking them to rehash their tenth-grade oral report on animal rights for their twelfth-grade research paper on the industrial food complex. Students need encouragement and support to make meaningful connections.

So. We start by making the connections visible. Picture one of those maps of flight paths in the back of an airline magazine. Think of all those graceful arcs connecting the airline’s different destinations, the hubs bright with converging lines. Now picture your own intellectual journey—the places you’ve been, the books you’ve read, the subjects you’ve studied, and the degrees and credentials you hold. How have the connections among these learning experiences shaped the person you’ve become? In what sites and paths have you spent the most time? What routes were the most transformative?

To help students develop a mind-set toward connection-making, ask them to draw their own map, linking the different sites of their learning, including classes, projects and assignments, home, work, sports, music, electronic environments, and so forth. Encourage them to include in-school and out-of-school learning experiences. Tell students to draw a line between “destinations” if they have transferred learning from one task or context to the other. The purpose of this activity is for students to find their “connecting cities,” those sites of learning that interact with the others. Students may even find they have a learning “hub” (think of all those American Airlines flights that connect in Dallas, Texas). See the model and student sample in Figures 1.7 and 1.8.
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TRANSFER MAPS

Directions to Students: First, look at a picture of an airline’s flight paths. You can find this image online if your teacher doesn’t provide one for you. Notice all the different destinations the airline flies to and how many of those cities are connected by the airline’s itineraries. With this image in mind, now draw a map of your own sites of learning, including classes, projects and assignments, home, work, sports, music, electronic environments, and so forth. Include in-school and out-of-school learning experiences. Draw a line between destinations if you have transferred learning from one task or context to the other.

Try following up with these questions:

• What are you learning now that will be useful in college and in the workplace?
• How is what you learned in one area of your map related to another? For instance, what have you learned from playing sports that you’ve used in school?
• What opportunities do you see to connect your learning that you haven’t taken advantage of yet?

FIGURE 1.7
Transfer of learning map