

## Course Planning and *The Heath Anthology*: Challenges and Strategies

The expanded conception of American cultural history represented by *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* and the transition from a narrowly defined formalist pedagogy to the more historically grounded rhetorical approach recommended in this instructor's guide create new challenges both for the teaching of individual texts and for the planning of American literature courses, particularly survey courses. The following section will define some of these challenges and provide pedagogical strategies for planning a multicultural American literature course.

Perhaps the most daunting challenge facing most instructors planning a culturally diverse American literature course is the prospect of assigning and teaching texts that an instructor may never have taught before or may be discovering for the first time in *The Heath Anthology*. In fact, one of the functions of the anthology is to encourage instructors to consider unfamiliar writers and texts as a means of expanding students' conceptions of the possibilities of American cultural history. This is both an epistemological and practical challenge, since the assigning of new texts means not only familiarizing oneself with the texts but also finding the time to do so. The introductory material in *The Heath Anthology* itself, the instructor's guide, and the *Heath Anthology* web site provide useful starting points for class development and preparation, but starting points are just that, and the challenges presented by individual texts in *The Heath Anthology* extend to the shaping of the multicultural literature course as a whole.

As described above, the rhetorical model of multicultural pedagogy, with its focus on how texts operate as part of a field of historical discursive practices, also brings with it the question of integrating such socio-historical information into the classroom. Teaching the literature of slavery, for example, or texts from the 1930s, raises the important question of just how much "background" information students and teachers need in order to understand these texts; indeed, they make us rethink the very distinction between "background" and "foreground" and just what we

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mean by “understanding” a text. The fact that many of the  
selections in *The Heath Anthology* represent important  
historical perspectives that have subsequently become  
marginalized and/or hidden in relation to dominant historical  
narra-tives underlines the point that multicultural pedagogy  
invites us to reexamine critically all our historical and cultural  
assumptions.

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Compounding these challenges are the crises in funding and working conditions facing the humanities today. More and more, the survey courses and other lower-division classes where *The Heath Anthology* is frequently assigned are being taught by nontenure track instructors, graduate students, and adjunct faculty who are given little time, remuneration, or scholarly credit for the kinds of pedagogical and research work called for by a multi-cultural approach to American literature. Following are some suggestions for coping with these demands and for turning these challenges into opportunities for rethinking the form and method of the American literature course, as well as a description of some of the resources, both print and on-line, available to adopters of *The Heath Anthology*.

### **Beyond the Mastery Model: The Course as Starting Point**

In *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*, James Berlin calls for a literary pedagogy less concerned with “the preservation and maintenance of a sacred canon of literary texts” and one more focused on “the examination and teaching of reading and writing practices” (104–105). This more process-oriented approach toward the teaching of literature suggests a movement away from a “mastery” model of cultural study and a redefinition of what constitutes our professional expertise in the field of American literature. Traditional course titles such as “Survey of American Literature” and “Masterpieces of American Literature” imply literary study as a fixed body of knowledge, with questions of literary merit and historical significance as somehow settled and shaped into a broadly held consensus. According to such a model, classroom practice would involve both the transmission and justification of this consensus information. A multicultural pedagogy based in cultural rhetoric, however, sees questions of interpretation, evaluation, and definition as always in process, as anything but fixed and permanent. Such an approach suggests transforming these definitive-sounding course titles from settled destinations into starting points for class investigation, with no guarantees as to where that investigation will lead. This approach brings with it a number of suggestions for a rhetorically focused course design.

### **Make the Title of the Course a Focus of Critical**

## **Concern**

Sometimes instructors have great leeway in terms of providing a course title that asks students to question received constructions of American cultural and literary history (some of the section headings in *The Heath Anthology*, for example, would make excellent course titles: “Voices of Revolution and Nationism” or “Race, Slavery, and the Invention of the South”). Many instructors, however, particularly those in lower-division courses, have to make do with traditional course titles like those mentioned above. The use of *The Heath Anthology*, as a result, may cause instructors to feel they have either somehow to fit a greater diversity of texts and cultural experiences into the traditional consensus constructions of American literary history implied by those titles or to come up with equally complete alternative stories of their own, and certainly both of these options are open to the instructor. A cultural rhetoric approach, however, offers the additional possibility of focusing class discussion on the question of just what such a revised story would be, or indeed if there would or should be just one story. Such an approach can be a powerful way of considering the functions of narrative forms in both “literary” texts and in the process of constructing history. In this way, texts could be chosen not only on the basis of how well they fit in with other texts or within a given historical narrative, but how they may conflict or even oppose other texts in the class. This contrastive approach points to another course-design strategy.

## **Organize the Class Around Points of Discursive and Rhetorical Conflict**

The cultural rhetoric model focuses attention on the ways in which putatively objective-sounding descriptors of historical, cultural, and aesthetic periods—Puritanism, the Romantic era, the Age of Realism, Modernism—are themselves rhetorical constructs, arguments put forward about the significance and meaning of certain developments in American cultural history. As such, their function is as much implicitly prescriptive as it claims to be explicitly descriptive. That is, in the interest of

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creating a unified consensual way of understanding a given historical and cultural moment, these categories exclude or minimize the importance and influence of certain texts as they foreground and highlight others, often in ways that would have been deeply surprising to many who lived during those historical periods.

As was mentioned earlier, classification and categorization per se is not a bad thing; indeed, it is cognitively inevitable. By refusing to fit neatly or easily into these traditional categories, however, many of the texts in *The Heath Anthology* provide the opportunity to open up these categories for discussion, revision, and reformulation. Instead of feeling the need to make sure the texts on the syllabus all cohere with one another, an important principle of selection can be the ways texts conflict and interfere with one another, particularly, although not exclusively, those texts explicitly involved in the task of cultural consensus formation. A good example would be the linking of the Declaration of Independence with the revisions of that key document offered by both Frederick Douglass (“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (“Declaration of Sentiments”). A close comparison and contrast of these texts would reveal complex strategies of protest, co-optation, reinforcement, and radical revision on the parts of Jefferson, Douglass, and Stanton. Stanton’s document, for example, both affirms the ideological importance of the original Declaration (keeping in mind that the validity of the democratic ideals presented in Jefferson’s text was not a settled question in early nineteenth-century America) while pointedly underlining the gendered limitations of that document.

Furthermore, the emphasis on the interaction *between* texts also suggests we consider the ways points of conflict, contradiction, and negotiation occur *within* texts. While many of us were trained to construct literary analyses that ultimately affirmed the unity of the texts we were studying, a more rhetorical approach, by breaking down boundaries between the “inside” and “outside” of texts, between text and context, points to how unity is not a quality a given text has or doesn’t have but a goal a text may or may not be struggling toward. Thus, the comparison and contrast of the Declaration of

Independence with the texts by Douglass and Stanton not only points to long-term processes of historical struggle over cultural values and beliefs, but also highlights those struggles within the texts themselves, as evidenced, for example, by Jefferson's need to spell out, define, and argue for political rights he claims are "self-evident" or by his inclusion in the version of the Declaration he presents in his *Autobiography* of excised material from the draft of the Declaration, material relevant to what most of my students have always found to be the most glaring contradiction of the Declaration, the insistence on the radical equality of humanity by an aristocratic slave owner.

This emphasis on process, on discursive confrontation, negotiation, and revision, is one reason for section headings in *The Heath Anthology* such as "Contested Visions, American Voices," "Literature and the 'Woman' Question," "Critical Visions of Postbellum America," "Orthodoxy and Resistance," "New Communities, New Identities, New Energies." As the pedagogical introductions to these various sections in the instructor's guide will suggest, these groupings can be taken as organizational principles for the development of class syllabi. Unlike traditional "themes," with their suggestion of unanimity and a historical relevance, such headings share more in common with what Gregory Jay has called "problematics." As with the above suggestion to transform traditional course titles from settled conclusions ("Here is American Literature") to open-ended starting points ("What is 'American Literature'?"), problematics are more concerned with posing questions than providing answers, with opening up the processes of rhetorical contestation and negotiation to look at what is at stake in attempts to claim consensus or to insist on cultural definitions. As Jay puts it, "A problematic indicates how and where the struggle for meaning *takes place*" (22, emphasis his). As examples of what he means by "problematics," Jay suggests origins, power, civilization, tradition, assimilation, translation, bodies, literacy, and borders (22). The point is not just to regard these terms as ideas that a given text may be about, but as analytical tools for opening up questions about how texts participate in ideological processes of cultural definition, a process that includes every course

## **Involve Students in the Process of Syllabus Formation**

Jay’s emphasis on *place* can be taken as referring to not only the specific social and historical context of the production of a given text but also to the more diverse contexts of the reception of that text, contexts that include not just the immediate historical audience for a particular text or performance but also the contemporary classroom. One key assumption of cultural rhetoric is that a given text does not mean the same thing to all readers and listeners anytime anywhere. Meaning itself is part of the process of historical change and rhetorical conflict. This means that classes in multicultural American literature must be sensitive to the social, cultural, and historical reality of individual classroom settings, with all the diversity and variability that entails.

This diversity poses a problem not only for instructors but for the writers and editors of instructor’s guides such as this one. How can anyone come up with teaching strategies applicable to all students everywhere? How can anyone come up with a similarly universal course design? The short answer, of course, is that no one can, but the focus on process indicated above, on thinking in terms of problematics rather than themes in course design, on looking for points of conflict rather than insisting on a consensus, has its classroom component in what Paolo Freire famously labeled a “problem-posing” approach to teaching, one that looks to the students and their own concrete social and cultural experiences to furnish the starting points for the exploration of conflict and consensus, negotiation and protest in cultural history. One means of accomplishing this is simply to involve students in the process of syllabus formation, asking them to choose texts for class reading and to prepare texts for class discussion. If the overall focus of the class has been on the rhetorical interactions among texts, both those included in *The Heath Anthology* and the larger cultural and historical context, such student involvement need not be overly idiosyncratic or apparently random, although there is

always a cultural logic at work in any selection process, whether controlled by students or faculty, that can be usefully explored in class. Indeed, the selection processes used by students are just as relevant to class discussion as the texts eventually chosen.

## **Redefining Expertise**

The question of context also brings us back to the vexing question of how instructors can assimilate and master the wealth of newly highlighted texts found in *The Heath Anthology* along with the rhetorical contexts relevant to those texts, particularly given the increasing constraints on the time and resources faced by faculty members at all levels. By emphasizing the importance of historical and social context, moreover, the cultural rhetoric approach in and of itself seems to represent a massive complication of the pedagogical project over the apparently more focused models of close reading favored by traditional New Critical models of literary analysis, models emphasizing the importance of limiting discussion to the “text itself.” But as many critics have pointed out, the New Critical model of close reading does not really dispense with the relevance of history and society; it merely assumes the universality of what is in fact a particular and limited historical and cultural understanding. Furthermore, an important impetus behind the multicultural movement in literary studies was the arrival in college classrooms and, later on, the college faculty of people from demographic backgrounds radically different from the small culturally homogeneous group of scholars who developed the New Critical methodology. It was this more diverse group of students and scholars who helped reveal the limitations of the traditional formalist approach.

Given these limitations, what new pedagogical models can instructors follow that do not entail large new investments of time and work that may be hard to come by in today’s educational environment? Again, the key here is to follow the emphasis on process, on problem-posing, of structuring the class around questions rather than answers. One way to do this is to redefine our expertise in the classrooms from master

knowers to experienced learners. This means defining our authority on the basis of the skills we have developed as researchers and analysts, adept at asking critical questions and finding and evaluating sources of information.

This is not to say, of course, that the lessons we have learned and the knowledge we (and the students) acquire is irrelevant; quite the opposite, in fact, and a key argument in favor of the expanded, multicultural canon is how traditional formations of American cultural history have ignored whole areas of scholarly inquiry. This same critique of the inadequacies of these traditional formations, however, is also a critique of the notion of a comprehensive or definitive understanding, of claims of having mastered the field. Indeed, the multicultural approach, with its insistence on the tremendous diversity of American cultural history, from the myriad written and oral traditions of the hundreds of pre-contact indigenous cultures to the truly global origins of the immigrants to the North American continent, both voluntary and involuntary, points out some of the absurdity of claiming that the study of a small group of writers in English, all mainly from English and Northern European Protestant backgrounds, most of whom lived in the Northeast, however interesting and provocative these writers are, could constitute a comprehensive understanding of American culture.

A problematic-centered approach, then, to the question of background and research would mean using the resources provided by *The Heath Anthology*, the instructor's guide, and the electronic resources as starting points rather than destinations for exploration and study. Rather than seeing such research as strictly preparatory and behind the scenes in terms of course construction, such exploration can be built into the course itself. For example, although the text you are now reading calls itself an instructor's guide, there is no reason the materials included here can't be shared with students, or that the process of developing a class plan for a text new to the instructor can't involve the students as well, as the instructor shares with the class the kinds of questions and concerns instructors bring to the tasks of class planning and course development. This process approach can even work with the traditional lecture model often dictated by the demands of the

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high-enrollment survey course. Instructors can make the development of the lecture part of the subject of the lecture itself, giving students insight into just how many tough choices, hard questions, and provisional conclusions go into the writing of even the most definitive-sounding lectures.

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