

Conference Paper

Liberty, Equality and Not Too Much Fraternity: An Experience in Practical Application of Liberal Education Teaching Techniques

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Abstract

The paper explores an experience in practical application of liberal education teaching techniques. We describe the most frequently used techniques and present sample classroom assignments based on this framework. We also discuss the opportunities and limitations provided by the use of these methods in a classroom setting.

Keywords: teaching techniques, liberal education, writing and analytical reading, humanities teaching.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, liberal education, already enjoying considerable popularity abroad, have been gradually gathering attention in Russia. At the same time, it represents only one of the existing (and former) approaches to education. Analytical methods used as part of this teaching paradigm – including those for working with texts and developing critical thinking – can be easily lost among hundreds competing approaches. Because of this, it is difficult to assert the uniqueness of liberal education, and the arguments of its critics pointing out the existence of many equally efficient teaching approaches are in some ways justified [2]. Our goal here is not to provide an unequivocal defense of liberal education and its methods but to demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of the latter, as well as to provide examples of their use in two main situations encountered by the humanities instructors: when humanities disciplines are taught as part of core curriculum or as supplemental courses.

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2. Methods

Here we briefly describe the most widely used methods. They are united by an umbrella term “Writing and analytical reading” and form a system of interconnected methods used in working with texts, writing and developing reasoning abilities (The methods of writing and analytical reading were taught to us during several workshops conducted by Ye. V. Glazanova, Assistant Professor at the Department of Theory and Methodology for Teaching Arts and Humanities at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Saint-Petersburg State University)). The purpose of these methods is to teach students critical reading of the texts of different genres, understand their underlying logic and structure, as well as the expressive means used by the authors, as well as to develop or improve skills of forming their personal opinions about the texts [For more details see 1, pp.171–174].

Free focused writing is an uninterrupted writing on a topic set by the teacher based on a current curriculum theme. The teacher needs to frame the question in such a way that the lack of the “right” answer to find or to guess would be immediately apparent. The content and the form of the writing may differ, but it is important that the students provide arguments for their position. The audience is warned in advance that their writings would be read in class or checked by the teacher. This method concentrates the students’ attention on the topics important for the current lesson and its theme.

Focused writing. Every student reads an individual copy of the text and performs concrete tasks (highlights key words or unknown terms, underlines metaphors, writes their emotions in the margins etc.). This micro-work with the text (unlike general questions, such as “what is the author’s main idea”) allows to see textual details. Combined with other methods, focused writing helps to focus the students’ attention on a particular problem.

Visualization. The students are divided into several mini-groups, each of which produces an illustration to a fragment of the text, the same for all groups. After finishing their work, the mini-groups defend their projects, evaluate and discuss each other’s drawings. Concretization of a metaphor necessary to produce a drawing often requires multiple readings of the same textual fragment. This method develops attention to detail, provides alternative methods of reading, and playfully engages students with the original texts, which, among other results, helps to overcome excessive “worship” and a fear of critical analysis of classical or canonical texts. Some original texts are already highly visual (for example, Biblical prophets or the Gnostics of late Antiquity).

The process of decoding such texts may be interpreted as their translation into an original visual-imaginative form.

Text diagram The students are divided into several mini-groups. All groups read the same text or textual fragment and note the most important passages. After this, each mini-group creates a diagram reflecting the author's logic. It is important that the students include not only a linear thought development, but any encountered gaps: inconsistencies, asides etc. After completing the assignment, each mini-group presents the results to the audience, with other students commenting and asking questions. The purpose of this method is to teach students see the text's structure and logic, evaluate the consistency of this structure, the text's logical coherence and the strength of its arguments.

Mutual review The students are asked to read a text or a textual fragment, write down the author's thesis illustrating the main idea and either agree or disagree with it in writing. After this, the group is divided in pairs, with each pair exchanging their notes and commenting on them in writing. After this each pair of students read aloud the most important parts of their notes. The goal of this method is to teach students discover key text ideas, formulate their own opinion and defend it against criticism using well thought-out arguments.

All methods of writing and analytical reading described above may be used in different combinations, allowing to design complex tasks for practical classes and independent work using different time length, depth of immersion and thematic issues. We believe that the latter factor makes these methods especially useful for teaching humanities as supplemental subjects (not part of a core curriculum), because such courses are typically taught under significant time constraints, but they still include certain number of hours for independent students' work.

Below we provide several examples of assignments designed by the authors of this paper according to the logic of these methods.

Example 1 (classroom activity) (The assignment is designed for use in culturology and philosophy courses that are not a part of core curriculum. The purpose is to familiarize the students with a core text, as well as with several key concepts of culture, and to help them develop their own opinion on what culture is. When teaching this assignment in large student groups and under significant time constraint, the assignment is shortened to include only the 2, 3 and 4 parts).

“Culture: the concept of the founder of culturology”. Working text: Leslie White “The Concept of Culture”.

1. Free focused writing (5-7 minutes). Think about what *you* mean by culture trying to avoid cliché answers and common opinions. Articulate your thoughts and write them down.

2. Focused reading and writing (25-30 minutes). Read the text. Find all concepts of culture mentioned in the text, explain them in writing in your own words. Read what you've written, choose three concepts of culture that you find most interesting/surprising/important.

3. Mutual review (20-25 minutes). Briefly state and write down your opinion about the three concepts of culture you have chosen (if you agree or disagree with them, for what reason; if you felt interested or surprised, why exactly). Give your notes to your neighbor who should answer with a written commentary on the concepts of culture you described. Take back your notes, read your neighbor's comments, answer these comment and write a general conclusion explaining whether your opinion about these concepts of culture changed or not.

4. Free focused writing (3-5 minutes). Out of three concepts of culture choose one that, *in your opinion*, better reflects reality. Explain your choice.

5. Reflexive meta-cognitive writing (7-10 minutes). Do you feel that the text you've read and the exchange of opinions with your neighbor have enriched your concept of culture? If yes, why exactly, if no, why not [4, pp. 108-109].

Example 2. "A letter from the 1920s village reading room" (The assignment is aimed at the students in "Leisure Studies" specialization, as part of the course on the history of Soviet clubs and recreation centers. The goal of the assignment: to deeper understand the workings of recreation centers of the period based on historical documents and to try and understand people of this era while preserving historical distance.) **Working text:** "What every *izbach* should know about recording, accounting and planning in his work" (Moscow: *Kresty'yanskaya gazeta*, 1926).

Read the text and try to immerse yourself into the atmosphere, imagine yourself in a position of a Ural *izbach* – the leader of a village library and reading room in 1920s. Your legend is: you have graduated from university and was sent to work as an *izbach* in a Ural village. You have spent several months working in this position. Now you are writing a letter (1-2 pages) to your friend describing your new life. The "letters" are read aloud and discussed in classroom.

The letters should be written on a page taken from a common exercise book, preferably using a pencil or a fountain pen with blue ink. As an additional source, students are recommended to use published letters of the period (to understand stylistic conventions of the period epistolary style) and historical documents. Evaluation criteria:

lack of anachronisms, historically appropriate style, inclusion of concrete facts from professional and private life of 1920s *izbaches*.

Example 3: "Graphic summary of a classical text" (The task is a part of the course in the history of world culture taught to the students in "TV and Radio Journalism" program. The task is prepared in line with the idea that the students in this specialization should not only study foundational texts but develop professionally required skills in re-encoding textual information into visual representation). Working text: Marcus Aurelius *Meditations*.

Read the book, highlight main components of the text (at least 20 components) and draw them according to the textual logic (create a graphical summary). You can use any pictures, mathematical signs, symbols etc. Collage technique is also allowed.

Marking criteria: completeness, representation of main narrative arcs (psychological traits); relevancy of graphical tools to the text; intelligibility to the viewer (whether it is possible to decode graphic summary back into the text). The works are presented and discussed in classroom. The works are collectively assessed by the students.

3. Discussion

An experience in using liberal education methods – both described above and others – allows us to ruminate on their strong and weak points. The advantages of these methods are, first, the fact that they can be used together, as a foundation in teaching either an entire course or part of the course (for example, only practical classes). Second, these methods are easily combined with each other allowing to design tasks of various complexity. Third, the methods of textual analysis can be used in working both with textual fragments and with the complete texts. Finally, the methods of liberal education can be combined with the traditional teaching approaches. As for the disadvantages of these methods, the first one is the difficulty to objectively evaluate their efficiency (as far as we know, today methods for such evaluation are not available); for this reason, to assess their efficiency, we are forced to use only our own empirical experience, opinions of our colleagues [3] and the students' responses. The second significant disadvantage is that these methods are well suited to teaching concrete texts and topics but can hardly be used to explore complex extensive themes. Another important point to note: the approach developed by the system of liberal education and realized in these methods is generally geared towards reducing or even eliminating the traditional lecture genre. However, this creates a problem: often teachers have to teach courses that do not belong to the students' core curriculum. For example, one of the authors teachers

a course in philosophy for the students specializing in “Production technology and organization in food services”. Another author teaches history of Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism for students in culturology. Both cases cannot be fully embraced by the described methods. In such cases designing an entire course based only on readings of the text is exceedingly difficult simply because the students lack basic conceptual, historical and methodological foundations.

The authors see two solutions for this problem (while continuing to use methods of liberal education): 1. The textual work should be preceded or followed by lectures covering foundational material. 2. The teacher accompanies each studied text with an extended commentary covering wider context and trying to encourage students to reach for more general conclusions, beyond the narrow close reading.

4. Conclusions

Despite the disadvantages mentioned above, methods of liberal education are useful in teaching a number of courses in humanities in Russian universities, both as part of a core curriculum and as supplemental courses, because they facilitate the development of general skills required for the humanities students – that is, the ability to find, analyze and process information [1, pp. 178-179].

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