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## A Different Connection Between Research and Teaching

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A DIFFERENT CONNECTION  
BETWEEN RESEARCH AND TEACHING

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Last year, I took several students to the national convention for our honor society, Sigma Tau Delta, where they presented papers, heard their peers do the same, and listened to regionally and nationally known writers. Not surprisingly, they were nervous about presenting their papers, but I assured them that the environment was supportive and that people did not set out to make them appear ignorant. However, I disproved my own assertion when I asked a student from another school a question that left her unable to formulate an answer at all. I apologized to her, as I had not intended to embarrass her, but it was obvious her argument was unaware of post-1970s scholarship and so was a complete misreading of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I talked with my students about it later, as they could tell I was angry. Of course, I was not angry at the student; I was angry at her professor who had let her get to that point in her career without his or her having guided the student to appropriate areas of criticism and was teaching the novel the way he or she had been taught decades before. My students understood this distinction, and, though they joked with me about my supposed attempt to show off my intelligence by attacking a college student, they already knew that I had not purposefully tried to embarrass her.

Now, I realize that some readers may have already taken issue with my argument that the student "misread" the novel. Let me answer by focusing on disciplines as conversations. If one plans to deviate from traditional views of a novel, then one must know what those traditional views are so that they can be acknowledged and then countered. This approach enables the students to make up their own minds about those traditional views, possibly rejecting them or the professor's alternate reading of the work. Students can hear numerous voices when it comes to how to read that particular work, moving them beyond our voice and what we have been able to glean in our preparation for the course. It is important for students to see that literary interpretation is a discussion between a wide variety of scholars over the course of time, not just isolated readings. Informed of this conversation, students' own essays can become part of the conversation.

I will admit that it is almost impossible for those of us who are faculty at teaching-oriented universities with 4-4 or 3-3 loads to keep up with the scholarship on authors we teach only every two to three

years. When I teach a U.S. Literature survey for majors and a Western Literature course for majors and non-majors in the same semester (as I often do), for example, I end up with fifty or so authors to cover. Since these classes rotate every two to three years, I can easily end up with close to one hundred different authors whose scholarship I should be passably familiar with. On top of this problem, there's simply the amount of work we have to do outside of class with committee assignments and other service responsibilities, leading us to resort to skimming or ignoring articles or criticism we should be reading (see Robert J. Cabin's "Skim This Article"; *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 7, 2010, for more on this problem).

There is a way to have the scholars themselves help us with this task. Whenever I teach an upper-division course, I include critical articles on the novels as part of the students' assigned reading. If I know an author well, I can pull seminal works and assign those, but, even when I don't, just the fact that I assign the articles begins to immerse the students in the critical discussion. The students read one critical article for every day we discuss the novel, responding to one article per work in a short response paper. The article then drives the discussion of the class meeting that day, modeling the discussion that takes place throughout our discipline. They watch me interacting with the article, just as they have done in writing, then they and I both enter into a conversation with the article, even as we are having a conversation in the classroom. This model helps reinforce the idea that scholarship is not something that occurs only within the pages of the journal or only within a classroom, but that disciplines should be cross-pollinating information from one area of their studies to another.

There are a few side benefits, as well. First, I can use the journals to help students see how they should structure a longer, more complex argument, as I take the time to show them where scholars can put their thesis sentences, how they use sub-theses, and even how they use the types of sources they draw on for their argument. Also, even if the article is not a major contribution to the field, it mentions other authors who have made a significant impact and acknowledges other interpretations of the novel at hand. In fact, sometimes the best article to use is one that has largely been discredited. Students can see that scholarship is a changing set of knowledge, not one interpretation set in stone for decades, which gives them faith that they can one day contribute to it.

This addition makes for a different connection between research and teaching, as the argument that is most often put forth in defense of research at teaching institutions is that professors bring such research into their courses through their lectures. The focus remains on the professor sharing the knowledge with the students, passing it along second hand. In fact, when I was in college, I had no idea professors read

scholarship; I assumed they came to their interpretations on their own. It was only when I was in graduate school and I asked a professor from my undergraduate institution about a theory he had mentioned that he pointed me to the original piece of scholarship itself. If he would have given me that information first hand, I could have realized that I, too, was part of an ongoing conversation.

Professors at teaching institutions who have no desire to publish articles or books should continue to actively read in their fields to assist our students. Professors can work around their time limitations by including scholarship in their classes as a way to model this behavior and help students understand the importance of keeping up in their areas of expertise. Also, such an approach should prevent us all from leaving a student at the front of a hotel conference room caught completely off guard by an innocent question, as none of us seek that result for our students.