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## Literary Learning: Teaching the English Major, by Sherry Lee Linkon

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## Book Reviews

**Sherry Lee Linkon.** *Literary Learning: Teaching the English Major.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. xvi, 163p. ISBN 9780253223562. \$24.95.

As the lone instructor of our department's Introduction to Literary Studies and Capstone courses (the only two courses we teach exclusively for English majors), I was comforted and excited to find a practical study devoted to seeing literature pedagogy through a literary lens, not an assessment rubric! Sherry Lee Linkon, a professor of English and American Studies at Youngstown State University, exposes the very ways English "experts" (literature professors) employ "literary knowledge" in their own scholarly and pleasurable interactions with texts. She goes on to suggest that professors can advance student learning and an appreciation for the complexity of literary analysis by appropriately employing this knowledge in assignment and course design. The value of Linkon's book resides in its confident application of "literary thinking" to the literature classroom and even to the professional exigencies of faculty scholarship and assessment.

Linkon adeptly identifies a disconnect between our pleasurable encounters with and discussions about texts we enjoy and the unsophisticated or downright resistant approach to literature evident in what she labels "novice" or student work. Our frustration at this separation suggests that we may take for granted and do not explain to students how we teach or even assess literary texts. With a nod to scholarship from educational psychology, she suggests that our "intuitive" approach to literary research is "embedded in webs of related information" that "... reflect the core assumptions and practices of our field" (5). As inheritors of this nexus, we may not even realize why we are eloquent in the discourse of literary studies, while we demand of our students the same fluency with a language they barely understand. Perhaps a greater problem resides in our attempt to articulate learning outcomes and standards with a vocabulary derived more from "shared values and attitudes" among faculty rather than "an explicit methodology" derived from literary thinking (7). Unintentionally, we might actually inculcate learning into our students more by covert behaviors than by codified learning processes, unconcealed and easily identified.

Here Linkon's study proves most valuable by providing concrete and pragmatic approaches to assignment and course development, exposing the literary thinking behind literary pedagogy. She gives tables outlining resources and research strategies for sample assignments, helping the instructor "model" and "scaffold" literary thinking for students. She also rethinks course structure to focus on "strategic knowledge" (58) about how we acquire meaning from literature rather than focusing solely on the literary content itself. While Linkon still recommends a traditional English research paper as a culminating assignment for the literature class, the process in getting to that end involves student reflection, assessment, and student observations of the skills inculcated through the research and writing process. Again, Linkon provides a sample rubric and schedule for the instructor, modeling how these learning ideals work in course design.

In some ways, Linkon's approach can feel a bit too idealistic in its presentation of student learning. She establishes a clear line in her first chapter between a professor's expertise and a student's unwillingness or inability to engage literary texts, but her students appear in subsequent chapters able to parse sophisticated cognitive processes. In one example, after noting that students take "poor" notes and "don't read, don't understand, or don't remember" the introductions and explanatory headings in anthologies (64), she goes on to task these same students with "track[ing] the content and strategic knowledge" involved in literary analysis and taking notes on "critical moves we make in a class discussion" (65). Linkon is careful to pull this self-reflection back to more traditional research and writing projects in the classroom so that it has a decidedly literary turn, but the notion that literature students as observers are enthusiastic and academically capable while students as readers of literature are not seems to point to a bigger crisis for the teaching of literature itself! Linkon provides detailed rubrics and guides to help the students engage in these strategic processes, but the discrepancy between students' behaviors while engaged in this kind of meta-learning and their unwillingness or inability to parse a literary text or even introductory reference material needs to be more nuanced. At what point does focus on the process of writing and learning replace vital content knowledge? If we expect that our students are unprepared to encounter texts, even on a rudimentary level, then what is the value of teaching a literature course at the college level?

Linkon's final chapter should find a welcome audience for literature and composition academics at state comprehensive universities. Saddled with heavy teaching loads and a continual need to justify professional and teaching expertise to various campus and accreditation venues, English professors can turn these administrative exigencies into areas for critical inquiry and incentives to establish departmental pedagogical goals. As we take a closer look at the assumptions behind our own strategic methods and study how these play out in the classroom, we have preliminary primary source material and a critical vocabulary to use for publication. Linkon finishes with an introductory how-to guide for the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), with ideas for beginning studies, questionnaires to use, and how to use student work in your own scholarship.

*Literary Learning* offers valuable resources for the literature instructor. It is easily manageable as a theoretical tool when developing a literature class, and it has a number of classroom-ready resources. As an introduction to some of the most elemental ideas behind the teaching of literature, *Literary Learning* is commendable for referring to actual classroom practices as illustrations of these ideas. Certainly this book will benefit graduate students and faculty interested in examining their own teaching practices. And while many of the techniques Linkon discusses are, as she admits, familiar to those who teach in the composition classroom, she establishes a thoroughly literary perspective for why these techniques work for literature students. It is an engaging and accessible read that presents SoTL as an approachable and useful vein of inquiry that can change departmental dynamics, professional goals, and, ultimately, our literature students.

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