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Event-Object-Meaning: A Key to the Art of Teaching Literature - and Maybe Everything Else

John Bird

Winthrop University, birdj@winthrop.edu

Teaching and Learning Center

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Dr. John Bird
Professor,
Department of
English
Bancroft Hall 260
(803) 323-3679

Director, Teaching &
Learning Center
Dinkins Hall 233
(803) 323-2447

EMAIL:
birdj@winthrop.edu

Winthrop University

Event-Object-Meaning: A Key to the Art of Teaching Literature—and Maybe Everything Else

I returned a book I borrowed from a colleague last semester. My gesture surprised him; we both remarked on the number of books we have loaned to others and never seen again. And it gratified me to do something I had intended to do before school ended in May.

I loaned the most valuable book I had ever read about the teaching of literature to someone about 20 years ago. I never got that copy of the book back, but I had already learned from the book a really important principle about teaching literature—and about teaching in general.

I often talk about this concept in my literature classes, especially in graduate courses, where the bulk of the students are teachers or are planning to be. I could not remember the name of the author or the title of the book—something about “the art of literature.” I could, however, remember that the book was blue and green. And I

certainly could remember the central principle.

A student surprised and delighted me a couple of years ago by presenting me a copy of the book. She had found it at a used book sale for fifty cents. What a nice gesture! So I can report that the missing book is *Teaching the Art of Literature* by Bruce E. Miller, published by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1980.

Miller’s central idea about teaching literature applies to all teaching, I think. I am happy to share his idea, one that I have found helpful for more than 30 years. His concept is this: event-object-meaning.

In Miller’s explanation, a work of literature must go through a process of being all three. In other words, the poem or play or novel must first be an “event.” The students must first have the event of reading the text.

Then the work of literature

must be an “object.” This is where analysis comes in, and takes up the bulk of class time. The object should be studied at length, from a variety of angles and perspectives.

After the event and the object, we can finally arrive at “meaning.” The meaning of a work of literature can be either intrinsic—finding meaning with the work itself—or extrinsic—finding meaning by applying some outside lens, like psychology, politics, or some other theoretical approach. (When I was in college, the intrinsic approach reined, the era of New Criticism. As I moved on to graduate school, the world shifted to extrinsic approaches, the age of deconstruction and its aftermath. These days, we use all available approaches.)

I am confident that you can take Miller’s concept of teaching literature and apply it to your discipline. No matter your subject, students still must go through the process of event-object-meaning. (I

“If students do not have an event, they cannot move on to analyzing the object, and they cannot move on to making meaning. Making sure students are having a successful event, then, is crucial to teaching and learning. If your students do not seem fully engaged during class, I suspect the problem is they did not have a full event before they came to class.”



Continued from page 1

think—please correct me if I am wrong!)

One of the things I realized early on in my teaching was that I could not assume my students had experienced an “event” before they came to class—in other words, they either had not read or had not read carefully enough in order to experience the event for themselves. I found out that I had to make sure they had the event in class, which might mean me reading portions, especially early on, then having some of them read aloud. In time, most of my students can become good enough readers to have the event on their own.

I think that is one of the reasons I long ago began harping on critical reading, which led to my handout “How to Read Critically.” (The handout is available on the TLC’s Resources page.) The first line of that handout says, “The key to success in college, in all courses, is critical reading.” I used to assume that my students were reading critically: underlining and writing key ideas in the margins. That assumption was incorrect, woefully incorrect. I have found that even our best students have not mastered the skill and

acquired the habit of critical reading. If you assume your students are having an event before they come to class—in other words, are fully doing the reading—you are probably fooling yourself.

If students do not have an event, they cannot move on to analyzing the object, and they cannot move on to making meaning. Making sure students are having a successful event, then, is crucial to teaching and learning. If your students do not seem fully engaged during class, I suspect the problem is they did not have a full event before they came to class.

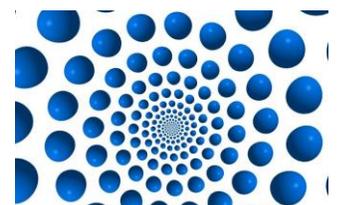
When I first started teaching, I really enjoyed reading aloud to my students, but I always felt a little guilty about it. Was I just indulging my hammy side by reading aloud, and in essence, performing? But I would so often have my students say, “That was so great when you read it! I read it before, but I didn’t really get it until I heard you read it to us!”

Rather than chalk that up merely to my skill as a reader and performer, I realized that, in Miller’s terms, I was providing the students an event. The event of my reading aloud was superior to the event

my students had experienced for themselves. (In the best of outcomes, by our modeling effective and engaged reading, students learn to do that for themselves.)

When I first read about flipped classrooms, I was intrigued. Then I realized that this is just another way to have students experience an event before they come to class. As I try it myself, I also realize that some of the same old problems still occur: the classroom can’t be flipped if the students will not click on whatever it is that I expect them to do before they come to class. “Who listened to the podcast?” I ask. Only a few hands. Sigh. So much for the event!

I am interested to hear if and how Bruce Miller’s concept of event-object-meaning applies to your teaching in your discipline. My intuition tells me that it can apply to all kinds of teaching, not just the teaching of literature. If it does, I hope this concept will help you as much as it has me for over 30 years.



Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

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The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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Thought For the Week

“Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in.”
--Mark Twain