

Spies in the House of Literary Criticism

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Lately, I've learned a lot from working with two Canadianist colleagues, Kathryn Grafton and Katja Thieme, whose research and teaching also includes writing in the disciplines. Those of us who teach literature know how to write in our discipline, but it likely hasn't occurred to us to think about the typical moves a successful critical article actually makes. We certainly know them when we see them as we go about reading and evaluating undergraduate and graduate essays and articles and books written by our peers. I also read and edit articles submitted to this journal and have the pleasure of reading the reports of the expert readers we conscript to evaluate them. Many of these reports are amazingly helpful, not just in pointing out gaps in knowledge or writing problems, but also in suggesting how the article might be reconceptualized or reframed overall. Far too often, the readers point out that the argument is stated too late, vaguely, or not at all. Further, they note, theoretical approaches are either buried or too schematically applied, connections to the wider disciplinary conversation are few and far between, and the article's own contribution underplayed.

My writing colleagues, however, have shed some light on why even expert literary critics might still be missing some of the obvious marks in producing their articles. We rarely, if ever, think about method. Methodology is a word I never encountered in graduate school and recently, when I have been asked to explain my methodology, I am now ashamed to report that I often replied, flippantly, "reading, writing, and thinking." A while ago, I was ranting about the requirement to fill in a section on methodology on grant applications. The form, I felt, was clearly designed by evil social scientists. My discipline

just didn't have a methodology and should not be expected to, any more than we should have lab results or data collections. My patiently listening colleague said kindly, well, it is a good idea to explain what texts you will be reading, why you selected them, how you will be reading them, and what your reading might add to what we already know about them. Oops. We actually do have methods, but we just don't talk about them much. We see ourselves as studying literature, not literary criticism. Our analytic gaze is focused on the texts we read, not on how we do the reading.

Because we tend to work in disciplinary silos, different disciplines have different "epistemological styles" (Lamont 54); since most of us do not engage in interdisciplinary work, we tend to see those in different disciplines as "the Other" and hold stereotypical ideas about their disciplinary practices. As my rant makes clear, even those of us who have wandered across or been forced over disciplinary boundaries may still lapse. I wrote a literary history for my doctorate, completed an undergraduate applied linguistics diploma, and took on a research project for my first tenure-stream position that was based on millions of words of real-language data. I have taught Women's Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Science Studies, and team-taught a first-year course with historians and philosophers (UBC's Arts One). I consider myself lucky to have had these highly educational interdisciplinary experiences, despite the vertiginous sensations of imposter syndrome that still wash over me as I think about them. In fact, these sensations are deserved, since I remain a literature scholar: I lack a great deal of knowledge about the foundational assumptions of these other disciplines. Witness my problems with methodology. Worse, as my writing studies colleagues point out, I don't really understand the foundational assumptions of my own discipline. I still just perform them and hope for the best.

Writing specialists put it this way. We have lots of what they call tacit knowledge about critical writing in our field, but we don't make it explicit. We learned by immersion and imitation. We usually teach our students to write literary criticism by demonstrating how it's done in lectures, by guiding them in discussion, by encouraging them when they get it right and by getting them to read the occasional critical and theoretical article. We know good criticism when we hear it or see it. However, students are unable to articulate the moves that we perform for them—not surprising, since we often can't do this either. Often they disappoint us by imitating us too closely, when we really want them to do something original—to surprise us. Or they disappoint us by ignoring our moves altogether and lapsing into plot

summary interspersed with uncritical quotation from a random assortment of sources. Writing specialists think we should help students by explaining our moves rather than simply performing them.

We could also expand our horizons and that of our students by taking on board the findings of other disciplines (like writing studies) that relate to literature and literary criticism. However, we don't read articles that analyze literary critical articles—why would we read social science? We don't read about how scholars in psychology, cognitive science, rhetoric, linguistics, philosophy, history, education, and sociology analyze literature, although these disciplines and others are, like us, busily studying texts, narrative, and discourse. Yet more and more, our grant and scholarship proposals are assessed by those in other disciplines: we need to be able to mount an argument for our projects that they will engage with. Michèle Lamont's study of academic assessment committees points out that my hostility to social science is grounded in a fundamentally different attitude to truth: "Humanists often define interpretive skills as quintessential for the production of high-quality scholarship. Social scientists, especially those who champion empiricism, more often deride interpretation as a corrupting force in the production of truth" (61). Of course, social science fields also vary in their beliefs and methods. My feeling is that we shouldn't get our experience of other disciplines indirectly, by having our grant applications rejected or by finding ourselves at a loss on a grants panel where we suddenly realize we are presenting as dangerous loonies. As Sherry Lee Linkon points out, "intuition and serendipity . . . are essential elements of our critical methodology" (22): an economist may be aware that these forces play a role in her discipline, but it's quite likely she won't proclaim this idea to a room full of scholars from other disciplines. We need to know at least enough about other disciplinary perspectives to make persuasive arguments about our own projects to those who don't share our assumptions.

Our failure to see our discipline as an object of study as well as a practice puts us and our students at a disadvantage. Although English literary studies began to replace the Classics in schools and universities only in the mid-1850s, English rapidly gained prestige. Matthew Arnold situated it as a substitute for religion in a secularizing Britain. Canonical works were touted as a model of civilized expression for the colonies. Settler colonies like Canada and the United States became fixated on developing great national literatures. Members of the educated upper class were expected to have read widely and to show their cultivation by alluding to their literary knowledge.

The justifications for studying literature became so obvious as to be hardly worth stating. Now that those props have been kicked out from under us by a neoliberal ideology that focuses on monetary profit, by a rise in narrow positivism in some disciplines, and by an attitude to education that focuses on jobs, we are left sputtering. Like aristocrats faced with a crudely practical rising middle class, we find it demeaning to justify what we do. In fact, we can't, at least not in terms that make sense to those outside our discipline.

But it is even more troubling that we don't explain our primary critical strategies to our students. In *Literary Learning: Teaching the English Major*, Linkon argues that we are good at demonstrating our ability to work through interpretations in lectures and to guide class discussions about texts. Where we fall down, in her view, is explaining to students as we go through this process just how we arrived at our interpretation, which is usually presented to them as a finished, polished performance. This typical pedagogy fails to convey our method, what she calls strategic knowledge and what Laura Wilder calls "rhetorical process knowledge" (4), vital information if students are going to be able to succeed at tackling the interpretation of unfamiliar texts by themselves.

For Linkon, the solution lies in changing the way we lecture to include a sort of cooking-show running commentary. We might note what aroused our interest in a particular word in a poem and how we tracked its use in the OED. We might explain how biographical information can be parlayed into an illuminating context. It also means more class time spent on group work where students use the strategic knowledge we have offered them to work out interpretations for themselves. Finally, it affects writing assignments. The most typical assignment in English courses is the research paper, usually due at the end of the term. However, the students don't get the benefit of our feedback at this point: it's done. No wonder some students don't bother to pick up their final papers, despite our careful comments.

Linkon and other writing scholars argue for what they call "scaffolded writing." The scaffold is a series of classes and assignments that lead toward the final paper, making the class more like a writing and research workshop than a lecture/discussion class. Students choose their research topic early, producing a series of short writing assignments related to it throughout the term: e.g., short paper proposal, annotated bibliography, draft, response to peers' essays, and finally the finished essay. During the process, they will have received instruction in research and in several common disciplinary genres. We will have time to intervene at several stages in the process.

Students are given more low-stakes assignments that turn the typical summative evaluation of the final paper into a process aimed at developing their skills. Students may read less, but they arguably learn interpretive skills that are transferable to other literature courses and, it is hoped, to the jobs they take after graduation.

One typical research method for a writing studies scholar is to select a sample of published critical articles and to analyze them for recurrent features. Laura Wilder promotes the explicit highlighting of what she calls “special topoi of literary analysis,” topoi she has identified by reading contemporary literary critical articles. These topoi are “agreements that are shared by members of a particular discipline” (Wilder 18). She argues that students should be taught these topoi so that they are aware that as they move from one discipline to another that they are moving from one set of writing expectations to another. Majors thus become apprentices to a scholarly discipline, trained how to move from novice to expert rather than merely forming an audience for our performances, which range from the bravura to (in many more cases) the mundane.

Rather than further describing these and other works of writing scholars focused on writing in the discipline of English, I urge you to read them for yourselves. My interest in them comes from our plan to use these and other studies to underpin a guide to academic research and writing in *Canadian Literature*'s online teaching and learning resource, CanLit Guides. For courses that focus on making disciplinary writing practices explicit, the design of writing assignments is a crucial component. We hope to help Canadian literature instructors to think about their own assignments by providing samples for them to model in their own classrooms. We hope to “create a digital resource that helps students learn to read scholarly articles and produce their own instances of scholarly genres about the literatures of Canada” (Fee, Grafton, and Thieme 1). Although we are still thinking about what this resource will look like, we hope to test it at a CanLit Guides workshop we plan to hold in spring 2016. Tentatively, we propose that this writing guide will contain (with the author's and readers' permission) examples of a few articles published in *Canadian Literature*, along with the first submission, the two readers' reports, the revised submission, and the second set of readers' reports. Students—and those planning to submit to the journal—will be able to see the stages of a process that now largely remains invisible except to editors and authors. Along with this, we hope to include a set of student writing samples, showing the steps that students go through

as they work through a scaffolded set of writing assignments to a completed research paper. Laying out the process that a published scholarly article and a final student research paper goes through in development, research, drafting, evaluation, and revision will make a process that is largely hidden more visible. However, we realize that simply throwing these texts up on the web will likely not engage readers: we need to consider how to present this resource effectively and how to add our commentary to situate these writing samples in the process that writing scholars like Linkon and Wilder use to articulate how we write in our discipline.

Although the discipline of writing studies has been developing since the 1990s, the complexity of literary critical writing has meant that works like those I examine here have emerged only recently. Along with writing textbooks that use their theoretical findings, these works should move into our own collections, not to mention the reading lists for teaching assistants in our discipline.

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