

## I. It's still you, Virginia

Twelve years ago I wrote a philosophy of teaching. At the time I didn't know I had a philosophy of teaching, but, it turns out, I did. I started that philosophy with a quote from Virginia Woolf's novel *To The Lighthouse*. In it, Mrs. Ramsay is trying to get her two children to go to sleep--a boy, James, and a girl, Cam. They are fighting over a boar's skull. James wants it all out in the open, but it gives Cam nightmares. Mrs. Ramsay, Modernist genius, does this neat trick of making it work out for both of them. It's really something, and my favorite part of the book. I quote it again here:

She quickly took her own shawl off and wound it round the skull, round and round, and round, and then she came back to Cam and laid her head almost flat on the pillow besides Cam's and said how lovely it looked now; how the fairies would love it; it was like a bird's nest; . . . She could see the words echoing as she spoke them rhythmically in Cam's mind, and Cam was repeating after her how it was like a mountain, a bird's nest, a garden, and there were little antelopes, and her eyes were opening and shutting, and Mrs. Ramsay went on speaking . . .until she sat upright and saw that Cam was asleep.

Now, she whispered, crossing over to his bed, James must go to sleep too, for see, she said, the boar's skull was still there; they had not touched it; they had done just what he wanted; it was there quite unhurt (114).

The thing I love most about reading is the possibility of invention. That is what Mrs. Ramsay is capitalizing on here. She is reading the boar's head two different ways, depending on her audience. This is actually quite a clever rhetorical move; it's also a very old one. It's Aristotle. More precisely, the Aristotelian Triad of a speaker, an audience, and a text. Twelve years ago, this seemed like a very clever way for me to talk about what I wanted my students to learn--to think of writing as a relationship between readers, writers, and texts--in a sort of dance with each other. Sometimes someone has two left feet, but sometimes it's sublime.

I still think that this is what I'm trying to do in all of my writing classes. I'm trying to help my students understand their writing beyond school, in the world. Doing things. Making the magic happen. But, in twelve years, my sense of the wisdom of Mrs. Ramsay has expanded. I understand her skill as a true literacy, a powerful literacy: she has control over her circumstances.

My students, too often, regardless of the course, come to me without any sense of their own power to affect change in the world--in small ways or in large ways. Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian educator, once said that "one true word can change the world." Mrs. Ramsay, speaker of true words. My students, our students, are often disenfranchised in such subtle and powerful ways here in the Northeast, in Massachusetts, a stone's throw from the kind of privilege and wealth that they may never know. What I want most for my students is to feel powerful--to feel that they can make choices about how their life might turn out to be.

That's not about writing, I guess. Or it doesn't seem like it is about writing. And I'm supposed to be a writing teacher writing about how my writing classes work. I know, I know: students need top level communication skills. Employers demand it. I don't care. Well, I care. I want my students to have *economic choice* as well as any other sort of choice. And careers and employment are part of that. But I believe that tending to the development of true, rich literacy skills--reading carefully and generously, writing well and true, thinking deeply and with passion--all those other things will necessarily follow.

But Mrs. Ramsay is only one half of the story.

## II. The "R" on the Horizon.

I like to reread *To The Lighthouse* every so often. It's my second favorite book ever. On some subsequent reading in the past 12 years, I noticed that in complete and perfect opposition to Mrs. Ramsay's fluid sense of interpreting the world, of creating knowledge, of effecting change is Mr. Ramsay's perfectly miserable, measurable, miserly understanding of *what counts as knowledge*. In literary circles we are to understand that Mr. Ramsay represents the oldish, Edwardian/Victorian view of things while Mrs. Ramsay represents the Modern. But what I'm interested in is that Mr. Ramsay spends the majority of the text consumed with measuring his intellectual progress and success against a sort of Transcendentally True Alphabet of Knowledge. He says:

He had not genius; he laid no claim to that: but he had, or might have had, the power to repeat every letter of the alphabet from A to Z accurately in order. Meanwhile, he stuck at Q. On, then, on to R.

Feelings that would not have disgraced a leader who . . . knows that he must lay himself down and die before morning comes, stole upon him. . . . Yet he would not die lying down; . . . he would die standing. He would never reach R. (35)

One thing that has very much shaped my time and my teaching at Bridgewater is thinking about how Mr. Ramsay understands himself in relationship to knowledge. I am not teaching classrooms full of Mrs. Ramsay. It's Mr. Ramsay that I'm working with. And it's not their fault. No part of school is set up to accommodate Mrs. Ramsay's messy expression. It is much better suited to how Mr. Ramsay works. I'm not going to go off on standardized tests here, but the word "standardized" alone should make my point. Students measure themselves against something and someone else all the time. And it is the measurement itself that matters more and more. I encounter this routinely among my students--especially good students. They are so accustomed to being successfully measured that they pay hardly any attention to anything other than the form of the measurement. For less prepared students, less successful students that I encounter in Targeted ENGL 101, for instance, the effect of a constant state of being measured--and not measuring up--has beat them down.

It's not that simple, I know. But what I've come to understand is that real learning requires risk on the part of the student. And the measurement that Mr. Ramsay lusts after makes taking risks a very, very unlikely move for any student in a US classroom to take. And, yet, it is only in risk that we really learn anything. Learning, the philosopher Gadamer tells me, is supposed to hurt. So much is to be gained from a first failure. A subsequent recovery. I know this to be true personally and professionally. Why would I deny my own students that same space--to risk, to fail, to recover. So, for me, as a teacher of writing, what consumes me as I design and teach classes and assess and evaluate student writing is this: how can I get my students to risk something--anything? How do I encourage the leap?

There are many other things I might say about what I value in my classroom, but, in the end, it all comes down to risk. What am I willing to risk as a teacher in a classroom every semester? The teacher and scholar bell hooks says that we have to be a real and whole person in the classroom--that is a risk I take every semester: to be the real and genuine Lee Torda as I read and respond to student writing. A teacher who says honest things to students about their writing. What risks am I asking my students to take? What is the pay off if they take them? How do I make it safe enough that they will leap? How do I make this happen in a classroom, where nearly every aspect of classroom life seems structured to kill any instinct to risk anything.

## III. On a Monday morning.

All that is well and good, but, and I know this is what you most want to read about, on Monday morning, what does such a class look like? What do students *do* to risk, to fail, to recover?

Let me start by saying I'm not a touchy-feely teacher. I think people think I'm touchy-feely, but I'm not. I'm a rigorous teacher. I ask a lot of my students. I do tend to grade high, mostly (sorry to break it to you Mr. Ramsay) because I think grades do much more harm than good for students. Also, if a student does all the stuff I ask them to do in a semester, they've earned the grade. Trust me.

It's sometimes been a bit of a struggle. I design classes for students who want to play my reindeer games for 15 weeks, and that isn't always the class of students you have in front of you. It's taken me a long time to figure out workload and students. That is reflected sometimes in my evaluations I think.

But, like I said, I'm not a touchy-feely teacher. And more than that, I try to design classes that make the student make the tough decisions about their success in the class. I locate my inclusion of risk in my classroom in (where else would it be) my assessment and evaluation of students. In all of my classes, I use a portfolio system of evaluation combined with narrative assessment on major writing projects and non-evaluative, informal commenting on informal student writing. You will have ample time to consider this system in this submission. I've included syllabi from two representative classes (a first year writing class (ENGL 101) and a senior capstone class for writing concentration students (ENGL 489) that demonstrate how I write about and explain the portfolio system to students. I've included two complete final portfolios from both a first year student (ENGL 101) and graduating senior (ENGL 489) as my student assignment samples.

As I say to my students, what portfolios allow me to do is two-fold. First, it lets me consider the entire student. I'm not interested in giving an A to the A student who coasts. What are they learning there? I'm much more interested in that kid in the back of the room trying her heart out and only half getting it. I'll take a million of her. In this model, showing up matters, doing the work (all of it) matters. And, I'm sneaky this way, I know that if you show up, do the work, put in the time, you'll get better at writing.

Secondly, the portfolio means that students receive letter grades from me only twice a semester--at midterm and at the end of the semester. This, as I say earlier, is risky for *me* more than the students. In between, they receive narrative evaluations from me. It takes some time, but it is the opportunity for me to talk honestly to them about their writing. That's the trade off (and I tell them that). Grades mean that comments only act as an explanation for the grade. But to simply talk about where a piece is at with students and then insist that they consider that information for purposes of revision (the portfolio requires revision so that students are forced to see the value of it), that can be difficult for students to deal with. They think there is a catch--like I'm trying to trap them in some way. One way I combat that is by showing them the kinds of letters I write to students using the letters (names changed) from previous semesters. This way they know that all students--A students, D students--all students are getting letters and suggestions for revision.

For me, this practice comes from St. Augustin. St. Augustin came up with a way to read the bible that he termed *Caritas*--or "charity." The idea was that the way to find real worth and meaning in the bible is to read with charity--to look for the best in the text. And that is what I try to do with student work. I jokingly call it "reading with love" with my students. My goal is to look at the text I have in front of me and imagine what it could be, and my comments come from that place. Simultaneously, I ask my student to also read with love. To read their own work and the work of their peers with an eye toward what is possible. In this way, I believe I help my students towards the most authentic experience of a successful writer as I can give them. It takes some getting used to, but, as the letters I've included in this application, both formally and in an appendix, would indicate, they have learned this lesson--one of effort and reflection and of trying again. I could ask no more of any of them.

I am weary of yardsticks and measurement. Leave me to Mrs. Ramsay and the boar's head and Cam and James. My students and I, us together, we will spin stories and make magic and the stuff of good dreams. And I most sincerely believe that is how we will change the world.