

From page to stage

Incorporating experiential learning into the literature classroom

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*In many traditional literature classes, students engage with texts primarily through reading and discussion. However, literature, and even drama, can often remain abstract or stagnant on the page without a way to relate it to a tangible, lived experience. This paper explores a hands-on pedagogical approach in which students on a university literature course studied a theatrical work in translation—in this case, Federico García Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*—but also collaborated with theater students in the process of staging the play. In this course, students assumed a dramaturgical function in which, after close reading and contextual study during the first part of the semester, they participated in table reads and rehearsals, presented interpretive material to the cast and crew, and then attended the live performance of the show. This paper considers the tenants of experiential learning and uses the design of the course to give real-world examples of how experiential learning can be incorporated into a university-level literature class.*

Keywords: literature pedagogy; experiential learning; Lorca; dramaturgy; theater collaboration

1 Introduction

Although many language programs include literature courses as part of their required or elective curriculum, encouraging students to engage with the material presented in those classes can be a challenge. While presenting works written in a different time period, in a different culture, or in a different language, finding the best way for students not only to comprehend the material on the page but also to connect with it in a deeper way can feel like a never-ending task. The blank course calendar or lesson plan is full of opportunity and but may also overwhelm.

When I learned that the theater department at my institution, Wright State University, was going to be staging Federico García Lorca’s play, *Blood Wedding*, the idea of collaborating was instantly appealing. It seemed like a unique way to help the undergraduate Spanish majors and minors in my program, nearly all of whom counted English as their first language, gain a deeper understanding of Lorca and his work, which I knew could be complicated even in translation. I set out to design a course that would incorporate *Blood Wedding*, hoping that

we might be able to visit the set and eventually see the play at the end of the season as part of the class. When that collaboration developed into an opportunity for my class to work as dramaturges on the play, I was however pleased and apprehensive in equal measure. It was clear that the payoff of this kind of learning experience could be remarkable for students, and I also realized that I would have to work from the ground up in order to prepare students for the opportunity. As I considered the design of the class, the tenets of Kolb's (2015) model of experiential learning provided a framework against which I could evaluate the elements of the course in order to try and maximize the students' learning experience while ensuring they had the capability to make a meaningful contribution to the staging of Lorca's work.

2 Experiential learning and active engagement

Educational theory has long emphasized the importance of experience in the learning process and figures such as Dewey, Vygotsky, Keeton and Tate, and Kolb, among many others, have all contributed to its definition and development. Dewey (1938) was among the first to highlight the need for connection between experience and education. Keeton and Tate (1978) reinforce this link and note that experiential learning occurs when the learner is directly engaged with the topic being studied. It is not enough, however, for students to just have an experience, and not every classroom activity is automatically pedagogically meaningful. For Dewey (1938), creating a meaningful learning experience requires organizing the experience itself in a way that sustains reflection, continuity, and growth. As Keeton and Tate (1978) note, students must do something with that experience to create true experiential learning. The task for instructors then is to determine what exactly students must do to create meaning and learning from these classroom experiences.

Kolb (2015) echoes the significance of a transformative experience in order to facilitate learning. His four-stage cycle in his model of experiential learning further details the reflection, continuity, and growth demanded by Dewey and provides a guide for instructors looking to incorporate these qualities. In this model, students pass through four "adaptive learning modes—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation" (2015, p. 66). As in Dewey (1938) and Keeton and Tate's (1978) theories, the mere experience is not sufficient for learning. Kolb (2015) views each of the stages as necessary elements of experiential learning. Explained further, in this model students actively experience something, reflect on that experience before attempting to make sense of the experience, and then apply that new knowledge to a different situation. This becomes a new concrete experience which should then start the cycle anew.

In the context of a literature class, experiential learning means that students learn most powerfully when they move beyond reading to engage in concrete experiences related to the text. As Eddy (2019) writes, these activities aid in student transfer of information because they provide learners with the opportunity to demonstrate their comprehension of a topic by applying it to a new situation. Additionally, experiential learning can remove the barriers or stereotypes presented by the object itself by instead permitting personal connection with the text in a way that allows for greater understanding (Eddy 2019). As in Kolb's model, students are able to bring their own connection to the text into play, utilizing it for reflection and then applying that knowledge to this new situation. The stages of Kolb's model can occur repeatedly throughout the semester, and activities such as collaborative interpretation, design work, rehearsal observation, and reflective analysis help students to move through this cycle as they approach new texts, engage with the material in new contexts, or participate in activities of increasing complexity. Although experiential learning is often tied to ventures such as internships, study abroad opportunities, or clinical lab practice, Keeton and Tate (1978) posit that most experiential learning happens via pedagogical methods adopted within this type of academic class.

As experiential learning practices have become more regularly included in higher education classrooms, quantitative and qualitative studies have demonstrated the positive impact these practices can have on student learning (Prussia & Weis 2004; Villarroel et al. 2020; Zelechowski et al. 2017). Villarroel et al. (2020) found that completing a course in which experiential learning was a central component led to an increase in student satisfaction with the quality of the class and better recall of the information delivered in the course. Zelechowski et al. (2017) likewise note that university students in undergraduate psychology and law/forensic psychology classes that incorporated experiential learning practices reported better understanding of the course material and an enjoyable class experience. Additionally, instructors of those classes incorporating experiential learning components were rated more highly and students reported a higher likelihood of choosing those instructors again in the future as compared to instructors of the control courses. Prussia and Weis (2004) similarly found a large positive change in retention rates for MBA students that completed a mandatory experiential course.

From the educator perspective, Bradberry and De Maio (2019) find that experiential learning provides an opportunity for faculty to impart skills that are known to be important, but difficult to teach, such as group work, accountability to others, professional etiquette, and appropriate interaction with figures in mentorship or supervisory roles. They argue specifically for going beyond the four walls of the classroom as part of the experience and posit that

placing students into a novel environment results in an increase in student agency in their education. Furthermore, they find that, as students interact with people outside of the “safety net of the classroom”, they “are encouraged to take risks and to take accountability for their actions” (2019, p. 98). Considering the benefits to learners and those for faculty, incorporating experiential learning seems to be a sound pedagogical decision. Deciding what that looks like in terms of a course calendar or assignment description, though, is a different challenge. In the following example of the class I taught, the final, grand experience of the staged play was a given from the outset. The question instead became: how do I get students there? What are the steps that take us from no base knowledge of this author or his works to a place where students can hold and express opinions about the staging of this play?

3 Course design

From the outset, the collaboration with the theater performance was built directly into the course design; it was not incidental or extracurricular. As such, the course was structured around this movement from page to stage: students were first prepared with contextual knowledge about Lorca and his writing before being asked to apply that knowledge in a real setting. *Blood Wedding* was part of the university’s semester lineup and was slated as one of the last shows of the season. This provided ample time for students to build a contextual base during the first half of the semester by studying Lorca’s life, the historical moment in which he lived, and a range of his works in translation. By the time rehearsals started, the goal was to prepare students to participate in the staging process by attending and observing rehearsals, formulating questions for the director, providing presentations to cast and crew members, and writing response papers that tracked the development of the production over time.

The class was offered once-per-week in the early evening to align with the eventual rehearsal schedule of the play, but students were made aware from the very beginning of the term that the contact hours of the course would at some points vary from our established meeting times. Every effort was made to accommodate student schedules in these cases; for instance, entrance to multiple showtimes was arranged since none of the offerings aligned with our class time. Once work on the show started, our class meetings largely switched from our assigned classroom to the theater so that students could attend table reads, give their presentations to the cast, and observe rehearsals.

The syllabus assignment categories, shared nearly equally among the categories of brief presentations, reaction papers, class participation, and a final paper, demonstrate that active engagement was central to the course rather than peripheral to it. As will be discussed below, these assignments were intended to develop students’ abilities and confidence within our

classroom before asking them to present their work in front of the cast of the play. Additionally, as in Kolb's model of experiential learning, written reflections submitted at various points in the semester encouraged students to continually make connections between their prior experiences the new opportunities and tasks being asked of them.

4 On the page

This class aimed to meet the standards for experiential learning set by Dewey, Kolb, and others precisely by scaffolding the performance component, rather than merely adding it as an appendix. Students did not merely attend a play at the end of the semester. Instead, they moved through a carefully structured sequence in which contextual study prepared them for rehearsal observation; that rehearsal observation informed their later reflective writing, and the final performance became an occasion for deeper synthesis rather than first exposure. While there was plenty of biographical information, textual analysis, and class discussion, students were also asked from the beginning to present their reactions and interpretations in a more formal way to prepare for their dramaturgical work later in the term. Additionally, their interpretations went beyond the words on the page as they considered how to interpret the works auditorily and visually. The dramaturgical work later in the term required a higher level of independent mastery from the students. These presentations earlier in the term allowed for instructional scaffolding as it relates to Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, and helped students build the foundational skills needed to perform the more advanced "on the stage" activities later in the course.

Language played an important role in this class experience, too. The class was taught in English and all of Lorca's materials were studied in translation, partly because the final play itself was to be staged in translation, but also to make the class available to a wider cross-section of students. It quickly became clear, however, that enrollment in the class did not presuppose any sort of ability to discuss poetry, literature, or dramatical works even in a student's first language. In this way, the development of a shared literary language became one of the necessary components of the overall scaffolding of the course.

One strategy utilized in the course was the Lorca Glossary, wherein students throughout the term compiled important names, dates, events, and themes related to the texts examined in class. This activity was designed to facilitate connections among various works, recognize repeating themes or figures, and organize what could have easily become an overwhelming amount of contextual information. Each student was responsible for maintaining their own individual glossary, and this became a type of self-assessment as the thoroughness—or lack thereof—of the glossary impacted future activities. Hart et al. (2017) describe a shared class

version of this glossary using a Google Drive or class wiki, for instance, but at university level, I chose to require individual documents to help students become responsible for their own learning.

With the same goal of students developing the ability to communicate about Lorca's work and the themes and ideas present in it, students were asked to interpret Lorca's works in ways that went beyond written language. Early in the semester, for instance, students were asked to choose a song that they felt reflected the feeling, theme, imagery, or ideas of one of Lorca's poems that we had studied in class. Each student selected a short clip of the song to play in class before explaining why they had chosen the song and what connection they found between the song and the poem. Choosing a narrow text in the form of a poem provided initial parameters that were more approachable to students, and giving students the freedom to select any song in any genre allowed them to draw from their individual prior knowledge and tie that to the class information. It also presented an interesting base for class discussion as different songs were proposed to represent the same poem. This sort of activity provided a strategy that was available for students to utilize in later moments when discussing sections of the play with the cast and crew of the play, each coming to the table with varying levels of exposure to literature, Spanish culture, and Lorca himself.

As the dramaturgical work approached, students were also encouraged to think visually about the play. Each student was asked to select a scene from *Blood Wedding* that they found to be particularly interesting or powerful and create a visual presentation of the elements they felt represented the words on the page. The assignment was not necessarily a straight set design; the resulting project was something more akin to a visual collage, with color swatches, specific objects that were integral to the scene (orange blossoms, for instance, or the moon), costume ideas, etc. Again, students were asked to present their visual interpretations to the rest of the class. This activity not only provided material for class discussion, as it inevitably results in differing interpretations of how scenes should be staged, but it served as the basis for a later written reflection after seeing the set for the first time, when students were tasked with comparing the director's aesthetic decisions to their own take. The set design reflection provided an opportunity for students to utilize the information and the language developed within the classroom and apply it to a new context; finding much in common with the final decisions made for the official set, students were asked to consider what the director might have considered in making those choices, and others were asked to support their agreement or disagreement with those staging choices utilizing information from the text and from our class discussions.

These exercises did not merely diversify class time; they developed the contextual vocabulary students would later need when working with *Blood Wedding* as an embodied theatrical text. They also encouraged students to reflect on which aspects of the class presentations they hoped the cast would take into consideration when developing characters and performing the play. Additionally, they provided space for students to practice discussing their interpretations with confidence and backing up those interpretations with textual evidence.

5 On the stage

The distinctive feature of this course was the extent to which students functioned as dramaturges for the *Blood Wedding* production. Rather than merely observing the theatre department's work, they were asked to present research and interpretation to the cast and crew on topics such as Lorca's life, the rural trilogy, and significant themes within this particular work. Prior coursework helped prepare them for these conversations and gave them the vocabulary necessary for communicating their ideas. This dynamic was a unique one, with each group bringing a separate domain of knowledge and experience—the students with the historical, literary, and symbolic significance of Lorca's play, and the actors and director with the expertise in embodiment, staging, and performance choices. The collaboration therefore opened an opportunity for a reciprocal learning environment in which students were not passive observers but contributors whose knowledge mattered to the development of the play. Additionally, in this dynamic, the students were no longer only presenting their knowledge to the instructor; they were speaking to collaborators who could use, question, appreciate, and respond to their interpretations in real time.

In addition to presenting to and dialoguing with the actors staging the play, students in the class were tasked with preparing questions for the show's director, a faculty member at our institution. This unique opportunity permitted an assessment of two separate skills: the students' comprehension of the work leading up to the play, and their ability to communicate their own understanding of and opinions about the play. As with the cast presentations, this interview represented another shift in the classroom dynamic as students were asked to step into the knowledge acquired by that point in the term.

As part of the staging of *Blood Wedding*, students in this course attended table reads and rehearsals as the student actors prepared for the opening of the play. This backstage access brought to life what previously had only been written words and facilitated a connection between classroom discussions and the discourse, emotion, and action of the play. Students were invited to examine previously held opinions of themes and characters and to analyse the ways in which those opinions held true or evolved in the face of the live delivery of the work.

They were also present as the actors themselves utilized feedback from the director and their growing confidence in their roles to refine their delivery and acting choices.

After the preparation and work throughout the semester, the staging of *Blood Wedding* as the last show of the season that semester was set as a culminating event. The goal of the course was to facilitate a viewing experience unlike that of most other audience members, with students bringing to the show the totality of their personal and learned experiences from the duration of the semester. In this way, students' experience of the live performance was the summative assessment of the semester, and their final written reflection about their experience was designed to be a natural way to demonstrate not only the acquisition of information about Lorca and his life, but also the development of their personal connection to the material and their ability to communicate this.

6 Expanding the approach

The implementation of experiential learning strategies in the university literature classroom is an area ripe for future studies with measurable outcomes. The aforementioned studies come from other subject areas or degree levels and, while they are useful in demonstrating the possible impact these strategies can have on student learning, it would be ideal to have measurable results stemming from a case study more closely related to the one described here. Regardless, the delivery of this class provides one additional contribution to the idea that experiential, performance-infused pedagogy can be employed in a variety of literature and humanities courses. While the live departmental production offers a unique opportunity, the underlying strategies are adaptable and useful even where the literal staging is not possible. Not every institution will be able to pair a literature seminar with a simultaneous active theatre production, but many of the practices from this course can be replicated in smaller or more modest ways.

What is perhaps most transferrable in this model is not the exact institutional arrangement, but the pedagogical sequence. The course's primary strength lies in the way it moves students through contextual scaffolding, authentic application, and structured reflection. Instructors in other settings can preserve those same principles even if the performance element takes a different form. A staged reading, a recorded production, an in-class scene workshop, or a collaboration with a local arts expert or partner can still require students to transform interpretation into action and then reflect on the results.

In literature courses focused on drama, instructors might incorporate staged readings, scene workshops, design presentations, actor dossiers, or comparative analyses of filmed

performances. In courses centred on poetry or prose, instructors can still ask students to dramatize scenes, curate soundscapes, storyboard symbolic motifs, or perform monologues based on close textual evidence (Hart et. al 2017; Hash 2021). Instead of preparing questions for a director of a particular work, students could interview a guest artist or translator about the art and process, more generally speaking. Response papers could be assigned based on myriad sources: recorded stagings, in-class performances, or debates on performance or language choices, among others. Elman (2004) provides a number of useful activity ideas that can be used directly in a class studying Lorca's life and works, but which could also be adapted to other authors. While not necessarily geared explicitly towards experiential learning, Boyle and Hall (2016) additionally detail ideas for bringing Cervantes's *Don Quixote* to life in the modern day and many of the suggested activities carry the same theme. Eddy (2019) likewise discusses suggestions for literary activities that aim to bolster student transfer of information and can be adapted to nearly any literary genre, language, etc. The essential principle is to create situations in which literary interpretation must be used rather than merely asserted.

This approach can expand beyond the literature classroom, too. Similar approaches would find history students staging debates or reenactments, language students performing scenes in the target language or debating translation choices, or religious studies or philosophy students dramatizing dialogues or ethical conflicts. What unites all of these possibilities is the movement from passive reception of information to active construction of meaning. Experiential pedagogy encourages students to inhabit perspective, test interpretation, collaborate with others, and reflect on how ideas take shape in embodied, social contexts. The page remains essential, but the stage—or any performative analogue—can provide the missing dimension that transforms interpretation into lived understanding.

7 Conclusion

Although this particular class remains a singular experience in my teaching, the approach to its delivery has undoubtedly spilled over into related courses. Kolb's (2015) model of experiential learning has provided a framework for other curricular development opportunities and the activities designed for this course have been adapted in different ways in other classes on literature and culture. Embedding active engagement along with reflective practice—two cornerstone elements of Kolb's model—into the literature syllabus does not merely enrich the delivery of the content itself; it invites student agency in the learning process and creates a more immersive environment that moves far beyond the traditional lecture. Future iterations of this type of course, and continued experimentation with and

measurement of the outcomes related to these strategies, can contribute more broadly to the continued innovation of literature curriculum.

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