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PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING WITH THE NOVEL
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Problem-Based learning (PBL) is a methodology commonly used in medical and business schools, but it can also be effective as a way to teach the novel. In my tenth-grade English class, PBL allows me to be a facilitator as it puts students in control of their analysis of *The Great Gatsby* and *The Scarlet Letter*.

Problem-Based Learning uses a strict protocol to guide a process of inquiry and analysis around a case study whose elements are presented in stages. Close reading of the case, careful generation of thoughtful questions, and informed speculation are at the center of the methodology, but equally important is the discussion that accompanies the analysis. Any text, but particularly a novel divided into chapters, can be approached as an unfolding case study of characters responding to a particular set of circumstances. I use PBL to structure each class period as we analyze and discuss the text, chapter by chapter (or group of short chapters).

The protocol I use asks students to consider, in this order, three questions:

1. Based on your reading so far, what do we actually know about the characters, setting, and plot? With what evidence has the author presented us that shows what is really going on in this story?
2. What questions does what you have read raise for you? What issues in the characterization, the relationships of characters, the plot, or the dilemmas faced by characters do you want or need to know more about? What questions are you asking yourself based on the reading so far?

3. What do you think may happen? On what issues can you speculate?

At the start of each day’s class, I divide my board into three sections (see Fig. 1) and label them with abbreviated versions of these questions. I then ask the class to address Question 1, which is really asking for a demonstration of close and accurate reading. On the first day of a working with a new book, they may—and should—include such obvious facts as the title, author, and date of publication. (By including the title page and table of contents in the opening reading assignment, I make sure that students attend not only to matters of authorship and context but also, in the case of a book like *The Scarlet Letter* whose chapters are titled, to the intentional narrative trajectory to the story.) I also insist that students have their books in front of them and a pen in hand at all times as we do our work.

Figure 1. Sample board layout for PBL discussion

| What do we KNOW? | What questions do we have? | Speculation? What next? |
|------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| | | |

I try hard to stay in my role as a facilitator only, although I may ask for clarification or confirmation of a point. I demand that each contribution be supported by a textual reference, and if an “incorrect” fact is offered, I will hold discussion until the matter is resolved from the text. I actively discourage any offering that strays into interpretation (“The letter seems like it’s a symbol”) although I happily accept as part of “what we know” any information that can be supported by direct evidence.

After exhausting this category, we move on to Question 2. Here students are allowed somewhat more free rein in their analysis, and questions can range from the not-so-critical (“What is Daisy’s favorite color shirt?”) to the truly provocative (“Why does Fitzgerald write so much about body parts like eyes and noses?”). Again, I am primarily the genial facilitator, although I will paraphrase or condense as necessary—and I will sometimes draw lines that connect questions that seem to be related. Here the purpose is to engage students in the text not just as a source of knowledge or a plot but as manifestation of the problems and dilemmas that confront both the characters in the story and the author who has created them. In this stage it is not unusual for students to engage in vigorous discussion as they see questions connecting with one another, and I encourage them to address problems of relationship (e.g., “Does Dimmesdale see what Chillingworth is doing to him?”) in the text. I discourage any attempt to answer these questions, although I will, if it does not detract from the discussion, answer questions of fact (“Did Hawthorne ever get married?”) or put in some perspective a critical issue (“How Midwestern was Fitzgerald?”). It is especially important here to abide by the dictum that there is no such thing as a stupid question—I remain as neutral and encouraging as possible. Instead of rejecting a question that seems wrong-headed, I try to direct more fruitful thinking by requesting clarification or a basis in the text.

Question 3 asks students to use their knowledge of the characters, the central problems of the story, and the plot to speculate on what might occur next. This is where the discussion becomes most active, as everyone has some idea about what could or might happen next. I do ask for some justification of most offerings, so that when a student says, “Chillingworth is going to murder Hester and Dimmesdale,” I can tease out the student’s understanding of what is going on in the story. As always, it is important for the teacher-facilitator to remain as neutral and open

as possible, responding positively to a student's enthusiasm and the quality of support for an idea rather than to how "right" the idea might be. Students who have read ahead can be gently discouraged from giving the plot away.

I give over the last quarter of the class period to free-flowing, interpretive discussion, and it is a rare day when I have to do more than provide some gentle guidance. Since there is no interpretive "party line," students can go anywhere they want—as long as they can support their ideas to me and to their peers (a tougher audience than I am, usually).

What appears to be missing from the Problem-Based Learning methodology is the essence of "classical" English teaching: the structured elucidation of the text, including the identification of symbols and the conventional interpretation of what it all means. This is, to me, the beauty of PBL: it puts students in charge of that elucidation, with the protocol providing the structure. Students quickly discover, by themselves, the points that English teachers love to linger on—Pearl in the forest, Dr. Eekleburg's eyes. Instead of directing students to a final and "correct" understanding, PBL allows them to raise issues and draw out important points and, ultimately, to own a text deeply and passionately.