

“Rethinking Bruner: A Case of Intellectual Honesty”

Cyrano de Bergerac isn't just a play about a guy with a big nose. It's a play about love, true sacrifice, conspiracy, sword fighting, word play and, most of all, panache. Getting students to look past the nose and into the heart of the real play is a challenge on many levels. This is the challenge I confronted when I brought Cyrano into the classroom: how can I best guide my students into the heart of the play while still remaining true to the text?

Theoretically Speaking

According to Jerome Bruner, “[t]he task of teaching a subject to a child at any particular age is one of representing the structure of that subject in terms of the child’s way of viewing things” (Bruner, 1960). Teaching in this intellectually honest way allows students to better understand the basic components of the subject, which they can later relate to the more formal discourse they will encounter. Providing students with the opportunity to engage with the larger ideas on terms they understand also creates a higher probability that they will transfer these ideas to other areas of learning.

Teaching in an intellectually honest way is a challenging endeavor because as a teacher, you must know your subject matter well enough to rephrase it in a way that makes the most sense to your students. Presenting them with material that most closely connects with their immediate learning needs and experience involves having a good sense of where they are developmentally and what their learning styles are. Intellectual honesty is also slippery because presenting material in its purest form is not always the best way to encourage understanding because students are not able to directly translate the material for themselves.

Intellectual honesty is a powerful tool in structuring lessons, but it is also incredibly difficult to work with, something I encountered while teaching my C&I unit this January. Using the following two lessons, I will explore these ideas of intellectual honesty, closely examining two lessons to see if, how and where I took

Sonya

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this concept into account while I tried to teach my students about the play *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

Setting the Scene: B Period World Tradition and *Cyrano de Bergerac*

Cyrano de Bergerac is one of the few pieces of literature I remember from my high school days, mostly because I can still vividly picture dreaming about it freshman year. It is also one of the more uplifting pieces that my World Traditions class read during a semester of *Animal Farm*, *Macbeth*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Although it does have some battle scenes, for the most part, *Cyrano* is the story of a man with a “huge schnoz” (as one of my students put it) who helps a more handsome man win the girl that he himself loves. Insecurity, favoring beauty over talent and wit, being in love with someone you never thought you could win—these are all themes in *Cyrano* that I felt my students could relate to on many different levels. My mission, which I had accepted, was to take my students through this play in exactly twelve days, encouraging them to think about the characters and themes they encountered while following the story of Cyrano, Roxane and Christian. After a month of carefully thinking about my different options and crafting a plan I felt was reasonable, I thought I was prepared. In some ways, I was, but in many ways, I couldn’t have anticipated the paths we would take in our quest to better understand this play.

The school where I teach, Harry Elkins Widener High School, is a lot like the high school I went to. Fairview, like Saratoga, where I grew up, is a fairly affluent area made up of Silicon Valley types, with most of the population consisting of upper middle class families. The school has just over sixteen hundred students, most of whom are Caucasian or Asian. About a sixth of the school is made up of African-American and Latino students, and a good number of these students tend to be tracked into the lower level classes. The school campus itself is beautiful, with a large quad area where students can congregate, a sizeable theater that the community also uses, and numerous fields for the athletics program. The school also has received funding to be used for remodeling, so the English department has spent the last year teaching out of a series of portables affectionately known as “The Village;” these portables form a L at the side of the school nearest the fields.

Widener tracks many of its classes, including English classes, although that tracking system is a little more lax during the freshman/sophomore years when

students are allowed to decide if they want to be in an Advanced or General English class. State funding has made it possible for freshman/sophomore English classes to be limited to no more than twenty-four students, which results in a great learning environment for the first two years of high school English. Widener has also combined its junior/senior English classes, although those tend to have around thirty to thirty-five students per class. English classes switch at the semester and each semester is a separate course with all different students. Because of the combined frosh/soph classes, courses are taught every other year so that students don't get the same material twice. Last year, students studied *Romeo and Juliet*, *Lord of the Flies*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Tale of Two Cities*, and *A Separate Peace*. This year, the two courses being offered are Communications, which is primarily a public speaking class, and World Cultures/Traditions, a literature-based class.

In addition to offering two separate semesters of frosh/soph English, Widener also follows a rotating schedule. Students take seven courses a semester, but they only meet with each class four times a week and at different times in the day. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, students attend six classes, four in the morning (with a fifteen-minute mid-morning break for brunch) and two after lunch. Tuesdays and Thursdays have a slightly different schedule; students attend five classes (four in the morning, one after lunch) and the remaining period is used for staff and department meetings or tutorial purposes. My particular frosh/soph class followed this pattern: I saw them Monday between 9:05 and 10:05 am, Tuesday between 10:20 and 11:20 am, Wednesday between 11:25 am and 12:25 pm, and Friday between 7:55 and 9:00 am.

My B period class is a General English class, World Traditions, where we read *Animal Farm*, *Macbeth*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *Cyrano de Bergerac*. There are thirteen students in the class, three of whom are female. The class consists of seven Caucasian students, three Asian students, two African-American students and one Latina student. The class also has six special needs students, so in addition to Jessica and me, there is also Julie Haggerty, a special needs aide who helps with the assignments. The students have become very close

since the beginning of the semester even though there are a wide range of skills among them. Two of my students are second language learners, three of them are “new” readers which means they have very low-level reading needs, and the other eight are fairly strong readers. For most of the semester Jessica has been the primary teacher. During *Animal Farm* and *Macbeth*, she led most of the instruction, although I had been experimented with leading a few discussions during *All Quiet*.

The semester has primarily centered around the four texts in our course; because most of our students were having difficulty just getting through the material, most of our lessons related back to the plot and encouraged students to make their own connections to the text. Throughout *Animal Farm*, we explored the ideas of rebellion and corruption; with *Macbeth*, we discussed fate, prophecy and ambition; and with *All Quiet*, we spent quite a bit of time discussing the idea of war and what causes war. All through the semester, we worked assiduously on getting our students to develop strategies for selecting good evidence they could use to support their thesis statements. A lot of the exercises we used to promote these skills were structured pieces where we either provided students with a quote and had them interpret it through a series of questions or where we gave students a thesis idea and had them find the evidence in the text themselves. We spent a few periods of class time throughout the three units working with students individually and assessing their progress, as well as getting them to practice these skills by writing essays at the end of each unit.

Since I spent time planning the unit on *Cyrano*, Jessica and I agreed that I would be the primary teacher, something the students had not yet experienced. Because the unit was being taught right after winter break, we decided that the switch would be easier for them to adjust to than if Jessica started off teaching the unit and I gradually took over. Besides, with only twelve days to work with *Cyrano*, it was easiest for me to handle the entire unit, especially since I felt confident that I had a better sense of how to work with this mix of students than I did when we started in September.

The main reason we were teaching *Cyrano* was because it is a text required by the department for this course. When I was planning my unit, I found that even

though I had started off focusing on the idea of beauty and how beauty influences people, I really became more interested in the character development that revealed itself during the course of the play. In my view, one of the most interesting aspects of the play involved character motivation and why characters acted the way they did. A lot of this motivation was revealed throughout character interactions; readers learn a lot about Cyrano in the fact that he agrees to go along with Roxane's wishes to protect Christian even though he is in love with her. My main goal for the unit, besides getting my students to understand the plot, was to have them think about and better understand the motivation behind why the characters act the way they do. Cyrano was my main focus because he is the character with the most to think about; he sacrifices his love to help the woman he loves get her man, remains fiercely independent throughout the play, yet breaks down and reads Roxane his letter (Christian's last letter) the day he dies. Not to mention the fact that he is insanely temperamental about his nose and spends quite a bit of the play challenging people who insult him. Roxane and her underlying motivations also provide some food for thought, even though most students just see her as manipulative and evil, and I wanted to get my students past that instinctive reaction and have them really understand the options she did have (which weren't many). I also wanted them to think about Christian and how he finally ends up wanting Roxane to love him for himself and not just because he is beautiful, even if he can't woo her with intelligent, witty words to save his life. I knew that twelve days were not very many, especially with a group that was very unreliable when it came time to read at home, so I approached the text with the intention of following the main plot and getting them to think about these character motivations and developments. We hadn't spent much time on character development, but I thought this would be an area that students could relate to more easily, and I wanted to get them thinking about their own motivations for how they acted. I thought that this would be an area they could easily relate to, especially since it would incorporate their own personal beliefs and allow them to connect more deeply with the actual text.

Cyrano: Part One

My unit started off surprisingly well, but I got my first wake-up call during the third day of my unit, a Wednesday where I met my students right before lunch. I was also entirely on my own that day, since Jessica had a meeting at the District Office and Julie only stays for ten minutes on Wednesdays. The day before, we learned how to pronounce the French character names, discussed the idea of why someone would choose to write a play and viewed the opening scene of the De Pardieu film version. I felt I had given my students enough background for them to get into the play and thought that the best way to expose them to *Cyrano* was through having them read the play aloud and deal with it that way, since it was a text that was meant to be heard, not read.

I started off the day with a technique that Jessica and I used a lot during *Macbeth* to get students familiar with the language. On each student's desk, I placed an index card with a character's name written on it; once they came in, I gave them a few minutes to practice their name with a partner and then had a quick read-around where each student said their name and briefly explained who the character was. This was a strategy to get students re-focused on the play and review names before we jumped into reading the play aloud.

Before reading the play aloud, I wanted to remind students of where we had left off, using both the reading and the film from yesterday. Because a lot of my students are visual learners, I thought that reminding them about the film would give them a more solid basis for relating to the play; if they could visualize the characters, they might be better able to get into the play and be interested in what was actually going on. One of my students, Aretha, had been absent the day before, and I thought that getting her up-to-date would be the perfect way to have students review the text; it gave them a purpose instead of me arbitrarily saying, "Ok, let's review the text." Aretha, however, came into class with an irrepressible burst of energy, and she spent a lot of the time getting the students around her to focus on her antics instead of the text. Despite this distraction, students did manage to come up with some sort of summary of the first part of the play, remembering "Roxane was the one with the mask," and "Cyrano had this huge nose and then he started

fighting people.” We discussed briefly why Roxane would be wearing the mask, ending up with a few different reasons. Chris said it was “because she’s beautiful but wants to hide her beauty,” and Alicia added that “if she can’t see people, then she figures they can’t see her either.”

After this brief recap, I directed students back to the text, starting with page 18, where the play *La Clorise* is about to start. We had seen this part in the video, especially the part where the pages yanked the man’s wig off of his head, and I thought starting with this visual memory would give students a more concrete place to plug in. I asked for volunteers to read and assigned the twelve parts that appeared in this section. Once parts had been settled, I figured we would spend the rest of the period reading through the play and that I could explain plot points and clear up confusion as necessary.

What actually ended up happening was much different than what I had predicted. Even though I wanted to present my students with the material in its purest form (spoken, instead of just read), I had not anticipated the difficulty that would accompany this plan. Instead of reading the play in a fluent manner, students got confused by the format; the newer readers couldn’t follow the strange layout and the more experienced readers got easily frustrated with the delays. I tried to help Keith and Robbie (two of the special needs kids) stay on track by pointing out where they were supposed to be reading (they only had a few lines each), but even with my support, they lost interest and closed their books. Aretha entertained her section of the room by pulling out her sketchbook and showing them pictures she had drawn; she and Chris got into an animated discussion over Cirque du Soleil and their favorite bands, completely disregarding my attempts to get the class back on track and into a relevant discussion. At one point, watching my unsuccessful attempts to redirect the energy, Alicia looked at me and said, “Well, *I’m* paying attention, you know.”

About two thirds of the way through the class, I realized that reading aloud was not working and my students were not getting the character interactions, so I decided to try a different tactic. Enlisting the aid of both Aretha and Brad, two sophomores who were fairly strong readers, I had them act out the scene where

Montfleury is chased offstage by Cyrano. Both are fairly theatrical, and they gave a believable rendition of an irate Cyrano threatening the poor actor and causing him to go dashing into a corner (as Aretha did quite effectively). This seemed to capture my students' interest; they perked up with the visual element and seemed more engaged than they had during the reading. Even though I had to explain a bit more about the scene than I anticipated, my students seemed more willing to get involved with the characters and figure out why Cyrano had chased Montfleury off the stage. "Why was he so mad at the actor?" Miguel asked, and Shane followed up with the question, "Why didn't anyone attack Cyrano for chasing the actor off the stage?"

After this impromptu staging, and for the last ten minutes of class, I had the students split into pairs and read through the interaction between Cyrano and the meddler, something that also served as a precursor to their homework. Because I had only a vague idea of where I wanted to end up that day, I had not adequately prepared a homework assignment, even though getting them to read more of the play was essential in keeping them engaged for Friday's class. I thought that getting students to pair up and read through this scene would give them more responsibility for tackling the text; instead of being part of a large group where they could become disengaged, they were in charge of reading half the text and discussing it with their partner. For the next two evenings, their task was to read through Cyrano's speech, where he insults his nose before Valvert can, and think about why someone would insult himself instead of allowing another person to insult him.

Overall, my assumption that all students could relate most easily to the text if it were read aloud, combined with the generally held sense that Jessica is the "real" teacher while I am not quite a true authority figure, resulted in a general sense of chaos that was very hard to focus and move toward productivity. I left the class feeling quite frustrated, unhappy and unsuccessful, which was doubled by the fact that I am sure most of my students were as frustrated as I was with the day's lesson.

This Thing Called Intellectual Honesty

Getting past the frustration is the first step in being able to analyze and reflect on a lesson. Even though I left class feeling unhappy and unsuccessful on many different levels, I needed to think about what had happened and where things went wrong. I realized that I had been inadequately prepared for the lesson, but I also realized that I had made a few erroneous assumptions and that these assumptions had contributed to the day's frustration.

The first assumption I made was that teaching in an intellectually honest manner meant that I should present the material in its purest form, the text itself. Going with the notion that plays are meant to be heard, I thought that having students read through the play would automatically give them access to it. I thought that hearing the words would give them a chance to visualize their own version of the play in their heads; from that visualization they would be able to piece together plot and character descriptions. I didn't take into account the fact that most of my students are not equipped to just jump right into a text and create their own visuals, and that throwing them into this situation would leave them frustrated and uninterested. Instead, I figured that since the play appealed to me on so many levels, it would also appeal to my students on many levels as well; by presenting them with the text, I would be encouraging them to make their own connections and relate to the play on their own terms instead of imposing my interpretation on them. Obviously, this line of reasoning did not work and instead of being engaged with the texts, my students were only disengaged, their attention diverting to other more interesting topics, like sketches, Cirque du Soleil, and music.

Once confronted with the fact that I hadn't adequately taken my students' needs into account, I stumbled upon one moment of intellectually honest teaching, more out of sheer desperation than any sort of careful planning. When I decided to have Aretha and Brad act out the scene between Montfleury and Cyrano, I provided my students with visual access to the play; because they were mostly familiar with the play genre, they knew how to respond to people acting in front of them. They were able to take the visual I presented to them and work with it in terms of the

text, raising the why questions I had hoped they would ask when they had read the text. In this repackaging of the text, I had come across a concept that was more intellectually honest to their needs; I had presented them with the material in a way that gave them access on a deeper level and got them thinking about the key concepts we were focusing on, namely what motivated Cyrano (and the other characters) to act the way he did.

Using the visual representation acknowledged my students' learning styles and gave them an entrance point into material that was otherwise confusing and inaccessible. It also provided them with a more intellectually honest take on the material; indeed, plays are meant to be seen and presenting the action "on stage" gave my students a reference point the text alone couldn't. Once they had this concrete idea of what was happening, they were able to spend less time worrying about (or tuning out) the language and were able to focus more directly on the ideas and concepts we were exploring. Watching Montfleury flee into the corner and hearing the wrath of Cyrano allowed them to more deeply think about why Cyrano would be so intimidating to another person and the power he wielded in the town, something that would come up again throughout the course of the play. Inadvertently, I had discovered how effective Bruner's idea of intellectual honesty truly was in helping students better understand and tackle difficult material that didn't seem to have much direct relevance to their current lives.

Cyrano Revisited: Part Two

Taking my revelations from that first Wednesday, I decided the following Wednesday that I needed to really think through the lesson and design appropriate activities, especially since I knew my students would be extra-energetic right before lunch. The previous day, we briefly reviewed the film clip where Cyrano meets Roxane and learns of her love for Christian. We also closely examined the speech where Cyrano explains why he refuses to be beholden to a patron (which has been affectionately dubbed the “No Thanks” speech by the Widener English department). Each student had been given a line from the speech; they needed to study this line and explain to the class. Once they had time to prepare, we read through the speech, pausing so each student could explain his or her line. I had then given my students a very unstructured homework assignment, something along the lines of coming up with three of their own “No Thanks” statements.

Tuesday evening, I decided that the “No Thanks” speech was worth spending more time on and that it was a good opportunity for my students to make direct personal connections with the text. My opening activity involved revisiting the speech so that I could provide my students with a better structure for their statements. I also wanted to read through the section where Cyrano and Christian make a pact to woo Roxane together, and discuss the motivations behind both men’s actions. I felt that this was an appropriate amount of material to cover for the day, especially since my students often get distracted by transitions and I didn’t want to switch gears too many times. This lesson was being videotaped, something that had the potential to get them off-topic and even more unfocused than usual. Even though I had gone over my lesson plan with both Jessica and my supervisor (who was videotaping), I was still nervous because I didn’t know what to expect. My class is quite unpredictable, and even though I felt I had done a solid job of planning activities that fit together nicely, I knew that no matter how much planning I did, they would ultimately affect how well the lesson turned out. With this in mind, I walked into class, feeling fairly prepared but still quite intimidated by the memories of the previous Wednesday’s chaos.

In order to focus everyone from the very beginning, I started off the lesson by creating a circle in the front of the room, using yellow stickies with students' names on the floor. I encountered my first decision here; Jessica had inadvertently left the name stickies in the English Department, so I had to decide if I wanted to arrange students without the stickies or if they needed the little yellow squares to help them remember where to stand. Despite the extra few minutes it would take to write out the stickies, I felt having the concretely labeled space to stand would ultimately divert potential problems, so I had students review their line as I scribbled out the stickies. The order of the stickies was linked to the lines the students had studied the previous day, so having them review their lines was not a filler activity. My circle included two exaggerated spaces where the speech changes tone; as Jessica and I had discovered the previous day, the "No Thanks" speech is broken into three different sections: what Cyrano won't do, what he will do, and why. Setting up the circle this way would scaffold for their writing assignment, since they would have to follow the same pattern Cyrano uses in his speech. I also thought having a visual representation would help more of my students see how the speech was arranged.

Once we formed the circle, I had each student read through his or her line, reviewing the entire speech first. We then looked at the circle as a whole and I asked them about its structure, even though I had previously planned on telling them about why I had included the two breaks. Brad volunteered the idea that it was split into three parts just like the speech, but Aretha was the one who made the more concrete connection between the three sections and their foci. With this connection made, I then told my students to come up with three statements of their own: something they won't do at any cost, something they will do no matter what, and an explanation of why for both.

After ten to fifteen minutes of quiet reflection and writing, I had a few students share their statements. Robbie's three statements were "I would never kill anyone, I will always play football," and "Killing people is wrong because it is against the law and I love playing football." I pointed out how his passion for football related to Cyrano's passion for being independent. Brad said that he would "always do what I think is staying true to myself, and I will never sell out because

selling out is not being true to who you really are and that is wrong.” Chris offered a slightly different interpretation, saying that he “would always live in awareness, even if it means being miserable and unhappy because I don’t want to live in ignorance and bliss.” Students spent some time discussing why he would say this, and why it would be better to be unhappy and aware of your life instead of living in ignorance. *The Matrix* came up as an analogy to illustrate Chris’ point and students were able to relate his idea to the reason why Neo decided to take the red pill of awareness instead of taking the blue pill that would make him forget everything.

Once we spent time talking about the students’ own statements and relating them back to Cyrano and his statements, we moved on to the next interaction, which was between Cyrano and Christian. In order to get students thinking about what was coming up, I had them guess what would happen when Cyrano met Christian: if he would go along with his promise to Roxane and protect Christian, if he would end up breaking this promise, and why. Most students felt that he would go along with his promise to Roxane, although he wouldn’t be happy about it, but Ivan argued that he would break his word and get into a fight with Christian instead. With these predictions still fresh in their minds, I split the students into their groups of three and had them read through the interaction so they could see what really happened. The trio readings were a way to keep students more focused and more engaged; I had created groups that combined strong and weak readers so that stronger readers could help explain what was happening to the weaker readers. Despite this support the weaker readers were still able to participate because they could read the smaller side parts. Once students finished reading through the scene and discussing, I brought everyone back into the large group and asked them why Cyrano kept his promise to Roxane. Shane said he was “a gentleman,” and Ivan said that “Cyrano loved Roxane, and when you truly love someone, you put their happiness before yours, no matter how hard it is.” We talked a bit more about the kind of person Cyrano is and how easy or difficult it is to put someone before yourself, and then I gave them their homework assignment,

which was to read a scene that focused on Roxane and decide how they would describe her.

As my students shuffled out of the classroom and I prepared to dash off to my supervisory meeting, I took a few minutes to breathe and smile. Even though I had been nervous and worried about falling on my face once again, it seemed like my students had really understood what was going on, especially in relation to Cyrano himself.

An Honest Look at the Bigger Intellectual Picture

Despite my anxiety and much to my surprise, my second lesson turned into a fairly successful event. Even as I took the time to savor the effects of my careful planning and scaffolding, I found myself wondering what aspects of my lesson made it so effective.

Once again, I found myself face to face with Bruner and his idea of intellectual honesty. Taking my lesson piece by piece, I saw that I had done a much better job of presenting the material in a way that was true to my students' needs and interests, giving them an opportunity to visualize, relate more intimately to the characters, and interact with the text on a less threatening level. I also was able to incorporate several strategies instead of just focusing on one approach; I incorporated some kinesthetic activity (standing in the circle), some writing and higher-order thinking (coming up with their statements), and quite a bit of verbal communication (discussing the statements and reading the play aloud). These diverse activities allowed more students better access to the material; in giving them a chance to move between representations, I also gave them very different ways of accessing the material. All of these activities offered some intellectual insight into the play because I had taken into consideration my students needs and tried to fashion the material in ways that would best suit their learning strengths.

Although I had not intentionally set out with the purpose of seeing how effective Bruner's theory was, in thinking about the best way to make the material interesting and relevant to my students, I had to take into account the idea of intellectual honesty. There is a delicate balance between presenting the material in a pure form and getting students to make connections they aren't necessarily capable of making yet and shaping the material in a way that doesn't completely distort it but allows students access in a way that is comfortable for them and inspires them to dig deeper. By offering the material in a context that was different but not completely far-fetched (standing in a circle isn't too intimidating or outlandish), I allowed them to see the play as something more dynamic than just words on a page and I gave them an "in" they hadn't seen themselves. This, to me, is intellectually honest teaching: noticing the "in"s that will capture your students'

interest and coax them into making the connections you know they are capable of making.

When designing my second lesson, I learned from my previous mistake and became more conscious of my students' need; instead of being so focused on the fact that we only had twelve days to get through the play and I had no idea how that was even going to happen, I thought deeply about how to best get them engaged in the material in a way that was authentic and enticing. By keeping this goal in mind all throughout my second lesson, I realized that it was possible, if challenging, to teach in a way that was true to both the students and the material.

One of the cores of good teaching, it seems to me, is truly having a sense of what your students need; this is one of the cores of intellectual honesty as well. As hard as it is to remember the needs of all students, or to figure them out to begin with (something I struggle with now as I become more acquainted with my new group of students), maintaining a strong awareness of the impact of intellectual honesty is quite essential for good teaching. Students need to be engaged with the material before teaching can really happen, and presenting it in an intellectually honest way will help them to make the leaps and connections that they didn't realize they even could.