



# Teaching Historical Interpretation in the Literature Classroom

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MaRke but this flea, and marke in this,  
How little that which thou deny'st me is;  
It luek'd me first, and now sucks thee,  
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;  
Thou know'st that this cannot be said  
A finne, nor shame nor losse of maidenhead,  
Yet this enjoys before it wooe,  
And pamp'rd swells with one blood made of two,  
And this, alas, is more then wee would doe.

## Project Rationale

Students in my general education literature course (ENG 203: English Literature I) (mostly sophomore, non-English-majors) are supposed to be able to “explain how content is shaped by the context in which it was created” and “develop and defend coherent interpretations ... of texts.” But in their poetic interpretations students struggle to link these two outcomes. Even when I provide historical background, students read poems through a contemporary lens or as an expression of feeling.

My hypothesis was that **students associate poetry with feelings, and this “inappropriate prior knowledge” locks them into certain kinds of readings** (Ambrose, *et al*, 20). I wondered if I was experiencing an instance of “expert blind spot” (Ambrose, *et al*, 99). **Students weren’t making the expert move that literary scholars make; in this case, literary scholars see historical poetry and automatically place the poem in its historical context.**

My goal was to help students make this *expert move* without being specifically prompted to do so. Instead of skipping over the moments in a poem that are strange/weird/different, I wanted students to realize that historical context can be used as a tool for interpretation. I hoped to help students develop just one of the “elements of mastery” in literary study (Ambrose, *et al*, 99). This disciplinary *expert move* strengthens general skills in analytical thinking and demonstrates connections across the disciplines.

## Methodology

For this study I tested the effectiveness of a “talk out loud” or “think-aloud” teaching strategy to model metacognitive processes and thus to teach students to recognize the need to read poetry historically (Ambrose, *et al*, 214-215; Kucan and Beck; Lapp, *et al*; Linkon 111-114). I wanted to see if this strategy could teach students an aspect of “mastery” in the discipline of literary scholarship. I chose not to specifically prompt students to perform historical interpretation because I wanted to see if a “think-aloud” could help students not only to perform historical interpretation, but also to realize its necessity. The study involved one double section of ENG 203 in fall 2014. 60 students were enrolled; 59 agreed to participate in this study. The study took place in the second week of the semester.

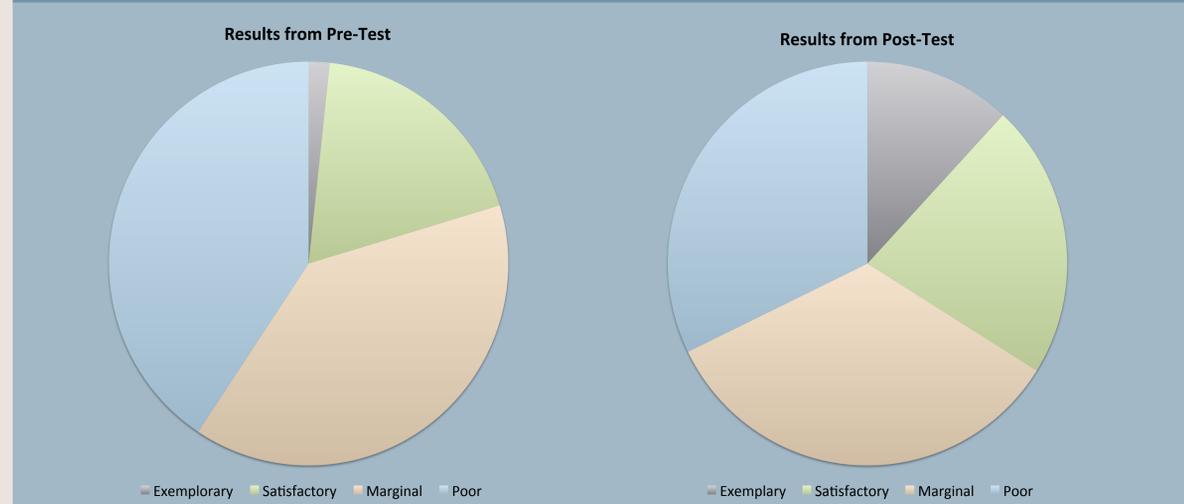
- As a **pre-test** I gave students the following prompt with no introduction to the poet or 17<sup>th</sup>-century England: Write a 500+ word essay in which you develop and defend an interpretation of Donne’s “The Flea.” Your interpretation should be grounded in the text (*e.g.* close reading of words, phrases, literary elements) as well as in some context (*e.g.* historical, theoretical, cultural, generic, biographical). You may consult valid secondary sources. I graded the essays on a credit/no credit basis.
- After the pre-test had been submitted, students read a second poem by Donne, “The Sun Rising,” as well as introductory material from our anthology entitled, “The Early Seventeenth Century,” that provided historical and cultural background, some of it specific to Donne and his poetry. I then did a brief “**think aloud**” on Donne’s “The Flea” and a detailed one on “The Sun Rising” in class, highlighting the importance of, and techniques involved in, historical interpretation. *All* of the students were present for my “think aloud” on “The Sun Rising.”
- As a **post-test** I gave students the same writing prompt as the pre-test, but with a new poem: Donne’s “The Good-Morrow.” I graded these essays on a letter grade basis.

NOTE: I chose poems by the 17<sup>th</sup>-Century English poet, John Donne, because he is known as being a poet of *his time*; meaning, he didn’t go to the classics for all of his images, but he drew them from things like new scientific discoveries, “new world” colonization, bug-infested realities, and religious persecutions.

Exemplary	Satisfactory	Marginal	Poor
-Student incorporates good historical context sufficiently -Demonstrates thoughtful historical reading -Thoughts pulled from the poem are focused on and supported by the historical context -Essay uses evidence that is relevant to the period and supports their reading  <b>Expert move has been made</b>	-Student engages with historical context to aid their interpretation -Identifies moments of historical relevance and involves the surrounding context -Thoughts may need additional support from improved/increased historical interpretation  <b>Expert move has been made, but could benefit from more practice with historical interpretation</b>	-Student notices/recognizes historically significant moments in the text, but engages little with historical context (does not engage <i>enough</i> with context) -Relies primarily on their feelings about the text to make their argument -Thoughts are not focuses on historical context; interpretation lacks period insight  (Too much feeling, not enough context)  <b>Expert move has NOT been made, but could be made with further instruction and practice</b>	-Student does not incorporate historically appropriate context -Focuses too much on summarizing the content of the poem -Essay focuses on feelings and impression of the text; relies on own thoughts to support their argument  <b>Expert move has NOT been made</b>

Figure 1 (above) shows the rubric that was used to analyze students’ pre- and post-tests to determine if they had made the “expert move.” Students were placed in the four categories based on the integration and quality of historical context in their essays.

## Results



Figures 2 (left) and 3 (right) detail the results from the pre-test and post-test after they were analyzed for historical context using the rubric in Figure 1. These charts also show the changes that occurred in students’ incorporation of historical context after the “think-aloud” strategy was conducted.

- The post-test results show that **20 students (33%) had shown sufficient contextual integration to place them in the “Exemplary” or “Satisfactory” categories by the post-test**, indicating that they had made the “expert move.”
- In addition, the results show that while 12 students moved “down” from their original rubric standings from the pre-test, 4 had already achieved a “Satisfactory” placement, and are therefore included in the total of students who had made the “expert move.” 24 students achieved the “expert” status (41%) for their integration of historical context in their pre- and/or post-test interpretations.
- It should also be noted that **22 students (40%) improved their integration of historical context enough from the pre- to post-test to move them “up” on the rubric** used to analyze their essays (Figure 1). While not all of these students were considered “experts” by the post-test, it does indicate that they benefited from the “think-aloud.”

## Conclusions

Overall, the results from this project are encouraging. If 12 students can improve and make the “expert move” without specific prompting to do historical interpretation, and with only one day spent conducting a “think-aloud,” the above results suggest that **conducting regular “think-alouds” would be worthwhile** in aiding students to consider historical context and moving them towards more sophisticated forms of interpretation. If 22 students improved their interpretations by adding more historical context after one “think-aloud,” more would improve over time if “think-alouds” were employed regularly.

There were 12 students who went “down” on the rubric from the pre- to post-tests, but it should be noted that 4 of these students had already achieved “expert” standing by earning “Satisfactory” on the pre-test. The students were not specifically prompted to employ an historical lens; a variety of lenses could be used, so it is perhaps sufficient that they demonstrated the “expert move” once.

These results suggest that **the “think-aloud” method could easily be used when looking to integrate other contexts (in addition to historical) in General Education literature courses.** In applying the “think-aloud” strategy, students’ understanding of the contexts that can be used in interpretation would benefit from the time spent showing the importance of that lens and how it can best be used.

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