Approaches to Teaching Dante’s *Divine Comedy*

Second Edition

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Beatrice in the Tag Cloud

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Anyone hoping to tackle Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in a semester-long undergraduate course today faces two problems, both of scale.\(^1\) The first is the poem itself—assigning all 14,233 verses during a semester is not for the faint of heart. Some instructors dodge the problem entirely, dividing the *Inferno* and the remaining canticles over the course of a year, whereas others apportion cantos from all three canticles with hopes for an abridged, yet complete, pilgrimage. This problem, however, doesn’t lend itself to an easily generalized approach to teaching the *Comedy* in the undergraduate classroom. Far easier to tackle, at least in this setting, is the problem posed by the sheer number of resources at our students’ fingertips.

Centuries of commentaries, studies, translations, adaptations, and more are available at the click of a mouse. In 2012, typing “dante’s divine comedy” into a Google search box yielded almost instantly 2.5 million results. Five years later, if a student attempted a similar search, it could yield over forty times that amount. It is easy to see how a student might be overwhelmed by the prospect of a five- to eight-page essay on Dante’s understanding of the concept of love, particularly if a search box is just a click away.

This search box problem has been described by media theorist Clay Shirky as “filter failure.”\(^2\) Shirky points out that information overload is not a new problem, but our diminishing capacity to filter for quality is unique to our information age. Yet, teaching students to manage this volume of information flow is analogous to the explicit aims of Dante’s encyclopedic approach to knowledge in the *Comedy*. And developing the ability to filter, discern, and refine significant information is the crux of humanities coursework, requiring students to develop their skills in both inquiry and analysis.\(^3\) Here, inquiry may be understood as the exploration of issues or works through the collection and analysis of evidence that results in informed conclusions, whereas analysis is the process of breaking complex topics into parts or, to use Shirky’s term, “filtering” in order to gain a better understanding of them.

Of course the complexity of writing tasks associated with inquiry and analysis is determined by how much information or guidance is provided to the student and how much is left to the student to construct independently.\(^4\) In this particular course, Dante in Translation, a weekly section provided an hour’s worth of guided discussion, and two seventy-five minute lectures placed Dante’s work in the intellectual and social context of the late Middle Ages. Students also had access to thirty additional hours of recorded lectures from a similar course on Dante, made freely available online by Yale Open Courses.\(^5\) In addition to a final exam, students would write a final paper on a topic of their choice of approximately three thousand words that would draw on, presumably, their reading of the entirety of the *Comedy*, their notes from thirty (or even sixty) hours
of lectures, the print and online resources placed on hold for the course in the
library, and the flotsam and jetsam churned up by commercial search engines.
Could this final writing task be scaffolded so that students could focus and sup-
port their written work with the substance of the poem through sustained,
guided practice?

Leading students through the process of preliminary exploration of the Comedy
with low-stakes writing assignments allows them to collect, reflect, and
share their perspectives over the course of a semester. WordPress, a free and
open-source content management system, facilitated the publication and collec-
tion of these assignments over the course of a semester. In its role as an asyn-
chronous online venue for discussion, the blog also extended and enhanced
classroom discussion, creating a space for intellectual digression and creativity,
as well as ongoing instruction.

Initially, students posted questions or comments on a specific theme or verses
each week before arriving in class. Initial writing assignments were simply first-
order expectations for learning, such as pick a passage you enjoyed and explain
why; or summarize an encounter between the pilgrim and a soul in Hell. Soon,
the prompts developed into second-order expectations, such as synthesis and
evaluation, associated with successive milestones in the VALUE (Valid Assess-
ment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubric. How does the pilgrim
view the sins of the damned? What did you find perplexing? These would allow
them to thread material from the lecture into their responses, drawing connec-
tions, probing questions, and suggesting the direction of our discussion.

As they entered the classroom, the most recent posts were projected for
everyone to see. Late or missing comments were noted and rarely recurred;
small conversations broke out among those puzzling over similar questions. The
posts provided the class with collectively selected points for discussion. Sixty
minutes later, these discussions would spill back into our online venue and more
than a few would stay after class to “get something up on the blog” while it was
on their mind. These posts were frequently collaborative, and went above and
beyond those required for the course. From the very beginning, the students
grasped the blog as a resource for them to plumb later on, a digital book of
memory.

One prompt that captured the attention of several students was on sensory
perception in the Inferno. Sights, sounds, smells, and the sense (or absence) of
touch among the souls of the damned provided a rich vein a number of students
would continue to explore throughout the course. The following is an example
of an early post from a physics major:

Throughout Inferno, of all the senses, Dante references sight the most.
While this is understandable in that sight is the sense we depend most on,
Dante seems to place much more emphasis on the eyes than necessary.
Does Dante view them as a window through which souls can see and
understand one another? In 1.10.131 (p. 139), Dante refers to Beatrice as
the one “whose fair eyes see all.” When Cavalcanti asks if his son has died or not, he asks if the light “strikes not the sweet light on his eyes.” In Canto 13, Dante describes the eyes of a harlot as shameless (vv. 64–65). Even later still, in Canto 15 when Dante and Brunetto recognize each other, Dante speaks of fixing his eyes on him.

Once students completed a post such as this one, they were also asked to use WordPress’s tagging feature. When used thoughtfully, tagging is particularly apt for filtering large amounts of information while building momentum for a collective consensus. Indicated by the pound sign (#) on several social networks and microblogging services, it is a form of metadata. These, known in WordPress as tags, make it easier for users to find posts with a specific themes or content, and it allows students to index small portions of writing (even a 140-character tweet) by whatever they deem valuable. Unlike other forms of metadata, however, tags can be subjective and even idiosyncratic. They can be descriptive or denotative, playful or sardonic. In social media, a hashtag archive is collected into a single stream under the same hashtag. An index would list alphabetically subjects and the location of their citation in the text (e.g., Acquasparta, Cardinal Matthew—Par. 12.124), but in WordPress, our tag archive is linked to the students’ commentary on the blog. The archive is graphically displayed as a word cloud; the more frequently posts are tagged with a key word, the larger the word’s appearance in the cloud.

The post above was tagged by the student as “sight,” “Inferno,” “eyes,” and “senses.” These tags allowed another student who, on reading Beatrice’s words to the pilgrim in Purgatory 32, “al carro tiieni o li occhi, e quel che vedi, / ritor-nato di là, fa che tu scrive” (“hold thine eyes now on the ear and what thou seest do thou write when thou hast returned yonder”; 104–05), was prompted to return to his classmate’s comments on sight and add his own reflections on bearing witness through the Comedy.

As the students’ online discussions proliferated, and so much of their interests were reflected in the blog, they soon realized they were creating their own index for our class discussions, an index that would prove extremely valuable to them as they began formulating arguments for their final papers. Each word linked to posts on that topic, regardless of who wrote the post. It allowed students to dig through the blog and read comments across cantos, for example, or posts that examine Dante’s relationship to the classical tradition. At our last meeting, the students remarked on how Beatrice seemed to dominate our tag cloud. Her arrival at the end of Purgatory coincided with their realization that tagging was a useful tool, and a number of reflections on our discussions on Vita nova at the beginning of the semester prompted the students to go back to their posts and retag them.

The blog posts are an example of sustained, guided practice where students have ample opportunities to write and receive feedback from both instructor and peers. By guiding students through systematically more complex pieces of
writing—from description to synthesis, like the examples above—the blog helped students consolidate and transfer skills from one occasion to the next. And, in receiving formative assessments such as comments, encouragement, or critiques, students also are asked to make their thinking processes visible and to give grounds for them. We saw earlier the preliminary stages of formulating a paper topic, and how on the blog such a topic would be subjected to peer review. Choosing a topic, crafting an argument, harnessing textual support, and prewriting were all subject to peer scrutiny online and in class, and although students were reluctant to comment on others’ work online, the classroom discussions shaped the final results.

We see this play out in the paper written by the physics major interested in the interaction between the gazes of Dante the pilgrim and the souls he encounters on his journey. The same student returns to this theme in a post a few weeks later, expanding and exploring his ideas in greater detail, adding:

Overall, Dante seems to refer back to the eyes when Dante meets a new character and begins to understand or recognize who they are. . . . How Dante meets or has his gaze met by other characters becomes significant. Except for a few key moments in the Inferno, Dante does not meet [a] character’s gaze but instead merely describes them, from the “burning coal” of Charon and the red-eyed ferocious Cerberus to the “slow-moving eyes” of the denizens of Limbo, some of which he does look up to and uplift himself with. He actively avoids one’s view with the temptation of the gorgon’s stare (which represents both physical and spiritual petrifaction) and the sinners in the final circle of Hell. Shortly after entering Purgatory, Dante meets up with Manfred, and the two share a mutual gaze, symbolically placing Dante on the same level as the other hopeful penitents as he prepares to climb the mountain. Partly through the journey, after being tempted by lust in the siren’s dream, he awakes and immediately searches for Virgil’s eyes and finds them.

The final paper would focus on the dynamics of the gaze in Purgatory, where “characters are present in a time-oriented environment and can thus be dynamically described through contrasts in aspects of vision. Within the canticle of atonement and spiritual development, Dante catalogs this spiritual progress of the Pilgrim as well as that of the penitent through changes in a character’s ability to meet another’s eyes.” The student continues, “Specifically, Dante’s progress as a penitent is described through how Dante views and is viewed by the other characters, with a reciprocal meeting of the eyes symbolizing equality between characters and a one-sided gaze symbolizing dominance on the part of the viewed.”

This student essay draws exclusively from the blog, using the online lectures and notes from classroom lectures as secondary resources. As one student remarked, “With the blog, I didn’t really need to go anywhere else.” In addition to
the blog posts providing students with ample opportunities to practice their writing skills in both analysis and inquiry, the associated tags create an expedient filter that allows students to focus on progressively expanding existing abilities with sequential writing tasks while not losing sight of the far more complex task that will complete their first journey as a reader through the *Comedy*.

NOTES

1 It is a daunting task to introduce beginners to a field of study that has historically generated an infinitude of research. My thanks to Giuseppe Mazzotta and the students of Dante in Translation for their enthusiasm and sense of purpose in this endeavor.

2 Shirky writes, "What we’re dealing with now is not the problem of information overload, because we’re always dealing (and always have been dealing) with information overload . . . . Thinking about information overload isn’t accurately describing the problem; thinking about filter failure is.”

3 Inquiry and analysis are included among the essential learning outcomes as outlined in the report from the National Leadership Council, *College Learning for the New Global Century* (3).

4 See the most recent report of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, *On Solid Ground: Value Report 2017*, which discusses the current landscape of key learning outcomes in undergraduate education according to the VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) initiative. These rubrics, grounded in research and best practices derived from educational psychology, cognitive psychology, student development theory, and instructional design, generate data or qualitative and quantitative methodological assessment. The rubrics outline the intentional progression from benchmark (1), to milestone (2), milestone (3) and capstone (4) and in doing so provide valuable insight into student progression from first-order expectations for learning (for example, the memorization and description associated with the benchmark level) to second-order expectations for learning, such as synthesis and evaluation, associated with the successive milestones.

5 The course is available online (Mazzotta, Dante in Translation). The same lectures are also available through Apple’s online platform *iTunes U*.

6 Although this particular instance of *WordPress* was installed on a local server and not publicly available, a public site would entail a number of other requirements, including a detailed classroom discussion of campus policies regarding student privacy and the possibility of students posting under a pseudonym, to mention just a few. For more on student privacy issues and helpful information about blogs in the classroom, see Sample’s discussion.

7 References are to the text assigned in the course, a reprint of Sinclair’s 1939 prose translation for John Lane and Elkin Matthews at The Bodley Head.