

GIVING MEANING TO THE ABSURD



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In a modern educational context that pursues objectives based on competencies, teachers who care about the quality and content of their teaching must be creative and innovative in order to gain access to the acquired knowledge of their students. If students are to find meaning (Aylwin, 1992; Develay, 1994) and (therefore), be active in their own learning processes, subject matter must initially connect to their primary culture and serve as a basis for the construction of their literary knowledge (secondary culture). From this constructivist perspective, using the group's knowledge as the starting point seems to set in motion the dynamics for integration, participation and success!

THE BASIS FOR THE SEQUENCE

The summarized presentation of the proposed didactic sequence below provides teaching methods and activities that optimize pedagogical strategies and ensure a better transfer of literary content. This document is based on the work *Rhinoceros*, a theatrical play by Eugène Ionesco, used as a symbolic illustration of the movement of the absurd in the course *Littérature et imaginaire* (601-102-04). Why this play more than another one? Quite simply because it presents marvellous challenges, while avoiding the possibility of an overly brutal encounter between students and author, as could be the case with *The Bald Soprano* (*La cantatrice chauve*) for example, where the nonsense is much more destabilizing. *Rhinoceros* presents a more obvious dichotomy of characters

and themes that are more readily identifiable by students who in turn can find corresponding examples of incommunicability, marginality and conformism in their own daily life. Despite these updatable reference points, *Rhinoceros* also causes literary resistance that must be dealt with. This will require that the teacher implement a plan to cover the content which includes on-going coaching of the play under study, as well as manage the foreseeable difficulties in language and speech on one hand, and the characters and values portrayed in the play on the other. Recognition of these difficulties highlights both the concept of incommunicability as well as that of conformism versus marginality, which we tackle through two distinct modules. Each of the proposed integrating activities corresponds to one particular dimension of learning, be it reading, writing or oral communication. As previously mentioned, the latter three involve coaching by the teacher before, during, and after the reading of the play in order to guide student learning.

Given that the literary work demands concentration to follow and the fact we can expect resistance, it would be appropriate for the teacher to follow up as regards comprehension during the study and to vary the activities so they facilitate the students' grasp of the play. With regard to the literary content, a sequence was developed in order for students to receive blocks of theory distributed over several courses. This is done to avoid needlessly weighing down explicit instruction and to allow students to make the most of their knowledge by actively participating in their own learning process. In this context, the teacher will favour theory development that uses student knowledge and observations as its starting point rather than presenting the theory *beforehand*. The teacher will use various types of material—audio-visual, literary, photocopies—to animate and support the sessions as well as to stimulate the group's attention.

WORKS STUDIED

The pedagogical material also includes two literary works to be reviewed at the same time as *Rhinoceros: The Bald Soprano* by the same author and *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. Our approach here is to use four a total of (4) excerpts as a thematic introduction to the play, since they also highlight the concept of "incommunicability" found in *Rhinoceros*. This networking activity (Touveron, 2002) provides student with the opportunity to work on language and speech through a theatrical medium, with its multiple dialogues and voices. Later, when immersed in reading the Ionesco play, he will be less destabilized by all these elements since he will have been able to prepare himself by analyzing similar works.

Other works, in this case visual ones, could also be reviewed within the framework of the sequence. We refer specifically to humorous sketches such as *Parler en même temps* by Denis Drolet and *Les reproches* by Jean-Thomas Jobin, two modern video versions of the phenomenon of the absurd. Presented in the form of introductions, they offer students a first contact with this unique genre. It will make it easier to sensitize them to the genre because the example comes from their own current realities. So, in establishing a bridge to the students' primary culture, the transition



to the secondary culture via *Rhinoceros* will be facilitated. It then becomes a case of transposing these observations to a more literary context via the analysis and appropriation of the Ionesco play.

In order to illustrate the transition from written page to performing stage and to insist on the fact that theatre must not only be read but also seen, it would seem relevant to present a video clip of *Rhinoceros* to the students. This excerpt will have special significance since it covers the same section of the script that will have been read in class by the students. This will allow them to visualize the staged transformation of a theatrical literary text while integrating various drama-related concepts covered during the third introductory activity. It can also be seen as a reinvestment and an exemplification of the content seen previously. The fact of attending a play collectively within a local institution can prove to be a very enriching experience for students when programming allows it, because this experience enables them to participate in a contemporary phenomenon and makes the play they are studying in class that much more real and concrete.

We could also contemplate viewing and analyzing a popular film like *X-Men III*, for example, which is directly connected to the primary culture of college students and conveys themes that correspond to those in *Rhinoceros*, conformism and marginality. The film depicts the opposition between these two concepts and seeing this conflict in images accentuates its impact, in addition to facilitating its comprehension by students. This stage of recognition and reinforcement of acquired knowledge is important from a constructivist perspective. It also allows the student to use his judgement by calling on what he already knows to better face the unknown *afterwards*.

OBJECTIVES

The presentation of these works leads to a transferability of acquired knowledge and competency that corresponds to one of the principal objectives of the sequence, to give meaning to what the students are learning. Consequently, content is no longer simply subject matter, but rather a useful tool not only for academic life but for everyday life as well. As part of the *Littérature et imaginaire* course within the college program, the sequence must cover the required subject matter, in particular modern literature, and meet ministerial expectations whose final objective is “To explain the representations of the world contained in various types of literary texts from various times”. In addition to complying with this mission, the sequence also proposes to fulfill the educational mandate of taking into account the five components of competencies, by associating each one to the activities carried out during the weeks spent studying the absurdity movement. Moreover, these activities are designed to establish a link between the students’ primary culture and the secondary culture that they will have to appropriate to enrich and construct their knowledge. Thus, whether they are institutional or “personal”, intermediate or final, the targeted objectives will tend to be realized within the framework of various academic achievements.

THE CONTENT

Concerned about smoothing over inherent difficulties in the work on the levels of speech and characters, and in pursuing program objectives in terms of content

to be covered, the three introductory activities will be used to build the initial basic theoretical notions on the concept of absurdity (activity 1), of a theatrical work (activity 2) and the interpretation of a theatrical element (activity 3).

Following this, it will be essential to identify the precise characteristics of incommunicability in order to continue the analysis of the work. And since a theatrical text cannot exist without its staged transposition, the mechanisms and impact of this necessary complementarity would then be discussed, leading to a second look at the theme itself. A short bio on Ionesco as well as the type of perspective he recommends in *Rhinoceros*—its main underlying theme—are additional components that are relevant to understanding the play and its underlying principles, and also to helping students grasp what is really at stake.

Finally, as module 1 comes to an end and makes way for the next one, it is the concepts of conformity and marginality that will need to be defined in order to discuss the absurd characters in the play. Obviously, the time and place when the play was written and performed will also have to be specified to ensure that students have a better understanding of the context.

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SYNTHESIS OF THE SEQUENCE

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES TO RHINOCEROS AND THE MOVEMENT OF THE ABSURD

The first introductory activity is designed to establish a connection with the primary culture of students by means of two humorous sketches on the absurd: *Parler en même temps* by Denis Drolet and *Les reproches* by Jean-Thomas Jobin. This would be the students' first contact with the absurd, to which a theoretical block will be connected in accordance with their prior observations. This first step towards the theatre of Ionesco would already put the accent on reflection and critical thinking that underlie the characteristics of the movement of the absurd. Using an example drawn from their daily life, students are made aware of the humour that results from the absurd which in turn gives rise to a more existential meaning of the apparent banality of topics.

The second activity is two-fold and deals more with students' affective nature. First, the teacher should introduce the phenomenon of metamorphosis by calling on the students' memory, since they should all have at least one example to provide, be it *Beauty and the Beast*, vampires or werewolves, etc. Once this first bridge has been established, the teacher should then be in a position to lead the students towards the more literary meaning of metamorphosis by reading an excerpt from Kafka in order to illustrate the phenomenon from a narrative perspective; back in class, students' written commentary on what these transformations symbolize will reveal all their richness and significance. Before the end of the course, the students would be invited to stage their own metamorphosis for the next

course and then to explain the reasons behind it. During the review by the entire group, the students' perceptions and concerns would be brought to light by analyzing the meaning behind their metamorphoses; this calls into play the students' affective dimension, since they will not only have to find examples in their daily life but also delve into their innermost core to conceive such an animalistic expression of themselves.

We should be able to consider the subject sufficiently covered when the theatrical dimension is reached, and this is what the third introductory activity is designed to do: Introduce and apply an analytical exercise to a theatrical element while integrating a content specific to this performing art. A photograph of the staging of *Rhinoceros*, immortalized at a 1960 performance, could be used as a symbolic element for group analysis. This image reveals a lot: the set, the actors, etc. Here, it is important to be aware that set components provide the meaning and the essence of the play; they also animate the play, as does the lighting, sound, interplay of actors, costumes and staging. Each element is the product of a reflection and carries a particular symbolic value that accentuate—very significantly at times—the written text of the play.

ACTIVITIES TO GRASP THE WORK

Activity 4: analysis of excerpts

The objective of the first activity in module 1 is to familiarize students with the theatre of the absurd. To begin with, the aesthetics of the theatre of the absurd are difficult for them to understand because they differ diametrically from the aesthetics with which they are familiar. This is why it is relevant to study short excerpts before undertaking a study of the complete work. Moreover, it is also an opportunity to connect the play with other works in the hope of stimulating the development of a secondary culture in students.

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For this initial contact with the theatre of the absurd, we propose a study on the theme of incommunicability in two specific works, *The Bald Soprano* by Ionesco and *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett. We will straightaway study language: a component that will likely be problematic for the student. Language is usually seen as a communication tool. However, this assumption is questioned in the theatre of the absurd. The nonsensical dialogues as well as the absurdity of certain exchanges are problematic for the student. This is why the study of certain excerpts, at first glance devoid of meaning, becomes essential to grasp one of the major themes of the plays: incommunicability. This thematic analysis is designed to develop the ability "To recognize a thematic treatment in a text", one of the competency components specified by the Ministère. Lastly, this activity is based on a constructivist approach, since the student must build his knowledge using preliminary analyses that will be validated subsequently by the teacher.



Activity 5: collective reading and analysis of the beginning of the play

This activity brings students to transfer the knowledge acquired on incommunicability during the preceding activity to a work they will read in its entirety: *Rhinoceros*. Initially, this activity should allow students to reactivate their knowledge in addition to strengthening a component of a ministerial competency, i.e., “To recognize a thematic treatment in a text”. This collective reading should also facilitate the mental representation of the play. The large number of characters could lead to resistance during the initial reading. However, during this interpretation with the entire group, each character is played by a student; this facilitates understanding and helps students visualize the staged performance. In this way, students are less likely to be initially put off by the abundance of characters.

Moreover, in order to look further into the theme of incommunicability, the activity introduces the concept of debate, an ever-present characteristic in *Rhinoceros*. In a context of college studies where the teacher helps the student acquire competency in effective communication and develop critical thinking, this play represents a formidable tool.

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Activity 6: written commentary after viewing the excerpt previously read in class

With a view to continuity with the first two activities of the module, the student is now called on to connect theatrical notions to the concept of incommunicability. This could entail being called upon to analyze a staged performance of the excerpt previously read in class. This activity strengthens the ministerial competency component “Specify the relationship between reality, language and imagination” by exemplifying the incommunicability theme in connection with its staged version and from the perspective of the transposition of a literary text onto the stage. Moreover, writing a commentary helps improve several aspects of a student’s writing skills, such as text structure, grammar and syntheses.

The exercise will also allow the class to deepen its analysis of incommunicability in the text, but through a new dimension, the visual performance of the play. This is also an excellent evaluation tool to validate the integration of concepts discussed such as the characteristics of the theatre of the absurd, the theme under study, as well as the symbolism and interpretation of a theatrical element. The student thus benefits from the subtleties of adding imagery, sound and movement to a static work.

Activity 7: viewing excerpts from the film *X-Men III*

The complex evolution of the hero in the Ionesco play proves to be a major obstacle in the work and it must be overcome so the students may better understand the world values and vision conveyed through the themes of conformism and marginality. To establish a link with the primary culture and show that the commentary in the play still rings true in the 21st century, we suggest starting with the film *X-Men III*, since it showcases the idea of marginality confronted to a conformist ideology that governs

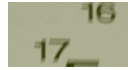
societies, with mutants on one side and the American nation on the other.

On one hand, this viewing in class should make it possible to define the concepts being studied and relate them to the context of their emergence by establishing a parallel with the existentialist movement that overlaps the literary period of the movement of the absurd at the end of the 20th century. In doing so, the third ministerial component of competency would be achieved, that is, “To place the text within its cultural and sociohistoric context”. This would involve the literary and socio-historic content dealt with in the play, that is, the definitions and characteristics of the terms “conformism” and “marginality” in relation to the existentialist movement that was evolving in parallel to the literary movement of the absurd and from which arose universal, existential and humanistic concerns specific to these times.

To use the student’s primary culture and knowledge as the starting point is the aspect of the activity that will ultimately allow for building a theory that is connected to the literary content to be covered.

The significance of this viewing is that students will have to build their own paths of reflection to define the concepts of conformism and marginality showcased through their cinematographic transposition and based on what they already know on the subject.

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Activity 8: comparative table of the characters Jean and Berenger

Once the concepts have been defined and illustrated, their transposition to the work of Ionesco will be facilitated. The following activity should use the same approach as the one adopted for viewing the film, except that the student will have to contextualize the concepts under discussion. The purpose here is to lead students to acquire a secondary culture by reinvesting their knowledge in order to demystify the evolution of the hero and facilitate their understanding of him. The vision of the world emanating from the play *Rhinoceros* is rather dark since it exposes the idea of a brutal conformism that keeps an eye on each member of the normalized, controlled, and therefore aseptic society. Through the character of Berenger, the reader enters into *an animalistic fight* to safeguard his identity and originality, vis-à-vis the growing threat of depersonalization of the masses.

Confronted with the arguments of others, the student must work at formulating arguments and responses to validate his point of view and consolidate his acquired knowledge.

These background issues constitute the principal content elements that students need to integrate, as a corollary to the “characterization” of the absurd characters—existential quest and distress, depersonalization, disease, etc.—by studying the characters of Jean and Berenger. Based on their respective attitudes, their physical appearances, and the concerns that preoccupy them, everything seems to separate them. On another hand, they claim to be “best friends”... This paradox allows us to raise the obvious contrasts between the two characters by simultaneously observing

their respective regression and evolution. Since this process is complex and rather abstract, a visualization of this inverted parallel is suggested to identify the textual signs taken from acts I and II in a table drawn for this purpose. This activity should achieve the first ministerial sub-objective by putting the student in a situation where he can “recognize a thematic treatment in the text”.

The interest of this activity is due to its very nature, i.e., its socioconstructivist dimension. Confronted with the arguments of others, the student must work at formulating arguments and responses to validate his point of view and consolidate his acquired knowledge. The interaction with his colleagues also allows him to discover elements that he had perhaps not thought of, but which remain within his grasp and that another student can explain to him. To center teaching on the students and to use their knowledge as a starting point allows the teacher to provide students with a more accessible content. Consequently, students will be more active in their own learning, and their involvement will ensure long-term understanding since it is built on the practical integration of subject matter.

| DIDACTIC SEQUENCE | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|----------|
| THEMES | ACTIVITY AND UNFOLDING | TEACHING CONTENT | DURATION |
| INTRODUCTION | 1. Presentation and viewing of humorous sketches (Denis Drolet and Jean-Thomas Jobin) | - Phenomenon of the absurd | 75 min |
| | 2. Staging a metamorphosis | - Concept of metamorphosis | 75 min |
| | 3. Pictorial analysis of a theatrical set component | - Symbolic aspect of an object - Theatrical genre (literary and staging aspects) - Interpretation of a theatrical element | 60 min |
| MODULE 1 Incommunicability | 4. Analysis of excerpts of plays from the theatre of the absurd (<i>The Bald Soprano</i> and <i>Waiting for Godot</i>) | - Theatre of the absurd | 105 min |
| | 5. Reading the beginning of the play | - Incommunicability for Ionesco - Debate for Ionesco | 60 min |
| | 6. Written commentary following a viewing of an excerpt from the play in class | - Articulation of theatrical concepts with those of incommunicability (example of the theme in connection to the staging) | 60 min |
| MODULE 2 Conformism vs Marginality | 7. Viewing excerpts from the <i>X-Men III film</i> | - Concepts of conformism and marginality in connection with the concept metamorphosis | 45 min |
| | 8. Comparative table of the characters Jean and Berenger | - Publication context - Placing in parallel of characteristics of both characters - Characteristics of the absurd characters | 60 min |

CONCLUSION

All these activities are directed towards the student to ensure he occupies an active role in his cognitive process and in his acquisitions through learning. It



goes without saying that to optimize his approach and lead him towards success, evaluations must be scheduled for constructive purposes and to measure the achievement of program objectives. For example, an activity in the form of a debate could be used for the oral evaluation where each student would have to present examples of “*rhinocerotis*” in current society and then defend his ideas. The idea of conformism, like that of the debate, would then be covered as would objectives relating to content. Lastly, in addition to the written evaluation provided by the written commentary, an essay might also be a good tool for the final evaluation to validate and solidify students’ acquired knowledge. To this effect, Berenger’s final monologue proves to be very meaningful material as a synthesis of the principal elements presented in the Ionesco play. The monologue also provides opportunities for reflection on the problematics they raise.

In light of this didactic sequence, it seems obvious that teachers who want to reach their pedagogical goals must remain open minded with regard to students’ primary culture and use this as a springboard for their own didactic strategies. This will lead to continuous renewal of teachers in a more effective and efficient way. Students will feel privileged as they realize they can now benefit from a literary culture that is within their grasp and a subject matter that we, as education professionals, should value and promote accordingly. ◆

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The pedagogical concerns that deeply motivate them were demonstrated in a common university project in Didactique de la littérature (The Didactics of Literature) and led to the development of the Didactic sequence presented herein.