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# Experiencing Literary Self-Consciousness in the Classroom

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Lesson plan for John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse"

### Barthian self-consciousness in the classroom

#### **Abstract:**

This activity is a fun and even bizarre response to John Barth's highly self-referential story "Lost in the Funhouse." In that story, Barth comments extensively on the writing as it happens (as he makes it happen), alerting the reader to the conventions of fiction as he deploys them. For example, early on in the story, Barth writes, "*En route* to Ocean City he sat in the back seat of the family car with his brother Peter, age fifteen, and Magda G —, age fourteen, a pretty girl and exquisite young lady, who lived not far from them on B — Street in the town of D —, Maryland. Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality." The following activity brings such jarring commentary into the classroom by leading students to call out the conventions of the classroom as they happen; the activity makes students live the experience of interruptive meta-commentary and can thus lead to vibrant discussion on the commentary in the story, too.

#### **Procedure:**

Cut the "cue cards" listed below into separate slips of paper and hand them out to students before or at the beginning of class. (As you'll notice, there are generic slips at the end asking students to jump into the game of commentary as they see fit; these slips are often good for active, creative students. You can copy these generic ones or add more to create full-class participation if you want that; alternately, you can leave some students as observers of the commentary.) As you begin the class, carry out the steps I've noted on each slip – marking absences, writing a plan of activities on the board, asking about the weather, asking what students thought of the story, etc – so that the student commentators jump into action. (Of course, feel free to adapt these cue cards to your own class procedures.) As you move into a discussion of the novel, a discussion punctuated by sudden student intrusions, the activity will have two faces: it will be an actual discussion of the text, and it will be a meta-discussion that self-consciously reflects on the procedures of that very discussion. It's a heady, fun mix of textual discussion and lived experience.

The student commentary portion can carry on for 20 minutes or so, and then move nicely into a discussion of the effect of these intrusions into the narrative. The students have just experienced the intrusions firsthand, so they will have plenty to say. Some questions:

- How did the sudden comments affect your experience of our discussion?
- Did the comments promote thought and reflection or distract you from it?
- If you had to create your own comment, how did you do it?
- Did this class experience mirror your experience with the short story?
- If not, what are the key differences between the story and today's discussion?

**Materials:** (Cue cards)

(after I ask if X student is present for class and some students have responded; in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand): “Teachers usually check on student absences at the beginning of class, to ensure that students are available for the learning they should be taking part in.”

(after I write some words on the upper right portion of the board, say the following in a loud voice – if you miss it, say this at any later time – no need to raise your hand): “Note that the teacher has employed a top-down writing method on the blackboard, which follows the rules of our writing and reading practice to indicate that the top item will occur first, followed by the lower items, each in turn. Here sequence along a vertical axis indicates chronology.”

(after I ask about the weather and other people have answered, say the following in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand): “Talking about the weather is a common form of pleasantry in our society, a way for people to start in on a conversation. Asking about the weather is usually a way for one person to solicit agreement and common ground with other people.”

(after I ask generally what people thought about the reading, and after a few have answered, say the following in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand): “Teachers will often begin discussion with some open-ended question about the reading, to give students wide leeway in sharing their ideas. Such breadth allows students to feel comfortable with their contributions, and it gives the teacher an immediate sense of what students found most notable about the material.”

(at any point, when you see that I have called on some students who had their hands raised, say the following in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand): “Students raise their hands in a classroom to show that they have something to say. Teachers will call on those students by name, handing them the floor for a moment. The teacher shares power, but ultimately maintains it by deciding who speaks.”

(at any point during the discussion, after a few minutes, say the following in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand): “Note that the students are sitting down but that the teacher is standing. The teacher has more choice about sitting or standing or walking around the classroom, while students are expected to remain seated in one place throughout class.”

(at any point in the discussion, as long as some students are typing notes into a computer, say the following in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand): “Many students have their computers open and are typing notes on them. Students are assumed to be typing notes relevant to class discussion, but in fact they may be sneaking time on social media websites in order to break the monotony of classroom discussion and connect with their friends in other classes.”

(at any point in the discussion, after I have called on some students by their first names, say the following in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand): “Teachers generally call on students by their first names, though some teachers will use a formal or fake-formal voice and call students Miss Smith or Mr. Lee, for example. In general students will call their teachers a version of Dr., Mr, Mrs., or Ms., prefixes that show level of formal education and sometimes marital status. Names can reveal power dynamics quite quickly in a society.”

(after I have called on a student or two who has not raised a hand, say the following in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand): “Teachers may often call on a student even if that student is not indicating a desire to speak. This practice, known as “cold-calling,” allows the teacher to get quieter students into the conversation, and it also shows the class that everyone is expected to participate and share ideas, raised hand or not.”

(after I have pointed to a student by pointing my index finger towards that student, and, as you wish, before or after the student has responded, say the following in a loud voice—no need to raise your hand): “Note that the teacher used his index finger to designate the student to speak next. The index finger is called such because in our system of gestural communication we use it indicate, to point out. Such use is a convention. Using the middle finger, for instance, would have a different, perhaps even slightly hostile, effect.”

(at any point, as long as students are looking into their printed reading sheets or computers without talking, say the following in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand): “Some students may be staring into their computers or at the reading material for today. These students may indeed be concentrating on the reading, or they may be making use of the conventions of classroom activity, which suggest that students should always look actively engaged and responsible, even if students are in fact daydreaming about breakfast muffins, MTV reality shows, or social engagements with other students in class.”

(at any lull in the conversation, after 10-15 minutes of discussion, say the following in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand): “Teachers will often create activities that mirror the class material that the students have read. This mirroring allows the students to experience the material firsthand and encourages a more authentic engagement with the text, which may seem dry in comparison to the lived experience. These mirror activities can spur more lively interaction than sheer discussion.”

(once you’ve figured out what’s happening, feel free to make your own observations about classroom conventions in a loud voice – no need to raise your hand)

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