

Introducing English Studies

Chapter 9: Screencast Transcript

Slide 1 [Title slide]

Hello. I am Tonya Krouse, co-author of the textbook *Introducing English Studies*, and in this screencast, I will talk about how to become a theoretical thinker, and how theoretical thinking can enhance your interpretations.

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Topics covered will include:

1. The uses of theory
2. Thinking theoretically vs. applying theory
3. Choosing the theories and theorists that are right for you
4. Integrating theory to enhance scholarly work
5. What not to do with theory

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Many times when students first encounter theory, they find it difficult and alienating, and they don't really understand what the uses of critical theory are. Critical theory can offer a broader methodology for asking complex questions. You can use it to:

- Create a framework for analyzing a problem, asking a question, or interpreting a text.
- Marshall another kind of evidence for your own scholarly claims.
- Connect the research questions of one discipline or field to those of another.
- Explore abstract concepts as they connect to practical questions about language, literature, and more.

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It is important to note, however, that thinking theoretically is a different practice from applying critical theory to a problem, object of study, or text. Thinking theoretically means that you approach questions with theory as a context for your inquiry, and you draw on theory in the service of exploring those questions. Applying theory means that you take a research topic and you apply a theoretical approach to it. The use of theory is not motivated by a question; the approach to the topic is motivated by the desire to use a particular theory. In general, thinking theoretically will allow you to practice creative problem solving and inquiry-driven scholarship.

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Now that you have a sense of what theoretical thinking is, you might be wondering how to begin using theory yourself. How do you choose theories or theorists that are right for you?

- Identify your own interests, commitments, and questions first. Theory shouldn't be something that limits your thinking – it should serve your intellectual projects. So don't start with the theory – start with your own ideas.
- Next, pay attention to your secondary sources. What theories are they using and what theorists are they citing? Do you feel like some of your sources have arguments that resonate with you more? What theories are they using to get there? Let the scholarly conversation create a roadmap for your engagement with critical theory.
- You can also use a critical theory anthology or reference work like *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* to find out more about possible approaches or important theorists. This can be a great way to sample a particular approach and to learn a little bit before you fully commit to engaging with a particular theory or theorist.
- Finally, talk to other students and faculty members about their theoretical interests and commitments. Learning about who is interesting to others who are engaged with the same or similar scholarly conversations can help lead you to discovering interests of your own.

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Once you have found critical theory that informs your thinking, you can then think about integrating it into your own scholarly endeavors.

- Many of the different scholarly approaches in English Studies are enhanced by integrating critical theory.
- Critical theory can help to explain a difficult concept or to flesh out the approach you are taking.
- Using critical theory does not mean you can ignore primary source analysis.
- Using critical theory does not mean that you can ignore the secondary scholarly conversation that exists.

Critical theory is a framework that we can use to situate our ideas, but it does not take the place of other kinds of analysis. Instead, it supplements those other types of analysis and allows us to take them further.

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To conclude, there are some things that you should not do when you engage with critical theory.

- Don't apply the same theory for every paper you write, no matter what your topic. Theory should help you to grow as a thinker and scholar, and if you are recycling the same theory or set of ideas for every piece of writing, you aren't growing. It can be tempting to use the one theory you feel like you understand or a theory that you had luck with in the past over and over again. But this is a mistake!
- Don't pick a theory to please a professor. Trying to read your professor's mind will result in lukewarm interpretations and warmed-over ideas. Be your own scholar! Develop your own scholarly perspective!
- Don't worry about what the "hot" theory of the moment is. Much as trying to read your professor's mind is a mistake, trying to look into the crystal ball to discover what is going

to be popular in five minutes will not help you to grow as a thinker and writer. Also, those who do this are often disappointed to discover that their timing was off or that what they thought was the next big thing was not, in fact, the next big thing.

- Don't reject theory because it seems inaccessible or hard to understand. While you may find other scholarly approaches more useful to you, it is anti-intellectual to reject something that doesn't speak to you immediately. And the reality is that English Studies is heavily influenced by critical theory, so even if you don't rely on it exclusively or very much in your scholarly work, you should be aware of its influence on the scholarly conversation.