A CALL FOR COLLABORATION: ARGUMENTS FOR COMMUNITY-ORIENTED

TEACHING PRACTICES IN THE FIELD

OF LITERATURE

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A Thesis

Presented

to the Faculty of

California State University, Chico

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

in

English

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by

© Danielle M. Astengo

Spring 2019

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APPROVED BY THE INTERIM DEAN OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

_____
Sharon Barrios, Ph.D.

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

_____
Kim Jaxon, Ph.D., Chair

_____
 Peter Kittle, Ph.D.

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DEDICATION

For my mother, my daughter, my sister,

and Penny Lane.

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I would like to thank the Department of English at CSU, Chico for supporting my

education for the better part of ten years. During that time, I experienced a number of

life-changing experiences that challenged my innate resilience and desire to learn

anything and everything. My academic goals kept me grounded and focused; the

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making, but she's been on my team, cheering me on, since 2015. I'd also like to thank Dr.

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ABSTRACT

A CALL FOR COLLABORATION: ARGUMENTS FOR COMMUNITY-ORIENTED

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This thesis argues for the necessity of improved teaching practices in higher education literature courses; suggests a theoretical framework for literary study that engages readers on a personal level as well as within communities of other readers; and shares the results of an action research project undertaken by a teacher-in-training. It argues that the decline of literary studies in higher education institutions is not just a symptom of the commodification of college degrees but of shortcomings in the experience of studying literature. Innovative teaching practices that allow for students to participate in meaningful ways and which might open up new avenues of participation in the field outside of the classroom are discussed. This thesis is an exploration of the potential that literature teachers have to positively impact their students and their discipline.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

Midway through an exceptionally long graduate education--a journey that will

take me seven years instead of the expected two--I became disheartened by my decision

to pursue an M.A. in English with an emphasis in Literature. Specifically, it was the

'Literature' part of the equation that had me doubting the conviction with which I applied

to the program. As an active and engaged member of the department, I quickly became

familiar with the striking differences and sharp divisions that existed between the various

fields of literary study offered to my peers and I: literature, creative writing, and literacy.

Although most of our professors teach courses in more than one area, I noticed that the

graduate students in each field were having vastly different experiences in terms of

faculty support, professional development, and overall satisfaction with their program of

study. Those of us with an emphasis in literature were receiving disproportionately less

faculty support with our individual research efforts, sporadic opportunities for

professional development, and, not surprisingly, we were the most disillusioned by our

experiences. As a result, it was difficult to know how and where we belonged.

On the surface, it is easy to blame these issues on circumstances within the

department: too few tenured professors, an insufficient budget, outdated practices and

requirements, political agendas--the list goes on. There's no doubt that what we

experienced is more than just a local phenomenon: English departments around the

country face similar challenges and the number of English majors has been in decline for

decades. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "the number of degrees in English language and literature/letters was 14 percent lower in 2014–15 than in 2009–10" ("Fast Facts"). Why are fewer students choosing to study English? The reasons for this are widely contested. Some scholars argue that the field's disciplinary boundaries have become too fragmented (see Jonathan Kramnick and Michael Clune), and lacking a singular purpose makes it difficult to attract an audience. And popular culture tells us that English degrees are useless commodities on the job market. In any case, attributing our discontent to shortcomings of the department and campus at large was my cohort's initial reaction; it was an attempt to make sense of why our ambitions and passions were so utterly crushed the more invested in our field we tried to become. We had a lot of energy and passion to dedicate to our studies but it was always difficult to see ourselves as more than just literature students. Of course, the environment we were immersed in *did* shape our experiences in significant ways; things might have been different if policies and budgets were more favorable to us. However, it is now my educated opinion that what we experienced is a symptom of a more serious, systemic problem affecting the community of professionals dedicated to the study and furtherance of literature. What ails the community at large plagues smaller and more vulnerable communities populated by overworked instructors and impressionable students.

Literature students did not receive the same career preparation as students following the literacy and creative writing pathways. Opportunities for professional development were built into literacy classes in a more effective way than in literature classes. Those students could, for example, seek internships or employment with on-campus writing centers and tutoring programs. Literature students were supported in

writing essays and with work that was relevant inside the classroom, but these assignments weren't necessarily relevant outside of the university. Seminar papers could, perhaps, be heavily revised and submitted for publication to a literary journal but this was the only apparent way to reach out to the professional literary community. The problem with that is the length of time it takes to write, revise, and publish a paper can extend far beyond the length of completing a graduate program (except, of course, my graduate program). So the goal of a literature seminar can't, realistically, be to produce an article-length and journal-quality research paper; this limitation makes it difficult to feel immersed in the professional community. At the same time, it's hard to feel invested in idiosyncratic coursework as a graduate student who is accumulating debt but not career experience.

There were opportunities to gain professional experience separate from graduate literature seminars. Participating in student associations like the English Graduate Student Council (EGSC) and the Council of Graduate Students (COGS) offered the most hands-on experience and practice with skills that were transferable outside of academia. By serving in leadership roles with these organizations, students learned how to organize conferences and professional development workshops; they practiced skills related to advertising and marketing; and they learned the ins and outs of publishing. We gained valuable interpersonal skills in the process. We were also encouraged to obtain teaching experience and were well-supported in our efforts to do so, especially in academic writing.

Literature, however, with the exception of providing teaching experience for graduate students, as an academic field of study, seems comparatively reluctant to

welcome progress in its professional institutions and its classrooms. In the closely related fields of literacy and creative writing, changes that reflect contemporary trends and advancements seem more apparent and welcome than in literature. To demonstrate, consider how a field's professional environment shapes its corresponding classrooms. If the course is a successful one, the instructor will have made an effort to relate course content to some practical application. For a literature class, this means that students are prepared to produce written work that conforms to the rigid guidelines of scholarly journals. Perhaps they are also given an opportunity to teach a section of the class, although it is more likely that those experiences are demonstrations of group work and not of actual teacher preparation. Students in a literature class are seldom given the opportunity to choose their medium of contribution because there are limited options in the professional world as well.

The characteristics and culture of a field that inevitably trickle down from the professional arena to the college classroom include more than just the type of work produced. They affect interpersonal relationships, access to and experience with different kinds of technology, and methodologies. In a literature class, this can set the stage for a rather unaccommodating and mundane learning experience at best. If the primary goal of a literature student is to learn how to construct an argument worthy of the Modern Language Association, this leaves very little room for collaboration (co-authored papers are rare in literature, even more so in its classrooms), for experimenting with the scarce tools of the trade, or for self-expression. All of these are significant limitations, which maintain barriers between student, content, and professional community. Of course, these barriers are a reflection of the isolating atmosphere of the professional community.

The activities in a typical literature classroom are familiar. The instructor will introduce a unit to provide context for the assigned readings, surveying the historical setting in which the texts were written. Readings are broken up into digestible chunks and dissected in class. There may or may not be quizzes on content; there might also be short writing prompts which serve to generate content for discussions and to assess comprehension. Group work and presentations offer some variety in this routine and allow students to demonstrate their interaction with the literature in a format that might appeal to more diverse learning styles. And then the cycle repeats with the next text: reading, analysis and discussion, low-stakes assignments. Along the way, students keep in mind that the ultimate goal of the course is to produce an essay demonstrating an understanding of a text (or texts) and to reach insightful conclusions based on one's reading. Of course, they must do so with a thesis statement, topic sentences, skillful integration of quotes, sufficient evidence to support claims, and proper citations. All of these are valuable skills to learn, practice, and refine in a literature course and are rightfully expected of students pursuing an education in the literary arts. However, these goals can be achieved through a more dynamic learning process where the intended outcome of the course is more than the consumption of texts and production of an essay, where the intended outcome is thoughtful and critical engagement with the discipline.

It is my intention with this thesis to present a design for higher-ed literature courses that prioritizes the student's learning experience and embraces their potential to adapt the study of literature in new and unpredictable ways. This does not mean that I am proposing a teaching method that disregards the traditions or the rich body of work produced by established scholars in the field. To the contrary, it was my goal while

developing the ideas presented here to honor that tradition in a way that makes it accessible to the greatest number of students. A literature course that succeeds in making content relatable in this way will do more for the enrichment of the field than one which fails to engage students because it prioritizes traditions associated with the profession. Change can be effected in both directions.

Elaine Showalter, who served as a visiting professor in England in the early 2000s, provides an example of an institution that harnesses the power of teaching for the benefit of the field in "What Teaching Literature Should Really Mean." She explains how the English Subject Centre at Royal Holloway College addresses "teaching practice and the ways that teaching can actually change a discipline." Part of England's centralized system of higher education, the Centre "publishes materials on teaching new aspects of the field, offers data and links to useful resources, organizes workshops and conferences, and works closely with . . . the closest British equivalent of the MLA" (Showalter). Her argument is that literary studies are in decline in part because of the highly fragmented culture within the discipline, and that an increased focus on teaching strategies is one path towards reaching a shared sense of purpose amongst scholars.

Inspired by the more positive experiences I had working with colleagues in literacy and creative writing, I sought out ways to incorporate what worked for them into what wasn't working for me. I borrowed practices, theories, experiences, and traditions from literacy and creative writing to supplement my literature studies, to inform my teaching practices, and to make my education a more satisfying experience overall. In other words, I borrowed to make the study of literature feel less like the study of literature. And it worked. I discovered that when I was able to study (and teach) literature

from a point of view shaped by my unique perspective--and when I was encouraged to do so by supportive mentors--I had much more to contribute intellectually. Interestingly, that encouragement came exclusively from outside of the literature community. The problem was that I had trouble finding a forum for the expression of my ideas outside of the classroom. Had my literature professors been more receptive to my interdisciplinary interests, I might have found one. Instead, I was encouraged to make my ideas "fit" the mold. Naturally, I ignored them and continued to apply what I gained in other courses to the work I was doing with literature as a student and as an instructor.

The result is this thesis: a very long work-in-progress that developed out of a lifelong passion for reading good stories, out of a carefully nurtured teaching philosophy, and out of a determination to find a more collaborative way to study literature. It discusses the process which led to the development of a model I designed for teaching higher-ed general education literature courses. "LitSync," as it's called, addresses the needs of students and harnesses their potential to contribute to the advancement of literary studies, thereby enriching their educational experience and effecting change in a field that so desperately needs it. From the start, this model was influenced by what was lacking from my seven years of experience studying literature: support for individual research interests, opportunities for professional development and active engagement in the professional community, and the sense of fulfillment that comes from those practices. The ways I account for those needs in LitSync are supported by research in the areas of literary theory, learning theory, and digital humanities. Equally influential are my experiences teaching academic writing and literature at Chico State, talking to countless students who have taken undergraduate or graduate literature courses, and the limited

amount of published work addressing course design in relation to higher-ed literature classrooms.

Scope

The goal of this thesis is to share my unique perspective on the teaching of college level literature and to suggest an alternative approach to traditional methods of teaching literature. Specifically, I have chosen to adapt LitSync as a model for introductory literature courses because their students are the most likely to experience low motivation and superficial engagement with course content and the least likely to be given opportunities to explore and participate in the field of literary studies outside of the classroom. However, the content of any literature course could be modified to work within the structure of LitSync. Students in upper division or graduate courses stand to benefit from a more accessible learning environment, too.

Additionally, since the model I present in this thesis is founded on a few fundamental concepts borrowed from a range of academic disciplines, it is also my hope to inspire instructors in other disciplines who are frustrated by the outcomes of their own teaching practices, revolutionary in spirit, or just plain curious to reimagine the possibilities for significant reform in the courses offered by their department and to engage in action research. The ideas and practices that define LitSync can easily be adapted to non-literature courses in the humanities and social sciences--and possibly others.

What you will find in the following pages is a review of the literature covering reader response criticism, communities of practice, and digital humanities. The

methodology chapter then presents how I applied action research to the analysis of my teaching and teacher-training activities. The fourth chapter is an ethnographic narrative of my teaching experience which frames the proposal for LitSync. Finally, I conclude with a summary and a call for integrated teacher training for graduate students and faculty.

Significance

The theoretical basis for LitSync is reflective of my unique perspective, which means that my ideas and the expression of them may not fit within any one specific model of scholarly research. In order to formulate this model I had to draw on sources from different fields but, as a result, this thesis represents a well-rounded and holistic understanding of the problem in question. LitSync incorporates ideals and practices that are well supported in contemporary research from several academic disciplines. For example, it encourages co-teaching, supports collaboration with the campus and local community, favors a student-centered learning environment, utilizes digital platforms in meaningful ways, and values flexibility and freedom of choice.

Limitations

Research on teaching methods in higher-ed literature courses is somewhat limited, although progress is being made. Most students who study literature go on to teach it (and this is especially true for graduate students), which means that teacher training is therefore a latent function of literature departments; however, it is rarely addressed with critical analysis. Perhaps this is because the field lacks a forum for the discussion to take place, or because it is considered to be outside the realm of literature.

In spite of this, and because of my interdisciplinary interests, there is theoretical support for the content of this thesis.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

When beginning this thesis, I intentionally restricted my initial research

parameters to the field of literary criticism, hoping to build a foundation for the design of

a higher-ed literature course firmly upon established tradition. There are two important

reasons why I did this. First, I recognized that in order for my ideas to be accepted by

literary scholars as legitimate and appealing, they had to be relatively familiar to the field.

Second, I believed it would make my course design much more effective if its theoretical

framework was, in an essential way, specific to the content of the course. This led me to

an examination of the many schools of literary theory and their practical implications in

the classroom. From there, I quickly discovered that reader-response criticism supports

community oriented teaching practices; it might be a useful approach in the formulation

of a democratic teaching philosophy. Unlike other theoretical approaches which focus on

the author, form, or historical context of a text (and which argue for "correct" analysis),

reader-response criticism focuses first on a reader's interaction with a text and how that

interaction leads to a unique response. It accounts for a range of interpretations, limited

only by a particular combination of reader and text. It is a solid foundation and could be,

I argue, a necessary first step in helping students formulate literary arguments.

For these reasons, reader-response criticism is a keystone of LitSync's design, with its practice reinforced by the structural elements, teaching methods, and day-to-day activities of the course. Thus, this review of the literature begins with a discussion of how reader-response criticism has been defined and shaped by theorists over time, moves into an overview of developing relationships between readers, and then introduces a few key concepts from the digital humanities.

Reader Response Criticism

Definition/Overview

Simply put, reader response criticism is a genre of literary theory that accounts for the role of the reader in the reading experience. Although it might not sound like a novel concept, the idea that the reader has any influence on the meaning or impact of a text in any way *is* remarkable in contemporary literary criticism. Consider, for comparison, the focus of more familiar approaches like formalism, Marxism, feminism: critics in each of these schools focus on elements of the written work, the author, or the historical setting as factors which produce meaning in a text. They may use a combination of these factors to support literary analysis, too, but they deny the primacy of a reader's actual experience with the text. From these and similarly narrow theoretical perspectives, the reader is assigned a passive role and contributes little to the meaning-making process outside of recognizing what's already there. The process of interpretation is superseded by the end result.

In a literature classroom, where students are asked to make sense of texts and literary traditions that they are encountering for the first time, the process of

interpretation is as important as the conclusions reached. Guiding students through that process is an invaluable part of their introduction to the discipline. When the unique perspective of every reader is the starting point for analysis, every student has the opportunity to engage with and contribute to discussions. This is especially important in lower-division and general education courses where the students are unlikely to be familiar with the methods of literary theorists; for these students, their immediate and most significant interactions with a text are likely to be personal. It is the teacher's role, then, according to Larry Anderson, to "get the students to articulate such responses and then move them to another level of analysis." In "Using Reader-Response Theory in the Introductory Literature Classroom," Anderson presents what he calls a "rhetorical approach to literature": a process by which instructors can guide students to recognize the underlying assumptions of their initial reaction to a text and then to articulate a response.

A reader's initial response to literature is the springboard for more critical analysis. It's not that a literature class needs to only pay attention to the interaction between a reader and the text, but it is an appropriate starting point. Facilitating classroom discussions that depend on personal revelations is an instructional approach that requires a teacher to display flexibility and diplomacy; it's not a universally adaptable strategy, to be sure. However, there should be no doubt as to its effectiveness when conscientiously implemented for the purpose of establishing an accessible, community-oriented learning environment where everyone can be a valuable contributor.

Reader response criticism, like other modes of literary criticism, represents a variety of nuanced approaches to the study of literature and, moving forward, it will help to have a more precise point of reference. Because it is the only critical approach that

focuses on the interaction between the reader and the text, it represents a broad range of theoretical perspectives. In *The Critical Tradition*, David Richter divides them into five "groupings": Rhetorical Criticism, The Structuralist Reader, The Psychology and Sociology of the Audience, The Phenomenologists, and Cognitive Theory (962-978). In a sense, the school of reader response criticism is a microcosm of the college of literary theory. The groups differ in the ways they understand the reader's role in the literary experience, though they all agree that the reader does have a role (962). Practitioners in the Rhetorical Criticism and The Structuralist Reader groups, for example, conceive of the reader as a product of the text: "either the posited or implied reader for whom the rhetoric is contrived, or the narratee located explicitly . . . within the narrative framework" (969). In other words, the author determines the reader. This perspective poses problems in the classroom much like those outside of reader-response criticism because it virtually removes a reader's agency from the meaning making process. In contrast, The Psychology and Sociology of the Audience theorists refer to "the *actual* reader . . . the quivering and unpredictable individual reader and his or her genuine but subjective response" (969). However, it must be pointed out that even within this sub-group of reader response criticism (The Psychology and Sociology of the Audience) there are a variety of theoretical perspectives which makes Richter's categorization problematic. There is so much diversity within the broad category of reader response criticism that its necessary to be more specific. What follows, now, is an examination of the "Transactional Theory of Literature," a theory that suggests a reciprocal relationship between a reader and a text. It is this branch of reader response criticism that informed

the development of this project and to which I refer throughout when I use the term "reader response."

The Transactional Theory of Literature

First introduced by Louise Rosenblatt in 1938 with the publication of her book, *Literature as Exploration*, and later developed by her in *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* (1978), the transactional theory of literature posits the literary work as a product of the interaction between a reader and a text. From this perspective, "the text" refers to "the sequence of printed or voiced signs," while the "literary work" refers to "the meaning" (*Literature as Exploration* 27). During the transaction between reader and text, the reader "[draws] on past linguistic and life experience, links the signs on the page with certain words, certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes" (30). Thus, according to Rosenblatt, every literary experience is unique. This point of view distinguishes Rosenblatt's theory in the field of reader-response criticism: it is the only one which acknowledges the fact that a person may have a different reaction to a text with each encounter. Even an individual's accumulation of new experiences over time will inevitably cause a change in perspective.

Another factor which significantly affects a reader's transaction with a text is the purpose for reading. Rosenblatt argues that the reader's stance can either be "predominantly efferent" or "predominantly aesthetic" (33). An efferent stance is one taken by a reader who wants to extract a message from a text for a practical purpose; for example, a student reading an article in order to summarize it or a consumer reading a label for usage instructions. Both will focus their attention on "selecting out and analytically abstracting the information or ideas or directions for action that will remain

when the reading is over" (32). On the other hand, a reader that takes a primarily

aesthetic stance will focus more of their attention on the "affective aspects" of a text, or

on "the nature and quality of what is offered" (32). A primarily aesthetic stance is the

approach a reader should adopt if they are seeking a literary experience. Thus, the teacher

of literature must carefully consider how assignments and class activities will influence

their students' interactions with a text as some may encourage the student to adopt a

primarily efferent stance. When that happens, according to the transactional theory of

literature, the reader's interaction with the text will be less meaningful (and therefore less

literary).

The importance of the aesthetic stance to the literary experience can be further

explained by Rosenblatt's definition of a literary reading as a creative process. As an

active participant in a meaning-making transaction, argues Rosenblatt, the reader engages

in "creative activity" much like the author of a novel (*Literature as Exploration* 34). In

order to evoke a literary work from a text, a reader "must face ultimately a unique task of

selection, synthesis, and interpretation"; in this, "there is an element of experiment, trial

and error . . . of creative adventure" (*Reader* 52). Hence, the aesthetic stance is conducive

to the "continuing, constructive, 'shaping' activity" of the reader. For these reasons, a

literature course should be designed to encourage creative thinking and critical reflection.

Indeed, the learning environment should be as dynamic as the reading process.

A common misconception about reader-response criticism, including the

transactional theory of literature--Rosenblatt's theory in particular--is that personal

responses to literature are incompatible with textual analysis, that valuing one necessarily

means abandoning the other. Not only is this fear for the sanctity of literary scholarship

clearly a symptom of the ivory-tower mentality held by elitist critics, it is simply not true.

Rosenblatt addresses this issue explicitly and repeatedly throughout her published works,

most notably in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*:

> Something encapsulated in a reader's mind without relevance to a text may be a
> wonderful fantasy, but the term "poem" or "literary work," in transactional
> terminology, would not be applicable to such a "mental experience" any more than
> to an entity apart from a reader. As soon as "poem" is understood to refer to the
> relationship between a reader and a text, the threatened critical anarchy does not
> follow. (105)

The transactional theory of literature, Rosenblatt reminds her critics, describes a mutual

relationship between a reader and a text. Unfortunately, among the some literary scholars,

there seems to be a prevailing reluctance or inability to accept a theory not defined by

absolutes. Because Rosenblatt's theory validates the importance of the reader *and* the

text, and because it acknowledges both an infinite range of interpretations to a text *and* a

"concern for validity of interpretation," it is easily disregarded by a field still entrenched

in patriarchal tradition (*Reader* 151). Encouraging personal responses to literature that are

at the same time "responsibly self-aware and disciplined" is the work of the reader-

response oriented classroom (129-130).

　　In order to elicit the kind of literary responses described above, the instructor

should have an understanding of their students' emotional and intellectual needs, their

cultural backgrounds, and their reading processes. While the need to acquire this kind of

familiarity with students may discourage some instructors from incorporating reader-

response criticism in their classrooms, it's important to keep in mind that much of this

information will be revealed through the practice of reader-response criticism. It's a

matter of shifting the instructor's focus from what the text is saying to what the reader

(student) is saying about the text, paying attention to the responses evoked by a reading, and to the underlying assumptions and bias of those responses, instead of the supposed accuracy of the response. There are well-supported generalizations about young-adult readers that can give instructors a sense of their students' needs before they get to know them personally. For example, as Rosenblatt points out by appealing to fellow teachers, young-adults tend to be influenced by the "human experience" of literature more than by its formal elements (*Literature* 7). "To a heightened degree," she says, they "seek to participate in another's vision--to reap knowledge of the world, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his own life more comprehensible" (7). Knowing this will inform a teacher's practice in significant ways, especially in their selection of assigned texts.

Readings should be chosen that are suitable to students, for which the students have "the intellectual, emotional, and experiential equipment" necessary to process (*Literature* 25). Accessibility, over the canon or the instructor's favorites, is prioritized. This applies to supplementary texts that are intended to provide students with contextual information and critical theory, too. Background information may provide students with hard facts about the main text and its author but, Rosenblatt argues, such information can be "irrelevant and distracting" (27). Similarly, assigned readings of literary criticism tend to overburden the student who is in the process of forming a personal reaction to a text. Worse still, critical opinion can interfere with a student's genuine response by artificially directing their attention to certain elements of a work and by shaping their attitude towards those elements (56). Supplementary readings will be "so much useless baggage if [the student] has not been led primarily to seek in literature a vital personal

experience," with the result being a "frame . . . elaborately worked out but [with] a blank where the picture should be" (57-58). Of course, this does not mean that there is no room for background information or critical theory in the classroom; when introduced into coursework or discussions organically—as opposed to being forced onto students at particular moments when the instructor's calendar calls for it—such readings will be productive. This reiterates a point I made earlier about reader-response criticism making room for other critical approaches: a student's literary reading may lead them into a natural inquiry into the text's background information or about what others have said in regards to a particular element of the text that stood out to them. The teacher's role here is to guide them in the direction of material that will support their reading process. In a reader-response oriented classroom, a variety of perspectives are not only welcome but they are expected.

If students' identities and intellectual needs are taken into consideration, what remains to ensure that their responses to literature are "responsibly self-aware and disciplined" (true to themselves and the text) is metacognitive awareness during the reading process. Defined by William Grabe as the ability of a reader to "devote attentional resources to determine whether or not comprehension is occurring" and "the reading goals are being met," keen metacognitive awareness is a trait associated with successful readers (*Reading in a Second Language* 52). Teachers can help guide students in developing and practicing metacognitive awareness by modeling the use of helpful strategies and by encouraging students to talk through their reading processes. In the classroom, then, how a student transacts with a text has as much value as the "literary work" produced by the transaction. Instead of focusing class discussions only on formal

elements of a text, critical receptions of it, or on promoting readings widely accepted by scholars in the field, instructors could initially provide students with a forum for their reactions. By validating students' perspectives in this way, the teacher creates a dynamic learning environment conducive to literary study.

In *Is There A Text in This Class*, Stanley Fish presents the idea of "interpretive communities": groups of individuals with commonalities who will interpret language (texts) in similar and predictive ways. He argues that an individual's (and by extension, a group's) interpretive potential is limited by the text and the community to which he belongs--and he can belong to more than one community simultaneously. This idea adds another dimension to Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Literature: the text, the reader, and interpretive communities, are all implicated in the meaning making process. Fish views interpretive communities as the source of logic behind somewhat stable readings produced by different people, rather than something within the text or the individual (15).

Interpretive communities, according to Fish, "will necessarily agree because they will see everything in relation to that community's assumed purposes and goals; and conversely, members of different communities will disagree because . . . the other "simply" cannot see what is obviously and inescapably there" (15). In a typical literature classroom there exists a sharp divide between the communities of "Student" and "Teacher" (or, "expert literary critic") that interferes with the exchange of ideas between the two, thus limiting potential for intellectual growth. A "community of readers," then, could level the playing field.

Communities of Readers

In this section, the framework for textual analysis in a literature course provided by the Transactional Theory of Literature is expanded to include the setting in which those literary experiences occur. Thus far, the ideas presented in this literature review explain the reading process as deeply personal. While it's true that reader-response criticism focuses on an individual's reactions to a text, it by no means suggests that reading is an isolated activity. It's clear in Rosenblatt's emphasis on the power of discussion to guide students towards more complex and valid readings that she understood this. However, the purpose of this section is to definitively situate a reader's transaction with a text into a broader social context. The concept of "communities of readers" is introduced and analyzed as an integral part of literary study.

Any notion of a community of readers implies that reading is a social process and, to be sure, communities of readers have an undeniable existence in the real world; they are not simply a conjecture of theoretical minds. Book clubs and online social networks like Goodreads attest to this fact. It is not my intention to debate the validity of describing reading as a social process or of communities of readers; that is an argument essentially resolved at this point in time, thanks in part to the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. Their influential *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* convincingly argues that all "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners," that "learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice," and finally, that learning occurs as a result of participation in communities of practice (29, 31, 100). These ideas are not new to the field of education; though because change is slow to be effected at an institutional level, they are yet to be a standard foundation for classroom

practice. According to their definition, "a community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (98). A community of readers, then, can be seen as a specific kind of community of practice; though, of course, there are many kinds of communities of readers with each sharing a unique set of members, practices, and goals.

In a classroom community of readers, specifically, members can self-identify their purposes for reading and their learning goals with the guidance of their instructor. To respect the student reader's active involvement in shaping a literary experience is to accept their active role in shaping their learning experience. Similarly, classrooms that understand reading as a creative process and which encourage students to adopt an aesthetic stance require a flexible curriculum. Each student will interact with a text in a unique way and, because the goal of the reader response oriented classroom is not to transmit a predetermined and definitive body of knowledge from teacher to student, each student must be allowed to formulate their responses to literature in a suitable way. The standard essay assigned in literature courses—a close reading of a text supported by peer-reviewed critical theory—does not always accommodate the immediate literary experience of most students. Instead, it forces them to read a text with the purpose of producing a pre-formatted response. In other words, it makes students look for homework answers in literature. While formulating coherent written arguments is an important aspect of literary study, it is hardly the best way to foster an initial genuine relationship between the student and literary activity; it is, however, a goal to move towards once the reader has untangled his or her initial response.

Furthermore, in *Reading in a Participatory Culture*, new media scholar Henry Jenkins, Katie Clinton, and Jenna McWilliams argue that this more traditional teaching method "cuts reading in the literature class off from the other reasons young people might choose to read outside the classroom and thus diminishes the relevance of the skills we are teaching" (16). What they suggest instead is for teachers to ask students "to identify their own goals for reading a text, to take responsibility for shaping what they learned from each other, and to translate their engagement with the text into a springboard for other creative, critical, and expressive activities." This goes hand-in-hand with the metacognitive awareness demanded by reader-response criticism. When students are given agency in their education, the result will be a more collaborative learning environment where new literary practices can take shape.

As in any community of practice, members in a classroom community of readers "have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity, and hold varied viewpoints" (Lave and Wenger 98). Thus, unique and interdisciplinary approaches to literary study are welcomed in the reader-response classroom. To support this position, Jenkins cites Pierre Lévy's theory of collective intelligence:

> People working together and sharing information are able to address questions far more complex and arrive at answers far more quickly than any single member could do. . . . If each member contributes his or her own expertise, the community is strengthened by the diversity of its participants. (86)

To lay the groundwork for this type of learning environment, it's again necessary for teachers to encourage and respect students' individuality and academic potential. Students can begin to see themselves as experts among their classroom community only

once their perspectives are permitted and valued. Better yet, when they are treated as colleagues rather than pupils.

Finally, members of a classroom reading community need access to opportunities for meaningful participation. To Jenkins, "meaningful participation" equals productive activity in the literal sense. Emphasis is placed on the distinction between consuming and producing, although this Marxist view need not apply so strictly in the classroom. Students can be participating, actively engaged in the practices of their reading community, without producing an artifact. Indeed, part of the literary experience is creative activity. In transacting with a text, students are in the act of producing a literary work. What happens next is the communication of that response, a translation from thought to discussion or artifact. While it is important and valuable to teach media skills for students' "expressive responses" to literature, doing so for the sake of productivity risks turning the literary experience into a means for an end, with the artifact superseding the reading process. More troubling, in Jenkins analogy, reading is likened to consuming—a position he staunchly contradicts elsewhere. If instead, like Rosenblatt urges, we consider the transaction between reader and text primary, the move from reading to expressing can occur more naturally. By doing so, we will encourage the creation of the product or artifact to become an extension of the literary experience itself, rather than contradictory to it.

What kinds of opportunities do students need, then, as members of a community of readers? They need opportunities to network with other readers, within and outside of their classroom. Communities of practice act in context with other communities; the same applies to readers. Their activity, when confined to the four walls of a classroom, is not

situated in a social context. A community of readers needs to evolve in relation to other communities. This should be considered a principle in the design of a reader-response oriented literature course. Advancements in the field of digital humanities have opened the door to new ways of thinking about and engaging in literary studies, providing a means to bridge the gap between literature classrooms and communities of practice.

Digital Humanities

The emergence of digital humanities as outlined by Matthew Kirschenbaum offers insight into the transformative potential of the field and its remarkable ability to foster communities of practice. In "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" he describes the development of the field as a relatively rapid coming together of like-minded scholars: "In the space of a little more than five years digital humanities had gone from being a term of convenience . . . to something like a movement." A growing network of scholars with an "unusually strong sense of community and common purpose" emerged, in part, because of technological advancements and platforms that facilitated communication and collaboration. It can be argued that the values upheld by the digital humanities--"collaboration, openness, nonhierarchical relations, and agility"--also make it an attractive, inviting network to belong to. Community and common purpose are precisely what's lacking in literary studies and the scholars in that field, whose work is often solitary, stand to benefit from modeling practices and adopting tools and techniques of digital humanities. If we think of classrooms as microcosms of the discipline they are meant to teach, then literature

teachers and their students will likewise benefit from embracing elements of digital humanities.

    There are notable examples of this convergence already taking place. For years, Mia Zamora has been an advocate of incorporating digital humanities into college literature classrooms. She is a proponent of electronic literature, which is defined by the Electronic Literature Organization as "works with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer." Electronic literature encompasses hypertext fiction, interactive fiction, installation pieces, and generative literature. The aspect of digital humanities that's most relevant to this thesis is not the ever-evolving nature of the field's tools and techniques, which are indeed valuable, but its culture of collaboration and community. It's these aspects that are central to my argument and proposal for making the study of literature a more inviting experience.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In "What Teaching Literature Should Really Mean," Elaine Showalter, in direct contrast to my experience as a student of literature, argues that literature as a discipline needs to not only analyze its teaching methods but engage in conversations about its own teaching. Any conversation about pedagogy has to be discipline-specific; we have to think about pedagogy within the discipline that we're teaching. In other words, literature professors need to talk about how to teach literature. James Lang reiterates this point in "Reinventing the Survey Course," suggesting that meaningful solutions to tired teaching practices are best discovered within the context of a specific field. We should "make our teaching as intellectually challenging and as much a topic of professional critique and review as our research," Showalter claims. She goes on to assert that the methods for studying teaching techniques in the humanities must be flexible because the "outcomes are not empirically measurable." Action research is one method that is well-suited for this purpose.

The premise of action research is that teachers can identify, examine, and resolve problems in their teaching practice through a sustained collaborative effort with colleagues. Action research is an organized method for teachers to record and reflect on their practice, to make plans for improving their teaching methods, and to implement changes. While forms of action research have been around since the mid 20th century and have been implemented in a variety of disciplines, especially in the social sciences and the humanities, the LAB at Brown University gave action research some newfound

validity by laying out steps for carrying out action research similar to those you might find in a scientific study. In its 2000 publication, *Action Research*, the author Eileen Ferrance defines it as "a quest for knowledge about how to improve . . . skills, techniques, and strategies," an inquiry process for teachers who want to "change [their] instruction to impact students" (2-3). In this way, it is a form of professional development and teacher training that addresses not only discipline-specific pedagogical concerns but classroom-specific concerns. Importantly, a fundamental principle of action research "is that researchers need each other's ideas for stimulation and depend on other people's perspectives to enrich their own" (23). Action research is localized and especially impactful when carried out within a community of similarly invested educators.

In the fall of 2014, I was enrolled in English 692: *Digital Cultures*. That semester, our class participated in UCI's Connected Courses, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) focused on developing and teaching courses with principles of connected learning. Connected Courses was designed and taught by faculty whose shared purpose was "to build an inclusive and expansive network of teachers, students, and educational offerings that makes high quality, meaningful, and socially connected learning available to everyone," and to use their experience to "inform the development of more open courses that are highly participatory and aligned with the principles of connected learning" (*Connected Courses*). Participants contributed to the learning community by sharing weekly "makes" showcasing the progress of their research via syndicated blog posts and various social media platforms. Mike Wesh kicked off Unit 1, "Why we need a why," by urging instructors to consider three questions before designing a course: "What is to be taught/learned? How should it be learned? Why should it be learned?"

(*Connected Courses*). The course then covered a range of topics including the purpose of higher education, teaching methods and approaches, equity, access, co-learning, and practical concerns for course design. The culminating activity was to put theory into practice by designing a connected course.

The Connected Courses material was the framework for our studies in English 692; our individual professional and academic interests determined the objectives. I decided early on that I would approach the material and ideas presented in Connected Courses with the lens of a literature instructor: my goal would be to apply theories of connected learning to the design of a literature class. My coursework in literacy studies had previously focused on teaching academic writing; however, having just taught my first literature class the semester before, I saw this as an opportunity for reflexive thinking about teaching and studying literature. As strange as it seems to me now, this was the only occasion I had to do so alongside peers and professionals. In order to teach a literature class, graduate students are required to serve as teaching assistants in a similar class and, of course, complete the same application and interview process as lecturers. We didn't receive teacher training that asked us to question our pedagogy or others' in spite of the fact that most of us, the graduate students in the literature pathway, planned to teach literature after graduation.

Throughout the semester in English 692, I worked closely with a fellow literature student who had also just had his first teaching experience with general education literature and was likewise drawn to the progressive, hands-on culture of our department's literacy program. We were jaded by the lecture and essay approach to literary studies and frustrated by the limited career prospects awaiting us after graduation;

these grievances fueled our resolve to imagine alternative ways to teach, study, and engage with literature. We knew from our own experiences as literature students and as literature teachers that lack of student engagement was a major problem. Could we transfer our teacher training from literacy to literature? How could we use innovative teaching practices in a literature class? What defines a literature class and what constitutes literary study, in the first place? We carried out this line of inquiry as we completed the sequence of assignments in Connected Courses, which culminated in the development of our own connected course that we called LitSync. What follows is an overview of that inquiry process using the phases of the action research cycle as defined by the LAB at Brown University.

<u>Identifying Problem Area</u>

The problem that my colleague and I identified is a lack of engagement in literature courses due, in part, to outdated teaching methods. In "Reinventing the Survey Class," James Lang identifies another cause. According to Lang, it is simply easier to experiment in some classes than in others. In contrast to literature classes, for example, composition classes tend to have fewer students and the objective (to develop writing skills) invites creativity in course design. A literature survey course, whether you are teaching majors or non-majors, is intended to cover as much material as possible in order to provide a one-stop overview of the field or to prepare students for upper division coursework. Either way, Lang contends, "every factor that works in favor of innovation in composition classes is working against it in survey courses." Understanding what makes literature teachers inclined to "play it safe pedagogically" is the first step in overcoming the obstacles that lie in the way of innovation. Our shared goal with LitSync

was to find alternative teaching methods that accommodated the objectives of a general education survey course and maintained the integrity of literary study.

<u>Gathering Data</u>

The data we collected took the form of anecdotal records from our personal learning experiences and those of our peers; self-assessment of our teaching experiences and the biases that informed our teaching practices; assessment of student work and student engagement in the literature courses we had taught; and a survey of scholarly work on the decline of the field of literary studies including fewer majors in English departments and fewer tenure-track positions. We used this first-person research to make decisions about the design of LitSync.

<u>Interpreting Data</u>

All of our data pointed to a trend that we had both felt was palpable as we progressed through our graduate studies, that the future of literary study looked bleak and that one way we could make a difference in the field was by assessing and refining our teaching practices. From our teaching experiences, we determined that student engagement improved when we let students' reactions to the assigned texts lead discussions and incorporated more collaborative work in our classrooms. At times lecture and exposition was necessary, especially to frame the introduction of a unit or when grappling with difficult texts; we understood this from a student's perspective as well. However, lectures had the most impact when they were used sparingly.

We found that it was important to strike a similar balance with the introduction of technology in the classroom: too much, and you risk overshadowing course content. When implemented as a tool to support learning practices, it can be immensely valuable.

We also agreed that there was value in open-access education and that moving course content from a Learning Management System like Blackboard to the open web offered a number of benefits to students like the professionalization of their digital identities, more ownership over their work, and, of course, the opportunity to interact, engage, and collaborate with a wider audience. Ultimately, however, we found that these forms of learning were the most meaningful when they were tempered by three-dimensional learning spaces, face-to-face discussions, and hands-on collaboration: just as they were for us while we were simultaneously enrolled in English 692 and Connected Courses. In a reflective study completed by educators closely involved with the Connected Learning Massive Open Online Collaboration, the authors had similar findings after five years of engagement with the project. They argue that "open as a design ideology is necessary but not sufficient in providing conditions for transformative professional learning"; that "open" is one component of a participatory learning community but inadequate as a starting point (West-Puckett 203). My research partner and I were careful to not rely on the affordances of technology as a solution to our teaching woes and took a holistic approach to our course design, equally emphasizing structure and content.

<u>Acting on Evidence</u>

Fortunately, we were granted the opportunity to think critically about teaching and to develop new approaches in English 692 as participants in Connected Courses and among other forward-thinking educators. "The most effective first step toward fostering new solutions to old pedagogical problems may be the simplest," Lange asserts, "invite your colleagues to talk about teaching, and see what great ideas emerge" (Connected). That was essentially the premise of Connected Courses and the ideas that emerged

focused on ways to merge learning with personal interests, real-world opportunities, and meaningful relationships--the three hallmarks of connected learning.

The course of action we took was designing an alternative model to teaching literature in higher education, specifically lower-division, general education survey classes. Every English department in community colleges or four-year institutions has its own version of courses like this; at our local institution those classes are given titles like *Great Books* or *Literature for Life*. We decided to focus our efforts here not only because of the ubiquity of these classes but because they offer quite a bit of flexibility in terms of text selection and content, therefore they are more accommodating to pedagogical innovation. We also wanted to create an "open" educational experience by building a learning community between similarly oriented classes and the department at large. Finally, these classes are where we gained our recent teaching experience. Overall, general education classes were well suited for our purposes.

We then developed ideas for syncing two general education courses with similar objectives but unique reading lists. It was important to us that the classes would interact in-person in addition to a shared digital platform because we agreed that no matter how engaging an open, online course purported to be, there was no substitute for face-to-face interaction. At the same time, we knew that it was necessary for each section to meet separately in order to facilitate discussions of the assigned readings, to carry out more traditional forms of literary study. We used Dr. Kim Jaxon's previous work in jumbo course design as a model for designing an educational experience that supported all three components: large group gatherings, individual course meetings, and a digital networking space.

As part of our work in Connected Courses and English 692, my research partner and I drafted a course proposal for LitSync, developed a sample assignment sequence, and actually built a website. Throughout the semester we were consistently engaged in a dialogue with each other and within the context of our learning community about course design, assignment rationale, and logistics and feasibility of implementation. It took time and guidance by experts to learn the ins-and-outs of web hosting, website design, and blog syndication. The semester was an intense period of professional development during which I acquired the confidence to engage with and contribute to my field.

Evaluating Results and Next Steps

Although we were never able to teach LitSync, it is possible to evaluate the course design that emerged by anticipating problem areas and imagining their solutions. This is the recursive, iterative work of action research that leads to continuous critical analysis and more effective teaching practices. A learning model like LitSync does present a few challenges. For implementation, it requires two instructors willing to co-teach and design their syllabi with a shared theme in mind. Both teachers must be willing to adapt to the specific needs of their respective classes and to them jointly as a large group since the learning environment and nature of assignments will be shaped by the students. A website would need to be built and maintained, which would require one of the teachers to possess the technical savvy to do so or the willingness to learn. It would require the support of the department to secure spaces necessary to accommodate the unique meeting pattern, and the support of campus colleagues willing to serve as guest lecturers.

It is crucial that instructors continually assess their teaching practices and engage in conversations about improving outcomes with colleagues. Even in courses whose

structure screams against innovation like the general education survey, reflection and

dialogue open the door to new possibilities. Indeed, "educators involved in action

research become more flexible in their thinking and more open to new ideas," and we

should see more of this taking place in literature departments (Ferrance). In an effort to

share my findings with my colleagues, I will describe my experience teaching Great

Books and the experiment in collaborative fiction that became the backbone of our

LitSync design in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

COURSE DESIGN

I begin this chapter with a summary of my teaching experience in Great Books to show the impact of incorporating a collaborative fiction project in a literature class and how principles of Reader Response theory applied. It was this teaching experience combined with reflective analysis (action research) and participation in Connected Courses that led to the development of LitSync, which I describe in the second part of this chapter. There, you will find a detailed overview of the course design.

Experimenting with Great Books

What does a reader-response oriented class look like? In the Spring of 2014 I had the opportunity to explore that question when I was hired as the Instructor of Record for English 260: *Great Books*. This is a General Education course that satisfies the requirements of Area C2 and is offered regularly. The Course Catalog defines the class as "The study of novels, poetry, and drama selected from the world's great literature. Historical, thematic, and formal approaches shape the analysis of these works." Students enrolled in the section I taught came from a wide range of majors and were at different stages in their academic careers. Some students chose the course because they had a lifelong passion for reading, while others were enrolled because it was the only class available that fulfilled a degree requirement and fit their schedule. There were a few freshman and a couple of seniors; the bulk of the class were either sophomores or juniors. It was the fourth time I served as Instructor of Record but the first time I taught literature. My previous teaching experience was in Academic Writing, a required first-year GE

course populated by students with a range of academic interests and goals. I was, therefore, prepared for the challenge of teaching to a diverse demographic and I had acquired extensive practice in making course content relatable to individuals. As an instructor, adaptability was one of my strengths.

When designing the syllabus for Great Books, I relied heavily on the examples set by my literature professors. I sought to incorporate elements of my past teaching experiences and individuality but without deviating too far from the norm of almost every literature class I had taken. I was taught the cannon; I listened to long lectures about the meaning of a text; I read critical analysis; and, of course, I completed some version of a five-paragraph essay in every class from 300-level undergraduate courses all the way to 600-level grad courses. It seemed that was the acceptable way to teach and study literature and so I attempted to recreate that structure in order to impress the hiring committee. It took me by surprise, then, when one interviewer (a notably progressive faculty member and I think the only other female in the room), asked about the lack of diversity on the reading list and how I planned to address the disparity when teaching the class. I tried to convey that the texts I chose were a reflection of my own education and the lack of ingenuity on my part was a reflection of my fear of doing it wrong rather than a narrow mind. I wouldn't experience the full potential of a literature class that pushed boundaries in creative ways until midway through the Spring of 2014 when we started experimenting with collaborative fiction in Great Books.

What's interesting is that I didn't have the same hesitation or dependency when creating Academic Writing syllabi, perhaps because I witnessed so many versions of that course or because the faculty who I learned from consistently modeled out-of-the-box

teaching practices. I had more ownership over my ideas and decisions when it came to teaching writing than I did when it came to teaching literature, as a result. Nonetheless, my syllabus was deemed acceptable and I was hired for the job.

The semester started off according to plan: we more or less stuck to the calendar and the planned activities and assignments. I did my best to facilitate student-led discussions of the texts and to minimize lectures. However, as is evident from the syllabus, there was nothing remarkable about the first half of the course. Participation was higher than average based on what I'd seen in similar courses (probably due, in part, to my contagious enthusiasm) but I felt genuine, personal engagement with the texts was lacking. I consistently made attempts to "shake things up" with unconventional discussion techniques and activities; sometimes they worked and sometimes they did not. What we needed was enduring momentum: a shared purpose and commitment that would unite the class and carry it forward in a meaningful way. We needed cohesion and unity to bring us together as a community.

One activity that seemed to resonate with the class was "Silent Discussion," something I'd picked up from a literature professor years prior. It's a simple activity that can elicit profound engagement with a text in ways that a verbal discussion cannot. At the start of class, students are asked to write down a question or topic for discussion; then, the paper is passed around the circle and each student is given a few minutes to respond to the original prompt and/or the comments that have been added. This gives quieter, shy students a prime opportunity to contribute to discussions and allows all students to respond with the candid honesty--and, often, humor--that comes with anonymity. At the end of the rotation of prompts, students look forward to receiving their original papers

back and are given time to read the comments before discussing some of the results as a class. At that point, it is generally easier for the students to talk about complex issues regarding the text's character, theme, plot, et cetera. With time to reflect quietly and with their peers' perspectives (their instructor's, as well) taken into account, they are more able to articulate the ideas they had at the start of class. Moreover, the ideas will have become nuanced as a result.

The most significant outcome of "Silent Discussion," however, is the solidarity it creates among all members of the class. Although the students and teacher do the work of responding to one another quietly and independently, they are engaging in a conversation between like-minded individuals, much like one does on an internet forum. Furthermore, they do so in the context of a shared experience: that being the reading of the text (if they have, in fact, done the reading), or the silent discussion activity itself (if they have not done the reading, they can usually still participate in some capacity). Inevitably, humor will result and its value to group morale is indispensable. It gives the feeling that there is an inside secret shared by members of the class and this, in turn, builds the foundation for a fellowship--or community--of readers.

Determined to develop the sense of community that began to emerge from our Silent Discussions, I finally started thinking out-of-the box in terms of teaching practices. Why not incorporate the ingenuity I had seen in other fields into our class? How could I make literary study engaging for the class as a whole? Most importantly, how could I do this while maintaining the integrity of literary study and keeping close readings at the core of the class? The concept of collaborative fiction, where multiple authors contribute to the writing of a story, intrigued me, as did the idea of simultaneously reading,

studying, and producing literature. Creating a work of fiction would necessarily overlap with the related disciplines of creative writing, editing, and (to some extent) publishing. This is appropriate for a GE class and an ideal way to expose potential majors to the depth of what the department could offer in terms of academic pathways. But how to incorporate collaborative fiction into the context of the class, so that it would contribute to students' learning processes? The solution to this question arrived organically as we were beginning to read Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*.

The genre of detective fiction lends itself well to analysis of form and discussions regarding its evolution. "Whodunnits" are an enduring and adaptable method of storytelling. They are also accessible case studies of the time and place they represent. In other words, detective stories offer more than the immediate allure of mystery, they are windows into the problems of the particular society from which the story arises. For example, there is much that can be said about the social, economic, and political implications of the central mystery in Collins' book, which is tracing the theft of a religious artefact from India and its discovery in England in the mid 1800's. Detective stories are relatively easy to mimic yet they can still provide telling social commentary; thus, I decided that the class' collaborative fiction effort would model the genre we were already immersed in.

Students were first asked to set the scene of a mystery, a la Collins. Any mystery, in any place, at any point in history. They brought the beginning of their story to class and, drawing on the techniques of a silent discussion, passed it to a peer for the next development of the story. This step was repeated once or twice a week in class for about 15 minutes and with each new development, we attempted to follow the trajectory of *The*

Moonstone's plot. The work of creating their own detective stories heightened

enthusiasm for the one we were reading and studying collectively, and vice versa.

Students became interested in tracing the history of the genre, providing context for

Collins' novel as well as a deeper understanding of books, television shows, and movies

they enjoyed outside of class. What I found most interesting about the construction of the

stories they were writing was how personal the writing seemed. Although they were

written anonymously, in many cases, it was evident to whom the original story belonged

and even who contributed certain sections.

It became clear after a few sessions that soon we would have a remarkable

collection of short stories and that these stories deserved a life beyond the walls of our

classroom. We were now embarking on phase two of the collaborative fiction project,

looking ahead to publication. From this point on, the skill and effort necessary to compile

and publish a book was entirely crowdsourced. Participation in the group effort exempted

students from the final paper; of course, those that were uninterested in the collaborative

fiction project were supported with their writing. Because the development of the book

we were creating happened gradually over the course of the second half of the semester,

it never seemed to compete with the reading load or class discussions. There were a few

obvious tasks that we addressed early on and made decisions about democratically. First,

we needed some form of cover art. Students shared their ideas and ultimately it was

decided to go with an original drawing created by a student who happened to major in art.

Second, we needed a title. As a class, we voted on several proposed titles using Google

Forms; the winner was, *Mysteries of English 260: The Complete Collection of Not So*

Terrible Short Stories. I asked for volunteers to assist with the rest of the work: typing

and editing each story (two English majors did the bulk of this work); creating title, copyright, and table of contents pages; and writing a preface. We decided together to dedicate the collection to Wilkie Collins.

As the teacher, my job was to coordinate the effort. Additionally, I asked the English Department to cover the costs of printing and I compiled the document for the printer. I took on these and other responsibilities over the course of the project because it had been implemented at the last minute. The collaborative fiction project is not reflected on the syllabus or calendar so I worked with what I received in terms of volunteer effort. In hindsight, the task of sourcing funding for publication would have been an excellent job for a business, marketing, or event management major. They could write a proposal to the department or other campus organization, they could also organize a fundraiser. Both would provide the students with real-world experiences that might hold more significance for them personally than the crafting of a five-paragraph term paper. Moreover, involvement in this capacity is far more likely to engage them in the work of the class. Compiling the document was perhaps the most time-consuming role I took on and required me to seek help from friends who were experts with the software required to do so. Here, I believe it would be appropriate to assign this task to students majoring in the graphic arts, journalism, or English. However, with a little research, any student could have performed any of the jobs necessary to publish the book. The trick is to encourage students to step forward and choose the jobs themselves; the best way to do that is meet their strengths and interests with participation opportunities and to treat them as colleagues in the process of development.

Students' contributions to the writing and publication processes occurred in addition to class discussions and frequent in-class writing prompts. They were engaged in traditional literary study: they performed close readings, they were exposed to supplementary materials, and they presented their analysis in a variety of written and verbal formats. The collaborative fiction project, as significant as it was, was only one aspect of the coursework. Likewise, the time I spent involved with the project was slightly greater than the time I would have spent grading final papers although it was significantly more rewarding. In sum, *Mysteries of English 260* was one component of Great Books--the one that brought the class together and turned an ordinary GE requirement into a memorable learning experience.

The project didn't appeal to everyone. Creative writing on command under the circumstances I detailed above was challenging for some. And when we were initially starting out, we didn't exactly have an end goal in sight. Once we did, it was hard for a reluctant few to imagine the finished product. Everyone participated in the writing of the stories and the few decisions that needed to be made as a group; we did not use class time for publication related work except to coordinate our efforts. That work was completed entirely as "homework" and like I said, substituted the work of a final paper. Eleven students opted to write a final paper and I believe many of them did so because they were still grappling with ideas from books we read and discussions we had: they wanted to say more on a subject and so they did. However, on the last day of the class, every single student beamed with excitement when they held a copy of *Mysteries of English 260* in their hands. For not only did the students in English 260: Great Books complete the requirements for passing the class, they became published authors in the process."

Mysteries of English 260 and Reader Response

The project outlined above is ideally suited for implementation in a reader-response oriented classroom for three reasons. First, the entire process was democratic. The students were offered equal creative control over the writing of the stories and the production of the manuscript. Second, it invited students to express their engagement with Collins' novel and the literary tradition it belonged to personally. Composing their own versions of a detective story revealed the body of knowledge they possessed about the genre in a creative way. Finally, it presented students with a multitude of opportunities to contribute.

Producing *Mysteries of English 260* undoubtedly influenced the students' transaction with *The Moonstone*. Collins' novel was a model, after all, for the stories being written by the class and there is the possibility that this prompted students to take an efferent stance while reading, essentially looking to the novel for tips or direction. At the same time, it can be argued that *The Moonstone* was a source of inspiration and the catalyst for the creation of something new, which by today's standards, constitutes a meaningful interaction. Whether or not this particular assignment required more of an efferent rather than an aesthetic stance, doesn't detract from the quality of the students' interaction with text, given the value of the final product. Implemented in tandem with close readings and discussions, a collaborative fiction project in a literature class will support two hallmarks of reader response criticism: creative thinking and critical reflection.

By far, the project had the most significant impact on group morale and in establishing a community of readers, and we know from Lave and Wenger that the latter

is a prerequisite for learning. The class began to function more as a team and the camaraderie noticeably improved the quality of discussions. Students seemed to feel increasingly comfortable opening up and sharing their reactions to the readings. Confidence improved (theirs and mine) over the course of the second half of the semester. Overall, we had created a more conducive learning environment. In hindsight, that sense of community is what I realized I had missed in the literature classes I took as a student. It is typical for students to be on an isolated academic journey in literature classes, where each person is processing the texts read independently towards the aim of authoring an essay. It's true that readers first and foremost must interact with the text in a personal way in order to make sense of it, but the meaning-making process does not have to stop there. Collaborative fiction offers a way for students to broaden their reaction to a text and produce something new together, as a community. That second part, I argue, can be just as important as the first. In the next section, I will describe the course design that evolved from the Great Books experiment and offer ideas on how literature teachers can support communities of readers throughout the semester.

LitSync

Inspired by the experience of teaching Great Books and by my ongoing professional development as a teacher, LitSync is a synthesis of collaborative learning, inclusive teaching, and creative reading. It builds on existing scholarship and teaching methods used in traditional lecture-based literature courses to fit the 21st century student and learner. The primary purpose of LitSync is to immerse students of literature in a community of readers throughout the semester, to reinforce the notion that they are

members of an active group and capable of making worthy contributions to it. It does so by supporting literary activity that is collaborative, interdisciplinary, and shaped by individual interests. LitSync is meant to offer an appealing, dynamic learning experience that has potential to recruit majors and inspire lifelong literary habits.

The foundation for LitSync is two general education courses that meet separately twice a week and jointly once a week. They would share a course website that would function in place of a Learning Management System (LMS, i.e. Blackboard Learn) and would showcase student work as well as offer the students and teachers from both sections a way to communicate with one another. The two sections would share this online platform and an assignment sequence to ensure both classes meet benchmarks at the same time. Readings for the two sections would vary but they might share a common theme; for example: the focus of one unit could be the Bildungsroman (novel of development), poetry or short stories might be the next unit, and so on. The possibilities for thematic unity between the two sections are endless and ultimately, they would be determined by the two instructors' area of expertise and interests. What's important is that there is a common thread unifying the two classes and establishing the framework for the activities of the once-weekly joint meeting session. The culminating project for both classes is a published work of collaborative fiction.

In their separate classrooms, the sections would focus on close readings, discussion, and analysis. The real work of reader response criticism would take place here. Students will talk through their reactions to a text, formulate conclusions on the basis of their responses, and "in the spirit of friendly challenge . . . lead one another to work out the implications of the position they have taken" (Rosenblatt 114). With the teacher guiding

the discussion, students will develop "a more critical, questioning attitude and will see the need of a more reasoned foundation for their thoughts and judgements, a more consistent system of values" (114). When called for, the instructor can lead students to supplementary material that will enhance their engagement with the text. For example, if a student was showing curiosity in the historical context of *The Moonstone*, the instructor could point to scholarly works on imperialism or Victorian ideals (depending on the student's interest). Solidifying a personal exchange with the primary text first is, according to Rosenblatt, the way to "keep alive the sense of human import of the more objective knowledge" provided by the experts (115). For roughly one hour twice a week, this is the kind of literary study that would take place. It is at the instructor's discretion to assign work in addition to readings and class participation or not.

When the two sections meet jointly, they would ideally do so at the end of the week in a collaborative space. The schedule for these sessions would need to be determined prior to the start of the semester as they require advance planning. Each week the two classes would unite for maker sessions, to listen to guest speakers, or to coordinate and carry out tasks related to assigned projects; all of which would support literary study. The primary purpose of these meetings is to situate the study of literature into a broader social context, connect communities of readers, and facilitate creative contributions to the field. In "Epic Learning: Large Class as Intentional Design," Jaxon describes the affordances of large group gatherings like this in an educational setting:

> The primacy of the teacher and student dyad and the classroom as closed container fades in the jumbo and is replaced by a network: encounters and entanglements with other students, with mentors and professors, and with other university professionals, inside and outside the jumbo.

In short, the joint meeting session provides students with a myriad of opportunities to participate and engage with the field beyond the classroom.

Guest speakers from within and outside the English department would be invited to share their expertise when it is relevant, in the same way that supplementary readings are introduced into class discussions. A guest speaker from the history department, for example, might speak to the classes to provide context for the current unit under study. In addition to offering a historical overview, this experience would demonstrate how academic fields overlap and provide the two classes with a shared point of reference. Guest speakers would be especially appropriate and beneficial during the collaborative fiction project, which should commence mid-semester to allow ample time for development and publication. Consider introducing a creative writing instructor during the writing phase and an editing and publishing expert during the next part. Adding this element to the project paints a better picture for the students of what it's like to actually be a professional in the field and is evidence of how people make unique contributions to complex industries. It involves them in the department and inspires them to participate.

The shared website would house both sections' individual course materials, the schedule for the weekly joint session, and student contributions in the form of blog posts. It would present LitSync to the public and enable students to share the ways they interact with literary texts over the course of the semester. The website is a tool for opening the "closed-container" of the classroom, for building a network of colleagues. Moreover, navigating the terrain of the open web in an academic setting in this way will help students begin to curate visible professional identities.

At first glance, these ideas might come off to some as farfetched, unconventional or unobtainable. But I've found that incorporating teaching methods that support communities of practice inside and outside of the classroom and occasionally straying away from the traditional essay format, is worth the effort it takes to acquire the skills and resources to do so. Not only does innovation contribute to the success of the students, it affords them the opportunity to engage in an environment that is more like that with which they will encounter throughout their lives and less like the strict structured format that is the literature lecture classroom and higher education LMS's.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This thesis has shown the necessity for improvement in teaching practices in higher education literature courses; to suggest a theoretical framework for literary study that engages readers on a personal level as well as within communities of other readers; and to share the results of an action research project undertaken by a teacher-in-training. It has been argued that the decline of literary studies in higher education institutions is not just a symptom of the commodification of college degrees but of shortcomings in the experience of studying literature. Innovative teaching practices that allow for students to participate in meaningful ways might open up new avenues of participation in the field outside of the classroom. This isn't a call-to-arms for a radical transformation of the discipline; rather, it is an exploration of the potential that literature teachers have to positively impact their students and their discipline. Reader response criticism is a good starting point for class discussions and textual analysis because it can help students untangle their initial response to literature and formulate sophisticated oral and written arguments. From there, certain tools, techniques, and values of the digital humanities can be adopted to facilitate collaboration and participatory learning opportunities.

Prospects for putting an M.A. in English to use following graduation are limited and less than ideal: Should we spend most of the next decade earning a PhD and scrambling for a rare tenure-track teaching position in a highly competitive job market, or

accept indefinite job insecurity as an adjunct lecturer? Graduate programs could and should do more to either confront the expectations of incoming students, provide internship opportunities with organizations outside of education (if there is so much that can be done with an English degree--then departments should tangibly demonstrate what), or operate as more intentional teacher-training programs. Graduate students can do their part by embarking on their studies with a clear purpose and plan post-graduation. It is possible for students in a Master's program to be better prepared for life beyond the university, but simply addressing the realities of the job market won't do much to improve the culture of literary studies.

The need to feel a sense of community and to be able to contribute to that community are essentially human traits and, unfortunately, the discipline of literary studies is notoriously individualistic. Because the nature of the work performed--reading, writing, and teaching--can isolate scholars from one another, belonging doesn't come easily. This is even more true for students and young professionals in the field, i.e., graduate students. How do you find your place in a field that lacks community? Many don't. Those who do are an exception or they find peripheral spheres to participate in, like my colleague and I (and several other members of our cohort), by leaning on literacy studies and committing to activities that transcend the boundaries of a conventional classroom. In the absence of inroads to a community, individuals will find some way to satisfy their need to belong even if that means abandoning the direction they were headed: this, I believe, is one significant reason English departments are shrinking, and why I think it's imperative that faculty (and students) continually assess and revise their teaching practices.

Recommendations

There are a number of ways English departments can support teachers and teachers-in-training and in some ways, they already are. Offering courses like English 692 that allow for students to reflect and improve on their teaching methods is a start; requiring it for all teaching assistants, whether they plan to teach academic writing, literature, or creative writing is even better. It would be wise to integrate journaling practices into teaching assistantship programs for the sake of professional development and as a potential source for future research projects. Providing workshops where graduate students can collaborate with other teachers on syllabi, assignments, classroom activities, and even action research projects are indispensable. Another way that graduate programs might support their students in developing innovative teaching practices is to follow the practice of Johns Hopkins and hold a competition: their annual competition invites students to propose ideas for a course; it's then evaluated by faculty and the winner is allowed to teach it (Michael Clune).

All of these ideas necessitate support at an administrative level. Departments need to be willing to invest in the professional development of their faculty as teachers in the same way that they invest in their research. Providing forums for the discussion and analysis of teaching methods, and the financial backing to do so, would mean placing more value in the role of teaching in higher education than currently exists. The return, however, is creating a more rewarding learning experience for students and that's worth the investment.

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