



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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INNOVATIONS FOR THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Recent conversations with students and classroom experiences have helped identify some areas where the English curriculum can be enhanced. Students have complained that textbooks are tedious, writing assignments are not always relevant and dynamic, the curriculum is narrowly focused with little sense of innovation, there is no living dimension in discussions about literature, and so on. Therefore, I have implemented some strategies to make the curriculum more vibrant, interesting, and whole.

The Curriculum

Does the curriculum involve enough contemporary issues, along with traditional literature and issues? Is there a balance between old and new? What if there is a resistance to change? Over the years we have noticed that students often find the curriculum uniform, devoid of provocative ideas and risk, and lacking in the senses—it is as if everything went through a multitude of committees. Many of the textbooks reflect this blandness and uniformity. A good step in any department is to make sure the books are excellent, rather than just the result of easy agreement and department traditions.

If students who love learning, reading and writing, and discovering various writers and places and ideas feel thwarted already, what about the students who take mandatory composition classes? What will their experiences of writing say to them? Will they get the message that writing class is not just an array of assignments, but an interesting journey, an exploration of consciousness, a way to learn and integrate disparate knowledge across the curriculum? Perhaps we should ask ourselves if we would want to write assignments we require.

It is important to remember what moved us when we were students—those x-factors that kept us involved. Such things, in surprising ways, compelled us to become teachers. Of course, we can strive harder to have a more interesting and relevant curriculum that can genuinely engage and surprise the student, to get them

to learn more than they ever expected.

A personal essay on beliefs or travel or music, for example, is a good way for the student to take stock of himself—it is like writing a letter to oneself, to say where one has been and where one is going. Personal writing is a safe harbor from which to enter the deeper waters.

The Globe

We all know the basic composition sequence, followed by introduction to literature and other classes. All students have to take composition classes, but after that many are rarely seen again. It would be a good thing if English classes had more appeal to students outside of English study. Quite often, say, business or medical students might not want to see English again. Maybe there are ways to entice those students into taking more English electives.

A sampling of available literature classes, for example, includes “American Literature 1850-Today” or “Introduction to British Literature.” These are worthy classes, but often an abundance of such classes, at the expense of others like World Literature, unbalance the curriculum in the direction of American and English literature. We are living more “global” lives, more immersed in what is going on around the world—culturally and environmentally. If it is a typical critique of college students, especially at the community college level, that they simply do not know much about other cultures, then more of what is out there should help them. We are aware, for example, that many students cannot locate some continents on a world globe, do not know writers from other countries (except for the most famous), or do not believe that America is the only democracy. To have students read more world literature is a path away from narrow views and narrow living.

A global literature curriculum helps students gain an understanding and empathy to all of humanity. Studying world literature is about making connections and seeing universals—it is about getting to know your neighbors, here and abroad. It is a great repository of knowledge for students to study world literature, from Gilgamesh and Egyptian love poetry, to Homer and



Sappho and the tragedians, to Ovid, to Sir Gawain and Chaucer, to Goethe and the other Romantics, to Leo Tolstoy, to Alice Walker—the list is nearly endless. The basic idea here is the great relevance of world literature—the stuff of real life and powerful dreams.

Thematic Literature Classes

Perhaps we can use more thematic classes. Students, for example, who have a taste for ecology can explore the ages with writers who offers interesting perspectives from their own times. At our college, the English Department, after offering a pilot class in composition with nature as its theme, is now expanding offerings. A thematic approach can focus the energies of the class and bring a new dimension to the idea of team-teaching strategies or invited guest lecturers.

Service-learning Writing and Literature Classes

Writing classes with a civic quality are important. They encourage students to learn first-hand about a field of interest and help others in the process. This experiential focus is a good way for students to obtain experience and information about which to write. For example, in a service-learning class, students can work with senior citizens or children, or work on cleaning up the environment, or just about anything in which they are sharing their lives with others and helping the community. They could volunteer time in a museum, soup kitchen, woman's shelter, political office, and so on. This is practical and important work that gets students to help others and, in the process, perhaps find a calling. Working outside the classroom, in a humanitarian setting, encourages students to truly embody the knowledge they have gained; after all, they had the experience of helping others, and they know that they did.

Contemporary Issues

Many students cannot make sense of the world. They do not understand political actions and repercussions. They often engage in jingoism where only reasoned argument will do. There is little studied questioning of our leaders or analysis of the whole situation. Solutions are simple, reflexive. Having a class that focuses, through literature, on important matters of our time is at the heart of education. Such a class can inform students by getting them to question generalizations and jingoism, see things with less myth and more transparency, and know their world and their place within it better.

Graphic Novels

We assign books to read, prose to ponder, and poetry to explicate. Too often, we fail to see the inherent diversity in literary offerings. But literature changes over time—e.g., the graphic novel is fairly new on the scene, with the added benefit of being attractive to a generation that responds inherently to visual stimulation.

Experiential Aspects

Students often write papers, of all types, without experiencing the subject matter. Recently, we have tried to include more experiential aspects in humanities, as well as writing, classes. For example, Composition I requires a research paper; we have required students to focus on holistic health, such as acupuncture, stress reduction, working out, yoga, and the Mediterranean Diet. Students are required to take a class—exercise, yoga, Pilates, whatever—or at least interview someone who teaches in one of these areas. In the process of becoming better writers, they gain a larger perspective of human health, and, perhaps, gain a greater appreciation for nature.

Supporting the Arts

Most English departments support their literary-arts journal. It is our experience that few, if any, departments emphasize the journal as much as the newspaper—an ironic situation and a reflection of what happens in the larger society. Information is more important. Yet, we must appreciate literature and the arts (at least as much as news), serve as advisers, or at least make announcements about journal submissions. Even if the literary arts journal is an afterthought, it can develop surprisingly well for a small amount of money and time. At the minimum level, departments could give release time to faculty members working on the journal, or at least devote more resources to it—e.g., a few computers for preparing copy.

Students can offer public readings of their work. A quality journal shows off students' works and is a special reflection of the college. Some of our students took the college journal to publishers or graphic design companies to showcase their work and have been offered jobs. Others have included their journal in their applications to universities.

When these activities are connected, students visualize how English literature can and should be related to other discipline areas and focused interests. Everyone can profit from such a holistic or systems approach. We continue to explore ways to raise the energy levels of English departments that are well-equipped to reach out across the curriculum and the ages.

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