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**LITERARY PEDAGOGIES AT UMSL:  
COMBINING CASE STUDY WITH PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

by

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Advisory Committee

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## Foreword

It has been several months—almost a year!—since I first began working on my thesis in earnest, and nearly a year since I first conceived of the project in its most nascent form. From the beginning, I knew that I was interested in literature and the study and teaching of literature, and how I could apply my recent engagements in the field of Rhetoric and Composition to my longstanding work in Literary Studies. You see, I began my work in the UMSL MA program with an English Bachelor's already under my belt—and, therefore, I felt I knew a thing or two about literature and how it should be taught. After all, I had just successfully navigated four years of literary analysis and canonical engagement.

None of this is to say that what I learned in those preceding years was wrong or problematic. Instead, I now see that younger version of myself much the same way I see other undergraduate students today—as bright-eyed lovers of stories and words with open minds and big ideas. I've always loved reading, as have most English majors, and writing has always come easily and naturally to me—and again, the same can likely be said of most undergraduate English students. We simply follow the stories where they take us, and for many of us the road winds to English programs in universities across the country. What those programs look like may change from place to place; I can't say for certain, as I've spent my entire college career on UMSL's evolving campus, and that is why I have elected to craft my thesis into a case study of the kind of literary education taking place in undergraduate courses here and the kind of reading and writing instruction students identify themselves as requiring or desiring.

Because I have chosen to pursue my English studies beyond the undergraduate level, I have different, unique ideas about what a literary education can and should look like, which I base upon my own needs and desires, teaching philosophies, my experiences with literature in and out of the classroom (canonical, popular, and everything in between), and the scholarly readings I have conducted in line with my interests in rhetoric, composition studies, feminism, and disability studies. But others will have their own conceptions of literary education, just as they have their own reasons for pursuing an English degree in the first place, and that is what I aim to capture with this thesis. I surveyed undergraduate literature students to facilitate this understanding: What do young (and old) St. Louisans want to see in their literature courses? Do they want more writing instruction? a non-traditional definition of the canon? more or less focus on personal or political issues? active learning? differentiation in instruction? These are all questions that have guided and will continue to guide my work on this topic for some time, and though I cannot and do not expect to answer them all (or any of them, completely), they are worth ruminating, worth probing for interesting and useful insights that can be incorporated into my teaching.

I see myself—or a younger version, anyway (or maybe I really mean the perpetual version of myself who just loves to read and talk about books)—in many of the responses provided by the students who were gracious enough to participate in my survey. Fortunately, however, I see responses that are unfamiliar to me, answers to my questions I did not anticipate because my nineteen-year-old self would not have responded in such a way.

With these questions and themes swirling through my mind, I have organized my thesis into several sections. The two larger sections, what I am considering the main chapters of my work, will entail the review of literature I have conducted and my interpretation of the survey data I collected during the earlier phases of this project. Interspersed between these sections, and also within, are more personal reflections and connections. This connective tissue I have supplied to facilitate unity amongst disparate parts and to make the larger work most meaningful to me as an individual reader of literature and an instructor working in the English discipline.

The first chapter, “Pedagogical Manifesto: (Re)Mixing Literature Pedagogies with Composition Theory,” reflects the melded interests I’ve been developing in my work in composition and rhetorical studies. Because I have spent so much time immersed in scholarly work on writing pedagogies—something I took great pains to learn before I ever set foot at the head of any composition classroom—I know a thing or two about teaching philosophy and how veteran professors conceptualize the instruction they deliver in their own courses. Many of these theories I encountered as the result of my enrollment in composition-based classes at UMSL, and, unfortunately, the literature courses I have taken at the university have not entailed the same intense scrutiny to the teaching of literary works. This is not by any means to say that there is not rich food for pedagogical thought in these classes or that any of my professors have been unskilled instructors; on the contrary, I am very much indebted to many of the professors whose classes I had the fine pleasure of taking during my seven years at the university. Rather, because I have a mind for theory and have encountered much pedagogical theory throughout my composition and rhetoric scholarship, I sought a similar experience

regarding the teaching of literature. I did not wish to enter the classroom without first painstakingly developing my own theories of teaching, an understanding of my place within various hierarchies of power and the duty I have to my students, of the intersection between myself as lifelong learner and myself as transmitter and sharer of knowledge. And so I did what I always do when I want to know something and how I feel about that something: I read and I slowly developed my thoughts and assertions regarding the teaching of literature and I put those thoughts onto paper, however awkward they may have at first seemed. Some of these earlier writings have made their way into this thesis; in any case, the ghosts of all of these thoughts remain throughout the work, and only I know where to look to find them.

The second chapter, “Digging Deeper: A Close Look at Undergraduate Literature Students’ Survey Responses,” comprises my interpretation of the survey data I have collected whilst working on this project. Due to the sheer amount of information gathered, I have chosen to focus on a select few questions and articulate the overarching themes I see dominating students’ responses. Because I am approaching these answers from my own literary and pedagogical frameworks, I cannot hope to know for certain what these undergraduate students require in these classes—many responses are contradictory from student to student, and all of them are far too complex to distill into the easy conclusions hoped for in theses—but I can come close, and I can certainly generate the insights necessary to become an open-minded and access-oriented instructor of literature and literary analysis.

This latter term I am defining more broadly than traditional definitions seem to indicate, as there may be an infinite variety in the ways students and scholars can respond

to literary works, both within and without the canon, traditional and popular. This is a thread I weave throughout the larger piece, as I show that individual needs, interests, emotions, and epistemologies influence the ways people perceive, think about, talk about, and write about their reading experiences.

Finally, I use this work to strengthen my conceptualization of myself as developing scholar and instructor of literature. Though I ultimately cannot know precise details regarding my academic future, I know the kind of academic professional and human being I intend to become, regardless of the courses I end up teaching or the institutional pressures I end up facing. Since the onset of my graduate studies, Universal Design for Learning, a pedagogy grounded in inclusivity and access, compassion and understanding, flexibility and experimentation, has appealed to me as tool useful for teaching in any discipline, any subject. Creating this thesis has only solidified that conviction. Courses ought to be taught with individual students in mind, and thanks to some helpful undergraduates—to whom I dedicate this Master's thesis—I now have in my possession some of the materials necessary for constructing courses of my own. Their voices give me strength and insight—something I can carry with me beyond UMSL's grounds.



### Prelude

I have a distinctive memory from my time as an undergraduate at UMSL. I was sitting in an upper-level course classroom, notebook open, pen poised, ready to hear what the instructor would have to say about James Fenimore Cooper or Flannery O'Connor. Or was it John Milton? It doesn't matter, the point being that I was ready to read and discuss and immerse myself in literature, in the best writing that has ever been written.

I had gotten to class early to unpack my materials and settle in to my desk. Spatially, the room was organized as many literature courses are. Rows of desks faced the figure of ultimate authority, the literature professor, and the tools of the trade: chalkboard, desk, computer projector. In this configuration, I felt ready to receive the words of that authority and develop a better understanding of the texts I had been assigned.

I had not been sitting down for very long when I heard a smattering of disdainful voices behind me.

“Did you do the reading for today?”

“No, I only read the Sparknotes.”

Is this not every teacher's worst nightmare? (Only a mild exaggeration.)

I don't recall the rest of the conversation, perhaps because I found myself overcome with disdain of my own—disdain and frustration and confusion over the idea that these students, who hadn't bothered coming prepared to class, had been masquerading as English majors all this time, with me none the wiser. And, perhaps, a deep sadness that they were not enjoying the words we had been reading.

Looking back on this recollection from the older, more cynical space known as graduate school, I now realize that these students knew something I didn't, that they possessed a wisdom unaccounted for in their literature classes.

They knew themselves better than I knew myself, passive receptacle of literary doctrine as I was during this time, and they knew what they wanted to read and the writing they wanted to compose. Or, at least, they had an idea of what they might be capable of, as did I, though in vastly different ways. They were following dreams of their own, tenuous, shifting dreams that hinged on an English degree that might not take them anywhere.

They were the students who didn't know where they wanted to be but knew they felt passionate about *The Great Gatsby* and *The Crying of Lot 49* and Ezra Pound and Adrienne Rich and Leslie Marmon Silko. Where I was pursuing knowledge that would enable me to assimilate into the discipline and gain easier access into graduate programs, they were pursuing goals that extended far beyond the walls of academia. Academia, in fact, might not even be able to touch these dreams, but you can't get anywhere without a college degree. Where I was quietly eager, not daring to consider carefully my position in the university, these students knew we were swallowing vast swathes of dense writing whole, rarely stopping to admire the scenery or the wildlife on the way to our destination.

I wonder about these students from time to time. What has become of them? What did they get out of their degrees? What are they like today?

Some of them I see around cyberspace, quietly keeping up with their lives on Facebook and Twitter. Some of them write poetry, though not the kind you'd find in a survey course, the course lauded as the ultimate preparation for understanding literature.

(And is not the sheer volume of reading in these classes overwhelming? I certainly cannot remember everything I read in those courses.) Some have used their language abilities to advocate for others in non-profit organizations. Still others have wound their way into MFA programs. The rest, though, have met fates I cannot fathom, probably because they left the Ivory Tower behind as soon as they were able. I have remained in the trenches.

And that is why I write today.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Pedagogical Manifesto: (Re)Mixing Literature Pedagogies with Composition Theory**

#### **I. Introduction**

The University of Missouri—St. Louis nestles itself amongst great confluences: between urban bustle and suburban quiet, between local politics and beliefs brought in by commuter students, between privilege and marginalization (both applying to students and nearby communities), between activism and intellectual inquiry on the one hand and declining enrollment rates on the other. Rich in hope, conflict, trust, and insecurity, St. Louis represents the merging of minds and bodies in powerful, if sometimes divisive, ways. UMSL, while a manifestation of the Ivory Tower, is no less a part of St. Louis realities than are its students, all of whom walk campus halls with their political leanings, career goals, and individual fears and aspirations in tow.

Cut to literature classes, those bastions of culture and intellectual rigor, some of the last remaining spaces where people can escape into far-flung philosophical musing, safe from the complexities of life beyond the walls of the Tower—or so we are often lead to believe. The reality, of course, is that literature is deeply political, as is the decision of what counts as literature worthy of academic scrutiny, and it can instigate important discussions relevant to the goings-on of our public and private lives. However, the teaching of literature, when grounded in traditional logocentric, elitist ideologies privileging the transmission of the canon—the passing of the intellectual baton to the next generation—are ultra-conservative and non-generative insofar as they do not encourage new readings of texts, differentiated instruction, modes of engagement

alternative to rigidly defined literary analysis, and active learning strategies that permit students to explore readings and creatively interpret texts.

St. Louis has been my home for over twenty-five years now, the past seven of which I have spent immersed in the culture of the UMSL English department, first as an undergraduate pursuing two Bachelor's degrees—one, of course, in English, the other in psychology—and now as a final-semester graduate student with an eye on the future of the discipline. I discovered during my time as an undergraduate that I am a close reader with an analytical spirit, that I can successfully internalize the conventions of the Literary Studies tradition—the same conventions I now critique. More recently, as a graduate student, I discovered that there are other ways of doing things, that the canon is not representative of all that is beautiful or consequential in the world, and that literary analysis papers do not have to be the lifeblood of the discipline. Some of these latter discoveries were guided by professors who taught in ways I will here briefly describe as non-traditional or compositionist, who spoke openly about students' positions in the English discipline and who facilitated active learning and meta-analysis in their classes. The rest are the result of a growing self-confidence, an increasing sense that my experiences mean something, that I can contribute meaningful findings to members of the discipline.

The work I undertake here represents a merging of my undergraduate experiences with my graduate school wisdom, applied, of course, in retrospect; of the value and necessity of teaching powerful and moving stories with composition pedagogies—teaching strategies, rooted in active learning and the social construction of knowledge, that foster true learning and personal engagement; of my background with the needs of

individual students at UMSL and the insights of likeminded scholars. I begin first, throughout the present chapter, with the scholarship, to establish a framework for my analysis of UMSL's literature course *vis-à-vis* my personal history with the department and then move to survey data collected from undergraduate students enrolled in these courses. These latter findings, tempered with personal recollections, will be presented in the second chapter of this graduate thesis. Ultimately, I assess here the functioning of these courses in order to urge myself toward newer and more exciting modes of literary engagement and strategies for student support. I simultaneously respect and critique the tradition of literary studies at the same time that I experiment with generative pedagogical insights—a meshing of the old with the new in order to compose a more robust understanding of the discipline.

Because what I am doing here is ultimately a literary analysis of a single literature department and myself as reader and transmitter of knowledge, I am going to quote one of the greats, even though I think we as a profession sometimes do that too much. I do so in the spirit of simultaneously defending and critiquing the canon, of acknowledging the beauty that has come from our storied tradition and at the same time the fact that it comes with its own unique problems. (See: any of the multitude of writings arguing that the canon and the literary tradition as a whole have largely catered to the needs and realities of white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, capitalistic, neurotypical, male, human life forms, etc. etc.) Let us not forget what Matthew Arnold wrote in his preface to *Culture and Anarchy*:

The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by

means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically. (5)

I write this quote in full because I realize I have misinterpreted it for years. I read selected essays from *Culture and Anarchy* as an undergraduate, and while I have forgotten much of the exact language of Arnold's arguments, the line "the best which has been thought and said in the world" has remained, an earworm that has made a permanent residence of my brain—though I cannot for the life of me recall something as significant as details from my own childhood. (Something had to be pushed out so that I could incorrectly remember this quote.) That quote wormed its way through my thoughts for so long that I believed Arnold was advocating for an elitist notion of the canon, and so I was about to earnestly take the man to task for his claim. And maybe I am not entirely incorrect in that assumption (he typically discussed the "elites" in his writing), but "turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits" seems to me what reading is all about, what brought many of us English students to the major in the first place. How many of us were avid readers from the times of our births? How many of us sneaked books with us into social and family gatherings—*just in case*?

What's important, however, is that our love of reading did not discriminate, at least not in the early days of our affair, before education told us what to read and what not to read. I, for one, have seen far too many defenses of young adult novels, science

fiction, romances, twenty-cent paperbacks, comic books, video games, and fanfiction, amongst too many more, when I cannot think why they should be necessary in the first place.

Most significantly, though, what Arnold's preface offers me now is a chance to reflect upon the traditions of Literary Studies and the degree to which I have become enmeshed within them. I have been staunch in my desire to carve a niche for myself in the English Studies discipline and mechanic out of a sense of wanting to respect my forebears and stick with the tried and true methods of the people I greatly admire. It is my aim with this thesis, however, to "turn a stream of fresh and free thought" upon the different ways I have been engaging with the discipline—what I have elected to read, how I have chosen to engage with that reading, and how I ultimately have determined to interface with my own students—and develop a thoughtful and access-oriented pedagogy on my own terms, according to my own interests and needs, and, of course, according to the interests and needs of my students.

## **II. Problematizing Literary Studies**

To begin with, I want to address one of the fundamentals of the field, one of the features we often take for granted. In "The Way We Talk about the Way We Teach Now," Amanda Anderson writes of argument for argument's sake, "the academic constitution of problems—or the act of 'problematizing'" that so heavily figures into the teaching of and writing about literary texts (20). This problematization has long been the hallmark of good literary analysis—and I have often enjoyed engaging with stories in this way—but it is absolutely essential to note that it "is not at all self-evident to those who



have not already been trained, or acculturated, in specific disciplinary practices” (20).

Thus, while it is considered important to teach this method of approaching literature, it is not the natural manner of reading for many people, including undergraduate English students. And if it is not the natural manner of reading and analyzing for many, we must ask ourselves: what is? How do people prefer to engage with the books and stories and comics they read?

A more direct and salient question might be: what views are promoted by the way we teach literature? Insofar as texts, to use the academic term, or books and stories, to use friendlier and more open terminology, are taught traditionally, in the sense that there are “right” and “wrong” ways to interpret the greats and write about them, then I am not teaching in a way that promotes fluidity of knowledge, the social making of meaning, or the process of coming to love and understand a work of literature. What I ultimately mean by this is that the kind of reading and writing and teaching and learning loved and appreciated by professors of literature are not necessarily the same for those who don’t go on to become English professors and teachers, nor is it the same amongst all of us who take up careers in English Studies.

Fundamentally, “[t]here is an implicit assumption that the self-definition of the humanities is integrally linked to their transmission through pedagogy,” which means that greater attention needs to be paid to the ways in which literature is taught (Anderson 19). Teaching remains the central locus through which the humanities are preserved, and though different strategies factor into each field differently (often, lectures and brief discussions constitute undergraduate literature courses at UMSL, while active learning and writing figure more heavily into writing classes here), it is well worth remembering

that students are ultimately the bearers of the future of the discipline(s). Without them, there would be no literature courses, no professorial positions at prestigious research universities, no looming Ivory Tower.

Some students may find lectures on centuries-old plays engaging and illuminating, feeling the words of past lives reverberating around their skulls; for others, such teaching may seem tedious or inaccessible—they may be unable to concentrate upon a single topic for seventy-five minutes, or they may disagree with their instructor's interpretation of a poem or story and feel as though they have no outlet for such disagreement. The same could be said of class-wide discussions in which the discussion is merely superficial, when instructors have predetermined interpretations they impose upon students. Some students may love composing traditional literary analyses because that is the type of literary engagement most suited to them—but what about those who fall in love with characters and plot but know they can't write about loving *Moby Dick* for the sake of it?

What happens when we get to college, and especially to graduate school, is that we increasingly apply “readings,” to quote Mark Edmundson, to the texts we experience (56). What is meant by “readings” is an intense focus upon certain aspects of a text through a specific lens long established in criticism as an effective means of examining a work. For example, a Marxist reading enables us to interrogate various socioeconomic factors in a piece of writing and reveal certain historical undercurrents operating on the text and upon the writer themselves. A feminist reading exposes oppressive gender hierarchies and the ways in which individuals work to subvert them. These are fruitful inquiries, to be sure, resulting in the creation of new and significant knowledges—but

they are not the only ones. For Edmundson, for example, reading literature can instead be a way to be re-socialized; it's "a great second chance," meaning that it enables us to throw off the yolk of the dangerous thoughts we learn while young (57). Some examples of this include racist beliefs indoctrinated by parents and peers, or notions of success that do not mesh with an individual's actual goals. Importantly, "a young person has the chance to discover new vital possibilities. Such a person sees that there are other ways of looking at the world and other ways of being in the world than the ones that she's inherited from her family and culture" (57-58). Literature, then, can make sensitive empathizers of us all, capable of effecting real, progressive change in the world and developing genuine interpersonal relations with others.

When we problematize and interrogate texts, to "enact a reading" of the kind decried by Edmundson, we "submit one text to the terms of another . . . allow one text to interrogate another—then often to try, sentence, and summarily execute it" (61). And while historical context and secondary criticism are productive domains for the understanding of texts and the construction of knowledge, they do not easily permit us to appreciate a story for what it is, to feel the joy that comes from some author from long ago telling us something we already know deep down but had never been able to access before the moment of reading. We execute what is beautiful in our attempt to understand it; but the thing about literature and good narrative prose is that it is often indirect and impossible to fully understand, complex and nuanced, with room for multiple interpretations. As Edmundson rightly asserts, "we need to befriend the texts that we choose to teach" (63). In fact, we would do well to read as we once did as children, or as

those who are not “experts” do when they read in the privacy of their own homes or meet for book clubs.

This enactment of “readings” that has become so prevalent—this problematization—makes its presence felt in many pedagogical writings. Anderson details her perspective on scholarship of literature pedagogies, and it is her to whom I turn to continue fleshing out the portrait I am here sketching. Specifically, her articulation makes for an insightful comparison with writing on composition pedagogies for several reasons. To begin with, composition scholars often write to analyze their own teaching methods and come into a productive mindset, to offer best practices to those in similar positions or those who will soon be in similar situations, to engage via theory current teaching practices in order to propose newer and more effective ones, or perhaps simply to share new ideas, readings, and assignments with their peers in the field. For Anderson, however, “discussions of pedagogy tend to be inherently justificatory for the discipline” when it comes to articles penned by literature scholars (19). She situates this conversation within the oft-quoted “crisis in the humanities,” noting the ways in which discussions of teaching literature have generally been associated with this larger focus on the supposed decay of the discipline and the (perceived) increasing lack of respect afforded scholars and teachers of literature. Discussions of teaching literature, according to Anderson, have been inextricable from this larger conversation; publications about teaching often allude to the “crisis,” and they tend to focus upon the same reading and writing and analytical traditions that dominate defenses of the literary discipline and its position within wider academe.

Though I have held Literature and Composition distinct throughout this discussion, because they have remained somewhat separate historically, there is ample room for crossover and mutual engagement, a fluidity that can enable each field to learn something new. For now, it is best to reflect upon the differences and seek ways to combine the best of both worlds, the storied and successful past of one with the adventurous mindset of the other. If the goal of a discipline is to propagate a storied tradition, then my teaching will reflect that; likewise, if the aim is instead to foster creativity and experimentation and innovation, my teaching will reflect that as well. But what if I merge the two? How can the teaching of literature benefit from the pedagogies established and advocated by composition scholars?

### **III. Self-Recommendations**

To be sure, I am confident that if I were to ask many professors of literature—and perhaps I should—they would likely say that their academic career was kindled by a love of literary texts, that they believe their teaching does in fact cultivate a stout and vigorous engagement with literature. In order that I might tap into that vigor myself, I think the time is ripe for a self-reflective assessment of my teaching styles, a closer scrutiny of the needs of my students, and a reconceptualization of the canon and of literary analysis that meshes best with my conceptualization of my personal teaching goals and their alignment with my students' goals and reasons for enrolling in my courses.

Before students ever enter the classroom, an instructor painstakingly scours textual material, designs small-scale and essay-length assignments, crafts lesson plans, and determines the day-to-day, week-to-week, and month-to-month operations of the

course. These features compose the delivered curriculum the instructor intends to share with the students; this curriculum does not, however, account for the minds and bodies students bring with them into that academic space. The experienced curriculum, then, should change from semester to semester, as new students engage with a syllabus and course materials from both the individual and collective standpoints they occupy (to borrow from Yancey). Room must be made for this necessary and productive maneuvering, and the most successful courses are ones in which active learning takes precedence—students and instructors work together to communally interpret materials and collaboratively construct the “text” of the class. New knowledge is generated every semester, knowledge that instructors can carry with them into subsequent semesters, which serves to benefit students and instructors in the sense that material remains fresh and instructors value and utilize the insights of newer minds in the field.

As an instructor, literary or otherwise, I must see inherent value in fluidity, in not knowing how discussions and activities will play out—in essence, in the ambiguity and uncertainty that comes with committing to building a course from the ground up every semester. A great deal of trust and respect must be placed in the students. If the students recognize this trust and respect, however, the results can be remarkable, as they begin to see themselves as valued contributors in an academic space—and why shouldn't they be? One of the first works I came across while researching this thesis was Michelle Neely's, at that time a forthcoming article: “Faculty Epistemologies in Successful Writing Fellow Partnerships: How Do Faculty Understand Teaching, Learning, and Writing?” I find it useful to consider the ways in which faculty epistemologies influence instructors' teaching strategies and the ways in which they orient themselves in relation to their

students. If faculty are committed to the claims I am beginning to build here—if they embrace uncertainty and trust students’ ability to uncover meaning in literature—it follows that students will take up the torch, so to speak, and accept responsibility for their education. Though she does not use the phrase “active learning,” as compositionists do, Neely writes that “students who have a contingent view of knowledge, meaning that they view learning as a process and knowledge as constructed, perform better on academic tasks . . . compared to students who view learning as a fixed skill and knowledge as certain” (1). It should be the goal of the literature instructor to facilitate active and collaborative engagement with stories—an engagement that allows for nuance and shifting meanings rather than a static, received interpretation of canonical texts. For that facilitation to occur, however, the instructor first and foremost must ascribe to an epistemology that values the constructed, contingent nature of knowledge and the ability of students to participate in that construction.

What this means is a reflection upon instructors’ epistemological orientations to their students, to literature, and to the teaching of literature. Based upon my experiences in undergraduate literature courses—less so for graduate classes—I get the impression many professors already have at least a general sense of how a work ought to be interpreted and historically situated. Why else would they be teaching it? This is especially true for texts that have been around for centuries, for which the perception pervades that nothing new can be said about them. But these are the texts that can most benefit from fresh eyes and perspectives, and in fact, an open approach to teaching such works can cultivate richer understandings. Neely, in her study of writing fellow partnerships, found that the most successful “[f]aculty members’ interviews [about their

participation in writing partner fellowships] revealed beliefs about learning as construction of knowledge and a shared responsibility between students and faculty to collaboratively build this knowledge” (8). Insofar as the sense prevails that undergraduate students need to be told what to think about literature, that they have no new or interesting insights to offer, such thoughts need to be tossed out and replaced with greater respect and dignity. Letting students talk about what they love and what they know from the sociocultural standpoints of their own lives generates insights not readily apparent to privileged academics steeped in tradition.

In this sense, I follow Neely in asserting that changes to faculty epistemologies are necessary, though, of course, the nature of something so firmly rooted as epistemology means that these will be difficult to alter for many, and impossible for others. One’s epistemological philosophies, their understanding of how knowledge is transmitted or received, crafted or deconstructed, directly underpins the pedagogies they carry with them into classrooms. Instructors viewing a canonical text (and, perhaps, some well-written secondary criticism penned by experts in the field) as the ultimate authority will perceive their pedagogical duty as keying students into that conversation via lecture and close reading. Those who perceive nuance in stories, problematic social views embedded in texts, the historical inequity inherent in acts of literacy will take a different approach.

It is important to note that Neely sees “the challenge to faculty beliefs and values” as inherently tied to composition pedagogy (8). With composition scholarship comes insights regarding strategies for facilitating active learning, scaffolding techniques for the building of knowledge, individual and collaborative writing activities, and frank and open



discussions of what works and what doesn't. This is fruitful terrain for any instructor of English Studies, combining theoretical orientations to teaching with concrete lesson plan ideas and deep internal reflection. (Many compositionists already practice what Neely preaches.) It strikes me that many literature professors probably do not read nearly as many articles and books on the teaching of writing as do their counterparts in Rhetoric and Composition, if they do at all. I elect instead to experiment with pedagogical strategies put forth by composition scholars and apply closer scrutiny to the teaching of writing and the place of writing instruction within literature courses, a proposal supported by the survey data I have gathered, as will be delineated in the next chapter. When instructors give up "classroom control and predictability" (9), as advocated by compositionists, the classroom does not descend into chaos, as some may fear; rather, new knowledge is forged and creativity enjoys freer reign.

Supporting many of these assertions, a group of English and language scholars tasked by the Modern Language Association with considering the objectives of an undergraduate liberal education likewise makes the claim for the benefit of the comingling of literature with composition. In their 2009 report to the Teagle Foundation, the scholars outline what they perceive as desired outcomes for undergraduate majors in literature and language—amongst these comes the assertion that literature students "would improve their skills in reading and their ability to write critical arguments if literature and composition courses were more closely connected" (293). Literary analysis is a special beast that must be learned; thus, aside from the active learning and social justice paradigms espoused by compositionists, it makes sense that writing itself should be taught in literature courses—though this has not been the case at UMSL. Simply put, I

never formally learned how to compose those analytical term papers assigned by many professors—I was expected to already know how to write them. It strikes me that there is room in every course for explicit instruction and discussion of the expectations of the field, why they are so, and how students can tailor their writing to meet the needs of the department. Though the authors of the report spend much time articulating findings that exist beyond the scope of the present thesis, the article, published in *Profession*, is well worth the read for literature instructors and academic departments and may even facilitate the epistemological alterations proposed by Neely.

Most significantly, the MLA authors wish to modify English and foreign language disciplines by connecting to knowledges privileged by our current society and by the students themselves:

the twenty-first-century knowledge commons puts specific forms of literacy at a premium: the ability to communicate effectively and persuasively with others through *cross-cultural literacy*, to work with new forms of media through *technological literacy*, to understand language and culture in context through *historical literacy*, and to analyze, organize, and make sense of information through *information literacy*. (288; emphasis in original)

This discussion of literacy is one I utilize in my composition courses, even going so far as to share this exact quote with my students. Students, as do all members of a collaborative society, need to have access to skills and knowledges that will help them navigate communities and understand their place in the world. The literacies mentioned above—cross-cultural, technological, historical, and information—all facilitate that process, and

they also represent ways of reading and engaging with literary works. We can read to better understand a historical moment or a culture that is different from our own. We can read to gather information about those times and places, but at the same time we can also develop empathy and a better sense of how we can orient in relation to others. We can read to understand the tools and technologies individuals and communities had and have available to them as they conduct their daily business, and we can also use new forms of technology, such as digital media, to read and engage with literary materials.

For example, let me consider some of the questions that may apply to such a discussion: What are the ways in which hegemonic notions of literacy contributed to the composition of the literary work in question? What are all the cultural and individual factors that have culminated in this work? What did it mean for this particular author to be literate at this particular time? What technologies were available that permitted the composition of this piece? What technologies are available now that permit the reading of that same piece in 2017? In what ways do they alter the reading experience from the contemporary moment of reading? What information colored that contemporary reading? What information colors our readings today? These are all important questions that can lead to fruitful discussions and allow for the insights of individual students, thus enacting active learning paradigms of the social construction of knowledge that will invariably evolve day to day, from one semester to another. A few questions may require more traditional lecturing on the part of instructors, such as in the providing of historical context for those students unfamiliar with previous time periods or other cultures, but others contain ample ground for the social construction of knowledge *vis-à-vis* discussion and active learning. This is what one of Neely's interviewees means when he claims that

“he sees his students as responsible for one another’s experiences” (8). And when the instructor takes on the role of learning peer, they, too, learn something in the process. Such is the decentering of authority advocated by many feminist scholars of composition.

Furthermore, just as disability studies (a field with disciplinary connections to Composition Studies) tells us that there is immense variety in learning styles, it makes sense that there is immense variety in reading styles. This, of course, is not an especially original insight, but the connection between disability pedagogies and the teaching of literature can help me make room for the ways of reading and writing that students might prefer.

What I am ultimately advocating here is a more open approach to literature and writing about literature and teaching literary (and non-literary) texts. I would like to see a place for emotion in these classes and for all of us, instructors and students alike, to reflect inward and demand the kind of teaching and learning that best suits us as individuals. I, for one, am no lecturer, though I have witnessed lecturing done remarkably well. I would love to see variety within the classes I teach: different delivery of readings and ideas, more writing instruction and access to technology, a greater focus on the contemporary alongside the canonical, and more sustained discussion of what the canon means, of what an English education offers us all.

Reading is deeply analytical, though it is important that we do not also do so from a hyper-suspicious stance, like the one articulated by Rita Felski in “Digging Down and Standing Back” that has “crowded out alternative forms of intellectual life” (15). Elsewhere she notes that “[b]ecoming a critical reader means moving from attachment to detachment and indeed to disenchantment” (“After Suspicion” 30). For Felski, too often

does literary analysis involve “railroading over a text; doing symbolic violence to a text; chastising and castigating a text; stamping a single ‘metaphysical’ truth upon a text” (“Digging Down and Standing Back” 15). This seems a harsh treatment for the best that has been thought and said in the world.

What Felski advocates instead, and she does so throughout her works, is a renewed focus on affect and the affective responses readers feel as a result of reading literary works. She seeks to remind scholars of the everyday reasons for picking up stories in the first place, the inherent pleasures we as a profession derive from a well-woven plot or a superb poetic image. In other words, “affect cannot be separated from interpretation,” for we only teach and write about the texts we love (“After Suspicion” 32). In calling for a more open definition of interpretation, or literary criticism, Felski encourages us to approach literature in a way that feels natural to us. Nowhere does she contend that tradition needs to be done away with or that common modes of analysis have no place in the field; instead, the body of her work on this theme advocates for freer notions of reading and writing about literature, a return to the kind of reader response work that seems to have fallen by the wayside but in fact offers much to intellectual satisfaction:

It calls not for complacency or confession but for strenuous reflection on how aesthetic devices speak to and help shape selves. Such reflection reaches outward to the world as well as inward to the text, asking how reader response is shaped by educational training or social circumstance, how structures of feeling and interpretative registers are modulated across space and time. Yet the starting point is a deep sense of curiosity about the

nature of our aesthetic attachments, as worthy of sustained and sophisticated investigation. Such an approach offers unique opportunities, as well as risks, in allowing students to reflect on rather than repress their engagement in what they read. (“After Suspicion” 32)

Such a move calls for less indoctrination and greater attention paid to the real motives of students and writers, whatever they may be. It also can help me reach out to students in ways that make sense to them, helping them engage with literature on their own terms and guiding them through their curiosities to new readings and understandings.

It also calls for a new kind of literary criticism that is more readable than what is often published by scholars of literary studies. Jargon-heavy and frequently obscure on purpose, many books and articles would not elicit the affective resonance that literary works often do. As a graduate student, I want my writing to contain narrative and multitudes and give my readers a sense of the inner workings of my psyche as I engage with stories and pedagogy. However, this is not to mean that there is nothing useful in criticism, nothing to preserve from the vast tradition of literary studies. Anderson writes that in some cases critical writings contain what she calls “charismatic argument,” which refers to “compelling, reproducible, and satisfying” argumentation—even if this is only felt by insiders, those familiar with jargon and theory, disciplinary standards and conventional modes of engagement (24). This charisma that some critical writers possess may be why high theory predominates within literary studies, despite its relative inaccessibility to non-academics (both because of convoluted language and university paywalls). There is thus an argument to be made in favor of preserving tradition—but preservation does not have to mean that something continues unaltered, that room cannot

be made for affect, for accessible writing styles and modes, for active learning and collaborative knowledge construction.

In defense of some of the pedagogical practices taking place in literature courses throughout the country, though, Anderson asserts: “I strongly endorse assigning secondary criticism, not only because it is pedagogically efficacious but also because it promotes a more transparent understanding of literary studies as a discipline and knowledge base” (21). Literary criticism can certainly be incredibly interesting and serve as the site of learning and intense engagement with stories, and, what’s more, it is important to remember that literary studies *is* in fact a longstanding discipline with traditions that matter and entrenched practices that serve as the makeup of the field. Students seeking entry do need to understand how the field operates on a daily basis at the same time that room needs to be made for innovation and experimentation therein. This transparency advocated by Anderson helps us and students understand the inner workings of literary studies and how they might situate themselves within it. Further, I would argue that an exposure to composition scholarship—even articles on rhetoric contemporary with a literary text or more personal engagements with that text—can supplement this understanding and help us all better see the ways in which we operate as a discipline and the ways in which we can learn from one another and our students.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

It was the hope of the Teagle Foundation group nearly ten years ago that their work would spark “a national dialogue in which departments can learn from one another about both the challenges and the opportunities for the creative renewal we have

described” (298). To facilitate that process, the authors have attended national conventions and brought their findings to the attention to as many literature departments and instructors as will listen. They “acknowledge the mandate to evolve,” a mandate with which I agree and to which I will contribute both with the writing of this thesis and with the teaching I will undertake in the future (299). What all of these authors argue, and what I myself argue, is for a reconceptualization of the discipline of English Studies that better represents the needs of all kinds of students and the methods of reading and writing that have not traditionally been well-represented in academia. This means a greater convergence between literary study and composition and rhetoric, and it means allowing bodies new ways of moving through the discipline.

I would like to close this chapter with a focus upon two literary concepts introduced to me by Rita Felski. In the spirit of practicing what I preach, I register that I “like” these theories. I like them because they open up new spaces in which I am able to operate as a writer, a critic, and an instructor, both in literature and composition studies. Have you ever felt that “click” of illumination when reading a book or a well-written academic article, that moment in which everything makes sense and you perceive your position in new ways? This is what Felski has been for me as I have constructed this graduate thesis.

The transtemporal resonance (her term) of a literary work, or its ability to exert effects upon a reader in a different time period—and perhaps in a different country or in a translated language—that has nothing to do with the sociohistorical context in which it was written, is worthy of further scrutiny and deserving of a place in our discipline. According to Felski, further, many scholars have already tapped into this important



feature of literature: “Queer theorists call for an ‘unhistoricism’ open to the affinities between earlier times and our own that does not blanch at proximity and anachronism. Scholars of the Renaissance are reclaiming the term ‘presentist’ as a badge of honor rather than a dismissive jibe, unabashedly confessing their interest in the present-day relevance rather than historical resonance of Shakespeare’s plays” (“Context Stinks!” 576). This resonance, what very well may be an affective response to a literary work penned long ago, can be a fruitful ground for scholarly inquiry, as students and professors alike reconsider the ways in which stories remain relevant in times far removed from their original composition.

Bruno Latour’s concept of actor network theory, as also articulated by Felski, becomes useful here, too. By viewing literary works as non-human actors, as autonomous agents capable of moving through time and space and influencing people, both within its original moment of composition and in future reading situations, we begin to open up new avenues for understanding literature. A story is not merely the product of the context in which it was written; it also exhibits influence upon that context, altering social and cultural and historical spaces. The same can be said when it is read again in the future, by readers existing beyond the scope of those spaces, sometimes separated by several centuries, oceans and mountains, languages and customs. Much like the collaborative endeavors of the classroom, a single literary work connects multiple readers and networks together; in this sense, it is much greater than the historical context in which we sometimes try to box texts. Importantly, the “significance of a text is not exhausted by what it reveals or conceals about the social conditions that surround it. Rather, it is also a matter of what it makes possible in the viewer or reader—what kind of emotions it elicits,

what perceptual changes it triggers, what affective bonds it calls into being” (“Context Stinks!” 585).

What this means for teaching is opening up the discipline for these emotive conversations and for more frank discussions of the field and pedagogy—even within, and perhaps necessarily so, undergraduate literature courses. Students need to be made aware of much of what I have written in the pages of this chapter, as well as the conclusions at which I will arrive in the next. Here, though, it is enough to assert that I can give my students a variety of ways of thinking about and talking about what they read. Theory and traditional literary criticism, important as they undoubtedly are, are not the only means of engaging with literature. What I can offer students is choice and the space to develop a literary toolbox that suits their own needs as lovers of literature.

To return to the discussion about the best that has been thought and said in the world, Edmundson notes that literary study “can help people learn to read more sensitively, help them learn to express themselves; it can teach them more about the world at large” (60). This is ultimately my goal as an instructor in any discipline, and I write this thesis as a reminder to myself of all that is at stake in the reading and the teaching of literature. Just as I have done throughout my studies, I want my students to feel comfortable and confident expressing themselves—in whatever media or mode that most appeals to them. I want them to use their engagement with stories to make sense of things, to make sense of themselves, to become the literate and compassionate human beings I know they can be.

Importantly, though, I must hold these thoughts in tension with what I am calling “reality,” the day-to-day unfolding of events, the inherent messiness of teaching, the

inability or the refusal of some students to engage with course materials, the moments when a lesson fails, a joke falls flat, and students disengage. I sometimes write while wearing my rose-colored glasses, though I know from experience that teaching is not always beautiful or even remarkable. Sometimes I stay up late wondering how this student is going to respond to my email, how that student is going to be able to complete their work with everything going on in their life, whether essay assignments are sufficiently interesting and meaningful to facilitate compelling compositions. This is the reality of teaching that is talked about in faculty meetings, between colleagues over late-night, early-morning text messages, and I find it valuable and necessary to contemplate it alongside my all-too-rampant idealism.

## Interlude

*April 2017*

This semester I may fail as many as eight of my First-Year Composition students. Some stopped attending class after the first few weeks and never got around to formally dropping out. A few have run into family troubles, health concerns, the anxiety of maintaining a full course load. Writing is not a subject that lends itself well to hasty makeup work.

I've taken chances on students, offering to coach them through the places where they've fallen behind. Often, they make progress for a couple of weeks, only to fall further and further behind until making up work becomes virtually impossible. I've sent countless emails out into the ether, wondering how students are doing, whether they need my assistance or even just my companionship. On most of these emails I receive no response. I never hear back from some students. I think about them still, months later.

I have no attendance policy because I know life gets in the way sometimes. I suspect there are a few, though not many, students who take advantage of this, but I also believe everyone needs a break now and again. I have only recently, just this semester, instituted a late policy to avoid receiving assignments weeks and in some cases months after their due dates. I do not feel right about it; I do not feel right about giving students zeros, though I know this isn't something I'm supposed to lose sleep over.

But the fact remains that I *do* lose sleep over it. I want to help all of my students succeed. I want to guide them to knowledge and understanding. I want to offer them the chance to write meaningfully and creatively. I've had to adjust my teaching over time, reconciling my desire to offer students variety and an opportunity to forge their own way

with their need and demand for structure, for knowing exactly what they need to do to earn a good grade. And so I continue offering them that same freedom, but I temper it with perhaps more guidance than I am comfortable with.

Of course, I am not always successful, and there is always the possibility for disconnect between me and certain students whose expectations clash with what I am able to offer them. (One student, for example, finds it disrespectful that I allow students to call me by my first name. This is an irreconcilable difference, an instance in which I remain divided from that student.) Some people, as I am learning, will always be unreachable, no matter how far I am willing to reach out, or they are unreachable by me—or they are reachable under certain conditions but not others. All I can do is keep trying, keep listening, keep adjusting my teaching, within reason, to meet the needs of my students.

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I walk into the classroom feeling confident about the day's lesson plan, an extended freewrite and collaborative activity designed to help students engage with the day's readings and brainstorm with one another about potential project topics. My students the previous semester took to it rather quickly, making use of my openness to work together and come up with interesting project ideas in a communal, productive setting. I couldn't stop them from talking to one another. This semester, however, the room remains silent. With a much smaller class size—six in attendance compared to the twenty from several months ago—tight-knit groups have not begun to form around the room.

They write quietly. They finish quickly. When the time comes to share responses, they are hesitant, awkward. I am awkward. Once one brave soul volunteers to contribute, the atmosphere brightens a little and conversation flows more easily—though not too easily, a problem I faced the previous semester.

Though we all remain good-humored and ready to engage in the class, it will be a few weeks more before we warm up to one another and accept the attendance problem affecting this particular class this particular semester. I wonder for weeks whether I am doing a good job. Every day I ask students to move closer to one another at the start of class; each day I return to find them in their original places. I eventually stop asking, finally feeling comfortable enough with this dynamic. We joke about the small class size, though we of course inevitably maintain the distance between one another, almost as if to reify the absences of so many students. These students have always been part of the class, and so they remain to the very end. At Week 15 it is still slightly awkward, though we have embraced the awkwardness, finally.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Digging Deeper: A Close Look at Undergraduate Literature Students' Survey**

#### **Responses**

##### **I. Introduction**

As soon as I set foot into my first college literature classroom, I knew I was in the right place. Nervous, as this was also my very first university course, I waited for the class to begin and the professor to set the tone for the semester. It was a literature survey course, designed to introduce undergraduate students to a variety of canonical texts, and the professor began—where else?—with *Beowulf*. What sticks in my mind from this first day is not syllabus policies or the faces of my fellow peers—rather, I remember the professor writing a line of Old English upon the board and uttering a long-unheard, unspoken phrase in a nearly forgotten language. I felt the words of the past echoing in my ears, as stories came alive vividly in my mind. I was mesmerized by the moment, in awe of the knowledge I then perceived as one day to be made available to me. I listened to this man speak about literature, passionately and knowledgably, for an entire semester and enrolled in his courses at every possible juncture for the remainder of my undergraduate career.

The teaching style of my *Beowulf* professor—we would read assigned texts before a given class period, during which he would lecture us on the history and biography behind the writing and make gestures toward received interpretation—became a familiar one as I moved through UMSL's English department, both physically and mentally. Quiet and contemplative as I was, lecture suited me well, and I never questioned

professorial or institutional authority. I assumed this was *the right way of doing things*. I figured others felt the same.

As I progressed to the graduate level, I realized they didn't, especially through informal discussions amongst peers that took place outside of the parameters of the graduate seminar. Different ways of doing things, of engaging with literary material, began to take shape in my mind as I listened to and participated in these conversations. The classes themselves, particularly those in rhetoric and composition, introduced me to discussions of pedagogy and disciplinary convention that not only provided me with the language necessary to critique the status quo of literary studies, but they also exposed me to a variety of instructional methods that I now appreciate as better suited to constructing collective knowledge. These professors believed in active learning, in the student's responsibility and ability to create knowledge alongside the instructor. Though I am still quiet and contemplative in these classroom settings and still require more time to process my thoughts, I value learning dynamics in which my peers feel free to advance conflicting ideas and new topics worthy of collective consideration. I daily reap the benefits of the confluence of multiple voices and standpoints within a single classroom.

I have therefore learned that it is not necessarily lectures that I enjoy, but the transmission and exchange of ideas. While I still often remain quiet in class, it is because I require time for processing and reflection, and I enjoy taking classes with students who do not require that extra time, who raise questions and challenge assertions and enliven the materials of the week. Such a performance cannot and should not fall solely upon the shoulders of the instructor. To return to the construct of epistemology discussed in the



previous chapter, but with a focus upon students this time, every student possesses a way of viewing the world that needs to be incorporated into the classroom space.

To ensure these views and voices continue to be acknowledged, I am asserting the need for the following in my literature courses:

- acknowledgment of students and needs that have not been traditionally represented in Literary Studies,
- differentiation and variety in instruction styles,
- ways of engaging with texts beyond attending lectures and composing traditional literary analyses,
- room for digital literacies and alternative modes of composing,
- explicit writing instruction,
- pedagogies rooted in active learning, and
- an opening up and expansion of the canon (combined with critical discussion about what the canon means and a consideration of popular texts).

These I base upon my experiences while an undergraduate English student at the University of Missouri—St. Louis and critical reading I conducted in current scholarship in the field while a graduate student at the same university. Fundamentally, these recommendations are essential when I am designing courses and curricula to ensure that literature classes are ethically created and provide equitable learning opportunities for everyone who comes into contact with course materials.

To generate these self-recommendations and develop a better sense of what is needed in these courses, I conducted a survey of undergraduate students enrolled in literature classes at UMSL, asserting the feminist methodology of centering the voices

that are frequently marginalized in curricular decisions—those of the students themselves. I needed the authority granted by the people most important to the teaching of literature, without whom such classes would not exist, and so I sought the insights and needs and desires of the students enrolled in the same courses I had taken only a few years previously.<sup>1</sup>

Then came the messy bits. Once I had collected the data and reviewed the responses, it was time to write, time to immerse myself in my findings and extract gold. At first, I think, I found too much gold, or not enough of it, depending on your perspective. Every question seemed to me to elicit information worth writing about and exploring further; and I still think this, but I am discovering in the process of writing this graduate thesis, my first foray into the world of quantitative data, that it is disastrous to sift through data with a fine-toothed comb. I found myself lost in the words of the students, unable once I got so deep to see the bigger picture any longer. I wanted to address everything, to remain faithful to the data, to thank the students for taking the time to write so extensively about matters dear to my heart. I wanted to rage against the students who claimed they don't want to see social justice in their literature courses (until I realized I should have phrased the question on that subject differently and better); I wanted to quote every gem of commentary left by the students, capture every nuance articulated in the data, make delicate linkages between each and every data point and discursive response, weaving an intricate constellation of a vast and too-complex picture.

In examining students' responses to my survey questions, I chose instead to focus on the themes briefly enumerated at the beginning of the present chapter. I wanted to see

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of this survey can be found in the Appendix.

how closely students' needs and expectations resembled my own, to what degree they diverged, and whether that divergence supported or refuted my claims—I am arguing for variation in teaching style and student engagement in literature courses, after all, so divergence was certainly not unwelcome. To that end, I will delineate and reflect upon the most relevant survey questions, as I investigate the following:

- why our students at UMSL elect to pursue literary study and enroll in our literature courses,
- what needs to be changed or added to these classes (in the words of student respondents, as well as in my own), and
- the pervasive call for more for more extensive and comprehensive writing instruction in these classes.

Response outliers and questions that elicited answers beyond the scope of the present project, however interesting or illuminating they in their own right may be, I chalk up to interpretive differences, and I retain them as potential material for a future research project, though I have decided to remove them from current consideration.

## **II. A Brief Note on Methodology**

Once IRB-approved, this survey was distributed to undergraduate literature students across the department. Enough professors welcomed my presence in their classrooms, permitted me to disseminate paper copies or electronic links of the survey, that I believe a useful sample size (thirty-five in total) has been obtained.

In examining students' responses, I searched for general trends, patterns in answers that I felt might be representative of something significant. I focused on what

appeared to be shared sentiments amongst students. Even opposing currents, though, I duly noted, for they still nonetheless revealed the needs and desires of those who enroll in undergraduate literature courses at UMSL.

It has been four years since I have taken a statistics course, and what I am doing here is not a wholly quantitative project. The numbers *do* matter, of course, but they compose only a small crosshatch of their larger portrait I sketch in these pages. Primarily, I am interested in the words of the students, the embodied experiences they attempted to transcribe upon the questionnaire provided. These responses have allowed me to reflect on the ways I hold conversations about social issues with students, and they have reinforced my desire to teach in a way that is generative and transformative—in other words, political.

### **III. Why Students Pursue Literary Study**

What strikes me most immediately when I consider the survey data is that I am reminded of myself when I was an undergraduate literature student. I see passion in these students' assertions about why they want to pursue literary studies and what they hope to get out of their classes. I see an interest in familiarizing themselves with the canon, in diving deeper into texts they have never seen before, in writing about the stories they are reading and coming to new understandings of the world at large. Students wrote of passion and love, of meaning and power, of childhood experiences, of the classes they love best. I certainly can relate to all of these feelings, and I think they are representative of people who become English majors, who see meaning and purpose in words and stories. Reading through the data, I could not help but find myself thinking back to my

earlier years as an undergraduate student of literature, unsure of what I wanted to do with my life but absolutely positive that I wanted reading and writing to be part of it.

One student wrote about the study of literature that, “It brings meaning into my life. To have ideas resonate across time and space, to connect with my personal feelings and insights, brings great comfort to me, allows me to expand my ability to understand the points of views and situations that other people experience.” Who can argue with that? A similar response from a different student notes that “Literature does a better job at revealing the human condition than Psychology does.” Many other students simply wrote that they “love” reading and/or writing—it is essential to foreground this admission of love because it reminds us that there is something deeply human, moving about books and stories, poems and sketches, that often gets lost in the quixotic flow of the classroom.

Most importantly, what I see in these responses are things that I have forgotten, or nearly so. What strikes me is the comparison I find myself making between what seems like my much younger self and my present self in graduate school—the self that has become accustomed to the inner workings of academia and has made significant strides in carving out a career path for myself. I have nearly forgotten my early aims in studying literature: a thirst to read as much as possible and immerse myself in histories, cultures, and rhetorics from different times and different places—a “less boring study of history,” as one student respondent contends. It seems so noble when I think of it this way. Now that my goals have become more refined and focused, and are no longer the mere quest for literary knowledge and writing ability, I am afraid that I might lose sight of these earlier, significant desires. This passion I see in these students—this is the passion I want

to hold on to for as long as I am privileged enough to study, teach, and write about the books that move me.

Reading through these responses may have reminded me of my earlier self, but it also reminded me that my earlier self is not the only kind of student who enrolls in literature courses. What often goes unaddressed in the disciplinary scholarship I have encountered is the significant number of non-English majors who enroll in these classes. Education majors, too, love literature, so much so that they desire to teach literary works at the K-12 level. But some students, regardless of major or disciplinary affinity, just *like* to read and write, which is as good a reason as any to enroll in the English department's undergraduate courses. There is an interdisciplinarity to students that is not always acknowledged or addressed in institutional conversations, but it comes through early on in these responses, and it proves useful when probing further into the discipline and examining spaces within the field that most require reconsideration.

#### **IV. What Happens Now?**

From reviewing students' responses to my survey, I can see that students have had similar experiences in their literature courses (i.e., lectures and class discussions on the reading materials), but also that they have varying assessments of the usefulness of some of these teaching styles. One student wrote the following, a sentiment shared by many of the respondents: "I actually prefer lecturing. I want the teacher to show us what they know, and all the different ways you can interpret what the author is saying." On the contrary, another student wrote that "I am not a fan of the lecture model. I prefer a Socratic Seminar style class but class discussions are always nice." Even on the subject

of class discussion, though, students were divided, with some relishing in “learning a variety of perspectives & interpretations of assigned texts” and others finding smaller group activities ineffective. Lastly, one respondent composed a significant answer that I believe necessitates a deeper look at the lecture-only model of teaching: “I am a little concerned about the mid-term and final exam. By only lecturing, I feel like there is an overwhelming amount of heady content to know.”

And, of course, there is always the possibility that no matter the strength of the lecturer, some students simply do not learn best via the auditory intake of information. Other modes of teaching work better for some students, an important factor to consider when planning curricula and designing lesson plans. It seems to me, therefore, that variety is what is needed here—variety in teaching styles and types of assignments, and variety in terms of the classes that are offered to undergraduate students studying literature. Students’ responses overwhelmingly support this interpretation, with many respondents indicating that the efficacy of lecturing or instigating class discussion depends on the class size, the facility of the instructor either to lecture or to moderate discussion, and the personalities and predilections of the other students enrolled in the course. This, to me, seems obvious in retrospect, but it also means that teaching can at times be an unwieldy entity. These claims must be tempered by the fact that instructors need to play to their own strengths, and, ultimately, teach in a way that is comfortable and accessible for them.

Related to this discussion are students’ responses to the seventh question of my survey: “How were you able (or expected) to show what you learned and engage with class materials?” Every single student surveyed indicated that written papers entailed at

least some component of their literature classes. This, of course, is not surprising, as academic papers have traditionally been part of English Studies; they're what seem to be the counterpart to the readings we do. Other high percentages are seen in students indicating that they also take tests and quizzes and are expected to participate orally, either in class-wide discussion or in smaller groups. Only 16% of students surveyed noted that they had the opportunity to compose multimedia projects; 32% were required to perform presentations of some kind; a mere 6%—two of the respondents—composed social media posts as part of their study of literature.

From reviewing the qualifications to these statistics, it is clear that the typical literature course at UMSL asks students to write a series of papers throughout the course of a semester and participate in some kind of formal assessment—daily reading quizzes or mid-term and final tests. Many students indicated that they feel they do well on the essay element of their classes: “Papers worked well for me, because they gave me ample time to lay out my thoughts and work towards an idea.” This seems to be a sentiment shared by a majority of the respondents, many of whom also indicated that while these papers are often difficult, they are still preferable to the kind of essay writing (or multiple-choice questioning) that is expected on formal exams. One student, echoing several others, asserted that “[t]ests and quizzes are more challenging and take away from my experience.”

About these students it is important to remember that they love to write and believe that writing is a way to learn new things and connect themselves to the discipline. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a majority of them indicated that they would like to see more explicit discussions of writing in their literature courses. Writing is a process, and



students (as do professionals) need to work through that process and receive thoughtful and thorough feedback from their peers and from their instructors. Class discussion and active learning environments facilitate a stronger engagement with the material of the class. Importantly, there are no clear expectations for what a literary analysis paper is supposed to look like, perhaps particularly for freshman students newer to the discipline or non-major students less familiar with the genre. Students such as these populated my data pool. One remarked, “So far I have had only one paper to turn in. It was slightly helpful, but the topic to write our paper over was very ambiguous. I would like a little more guidance in what to discuss.” Another reason to (re)consider the high price placed upon literary analysis papers is that they are often used as the *only* mode of assessment for students. As one student aptly noted, “This puts a lot of pressure on each essay or test because it counts for much of my grade.” There can be a lot of anxiety associated with this facet of many literature classes, to which I can easily attest. I have had several classes in which my final grade hinged on a seminar paper—the only assignment I was asked to complete for the entire semester.

There can be a weighty disconnect between the way we talk about literature in classes and in private spaces, full of fervent emotion and deep reverence for the texts, and the way we write about literature, either in assigned papers or papers that we are hoping to publish. Students, too, seem to pick up on this disconnect, writing that they wish discussions of literary analysis figured more heavily into their literature classes. One student wrote that “Professors expect students to know how to write about literature when not everyone has the same experience.” Another noted that “I think that each teacher wants different things and having them explain the way they want things done would be

very helpful.” Many responses continue in this vein, suggesting that perhaps students don’t know what is expected of them when they are to write literary analyses, for such is a genre that is not explicitly taught in college. And yet, as an additional student writes, “Professors expect students to know how to write about literature when not everyone has the same experience.”

What this variety in responses indicates is that I need to add variability to my teaching repertoire, taking into consideration the diverse needs and learning styles of my students. One size does not fit all; pedagogy must be diversified. And at the same time that I work to diversify my teaching styles, the ways that my students are expected to formally engage with literary works must also be diversified. For example, some students may be better suited to reader response papers, or their writing may thrive in blog format. There is a growing body of scholarship, combined with anecdotal evidence that I see operating in my own classes, indicating that multimedia and multimodal elements in classes facilitate active learning. Teaching, when combined with students’ digital literacies, can result in interesting and exciting work in the part of our students. Why should literature classes be an exception to this? The best option is to present my students with alternatives; many might elect to continue working within the literary analysis genre, but many might also wish to experiment with newer, different ways of engaging with literature. This is especially significant for students who do not wish to pursue their English studies to the graduate level and potentially beyond, where a solid grasp of traditional genres and methods of composing will be expected of them. Collaborative writing and multimedia presentations, for example, when done right, result in more

nuanced understandings of the subject than perhaps might be the case with a solitary writer working alone on a traditional analytical paper.

And there are additional reasons behind students' desire for writing instruction in the literature classroom; creative writing is something in which many English students are interested, and it can be useful to more openly discuss the "craft" of the literary analysis and promote a more productive and collaborative atmosphere of composing. Creative writers know well the value of the workshop, and all academics see the inherent worth in peer review. We share our work and ideas with one another constantly—why not do the same for our students in their literature classes? One respondent remarked, "Most writing/literature classes lack helpful critiques and proper instruction on how to utilize language and why. In my experience, anyways." Literature is all about language, so how can we help students tap into their own potentials for harnessing language in powerful and creative ways?

While all of this may seem familiar to people who have studied composition pedagogies, I find it informative that so many undergraduate students have identified many of these features as essential to their learning process. They are sure to note it when they see them working in their classes. And they also directly point out their absence. In fact, it's interesting to see the ways in which students' responses intersect with much of the scholarship on literature I examine in my previous chapter. The notion of ideas resonating across time and space and insights being generated in the *now* of human experience based upon that resonance (Felski) speaks to what we as lovers of literature know about the books we read. These are the things scholars feel deep within when they are young, but often forget when they learn too much about the way academia is

supposed to function. Patrocinio Schweickart in “The Female Reader and the Literary Canon,” for example, advocates instead for a revisionary reading, one that pushes against reading and writing styles enforced in the academia—reading and writing styles that may run counter to those with which students engage when they are young.

Students enrolled in undergraduate literature classes at UMSL, while valuing tradition and received wisdom, understand the importance of introducing new texts to the canon, especially those representative of marginalized populations or indicative of popular interests. They love writing but do not always understand what professors require of them in essay assignments. In their responses I see roots entrenched in the past, in the sense that they trust implicitly the authority of the literature professor. I also, however, see gestures toward a more inclusive, progressive future that recognizes multiple perspectives. Finally, too, I see demands for teaching styles that are more engaging, that do not assume students cannot be trusted to complete reading assignments (e.g., reading quizzes). (If they trust us, why do we not trust them?) Students know their needs are valuable, and if they do not know how to self-advocate, it is because I do not teach them to do so within the discipline. Thus, I argue, finally, for the presence of disciplinary conversations in these courses—what tradition means, who has been granted authority in the field (perhaps inequitably), and what positions students occupy relative to that authority.

## **V. Concluding Remarks**

On a purely practical level (though this is literature we are talking about), students need to be able to write well to succeed in their intended career paths. Many majors at

UMSL do not offer writing intensive courses, or courses in which writing is taught explicitly. It makes sense, then, that interested students, wishing to hone their writing skills, would turn to our department for support. It doesn't necessarily follow, however, that they would enroll in creative writing, technical writing, or any similarly titled courses. A love of literature is not the sole property of the English department, and there is value in practicing writing while enjoying the literary scenery along the way.

Education majors and students from various disciplines throughout the university, for example, frequently find their way into these classes, for practical purposes or because they may intend to become teachers at the K-12 level. Yes, Education majors wishing to teach English find enjoyment in literature and need to spend time getting to know some of the texts they may be teaching in the future. What they also need—but do not necessarily receive—is a discussion on how to teach these works, how to situate them within various constructs that younger students can understand. While graduate seminars at UMSL frequently account for the presence of high school teachers and their need for pedagogical discussions, I have not often encountered the undergraduate equivalent, despite the fact that there have always been education students in my classes. What I am advocating here, then, is not merely a reconsideration of literature pedagogy (though that, too, is needed); rather, pedagogy is a force whose presence needs to be felt in undergraduate literature courses. Such courses, as illustrated by students' responses to my survey, serve purposes for which we may not have intended, and these unforeseen purposes and these non-English major students need to be considered when designing the curricula of the department.

None of this is by any means to suggest a homogeneity in responses. Some students identified that they work best with lectures; others indicated the exact opposite. Some prefer writing papers, while other seem to enjoy class discussions and giving presentations. Some students want to read exclusively within the canon; many others want non-Western readings, readings from contemporary milieus, or graphic novels. What this brings me to, what everything seems to bring me to, is Universal Design for Learning. It's something I take very seriously when approaching every semester teaching FYC, and it guides my orientation to every one of my students. It strikes me that I now need to begin to consider on a practical level how I might incorporate all of these different needs and desires and learning styles my as-yet-imaginary literature courses that I might be teaching in the future.

Ultimately, the survey results confirm my attitudes toward the teaching of literature, but they also reveal a side to the discipline I had not previously considered. What emerges through an examination of the data acquired is that Literary Studies accomplishes more than we realize. While we may hold ideas of what a literary education—or a humanities education or a liberal arts degree—is supposed to mean, its true meaning ultimately resides in the minds and bodies of the students enrolling in courses and pursuing degrees. It is therefore imperative that I recognize immediately that students often possess greater knowledge and more diverse skills than they may be given credit for. I need to trust them, respect them, and include them in all curricular and disciplinary conversations. The survey data only strengthen my convictions in this regard. Where my opinions and needs differed the most from those of the respondents' are where I most needed to listen to student voices. This, too, is where administrators and professors

alike most need to listen to determine what changes, if any, need to be made within classes, throughout departments, and across the discipline.

I want to make room for them within larger institutional conversations, rather than expecting them to make room for decisions made without their input, particularly when we consider how insular and provincial English Studies can be; I want to guide them to knowledge and understanding, rather than forcing them to fit into the discipline. They already compose the discipline. They are the people whom we serve—without them, there would be no English Studies, no need for publishing books and articles, no tenure to speak of.<sup>2</sup> It is with this in mind that I propose new ways forward for the discipline, alternative modes of envisioning the field and paving the way for growth, inclusion, and a greater relevance to the goals of the real-life students who enroll in literature courses—goals that change day to day, semester to semester. The field thus must commit to ongoing change, an evolution that permits it to keep up with the students who people our discipline.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that there is not important and necessary work to be done outside the walls of academe. Such work, however, falls beyond the scope of the present analysis, though it is a focus I intend to bring to my future work in the discipline.

## Postlude

*April 2017*

There is one project I always love assigning my First-Year Composition students: the Critical Literacy Narrative. It's the last major assignment of the semester, and I view it as an opportunity for students to experiment, to create, to compose whatever and however they want. With their research papers just completed, the students are free to move outside academic convention, if they so choose, and craft and present or perform a final project that meaningfully discusses their literacies.

Screenplays, scrapbooks, debates, speeches, creative nonfiction pieces—all are fair game for this final project, a project with details I purposefully keep vague to prod students toward reaching beyond their comfort levels, if only for a brief moment in their literate lives. Many won't and don't, choosing to follow the tried and true method of the academic essay—which is certainly fine with me—but a few always do, and I have always been, without fail, astounded and impressed by these projects. It never would have occurred to me to write a screenplay or put together a scrapbook as an engagement with literacy, probably because my literate skills and lived knowledges do not encompass those skills—a further reminder that I don't always know what my students want and that I must provide them with the opportunity to determine that on their own, with a little guidance and friendship along the way.

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I am sitting in my office, one I share with three other TAs and an adjunct instructor, holding a conference with one of my FYC students. She sits next to me,



nervously flicking through the pages of a half-finished scrapbook. I reach over and feel the textured cover, the thickness of the first page. The meeting has just begun, and already I am impressed, excited, confident that the final product will be exceptional.

She walks me through her process, how she is already a seasoned scrapbooker, what stories she wants to tell between, within, and across the pages, all of which fall into a spectrum of blues and pinks. Her family members have been her most significant literacy sponsors, á la Deborah Brandt, and she is halfway through composing a final project that I sincerely hope finds its way into the family's collection of scrapbooks, perhaps on a bookshelf in her parents' house or lodged in storage for safekeeping. I'd like to imagine this composition physically becoming part of the family's larger literacy narrative.

I trust this student, believe she knows what she needs to do to complete this project meaningfully, however shy she in person may seem.

At the beginning of the semester, this same student confided in me that she doesn't like writing classes, finds them too personal, doesn't like sharing so much of herself with strangers. I can only imagine what recurring absences have done to this regard, with a shifting stream of students moving through the class, different people absent on different days, a few old faces resurfacing to attend for a few days, only to disappear once again. But something has shifted throughout this process, something that has compelled and empowered her to call into being a very tangible manifestation of the people she holds most dear—and want to share that with her peers.

While I cannot take full responsibility for this alteration, I believe the combination of the class environment my students and I have (re)constructed over the

course of the semester with the open and encouraging nature of the prompt has set the stage for this student's success. She leaves the meeting appearing more confident, more self-assured.

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A few hours later, I am meeting in the same office with another student, this time one who is writing a philosophical examination of the nature of communication. Is it possible to ever truly ascertain the intentions of others? Do we need to? How do people's diversity of backgrounds color their perceptions of others and their communication patterns? Isn't this diversity more interesting, more rewarding, to untangle that would be the case if everyone in a conversation came from the same background?

We debate these questions for over half an hour. I sometimes forget we are discussing a student paper. Despite having seen an impressive first draft, I have no idea what this paper will look like in its final form. I playfully threw a few wrenches in his line of inquiry, making him realize that some parts *must* be rewritten in order for the paper to work. He takes on this challenge with apparent joy. This is a student who thrives in the small-class setting; he has mentioned before that he prefers the absences of the students, as they make him feel more comfortable speaking in front of others. His perception of the class is different from mine, as it is different from every other student's. Just as we have been immediately discussing regarding his paper, we all bring together different embodiments and positionalities, composing the classroom in a way never seen before.

As he stands to gather his things and leave, he tells me, as he always does after our meetings, that these papers have been amongst the most rewarding school experiences for him, that he truly enjoys taking my class. This is the moment that makes teaching worthwhile. I have reached out to another human being, attempted to meet them on their own terms, and I have been successful. I will lose no sleep on this night.

### Looking Back and Moving Forward

Throughout the past year in which I have been researching and composing this thesis project and immersing myself in the language of the undergraduate literature students at UMSL, I have learned quite a bit about who I am as an instructor, as a student, as an academic about to head into a PhD program in Rhetoric and Composition. I have learned to trust student voices more fully, and I cherish the moments in which students feel both safe and compelled to share their thoughts and speak their needs and interests in academic settings. While I cannot vouch for students' internal states as they completed my survey—did they indeed feel safe and compelled to answer honestly and completely?—I am fortunate for the material I received, and I have done my utmost to treat their words with compassion and understanding. These, compassion and understanding, and a willingness to try new things and work more closely with students, I realize are necessary components of teaching.

I have also learned more fully about the nature of learning itself. What has worked for me in the classroom does not work for others, and vice versa. Learning and knowledge are situated and complicated and messy, and we are all coming together in one space and making the most of it. Provided everyone brings respect to that space, all of this can be beautiful and generative and rewarding.

Finally, as someone on the cusp of doctoral study, I have learned more about my place in academia—or, rather, I have learned what place I intend to occupy as a scholar of feminist rhetorics and disability studies and how my teaching fits into those paradigms. I will work to ensure inclusivity and access as I move through the discipline and encounter increasingly diverse minds, bodies, and needs. Significantly, I will work to

ensure students' voices are heard, that their stories are told. As an English student, after all, I know firsthand the value of stories and the power they hold, if only we are willing to listen.

## Appendix

### Survey Questions for “Literary Pedagogies at UMSL: Combining Case Study with Personal Narrative”

1. What is your connection to the UMSL English department?
  - a. English major
  - b. English minor
  - c. Have taken a course (or courses) offered by the program
  - d. Other:
  
2. Are you seeking a degree in English for (select all that apply):
  - a. Professional development?
  - b. Personal knowledge/personal interests?
  - c. Interest in teaching English (at any level)?
  - d. Other?:
  
3. Have you taken any literature courses at UMSL?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Not sure
  
4. If yes to the above, please list the courses (by title) that you have completed or are currently taking (for example, Contemporary World Literature):
  
5. What were the methods of teaching in these courses? Select all that apply:
  - a. Lecture
  - b. Class discussions
  - c. Small group activities
  - d. Class time devoted to writing
  - e. Online participation
  - f. Other:
  
6. What did these teaching methods look like? How effective did you find them in relation to your own learning?
  
7. How were you able (or expected) to show what you learned and engage with class materials?
  - a. Written papers
  - b. Tests
  - c. Quizzes

- d. Oral participation
- e. Social media posts
- f. Presentations
- g. Multimedia projects
- h. Other:

8. Can you take a moment to describe these assignments? What worked well for you? Where did you struggle?

9. Please list some of the reasons that you are interested, specifically, in the study of literature:

10. In your ideal literature course, what would you want to read? What kinds of activities or assignments would you want to complete?

11. Has the literature you read in these courses represented your interests?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Sometimes

12. If yes, how? If not, what was missing?

13. Would you like to see more writing instruction or writing activities (such as discussions on how to write about literature or opportunities to put your own thoughts and ideas down on paper) in your literature courses?

- a. Yes
- b. No

14. Why? Why not?

15. How important, to you personally, are things like social justice in the literature classroom? In your opinion, what can be done to ensure that each literature course adheres to the tenets of social justice?

16. What do you believe can be done to ensure individual needs are being met in literature courses?

17. Are you interested in participating in a follow-up interview or focus group?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

18. If yes, please provide your name and email:



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