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BRIDGE Project Report

English Department

AY 2013-2014

My BRIDGE project targeted English 346: Victorian Literature 1830-1900 and was intended to also generate new approaches for the other upper-level course I teach regularly, English 345: Romantic Literature. These courses primarily serve sophomore, junior, and senior English majors and minors seeking to complete their “Literature I” and “Literature II” requirement, in which they study a narrow historical era of literature--pre- and post-1800 respectively--in depth.

Over the course of this year, I have sought new ways to foster students’ independent thought and creative thinking through assignment design. In the past, I had given my students highly structured assignments that often directed students which specific texts to examine and which specific ideas to unpack. While I found that this helped my weaker students focus in on important ideas, stronger students were not encouraged to think creatively by moving beyond the perameters of the prompts. I have always included a “Choose Your Own Adventure” option where students might pick their own topic and check it with me in advance, but I found that few students selected this option. I also found that in spite fo the fact that I gave students a variety of prompts to choose from, these assignments yielded homogeneous responses.

Before beginning BRIDGE, I had come to the conclusion that such highly structured assignments were more appropriate for beginning writers who might struggle with organizing and supporting ideas. For a junior-level English course, however, students should already have a sense of how to organize and support ideas even if they lack expertise. In my class, then, they should be encouraged to pursue their own ideas about course texts. Weaker students who depended on structured prompts to tell them what to analyze would be pushed to think for themselves (and attend office hours for help if needed) and stronger students would be encouraged to construct original arguments about topics that interested them.

When beginning BRIDGE, I also sought to build more steps into major assignments so that students are building up toward these major projects with practice activities or proposals. I made this a regular part of composition courses for freshman, but did not include these steps in junior-level courses.

As I began to rethink my course goals, one of the most useful discussions for me personally was our conversation on the importance of skill-building as opposed to content knowledge. I found Craig Nelson’s argument compelling, particularly in his suggestion that it is a “dysfunctional Illusion” for teachers to operate under the assumption that teaching more content knowledge results in more content learning. His argument that teaching will be more effective if it is changed from a “Content-Centered Course to One Focused on Major Outcomes” has been useful for me, since it reminds me that syllabus construction shouldn’t all be about the readings, but that my desire to convey content knowledge should be balanced by attention to assignments and activities designed to cultivate critical thinking skills. My approach to upper-level courses has historically been to achieve broad coverage of major ideas and texts in Victorian (or Romantic) literature, but realistically, such coverage cannot be fully achieved in a semester’s time. I could, however, achieve the end of encouraging independent thought, stronger use of supporting evidence, and better writing habits (namely through drafting and planning). Some of the most important learning that could come out of such courses would be through writing, which in my view is one of the most important ways students can build or reinforce content knowledge. English majors and minors should, however, be improving their writing skills throughout the course of their major, and because strong ideas are inextricable from good writing, redirecting some of my course goals to work on writing skills could thus successfully build the kind of content knowledge I hoped my students would gain.

I would say that my courses already required students to do a considerable amount of writing, as students who completed the minimum required pages of writing wrote 30 pages over the course of the semester including both reading responses and paper assignments. I determined, however, that more opportunities for pre-writing activities as well as more opportunities for creativity in completing these assignments would more successfully cultivate the skills I hoped my students would improve on during their time in my class.

I do intend to apply some of these conclusions to my core literature courses in the future as well, particularly when it comes to writing. Where I ordinarily build in class-time to workshop thesis statements and allow time for peer review in composition courses, I have not taken this approach in literature classes where the primary purpose of the class is not writing instruction. I’ve come to the conclusion, however, that my students needs would be better served if they read one or two fewer texts and instead we spent more time discussing how to write about the ones they have read.

This semester, I’ve made a number of changes to assignments for allow for more pre-writing and creative work. For analytical assignments, I required students to submit abstracts a week in advance, which allowed me to catch several students before they moved forward with non-viable topics.

Yet by far the most significant change has been in the development of the “Creative Synthesis Assignment” (see Appendix A) which asked students to review the first monthly or weekly issue of a serialized novel from the perspective of a character or writer we had encountered previously in the course. I took inspiration for this assignment in part from Bloom’s Taxonomy of learning objectives, and particularly because the taxonomy emphasizes the fact that creative assignments demand considerable thought and reflection, and as such employ higher order thinking skills. While in the past my assignments have been overtly analytical, I determined to see if a creative assignment could successfully achieve the goals I had for cultivating students’ critical thinking skills. I also took inspiration from the Classroom Assessment Technique #17 from Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross’s *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers.* This CAT, “Invented Dialogues,” asks students to “synthesize their knowledge of issues, personalities, and historical periods into the form a of a carefully structured illustrative conversation” (203). My own assignment called for a more one-sided approach to the dialogue, though it did require students to understand what place their contribution would be take in an ongoing historical conversation. The assignment I constructed asked students to understand a source we had read previously in enough depth and complexity that they could apply its values and perspective to another source that we had not discussed as a class. Students were also required to write a rationale to justify the creative choices they made in their reviews. This assignment proved a valuable assessment tool as I was able to easily determine which students had depth of understanding of texts that I wished them to have.

I prepped the students in multiple ways, first by going over the assignment in a substantive fashion in class. In the week and half leading up to the assignment due date, I had them turn in a handwritten persona profile of the character or writer they had chosen to show me that they were trying to understand what life events, personality traits, and political or social investments might influence the way their chosen character would read and assess. The week students turned in the assignment, we did two preparatory in-class activities to give them a taste of how they might complete the assignment. For the first, we collectively selected one character--Sissy--from Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* and wrote up a character on the chalkboard. Then, I asked students to assume her perspective and tell me their perspective on another character, Lady Audley, in the novel we were then reading (Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*). I required students to speak in first-person when stating their views. This was a productive activity, as I was able to then and there critique impersonations that lacked some element of understanding. One student, for example, suggested that given Sissy’s values, she might judge Lady Audley harshly. My response to this was to point out that Dickens renders Sissy’s character as essentially compassionate, which raised interesting questions about how that character might balance her inclination to sympathize with her moral judgment. We discussed concrete examples from *Hard Times* to illustrate how she employs both in relation to each other. While I did not have my students do any in-class writing for this activity, it nonetheless modeled the kind of analysis they would need to do for the Creative Synthesis Assignment.

In the next class--the one immediately prior to the assignment due date--I had students work in groups and write a letter directly to Braddon from the perspective of a persona they all collectively worked on. The discussions were animated and thoughtful and at the end, the groups read their letters aloud to the entire class. I was quite impressed with the quality of writing in many of these letters, as in many cases they imitated not only types of arguments and perspectives of the selected characters/writers, but also the tone and style. This was an important activity for showing students how tone and style contribute to characterization, and thus the way language is inextricable from textual meaning.

After students had completed the final Creative Synthesis Assignment, I devoted an entire class period to the discussion of the project, asking students what they as individuals thought about the serialized novel they read independently. I then had us delve into the assignment, asking them to tell me what they wrote about and what kinds of thinking has to go into writing the assignment. I was told that the students enjoyed working on the assignment, but many of them also found it quite challenging. The creative portion may have come more easily to students who didn’t put as much thought into the assignment as perhaps they should, but the required analytical rationale forced them to use concrete examples and justify why they wrote what they did in the creative synthesis portion. Some students told me that this was the most challenging part. Ultimately the students who put more thought into their rationales were more successful in their creative portion. I also found that some students who did not speak up much in class otherwise felt more comfortable talking about their creative choices in class. Some verbally suggested that they felt more personally invested in this piece of writing than they did for other assignments.

In keeping with my BRIDGE goal of fostering independent and creative thinking, I thought the culmination of such a project might be to allow students to determine a course of study building on course materials that they might complete beyond our own section of English 346. In the final paper prompt for English 346, I included an additional creative options as follows:

Write a proposal for an independent study (IND 491) you might conduct on a subtopic you find interesting in Victorian literature. Your topic may be a cultural phenomenon you find interesting, a concept or character type, an author, a genre, Victorian literature in relation to a specific literary theory, etc. Whatever the case, it should be specific in nature (so, for example, not just “the novel,” but “the industrial novel and Marxism,” "Victorian fiction and science," "Empire and adventure fiction," "Victorian children's literature"). This proposal must contain a 4 to 5-page rationale on why the topic is important and what you hope your independent study will achieve, using secondary sources where relevant. It must also contain 2 to 4 pages where you list the texts you would read in this independent study and annotate them briefly by explaining why you selected the text and how you think it will contribute to your understanding of your topic. Minimally you should list 5 texts—poems, novels, short stories, plays, and/or essays—though I suggest you select more.

The proposals I received varied in quality, ranging from excellent to poor. I suspect I will use this assignment again as it allowed students to think creatively and research a subtopic that we were unable to spend much time on in class, but I will likely revise the prompt to be clearer about the use of secondary sources and about the types of primary sources that should appear on the list of readings. One student indicated that she did not fully understand the concept of an Independent Study (as all of the selected texts in her syllabus were texts we had already read for English 346). Though I verbally explained the purpose of an Independent Study in class when reviewing the assignment prompt, this student’s misunderstanding tells me that perhaps the prompt itself requires revision.

This past year of reflection in BRIDGE has been very productive, but there is still room for improvement moving forward. I think my syllabus construction can still use a bit more work, and I suspect I will always struggle between the desire to emphasize content knowledge and the need to think less about the reading and more about what students will *do with* the reading. While I introduced pre-writing activities and assignments into my ENG 346 course, I suspect these should be actually written into the syllabus itself so that students know from the outset that this is an essential part of the course. I also intend to employ creative synthesis assignments in future classes, and already have one in mind for my Utopian and Dystopian Literature class scheduled for the Fall 2014 semester.

**Appendix A: Creative Synthesis Assignment**

One important factor in the development of the Victorian novel is serial publication. When reading Victorian novels like *Hard Times* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, we must remember that these novels appeared in weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly installments. Why does this form matter? It materially impacts both the author’s construction of the narrative and the reader’s experience of the text. For this assignment, we will try to reconstruct a sense of the latter. As such, this assignment consists of two parts:

(1) a 3 to 4 page review of one serial installment from the point of view of a Victorian reader.

(2) a 3 to 4 rationale explaining why your wrote the review in the fashion you did.

**Preliminaries**

First, select a novel from the list of suggested texts below or another novel serialized in the Victorian era. You will need to find out a little about the publication history of the text. Was the author identified by name or was the text published anonymously? Did the novel appear in monthly numbers issued as standalone publications? Was the novel serialized weekly or bi-weekly in a magazine or journal? If so, which one and when? What chapters make up the first installment? This information can occasionally be tricky to find, though you have many resources at your disposal to figure this out. Try one of the methods we discuss in class, which include using the *MLA International Bibliography*, victorianweb.org, and Google Books. Some published editions include this information in prefatory materials or appendices, so it may be worth it to check out a library copy or visit a local bookstore.

Once you have concluded your investigation, write a short blurb noting the publication history of your novel. You will need to include this as a prefatory blurb before your review.

**Part 1: Review Reconstructing Reader’s Experience**

For this part of the assignment, you must write a 3 to 4 page review of the first serial installment of your novel *from the perspective of a specific Victorian reader of your choice*.

Begin by selecting one of our essayists (Carlyle, Engels, Ellis, or Taylor) or, alternatively, one of the characters we have read about in *Jane Eyre* or *Hard Times*. For your own notes, you will likely want to begin by writing a list of the important characteristics that impact this person’s point of view, which may include gender, class, religious views, nationality, career, publications, and political investments. Once you’ve garnered a good sense of your selected writer’s point of view, apply their logic to your chosen novel. Would your selected author praise or criticize this installment based on what you know of them? Would they wish to read more? What would Ellis or Taylor think of the representation of women, for example? What would Engels think about the depiction of class? What would St. John Rivers think of the ostensible morality of the novel?

Write a 3 to 4 page review of the serialized novel from the perspective of your author or character. In a brief prefatory note before your review, you should clearly identify who you imagine *your target audience* to be. Is this a private letter to a friend, family member, or fellow writer? Are you writing directly to the author of your serial novel? Do you intend to publish this review in a popular magazine for likeminded readers?

**Part 2: Rationale**

In 3 to 4 pages, provide a rationale for your choices. This rationale should use concrete evidence from (1) the text that serves as the basis for your persona and (2) the serialized novel. You may, for example, wish to quote from Ellis’s *The Women of England* to demonstrate her political perspective and then point to a quotation from your serialized novel of which you feel she might approve. You should also discuss why you chose the format you did and why you chose the target audience that you did.

**Suggested texts:**

William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*

Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*

*---. Cranford*

Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*

*---. The Moonstone*

George Eliot, *Romola*

Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*

*---. The Return of the Native*

*---. The Mayor of Casterbridge*

*---. Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

*---. Jude the Obscure*

**Appendix B: Slides from Faculty Development Day**













