BRIDGE Final Report

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During the 2013-2014 academic year, my BRIDGE project was to create the syllabus and assignments for GND 300 Feminist Literary Criticism, a junior-level course designed for gender and sexuality studies minors but open to any student interested in the topic. I had been asked to teach this course the year before and declined because I worried about how students would respond to such a course being taught by a man (there is scholarship on this pedagogical problem). In addition, although I have published a book in gender and sexuality studies and regularly teach about two weeks on feminist theory in my ENG 240 Methods of Literary Analysis gateway course for English majors, I had never really thought about teaching a course just on feminist theory, so that was also a consideration going into the course. In the end, I decided to teach the course because it had not been offered in five years and no else seemed to have interest in an area that many students in ENG 240 find interesting. Ultimately, I was able to work this problem of subject position into the discussion in week two by including a day where we discussed readings by Eve Sedgwick and David Porter addressing the potential problems posed by writing about identities that are not our own.

The main problem with designing the course was, strangely enough, caused by my popularity as an instructor. I have a strong connection to many students at Rider, and after taking in ENG 240 with me, they often look for other courses that I teach so that they can take another course with me. This means that I have to try to avoid repeating texts in my classes, and that was especially true for GND 300 because all but four of the 23 students enrolled had already read some feminist literary theory in ENG 240. However, I had no idea how much these other four students (non-English majors, GSS minors with no background in literary studies) had read from the field. As a result, “How do I teach a course to this varied of a group of students?” became a key question guiding syllabus development. To that end, John Bransford’s chapter “How Experts Differ from Novices” from *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* was useful because it helped me think about the various experiential levels of students I would have in GND 300 and their differing understandings—their status as closer to expert or novice—regarding gender and sexuality studies as they began the course. I also wanted to ensure that students had an understanding of the historical development of feminist ideas (first-, second-, and third-wave), how various thinkers have built upon and critiqued earlier thinkers, and emerging issues within the field such as the expansion of feminist studies to include transgender studies as well as the tensions created by this expansion. In addition to this, I wanted students to get a sense of how authors had written about gender across time—realistically, in terms of time and my own literary expertise, this meant that I wanted them to read British and American texts from the 18th century to the present.

When I began BRIDGE in fall 2013, I had a rough idea of which novels I wanted to use, but as I developed my learning goals for the initial assignment, I realized a few things: I had too many texts and I had too many contemporary texts to achieve my goal of students learning about how a range of authors from historical periods had addressed gender in their work. By the time I completed the second BRIDGE assignment, which asked me to specify my course goals, I realized that I needed to change some of the readings to match those goals. This was probably the most useful of the assignments because it helped me clarify my goals and then find texts that would facilitate them. I decided on the following course goals:

By the end of the term, I expect students to be able to write essays that demonstrate understanding of the following key terms in contemporary feminist theory (as applicable to their individual projects):

* Sex versus gender
* Essentialism and difference feminisms
* The social construction of sex and gender
* Transgender, transsexual, and intersex identities
* The problem of the universal within feminist thought
* Intersectional analysis between feminism, sexuality, race, class, and ethnicity

In my previous work in the summer 2013 Faculty Who Frequently Teach Freshmen workshop, I had designed a grading rubric for group presentations in my ENG 220 Literature and Society course. Since implementing that rubric, I had begun the process of creating analogous rubrics geared toward the paper expectations in each of my courses. For GND 300, I used two grading methods: brief, in-class writing assignments that asked students to respond to directed reading questions and apply their knowledge of feminist theory to the literature they had read that week and the final paper. Thomas Angelo and K. Patricia Cross’s *Classroom Assessment Techniques* details CAT 23 Directed Paraphrasing and CAT 24 Application Cards. My in-class response papers work as a combination of these two methods: students must first respond directly to the complex idea presented in the working paper question they selected (requiring paraphrasing), then they must show application to the literature they have recently read through closing reading and analysis:

**In-Class Responses:** Each week, I will distribute reading questions in advance for the texts that we are discussing the following period. About once per week, you will write an in-class response to one of these readings questions and cite a passage or two from our text to support your answer. These responses are typically between two and three paragraphs long, written with the help of one other classmate, and should show that you’ve taken the time to read the material closely.

These responses are designed to make you responsible for engaging with primary and feminist theoretical texts, to teach you how to analyze literature through close reading, and to help generate paper topics before you write the final paper. Response papers are graded using the following system: check plus (excellent, A range, indicates a clear, well-written response to the question that your group selected using substantial textual evidence and close reading of the quoted material), check (satisfactory, B range, indicates thoughtful engagement with the text but insufficient development given the complexity of the question and/or the passage(s) cited to respond to the question; may need fine tuning of a point being discussed), and check minus (insufficient, C range, indicates lack of effort or misunderstanding of key points of the question and/or the passage(s) used to respond to the question; may be mere summary of previous in-class discussion). *If you are absent on a day when the class submits an in-class response, you will receive a zero for that response. You may not make up in-class work.*

As the above section from the final syllabus suggests, they are collaborative, low-stakes assignments, each worth about five percent of students’ final grades. Although students are not required to maintain the same working groups for these exercises, within a couple weeks, they usually begin working with the same people each time. From their in-class interactions and their discussions before class, I can tell that this method helps them form study groups outside of class. I have included an example of the questions that I distributed below:

Working Paper 4: Showalter, Moi, Armstrong, Halberstam,

and Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*

1. In “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” Elaine Showalter argues that women often experience scenes differently than men reading those same scenes. Select a scene between Tom and Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss* and contrast how a male reader might view its events with how a female reader might view them.
2. Showalter differentiates between what she terms *feminist criticism* and *gynocriticism* (223-224). Using her definitions, briefly explain how a feminist critic might analyze a scene in *The Mill on the Floss* versus how a gynocritic might analyze that same scene.
3. In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Toril Moi critiques Showalter’s position, arguing that Showalter suggests that “The feminist critic, in other words, should attend to historical, anthropological, psychological and sociological aspects of the ‘female’ text; in short, it would seem, to everything but the text as a signifying process” (227).

Drawing on your knowledge of Judith Butler’s idea of performativity (citationality) from earlier in the course, choose a specific character from *The Mill on the Floss* and think about how and what that character’s body signifies in the novel.

1. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter argues that the woman writer “was part of a tradition that had its origins before her age, and has carried on through our own” (11).

To what extent does Eliot seem to be responding to, reworking, or critiquing the work of previous women writers? Compare a key aspect of *The Mill on the Floss* (femininity, masculinity, social class, decorum, familial relations, race/ethnicity, etc.) to either Burney’s *Evelina* or another women-penned text from before 1860 that you have read.

1. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong traces “the development of a specific female ideal in eighteenth and nineteenth century conduct books and educational treatises for women, as well as in domestic fiction” and argues that “one cannot distinguish the production of the new female ideal either from the rise of the novel or from the rise of the new middle classes in England” (151).

Does Armstrong’s point that the women-penned novel provides an ideal to which women should aspire hold in *The Mill on the Floss*? Do we also see the intersection between social class and this female ideal that Armstrong identifies?

1. Showalter outlines three sequential phases inherent in women’s writing: “First, there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity” (13).

Based on these three phases that Showalter identifies, which phase represents Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*?

1. Use Judith Halberstam’s essay “Female Masculinity” to discuss femininity and/or tomboyism in *The Mill on the Floss*. Pick one of Halberstam’s main points from the essay, and apply that idea to a specific character from the novel.

This response paper, which students completed at the end of week six, shows the variety of options students have. Each response is designed to let them collaborate to model the final paper, but on a smaller scale. These responses papers also let me give students formative feedback on a roughly weekly basis on their writing skills, their analytical skills, and their understanding of the theory itself, as demonstrated through their close reading and analysis.

In the last weeks of the term, I gave students the option to do two extra-credit assignments: one where they could watch *Thelma and Louise* outside of class and respond to a range of questions about the movie and another that asked them to use my working questions as a model to create their own question regarding Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, then write a response to that question. (The latter of these was suggested by the section of *Classroom Assessment Techniques* as CAT 25 Student-Generated Test Questions.) Only a few students chose to do this extra-credit assignment, but those who did it, did it very well. Both of these were individual, take-home assignments designed to move students from the collaborative, in-class writing to the more traditional individual, take-home paper required by the final assignment.

The other assessment tool that I used was the final paper rubric:

**Final Paper Grading Explanation** (distributed with the final paper assignment)

**A/A-** Grades in this range indicate **excellent writing and analytical skills**. The essay demonstrates

 a sophisticated writing style, including variety in sentence structure, effective word choice, and a firm grasp of standard conventions of written English. The author quotes directly from the theoretical and primary text(s) used, understands the theory, and uses it to create a complex, nuanced reading of the primary text being discussed. All main points are supported by specific evidence or examples that explore the issue in a focused, organized, and well-developed manner. The A- essay may require proofreading for an occasional typo or minor expansion of an idea, but there is no pattern of grammatical, stylistic, or word-choice issues.

**B+/B** Grades in this range indicate **strong writing and analytical skills**. The essay shows some

 variation in sentence structure and vocabulary and demonstrates general competence in the areas of grammar, punctuation, and style. The author quotes directly from the theoretical and primary text(s) used, understands the theory, and uses it to create a complex reading of the primary text being discussed that could be more nuanced at times. Most main points are supported by specific evidence or examples that explore the issue in a focused, organized, and well-developed manner. On the whole, these are strong essays that require fine tuning of ideas, qualification of an occasional generalization, or more attention to proofreading for typos or random grammatical or punctuation issues. The B+ essay is often an A-quality paper that struggles to maintain a consistent point of view, has an uneven or informal tone, or needs more attention to formatting and MLA Style.

**B-/C+** Grades in this range indicate **satisfactory writing and analytical skills that are marginal in some areas**. The essay offers strong ideas but shows a pattern of issues relating to grammar, style, punctuation, and/or clarity of writing that is distracting without impacting comprehension.
The author quotes directly from the theoretical and/or primary text(s) being discussed but may not fully understand them. The essay may show an attempt to focus and organize the essay, but examples may be randomly ordered or so brief that they lack clarity. The B- essay is usually strong in terms of content but shows a pattern of problems with writing mechanics.

**C** The C grade indicates **average, perhaps hasty, writing and analytical skills**. The essay has problems in one or more of the following areas: The essay may make claims that are too general and overlook the complexity of the issue under discussion. Sentences may lack variety, may repeatedly use language in an imprecise manner, or may contain multiple patterns relating to grammar, style, punctuation, and/or clarity of writing that are distracting and may occasionally impact meaning. The author may inadequately develop and support the thesis because of a misreading of the theoretical and/or the primary text(s) being discussed or the essay contains insufficient quotations from these texts. The essay may lack focus because its thesis *describes* instead of *argues*, is vague, digresses, or provides insufficient organization.

**D** Grades in this range indicate **clearly inadequate writing and analytical skills**. The essay may be incomplete or read like a draft with stylistically simple or structurally repetitive sentences and/or multiple problems with grammar, punctuation, word choice, style, and/or clarity of writing that are confusing. The author misunderstands the theoretical and/or the primary text(s) being discussed or the essay contains no quotations from one or both of these texts. Paragraphs may be disconnected and/or the thesis may be unclear or absent.

Although a few students who skipped the final paper workshop struggled to write their papers, most of the final papers were strong in terms of ideas and theoretical understanding. A couple students reached too far and attempted to use theory they didn’t understand, but overall, I was pleased with the progress students made in understanding the material and demonstrating that understanding in their final papers. I have already asked several students to present their work in fall 2014 at the fourth annual Interdisciplinary Day of Literature (IDOL) conference in October.

The most useful ideas for my project came from Thomas Angelo and K. Patricia Cross’s *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*. In the chapter on “Planning and Implementing Classroom Assessment Techniques,” Angelo and Cross discuss the value of starting with teaching goals and developing assessment techniques from there. Although I had been doing this in the past, I hadn’t always taken as much time to articulate those goals as I did with this course—probably because I was initially less comfortable teaching GND 300 than other courses I have designed at Rider.

Working through the creation of this new syllabus and its assignments over the course of the 2013-2014 academic year was an interesting process and one that will help me as I continue to develop new courses (something I don’t seem to be able to stop myself from doing—constantly!).