

PART I: BACKGROUND

Title: Write a descriptive title for your lesson study so that others may cite your work. (E.g., “Reading for Complexity: Recognizing and Valuing Ambiguity in Literature”)

“What is Literary Studies?”: An Online Lesson Study

Authors: Include the names and institutional affiliations of each person on your lesson study team.

Chuck Rybak, Assistant Professor (University of Wisconsin-Washington County); Holly Hassel, Assistant Professor (UW-Marathon County); Nancy Chick, Associate Professor (UW-Barron County)

Contact: Include a name and email address of a person who may be contacted about your lesson study.

Nancy Chick, Nancy.Chick@uwc.edu

Discipline or Field: If your lesson may be used in more than one discipline or field, list all that apply.

Literary studies or interdisciplinary studies courses that involve literary studies (face-to-face, online, or hybrid)

Date: Include the date you posted (or last updated) your final lesson study with KEEP Toolkit.
August 6, 2007

Course Name: Give the course title rather than its catalog number (e.g. “Freshman Composition” rather than “English 110”).

Introduction to Literature

Course Description

Briefly describe the course, its place in the curriculum, and where the lesson fits in the course. Include pertinent facts such as course level, class size, student population, length of lesson, and learning environment (e.g. networked classroom, lecture hall, special equipment, etc.).

Introduction to Literature (ENG 250) is designed primarily to introduce students to close readings of literature, including poetry, drama, fiction, and creative nonfiction. It is a sophomore-level course but often students’ first college-level literature course. This particular course--and this lesson--is entirely online, so it has a higher percentage of non-traditional and full-time students than traditional, campus-based courses. It also carries a Writing Emphasis designation, so the enrollment is capped at 25.

The lesson occurs early in the semester, ideally in week two of a 15-week semester. Because of the asynchronous nature of online courses, the length of the lesson is one week (or the

equivalent of two days in a F2F class), in addition to a post-lesson assignment that may occur immediately or at the end of the semester.

The course is password-protected in Desire2Learn (D2L), but the official outfront pages are public.

Executive Summary

In approximately 250-450 words, provide an overview of your learning goals, instructional design, and major findings about student learning.

The lesson study topic is the discipline and methodology of literary studies. Introductory courses often focus on the goal of covering enough material to introduce the texts, theories, and concepts of the discipline; just as often, they gloss over the discipline itself, assuming students will get it along the way. On the contrary, introductory courses should be intentional and explicit about their disciplinarity to help students recognize the scope of what they're learning and situate each course within the wider context of their educational careers. This kind of disciplinary and methodological awareness--which facilitates an awareness of the whole liberal arts curriculum--is something we should be intentionally and explicitly fostering as a service to all of our students (not just our majors) and as a way to deepen our students' learning of literature. Our lesson encourages students to discover and practice the larger vision of literary studies as a discipline.

Learning Goals: The immediate learning goal is for students to apply the methodologies of literary studies to a single poem, a focused goal that will ideally transfer to other literary readings and contexts. Ultimately, students will recognize the methods and goals of literary studies as a discipline, and they will begin approaching literary texts using some of the methodologies of literary scholars.

Lesson Design: Before the lesson, students read a poem, wrote their interpretations, and submitted them to the course website's dropbox. These initial interpretations would serve as prior knowledge, illustrating assumptions about close reading, interpretation, and the work of literary analysis. Students then read an online lecture "What is literary studies?" and our model hypertext interpretations of the same poem students just interpreted. In small groups on the discussion page, using their own novice readings (anonymous excerpts of their initial interpretations of the poem, posted by the instructor) and the expert readings (the model hypertext interpretation), students identify and discuss the differences between the ways novices and experts approach a literary text and then connect these ideas to the lecture on literary studies. After the lesson--either immediately or as a final project--students apply what they've learned to a new poem by creating individual hypertext interpretations of the poem and using as needed an unstructured discussion area devoted to the poem. Finally, students submit a brief reflection about what they've learned.

Major Findings: Although not our initial goal, this lesson's primary value was in revealing student misconceptions as related to literary studies and the reading of poetry. By analyzing the students' initial, and often subsequent, interpretations of assigned poem, the research team was able to identify clear patterns of student error and misinterpretation. Our lesson makes clear distinctions between "novice" and "expert" literary readers, and executing the lesson allowed us to more explicitly define the novice reader and his or her practices. By explicitly defining the novice reader, we are better able to present our materials in a way that matches our initial goal: to lay bare and articulate the methodology and strategies of literary studies. Finally, we believe

the specificity provided by these student misconceptions reaches far beyond the common assumptions made about why students struggle when interpreting poetry. If the misconceptions we identify could become the starting point for teachers, rather than an eventual realization, we believe students would gain a much more immediate, thorough, and rewarding engagement with literary studies and poetry in particular. Such contribution to pedagogical content knowledge in literary studies will be invaluable.

PART II: THE LESSON

How to Teach the Lesson

Describe the steps of the lesson, providing enough detail for other teachers to use it in their classes. Include any necessary pre or post lesson work. For each step in the lesson describe instructional and learning activities, including the approximate time needed.

- ❖ *Describe what teachers should do. Provide specific wording of prompts, explanations of handouts, etc.*
- ❖ *Describe what students should do, and how they are likely to respond. Offer tips for responding to student questions, confusions, etc.*

A Word about Timing: Because this lesson is written for asynchronous, online courses, the time for each step is dependent upon the pace of the course. However, the lesson may be adapted to hybrid or even F2F modes.

Lesson

1. Students read and interpret Claude McKay's "The Harlem Dancer." They write and submit their interpretations (approximately 500 words) to the course website's dropbox.
2. Students read online lecture "What is Literary Studies?" and sample hypertext close reading "What Do Literary Scholars Do?: An Example," as well as the literary studies rubric.
3. Instructor posts anonymous, unanalyzed excerpts from student interpretations of "The Harlem Dancer" (#1) for class to read.
4. Students write a comparative analysis (250 to 500 words) of novice readings (their own and their classmates' interpretations, #1 and #3 above) with expert readings (#2 example).
5. Students now apply what they've learned to a new poem, "American Sonnet" by Billy Collins, to demonstrate their movement on the continuum from novice to expert. In a general discussion area, students may discuss the new poem. Individually, students create a hypertext illustration of their reading of the new poem, similar to the "What Do Literary Scholars Do?" sample. (Instructor provides template and directions for hypertext assignment.)
6. Students write a 250- to 500-word self-assessment of their hypertext assignment using the rubric, and submit it to the dropbox.

Student Learning Goals

List your student learning goals. Include both the immediate academic learning goals and the long term qualities the lesson supports (e.g., abilities, skills, dispositions, sensibilities, values you want students to develop in your program). Write the goals in terms of the knowledge and qualities students should exhibit as a result of the lesson.

Provide background on why you chose the lesson topic and your student learning goals.

As a result of the lesson, students should be

1. better able to *apply* the principles of literary studies to literary texts.
 - a. Closely read literary texts
 - b. Consider literary texts in their biographical, historical, cultural, literary, critical, and personal contexts
2. better able to *appreciate* the principles of literary studies.
 - a. Articulate the reasons for reading literature
 - b. Recognize the differences between reading merely for information or entertainment and reading through the discipline of literary studies

The immediate academic goal of the lesson is to develop students' understanding of the discipline of literary studies. This lesson defines the discipline of literary studies since many students have probably never thought about it as a discipline. Because it is an introductory lesson, however, expertise is *not* a learning outcome; instead, our learning goals include developing students' awareness of the differences between novice and expert practices and their movement away from the status of novice and towards expertise, as well as application of some of the principles of the discipline are more realistic goals of the lesson. Subsequent lessons will apply the specific principles of close reading and contextual connections, as well as considerations of the canon and metacognitive reflections on benefits of reading literature.

The broad goal of the lesson is to develop students' ability (and tendency) to read through the perspective of literary studies. Introductory literature students (or novice readers at any level) typically focus on plot summary and how the text reflects their own lives and beliefs; stop at a single interpretation; look for a moral; avoid what's puzzling or ambiguous; and/or support their ideas with minimal textual details, sometimes taken out of context. The lesson should enable students to seek multiple levels of meaning, including denotative and connotative meanings and ambiguities of words and phrases; look to the author's biography and other writings and historical, cultural, social, and philosophical contexts; and support their ideas with textual evidence and clear analyses that connect their interpretations to this evidence.

How the Lesson is Intended to Work

Discuss how the lesson is supposed to work in practice:

- ❖ *Explain how the instructional and learning activities and materials are designed to facilitate and support student thinking. If applicable, discuss how you tailored the lesson for the student population, learning environment, etc.*
- ❖ *Refer to any theoretical, empirical, or pedagogical work that influenced your lesson design.*

The "What is Literary Studies?" lecture and "What Do Literary Scholars Do?: An Example" are key to the lesson to define and illustrate the principles and skills of literary studies. We selected our specific poems (Claude McKay's "The Harlem Dancer" and Sylvia Plath's "Cut") for their brevity, apparent simplicity, complex subtexts, and rich contexts. The lesson is not, however, dependent on these two poems, so any short literary texts (or excerpt) may be used instead, as long as they are complex enough for students to engage in deeply. The discussions in which students compare novice and expert readings of the same poem are also key. The goal is not to make students feel "stupid" or inadequate but instead to guide them towards recognizing and articulating the ways they've read in the past (quickly, reductively, and without repetition or reflection) and new ways of reading equipped with the skills and principles of literary studies (deeply, actively, questioningly, and repeatedly). The hypertext interpretation assignment is less daunting than it appears. It helps students engage in the text, and through its webbed, layered format, the hypertext nature of the assignment helps students see the text in a different way—literally and metaphorically. The final, written reflection on the experience is also vital to the

lesson. This solitary time of reflecting on what they've learned is crucial to the internalization and transfer of the learning goals.

Our approaches to data collection and analysis in this project emerge directly from our discipline and our disciplinary training: as literary scholars, our expertise comes from closely reading, interpreting, and analyzing written texts, and so as literary teacher-scholars researching and disseminating what Shulman calls “pedagogical content knowledge,” we closely read, interpret, and analyze written texts—from students (“Those Who Understand” 9). Salvatori and Donahue have noted that a key technique of research in English studies has been “discussion of *student language* and the status of *student text*” [emphasis in the original] (70-71). They also explain that a “baseline for scholarly work” in English studies scholarship is the “deployment of dominant styles of inquiry and methodologies—for example, textual interpretation and critique, discourse analysis, historical analysis, theoretical formulation” (“English Studies” 82). Consistent with our disciplinary values, then, we have drawn upon the skills of close reading and interpretation—or textual interpretation and critique—from our training as literary scholars and applied them to student language and student texts to reach meaningful conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of our lesson design and resultant student learning.

PART III: THE STUDY

Approach

Describe the types of evidence you collected before, during, and after the lesson, e.g., observations, written work, student interviews.

As consistent with Salvatori and Donahue’s recommendations, the evidence we collected emerged at several steps in the lesson. First, we examined student interpretations of the poem “Harlem Dancer,” using them to draw conclusions about expert and novice practices that could then be translated into an instructive document for students, as part of the lesson. The second piece of evidence collected was collaboratively drafted student comparisons between expert and novice reading practices. Third, because we conducted our lesson online, we collected a student application of the new knowledge developed from the three reading and writing tasks, having students create a hypertext analysis of the new poem (in the first iteration, “Cut” by Sylvia Plath” and in the second iteration, “American Sonnet” by Billy Collins. Finally, in the first iteration we had students do a reflection on their learning, which constituted a fourth piece of expository evidence from students. However, in the revised lesson in our second iteration, we instead in essence combined the third and fourth steps by asking students to turn in, in addition to their hypertext analysis, a self-assessment of their work using a *rubric* that was provided. This shifted the student mode of thinking from reflective and narrative in the first iteration to analytical in the second iteration.

Describe the procedure for observing the lesson, indicate who observed, what they observed, how they recorded observations, etc.

Because our lesson was taught online, collaborators did not make one single observation of the lesson but rather multiple and ongoing observations of portions of the lesson, such as student postings to the discussion boards. The researchers wrote individual analyses of the student work and then took turns synthesizing the multiple analyses to notice patterns. Finally, at the end of the second classroom iteration, each researcher read all analysis and synthesis documents and wrote “uber-syntheses” to draw final conclusions and observations.

Findings

Summarize the evidence. Present major patterns and tendencies, key observations, or representative examples of student learning and thinking.

We believe the following to be the defining characteristics of, or mistakes made by, the novice literary reader:

- The Intentional Fallacy: The Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory defines “Intentional Fallacy” as “The error of criticizing and judging a work of literature by attempting to assess what the writer’s intention was and whether or not he has fulfilled it rather than concentrating on the work itself. Modern criticism (since the 1920’s) has tended to the point of view that anything except the work itself is irrelevant” (421).
- Teacher as Keymaster, or protector of “the right answer”
- Interpretive Relativism
- Summary as Interpretation
- Reading Literary Language Out of Context
- Textual Narcissism
- Tunnel Vision
- Moralizing/Shut-down Readings
- Speculative Narrative and Unsupported Psychoanalysis
- Discomfort/Avoidance of difficult sections in the work (paradoxes, tensions, and ambiguities)
- Resistance to Poetry/Poetry is Hard
- Overlooking Poetic Form
- Authority-codependence vs. interpretive independence
- Recreational vs. Literary Interpretation
- Historical Reference and Historical Context

Discussion

Discuss what your study suggests about...

- *how the lesson affected or changed student thinking, especially with respect to the lesson’s goals*

While the most revealing aspects of this lesson involved student misconceptions, it did have some direct and positive influence on student thinking. The lesson succeeded in getting a number of students to recognize the need to move away from narcissistic interpretation to more text-based interpretation, which is a core value of literary studies. The lesson also succeeded in presenting multiple interpretive strategies, evident in our PowerPoint component. Students came to realize that they had a lot of options/approaches available to them, the result being multiple entry points into the assigned text. Furthermore, students were forced to slow down and focus on individual words—the hypertext demanded this because of the requirement to create links. This technological requirement paired nicely with our lesson material, so the results were positive. Our larger goal was to get students to read texts like literary scholars, and all elements of this lesson that moved many, but not all, students to focus specifically on the text for an extended period of time were successful.

- *what the lesson reveals about student thinking such as their misconceptions, difficulties, confusion, insights, surprising ideas, etc.*

As described above, we identified fifteen specific areas of student misconception as applied to their reading of poetry. It is our belief that these misconceptions thoroughly chart the terrain that comprises the novice literary reader. This outcome of the lesson study, while not our original goal, is extremely useful for teachers of literature. As we note above, awareness of the kinds of misconceptions and misunderstandings that students bring to the literature classroom means instructors can approach their courses with pedagogies and content that directly addresses these misconceptions.

- *how the lesson was designed and/or studied*

A good deal of our analysis was directed at revising and finding flaws in the lesson, ways it could be revised. Partially this emerged from our realization that what the lesson was excellent for was revealing misconceptions students have about literary studies. As a result, it seemed each step of the way the research team realized ways the lesson could have been more effective in addressing those misconceptions. Some observations:

- We wondered if the power point lecture students read as one phase of the lesson had too much information that was overwhelming. It occurred to us that it could be revised into an html page that students could absorb more readily and perhaps could be divided into smaller sections throughout the semester, making the lesson really more about the aspects of literary studies that applied to close reading an interpretation of poetry.
- Our poem selection never quite made us happy. Though the model poem interpreted in an “Expert” fashion seemed to lend itself readily to an expert reading, the poem(s) by Collins and Plath each had their own quirks that may have made them difficult for students to work with—sensationalistic biographical contexts in one case, a challenging case of formal literary knowledge that some students glossed over in the other. However, since the lesson shouldn’t depend on the specific poem, these are minor issues.
- The use of hypertext may have presented problems for some students, though that could be overcome with more detailed instruction or a slowed-down process.

- *the practice of teaching and learning in your field*

Our work on misconceptions resulting from this lesson will be significant in the field. Although any literature instructor will be able to articulate hunches and anecdotal evidence, little scholarly work has uncovered and articulated specific misconceptions in literary studies. Failing to address common misconceptions about the practices in the field guarantees their persistence, and indeed literature instructors might unknowingly reinforce some misconceptions.

References

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APPENDIX

Include

- *materials used to teach the lesson including student handouts, instructor's notes, etc. Please annotate each item with a brief description.*
- *materials used to study the lesson including observation guidelines, written questions, prompts, checklists, etc. Please annotate each item with a brief description.*
- *evidence and data not included in the text of the report such as observers' notes, examples of student work, results of data analysis, etc.*

Linked to our Snapshot are our lesson's in-class materials (the lesson plan, the poem we used in the initial step of the lesson, the "What is literary studies?" lecture, our sample hypertext interpretation, a list of common novice strategies and examples, directions for the small-group discussion, the poem we used in the last step of the lesson, and the directions for the hypertext assignment) and our lesson's analyses (the study itself, the rubric we used for our analyses, four documents synthesizing the researchers' individual analyses of the four steps of the first classroom iteration of the lesson, and then three documents synthesizing the researchers' individual analyses of the three steps of the second and final iteration of the lesson.