2011-12 English Lesson Study Final Report

I: BACKGROUND	
Title	**Lesson Study in English: Framing Expectations for Literary Interpretation**
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Discipline/Fields	English, English Studies, Literature, Poetry
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Course Name	Literature and Human Experience (Eng 200, Fall 2011) Foundations for Literary Study (Eng 301, Spring 2012)
Course Description	"Literature and Human Experience" is a general education course that focuses on intensive study of selected literary texts. The course emphasizes reading, studying, and appreciating literature as an aesthetic, emotional, and cultural experience. "Foundations for Literary Studies" is an introductory course for the English major, introducing students to major literary genres and periods as well as the practice of literary criticism through close reading, research, and the study of historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts. Our lesson occurred during the first week of the semester in both courses and was intended to introduce students to goals that would be addressed the whole semester.
Abstract	Students frequently think about general education and foundational literature courses simply as requirements to fulfill. Our broader goal was to scaffold student thinking about the purpose, value, and necessity of literary study. We focused on three more specific goals: 1) to help students understand that both a "right answer" approach to interpretation and an "anything goes" approach are problematic; 2) to help students appreciate the positive value of ambiguity as something that invites multiple persuasive interpretations; and 3) to help them recognize that literary modes of thinking can be applicable to non-literary texts as well. Our observations revealed that some teams arrived quickly at single, closed interpretations whereas others generated new, persuasive readings of the poem. During the large group conversation, individuals generally were good at providing valid textual support for their interpretations. In subsequent classes students seemed more willing to entertain multiple interpretations and to challenge one another. Students seemed to have made progress with our first and second goals. We saw evidence for our third goal when students at the end of class started asking the question, what makes a text "literature" or not?
II: THE LESSON	

Learning Goals	Our broad developmental and disciplinary goals involve helping students
	   1 understand that both a "right answer" approach to interpretation and an "anything goes" approach are problematic in literary studies;
	   2 see how ambiguity can be used to generate multiple persuasive interpretations; and,
	   3 explore what is unique about literary ways of thinking as well as how literary tools can be applied to non-literary texts.
	Our lesson-specific goal focused primarily on generating multiple persuasive interpretations of literary texts. As a result of the lesson, students should be better able to
	  ● articulate multiple persuasive interpretations of a piece of literature
	  ● reflect on how ambiguity can lead to multiple persuasive interpretations of a piece of literature
	The lesson itself was intended to promote reflection on how students typically read literature in academic contexts, to demonstrate those reading and interpretative strategies by applying them to a specific text, and to think about the implications for reading in (and out of) English classes.

Lesson Plan	PREPARATION FOR CLASS
	  ● Students complete an informal writing assignment and bring it to class:
	    ○ "How do you typically read literature in English classes? What do you find yourself thinking about?"
	I. STUDENT EXPECTATIONS ABOUT READING LITERATURE
	  ● Students share their responses to the informal writing assignment.
	  ● Teacher lists student responses on the board. Teacher looks for and comments on any contradictions in student responses or any evidence of the "anything goes" or "one right answer" approach to reading literature.
	  ● Teacher highlights these ideas:
	    ○ Ambiguity is a central concept in literary studies. Ambiguity can be productive, helping readers generate multiple interpretations.
	    ○ Such interpretations are more persuasive if they are based on inquiry into the text itself, its parts as well as its "whole."
	    ○ There may be multiple persuasive interpretations of a text, which is why the "anything goes" and "one right answer" approach are problematic.
	  ● Teacher introduces next lesson activity:
	    ○ "Let's work through some of these approaches and tools to discuss 'The Fish' and its possible meanings."
	II. READING A SAMPLE LITERARY TEXT: ELIZABETH BISHOP'S "THE FISH"
	  ● Teacher provides quick background on the author.
	  ● Teacher asks the class this question:
	    ○ "How did you respond to the prompt asking you to record what you noticed as you read "The Fish"? What parts of the poem stood out to you?"
	    ○ Students are invited to share their responses with the whole class. Teacher comments on any patterns or differences that

emerge.

- Teacher breaks the class into small groups and asks students to work through the final lines:
  - "How do you interpret "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow! And I let the fish go"? You can use the tools and approaches listed on the board or you may find there are other ones you want to bring in. Be ready to:
    - i Share at least one interpretation AND
    - ii Share how you used the text of the poem (including lines outside of the ones we are focusing on for interpretation) and literary tools or approaches to arrive at that interpretation
- Small groups report out on their interpretations. Teacher asks students to explain the thinking behind their interpretations and to support their interpretations with evidence from the text itself.
- Teacher categorizes student responses to show similarities and differences. Teacher draws student attention to the persuasiveness of multiple interpretations.
- Teacher comments on how ambiguity functions in literary study more generally. Literature thrives on ambiguity and invites us to play with language and meaning in ways that enhance rather than frustrate understanding.

III. READING LITERARY VS. NON-LITERARY TEXTS (as time permits)

- Teacher asks students to think about how reading literature is different from and similar to reading other types of texts. Teacher draws attention to what is unique about a literary mode of thinking and reading as well as how this mode can be applied to non-literary texts because they also possess a degree of ambiguity and are subject to interpretation.
- Teacher distributes handout with excerpts from other texts about fish. Depending on time, this activity can be a small-group exercise or a large-group discussion. Teacher gives this prompt:
  - "Consider what you wrote in response to the question "How do you read other kinds of texts similarly or differently" with these examples. "
    - i What makes (one, two, or all of them/the one your group is assigned) different from a literary text?
    - ii What makes (one, two, or all of them/the one your group is assigned) similar to a literary text?
- Students read the handout with excerpts. If they are working in small groups, the teacher assigns different excerpts to different groups, using a jigsaw approach.
- Students share responses as time permits.
- Teacher concludes this exercise by highlighting these ideas:
  - The ambiguity in literary texts encourages a different kind of relationship to the subject of the writings (a fish); some texts are not meant to be ambiguous. Also, some words and phrases do seem to have multiple layers of meaning or rely on some of

	the same descriptive detail we saw in Bishop's poem. ○ See the rich potential (excitement) of studying literature. Readers can become adept at exploring ambiguity and multiple meanings—complex critical thinking. You may find a new vision of relationship and value between yourself and the subject of the literary work.
III: THE STUDY	
Approach	We gathered informal student writing and reviewed evidence collected during our observations of the lesson.
Findings/Discussion	Eng 200 (Fall 2011) ● Pre-class informal writing demonstrated that students approach literature from a reader-response perspective, and that they try to figure out authorial intent. For instance, they try to put themselves into the text and to predict what will happen (reader-response). And they try to figure out what the author is thinking, why he/she chose certain phrasing, what he/she is <u>really</u> getting at (authorial intent). We might have predicted this considering the prompt specifically asked students to think about how they read literature for English classes (reader-response), and because many students have been taught to look for the author's intended morals, lessons , and hidden meanings (authorial intent). ● In small groups, students gravitated towards a single reading of the poem - perhaps due to prompt, time constraints, or small group dynamics. We asked the students to focus their interpretation on a specific word and image ("Rainbow"), and students were able to quickly come up with possible meanings for the word and image, but they were slow to consider the tools and approaches they used to come up with this meaning. In many groups, students came up with one interpretation of the word/image and then drifted off task. ● Instructor was able to use large group contributions to demonstrate how students' collective evidence could lead to at least two persuasive interpretations. A few students did a nice job of pointing to other sections of the poem to support specific readings of the "Rainbow." Students seemed more eager to offer alternative interpretations in large group than in small group. ● The students didn't end up with a lot of time to analyze the non-literary texts about fish, but they come to some interesting conclusions. For instance, they argue that scientific writing has no room for interpretation, whereas poetry does. And they say that when more imagery is provided than is necessary for simple description, then writing becomes literary. Eng 301 (Spring 2012) ● Pre-class informal writing demonstrated that students approached literature with more sophisticated knowledge of literary terms and analysis, and students completed some web research (mostly on

biographical background). They still said things like "I try to apply the literature to myself," but they also said things like "I look for a progression of yearning in the main character" and knew terms such as alliteration, symbolism, tone, imagery, syntax. One student said "*The Fish* is obviously not about a fish," and thus implied the necessity of interpretation. Their research into biographical background (gathered from Wikipedia and other Internet sources) was interesting because it demonstrated how author-centered their analysis is at this stage of the English major.

- In small groups, students gravitated toward a single reading of the "Rainbow" image and word, but spent more time developing support for this reading. They were eager to dive into other sections of the poem to support their reading. They also posed questions related to the reading, and seemed comfortable even if they couldn't come to answers. Some of these unanswerable questions, however, might have alerted them to the possibility that their reading was not very persuasive.

- In large group, students eagerly presented a variety of interpretations they found persuasive, but none was particularly persuasive according to disciplinary standards. They seemed to get excited by interpretations that were not obvious (for instance, one group suggested that rainbow meant the boat was sinking and another analyzed the progression of colors in the rainbow); that is, when they thought they had discovered a surprising "hidden meaning."

- The students didn't end up with a lot of time to analyze the non-literary texts about fish, but they too come to some interesting conclusions. They suggested that knowing the genre of the text helps you to know whether or not to read it with a literary lens (for instance, one said that when you know it is a cookbook you know it is utilitarian writing). They also focused in on the idea of *ambiguity* as key to discovering the literariness of a text (as in, the more ambiguous, the more literary).

Our discussion of the two class observations left us with the following questions that we will explore in a subsequent lesson study:

- What forms of ambiguity are more productive than others, and how can we help students discern the difference?
- How do our goals translate to cohesive student writing?
- Do the superficial differences between the results in 200 and 301 just mask a similar cognitive sticking point in the students' thinking?