

2017 Professional Development Grant Report

College English Association Conference

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Prepared January 2018

B. Restatement of Creative Work / Professional Enhancement Activity

In March 2017, I attended the College English Association (CEA) Conference in Hilton Head, SC, where I presented research about using technology to increase empathy within the discipline of literary studies. The Association's website is as follows:

<http://www.cea-web.org/>

C. Brief Review of Creative Work / Professional Enhancement Activity

The CEA is an important peer-reviewed national conference in the discipline of English. At the conference meeting, I presented a paper on a Pedagogy Panel entitled, "Lessons from a Mobile Fellowship: Reading, Kindness, and Using iPads to Solve the Crisis of Empathy." The abstract is below:

I was selected to be an Arkansas Tech University Mobile Fellow for the Fall 2016 semester: a university initiative that outfits instructors and students with iPads in specific courses in order to train students to employ their knowledge to improve their larger worlds. The chosen course was ENGL 2013: Introduction to American Literature, which is a general education course in the humanities elective. For most students who enroll, it is the only literature course they will take. According to a recent study by the National Endowment for the Arts, adult rates of literary reading (novels, short stories, poetry, plays) are continually dropping, with only 37% of adult men reading at least one literary book a year. As reading literature is the most effective and direct way to learn, teach, and cultivate empathy, this is a problem. As rates of literary reading decrease, so too do rates of empathy (see, for example, research by William Axinn at the Population Studies Center that found that college students were 40% less empathetic today than just ten years ago; notably, this correlates with the a drop in literature-based required courses). To help students understand how literature directly relates to the formation of

empathy, students used iPads to translate the importance of reading literature to the larger world via social media projects and team multimedia projects in order to begin to reverse the negative downward trends of empathy that affects everything from voting behavior to driving techniques to life expectancy. My talk explains the course learning outcomes for this project, an assessment of the results, and recommendations for incorporating social media projects in future literature courses.

I also served as a moderator for a panel on Pedagogy and Metacognition. As well, I attended several useful panels to discuss pedagogy and the teaching of literature and writing.

D. Summary of Outcomes / Experiences

My panel was comprised of senior literature faculty at campuses across the country. After presenting our research, we had a long and fruitful discussion about how to move away from limited views of teaching as “insular” or focused only on what happens in the classroom, into seeing literary study as outreach-based. The panel and audience members, on the whole, had not thought of structuring their literature classes in this way, and so I learned that my approach is somewhat cutting-edge pedagogy. We discussed possibilities for expanding outreach programs in literary studies outside the off-mentioned standard of tutoring in reading in the K-12 schools.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

My teaching and my research are interwoven at all levels. What I present at conferences is the result of my discussions in the classrooms with my students, which is the result of my reading and thinking before I enter the classroom, which is the result of months of preparation before the semester begins. The conference paper I presented at CEA in March 2017 then transformed into a graduate course on the Literature of Happiness wherein students investigate in depth the relationship between empathy and happiness in literary and cultural texts, and then

recommend changes to current cultural structures to improve Arkansas' dismal ratings in national happiness polls. This course then generated another conference talk on "big concept courses" that aim to transform students' personal lives via literary study, which has been accepted for presentation at CEA in April 2018. As a teacher-scholar, to be effective in the classroom I must constantly be aware of the ongoing conversations in my field, in the larger academic community, and in the world. So that is what I aim to do every day.

I am extremely grateful for the Professional Development Grant to allow me the opportunity to continue my research.

Copies to: Dr. Carl Brucker, Department Head, English & World Languages
 Dr. Jeffrey Woods, Dean, Arts & Humanities
 Dr. Mohamed Abdelrahman, Vice President, Academic Affairs

F. Appendix

Copies of my paper are available upon request.