

2014 Professional Development Grant Report

South Central Modern Language Association

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B. Restatement of Creative Work / Professional Enhancement Activity

In October 2014, I attended the South Central Modern Language Association (SCMLA) Conference in Austin, Texas. The Association's website is as follows:

<http://www.southcentralmla.org/>

C. Brief Review of Creative Work / Professional Enhancement Activity

I presented on the Gay and Lesbian Studies in Language and Literature panel. My paper was entitled, "Discipline Problems in the Classroom: What Happens When Heteronormative Psych Theory Meets Cultural Studies." During the fall of 2014, I taught a graduate course called "Modern Love and the Mind" at Arkansas Tech University. In this course, we read contemporary psychological theories used to train marriage and family therapists, and used those theories to analyze the health of romantic relationships in twentieth- and twenty-first-century novels, films, music, and poetry. The purpose of this was to assess how our artistic representations of love affect (or do not affect) our actual lives. The main theoretical text we used was Robert J. Sternberg and Karin Weis's *The New Psychology of Love*, which is a 2006 anthology of the current dominant psychological theories for assessing relationship health, and contains works by the biggest names in that field: Sternberg, Clyde Hendrick and Susan Hendrick, Phillip R. Shaver and Mario Mikulincer, Helen Fisher, Ellen Berscheid, etc. This text is commonly used in marriage and family therapy graduate programs. The literary texts I assigned were a blend of "mythic" love stories—Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Scott Spencer's *Endless Love*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*—alongside works that challenge the dominant heteronormative structure of romance—James Baldwin's *Another Country*, Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, the film version of *Brokeback Mountain*. What we found is that the

dominant theories being taught to therapists still overwhelmingly employ a heteronormative structure that further alienates gay, lesbian, and transgendered individuals from ideas of romantic “health.”

I also organized two panels on Modern Drama, where I served as chair and moderator. I attended several useful panels, and was elected as the secretary for next year’s Gay and Lesbian Studies in Language and Literature panel.

D. Summary of Outcomes / Experiences

My paper brought together the approaches used in relationship therapy and those used in cultural studies to demonstrate how not enough interdisciplinary conversations are happening and how, in fact, this lack of communication is harming patients by reinscribing heteronormative biases in marriage and family therapy practices. By highlighting this lack of interdisciplinary conversation, my hope is that we can start to bring the two areas of research closer together and begin to better serve clients who come to therapy. We need to understand where people already are, rather than expecting them to be different human beings altogether. Most current psychological theories are based on faulty evolutionary models that use reproduction as a basis, whereas human sexuality is rarely driven by reproduction (as cultural and anthropological research has shown for decades). The more conversations we can have that bring these disciplines together, the greater the chances we have for creating positive change in people’s lives in multiple ways.

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 SCMLA in October 2014 then transformed into another upper-level course on the history of sexuality in literature that I taught in Spring 2015, which then became another conference paper on debunking the myths about teaching sexuality in the Bible Belt that I will present in October 2015. As a teacher-scholar, to be effective in the classroom, I must constantly be aware of the ongoing conversations in my field and in the larger academic community and in the world. So that is what I work hard to do every day.

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

Copies to: Dr. Carl Brucker, Department Head, English & World Languages
 Dr. Jeffrey Woods, Dean, Arts and Humanities
 Dr. A. J. Anglin, Vice President, Academic Affairs

F. Appendix

Copies of my paper are available upon request.