

## Step-Dame Study's Purpose: Early Modern Literature and Critical Thinking

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Given what seems a constant barrage of criticism aimed at the academy from politicians and the public—and the great concern for buzz words like accountability and transparency—it has become fairly routine to see a defense of the humanities in opinion pieces in *Inside Higher Education*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The New York Times*, and even CNN.com. The pieces range from defending the intrinsic worth of the humanities to defending the concrete skills that we teach, like critical thinking and writing. Most of these arguments seem to imply that it's one way or the other; the defenders who argue for the former tend to see the pragmatic conversation as sullyng the aesthetics of our disciplines, while the defenders arguing for the latter see the lack of discussion of anything other than marketable skills as pie-in-the-sky idealism.

I'm certainly not the first to make this observation—and I hope that I'm not the last—but I think it's possible to make both arguments. Perhaps it's necessary to make both to ensure the survival of the humanities, which just about all of us seem to agree are in dire straits, given the current scrutiny of the money we bring to our institutions and the current economic restrictions we're all facing. What I want to do in this article is to first consider the role the humanities play in the teaching of those core skills of critical thinking, one of the more practical aspects of the

humanities. Though, of course, I hope that I also convey to my students my own love of literary studies, with the focus on the beauty of the art and the intellectual stimulation of literary criticism. From there, I will present my own experience of teaching Renaissance Literature as a case study in the ways that we can teach critical thinking in our literature classrooms. While the connection between critical thinking and literary studies has always been something that most of us understand intuitively, we can focus our attention not only on the early modern texts and in-class discussions, but we can also help our students develop a more coherent set of critical thinking skills by actively teaching students to think metacognitively about what they're doing while reading and interpreting that literature.

## **The Humanities and Critical Thinking Skills**

If Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, authors of the study *Academically Adrift*, are to be believed, the humanities are where most of the student learning happens in the first two years of college. To put it more precisely, Arum and Roksa have observed that students who take courses that are rigorous (twenty pages of writing over the course of the semester and forty pages of reading each week) are more likely to develop critical thinking skills and writing skills, as tested in the Collegiate Learning Assessment mechanism (Arum and Roksa 131). While critics of their study have fairly pointed out that the CLA does not account for certain types of subject specific learning, the fact remains that we all—across all disciplines—pay lip service to the idea that we want to foster critical thinking skills. The reality is, however, that even if students are learning subject specific materials, students still only learn things that would fall onto Bloom's Taxonomy at the lower order thinking skills of knowledge, comprehension, and application (or

remembering, understanding and applying, in the revised version of the taxonomy). That is, students may be learning a great deal of basic content, but they do not seem to be learning how to think about that content despite our stated desire to teach critical thinking.

While Arum and Roksa do not speculate on why it is that the humanities are more conducive to honing critical thinking skills (and while they avoid explicit criticism of pre-professional program), their findings support claims by various scholars who have published paeans to the importance of the humanities. For example, Martha Nussbaum, in *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, touts their importance for moral development and citizenship. While Nussbaum's claims focus on the development of ethics and of the whole human, she points to some of the reasons that the humanities are better able to do this. In arguing for the Socratic method of teaching—which most of us already do, even if sometimes inelegantly—she explains that “each student must be treated as an individual whose powers of mind are unfolding and who is expected to make an active and creative contribution to classroom discussion. This sort of pedagogy is impossible without small classes or at the least, regular meetings of small sections within larger classes” (Nussbaum 55). So, our teaching in the humanities—particularly our habit of frequently teaching through discussion—enables students to think more creatively, and ultimately more critically.

Thus, in theory, the humanities are a place where students learn those critical thinking skills that are so important not only for the working world, but also for life in general. Our understanding of teaching also needs to be informed by this sort of theory; as we are trying to teach our students to be conscious of the ideas underpinning their education, we need to ourselves be reflective of why we're doing what we're doing. By reflecting on the place of the

humanities in the larger structure of a student's education, we can better make the case for why these courses are useful – and we must make this case both to ourselves and to our students. Furthermore, working with the ideas of these researchers—that in the humanities, students are already learning to think critically and creatively—we can further inform our teaching and further examine what we're doing. In turn, this will help us become even more deliberate in paying attention to those skills that we're trying to help students develop. What's perhaps most important is that we can pay attention to helping all students develop these skills, not just the students who are able to intuit the intellectual moves that we make in the literature classroom.

However, suggestions of these books are primarily theoretical, and many of us need a bit more guidance in figuring out how exactly to do such things. Many college faculty members are not trained in educational psychology, nor are they trained in methods of constructivist pedagogy (which is particularly attuned to the types of teaching that encourage student-centered learning and interaction). That is where the paradigm of the Foundation for Critical Thinking might provide some practical support. Richard Paul, founder of the organization, developed his theory of critical thinking in response to what he saw as a lack of continuity in discussions across disciplines about how people think. The resulting paradigm has frequently been adopted by colleges and universities as part of their Quality Enhancement Plans. My own university, a small liberal arts institution that serves underprepared students with various personal challenges, has adopted this paradigm and is currently in the fifth year of implementation. Our program includes a first-year sequence of courses followed by various upper division courses designated as “CT” (working much the way that writing intensive or writing across the curriculum programs work).

The framework, developed primarily by Paul in the late 1970s and subsequently honed with Linda Elder and others, suggests that all thinking follows the same process no matter the discipline. While the framework itself is imperfect—as is anything that attempts to be universal or all encompassing—it does important work for educators who need to remember that students are in a different place intellectually from their professors, and that students must be held accountable for their thinking beyond the tests; we cannot encourage lifelong learning if we do not encourage serious reflection on the process of thinking.

The framework involves the idea that critical thinking can be cultivated, and indeed must be systematically cultivated in most people. While many of us who were good students in school intuitively grasped important components of our thought process – and intuitively took part in the thought process itself—most of our students and most people really do not find themselves challenged to do such a thing. Furthermore, Paul and Elder argue (as does just about every other educational theorist) that the current system of high stakes testing is discouraging students’ opportunities to develop critical thinking skills during the grade school years (*The Critical Thinking Community*). If Nussbaum and Arum and Roksa are right, then we may be facing much the same pressure at the collegiate level in the coming years. But, like many other educational philosophers, Paul suggests—in the tradition of Dewey—that learning through doing means that students will succeed equally well on exams as students who simply learn for the exam itself. It’s just that those students who learn through a critical thinking paradigm will also learn for the long term (*The Critical Thinking Community*).

The central thesis is this: critical thinkers apply universal standards to the elements of thinking in order to improve their thinking and move towards having the intellectual dispositions

ingrained, having them become organic to their own way of life (Paul, *Critical Thinking* 91). However, what does that actually mean? At its core, the framework suggests that we can only improve our thinking—and thus ourselves—by constantly evaluating the thinking through a set of external, universally understood, standards in order to improve our ability to think about problems, to think about the world. As we do this, we cultivate habits of mind— what Paul and Elder refer to as Intellectual Virtues—that will in the long run make us better thinkers and more reflective people (Paul and Elder, *Critical Thinking* 194).

The framework proposes eight elements of thinking: point of view, purpose, question, information, inference, concepts, assumptions, and implications (Paul and Elder, *Critical Thinking* 55). Though these are the “standard” terms, the framework suggests a host of synonyms for each, which is where the paradigm becomes more useful for most disciplines. For example, information—those experiences and observations we take in—can be the data of the chemistry lab and the evidence for the literature paper (that is, the words on the page). The goal of looking at these steps together as a process is to help us, our students, and really anyone consider what occurs beneath the surface. Many of our thought processes are unconscious, such as our assumptions; others are never fully realized, such as the implications of what we’re thinking or the consequences of our actions.

In general the structure of thought, as proposed by Paul, has a pattern that we can use to determine our train of thinking. The universal structure of thought that Paul and Elder propose goes like this: “Whenever we think we think for a purpose within a point of view based on assumptions leading to implications and consequences. We use data, facts and experiences to make inferences and judgments based on concepts and theories to answer a question or solve a

problem” (Paul and Elder, *How to Study and Learn* 11). In another rendering, they suggest that we consider our thought process through a series of questions: “What is my fundamental purpose? What is my point of view? What assumptions am I using in my reasoning? What are the implications of my reasoning (if I am correct)? What information do I need to answer my question? What are my most fundamental inferences or conclusions? What is the most basic concept in the question? What is the question that I am trying to answer?” (*The Critical Thinking Community*).

On its surface, the critical thinking paradigm seems easier to apply to disciplines that appear to have real-world consequences in their implications, like ecology, sociology, and psychology. These are things that require certain ethical considerations that seem to “really matter,”—and the website and much of the published material of the foundation tends to support this notion, intentionally or not (*The Critical Thinking Community*). However, after working with the material and taking into consideration the arguments of Martha Nussbaum and others, I want to suggest that we can indeed use this fruitfully in our literature classrooms.

The object of using this model in a literature classroom—and really within any discipline’s classroom—is not to discourage the use of discipline specific terminology and literary terms, but rather to encourage us to help students see that their structures of thought are consistent throughout their college experience. The most frequent graphic representation of the elements of thought in the Foundation’s publications is what they call the “logic wheel,” which orients the eight elements and their synonyms in a pie chart. The point of this visual organizer is that it is a model that can be used in any field—and that the *order* of the structures of thought

may not be the same through any two given problem solving situations, but that the elements are always there, whether we think about them or not.

The way that I have tried to explain this to the faculty and students at my institution is to suggest that chemistry and English have very different purposes, since both are looking for different types of results, with one viewing qualitative exactness as rigorous, the other embracing ambiguity and exploratory questioning as rigorous; nevertheless, both are actually using the same structures of thought. The chemist has a question (what happens when I mix these things together?), puts together a lab to gain information (more commonly known in science as data), and interprets that data based on observation (drawing a conclusion). Some of her underlying assumptions are deeply fundamental and unconsciously understood (the scientific method actually works, if something is repeatable four times, it will continue to happen in the same way). The literary critic goes through the same processes, though not necessarily in the same order. The literary critic has information in front of him—the text itself—which may raise some fundamental questions (how do these words make meaning?). Based on his particular assumptions about what art is or what culture is and based on his understanding of fundamental concepts, he will interpret the work. Different order, same structures of thought.

The question, then, concerns we want students to *be* at the end of a literature course. What are we trying to develop in the students through our course objectives? Do we want them to be literary critics (certainly one possibility)? Do we want them to be literate readers (something different from the previous)? Do we want them to be critical thinkers? Are these mutually exclusive, or can we have various outcomes for the various students in the same classroom? This is a serious consideration in my courses, as my institution has a small number of

English majors and we run almost all upper division courses open to non-majors. In the end, I think that by using this paradigm, we can do all of those things; by practicing the work of literary criticism, and particularly by supplementing that work with the critical thinking paradigm, we are able to teach students these skills through teaching literary analysis.

## **Thinking Practically about Thinking Critically**

In my own Renaissance Literature classroom, I have worked to adapt my syllabus to this critical thinking paradigm. I've also worked to improve student engagement in the classroom. While I felt like I was generally prepared to teach in the college classroom, I've found that my own teaching in this program has improved through a new experience of reflective and deliberative steps in teaching. In other words, my own teaching has improved because I have been forced to slow down and think about what it is that goes into reading and learning literature, and what goes into reading and learning altogether.

In planning my course—and in thinking about this paradigm—I found it useful to look at the basic objectives that Paul and Elder laid out for the critical thinker. They suggest that for the student to truly learn a discipline, he or she must be able to

- raise vital questions and problems within [the subject], formulating them clearly and precisely;
- gather and assess information, using ideas to interpret that information insightfully;
- come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;

- adopt the point of view of the discipline, recognizing and assessing, as needs be, its assumptions, implications and practical consequences;
- communicate effectively with others using the language of the discipline and that of educated public discourse; and
- relate what one is learning in the subject to other subjects and to what is significant in human life. (Paul and Elder, *Miniature Guide 2*)

These certainly suggest that anytime students learn in the classroom, any time students learn a new discipline, they need to understand how practitioners of the discipline engage with the content, and that this will lead them to a broader understanding of the human condition and of their own ability to think critically.

This means that one of the major efforts I have undertaken is to incorporate the elements and standards into my course objectives as follows (all critical thinking terms are in bold):

At the completion of this course the student will be able to...

- 1) demonstrate a broad knowledge of a number of both major and minor sixteenth and early seventeenth century texts within the context of early modern thought and culture;
- 2) formulate **relevant** and **significant questions** that lead to clear, deep and broad interpretation of the texts;
- 3) **clearly** and **precisely** articulate the **assumptions** and **purposes** underlying the **questions** that we ask in literary studies;
- 4) **clearly** and **logically** articulate and use basic **concepts** of literary studies and cultural studies, most especially in this course the **concepts** of prose, drama, poetry as well as the difference between the concepts of the Renaissance and the early modern period;

- 5) **fairly** articulate and appreciate the **implications** of our modern reading of early modern literature as a foundational to our modern literature and culture;
- 6) employ effective reading and writing practices within the discipline of English, by engaging in close reading of a literary text – the basic **information** of literary studies –, both on its own and in context of scholarship of the field;
- 7) practice close reading techniques through participation in class discussion and written work;
- 8) **clearly** and effectively transmit an interpretation of a specific literary text by presenting **information** and underlying **assumptions** through a group presentation; and
- 9) demonstrate an ability to present synthesized knowledge of the texts and methods of literary studies through an independent and original written interpretation that uses **specific** and **relevant information** drawn from the texts of the course and literary criticism.

These outcomes acknowledge the need for some basic knowledge of the content, but they also highlight the need to hone critical thinking skills. (See [Appendix I](#) for further details of the syllabus.)

Because one of the central elements for literary studies—and for critical thinking as a whole—is developing relevant and significant questions, one of the central assignments of the course was developing discussion questions (see [Appendix I](#) for the syllabus description of the assignment and [Appendix II](#) for the more detailed assignment sheet for the assignment). We worked in one of the first class periods on how to ask discussion questions—rather than questions that simply focused on identifying information (what happens next? What does this

word mean?). Students were given a reading assignment of a few poems by Wyatt, and once they came to the classroom, I divided them into pairs, assigning more experienced English majors to work with less experienced students. These pairs worked together, using both ideas about question types from the Paul and Elder model and with Bloom's taxonomy. I've also provided them with a series of questions that illustrate good discussion questions. We spent time developing questions and then we put the questions on the board. (See [Appendix II](#) for this assignment sheet, which has more details.)

Once the questions were on the board, we assessed the quality of the questions: were they significant? Relevant? Did they open up discussion? This type of work requires that students pay more attention to the poetry and it pushes the responsibility of interpretation onto them. Students did not necessarily need to have an answer to the question, but they needed somewhere to start. Throughout the semester, students would send questions to me via email and I would group them together according to question type. Once we met together, I would ask the questions—identifying the students who wrote especially productive questions—as a way to start discussion. If it became clear that there was particular confusion, I would address that confusion at the beginning of class. This sort of interaction allowed for a great deal of the Socratic questioning that Nussbaum calls for in the classroom.

Beyond this daily work, students were given a presentation assignment, based on the idea that in order to truly understand a topic you must teach it. The original exercise itself, as deployed at the annual CT conference under the name of “If you can't teach it, you don't know it”, calls for a group of students to work together teaching each other material. Each student is given a piece of the text (whether it's a textbook selection, a poem, or a new story) and then

given a specific amount of time to understand the piece in front of them. Then each student teaches the others about what they've just read. This can be done with a short piece over a short period of time; or it can become something much longer and more involved. In my classroom, I opted to have the students teach each other sonnets from *Astrophil and Stella*. The reason to talk about it as teaching each other the sonnets, rather than giving a presentation on the sonnet, is that this encourages a certain type of approach. Rather than the work of a presentation, which suggests that we try to demonstrate our own understanding and to impress the instructor with the interpretation we've come up with, we're required to think about how to most clearly and precisely explain something in order to get it across to other people. That is, our interpretation must be understandable to everyone in the room, and we're responsible for that. The simple idea behind this small change in terminology is one that pushes the responsibility onto the students for their own learning and the learning of the whole classroom. (See [Appendix II](#) for the assignment sheet.)

Another important aspect of both critical thinking and literary studies—particularly when it comes to older, more unfamiliar material—is the ability to read carefully and closely. One of the things I have found is that students, when they slow down, are actually better at comprehending the material than they believe themselves to be. To that end, I use an exercise termed “Critical Reading.” The basic exercise is this: students work in pairs on a given text; the first student reads the first sentence aloud and then paraphrases it; the second student evaluates the paraphrase, clarifying or correcting for precision and accuracy; then the students switch roles for the second sentence. The students go back and forth through the entire text. This works for

any text, really. (Again, this is an exercise I encountered at the annual International Conference on Critical Thinking.)

I found this particularly useful with Hobbes' *Leviathan*, excerpts of which my students decided we should read for the course. I paired students and assigned them various passages of the excerpt found in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Each group had about two paragraphs to read, were directed to answer a series of questions based on the elements, and were instructed to be prepared to summarize what they'd learned for the rest of the class. Among the questions that helped the students deal with the passage, I used several of the relevant elements and standards. On a worksheet, I instructed the students with the following:

What is Hobbes' central *purpose* or *goal* in this passage? That is, what *concept* or *interpretation* of *information* is Hobbes trying to delineate here?

What are the *assumptions* that Hobbes' claims rest upon? That is, what does he take as foundational to this claim?

What new *questions* do those *assumptions* raise?

What are the *implications* of those *assumptions* for government or for our understanding of what distinguishes human from animal, civilization from primitive society?

*You should try to determine the implications from your understanding of this passage – but you may also want to supplement your understanding of the implications by looking elsewhere in the chapter. Hobbes talks about implications (even if subtly) in each chapter.*

As students worked through the passages, I circulated around the room, helping students when they were stuck on their paraphrases and encouraging them to use their smartphones as dictionaries when they found words they simply didn't know. While we did not cover absolutely every one of Hobbes' ideas in the passage, we were able to generally make sense of Hobbes;

most importantly, my students were all engaged and all working to make sense of what they were reading.

This works equally well with poetry. Using this technique while students read a sonnet elicits a more careful, close reading of the text. For example, I have assigned students sonnets by Shakespeare and had them talk themselves through the basic interpretation of the poem. Or take for example Philip Sidney's seventh sonnet from *Astrophil and Stella*:

When nature made her chief work, Stella's eyes,  
In colour black why wrapped she beams so bright?  
Would she in beamy black, like painter wise,  
Frame daintiest luster, mixed of shades and light?  
Or did she else that sober hue devise  
In objects best to knit and strength our sigh,  
Lest, if not veil those brave gleams did disguise,  
They, sun-like, should more dazzle than delight?  
Or would she her miraculous power show,  
That, whereas black seems beauty's contrary,  
She even in black doth make all beauties flow?  
Both so, and thus: she minding love should be  
Place ever there, gave him this mourning weed  
To honour all their deaths, who for her bleed.

When confronted with such a poem some students tend to try to read very quickly and try to interpret line by line, ignoring the enjambment throughout. This, in turn, leads to

misunderstanding and misreading of the poem, since the syntax is not standard, according to our students' understanding of the language. When read as a series of sentences, however, students begin to see that the meaning crosses the line breaks, and they begin to interpret more carefully. Thus, with this poem, a student might take the first line and explain that it says something to the effect of "Why did Nature make Stella's eyes such a dark color—and those are, by the way, Stella's best feature." The second student could then examine the next line, perhaps paraphrasing it as something like "An artist wouldn't use black to highlight such wonderful, delicate eyes, so why did nature?" As the students work through this, they can discuss the conventions of the Petrarchan lover, the Petrarchan sonnet, as well as the blazon. This allows for a discussion of concepts and a close reading of the poem: critical thinking terminology is thus embedded within traditional literary activity.

These are but some of the classroom experiences that I've used with my students in the critical thinking context. What makes a difference I think, and what highlights the nature of the critical thinking framework as a way to approach the problem solving process, is to include elements and standards on the assignment sheets. Every assignment sheet in the course involves key elements for the project. The final research project requires a significant question, careful interpretation of relevant information, and a consideration of the implications of such interpretive work. The discussion question assignment asks students to learn to develop significant questions that open up discussion that will help with interpretation and guides them by asking them to begin with major concepts of the course.

The exercises I've discussed have at their core both the goal of systematic cultivation of critical thinking and systematic work in interpretation. Students must slow down and think about

what it is that they're reading, which brings me back to where I began: we can have both the aesthetic experience and the development of transferrable skills. We can acknowledge beauty within our discipline and we can take pleasure in the simple act of reading and interpreting. Once students know how to read a text, they're better able to enjoy it for its own sake, and they're better equipped to recognize the value of the humanities in and of themselves. If any given day's news is any indication, we need to defend ourselves. My students begin courses not liking the literature because they can't understand it. However, by the end—by the time we've worked on learning *how* to learn the literature and *how* to interpret the literature—they enjoy it. They appreciate that there are things in this world that their first philosophies have never dreamed of.

## Appendix I

### Excerpts from the syllabus for the Critical Thinking-designated Renaissance

#### Literature Course

##### Course Description:

This course will introduce students to the literature and general culture of the early modern period in England (the English Renaissance). Students in the course will read a wide variety of texts, including major works by highly recognizable authors like Shakespeare and Milton and less-canonical works by authors like Wroth and Herrick; some of the selections for the course will, additionally, be chosen by the students in the first week of class. The work that we do in the course will all be geared towards answering the central question that all scholars of early modern English ask: “What characterizes early modern English literature and culture?” By the end of the semester, you will write a research paper that narrows that question down and responds to it meaningfully.

This course is designated at a Critical Thinking course. This means that the course will use the terminology of Richard Paul and Linda Elder’s critical thinking paradigm, most particularly considering the Elements and Standards of Critical Thinking. This means for students of the course a way to approach the texts: but it is a way that will actually seem quite familiar to students who have already taken literature courses, as the paradigm quite nicely folds into the way we approach things already. What this means for the structure of the course is that on a day-to-day basis, this will be a heavily student-centered course, with frequent discussions directed by student interest and questions.

##### Course Objectives:

At the completion of this course the student will be able to ...

- 1) demonstrate a broad knowledge of a number of both major and minor sixteenth and early seventeenth century texts within the context of early modern thought and culture;
- 2) formulate relevant and significant questions that lead to clear, deep and broad interpretation of the texts;
- 3) clearly and precisely articulate the assumptions and purposes underlying the questions that we ask in literary studies;
- 4) clearly and logically articulate and use basic concepts of literary studies and cultural studies, most especially in this course the concepts of prose, drama, poetry as well as the difference between the concepts of the Renaissance and the early modern period;
- 5) fairly articulate and appreciate the implications of our modern reading of early modern literature as a foundational to our modern literature and culture;

- 6) employ effective reading and writing practices within the discipline of English, by engaging in close reading of a literary text – the basic information of literary studies –, both on its own and in context of scholarship of the field;
- 7) practice close reading techniques through participation in class discussion and written work;
- 8) clearly and effectively transmit an interpretation of a specific literary text by presenting information and underlying assumptions through a group presentation; and
- 9) demonstrate an ability to present synthesized knowledge of the texts and methods of literary studies through an independent and original written interpretation that uses specific and relevant information drawn from the texts of the course and literary criticism.

### **Assignment specifics:**

*Final research paper:* A standard feature of any English class, the final research paper will be your opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge that you have gained over the course of the semester through the development of a thesis based interpretation of one or more of the texts for this course. A portion of the grade for this paper will come from a prospectus that you submit in week 10, outlining the question that you intend to explore, arguing for its significance and relevance, and presenting a working thesis statement. The final research paper will be 7-8 pages in length and will explore an original question that you develop and research over the final portion of the semester.

*Group presentation on a sonnet:* Part of demonstrating our understanding of ideas is the ability to transmit that knowledge to other people. Thus, one of your assignments this semester will be a presentation on a sonnet. You will work with a partner (or in a group of three, depending on the final number of people in this class) and teach the class about a sonnet from Philip Sidney's sonnet cycle *Astrophil and Stella*. The goal of this assignment is to demonstrate your ability to take information and interpret it, dealing with the assumptions underlying your interpretation and the implications of that interpretation for our greater course question. In addition to presenting as a group, each person will write an evaluation and summation of the work done for this assignment.

*Midterm exam and final exam:* You will take two exams to demonstrate your knowledge of the texts for the course. Both exams will include sections of identification questions and quotation identification/ explication. The midterm will include a relatively brief (3-4 paragraph) essay question; the final exam will include a longer essay question, which is comprehensive in nature.

*Daily discussion questions:* In an effort to create a student-centered environment for discussion and to develop the important skill of asking significant and relevant questions about a literary text, you will submit at the beginning of each class period two discussion questions for us to

consider. You will note that I have listed 32 discussion question sets on the schedule – this means that should you miss one or two of them, you will be able to make up for lost work. Of all the work that you submit for class, this is the one assignment that you may submit to me via email. Please include in the subject line the question set number and email it to me no later than 9:30 the day it's due.

*Participation:* Participation grades are admittedly the most difficult points to define. Because of the nature of literary studies, your participation is imperative, and thus you will find it necessary to participate daily. I will run the class as a seminar where we follow leads and see where we get in the discussion – hence the importance of the student questions. I will occasionally ask for individual work in class as well as in-class partner projects. Participating in these will also be important – and will earn you further participation points. Truly engaged students come to class having read the texts and having written down their ideas about the texts – even if those ideas are questions about things that are confusing or unclear.

***Further information and assignment sheets will be forthcoming throughout the semester, including specifics on the critical articles and ideas for the final research paper. I will distribute all assignment sheets in class and discuss them at appropriate times. You will also be able to retrieve these sheets from Blackboard, under “Assignments.”***

### **Daily Schedule**

Please pay attention to the daily schedule. I expect you to read all assignments prior to class and come prepared to discuss them – and you must bring your book with you to class. You must also complete any writing assignment prior to the class period when it's listed. I reserve the right to adjust the schedule, should the need arise, and you are responsible for following those changes. If I must change the schedule, I will alert you as soon as I know. I will provide an adjusted schedule in class and post it to Blackboard. Most work is in *The Norton Anthology*. The only exception to that is John Ford's play *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*.

You will also note that this schedule has many blanks. One of the first activities of this course will be to fill in those blanks. I have selected a series of readings for this course. However, in an effort to encourage student ownership of the material, and to encourage students to pursue particular interests, you and your classmates will work together to determine a portion of the readings. You will work on this in class on Friday, January 14. Once you, as a class, have made your selections, I will fill in a complete schedule of readings and distribute it to everyone in class. We will stick to that closely.

***With every reading, please read the introduction as well as the listed texts below.***

## Appendix II

### Assignment Sheets

#### *Discussion Question Sets*

Assignment objectives:

- 1) To facilitate student engagement with literary texts through developing significant and relevant questions about literary texts
- 2) To encourage student ownership of discussion
- 3) To encourage intellectual autonomy and courage

*From the syllabus:*

In an effort to create a student-centered environment for discussion and to develop the important skill of asking significant and relevant questions about a literary text, you will submit at the beginning of each class period two discussion questions for us to consider.

*Please type these and turn them in at the beginning of the class period.*

The goal of this particular assignment is to give you practice in asking open-ended questions, a vital skill in any study of literature. You don't even need to have a specific answer to them when you write them down: instead, these are an opportunity for exploration of the text and ideas that it presents. Good discussion questions have embedded in them follow up questions that will allow us as a group to explore pieces of the text in great depth; they will also ask discussion participants to look carefully at the text – and not just generalize about what we've read together.

To write these questions, think about Bloom's Taxonomy:

#### **Bloom's Taxonomy**

Bloom's Taxonomy is a systematic discussion of the ways in which people think. The first three levels – knowledge, comprehension and application – are basic skills that you have learned throughout your academic career. These three build onto each other, like steps of a ladder. The next three – analysis, synthesis and evaluation – are also interrelated, but do not necessarily follow sequentially like the first three. Good discussions of literature begin at the analysis, synthesis or evaluation levels of thinking. (The first three levels of the taxonomy are, of course, important when discussing literature, but they should not be the central focus of discussion.)

**Knowledge** define, recall, recognize, remember, who, what, when, where

**Comprehension** describe, compare, contrast, rephrase, explain

**Application** problem-solving

**Analysis** identify motives or causes, draw conclusions, provide evidence

**Synthesis** predict, produce, write, design, develop, construct

**Evaluation** judge, argue, decide, appraise, evaluate, choose

As you write these, you might try a few different approaches:

1. Pick out a choice claim from a critic of the text. Build a question that encourages the class to either support or deny the claim with textual evidence.
2. Select a specific passage and ask us to reflect on some specific aspect of it. Build into your question an idea about the theme of the larger text or an idea about the way the language of the text actually works.
3. Think about the greater philosophical or cultural questions that the text raises. Build your question around something like the way that the text represents typical gender roles or class anxieties.

These are not the only questions you might ask, but they should get you started. As we continue to do this over the semester, I expect that you will become more comfortable with this process and asking the questions will become an increasingly organic experience for you.

Examples of what works and what doesn't:

Poor discussion question: Who is the leader of *The Others* in the third season of *Lost*? (This question doesn't work because it's not open-ended. This would simply result in identifying a character at a specific point in a television series, but not particularly lead to meaningful discussion of that series.)

Better discussion questions:

What is the effect naming the initial human enemies on the island "The Others"? (More open-ended)

Why might "The Others" consider themselves not only the proper owners of the Island, but also good – and even better than people from somewhere other than the island? (A clear follow up question to the first, based on information suggested in the answer to the first question)

What does the comparison of "The Others" with the survivors of Flight 815 suggest about the nature of the enemy?

(A clear evaluation question that requires specific discussion of information about a great deal of information, and which gets at the heart of one of the central concepts of *Lost* – the idea of the duality of the individual)

## Using the Oxford English Dictionary

Assignment objectives:

- Develop precision and accuracy in interpreting information
- Introduce basic resource for literary studies

One of the tools that we want to make use of in literary studies – and particularly when we are dealing with literature from earlier eras – is the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Fortunately for you, Whitaker Library has this resource available electronically.

Your assignment for the next class period is to look up one word, as assigned below, and find the definitions that would have been in use when the poems were written. This is important, because words change in meaning over time. Once you've found the word and the definitions, write these down (or just print them out). – and bring it to class.

We'll share these in class on January 21.

Student	Word	Poem
Ariel	Pleasure	"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love"
David	Madrigal	"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love"
Rose	Reckoning	"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd"
Sienna	Complain	"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd"
Danielle	Guile	"Farewell False Love"
Matthew	Vile	"Farewell False Love"
Leila	Vestal	"Methought I saw"
Sarah W.	Hearse	"Methought I saw"
Andrea	Wont	"Methought I saw"
Sarah R.	Compose	"Nature that washed her hands in milk"
Andrew	Jelly	"Nature that washed her hands in milk"
Joseph*	Wantonness (wanton)	"Nature that washed her hands in milk"

*\*All names have been changed*

## **Presentations**

Assignment objectives:

- Develop fair-minded and logical interpretations of texts based on information presented in texts and other sources
- Determine relevant and significant information in developing those interpretations
- Consider implications of interpretive work
- Develop presentation skills, as outlined in the Department of Language and Literature learning objectives

For this assignment you and a partner will teach the class a sonnet. So, what does that mean?

Each pair will be assigned a sonnet from Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*. As a pair, you will work together to interpret this sonnet, considering not only the basic meaning of the information (words of the text itself), but also broader questions about how the sonnet fits with Sidney's definition of art, as we discuss in his "Defense of Poesy," and his larger work of the sonnet sequence. You will want to make use of all available resources, including the *OED* and critical articles.

You will then present your interpretation and the implications to the class: you will teach us the sonnet. When you do this you want to make sure of the following questions:

- Do your classmates understand the basic meaning of the sonnet?
- Do you explain the metaphors of the sonnet and the way that they relate to the concept LOVE?
- Do you define any words that are unclear – or that have meaning particular to the early modern period?

Your presentation of this sonnet can take any format you wish – so long as both partners are clearly involved in the presentation.

Once you have presented this work, you will write an evaluation of the process: you will evaluate yourself and your partner, determining in writing what percentage of the work each of you did. I will take this into consideration as I grade this assignment.

### **Grading considerations:**

Accuracy of information: 25%

Fairness and logic of interpretation and inferences: 50%

Clarity of presentation: 25%

## Final research paper

Assignment objectives:

- 1) To encourage students to develop a significant, broad and deep question about a topic related to this semester's readings
- 2) To encourage students to wrestle with one (or several) concepts central to the early modern era and the study of literature
- 3) To encourage students to analyze information and develop a clear and precise interpretation of the text(s) at hand

From the syllabus:

A standard feature of any English class, the final research paper will be your opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge that you have gained over the course of the semester through the development of a thesis based interpretation of one or more of the texts for this course. A portion of the grade for this paper will come from a prospectus that you submit in week 10, outlining the question that you intend to explore, arguing for its significance and relevance, and presenting a working thesis statement. The final research paper will be 7-8 pages in length and will explore an original question that you develop and research over the final portion of the semester.

As you prepare this paper, you'll want to keep in mind the following things:

- You can stick to a single piece of literature, but you're welcome to look at more than one
- That said, you'll probably want to limit yourself to no more than 3 for a paper of this length
- A good research paper in literature classes will typically average about 1 resource for every page
- Scholarly articles found through the library databases and books/book chapters are more reliable resources than the internet
- Wikipedia is not an acceptable source for this assignment
- Neither are personal blogs
- You must have a works cited page for your final version of this paper. I will not grade your paper without one.

The final paper is worth 250 points (25% of your course grade). 50 points will come from the prospectus, due in week 10; 200 points will come from the final paper itself.

In order to write the prospectus, you will develop a substantial and significant question related to the course theme and texts. As you write your interpretation of the text, you will develop a thesis statement that answers that question with depth, breadth and precision. This means that you will

narrow your question down from the main question of the course (What characterizes early modern literature and culture?) to a more specific question that will ask you to answer it through accurate and precise consideration of the information (texts) of the course. You will develop a clear and logical analysis of the text, using outside resources to bolster your claims about the text(s).

Sample questions:

- How does Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* represent the concepts of marriage and chastity?
- How do the poems of Ben Jonson construct the early modern concept of the author?
- How do the poems of John Donne present the intersection between the materiality of this world and the spiritual world?
- How do *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and *The Duchess of Malfi* negotiate the taboo concept of incest?

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