

 THESIS

LITERATURE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: EDUCATING THE  
CONTEMPORARY STUDENT

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## ABSTRACT

### LITERATURE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: EDUCATING THE CONTEMPORARY STUDENT

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In the modern era of globalization, college graduates are involved in technological, environmental, and economic improvements for communities throughout the world. As students train for these experiences during their educational tenures, they inherit valuable specialized skills. However, because of the specialized nature of business, science, and engineering programs, many of these students do not have the opportunity to explore additional academic disciplines. For example, though many college students may enjoy reading for pleasure outside of the classroom, with the exception of a university's Humanities department, fictional works of literature are rarely included in an academic setting. I argue that the study of literature offers practical, educational, social, and psychological benefits for students of any discipline at the college level. Furthermore, those not exposed to literature, whether it is fictional, poetic, or dramatic, may be lacking in certain areas of critical thought, imagination, interpretation, and socialization. Through the sharing of a collection of research studies, personal interviews, group surveys, and published trials, I present the emerging presence of interdisciplinary literary study and demonstrate the advantages of incorporating literature across the curriculum.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERDISCIPLINARY LITERARY STUDY.....	6
III. WORKING TO LEARN AND LEARNING TO WORK.....	11
IV. PUBLIC POWER AND PERSONAL PROGRESS.....	29
V. THE FUTURE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY LITERARY STUDY.....	33
APPENDIX.....	36
WORKS CITED.....	38

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*The place where we are to get knowledge, even theoretic knowledge, is the books themselves! It depends on what we read, after all manner of professors have done their best for us. The true university of these days is a collection of books. (Carlyle)*

Wilde. Faulkner. Chaucer. Hurston. Chopin. While many students recognize the names and works of these influential writers, few have had the opportunity to investigate, discuss, and appreciate their celebrated texts. Contemporary university students are often drawn towards the professional schools in order to prepare for specific careers. In our technologically-advanced society, many college students concentrate on these future professions, seeking competition and capital, instead of focusing on the basic intellectual and social expansion that a university atmosphere provides. Because of this trend, the number of literature majors on college campuses is steadily decreasing. According to Yale Professor Michael Holquist, "As American universities gear up to meet the challenge of globalization, the humanities are being assigned an increasingly diminished role [ . . . ]. Literature has been excluded from current understandings of what constitutes culture" (6-7). For example, though students enrolled in the International Business major at the University of Dayton may choose to participate in an elective literature course, they are not required to take a literature course in order to complete their degree program. To the English student, professor, or scholar, such a notion is perplexing, as the study of literature indeed plays a central role in international study and cultural development.

As a Master's candidate in the Department of English, I have a deep appreciation for the value of literary studies in academia. Literature is an important channel through which we can further understand various peoples, traditions, and cultures across the world and throughout time. Literature provides a means to confront, explore, and enjoy the lives of the fictional. This skill is especially significant in the current age of globalization, as it allows students to rehearse potential interactions with people of other backgrounds who may embrace alternate religious values, political beliefs, cultural traditions or economic practices. Nevertheless, for college students who choose to study in the fields of business, engineering, or science, the world of literature traditionally does not exist past the senior year of high school. With the exception of a few brief fictional readings during the first year of college, students who choose a technical or professional path are not always exposed to literary studies as a part of their academic curriculum. The literary opportunities for such students often exist only through participation in individual pleasure reading activities or organized book discussion groups.

In a brief survey of forty-two first-year undergraduates from composition courses at the University of Dayton, I asked the students about their feelings concerning a variety of literary activities. Students were first asked a simple question: Do you like to read for pleasure? Sixty-eight percent of the students responded emphatically that they enjoy reading works of fiction in their spare time. The students listed entertainment, relaxation, and knowledge as reasons for their enjoyment of reading. Furthermore, many of these students are reading academic-level fiction for pleasure: Students listed Walt Whitman, Chaim Potok, Toni Morrison, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zora Neale Hurston, Ernest Hemingway, Alice Walker, Jane Austen, and Daphne duMaurier as some of their favorite authors. The University of Dayton supports these interests by providing a

pleasure-reading book collection in the library and organizing a campus-wide book discussion group entitled “Porch Reads” four times each year. Such opportunities are not exclusive to the University of Dayton. Many universities bring authors to campus for book talks and provide roundtable discussion opportunities for both controversial texts and popular works of fiction. For instance, San Jose State University supports a campus reading program entitled “A Culture of Reading”; The University of Michigan-Dearborn hosts R.E.A.D (Read, Eat, Discuss) meetings four times per year for avid pleasure-readers; The University of Georgia began the Bulldog Book Club in 2006 in an effort to encourage students to read; The University of Massachusetts-Amherst promotes a once monthly “Women of Many Colors” book club; The University of Notre Dame provides on-line links to and lists of leisure-reading collections and opportunities for their students. Though this is only a brief list of institutions, it appears that the appreciation for pleasure-reading activities is apparent across many university campuses. If reading remains popular among university students, why is reading so frequently recognized only as a leisure activity on college campuses? If students like to read works of fiction, doesn’t it seem logical to introduce and promote this pastime in an academic sense, in addition to supporting the extracurricular style of reading? In the following pages, I will explore how the inclusion of literary study across the curriculum enhances intellectual, professional, personal, and social experiences for university students.

Gwendolyn Barnes-Karol, Associate Professor of Spanish at Minnesota’s Saint Olaf College, shares my concern about the lack of opportunity for students to study literature in a university’s academic environment. When conversing with her students about literature, she received a seemingly contradictory response. Her students admitted their passion for reading “books” yet declared their hatred for reading



“literature” (13). In Barnes-Karol’s Spanish literature class, students excelled when reading short passages. However, when confronted with longer pieces of literature, her students assumed they would not be able to comprehend the text, and thus experienced great difficulty (13). It is evident that there is a misconception among college students about what literature is, why it is essential, and how it can be used. As instructors of literature, it is our duty to erase the stigma so often associated with the word “literature.” It is important to show students that, no matter their chosen degree program, literature is valuable, understandable, and applicable in any situation.

In my secondary research, I encountered a number of instructors who support and provide interdisciplinary literature courses. In the subsequent chapters, I will explain and share examples of how each of their classroom experiments displays the advantages of incorporating literature study across the curriculum. In order to fortify the results found in these secondary studies, I refer again to the brief optional survey conducted among my own students (see Appendix). It is important to note that in order to ensure confidentiality, students were instructed to indicate only their academic majors on the survey, and not their names. I chose to include the results of this survey, not to serve as a basis for my argument, but rather to provide additional support to the notion that interdisciplinary courses that include literary study provide concrete benefits to university students. Literature offers practical, educational, social, and psychological benefits for students of any discipline. I argue that those not exposed to literature, whether it is fictional, poetic, or dramatic, may be lacking in certain areas of critical thought, imagination, interpretation, and socialization. I wish to focus on the previous absence and emerging presence of literary study across disciplines and argue for the inclusion of literature across the curriculum at the college level. I will begin with a consideration of the ever-changing status of literature in the university environment.

Then, I will prove precisely how the inclusion of literature across the curriculum will advance our students. "Working to Learn and Learning to Work" investigates what students can gain intellectually from the study of literature, and how literature fosters development in technical and professional disciplines. The chapter entitled "Public Power and Personal Progress" explores how students can profit independently from the study of literature, and how literature can serve as a model for practical application in the social sphere. In conclusion, I will respond to the arguments against this curriculum modification, providing further support for the inclusion of literature across the college campus.

## CHAPTER II

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERDISCIPLINARY LITERARY STUDY

*There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them. (Brodsky)*

During the past century, the structure of higher education has embarked upon a continuous journey of change. Before examining and supporting an adjustment in the modern university's curriculum, it is valuable to consider the role literature played during the interdisciplinary debates of previous generations. During the 1930's, the discussion began about the borders that had been created between the liberal arts and the professional curricula. In 1936, The National Council of Teachers of English called for a restructuring in which the "artificial barriers" between disciplines would be alleviated (Goldbort 121). A slight movement in favor of crossing the disciplinary boundaries had occurred at the University of Southern California in 1930. Professor Carl Naether suggested that "the ability to write and speak his mother tongue correctly, fluently, and forcefully is, without exception, the most important asset that an engineer can have; [. . .] He cannot hire anyone to speak for him [. . .] or to express satisfactorily his ideas on paper" (xiii). Naether's realization about the importance of the skills that a liberal arts education provides is noteworthy, and his early efforts to encourage literacy skills among technical students are admirable. However, Naether's proposal does not fully support an interdisciplinary method. He later states, "Engineering students have little time to devote to the study of poetry [. . .] but they do need thorough instruction in how to speak

and write modern English [. . .]. The beauties and niceties of our tongue can be taught just as effectively in technical literature and diction as in any other class of literature and diction” (xiii). Here, I disagree with Naether entirely. While technical literature can provide a wealth of information and expertise concerning technical language and processes, it does not provide the keys to fundamental written and oral communication skills. Athanasios Moulakis, Professor of Humanities at The University of Colorado at Boulder, agrees: “Engineering attracts bright people and equips them to do important things, but it does little to help them understand the human condition or, indeed, the fullness of their own humanity” (1). Fictional literature is an excellent source of linguistic instruction and a model of human experience. A controversial and thought-provoking novel has the power to illustrate the writer’s command and the reader’s possible interpretations of the English language. For example, students in a mechanical or aeronautical engineering program might benefit from a comparative study of Nevil Shute’s *No Highway*, written in 1948. The author/engineer’s novel about an aircraft’s structural malfunction provides a creative way for students to study language while comparing and contrasting contemporary methods of engineering to those of previous eras. While such a novel must be carefully chosen so as to capture the interest of the technological student, fiction clearly provides supplementary value to the technical course.

In 1959, British scientist and author C.P. Snow examined further the great divide that existed between the world of science and the sphere of literature in the twentieth century. He explained that since the “two cultures” remained so separate from one another, there were gross misconceptions that existed between scientists and literary scholars. Regarding the scientists, he states, “It is not that they lack the interests [in morals, social life, politics, and religion]. It is much more that the whole literature of the

traditional culture does not seem to them relevant to those interests. They are, of course, dead wrong, and as a result, their imaginative understanding is less than it could be” (20). This misconception that Snow highlights is quite similar to Naether’s false impression about the potential use of poetry for a course in the engineering curriculum. The study of literature indeed is relevant to any person, in any field. Snow further explains, “There seems to be no place where the two cultures meet. I am not going to waste time saying that this is a pity; it is much worse than that [. . .]. It is a disastrous process for the purpose of a living culture [. . .]. It is nearly fatal if we are to perform our practical tasks in the world” (21-22). Thus, as early as 1959, a call was made to restructure the system of higher education. Through various conversations with members of each “culture,” Snow realized that all were lacking vital skills and knowledge for survival in human society. The act of offering more literary interdisciplinary courses in the modern university is a first step to alleviate such tension between the “two cultures.”

During the 1960’s, Herman Estrin put Snow’s vision into action. In the May 1961 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, Estrin conveyed his students’ excited reception of a variety of literary works. Near the completion of the course, Professor Estrin asked his students what literature meant to them. His students, all first-year engineering students, compiled a list of twenty reasons why one should read literature. The students valued literary works because of their expression of human interactions and experiences, their ability to provide a well-rounded education, their connection to the students’ personal values, and their implication in the human imaginative process (Estrin 102-105). One most especially thoughtful student muses, “Without literature, there would be no civilization” (104). This student’s observation echoes that of poet William Blake: “The Foundation of Empire is Art and Science. Remove them or Degrade them

and the Empire is no more. Empire follows Art and not vice versa” (447). By engaging in discussion and composing analyses of these readings, each of the students noticed a connection between the reading tasks and their personal, social, and professional lives. These students, despite their relative youth and their technological interests, offer valuable insight regarding the study of literature. While many contemporary students tend to focus solely on their future careers, students of past eras readily appreciated the tools necessary to expand their minds and become better humans. As literary critic Lionel Trilling adeptly reveals, “Literature is indeed power, moral, political, [and] scientific” (121). Literary works, much like historical texts, provide accounts of generations past. Though the settings and characters are fictional, they subtly provide insight into past successes and failures, and future possibilities; literature is a supplementary powerful catalyst for contemplation and transformation in the modern age. As Professor Terry Eagleton states, “Literature [. . .] is an ideology. It has the most intimate relations to questions of social power” (49). Students can apply the knowledge gained from the study of literary works in order to make improvements in their own communities. Thus, literature can play a role in everyone’s life, no matter the political interest, choice of profession, religious belief, or personal interest. Students who are not enrolled in a literature course are missing a crucial component of their university education. They are lacking additional opportunities to explore themselves, their past, and their society in an artistic and stimulating manner.

In the contemporary university setting, Bowling Green State University Professor Emeritus Ray Browne suggests that English departments are upholding high standards of education: “Despite the security of so-called canonical literature, English literature departments like to sail in the giant battleship called the humanities and mix their literature course offerings with other humanities offerings across campus, which not only

brings in more students but also mixes various disciplines into a better rounded educational package” (9-10). However, *more* can be done. If literature proves to be functional and beneficial across the humanities curricula, why not employ literature across the university curriculum? As Browne states, “Outreach and growth should be a constant in academic development” (10).

## CHAPTER III

### WORKING TO LEARN AND LEARNING TO WORK

*If we encounter a man of rare intellect, we should ask him what books he reads.  
(Emerson)*

The most important factors to consider when contemplating the addition of literature into the classroom are the specific intellectual and professional benefits that will ensue for the students. Since students have chosen a college major based on their strengths and interests, it is vital that the selected literature provide additional valuable knowledge. Professors Warren Westcott and J. Everett Spell explain the importance of broadening students' academic horizons: "It is rare, indeed, to find English teachers who incorporate science or math or business into their classrooms, rare for science teachers to bring fiction or poetry into the science classroom as a way of 'cross-fertilizing' the disciplines; yet these are precisely the sorts of things that can and should be done" (70). Browne also explains the importance of interdisciplinary opportunities for students:

Academic curricula are being strengthened and enriched through the enlightened realization that no discipline is an island unto itself. Instead, each is a part of the curriculum mainland, to which it feeds important nutrients and from which it draws life-giving nourishment in the form of intellectual commerce and trade. Without this cross-fertilization, eventually it will hear the death knell tolling. (3)

Through Browne's vivid imagery, he states a critical point. The objective of a university education should be continual stimulation of the brain. Students should be in a state of



perpetual contemplation and learning. A contemporary university must aim to create the desire within each student to grow intellectually by experimenting with new disciplines.

Presently, many instructors have studied and experimented with the use of fiction in the classroom. During my composition course, students were exposed to a variety of literary genres and themes in addition to non-fiction works. The students in the course developed a basic understanding of and appreciation for literature, yet these students were, for the most part, only scheduled to read academic-level fiction within *this* particular first-year course. College curriculum planners across the country commonly debate this issue, as not all college composition courses throughout the nation choose to include fictional readings to accompany a textbook and/or non-fictional essays. Patrick Scott, Professor of English at the University of South Carolina, describes this ongoing discussion concerning the value of literary studies in the composition classroom:

Professionalized writing specialists have become unnecessarily suspicious of traditional literary reading assignments; the educational functions of reading assignments have often been misunderstood; those functions can, at least for some students, better be fulfilled by traditional, substantive literary texts [ . . . ]. The trend is for freshman reading assignments to become less 'literary,' less personal, less affective, and for the newer freshman readers to include more of that functional, informational, and expository prose we identify as non-literary. (1, 3)

While non-literary prose has a permanent place both in the composition class and in a number of university courses, additional fictional readings may offer significant benefits. The characters in fictional works often create a window through which students can view and understand their own lives. This recognition may increase the possibility that students will become more interested and more engaged with the text, as they may see

direct relevance to the events in their own lives. Selecting texts to increase student engagement is important; however, it is imperative that the chosen fictional work reinforces the students' knowledge of the essential skills necessary for success in the original field of study.

While the act of reading, in and of itself, provides a breadth of intellectual benefits for students, in order for the interdisciplinary literature course to be most successful and worthwhile, students must also interpret and reflect upon what they have read. After students reflect upon a text, they have the opportunity to analyze and synthesize their thoughts with the themes from the text in a piece of writing. Chris Boyatzis emphasizes the written component of his interdisciplinary course at California State Fullerton. After his psychology students completed papers on a Maya Angelou text, they were better able to "understand the complex issues of race, gender, and social class in development" ("Let" 222). Extracurricular reading groups rarely provide the opportunity for students to compose written syntheses; therefore, it is essential to create academic interdisciplinary courses that include literary study. By incorporating literary study across the curriculum students employ additional skills: students combine their oral and written responses to a piece of literature with the type of analysis used in their individual discourse communities. Scott found comparable results during his classroom instruction: literature indeed enhances students' comprehension of both basic and discipline-specific writing principles. Scott advises the use of fictional literature because he observes that "it is very difficult to write about a constant succession of general topics of which one has little understanding" (8). Because all students have different learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses, it may be beneficial to vary the approach used in the classroom. For example, some students may overlook important themes while reading an essay about the dangers of drug abuse; however, if these students have a fictional

character to guide them through the actual experience, the important themes may be more likely to resonate and affect this group of students. This connection between reader and text creates improvement in the final written expression of ideas. Furthermore, at times, students may not question concepts in a factual essay; with a literary work, students may be more readily able to see the connections or disconnections to their own lives and want to comment both in writing and in conversation with their peers. Literature should not by any means replace non-fiction works in the composition course; rather, the addition of literature simply permits a sense of universal access and understanding for those students who do not readily adapt to non-fictional works. Furthermore, additional types of writing tasks, such as literary analyses and syntheses, can be composed upon completion of a fictional text. Students will be able to adopt practices of clear and innovative writing because of the increased attention to figurative language and enhanced vocabulary during their study of fictional works.

Of the forty-two students surveyed in my first-year composition courses, ninety-five percent reported that they found the fictional readings to be an asset to their experience and progress in the course. Concurrent with Boyatzis' findings, the students realized the works of fiction were not only intriguing, but they also helped to build writing skills. A Biology major in the class indicated that the readings "helped create arguments to discuss within [her] own papers." A Spanish and Photography double major claimed, "Not only were the readings interesting, but they were additionally engaging and open for analysis." A Pre-Medicine major also explained the benefit she received from the study of fictional material: "As students, we were able to analyze the texts and write papers that were controversial. They challenged our thinking and were the basis for good discussion in the class." An Education major suggested, "They gave insight into some

common issues like race, poverty, and communication, but presented them in a way I had never thought about.” Lastly, an International Business student stated, “The fiction helped me to have a better vocabulary.” Based on these students’ introspective and articulate comments, it is evident that they found value in the inclusion of literature in their composition course; the students noticed the increase in their vocabulary, argumentative skills, and composition abilities because the texts forced them to think in a critical manner. University of Chicago Professor Martha Nussbaum agrees: “Storytelling and literary imagining are not opposed to rational argument, but can provide essential ingredients in a rational argument” (*Poetic* xiii). Based on the activities at California State Fullerton, the University of Dayton, and the University of South Carolina, literature proves extremely beneficial in the general composition course, as students of all majors are guaranteed exposure to literature. More importantly, literary study often contributes to the improvement of basic research, interpretation, and writing skills, which may be applicable to a number of careers: scientists interpret and compose reports; businesspeople review and draft prospectuses; public relations specialists critique and create advertisements; engineers prepare and approve work orders, and virtually all college graduates compose and revise cover letters and resumes.

Since the inclusion of literature in the first-year writing course offers concrete practical and intellectual benefits to students, why not consider incorporating fiction into other curricula across the campus? I proposed to my students an addition of one course relating to each of their majors that would contain relevant fictional readings. Sixty-five percent of my students responded that they would both enjoy and appreciate the opportunity to participate in such a course. Many instructors have reported the successful installation of fiction in other courses not directly related to either literature or the humanities because the divide between the subjects is not so vast as once

imagined. Though the precise subject matter may initially seem different, if one looks closer, he or she will find great similarities between the sciences and literary studies. Brad Sullivan, Professor of English, and Edwin Everham, Professor of Environmental Studies, believe that science and humanities studies are corresponding disciplines because the boundaries that exist between them have been *created*. They suggest, “The humanities and sciences are unified in their effort to make sense of complex systems, both physical and textual” (14). By reading literature, their students discovered a number of important comparisons between the supposedly contrasting subjects: “Overarching literary metaphors and scientific paradigms are essentially identical in structure and purpose. Both direct perception and inquiry; both provide the organizing pattern that provides context for new discoveries” (9-10). University of Missouri-Kansas City Professor Emerita Lois Spatz also reveals similarities between the sciences and the humanities. She believes that “literary criticism complements the scientific method because it leads to a greater understanding of the role of intuition and feeling in making decisions” (683). Intuition is such a skill more often used by those in right-brain careers; thus, this provides a new intellectual avenue for those not accustomed to literary studies. Scientists continually make important, sometimes life-altering decisions, so critical and intuitive thought is essential. It is important for students to have the opportunity to make these scholarly connections between disciplines, as it may open up new windows of interest and opportunity for them. For instance, those in the science field who have an aptitude for reading and writing might consider writing or reviewing grants for scientific research or teaching courses to aspiring scientists. Literature creates the opportunity for students to acquire multiple skills and interests, which they can adopt anywhere in the professional world.

Because of the overlap in literary and scientific studies, and after discovering that scientific researchers and theorists still often disregard literature, Boyatzis explored ways to enhance his psychology courses with fiction at California State University Fullerton ("Studying" 32). Traditionally, students involved in social science courses utilize textbooks, theories, and case studies to comprehend their subject of interest. In a field based on fact, practicality, and immediacy, many find no room to incorporate literary works, especially fictional pieces. In this case, fiction is often thought of as a trivial activity meant to be enjoyed outside of the classroom. However, because scientific research is continually updated, improved, and disproved, students need a guide to help them understand complex and evolving scientific theories and concepts. Boyatzis' response to this problem was to use literature as a bridge for the students. He describes, "Using literature along with scientific approaches helps students appreciate that, as Oscar Wilde observed, the truth is rarely pure and never simple [ . . . ]. The narrative and scientific are [both] interpretations" (33, 37). Thus, for students to understand that as future scientists they must always have an interest in probing for greater understanding, literature can be quite a useful tool. Furthermore, as Nussbaum explains, "Good literature is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not. Because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles" (*Poetic* 5). Each student will, based on his or her own experiences and biases, interpret a piece of literature differently. The discussion that arises from this event is such that may not occur during a discussion about a theory or piece of research that is assumed to be true; stimulating debate will transpire because a multitude of interpretations emerge with the study of literature. Incorporating literature in the social science field increases basic interpretive skills necessary for students' success in their courses and increases students' awareness of the importance of their future professions.



Literature connects not only the gap between reality and scientific theory, but it also serves as an alternate form of a “case study” for future scientists, sociologists, and psychologists. Sullivan and Everham found that “particular modes of representing nature became pervasive in our culture’s literature, and the ways in which our culture’s behavior patterns reinforced and relied upon those modes of representing nature” (6). Though most stories may not be exact representations of the theoretical models, they provide an entry point for students to better grasp and discuss complicated theoretical approaches. The stories must be carefully chosen by instructors in order to have the greatest impact on the students’ education. He or she must serve as a guide for the students so that they may make the connections individually and collectively between theories in their field and the characters’ experiences. Boyatzis agrees: “Literature’s value is precisely that it uses personal, subjective experiences. Stories vivify theories, which students often find too abstract” (“Let” 221). In a psychology course, asking students to read Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, for example, helps students to explore a variety of psychological disorders that may have seemed foreign when described in a textbook. Students could also benefit from a study of Carson McCullers’ *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in order to understand alternative human personalities and interactions. Students studying forms of physical and psychological addiction might consider “The Angel of the Odd” by Edgar Allan Poe. Each of these tales makes the textbook information more realistic and accessible for the students. A fact-based textbook chapter cannot adequately summarize the situations portrayed in these fictional works. On the other hand, precisely because the literature is not held to any scientific standards, students may find that significant discussion ensues because of a scientific misrepresentation or inaccuracy in a literary work. Such discussions test both the students’ knowledge of social science and their ability to comprehend literature.

Literature's illustration of social science, whether accurate or inaccurate, creates a multi-layered learning environment that will engage students.

Not only will students in the social sciences find intellectual value in the study of literature, but so too will students studying the natural sciences. Though on the surface the discipline of natural science seems far removed from that of literature, there are basic skills that can be used in the study of either subject. Indiana State University Professor Robert Goldbort explains, "The reader of science or of literature does not passively receive a version of reality but *participates* in its making and remaking" (122). Just as science students spend time in the laboratory making and testing hypotheses, literature students are questioning and analyzing texts in the discussion classroom. Thus, though the science students will gain new skills and insight in the interdisciplinary literature class, the investigative process is not foreign to them. Goldbort explains, "Fiction about science can help students integrate [. . .] the empirical, interpretive, and evaluative dimensions of human endeavor" (124). Instead of having exposure to only two skills as science students, they will now participate in three different brain functions. This only slight differential will make the transition between literature and science a feasible option and will provide innumerable fictional possibilities for students enrolled in a scientific literature course. For instance, students might enjoy the opportunity to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of scientific progress after reading Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth Mark" or William Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much With Us" in a course about the history of science. It is crucial to select literary works that will benefit, enhance, and entertain the science student; the short pieces by Hawthorne and Wordsworth introduce fundamental questions of science ethics and scientific advancement in a creative manner.



Even though the scientific debate prompted by the novel takes place years ago, Imperial College instructor Jon Turney suggests that studying a book like Shelley's *Frankenstein* allows modern students to "understand the sources of attitudes to present-day science, at a time when a variety of explanations is on offer for what is seen as opposition to some new science and technology" (3). Although the novel surfaced at a turning point in the history of medical invention, many of the fears expressed in *Frankenstein* are still apparent in the progressive contemporary society. As Rutgers University English Professor H. Bruce Franklin reveals, there is a direct connection between the "narrative of the novel and the history of medicine" (219). Contemporary citizens ponder the safety of human cloning and the potentially harmful effects that could ensue; a work like *Frankenstein* demonstrates the truth behind these fears.

Communication instructor and former registered nurse Dieter J. Boxmann explains the book's negative portrayal of technology: "The novel's metaphors of invention and technology evoke sustained cultural fears about grafting body parts, experimenting with the dead, and tinkering with natural biological processes" (178-79). Westcott and Spell also suggest that "the common thread that holds imaginative works and scientific works together is a celebration of the sense of wonder and awe that comes with addressing big questions--even ultimate questions--about the nature of humankind and the universe our species inhabits" (70). Science-themed texts allow students to confront these issues of the relationship between humans and science. Textbook study and laboratory experimentation do not necessarily provide the human component of the scientific world; the science student should not overlook this important tenet. Laboratory-based classes provide opportunities to explore facts, scientific data, and experimentation; however, the human ethical response may be absent in the laboratory. By studying a book like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, students can understand the potential ramifications of a

man-made “human” and may find the need to incorporate further methods of thinking into their practices.

Literature regarding human influence and opinion is important in fields of engineering and history as well. University of California, Los Angeles Professor Emeritus Richard Lehan explains the important connections one can make between literature and the city: “The ways of reading literary texts are analogous to the ways urban historians read the city. Shared are constructs built on assumptions about the mechanistic, the organic, the historical, the indeterminate, and the discontinuous [. . .]. Reading the text has been a form of reading the city” (8). At the University of Dayton, Associate Professor John McCombe is involved in an interdisciplinary project that links a variety of professional fields to the depiction of the city in literature. Though any student is welcome to register for the class, the course targets students in technical and scientific programs. The course, led by professional historians, literary scholars, scientists, and engineers, is meant to teach students about the physical, historical, and social causes and effects of the modern city. In the University of Dayton course, students study the rise of the modern city from a variety of vantage points: the architectural, the technological, the historical, and the political. Students who have read very little literature during their academic careers are introduced to canonical authors such as Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, and William Wordsworth. Though the students are often out of their scholastic comfort zone, McCombe reports that the students “crave a different way to use their brains” and surpass competence in the ability to understand and appreciate the value of the literary works. One reason that the course is so successful is because the connections between the literature and the students’ fields are evident. For instance, an engineering student enrolled in the course chose to compose an essay about the recurring appearance of the automobile in E.M. Forster’s *Howards*

*End.* He found, based on the evidence from the text, that technological advances do not always improve people's lives, especially in the field of communication. For McCombe's student, literary studies and engineering practice are not as divided as once imagined. This connection is similar to the connection science students might make about the power of scientific advancement after studying *Frankenstein*. It is most important that the students engage closely with the text in order to apply their knowledge, create discussion, engage in debate, and hypothesize individual interpretations or conclusions, as opposed to readily agreeing with any author or theme. These interdisciplinary studies of literature are successful because the students realize the many interpretive strategies used to understand the power their respective fields have over human interactions.

Reading literature introduces new problem-solving and conflict-strategy methods for students across the curriculum. In the case of an engineering program, students are often involved in mathematical and scientific equations and improvements. However, as Moulakis explains, "When faced with questions that have no simple and complete answers, they often feel awkward and unprepared; yet problems of this kind are the most common in life" (11). This atmosphere, often found in any humanities classroom, is not readily found throughout the rest of a university setting; nevertheless, it is vital for the personal and professional development of each student. Moulakis further explains, "An engineer who has enjoyed a broad exposure to liberal learning and who has had the opportunity to lay a solid foundation in the humanities will be a fuller and richer human being, a better citizen, a more useful, effective, and successful person, and finally, perhaps surprisingly, a better engineer" (10).

Though the aforementioned outcomes are mostly intellectual, students will also benefit professionally from the study of literature at the undergraduate level. Barnes-Karol explains that her students "view reading literature as irrelevant to their future

careers [ . . .]. They see time spent reading literature as time robbed from more practical courses with an immediate application to their life beyond graduation” (14). Contrary to her students’ beliefs, immense professional value can arise from a brief study of literature. In the medical field, students spend much time memorizing symptoms and diagnoses from textbooks and clinical rounds in preparation for their lives as doctors, surgeons, and nurses. However, if the reader may recall any unpleasant experiences with doctors, it may have been due to an overt lack of bedside manner. Spatz suggests that a good doctor must possess more than “a collection of technical skills” (674).

Literature that highlights situations about medical ethics, human conditions, or tragic illnesses creates a more personal connection between a doctor and his or her patients. This literary connection leads to a physical and emotional understanding that can help ease the discomfort that often develops between a nervous patient and an unfamiliar doctor. Grantham University Professor Kathleen Welch suggests that literary study prompts doctors to better “communicate with the whole patient” (312). Despite the long hours spent reading textbooks, dissecting cadavers, and practicing rounds, little time is spent developing basic communication skills; therefore, a medical literature course may prove beneficial to the doctor’s future success and reputation. Literature indeed improves communication skills because it exposes different types of people in different types of situations. Reading about the interactions between two characters in a dramatic or fictional work introduces the reader to communication strategies and challenges the reader to examine his or her own manner of handling conflicts. In the medical profession, it is essential that a doctor is able to read between the lines during a conversation with a patient, ask the right questions of the patient, and relay serious information to the patient; literary study can strengthen these skills.

In Welch's course her main goal was to "help [medical students] recognize that being a good doctor doesn't always necessarily entail finding the *right* diagnosis or picking the *right* multiple choice answer [ . . .]. It also entails 'reading' a particular medical situation in order to figure out what's going on at this one particular moment" (325). As Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, Northwestern University Professor of Medicine, suggests, the practice of medicine is not a science; instead, it is an "interpretive activity" (xvii). Any scientific, business, or engineering profession has the same demands. The scientific process can only solve so many problems; one must be intuitive, based on the information he or she has at hand. The ultimate goal in this case, or in any interdisciplinary situation, is not to make the students experts in modes of literary theory or genre; but rather open their eyes to a variety of human experiences and interpretations that they can apply to their careers and lives.

Professors Anne Hunsaker Hawkins and Marilyn Chandler McEntyre suggest another component of literature in understanding the patient better: "There is a great deal of reciprocity in the relation between medicine and the various cultural mythologies about illness, suffering, death, and grief embodied so often in literature" (2). Poetry most carefully and efficiently demonstrates potential patient experiences. Because medical students, both during undergraduate and graduate coursework, have a limited amount of time for elective credit hours, it may be most beneficial to expose these students to short works of fiction. For example, Edgar Allan Poe is an expert in his creative portrayal of madmen and their demises. Students may find such literary study extremely realistic and effective; they may also benefit from Poe's humor during a particularly dry study of textbook lessons. Spatz states that such study allows future doctors to view their patients as "complex individuals with unspoken problems and feelings" (675). Because of the time constraints of such a course, students may also profit from the study of a

succinct dramatic work: Harvey Fierstein's *On Tidy Endings* provides moving commentary about AIDS patients and the daily discriminations and misunderstandings they confront, while Marsha Norman's *Night Mother* introduces students to the inner-workings of mentally disturbed and suicidal patients. Spatz concurs, "The content of literature is neither useless esoterica nor trivial diversion. Rather it concerns everything human and it expresses fundamental questions about human life in a unique manner which demands a subjective response instead of an objective evaluation" (674). Such responses are vital in the treatment of a live patient, as opposed to a written medical examination. Spatz also proves that the study of medicine and the study of literature indeed have similarities. Just as the transition for science students into a literature course was feasible, so too is the transition into a medical literature course. Many poems provide concrete images because of careful word choice, much like the concrete images to which medical students are accustomed (Spatz 682). For example, in Anne Sexton's moving poem "The Abortion," because she employs uncomplicated imagery, the speaker's abortion is evident; however, her feelings regarding the experience require interpretation (Spatz 680). Medical students who practice this type of interpretation during literary study may find greater success in decoding their patients' perspectives and concerns. Westcott and Spell urge teachers to take note of these important similarities between literary and medical study, because a well-rounded doctor will be most valued in contemporary society. They suggest, "If we hope to lead students away from academic prejudices that can only serve to limit their options and their futures, [we must] knock down, as much as possible within the current academic structure, the walls that separate the disciplines" (75).

Literature serves not only as a benefit to those involved in the medical profession, but also those in the business world. At the University of Dayton, instructor



Barbara John uses fiction in each of her business economics classes. According to John, there is no realistic barrier between the business world and the world of literature: “Economics simply involves making sentences out of numbers.” She believes many of her students take business economics for the sole reason that no reading and/or writing is expected. However, John believes that a university education must continually incorporate both of these skills in order to create well-prepared students. Business students cannot be successful in the business world if they are unable to communicate clearly both orally and in writing. John believes that literature hones her students’ critical thinking skills. Furthermore, with each reading assignment, John integrates a variety of written components. Thus, the students must analyze, interpret, and compose based on the connections they are able to make between the fictional work and the economic principles that they have studied. The fiction serves not only as a means to solidify economic principles, but it allows students practice in a field that is essential for success in daily life. She integrates a selection of Marshall Jevons’ novels into the class in which the main character, Henry Spearman, is a Harvard economist. While learning valuable lessons about economics, the students hone their interpretive skills. John discovered that literature enhanced the business experience for students new to the discipline, yet it also opened up new avenues of intellectual growth for those already enrolled in the business program. Just as the literature major should have the ability to make wise economic decisions, it is vital that the business student demonstrates mastery of interpretation and communication in order to find success in the corporate world.

Although the study of economics is traditionally categorized as a business discipline, like the sciences, it too has immediate connections to the world of literature. Each member of society unconsciously uses economic principles on a daily basis. Consequently, economic principles and situations are readily found in an assortment of

literary works. Just as the psychology student may find literature helpful in order to understand a theoretical principle, the business student may use literature to invigorate an ordinary economic theory. Economics Professors Michael Watts and Robert Smith demonstrate that a variety of literary texts are concerned with the following economic issues: allocation of resources, opportunity costs, entrepreneurship, economic power, efficiency, and division of labor (50). Aside from the commonly used Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, and Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, there are a number of other works that showcase economic principles, like Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* or William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Though considered classic works of literature, both tales provide timeless and invaluable lessons about business ethics and principles. According to George Mason University Professor Peter Boettke, economics itself is a form of storytelling:

First, in teaching economics, while it is important to stress the logic of economic concepts, pure logic rarely excites the minds of the uninitiated while a good story sticks in their heads. Second, the real economy, the public policy debates surrounding it, and the evolution of its operation are necessarily told to listeners in a narrative form. How good a teacher an economist is is largely a function of how good a story he can construct. When we try to communicate economic ideas and economic history, we tell a story and this is as it should be because the economy really is an unfolding story and learning economics is ultimately how to read that unfolding story. (446)

The narrative structure and style apparent in economic study reinforces the notion that literature can be used to demonstrate, propose, and create ideas. In essence, society shapes literature, and literature shapes society. Without contact with literature, it



becomes more difficult to understand our society's dilemmas. Former *Partisan Review* Editors Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips concur: "Everything can be interpreted as a text. Meanings, events, ideas, theories, literary works--all are texts. In a sense, all life is a text" (10). Literature offers a powerful perspective of understanding the world that surrounds us. Nussbaum agrees:

I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own [. . .]. If we do not cultivate the imagination in this way, we lose, I believe, an essential bridge to social justice. If we give up on 'fancy,' we give up on ourselves. (*Poetic xviii*)

Nussbaum's argument is especially poignant in the modern era of globalization.

Creative interpretive skills are essential traits of any well-rounded member of society.

## CHAPTER IV

### PUBLIC POWER AND PERSONAL PROGRESS

*Properly, we should read for power. Man reading should be man intensely alive. The book should be a ball of light in one's hand. (Pound)*

The extensive communal and cultural benefits that literary study promises are as important as the wealth of intellectual and professional knowledge that it provides. These social and cultural opportunities emerge because of the “power” and “justice” about which Trilling, Eagleton, and Nussbaum respectively speak. According to Moulakis, “A university education worthy of the name must provide more than the tools of a trade. It must enhance the student’s familiarity with the wealth of human experience and the many modes--scientific, poetic, philosophical, artistic--of human expression” (10). For students who have chosen to enter a university, rather than a vocational school, there is an expectation that the student will graduate only after receiving a well-rounded educational experience. A well-rounded educational experience should include literary study. Holquist best describes the mission of the modern university: “What we teach turns out to be among the skills currently most needed by citizens [. . .]. We teach distance, abstraction, reflection, and above all, the mysteries of relation, together with the interpretive skills such matters require” (9). Barnes-Karol explains that her university wants its students “to be lifelong learners instead of merely providing them with the tools for a livelihood [. . .] forming broadly educated and analytically minded people capable of responsible citizenship in a global society” (14). All of the proficiencies that Holquist and Barnes-Karol present may be learned through the attention to detail, analysis of

situations, and interpretation of themes that occurs upon reading a work of fiction. In our diverse and fast-paced society, students must be prepared to interact with different people and prosper in unique situations. Literature provides not only immediate "access" to different peoples and cultures, but it also prompts the critical thought process necessary to navigate actual daily challenges and decisions. For example, students who read Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* have the opportunity to explore a young girl's life in the Latin American community, which may or may not be similar to their own childhoods. With such study, students reflect upon their own socioeconomic positions in society and consider their attitudes toward important issues of politics, government, race, and religion. If students do not take advantage of as many cultural opportunities as possible, including literary studies, they will not achieve the highest educational standards, and they will remain a step behind the rest of society. Moulakis explains, "Anyone who does not achieve cultural literacy is condemned to remain marginal" (35).

Students require a variety of courses to attain this goal, including history, philosophy, and sociology. Literary study simply is another avenue that students can explore in order to enhance cultural literacy. Nussbaum relies upon Marcus Aurelius' theory that "we must cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us" (*Cultivating* 85). Fictional works like Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* help students to understand the importance of cultural literacy, as they provide subtle critiques of the unequal treatment of the 'other' that still exists in modern society. Students must recognize the importance of respect and understanding, in addition to alternate points of views and lifestyles that exist in any

community. No matter a person's professional endeavors, respect is key to success in a contemporary multi-cultural society, and literature can aid in this realization. As Illinois State University Professor Kimberly Nance explains, "To accomplish [ . . . ] cultural translation, most readers will need to imagine themselves in situations both different and far more difficult than they are likely to have experienced" (11). While history texts are often the best source of facts, works of fiction provide an additional route to understanding experiences. For example, students in a sociology class working to understand historical issues of racial injustice may find value in the study of Harper Lee's classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, or *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, in which racial prejudice and hatred are highlighted in a way that cannot be ignored. Nussbaum explains that students must have this "historical and cross-cultural understanding" in order to make future moral, political, and religious decisions (*Cultivating* 8). Though fiction depicts lives of imaginary characters, their lives are usually not as fictional as they appear to be. Fiction creates an element of connection between reader and character, thus providing the reader with valuable social skills for the future. Barnes-Karol describes her students' involvement with fictional works of literature: "The reality of a culture must be perceived through both facts and experiences" (17). The experiences fictional characters encounter can enlighten readers about their own past experiences, their current society, and their future opportunities for change.

In addition to a new appreciation for others, the study of literature provides innovative techniques to face adversity and novel ways to imagine. Moulakis suggests, "Faced with a lifetime of challenges, students should acquire the skill of acquiring skills, the skill of teaching themselves" (11). Works of literature accomplish this goal precisely. Books teach readers how to think, as they must participate in individual critical analysis.

Literature provides not only the tools for self-education, but also the means to make educated and wise decisions. Nussbaum believes that literature has the power to “cultivate capacities of judgment and sensitivity” (*Cultivating* 86). Literature can serve either as a beneficial or a flawed model of how the reader should conduct himself or herself and contribute to society. Challenging ideas in literature is a healthy activity because it can prompt students to do the same in their lives. Moulakis explains, “[Students] develop habits of intellectual rigor paired with civility and conversational ease” upon discussing literary meaning (132). Reading and discussion allows opportunities for students to question and reevaluate their own values, based on the notions of the characters or situations within the respective text. Spatz explains, “The sharing of ideas also increases students’ awareness of the existence and possible validity of different interpretations [. . .]. The members of the class recognize that each of them holds different assumptions and attitudes and begin to perceive how and why they differ from one another” (675). For success in the complex contemporary world, these interpretive skills are essential. Such understandings will be helpful for achievement in the fields of medicine, business, science, education, engineering, and law, as any career requires the ability to work as a functioning member of a team. The institution of higher education is a place in which students have the greatest opportunity to explore the many facets of humanity. Mustapha Marrouchi, Associate Professor of English at Louisiana State University, explains the social significance of literary study: “It is, in short, to uphold the tradition of the *public* intellectual, the social critic, and the committed teacher willing to address the full range of ethical, political issues and to connect them to the richest examples of cultural expressions” (190).

## CHAPTER V

### THE FUTURE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY LITERARY STUDY

*Books are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations. (Thoreau)*

Incorporating literature into other courses on the college campus has clear intellectual, professional, social, and personal benefits. Yet, when planning such an interdisciplinary course, three questions may arise: What type of literature should be used? Who should be instructing the course? What happens to the specialization and unique quality of each individual program? In response to the first question, both classic and contemporary works of fiction, in addition to dramatic and poetic pieces, are effective in accomplishing the aforementioned goals. While contemporary literature presents modern issues that are readily recognizable, the same issues can be located within classical literature as well: modern readers often confront social issues and personal struggles similar to those experienced by characters in works of classic literature. Classic literature may not immediately resonate with a contemporary reader, yet it provides great opportunity for deep analysis, comparison, contrast, and discussion. For example, in his study, Scott found physical appearance issues in Chaucer to resonate with modern students' body-image issues (7). Contemporary students may relate to matters of love, money and betrayal found in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Students may also experience a connection to Stephen Dedalus' search for identity in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Whatever selections the instructor

chooses to use, what is most important is that the works have both direct relevance to the students' society and to their interdisciplinary subjects.

Another concern arises in the level of expertise necessary to teach an interdisciplinary course. As Westcott and Spell remind us, "Collaborators share expertise and learn from one another; neither needs to become an expert in the other's territory" (72). The English professor instructing a business literature course, for example, need not be an expert in economic theory. Rather, the instructor serves as a guide for the students. Such cross-discipline classes also serve as an opportune time to increase interaction among faculty members across the university campus. This coming together will offer not only the most educational value for the students, but it will also promote professional development and support throughout the academy, as instructors themselves have the opportunity both to learn from and advise colleagues in other disciplines.

A final concern that may arise with this change in curriculum deals with the idea of specialization. Will adding one or two literature courses into a science or business curriculum make those students any less specialized in their field? Much like Snow, University of New Mexico Provost Reed Way Dasenbrock realizes that divisions, both within the university curriculum and within the greater social sphere, simply are not practical or successful. Dasenbrock ensures that "interdisciplinarity doesn't erase disciplines" (19). Rather, it creates a more desirable and balanced system of education for its students, preparing them for greater accomplishment in the future. With a well-rounded educational experience, students are more marketable in the workplace, and better acclimated to society. Hawkins and McEntyre state, "Students who leave college having learned to pose the kinds of questions interdisciplinary work raises take with them a valuable set of skills and an approach to problems likely to enrich colleagues"

(11). With an instructor's careful selection of literature and active student participation, the installation of an interdisciplinary literature course into the university curriculum provides only advantages to students. With an intellectual and cultural approach to the study of literature, students will relish the opportunity to explore techniques to expand their minds, enhance their careers, and contribute to their communities.



## APPENDIX

### First-Year Composition Student Survey: Literature Across the Curriculum

Major (required) \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please list all of the courses you have taken thus far at UD:

2. Did you find that the fictional readings in the Humanities Based text were an asset or a detriment to English 102? Why?

3. Have any of the courses you have taken at UD (aside from English 101/102) incorporated any fictional readings? If yes, please list the name of the course(s) and the instructor's name(s):

4a. If you answered yes to question #3, please list the fictional readings:

4b. Do you think these readings were an advantage or disadvantage for the course? Why?

5. Now, think back to high school. How many English courses did you take?

6. Did you read anything fictional during any non-English courses in high school? If so, please list the readings:

7. Do you like to read literature for pleasure? If yes, why? If no, why not?

8. If you answered yes to question #7, please list the novels, stories, plays, and/or poems (and corresponding authors) that you have most enjoyed reading outside of the classroom.

9. What are your thoughts about adding an applicable fictional reading to a business, engineering, education, or science class?

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