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The Strange and Surprising World of Curriculum Reform and Its Consequences for Eighteenth-Century Studies

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Skills-Based Curriculum and the Mandate for Assessment

DESPITE every conceivable obstacle, including innumerable departmental, college, and university committees seemingly created for the sole purpose of impeding change, both my university's core curriculum and my department's literature curriculum have in the span of the last two years been dramatically revised, or "reformed" as the university refers to the process, for the first time in thirty years. I have regarded this strange and surprising process with alternating wonder, anxiety, disorientation, and denial, much like Robinson Crusoe when he is first stranded on his island. Although neither "savages" nor "wild beasts" threatened me, I felt wholly isolated as our university's only specialist in eighteenth-century British literature. Observing and to some degree participating in this process — though my involvement was limited to futile attempts to oppose the departmental changes — has made me realize how much my ability to teach my area of expertise to undergraduate students is circumscribed by curriculum.

The process of curriculum reform as I have experienced it at Boise State University (BSU), a regional state university in Boise, Idaho, testifies to the truth of the adage "as the university goes, so goes the department." Therefore, I will begin my account with the university. A department's mission derives to a large degree from the university's ambitions. During the last ten years BSU has become increasingly hierarchical and research-oriented. These changes affect faculty in many different ways, some positive and some negative. While I appreciate our reduced course loads, access to internal grants, and the availability of course releases for research, I mistrust the attendant perpetual evaluation of programs, faculty members, courses, and

departments. The university's reform of its core curriculum, and less directly the changes we have made to our departmental curriculum, reflect this emphasis on evaluation. University and departmental courses that have survived or were created through these processes integrate skills assessment into their design in order to provide empirical evidence for a specific and narrow sort of achievement that ultimately devalues, as I will argue, the very expertise research cultivates.

Every course offered across the university as part of the new core sequence must adhere to a set of university-mandated learning outcomes. Some of these outcomes are innocuous, if vague, such as the requirement that the "cluster" of literature and humanities courses "apply knowledge and the methods of inquiry characteristic of literature and other humanities disciplines to interpret and produce texts expressive of the human condition."¹ However, the specific requirements for individual courses within the required departmental sequences of core courses are more troubling. For example, Finishing Foundations (FF) 400, a capstone course designed by individual departments and tailored to specific majors, must according to the preliminary course proposal posted on FF's website "support" the specific learning outcomes of "critical inquiry and innovation & teamwork" as well as either "writing or oral communication."² In other words, professors teaching FF400 must provide assessable evidence that every section offered in every department teaches these skills. I have no objections to two of the learning outcomes: critical inquiry and writing or oral communication (although perhaps I might feel differently about these outcomes if I were required to teach an FF400 course in physics, an admittedly unlikely scenario). Any upper-division English course ought to inculcate interpretive skills as well as improve students' ability to communicate. However, I find the "innovation and teamwork" aspect of this course problematic. Should a capstone course in literature necessarily teach students to "think creatively about complex problems in order to produce, evaluate, and implement innovative possible solutions, often as one member of a team"? Even if we agree that this learning outcome is a legitimate one, by no means a foregone conclusion, it raises another equally important question about the relevance of our own expertise. How is a specialist in eighteenth-century literature uniquely qualified to teach students about teamwork, especially when compared to a professor of business or kinesiology? If my specific training has not prepared me to teach a capstone course in literature, what value does this training, and by extension the person who received this training, retain for the university?

Gerald Graff's explanation of the reasons for the shift from classical languages to modern languages in early university curricula provides a cautionary tale about the dangers of adopting a skills-based curriculum. Classicists justified the almost exclusive teaching of their subject at universities not because *what* they studied was of inherent value but rather because learning classical languages was supposed to instill "mental discipline" (30). The question naturally arose over time: why would the study of modern languages, if approached rigorously, not toughen students' minds just as

effectively as the study of classical languages? Consequently, the seemingly unbreakable stranglehold of classical languages over university curricula loosened rapidly. Graff's example demonstrates the hazards for professors of specific types of literature, such as eighteenth-century literature, of emphasizing the value of the skills we incidentally teach over the subject we actually teach. After all, other subject areas may inculcate particular skills equally well, or in some cases even better. In our field, this is one of the primary threats of moving to a skills-based curriculum.

Not only do learning outcomes such as “teamwork” potentially devalue and thus endanger our specialties, but they also assume that professors in our field possess skills that are inimical to academic training itself. The sort of research productivity coveted by the university is, in the Humanities at least, dependent upon individual achievement rather than teamwork. The very term, *original research*, which we use to designate a valuable contribution to a particular field, explicitly defines innovation as a form of self-sufficiency. Succeeding in academics requires that professors of the Humanities spend at least as much (and usually more) of our time in the company of books than people. Anyone who actually enjoys or values teamwork—the sort of person, presumably, who ought to teach this skill to others—is likely to choose a profession that requires and rewards it.

Turning to the departmental level, where changes in curriculum have the most direct impact on the teaching of eighteenth-century literature, the same relentless focus on evaluation evident in the new core sequence compelled the English Department to emphasize assessable skills when revising our course offerings. I will delay my explanation of the specific changes we made to the literature curriculum until the next section, noting here only the ways in which larger institutional forces shaped the process itself. One of our primary goals in undertaking this curriculum overhaul was to achieve “curriculum alignment,” a term used primarily in reference to elementary- and secondary-education. David Squires, who published an entire book on the subject (descriptively if somewhat unimaginatively entitled *Curriculum Alignment*), defines this process as ensuring the “curriculum and the standards match” (5). The standards to which he refers are numerous national and local assessments, the criteria by which schools and school districts are themselves evaluated. In other words, *curriculum alignment* means teaching to the test. The question of what test one ought to teach to is a vexed one for those who design K-12 curriculum, since there are so many. For the opposite reason — there are no national tests that assess the knowledge or skills acquired in upper-division university literature courses — it was equally difficult to determine to what exactly we were supposed to align our departmental curriculum. In lieu of a test or set of tests to teach to, we focused, as does the new core curriculum, on skills-based learning outcomes.

The Nuts and Bolts of Curricular Change: How Types and Sequences of Courses Affect the Teaching of Eighteenth-Century Literature

The revisions to our literature emphasis (our version of an English literature major) were driven by more than just curriculum alignment. We were encouraged by central administration to decrease by the equivalent of about one course the number of credits we required for graduation. For a combination of reasons both pragmatic and pedagogical, our Literature Director (who assigns and schedules literature courses in our department) also sought to cut the number of courses we offered and to make the remaining ones more general in subject matter. Thus, we would be less dependent on individual faculty members to teach particular courses. Additionally, limiting our offerings to general courses was supposed to act as a centripetal force, counteracting the centrifugal tendency of the idiosyncratic interests of individual faculty members to determine what subjects were covered. We were also supposed to design a curriculum that would emphasize students' intellectual progression over time, rather than allowing them to select courses based exclusively on schedule preferences or their partiality for a specific professor or subject area.

There are numerous ways to design a literature curriculum, some of them more commonplace than others. Courses can be conceived of as historical and period-based surveys, or organized according to themes, genres, or major authors. Period courses are the most familiar means of organizing undergraduate offerings in literature. As Kim Michasiw observes, literary periods are to some degree themselves a "construction" and therefore "by no means" an "inevitable" way to parse out a literature curriculum. Graff has also, for different reasons, critiqued what he calls the "field-coverage model of departmental organization" reflected in period courses (6).³ Despite their legitimate criticisms of this model, periodicity remains a convenient and logical way to structure courses because it aligns with graduate training and faculty hiring practices. Courses are also typically sequenced so that students build skills and knowledge as they advance toward their degrees. As Robert Moore observes, the curriculum in English has "traditionally been broken up into units that tend to get smaller, more narrow, with the subject matter more specialized, at each succeeding level" (423).⁴ Our department radically revised both our course offerings and our course sequencing, as well as changed the graduation requirements for our literature emphasis. All of these changes impacted the teaching of eighteenth-century British literature.

Our previous curriculum concentrated the course offerings at the 300 level, with most courses focusing on a genre or set of genres during a specific period, and a few focusing exclusively on one major author. Our 300-level British literature courses consisted of the following: four courses in Medieval literature, including a single-author course in Chaucer; four courses in Renaissance literature, including two specifically devoted to Shakespeare; two courses focusing on seventeenth-century literature, one of them a single author course focusing on Milton; three courses in Restoration and eighteenth-century literature; one course in Romanticism; three

courses in Victorian literature; and two courses in modern literature. We also offered seven courses in various types and periods of American literature, two period-based courses on “Continental literature” in translation, and two courses in transatlantic poetry. This curriculum, with its emphasis on British rather than American literature (nineteen different courses in British literature, and only seven in American literature), its preference for poetry and drama over fiction, and its allocation of several courses to canonical male authors reflects what Moore describes as “Arnoldian humanism,” or the attitude that particular “authors, genres, and movements” were “deemed expressive” of the “humanistic tradition” it was an English Department’s calling to teach (423). While this assumption about our mission and the means of achieving it seems outmoded, there is no question that it facilitated the extensive teaching of pre-twentieth-century British literature. The old curriculum was an embarrassment of riches for British faculty. Students were required to take twenty-four upper-division English credits (eight three-credit courses), any number of which could be at the 300 level, with at least twelve of these credits (four courses) being in pre-twentieth century literature.

The new curriculum looks very different, with fewer and more general courses offered at the 300 level and minimal requirements for literature emphasis majors to take those that remain. We now offer the following courses in British literature: two courses in Medieval literature, including one focusing on Chaucer; two courses in Renaissance literature, including one course on Shakespeare; a course in Milton; one course in Eighteenth-Century literature; one course in Romantic literature; one course in Victorian literature; and one course in Modern literature. American literature offerings have been reduced to five courses. The primary way we achieved such a dramatic reduction in the number of 300-level courses was to eliminate all courses focusing on specific genres as they developed over a particular period, collapsing all such courses into individual courses bearing generic titles such as “Renaissance Literature” and “Victorian Literature.”

The particular configuration of the Restoration and Eighteenth-Century courses will be of particular interest to readers of this journal. The three courses we originally offered in these periods were divided as follows: Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Poetry and Prose; Eighteenth-Century Novel; and British Drama: The Restoration through the Decadent Movement. (Though the course title of the drama class suggested the readings would extend across periods, it usually focused almost exclusively on Restoration plays.) These three courses have been collapsed into a single course called “Eighteenth-Century Literature.” My teaching schedule will necessarily change to reflect these alterations. While I used to teach “Eighteenth-Century Novel” every fall, and “Eighteenth-Century Poetry and Prose” most spring semesters, now I will probably teach one section of “Eighteenth-Century Literature” per academic year: a net loss of half the opportunities I have to introduce

students to my period. The Restoration drama course, which had been staffed by a professor who recently retired, will disappear as well.

To compensate for the loss of emphasis on genre in the period-based courses, our department created four 300-level genre courses titled “Studies in Fiction,” “Studies in Poetry,” “Studies in Nonfiction,” and “Studies in Drama.” We also devised new thematic 300-level courses such as “Ethnic Literature,” “Film and Literature,” “Literature and the Environment,” “Postcolonial Literature,” and “Women Writers” (which used to be a 400-level course). Students using any catalog from 2011 onward will be required to take only nine credits (three courses) of 300-level courses. We also eliminated the requirement that any of these courses be in earlier periods. None of these courses may be repeated. The consequence of this last component of the new curriculum is perhaps the most prohibitive to my ability to cultivate students’ interest in the eighteenth century over time because students can only take, for example, one section of “Studies in Fiction.” If they take this course from our Modernist, they will likely study Virginia Woolf, whereas if they take it from me, they will likely study Samuel Richardson. Never mind that Woolf was deeply indebted to Richardson and that taking two sections of this course might demonstrate the way a genre develops over time. Neither are period courses able to be repeated. Students may only take the designated eighteenth-century course once. Of course, students can take 300- and 400-level thematic courses from the same professor. I intend to exploit this “loophole,” however dependent on the whims of scheduling during any given year, to continue in some manner teaching the eighteenth century across our curriculum.

To compensate for the fewer elective 300-level courses students now take, we have added requirements for specific courses at the 200-, 300-, and 400-level. For example, literature emphasis majors will now have to take all four of the 200-level literature historical survey courses (two in American literature and two in British literature) rather than just the British surveys. A requirement that students take a 300-level “Literary Criticism and Theory” course will remain, to which we have added a requirement that they also take a 300-level “Argument” course focusing primarily on persuasive writing and taught exclusively by Rhetoric and Composition faculty. Additionally, after satisfactorily completing all the aforementioned requirements, literature emphasis students will need to take six credits (two courses) of a small 400-level seminar-style course, “Topics in Literature.” This course will resemble a graduate seminar, with topics varying semester to semester according to professors’ interests. I will probably teach this class once about every three years.

In order to comply with new expectations about assessment, each of our courses will now have an accompanying set of learning objectives: some courses will have individual objectives, while others will share a set of objectives with a number of other courses. Sharing learning objectives has the effect, if not the explicit intent, of homogenizing courses. For example, all 300-level elective courses will share the same

learning objectives, meaning that they will in practical terms need to require the same sorts of assignments. While it is true that most 300-level courses require certain types of assignments— research papers, group presentations, and close readings of important passages immediately come to mind — it stifles the sort of innovation the new curriculum is supposed to reward (remember the “innovation” learning objective?) to make these formulaic assignments an immutable feature of every section of each 300-level elective course. The same situation applies to other sets of courses that share learning objectives, such as the 200-level historical surveys and the 400-level “Selected Topics in Literature” courses.

While it is disturbing that many subject areas such as the eighteenth century will in obvious ways lose coverage under the new curriculum, it is in some ways much worse, because more insidious, that the curriculum itself renders invisible the possible omission of other equally significant literary movements. One example of this phenomenon is the Victorian novel. Our specialist in this area just retired and was replaced by a Romanticist whose teaching and research interests center on poetry. When she teaches the “Victorian Literature” course, she will almost certainly choose to teach predominantly, if not exclusively, poetry. She probably will not apply to teach a “Studies in Fiction” course because she is not especially interested in fiction, or if she does so she is more likely to teach *Frankenstein* than *David Copperfield*. I could remedy the situation by teaching a section of “Studies in Fiction” focused on Victorian novels, but only at the expense of teaching my own specialty, the eighteenth-century novel. Since I might only get to teach this course once every few years, I will probably have to choose between the soothingly familiar pleasure of teaching *Moll Flanders* and *Tom Jones*, and the newly assumed responsibility to preserve *Middlemarch* and *The Way We Live Now*. While this is a delightful sort of problem to have, it is disturbing to realize that whatever decision I make may well determine the only fiction students will be exposed to as undergraduates. At least I am aware of the endangered status of Victorian novels in our program and will work to prevent their extinction; whole other fields, such as seventeenth-century literature, will likely disappear entirely from our curricular landscape without even a whimper, much less a bang.

But Will You Love Me Tomorrow? Curriculum and the Future of Eighteenth-Century Studies

As long as there are tenured and tenure-track professors of eighteenth-century British literature, eighteenth-century British literature will continue in some fashion to be taught in English Departments, regardless of changes in the curriculum. However, since changes in the curriculum can render experts in the eighteenth century unnecessary by minimizing or eliminating coverage of the field, we cannot allow curricular change without seeing the process for what it is: an investment in our long-term survival. That many of us are skeptical about the future of our field is obvious to

me from the sorts of discussions I have had at the last few annual American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies conferences I have attended. Most of my friends are at the same stage of their careers as I am: recently tenured and breathing years-long sighs of relief while they emerge from their research bunkers to look about them. What they collectively see is best described metaphorically. They view their own success much like Indiana Jones reaching back into a collapsing cavern to retrieve his hat. Though we are immensely relieved that we are now ensured long and rewarding professional lives teaching and researching the eighteenth century, most of us believe the same opportunities will not be around for aspiring versions of ourselves in ten years. State support for public universities is rapidly dwindling, and the private grants and gifts that take up the slack in science and business programs are not available to us. Although none of us (at least no one I know) is making a great deal of money at our vocation, we are still by the university's standards a luxury rather than a necessity. If we take seriously the oft-repeated mantra that universities ought to be run "like businesses," we appear to be a vestigial sort of expense account that ought to go the way of martini lunches and smoking in boardrooms.

This pervasive sense of our own vulnerability convinces us we must frenetically try to "sell" our field to students. Our own fears magnify and ultimately distort the perceived indifference of students so that it takes on monstrous forms. We come to believe, even, that students metonymically stand in for the most threatening aspects of the world they grew up in: distractibility, hunger for novelty, and the conflation of *value* and *profitability*. This anxiety is apparent in most articles focusing on the eighteenth-century curriculum. Tom Mason and Phillip Smallwood, for example, presuppose their readers will agree that "persuading prospective students that there might be any interesting writing" published in the eighteenth century is a "perennial pedagogic problem" (192).

One popular approach to "selling" the period is to emphasize its similarities to our own. Jan Gorak, for instance, claims that the eighteenth-century's "aspirations and difficulties . . . parallel our own in so many ways" that understanding eighteenth-century literature and culture may "supply some useful hints in helping us to talk purposefully about our own" time (198). Despite its appeal, there are several problems with this approach, the most obvious of which being that every period can make some sort of plausible claim to resembling the twenty-first century. Professors of twentieth- and twenty-first century literature will inevitably stake the most convincing claim for this brand of relevance. In any case, it is a misguided use of our intellectual energy to expend it trying to argue that Defoe has more to say about living in the world today than Shakespeare or Joyce does. Rather, we should concede and take pleasure in the fact that literature of every sort from every period is relevant in different ways to students' lives. It is also reassuring to realize that our apprehensions about students' perceived resistance to our period is nothing new. For example, "roughly half" of the faculty respondents to a questionnaire about eighteenth-century curriculum "were

concerned about the falling off of interest in eighteenth-century literature” and decried the “pronounced shift of the students’ interest to contemporary literature and the scorn they have for anything written before 1900” (Boys 403). The results of this study were published in 1956.

Although there are many productive ways to emphasize the cultural, economic, and literary connections between the eighteenth century and the twenty-first century, I have found that what excites students most about our period is actually its wonderful bizarreness. Bill Overton and Elaine Hobby found that one of the things professors of seventeenth-century literature like best about teaching their period is that before enrolling in their courses, “most . . . students have *no* view of any kind” about the period itself (267). This observation is arguably even more pertinent to eighteenth-century courses, since while some high school students at least study Milton or Donne, hardly any of them read Swift or Pope. We have the singular privilege, and all its attendant responsibilities, of introducing our students to a period about which they know virtually nothing. This was true for me when I first encountered *Pamela* in a course called “The Novel and Mimesis” during my junior year at Reed College. The sheer weirdness of Richardson’s clumsy didacticism was fascinating. The world depicted in *Pamela* was so foreign and intriguing, I predicted that no matter how long I spent studying it, “Hills,” Pope’s familiar metaphor for intellectual challenges in *An Essay on Criticism*, would still continue to “peep o’er Hills, and Alps on Alps Arise.” This has proved true so far. I have improved my understanding of the period a great deal since my first naïve attempt in that course to culturally decode Richardson in an essay entitled “Pamela: or Hymen Rewarded.” The reasons I selected his novel to write about then, however, are the same reasons I continue to teach and research eighteenth-century literature now: not in order to cultivate a particular skill set or help me understand my own world, but rather because it is a limitless source of the strange and surprising.

If future students are to similarly light upon the curiosities and wonders of our period, we must become unapologetic advocates for eighteenth-century courses of all types at all levels. Assessment is probably here to stay, and it will undoubtedly circumscribe to some degree how we teach. However, we must resist as much as possible its encroachment on decisions about *what* we teach. We must articulate our collective dedication to our field as a subject of interest in and of itself, not as a means to better prepare businesspeople or lawyers for their careers. We must be wary of the curricular claim jumping that happens when you replace period courses with thematic courses. Thematic courses may be taught in any subject area, and therefore belong to none of them. If we willingly make departmental curriculum a sort of “commons” where any course may be taught by anyone, we render our specialty, and thus ourselves, unnecessary. If the eighteenth century is central to your department’s curriculum, students will come. The rest is up to you. However, the contrary is also

true; if you remove eighteenth-century courses from the curriculum, students cannot come, and the future of our field is effectively out of our hands.

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NOTES

- ¹ The current version of these learning outcomes is posted on the website for our new core curriculum: <http://academics.boisestate.edu/undergraduate/foundations-program-2/university-learning-outcomes/>.
- ² The current version of the learning outcomes for specific courses is posted on the following website: <http://academics.boisestate.edu/undergraduate/foundations-program-2/foundations-courses/>.
- ³ Graff traces the history of the field-coverage model in order to show that organization by literary specialties is by no means inevitable. His larger concern, though, is that the model “evade[s] the issue of its own intellectual coherence” (112).
- ⁴ Moore does not advocate for this model, which he views as a structural means by which departments perpetuate traditional literary canons. He would prefer a curriculum that fosters towards the subjects it examines a “tense, unstuck, unfixed attitude of surprise” (432).

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