YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE
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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2011 Volume I: The Art of Reading People: Character, Expression, Interpretation

Introduction

by Jill Campbell, Professor of English

- Man is a social animal. The soul yearns with inexpressible longings for the society of its like. . . .
- William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 1793

Writing more than two hundred years ago, the visionary political philosopher William Godwin could not have anticipated the rapidly-proliferating array of media and consumer products that would, in our own time, bear out his statements about humans' deep longing for contact and communication with other human beings: the cellphone as a prosthetic extension of many bodies, BlackBerries and iPhones, email, Twitter, text-messaging, Skype, Facebook and My Space, blogs, chat rooms, the nearly limitless capacities of the Internet to transmit communications across space and time. What extraordinary technological advances have been made in a short historical period to provide us with more and more means with which to make contact with "society" of our "like"; how eager individuals have been to invest funds, time, and energy to make use of the astonishing series of new devices and media that industries offer us at every turn. Surely our souls' "inexpressible longings" for companionship and society – our yearnings to know others intimately, and to be known by them – have been answered in our time.

"A quarter of Americans report having no close confidantes, double the number who reported such a degree of isolation in 1985. Today, most say they have just two people they can turn to for social support, compared with three in the mid-eighties," reports Maggie Jackson in *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (2009). "When we do come together," she asks, "especially with those we love, do we turn away? . . . Do we yearn for such voracious virtual connectivity that others become optional and conversation fades into a lost art?" Without holding our increasing reliance on "virtual connectivity" responsible for whatever erosion of true intimacy and communication may be occurring, as teachers devoted to promoting *literacy* in every sense, we must remark that no technology of transmission can replace or perform the work of human intelligence in receiving and interpreting the overt content and implicit cues contained in every act of communication.

Recently, cognitive scientists have demonstrated just how fundamental and extraordinary is the capacity of the human brain to register and "read" clues about other people's inner thoughts and feelings through facial expressions, physical attitudes, indirect implications, tone of voice or written stylistic cues, as well as through the semantic content of words. For most individuals, at a very early age, human faces prompt dramatic cognitive activity in a way no other visual object does; as a child grows, the ability to attribute states of inner feeling and thought to other people through what is observed is one of the most complex and demanding areas of cognitive development. In the 2011 National Initiative seminar on "The Art of Reading People," eleven of us came together to explore the familiar but mysterious process by which people interpret others'

characters, emotions, and experiences, and to identify the range of ways that we can encourage our students' self-aware engagement in that key process.

Our exploration of this subject took place simultaneously on several levels. The readings we prepared and discussed in depth and detail in seminar meetings particularly emphasized the ways that character is constructed and inner experience is represented in literary works; we honed our methods for drawing inferences and reaching conclusions about characters through literary analysis, and we considered how skills of inferential and interpretive reading can be cultivated in our students. Talking about our classrooms and our students, we often found our inquiry moving onto a pedagogical plane: again and again we observed that the challenge of grasping other people's ways of thinking and honoring the great range of individual human difference requires special self-awareness and resourcefulness in our work as teachers. First and last, at the most fundamental level, we experienced the mystery of other selves and the rewards of paying close, respectful attention in our encounters with each other: we came together as a group of strangers, our initial responses to each characterized by hopeful interest, wariness, curiosity, and a variety of preconceptions; we ended our intensive two-week session as respectful collaborators, fellow travelers, and friends – with new knowledge of our commonalities and of our important, and enriching, differences.

The group of outstanding units produced by seminar members, with its range of different emphases and aims, represents the several main dimensions of our work together. Several units focus strongly on developing the skills of literary analysis that will allow students to become more probing readers and thereby more able and confident critical thinkers. Stacia D. Parker's unit, devoted to studying characters from Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* and William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, requires high-school students to move beyond routine methods for identifying character traits they may have mastered in earlier grades to pursue the subtle features that distinguish those remarkable literary characters whom we experience as "real," unique people – whether they appear in a novel published in 2009 or in a play performed more than four hundred years ago. Nancy Ventresca's unit, designed for fifth-grade Reading Enrichment students, moves them from fluency about a literary work's superficial features to deeper questions about characters' internal processes of change, awakening students to the mystery of how we interpret people's thoughts and feelings in literature and in life. Marsha Liberatore takes on the underlying, seemingly intractable problem of how to encourage students to read on their own rather than solely when they must do so to fulfill assignments. Cleverly, she approaches her paradoxical aim of creating required activities that will promote voluntary, independent reading through the attractions of a popular series for young adult readers: immersing students in the *Bluford Series* through shared reading and discussion of the series' first book, she will then offer them access to the many other volumes in the series for free-reading. An art teacher, Elizabeth R. Lasure has woven together lessons in the study of literary character and exercises in the creation of visual portraits, leveraging the well-developed methods of literary character analysis to inspire a deeper, more creative appreciation of how visual portraits may reveal subtle inner qualities in their subjects.

In the units they have designed, Lori Hiura and Stephanie Murphy both seek primarily to build personal character in students through strategic encounters with literary works. As Lori Hiura observes, despite the availability of a number of well-designed character education programs for schools, a gap often exists between instruction in content curriculum and in character education. She aims to bridge that gap through a unit that combines a model for ethical decision-making with analysis of characters' choices and their consequences in songs, picture books, and a novel. A teacher of special day classes for students with moderate learning needs, Stephanie Murphy concentrates on developing a capacity for pride in her students, who often struggle with navigating social situations; her carefully-chosen sequence of readings introduces students to characters who are able to draw on pride and on the courage of their convictions amidst adversity

or inner confusion.

Through their units, Audra Bull and Joy Beatty both hope to increase their students' capacities for self-knowledge. Drawing on evidence from the burgeoning field of neuroscience, Audra Bull contends that many students' apparent inability to learn derives not from the limits of their intelligence but from the effects of emotional trauma, which impairs their cognitive development and often sets in motion a cascading chain of effects, as they fall further and further behind and suffer academic and social marginalization. Proposing a "bibliotherapeutic" approach to intervene in this downward spiral, Audra Bull introduces the reluctant readers she teaches to characters who have suffered personal traumas and offers them a range of activities for reflecting on and sharing their own life stories. A geography teacher, Joy Beatty has designed a unit that aims at once to honor her students' distinctive home cultures (often rooted in neighborhoods or even specific streets); to make students more aware of the specificity of the values and customs they have adopted as members of those cultures; and to encourage them to become more open to other cultures – cultures that coexist within the bounds of Richmond as well as in the country and world beyond – by recognizing more consciously the features of their own "cultural geographies," which potentially both enrich and limit their lives.

All of the units developed by seminar members strive in some way to develop students' capacities for empathy and their skills for observing and comprehending the experience of others. Gretchen Wolfe's and Sarah Hall Kiesler's units focus particularly strongly on this aspect of our shared aims. Gretchen Wolfe cites evidence that well-developed reading skills and powers of empathy are strongly correlated in young people, and her unit simultaneously advances the development of both kinds of power in her first-graders, as they read biographies and approach historical characters as complex characters who made a difference in the world. A teacher of first- and second-graders, Sarah Hall Kiesler addresses the same question of empathy but brings it closer to home for her students – that is, an elbow's length away – to the joys and frustrations of interacting with the child sitting in the next seat or converging on the same set of blocks. In a carefully designed sequence of picture books depicting friendships, Sarah Kiesler moves forward incrementally from direct to more inferential forms of observation of others' feelings and from simpler to more complex kinds of relationships. Drawing on her students' own experiences and evolving conceptions of friendships as well as cultivating their skills at observing facial and verbal expressions of feeling, Sarah Kiesler – like her colleagues in the seminar – seeks to prepare young people to make intimacy, communication, companionship, and a rich experience of giving and receiving social support real and present parts of their lives.

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