



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2015 Volume I: Literature and Information

Introduction

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Literature and Information: admittedly, it's not a narrow topic. One of my high school teachers had a poster on her desk that read, "What in the world *isn't* chemistry?" But one might better ask: what in the world isn't either literature or information? In order to make sense of this broad topic for those who were not a part of this Yale National Initiative seminar, this introduction will address how and why the concept of the seminar developed, as well as what is at stake for us in thinking today about the relation of literature to information in the classroom, or (for this is what we really mean when we use those words) the relation of fiction to nonfiction.

The first thing at stake is a conversation about educational policy nationwide. The Common Core, now adopted by nearly all of the 50 states, mandates changes in the distribution of fiction and nonfiction across the K-12 curriculum: literature on the one hand, and "reading for information" on the other. The scariest number, for teachers of English literature, is the expected 70/30 split for high school students between nonfiction and fiction. The proposal is that 70 percent of what students read should be nonfiction—ostensibly to prepare them better for the kinds of reading that they will need to do in life, and particularly for the kinds of reading that they will need to do on the job. This preference for nonfiction is worth questioning for many reasons, not least of which is the instrumentalizing of education for the purposes of the workplace. But even if we accept the premise that students are primarily in training to be good workers, there are strong arguments supporting the value of reading imaginative writing, with its complexity of language and richness of ambiguity, to train students' critical and analytical faculties. It is not clear to me, at least, that reading poems or novels is worse preparation for the kinds of thinking one needs to do as a productive citizen than reading Op-Eds.

Moreover (and this has been a main concern of articles published in the popular press recently)¹ the necessity to squeeze literature into ever smaller parts of the school year has led also to the frequent excerpting of fiction, such that students never have the opportunity, or the challenge, of reading a whole novel, or engaging in a sustained way with a writer's craft over an extended period of time. Instead, students read excerpts of novels in order to connect their themes with contemporary concerns, further impoverishing the experience of reading. Should we be teaching *Tom Sawyer* in order to think about youth unemployment? Or teaching *King Lear* to get to debates about end-of-life issues? As important as those topics are in contemporary society, works of literature such as these—as some rightly point out in letters to the editor—have much more to offer than that. The commerce between the present and the past should go in both directions, and works of literature are ends in themselves, not only means to relevancy.

But even as there are some horror stories coming out of this new emphasis on nonfiction, there are some opportunities, too, for lovers of language—or at least I hope there are. First of all, it seems that the new

guidelines run the risk of some crucial misunderstandings: the balance of nonfiction to fiction advocated by the Common Core is not to be 70/30 in English alone, but across the whole curriculum. Indeed, a student's English class might account for the 30 percent of fiction, filled with all of the novels, short stories, poetry, and drama that classes in English literature have always offered. Part of the idea, I think, is to suggest that students should be reading more quality nonfiction in their other classes—in history, science, even mathematics. And here there is an opportunity: if students could be reading not only nonfiction, but *good* nonfiction ("quality"), across the curriculum, then they could be growing constantly as readers, writers, and thinkers. In this optimistic vision of things, students are not to be reading instruction manuals or train schedules (this was the nightmare scenario some had feared), and they are not even to be reading an American history textbook. Instead, they should be grappling with some of the most amazing writing that both underlies and communicates that history: Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence," Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

The primary way to combat the problems of the Common Core, and at the same time to take advantage of the opportunities the new curriculum represents, is to make sure that the nonfiction we're asking our students to read is "quality" (an elusive measure of value, of course). But there are also other strategies. One of these is to take advantage of the suggestions here for rich interdisciplinary study across many modes of discourse: fiction and nonfiction, but also the performing and visual arts: theater, music, dance, painting, sculpture, photography. Crossing among these modes forces us to think critically about how we understand them: what do we do when we read fiction? Or nonfiction? Are our methods of interpretation that different?

Because the goal of all good seminars should be confusing the categories we thought we had understood, the first thing we read in the organizational session of "Literature and Information" was an essay by historian Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact."² The argument of this provocative essay is made by its title: the historical text, far from being a transparent accounting of events, should be thought of as a narrative, shaped like any narrative by the rhetorical needs of its author and its audience. White suggests that we should think of any historical narrative as a story being told from a perspective and for a reason. Just as we glean information from literature, so we can treat "informational" texts (nonfiction of the right kind) as "literature." When White calls the historical text a "literary artifact," he signals both something about the status of the text—what it *is*—and also something about how it is *used*—how we read it, and in what spirit we approach it. If the historical text is a literary artifact, that means we can apply to it the techniques of reading that prove most helpful when we read fiction. We can ask about its structure and its form, as well as its content. We can ask about its audience and its context; we can analyze the rhetorical devices that make it persuasive, or not.

White's basic proposition—that historical writing is itself a kind of fiction—provided a theoretical provocation for our more practical thinking about the relation of literature to information in the remainder of the YNI seminar. We began to think about these two rich modes of writing in conversation with each other by reading Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, a compelling and beautiful example of creative nonfiction that shows how a young Hmong girl's epilepsy reveals the differences between her family's culture and the cultures of American medicine.³ Like White's essay, Fadiman's book argues that histories and stories, fact and fiction, cannot be definitively separated from each other. In the intensive session, we continued to read some of the best examples of both imaginative fiction and imaginative nonfiction that we could find, in order to explore how the YNI Fellows might weave the two together, productively separating and also combining them, in the curriculum units they were writing.

Our seminar Fellows included teachers who teach across the K-12 spectrum—from kindergarteners to high

school seniors—and the subjects of the units accordingly vary quite a lot. But precisely because we all face different pedagogical situations, both the seminar discussion and the curriculum units proved to be especially rich. Moreover, given our diversity, it was surprising how consistent the units in some ways proved to be: like White and Fadiman, all of the units ultimately imply that we construct ourselves through the stories—fictional or nonfictional—that we tell.

Several of the units took up the topic of culture through the lens of fiction and nonfiction. Joseph Parrett (“Defining Culture through the Lens of Literature and Text in Kindergarten”) and Nadra Ruff (“Different Cultures in Chicago’s Neighborhoods: Chinese and Mexican Communities”) both wrote units that introduce young students to the Mexican and Chinese cultures through story, song, image, and history. Taking advantage of the ways in which multimedia can inspire imaginations, both Fellows seek to present differences among cultures that might vary substantially, as well as similarities among human societies that share many features in common. LeTanya James (“Farming, Food, and a Balanced Navajo Lifestyle”) has constructed a unit that draws on her own cultural knowledge close to home: Navajo foodways and food histories form the basis of a unit that seeks to inform children in the Diné Nation about healthy eating, a unit that will teach young students new concepts by connecting them to their own cultural history with food and farming.

Several of the units designed for older students used fiction and nonfiction to explore the ways in which stories can be used to construct societies for good or ill. Teresa Rush (“Dystopian Societies in Adolescent Literature: Can Compliance and Freedom Coexist Peacefully in a Dark, Dystopian World?”) wrote a unit about dystopian fictions, a very popular genre currently for adolescents in both novel and film. She hopes to use nonfiction to challenge her students to think about why fictions of this sort are so compelling. What connections can be made to history? To our own experience of communal life? Luke Holm (“Helping Students ‘See Beyond the Pale’”) also hopes to open his students’ eyes to more than they usually see about the society they live in. Inspired by his students’ potential, he hopes to provide them with critical tools to better understand their world and to make good choices about their contributions to life on earth. Keisha Wheat (“Words of Patriotism: The Pledge of Allegiance”) will use her unit to inspire much younger students to make similarly good choices as citizens, as they open their eyes to the implications of extremely familiar words: the pledge of allegiance. Her students will be inspired by each phrase of the pledge to think hard about what citizenship means for them, and how they can productively be a part of this nation. Julie So (“Biographies and Autobiographies: Portraits of Peacebuilders”) also hopes to inspire her young students with words, biographies of great figures who can model peace building behaviors for her own students’ developing stories—their autobiographies.

The history of this nation provides many compelling stories taken up by a final group of units. Joyce Arnosky (“Wandering Through The Bad Times: Children Making Their Way Through the Great Depression”) has written a unit based on award-winning fiction, as well as on letters, newspaper accounts, photos, and songs from the period of the Great Depression, harnessing the power of interdisciplinary experience to provide her students with a sense of the era from the perspective of its children. Valerie Schwarz’s unit (“Jim Crow, Civil Rights, and the Integration of Schools”) takes in both local Richmond and national histories of school integration, using prize-winning fiction as well as historical documents to create an account of the events and emotions of the struggle. Krista Waldron (“Race and Riot: Exploring Tulsa’s Conflicts in Fiction, Nonfiction, and Image”) also has based her unit on a locally specific event—the 1921 race riots in Tulsa, OK. But she shows how that event can be understood in light of very recent developments around race and law enforcement in the summer of 2015, as well. Her unit is both timely and timeless, both geographically specific and inescapably relevant to any community in the US.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Kate Taylor, “English Class in the Common Core Era: ‘Tom Sawyer’ and Court Opinions,” *New YorkTimes*, 19 June 2015.
2. Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” from *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 81-100.
3. Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*(New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997).

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