

The “Why English?” Reading Group: A Vivisection

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What We Did During our Summer Vacation

Several members of the English Department have formed a reading group to address the role of English Studies in academic and social contexts. We have investigated the question “Why English?” as it might be asked by a student pondering what it means to be an English major, as it might be asked by educators, researchers, and theorists within the fields of literary and rhetorical scholarship, and as it might be asked by observers outside the field.

This investigation has entailed comparing books and articles focused on the profession and practice of teaching English (by Martha Nussbaum, Marjorie Garber, and Cristina Vischer Bruns, for example), as well as texts concentrating on the social and cultural valuing of English study (by Louis Menand and Frederick Luis Aldama), and on the historical definition and identity of the humanities (Robert Black), as well as the capacity of writing to serve as political identification (Jacques Rancière).

Our study has led us to a number of conclusions:

—Many commentators on the field have charged that the study of literature and rhetoric must inculcate cosmopolitan values and intellectual curiosity in its practitioners, while others have challenged that inculcation as a misguided objective or a function outside of the academic discipline.

—Numerous professionals within the English studies community, as well as critics of humanities education, have observed that the field of English, or the educational goals it represents, are often de-valued or threatened in our current political and cultural climate. Multiple sources described both a climate of scorn and a process of direct assault on education in the humanities, whether motivated by the misperception that a liberal arts education does not prepare students for a business environment governed by the acquisition of skill sets, or by resistance to the perceived multi-cultural and liberal biases of humanities scholars.

—Increasingly, elite universities, as well as administrators and executives, state that a humanities education contributes to intellectual, professional, and commercial success through its preference for a sophisticated diversity of philosophical, cultural, and interpersonal concerns over instruction in a fixed set of static skills.

—Our contemporary interrogation and assessment of the worth and worthiness of English studies as a discipline and a profession follows in a centuries-old tradition of fluid self-definition and ceaseless internal examination that has kept the humanities in general, and English studies in particular, relevant to the political, social, and educational controversies of the moment while opening the minds of scholars and citizens to an awareness of cultural, artistic, and intellectual patterns remote from our current place and time.

As our reading group continues its efforts in the coming months, we will explore questions inspired by our readings and our stimulating conversations about them:

—Nussbaum and Bruns have offered compelling studies of what professors do when they teach literature and rhetoric, how students respond to the pedagogy and the underlying assumptions that they encounter, and how this practice shapes and is shaped by the world outside the classroom. By becoming more conscious of these dimensions, we have been prompted to examine our individual performance and the objectives that we seek to realize.

—Given that critical and rhetorical theory-making is crucial to how most of us understand and appreciate literature and the act of writing, how can we weave theory—with its inherently complex modes, methods, and lexicon—into our teaching of undergraduates?

—Rancière’s observation that “literature provides a different sensorium, a different way of linking a power to perceptibly affect and a power to signify,” and his critical interrogation of literature as political expression, challenges us to consider how we shape our students as authors of policy and power.

—Menand’s writings have prompted us to ask whether today’s university English departments preside over a culture in mental and moral decline. If so, is our discipline said to have contributed to this devaluing of intellects and ethics, or does it play a part in resisting such crises?

—Does the study of literature and rhetoric produce minds and spirits intent on challenging and complicating the cultural and political status quo, or does it produce a “bought priesthood” of “mandarins” who serve to maintain the norms of their society, as Aldama suggests? Must it do either?

Why English?

Reading Group

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UW-L English Department

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