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# Devising the Appropriate Program of Studies for the 21st-Century English Major: The Consumer as Designer

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In the fall semester of 2001, a newly required class for undergraduate English majors was introduced at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. The class was called Issues in English Studies. As a member of the UST English department, I was invited to teach a section of this class. Teaching **English 380: Issues in English** was one of the best educational experiences of my life as teacher and learner. The class provided me with the opportunity to address the practice of the discipline of English at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What better way to do this, I thought, than to have the students not only investigate the present state of the discipline, but also construct an appropriate program of study for an English major in this age of pluralism and diversity.

Constructing and leading the class caused me to reevaluate my understanding of English as a discipline and as a profession. Ultimately for me, the most important element was learning how UST's English majors defined English as a discipline. This definition took concrete form in the main project for the semester. Class members had to study the structure of the English major at UST and UST's eight peer institutions and then **each** student was to construct an appropriate program of studies for an undergraduate English major. This program of studies was to be described in two forms: a concept map and an accompanying narrative of approximately 10 pages in length. At the semester's

end there was to be a symposium in which each student presented her or his appropriate program of studies for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century English major. In the class there were 18 students: 11 were seniors, 6 juniors, and 1 sophomore. One student was not an English major but was very interested in the topic of English Studies. Of the remaining 17 students, 7 were majoring in English with a Teacher Education emphasis, 5 were majoring in English with a Writing emphasis, and 5 were traditional English majors.

In explaining the context, structure, and results of the project, I would like to make clear that this is done at the behest of and with the permission of the students of the English 380 class. Their hope here is to prompt debate about the shape and nature of future, potential courses, and the structure of programs of English studies in general.

In the semester's first class session, we examined the course description for English 380 as found in the undergraduate catalog:

This course focuses on ideas and practices central to advanced work in the field of language and literature. In addition to refining students' facility with critical concepts and scholarly methodology, this course will explore a number of key questions for current work in the discipline: How do we define such concepts as literacy, literature, and interpretation? How do we understand the relationship between reader, writer, and text? How do such factors as gender, culture, and history affect our understanding of literature and of ourselves as writers and readers?

Our exploration of that description led us to define English 380 as an introduction to the history, theory and practice of the English profession. From there we agreed that as a profession, English is dedicated to the analysis and discussion of texts. Having arrived at that point the class uncovered a number of important questions to ask, such as what does it mean to major in English? What are "we" English teachers teaching, and what can be done with what we teach? Can a living be made from books? What are the economics of this profession? What makes English Studies and Cultural Studies distinct from each other?

Where, in short, did English come from, and where is it going? These questions formed the context not only for the semester but for the students' main project.

As we constructed the list of questions to address during the semester, one student asked: Why were we using the label *English Studies* in the title of the class? My explanation of the term was that it (1) points to an extremely large subject matter (*English*, which is much more than the traditional study of literature) while (2) giving equal emphasis to the educational process of understanding it.<sup>1</sup> Using the distinction made by Rob Pope in *The English Studies Book*, I suggested that another way of describing what is meant by English Studies is to say that throughout the semester we would focus on English as something we *do* (*know-how*, skills, techniques, strategies, interaction) as much as on what English *is* (*know-what*, knowledges, a body of set texts, a hierarchy of textual and social relations). In other words, we would be addressing what we considered to be the essentials of the "know-how" and "know-what."

The first unit in the semester was *Introduction to English Studies*, in which we looked at what "English" has been, is at present, and what it may be. Two important questions we worked with were: Which "Englishes" are we talking about? And how have they been studied? Beginning with the development of English as an educational discipline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we mapped out how such subjects as rhetoric, history, and classics have affected the evolution of our discipline. In particular, we sketched out the significant shift from the discipline's origins as literary *appreciation* to literary *criticism* and from thence to the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century emphasis on literary and cultural *theory*. Hence we looked at English under such configurations as literary, composition, communication and media studies. As the first unit came to a close, the students launched off into the main project, i.e., their considered review of current courses and the program for UST's English major. The next unit, Textual Activities and Learning Strategies, brought students to consider the significance of cultural criticism and pluralistic approaches to learning as they laid the foundations for their project.

The main project was designed as an inquiry-based learning exercise in the belief that such an approach would (a) involve the use of pluralistic approaches to learning, and (b) help the students develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of the English profession, and the social and political issues that surround the field of English.

The goals and objectives of the project were outlined as follows:

1. The problem students were to investigate centered on creating the kind of program that would prepare an English major for a successful career in the English profession.
2. As a basic structure for the final product, students had to use semantic networking, otherwise known as a concept map, which is the process of identifying important concepts, arranging those concepts spatially, identifying relationships among those concepts, and labeling the nature of the semantic relationships among those concepts.

I chose semantic networking because knowledge is organized semantically in memory, that is, according to the meaning that defines the relationships among ideas. When learners construct semantic networks for representing their understanding in a domain, they reconceptualize the content domain by constantly using new propositions to elaborate and refine the concepts that they already know. This leads to

- the reorganization of knowledge.
- explicit description of concepts and their interrelationships.
- deep processing of knowledge which promotes the ability to apply knowledge in new situations.
- relating new concepts to existing concepts and ideas
- spatial learning through spatial representation of concepts in an area of study.
- understanding the structural foundations of the content domain.

- problem solving and procedural knowledge acquisition.
- understanding the differences between the experts' structural knowledge and that of novices.

In other words, in using a semantic network to design a program for English majors, I hoped students would see why we study what we study, how we study, and what issues are central in the English profession. The class used Inspiration software to create the semantic network of their ideal program for an English major.

The first step for the students was to make a plan for their individual project and set the perspective for analyzing the domain of English. Thus students had to identify and consider such important concepts as literary theory, writing theory, historical foundations of English as a discipline and profession, cultural theory, human diversity, the historical distribution requirement, elective courses, and the computer technology requirement.

Next students had to create, define, and elaborate nodes. Semantic networks and concept maps consist of nodes representing concepts and labeled lines representing relationships among them.

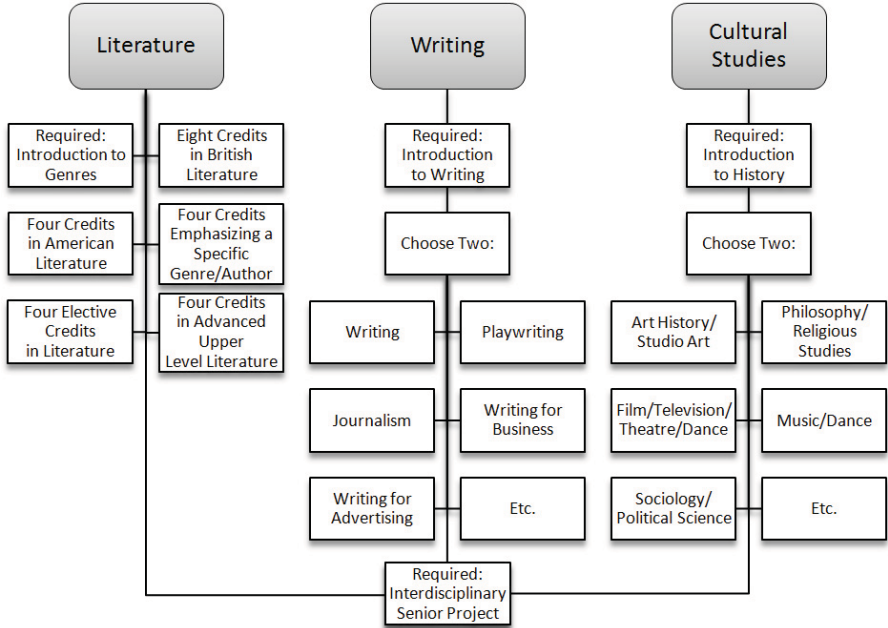
In step 3, students constructed links and linked concepts in an attempt to create a workable and valuable program of studies for an English major. Once the concept map was completed, students had to reflect on the project by writing a narrative in which they explained the philosophy and reasoning behind the character of the program of studies they created. Some students went so far as to devise course descriptions for the classes they envisaged as part of their ideal program. At this point, a couple of examples are appropriate, allowing the reader to see how this project helped students step out of the traditional model of English and consider how the discipline needs to develop.

Danny Cleary created the following two concept maps. The first lays out the general framework for the major. Students would be offered three emphases in terms of English Studies. They could approach it through a literature track, writing track, or cultural studies track as you can see in the following semantic framework:

The English Studies Major	Cornerstones	Core Curriculum	Capstone
Literature	Introduction to Genres (Required)	20 Credits in Literature	Advanced Literature Elective
Writing	Introduction to Writing (Required)	8 Credits in Writing	Advanced Academic Writing
Cultural Studies	Introduction to History (Required)	8 Credits in Cultural Studies Plus Service Project	Interdisciplinary Senior Project

More specific details of the three emphases are described in the second map:

Dan's Major in English Studies



Dawn Sommers, in the narrative that accompanies her description of an appropriate program of study for an English major, offers the student the opportunity to choose one of four concentrations: literature, writing, multicultural/world literature,

or American cultural studies concentration. This is how she describes the multicultural concentration:

The Multicultural/World Literature concentration is designed to offer interested students the opportunity to engage with literature representative of a diverse selection of cultures and geographic regions. Many of these courses will overlap with the American Cultural Studies concentration and therefore students will be required to divide the distribution of their required courses between those that appeal for issues of culture (with only one being in American culture) and those dealing with geographic location outside of America. This will ensure that students receive the appropriate knowledge of cultures and literary traditions outside of America, the fundamental difference between this concentration and that of American Cultural Studies. Some courses included in this concentration include *African Literature*, *Caribbean Literature*, *European Literature*, *Irish Literature*, *South Asian Literature*, *Border Literature*, *Studies In World Literature*, *Literature and Ethnicity*, *Literature of Classes*, *Literature and Race*, *Literature and Education*, etc.

Dawn then goes on to describe the American cultural studies concentration in this way:

The American Cultural Studies concentration is designed to appeal to students who wish to 'acquire a critical intellectual framework for thinking and acting in a diverse and increasingly fragmented society, developing a political, economic, artistic and spiritual consciousness that is informed by and expressed through popular culture,'<sup>2</sup> with a special emphasis on how such elements are informed through various "texts" (including literature, poetry, film, drama, media, advertisements, music etc). Courses students may choose from to fulfill their four course concentration requirement include *History of Cultural Theory*, *Literature of High and Low Culture*, *African-American Literature*, *Native American Literature*, *Literature and Gender*, *Great Books of the American Tradition*, *Literature of Oprah's Book Club Selections*, *Literature and Class*, *Topics In The Study of Culture*, *Novel of Labor In The United States*, *Literature of The Harlem Renaissance*, *Literature and*

*War, Contemporary American Literature, Literature and Music: Jazz and Blues In the African-American Experience, The Literature of Media and Advertising, Literature of American Dramatists, Race, Class and Gender in Contemporary American Novels, etc.*

To summarize the content of each student's project is impossible to do here. As a class, however, we did spend time in the end of semester symposium examining each project and discovered threads common to most of the programs designed:

1. **Required Freshman English seminar(s)** that will introduce students to literature, writing, history, ethical issues, and rhetoric. This seminar would involve other disciplines in the humanities.
2. **Required literary theory class.**
3. **Required rhetoric/public speaking/communication class.**
4. **Required class which teaches critical approaches to texts in the non-print media**, such as television, film, radio, and the internet as popular culture forms and forums.
5. Strongly recommend **a class in the history of the English language and linguistics.**
6. More historical and cultural context for literature or perhaps a class specifically designed to teach history for English majors from a literary perspective.
7. Along with the three present tracks of literature, writing, and teacher education in the UST English program, add one new emphasis: **technical writing.**
8. **Required career-oriented course.** A number of students suggested a class geared toward the value of English in terms of career. As just one example of this kind of class, I offer Becca Krupnick's description of English 350: "... **a required course for all English majors ... [that] focuses on the variety of professions available for English majors. Students ... must contact professionals in these fields to interview, and produce writing samples catered to those fields....** The course



**will help prepare them for internships and jobs in their chosen field.”**

9. **Required English lab in which students learn several software programs that are commonly used in English professions such as Microsoft Publisher.**

Students would be required to complete several computer-based projects in this class. These projects could be connected to service learning to show the connection between English and the community.

10. **Required Senior Research Seminar.** As an example of this I offer the description given by Dawn Sommers:  
**“Under the advisement of an English faculty member/members the student will produce a substantial critical research essay on a specific author(s), text(s), genre(s), theory(s), study(s) etc. The student will be required to meet with his/her faculty advisor at least 6 times throughout the semester and turn in their final product along with self-evaluation forms no later than the last day of final exams. The course is designed to encourage students to work as an effective scholar by applying the tools and skills they have learned throughout their English courses.”**
11. **Include religious traditions in literature.**
12. The class was split on students following a clearly delineated path which builds on following specific modules as they progress from freshman to senior. Which-ever camp students found themselves in, there was a stated desire for some kind of building blocks to be in place.

Thanks must go to the students of English 380: Mari Bauer, Shay Boero, Brigit Burk, Joe Casey, Danny Cleary, Megan Fee, Ali Gray, Courtney Hanneman, Jeff Hoganson, Matthew Kolstad, Becca Krupnick, Amy McFerran, Kristen McNamara, Andrea Nelson, Drew Smith, Dawn Sommers, Brianne Taylor, and Kara Zeilinger.

As the UST English department continues its discussion of the English core in 2007, the work of those students who participated in English 380 is proving of great value as we grapple with newer ways of understanding the discipline of English.

## Notes

1. The explanation of the term “English studies” is taken from Rob Pope’s *The English Studies Book*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
2. This particular description of the concentration was taken from UST’s description of the American Cultural Studies minor informational booklet.

## Bibliography

Pope, Rob. *The English Studies Book*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.