Cabbage Patch Colleges: Towards a More Aesthetic University Pedagogy

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Cabbage Patch Colleges

TOWARDS A MORE AESTHETIC UNIVERSITY PEDAGOGY

BY MAXWELL EDWARD SHEAHAN
B.A. UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO 2009

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written by Maxwell Edward Sheahan

has been approved for the Department of English

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Abstract

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The Humanities, long the bastion of messy thinking to discern a messy world, recently have seen waning significance and dropping enrollment, as more and more students flock instead to degrees which they believe offer more immediate value. Such an ongoing shift begs many questions: How can colleges of the Arts reignite student interest and vicariously reassert their primacy? What tangible benefits do degrees in the Arts offer? How do we identify the pedagogy on which the Arts most heavily rely and how can we improve upon it? How might such a shift better affect society at large and for better bridges between the at-times disparate communities which compose it? By recalibrating our dependence on the Canon and encouraging a student-centered pedagogy rooted in experiential service learning, the Humanities can reassert their importance and produce more well-rounded students.
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Chapter One: An Introduction to Aesthetic and Efferent Learning

The Humanities, long the bastion of messy thinking to discern a messy world, recently have seen waning significance and dropping enrollment, as more and more students flock instead to degrees which they believe offer more immediate value. Such an ongoing shift begs many questions: How can colleges of the Arts reignite student interest and vicariously reassert their primacy? What tangible benefits do degrees in the Arts offer? How do we identify the pedagogy on which the Arts most heavily rely and how can we improve upon it? How might such a shift better affect society at large and for better bridges between the at-times disparate communities which compose it?

Close your eyes. Picture a hospital from the 1950s. Now picture the most recent hospital you visited. I imagine they are pretty different; yet, I hazard to guess that today’s classroom, aside from a dash of technology, largely resembles its counterparts from nearly seventy years ago. To modernize the university classroom in a meaningful way, we must integrate aesthetic learning in a way which acts as a check on, and balances, our efferent foundations. Over the course of this paper, I will illustrate efferent learning’s roots as well as its limits, while offering ways in which aesthetic learning better suits our students’ needs, and the results student-centered grassroots learning might provide. In the third chapter I will demonstrate how service learning embodies such an aesthetic approach and what such a “messy” approach looks like, and in my final chapter discuss ways in which we can apply service learning within the classroom, making sometimes dense and antiquated literature personally relevant to today’s students. The sum of which, I hope, will reassert the Arts’ intrinsic value beyond the Academy.

Yet, more and more students have come to value degrees with tangible economic benefits – think business, computer science, or pre-med – over those which offer equally valuable
benefits, and as a result, Humanities degrees have lost their luster. Unless we reinvigorate our pedagogy, degrees in the Arts and the departments which offer them, may, more than merely losing value, cease to exist in any recognizable form. Public universities, largely due to shrinking government support, increasingly depend on market forces rather than academic ones when allocating funds and structuring curricula. Regardless of intellectual import or rigor, shrinking attendance in the Humanities may force public universities to recalibrate, cutting the Arts to ensure the Academy’s survival.

What inherent values does a degree in the Humanities offer? While often not as concrete as those offered by our Business and Hard Science counterparts, the soft skills fostered by the humanities find particular relevance today, wherein more-and-more communities find themselves breaking down or at odds with those with whom they once shared common ground. Rhetoric rooted in illogical fear has become more prevalent than the truth, and in an age of spin, the ability to determine fact from fiction gains newly-found import. Of more importance, however, is our ability to transmit the truth effectively to innately skeptical masses, in a manner that bridges across social divides rather than the more common practice which more often preaches to the choir, and strengthens the bonds between the already converted while driving a wedge between them and those they hope to convince. Both sides of the aisle lean on paradigms to align their experiences, when the opposite – relying on experiences to align worldviews – produces both more social good, and worldviews rooted in fact rather than more malleable opinions. As a result, unrelated beliefs intersect and create a more rational perspective.

The Arts – rationally or otherwise – have long been viewed as humanizing: appreciation of elevated aesthetics, many argue, breeds empathy. And yet, the Arts can divide: Moreover, many of our efferent “truths” don’t align with our students’ artistic appreciations, and when this
is the case, many professors unwittingly transfer assumptions which might drive a wedge between student and professor, or more problematically, between social classes. Consider the following comparison between the artistic palates of the petit-bourgeois (i.e., students) and more “cultured” society (professors): Those at the higher and lower ends of the social spectrum have markedly different tastes in photography; those at the lower end value a kind of beauty that seems more readily available to most people – namely nature – as landscapes and sunsets dominate their lists; conversely, those at the higher end reject the same sunsets and landscapes in favor of the less accessible or more obscure: “subjects such as car crashes, cabbages, and pregnant women” (119). And, while car crashes can be more unique than sunsets, a car crash inherently possesses nothing that makes it more artistically valuable than sunset. And yet I feel, at the university level, we constantly fail because we repeatedly try to teach students that cabbage has more artistic merit than the sun setting over the Rocky Mountains, and we are doing so to a sometimes-resistant audience, using little more than time-held opinions and assumptions which have calcified as fact.

Cabbage, however, can be beautiful. Pregnant women certainly are. And while it does take a certain eye to appreciate garbage’s aesthetic value, it certainly has one. While not necessarily more striking than a landscape or sunset, it is the Academy’s role to encourage students to find beauty – and meaning – in the seemingly ugly and meaningless. Perhaps finding beauty in cabbage fosters more empathy than sunsets. Car crashes may invoke more emotion than a landscape, and finding hidden beauty and meaning in the more abstract can be more rewarding than a pretty sunset. Students’ appreciation and recognition of such, however, might take deeper root if they come to such a conclusion on their own terms, through their own experiences.
How can we best change the university classroom so it better speaks to those we teach? First, I argue, we ought to examine the type of learning the college classroom encourages while imagining what a better alternative might look like. Students, when reading critically, generally assume a particular stance, or perspective, depending on how they receive the information they read. Louise Rosenblatt calls this the “Efferent-Aesthetic Continuum,” wherein “a particular stance determines the proportion or mix of public and private elements of sense that fall within the scope of the reader’s selective attention. Or, to recall Bates’ metaphor, a stance results from the degree and scope of attention paid respectively to the tip and to the base of the iceberg” (10). In short, the way students read, or are asked to read, lies somewhere between selectively looking for what are deemed the right answers, or letting the text wash over you, with little regard for right and wrong. Too often we ask students to take an “efferent stance” which examines the “public tip” of the iceberg at the expense of its aesthetic, and larger private “iceberg of meaning” (11). Rosenblatt defines the “efferent stance”:

The term efferent (from the Latin efferre, to carry out work) designates the kind of reading in which attention is centered predominantly on what is to be extracted and retained after the reading event. An extreme example is a man who has accidentally swallowed a poisonous liquid and is rapidly reading the label on the bottle to read the antidote. Here, surely, we see an illustration of James’s point about selective attention and our capacity to push into the periphery of awareness or ignore those elements that do not serve our present interests. The man’s attention is focused on learning what is to be done as soon as the reading ends. He concentrates on what the words point to, ignoring anything other than their barest public referents, constructing as quickly as possible the directions for future action. These structured ideas are the evocation felt to correspond with the text.

Reading a newspaper, textbook, or legal brief would usually provide a similar, though less extreme, instance of the predominantly efferent stance. In efferent reading, then, we focus attention mainly on the public “tip” of the iceberg of sense. Meaning results from abstracting out and analytically structuring the ideas, information, directions, or conclusions to be retained, used, or acted on after the reading event. (11)

Rosenblatt then defines the more personal “aesthetic stance”: 
The predominantly aesthetic stance covers the other half of the continuum. In this kind of reading, the reader adopts an attitude of readiness to focus attention on what is being lived through during the reading event. The term aesthetic was chosen because its Greek source suggested perception through the senses, feelings, and intuitions. Welcomed into awareness are not only the public referents of the verbal signs but also the private part of the “iceberg” of meaning: the sensations, images, feelings, and ideas that are the residue of past psychological events involving those words and their referents. Attention may include the sounds and rhythms of the words themselves, heard in the “inner ear” as the signs are perceived.

The aesthetic reader pays attention to – savors – the qualities of the feelings, ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, and emotions that are called forth and participates in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions of the images, ideas, and scenes as they unfold. The lived-through meaning is felt to correspond with the text. This meaning, shaped and experienced during the aesthetic transaction, constitutes “the literary work,” the poem, story, or play. This “evocation,” and not the text, is the object of the reader’s “response” and “interpretation,” both during and after the reading event.

Which better suits our students? Should our students treat literature as “poison,” searching for the “right” information to save them from it? Or, ought we to throw notions of right and wrong out the window, and solely rely on our students’ feelings? The answer lies somewhere in the middle. Fortunately, Rosenblatt offers a continuum rather than a binary, and the question we should ask is not whether we should encourage one stance over the other, but whether to encourage students towards either a “predominantly efferent stance” or a “predominantly aesthetic stance” (12). If the “efferent stance” is generally be labeled “scientific,” and the “aesthetic stance” as “artistic,” the Humanities, ought to encourage a predominantly aesthetic stance in its students, while shifting the efferent nature of many courses from the end-all-be-all to parameters which gently guide students’ aesthetic responses.

And yet, most university classrooms revolve around top-down efferent knowledge, which may stifle students for whom both options A and B both fail their worldview. For the Humanities to provide students a more rational and less superstitious lens with which to view their
surroundings, we must recalibrate our classrooms and the models on which we base our pedagogy. What would such a classroom look like? What challenges might arise? How might such student-centered lesson plans better serve both the student and the university?

Integrating service learning – wherein students ply their trade in the “real world” outside of the classroom – is certainly messier than the often-outdated canon-based lessons, and more than likely will cause more than its fair share of headaches. I broadly define service learning: It doesn’t need to be extracurricular, but it should connect learning to experiences outside the classroom; the hyphen between “service” and “learning” is crucial as we want to encourage students to make connections often lost when learning centers in the classroom alone, ignoring the world outside its walls. Such connections promise to be messy, yet Art is messy, and such untidiness is unavoidable in our muddled world. Service learning, while often untidy, delivers tangible outcomes which merit getting one’s hands dirty: bolstered student confidence; more varied and thoughtful critical responses; improved and deeper student-teacher relationships; as well as increased interdepartmental cross pollination. In short, a shift away from strictly canonical and efferent learning, to service-rooted aesthetic learning, produces happier students and, vicariously, more meaningful work, and can bridge the sometimes wide gaps between professor and undergraduate, and between disparate university colleges and departments.

University of Colorado Professor Martin Bickman, in his 2010 article, “Returning to Community and Praxis,” argues for a university pedagogy which “moves beyond solitary efforts to form communities of joint endeavors,” cultivating stronger community amongst university faculty, and, more notably, between faculty and students, with the goal of creating university classrooms that better “multiply and institutionalize” what Bickman calls “occasions of imaginative learning” (11). Central to such an educative community is a “Copernican shift” in
how the college classroom is currently perceived, away from the professor’s interests and closer to those of the students; Jane Tompkins nicely sums up the notion as education designed to “stress learning over teaching, thinking over having once thought” (17). Breaking a reliance on efferent learning and moving lessons into an aesthetic space allows students to be more flexible in their thinking, while demanding the same of their teachers. As academics, we are trained to write what we know; in the classroom, however, a bit of amnesia might be helpful. In a defense of the curious over the certain, Bickman cites Millicent Bell:

> Readers who think they have solved all the puzzles, arrived at all the answers to questions of meaning, perhaps no longer read: those who win through the last page after travail and error and grow in understanding without surrendering the doubt are themselves heroes of the work they have experienced. (15)

In the classroom, I argue, a student's individual experience, more than the rightness or wrongness of their perception of any given text, should receive priority. This is not to say we should outright ignore the well-supported arguments and beliefs with which we enter the classroom; rather, such thoughts should be kept in the back of the mind as the teacher “reads” the text *with* the students, not *at* them¹. Perhaps at least the initial goal of literature courses should aim to first better personalize students’ interactions with texts to organically foster curiosity-driven arguments from the individual up rather than funneling 20-odd unique readers to the same often stale conclusion.

Reflecting on my first teaching experience, I identify my desire to push efferent learning on my students as the root of my many mistakes and the stress they caused both me and my students. I taught an audience of primarily African students and approached each lesson plan as if they were American; I presumed too much, assuming we shared similar educations and

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¹Dr. Martin Bickman is a good example of this as he re-reads *Moby Dick* each semester he teaches it, and discovers something new with each reading. I believe the count is currently in the high 80s.
classroom expectations, which, as the year progressed proved to be ineffective and another source of the many barriers I built between my students and me. I remember my first day of teaching, nervous as hell, in a small and empty Ugandan classroom sitting with one student, hoping the rest would arrive shortly. They didn’t. And for fifty minutes it was Nicholas and me, sitting across from each other on old faux-wood tables and metal folding chairs. I’m sure he was as nervous as I was; we had just met and he probably did not know what to expect from me as much as I was without a compass when it came to teaching a classroom of one. The students trickled in over the course of several weeks and my classes grew; by term’s end, my average class size was eight. The nerves eventually went away, but the need to adjust expectations remained.

What did I expect from the experience? I recall my favorite teachers from my youth: Mr. Waterton, Mr. Palm, and my fifth-grade teacher who was cool enough to go by just Millie. They shared many qualities, but what stands out? They created a space where expression was encouraged, discussion flowed effortlessly, and, at least I, wanted to walk with them down any road they might take me. They also shared a sense of solidarity with us, their students. They were not the knuckle wrapping, stern and separate nuns and priests my parents described when recalling their Catholic-school education. To be sure, they set boundaries, were still more teachers than pals, but they taught in such a way that those boundaries seemed to fade, and they seemed like they could be our friends. I expected to create a similar space that lowered inhibitions, encouraged involvement and had little imposing structure: a space where the student was comfortable. What strikes me now was how effortless they made creating such a space seem.
My first year of teaching at Kampala Diplomatic School (KDS) can be summed up in many words; none of which is “effortless.” I fought for both interest and respect and never completely got either. I sat through seconds of silence that seemed like hours. There were days when I had to collect homework that nobody did, teach books that nobody read, lecture when nobody was listening. Anger, frustration, self-pity, and defeat. I would raise my voice too often, and speak at, instead of with my students. One such experience came with Kwon Jok El Jak, a 14-year-old South Sudanese boy who was raised in London and had a cockney accent as proof. I loved Kwon Jok for the first few weeks. He seemed kind, sat quietly, and ran his ass off in P.E. Then Farris and Tak Jok showed up. I was listening to an interview with a professional sports GM; he said that you can take on one knucklehead and your locker-room culture will survive, just don’t give him another one to hang out with. Initially, I thought boys will be boys; I enjoyed hearing them rap Notorious B.I.G. lyrics that I recited daily in my '96 Subaru Legacy on my way to high school, and it was good for some of my older students to have friends with similar backgrounds. But they started to miss assignments, then classes – an impressive feat at a boarding school. The others started to follow suit. Their rap lyrics lost their luster as “fuck”s and “nigga” rang out through the corridors, and Fatima, a second grader, asked me in a high-pitched voice that lilted a bit as she spoke, stretching out the last few words of each sentence, if she was a “stupid bitch” and what that meant.

For much of the year, they were the other; they were the problem, and I had very few tools to improve anything. Forget about homework, half the school was Christian, the other half Muslim. Half were Black and half were Arabic, or as my South Sudanese students would tease them, “yellow.” A large population came from South Sudan, and a significant segment from North Sudan: two countries still recovering from a lengthy and bloody civil war that divided
Muslims and Christians, Black and Arabian Africans, and the ongoing recovery keeps my South Sudanese students separated from their home, which lacks sustainable infrastructure\(^2\). I’m not proud to admit it, but, after reflection, my teaching approach did little to bridge across cultures, and some classes would seem segmented into three: 1) the Black African students; 2) the Arab African students; and 3) their American teacher, ignorant to the heart of the divide between the them, and unprepared to shrink the growing fissure in my eighth-grade classroom.

One afternoon Kwon Jok’s father came to the school, responding to some sort of disciplinary issue, and what followed left me inspired yet befuddled, as he effectively, albeit temporarily, tore down the cultural divisions which kept many students at odds with one another, bridging across cultures and scoffing at the students’ often prejudice-driven rift. He had Kwon Jok late in life and must have been in his seventies at the time. While waiting in the office – it was recess – he pulled all the South Sudanese children together with all their Northern counterparts: “Eh! What is this I hear about black and yellow people? About Christians and Muslims? And from children? At a school?! Here, here you should grow. Grow together. For us, we are all one. One family. One God. You see? Eh! You see.” This man who lived through a half a lifetime of war, who had every reason to be bitter, showed unbelievable empathy, which left me bewildered for several reasons. First, his son seemed to share very little of it. More discouraging was that I had less and spent the entire year trying to fight apathy with force and passive-aggressive disappointment; I rarely considered looking through their eyes, rarely taking myself out of my then “grown-up” mindset and back to adolescence.

My experience at KDS was one in which I hadn’t developed sufficient tools, had too much liberty, and was hamstrung by often inadequate teaching materials. I started teaching a few

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\(^2\) David Eggers’s *What is the What* is a compelling read and painfully depicts the lives of South Sudanese youth fleeing the conflict.
years after earning a Bachelor’s degree in English Literature, but with little-to-no practical training, something I hid through sheer confidence and an inflated resume. The school’s head master dropped in my classrooms from time to time, but only when giving prospective students and their families a tour; I was never subject to outside review, and did my best to “wing it.” The school’s head teacher shared his philosophy with me and was a constant bastion of support after trying days, and sometimes weeks. But he had his hands full, teaching a full load, while navigating the school’s politics in which school fees, more than pedagogy, drove much of its decision making.

Reflecting on my shortcomings, I used the above complications as excuses rather than reasons to rise above my lack experience and the school’s sometimes lax academic expectations. In no case did I fail more frequently and more publically than with my eighth graders. And although I’m doing my best to come from a place of empathy, if we were to run into each other in twenty years, I’m not sure it wouldn’t come to blows. At least that is the sense of disconnect I felt as the schoolyear ended. I set rigid expectations without providing a roadmap. I told them what I wanted them to do, without sufficiently providing how, and when they didn’t do the work, or didn’t do what I saw as adequate, I ignored their “why”s. I didn’t appreciate the steep learning curve many of my students from South Sudan faced, wherein students who might be reentering school after years away, working on a farm, or those who had been homeschooled and were unfamiliar with Western, classroom-based education. When they failed a test, or didn’t turn in an assignment, I immediately labeled them as lazy, and wallowed in conversations of self-pity with my coworkers who had similar trouble reaching them. We never established a shared set of assumptions on which we could base our class’s culture and expectations, and as a result, my relationship with the school’s eighth-graders was steeped in antagonism. I heard “Fuck Teacher
Max” more times than I care to admit, and probably called them worse when complaining to my roommates. If I could have one do over, it would be to foster more common ground between my eighth graders and me, and establish a middle-ground between my unrealistic expectations and my students’ real needs and abilities. Rather than quickly assigning the day’s homework at the end of class, I might have offered a sample assignment we could work through as a class, which would properly model what I considered thoughtful work, while allowing the students space to demonstrate their worldviews and skillsets, and incorporating their unique perspectives, into my lesson plans while anticipating each student’s strengths and weaknesses.

While I had a much more amicable relationship with the school’s fourth and fifth graders, by-far the easiest (and smallest) group I taught, I failed them by not expanding on the school’s overly efferent and at times too-basic curriculum. While English was one of my students’ many native languages, the text books used by the fourth and fifth graders were clearly ELL books the school had repurposed due to what I imagine were budget restraints, or an old mistake too expensive to correct. Regardless of the “why,” the books we used resembled those read in elementary-school Spanish class – their pages covered in drawings of, say, a school, or a park, with English words transposed over a chalkboard or a jungle gym. My students surely knew these basics, and would have been better served by more age and culturally appropriate learning materials, which would have proved more challenging and enriching. Yet every Monday, we moved to the next chapter, the next set of basic vocabulary and conjugation more appropriate for first-graders, and I assigned the same sections for homework each week, and my students by-and-large breezed by with high marks. When I did mark them off, it was largely because my answer key said they were wrong; I never revisited the lessons with which the students struggled,
and each week I again began the process of shoving square pegs into round holes; we got through the year, and while we laughed a lot, I’m not sure how much we learned.

If given another chance, I wouldn’t use the school’s lack of materials as an excuse, but perhaps as a starting point. While the class’s books were insufficient, there were morsels I might have mined and connected to outside materials with more depth. Our global world offers countless lesson plans at our fingertips, often free of charge. Rather than limiting the unit in, to identifying and properly spelling words like “desk,” “teacher,” and “easel,” I might have asked students to incorporate such language in a reflection on their favorite classes and teachers. In short, I could have found more depth outside the school’s somewhat shallow texts.

Our undergraduate students, at face value, share little with the K-through-Twelve students I taught in Kampala. Yet, I believe many professors take a similar efferent stance when designing courses, offering sometimes antiquated interpretations, often incompatible with their students’ worldviews. By shifting the University’s focus away from efferent learning – in which we push assumptions often incompatible with our students’ reason- and experience-based worldviews – and moving it closer to the realm of aesthetic learning, we will be able to recalibrate our perspectives to more closely align with those of our students and reassert why the Arts matter.
Chapter Two: The Roots and Limits of Efferent Learning and its Effect on Campus Community

“What is heart-breaking is that the University can be so much more” – Patricia Limerick

To foster active learning, we must first actively redefine the university classroom as a space, not for a one-sided discourse, but rather for a continuing conversation, endowing our students with what Nicholas V. Longo terms “the sometimes subtle power of people telling their own stories” (xi). Efferent learning can stymie students’ confidence by excluding aesthetic responses from the narrow category of canonically “correct.” Longo calls for “engaged scholarship” the goal of which, rather than to “discover a truth,” is to “continue a conversation” (xi). A pedagogy rooted in aesthetically-driven conversation may actually bolster worn-out efferent truths; lessons in which the central goal is to deliver an efferent truth often carry many unchecked assumptions, which is not an accusation of lazy scholarship, but rather an inconvenient reality for many a calcified lesson plan. A pedagogy based in conversation, on the other hand, demands that students and professors analyze one another’s assumptions. Such critical thinking becomes essential in an age in which the term “fake news” is tossed around by both the left and right.

Conversations, more than opening a pedagogical feedback loop, require and encourage active participation within the classroom. The value of such active participation, however, is not limited to the classroom; we ought not restrict the effects of our pedagogy to the schoolroom, but extend the relevance of our lessons to the larger communities that surround us. In short, we should foster active students, not as an end in itself, but to promote active people within the community. Longo accentuates this point: “In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in
danger of becoming a nation of spectators” (2). Schools of Journalism may create journalists, Business schools may promote businesswomen, and while both are generalizations of more specific skill sets, they ready their students for the realities of the real world they are about to enter. Just as we cannot teach in isolation, the larger effects our lessons should rarely be isolated to our teachings. Teaching literature, more than developing a proper sense of aesthetics, should prepare students to be effective outside of the classroom. Fortunately, professors need not carry the load alone; a stronger community might help. John Dewey sees the community as a potential bridge between the academy and the real world:

> We may say the conception of the school as a social centre is born of our entire democratic movement. Everywhere we see signs of the growing recognition that the community owes to each one of its members the fullest opportunity for development. Everywhere we see the growing recognition that the community life is defective and distorted excepting as it does thus care for all its constituent parts. This is no longer viewed as a matter of charity, but as a matter of justice – nay even of something higher and better than justice – a necessary phase of developing and growing life. (Longo 23)

Written in 1902, Dewey’s words find renewed relevance more than a century later. And while many may equate the notion of developing active democratic participants with politics, such an extension is, I argue, redundant. Rather than actively promoting one particular brand of politics in our students, a more active classroom might bleed into a more active campus community. Promoting active democracy is perhaps beyond our powers; a pedagogy that encourages more active community, however, is not.

The difference between what we most frequently do – push efferent learning – and what we hope to do – develop more well-rounded students – may be rooted in the difference between what Longo calls “schooling” and “education” (2). “Schooling” factors in little beyond what is useful in the classroom; “education,” however, recognizes that “what happens in school reflects what happens outside the classroom,” and, I argue, vice versa (2). Communities, to a large
degree shape schools, and schools, I argue, should have a larger effect on their surrounding communities than they already do. To borrow from Longo,

Schools cannot educate in isolation. Equating education with schooling relieves the rest of society from the responsibility of taking part in the education of young people. It also misses the central issue because what happens in school reflects what happens outside the classroom. Educational successes and failures are mostly the products of communities and families: underachieving schools simply pass along the inequality of resources from families and communities, while high achieving schools pass along family and community privileges. Finally, limiting education to schooling overlooks important assets from improving our educational system and preparing young people to contribute to our democracy – our communities and community institutions. (2)

While I believe Longo wrote this with middle and high schools in mind, I argue it is particularly relevant to universities, some which carry with them a pedigree and, more significant, a community which will largely ensure certain privileges. Other universities merely churn out new students yearly, yet fail to produce the same benefits of community. In an era of grade inflation and an increased reliance on tuition, how does a university, particularly a large state university, produce community in addition to degrees?

Before answering that question, let’s examine the concrete benefits strong communities offer their members; rather, let’s examine what happens when a community breaks down, when its “basic institutions” disintegrate (Longo 6). William Julius Wilson examines the effects of communal breakdown in the inner city:

In these neighborhoods, Wilson argues, prolonged joblessness has caused a loss of basic community institutions – including churches, schools, stores, recreation centers, and community centers. The loss of these institutions coincides with the declining sense of community, neighborhood identification, and explicit norms against aberrant behavior – which, when combined lead to the deterioration of the social and civic organization of inner-city neighborhoods. (6)

I am aware of the problemic nature of comparing a predominantly white college campus with an inner-city neighborhood; university students by-and-large do not face the tangible
consequences of prolonged joblessness or poverty (many do, but not most don’t). What is relevant, however, is the declining sense of community on our campus, evinced by a campus-wide normalization of “aberrant behavior.” The University of Colorado at Boulder, despite the diligent work of many campus organizations and students, if judged by the prevalence of “aberrant behavior,” and defined as a party school, is failing its community. One area indicative of a community’s tolerance and perpetuation of aberrant behavior is its crime rate: the higher the crime rate, the more deviant behavior has become normalized in the student population. Take Stanford University – people overwhelmingly hold the Cardinal and its community in high regard. A degree from Stanford usually bolsters success in life. And, I argue, such success is not solely rooted in pedigree: Stanford has a strong community in which “aberrant behaviors” don’t seem to be normalized. As such, Stanford’s student-body crime rate is 1.64 percent (Stanford). The predominantly-Black, Howard University’s crime rate is even lower, and from March 2016 to March 2017 was 0.7 percent. CU Boulder conversely seems to unwittingly breed “aberrant behavior”: its student-body arrest rate is at 13 percent, or more than eight-times that of Howard. To this end, Longo states, “Unfortunately, education reform has too often been narrowly interpreted as school reform. Educational reform, therefore, has seldom been connected with the community” (Howard University; 7). The changes we make to the classroom will remain ineffective so long as their intentions remain isolated to the classroom. Published in 1998, Sam Nunn and William Bennett’s statement on behalf of the National Commission on Civic Renewal, feels particularly relevant 19 years later:

Too many of us have become passive and disengaged. Too many of us lack confidence in our capacity to make basic moral and civic judgments, to join our neighbors to do the work of community, to make a difference. Never have we had so many opportunities for participation, yet rarely have we felt so powerless…. In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators. (8).
Higher community expectations, bolstered by increased agency in its members, is perhaps the simplest way to shift ours from a community of “spectators” to one which demands active participation. Facebook, Twitter, and the seemingly endless stream of social media, combined with increasingly prevalent digital learning communities (Desire2Learn at CU) presents the university with plentiful “opportunities for participation” and active social connections exponentially more complex than the two-, and sometimes, one-way networks between student and teacher. In the classroom, educators can encourage civic-mindedness by centering active community in small actions. Weekly discussion on D2L, an already common feature of most literature classes, does more than transform students from passive spectators to active participants; online discussions, like in-class discussions, reinforce civil behaviors: from the most basic manners in digital communication, to respectful disagreement. A critical community, with proper oversight, might give students a skillset ignored by one-sided responses; increased and active connections with shorter turnaround times extend the community beyond the classroom and fosters agency and pride in students.

Aesthetically-driven arguments, fostered by complex communal connections, more than reinforce students’ individual identities, boost and redefine their sense of shared identity, which is both increasingly absent from, and essential to, nearly all levels of community. Today it seems, more than ever, that our national identity has become more fractured than any time in recent history; our declining shared sense of identity divides us on party lines, and while there may be more civically fervent citizens, any sense of middle ground between those on the left and right is rapidly eroding. This wasn’t always the case – in the mid-twentieth century many saw a trend correlating increased civic participation with a stronger sense of shared identity, which promised to permeate more and more social groups: “In the 1960s, in fact, community
groups across America had seemed to stand on the threshold of a new era of expanded involvement […] Their activity had shot up year after year, cultivated by assiduous civic gardeners and watered by increasing affluence an education” (Putnam 16). Putnam initially defines “expanded involvement” on the local level, primarily membership in neighborhood groups and clubs. A blue-collar Ralph Kramden can trade his bus-driver’s uniform for the Grand Poobah garb of the Royal Raccoon Lodge. And while Time-Life depicted most of its 1950s-era communities as “white, straight, comfortable, and (in the public square at least) male […] engagement in community affairs and the sense of shared identity and reciprocity had never been greater in modern America, so the prospects for broad-based civic mobilizations to address our national failing seemed bright” (17-18).

Education promised to be the bridge that brought such active community to those outside the Time Life’s America, dominated by the white, straight, and male hegemony. The Baby Boomer generation represented an obvious receptacle to do just that, as their parents’ wide-spread civic participation permeated into their practices:

The signs of burgeoning civic vitality were also favorable among the youngest generation, as the first of the baby boomers approached college. Dozens of studies confirmed that education was by far the best predictor of engagement of civic life, and universities were in the midst of the most far-reaching expansion in American history. Education seemed the key to both greater tolerance and greater social involvement” (18).

Universities acted as labs for community, social centers that implicitly demanded active participation, where the lines between the classroom and the community increasingly blurred. While universities rapidly popped up across post-World War II America, university education was not nearly as much as a given as it is now, and represented a new space where hegemonically marginal(ized) ideas might hold root. Universities played a large role in
disseminating ideas rooted in the Civil Rights Movement: “simultaneously shamed and inspired by the quickening struggle for civil rights launched by young African Americans in the South, white colleges in the North began to awake from the silence of the fifties” (18).

From what silence are we, in the late 2010s, awakening? Did the agreeable Obama-years lull many of us into slumber? Did we assume our community was larger and more cohesive than it was, while ignoring an angry group desperate to reasserted its existence? The 2016 presidential election confirmed what many had long suspected: Civic life, which never “looked brighter” than in the 1960s, is broken, suffering from eroding social institutions and increasingly impotent social capital. In Literature, canonical knowledge dominates, but its very existence allows for the rise of noncanonical knowledge that, without a canon against which to push, loses its potency. In America, a forgotten hegemony still dominates, yet we can effectively push back depending on how we use social capital to develop stronger and more inviting communities.

When we demand increased participation from students, we give them more social capital, which Putnam defines as the “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (19). Putnam connects a social network’s complexity – the number of connections and the frequency of interactions through them – with civic virtue: “social capital calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is the most powerful when embedded in a dense network of social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital” (19). Our university, particularly its faculty, I argue, often fits this mold. Tenured professors do have dense social networks. What is problematic about such networks, however, is that they largely extend outside the university more than they find root in it; academics frequently and better transfer knowledge to their

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3 In fact, they helped start it when four Black university students in Greensboro, North Carolina decided to sit at Woolworth’s segregated lunch counter, and politely asked for service.
academic community – literary journals, academic conferences, Modernists, Romanticists, etc. – than they do to the university’s undergraduate community. At the root might be how the academy parcels out social capital.

Returning to society at large, it might be helpful to bring “social capital” from the abstract to the tangible – What does a network with healthy social capital look like? Lydia Judson Hanifan defines social capital and extolls its myriad benefits:

those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit […] The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself […] If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in association the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of neighbors” (130).

Hanifan speaks to the ills of isolation and how dense social networks bond its members while providing them social goods. “Help,” “sympathy,” and “fellowship” – while a bit idealistic and flowery – are realistic goals most communities share. It might be more helpful to examine the more tangible effects of well-connected communities and social capital. Putnam cites sociologist Claude S. Fischer, who claims, “social networks are important in all our lives, often for finding jobs, more often for finding a helping hand, companionship or a shoulder to cry on” (20). Why then do most networks fail at encouraging such reciprocity?

Perhaps more important than social capital is the organism in which it exists, in which a network’s density is as important, if not more significant than, the social capital its members carry. Denser networks breed both productivity and a sense of mutual reciprocity, while sparse social networks fail even those with the most social capital: “A well-connected individual in a poorly connected society is not as productive as a well-connected individual in a well-connected
society. And even a poorly connected individual may derive some of the spill-over benefits from living in a well-connected society”; moreover, “social connections are also important for the rules of conduct they sustain. Networks involve (almost by definition) mutual obligations […]

Networks of community engagement foster sturdy norms of reciprocity: I’ll do this for you now, in the expectation that you (or perhaps someone else) will return the favor” (20). Putnam compares general and specific reciprocity in a community:

Sometimes […] reciprocity is specific: I’ll do this for you if you do that for me. Even more valuable, however is a norm of generalized reciprocity: I’ll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road. The Golden Rule is one formulation of generalized reciprocity. (20)

Such reciprocity builds trust among and between social groups, and is at the root of most social government programs like Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and Welfare, which require funding from a willing base that puts the good of others over their own: “trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity. Civic engagement and social capital entail mutual obligation and responsibility for action” (21; emphasis mine). Our society – on campus and as a nation – more often limits general reciprocity to the groups with which we affiliate, while encouraging specific reciprocity across opposing communities; our frequent reciprocal interactions are among uniform groups, whether such uniformity manifests racially, socio-economically, ideologically, or some combination of each.

The problem, at its root, might lie in the kind of social capital on which communities rely, and Putnam divides social capital into two classes: that which bonds and that which bridges. Social capital has a dark side, and capital that bonds often bolsters one community at the expense of another:
Networks and the associated norms of reciprocity are generally good for those inside the network, but the external effects of social capital are by no means always positive […] urban gangs, NIMBY (“not in my back yard”) movements, and power elites exploit social capital to achieve ends that are antisocial from a wider perspective. Indeed, it is rhetorically useful for such groups to obscure the differences between pro-social and antisocial consequences of community organizations. (21-22)

We live in a society devoid of general trust, I argue, because most social networks in which students and Americans interact effectively bond like-minded groups, but do little to bridge the divide with others:

Bridging networks, by contrast, are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion. Economic sociologist Mark Granovetter has pointed out that when seeking jobs – or political allies – the “weak” ties that link me to distant acquaintances who move in different circles from mine are actually more valuable than my own. *Bonding capital is, as Xavier de Souza Briggs puts it, is good for “getting by,” but bridging social capital is crucial “for getting ahead.”* (22-23; emphasis mine)

Our goal as educators is to help our students get ahead, but it is also to help our department, and in turn, our university do the same. I’m tempted to believe our current pedagogical practices more effectively help each “get by” than “get ahead.” We “get by” by restricting critical dialogue to our departments, and even within each department, critical conversations are often limited to the department’s faculty and graduate students, with little trickling down to undergraduate students. We are getting by more than we are getting ahead, I argue, because academic institutions are structured to reward bonding social capital – writing articles for a niche audience, attending the right conferences – with little incentive for bridging capital. How can we hope to pass along civic values rooted in compassion, when we cannot have an effective dialogue with those outside our circles?

As a nation, we are barely “getting by”; partisan politics, driven by an imbalance between bonding and bridging social capital, have left half of America distrustful of the other half; we so
little trust those outside our social network that we can no longer agree on what a fact is. This is driven by what ails the university: isolation. Thomas Green, in 1829, saw a similar divide and hoped for a greater union:

We come from all the divisions, ranks and classes of society […] to teach and be taught in our turn. While we mingle together in these pursuits, we shall learn to know each other more intimately; we shall remove many of the prejudices which ignorance or partial acquaintance with each other have fostered […] In the parties and sects into which we are divided, we sometimes learn to love our brother at the expense of him whom we do not in so many regards regard as brother […] We may return to our homes and firesides (from the lyceum) with kindlier feelings towards one another because we have learned to know one another better. (Putnam 23)

We “mingle” with those with whom we disagree so long as our interactions restrict themselves to the common ground we share. The left labels those outside its network as bigots, liars, and even traitors. The right assails the left as communists and un-American, who trust an administrative state more than the individual. Our common ground, I fear, is shrinking. Without recalibrating the social capital we most frequently employ, we will soon have little opportunity to bridge across our country’s many divides. Less important than being right, is being careful to not abstract those with whom you disagree. By labeling perceived opponents in broad strokes, we ignore the areas where we do overlap, and prevent any genuine conversation from taking place. Bonding and bridging capital, far from being an either/or question, is rather one of compromise. We may not always agree with the other side, but we can hope to establish a shared set of facts and assumptions from which to build by recognizing the opinions of others, not as abstracted nightmares, but as valid, even if one doesn’t agree with them.

After considering community’s larger stakes, let’s return our gaze to the University. While most faculty certainly don’t see their students or interdepartmental counterparts as abstracted others, many departments’ overreliance on capital which bonds – over that which
bridges – keeps them at arm’s length. And while we may be unfamiliar or resistant to much of what they teach or practice, recalibrating how we interact with our students and with those from outside our department might offer a bridge wherein a compromise is possible. For professor-student relationships this might take the form of a lesson plan in which teachers willing to give their students more aesthetic freedom may anchor such freedom by offering various prompts within an efferent realm, guiding students to a particular set of theory, rather than one “correct” response. Interdepartmental counterparts may benefit from ignoring what divides them, and focusing on what common ground they share. I imagine many in the university’s more liberal Humanities departments would bristle at the thought of borrowing a lesson plan from their more conservative counterparts in the Leeds School of Business, and vice versa; yet there is much to be gained. My time as a writing consultant at the University of Colorado’s Business School offered many ways in which business students thrive that we might learn from: Its hallways still bustle after nine p.m., filled with students – often working in groups – who, by-and-large, appear happily invested in their work. Perhaps business schools offer a more immediate and tangible carrot than many humanities departments – a job – but I don’t think that’s it. Many courses in the Leeds School of Business center around real-life experience and all the messiness that comes with it: proposals, business plans, and value-based assessments, many of which demand group participation. While it might not be relevant to ask our students to deliver cost/benefit analyses or business proposals, it might benefit them if we structured courses in a way which better encouraged active participation among and across groups in real-world settings. Service learning aims to accomplish just that.

Service learning, “a form of experiential education, is a collaborative teaching and learning strategy designed to promote academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic
engagement” and may be the key for stronger university communities (Ash and Clayton 138). Dean A. Pribbenow’s case study on service learning’s benefits – to both students and teachers – employs educators from areas spanning most corners of the Humanities: philosophy, history, communications, Spanish, and English. Paired with “rigorous reflection,” service learning provides a common language for both students and professors, and encourages social capital that bridges, boosting community among students and uniting professors across disciplines. In this section I hope to highlight the results of Pribbenow’s study and examine specific methods of reflection which can be applied both to service learning and traditional learning inside the classroom.

“With the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it,” Pribbenow focuses on service learning’s effect at Middletown University, a Catholic university of about 7,500 students; and, while “MU has always articulated undergraduate teaching and ethic of service as important values and priority,” at the time of the study it was undergoing an “increasing emphasis on raising the university’s research profile” (26). The study involved inviting undergraduate students to facilitate teaching in a neighborhood school. Pribbenow collected data over eleven months, the primary source being “semi-structured interviews with 35 faculty and teaching staff […] selected from a list of 61 service learning faculty – who had implemented or were in the process of implementing service-learning in a credit-bearing academic course at MU” (27). Such qualitative discussions suggest six common results from service learning: 1) more meaningful engagement and commitment to teaching; 2) deeper connections and relationships with students as learners and individuals; 3) enhanced knowledge of student learning processes and outcomes; 4) increased use of constructivist teaching and learning approaches; 5) improved communication of theoretical concepts; and, 6)
greater involvement in a community of teachers and learners, all of which, “in broad strokes […] led many faculty to more meaningful engagement in, and commitment to, teaching,” as well as “enhanced understanding of students” (27). While fuzzy, we can begin to see how service-learning and English literature might overlap: Service learning bolsters in students many of the same skills we want them to employ when deconstructing a text, and borrowing from math courses, forces them to show their work. Service learning in conjunction with personal reflection – the details of which I will go into shortly – not only improves students’ cognitive skills by testing them in the real world, but makes such skills more apparent and more easily identifiably by their teachers.

Perhaps these professors felt a stronger connection with their students because service learning “draws [students] out” in a manner that makes them more than just names in a gradebook, but “whole persons” to faculty now better able to relate to them. One faculty member went so far as to say, “it’s like having a picture of their soul,” which may be a bit flowery, but it does speak to a shared sense of empathy between professors and their students; as many students opened up, their teachers felt compelled to do the same:

I think I gained a deeper respect for the students because I see more of them. When they do their [writings] on service-learning, they can’t help but reveal more about themselves than a typical research paper would because they’re talking about relationships with people. So that in a sense opens them up to me as more complete human beings. And so I can respond in class with more of my commitment…. It encourages me, though, it encourages me to be a more complete human being in class, to kind of be myself more than just in the role of a teacher. (29)

Efferent stances inherently limit students, and their beliefs, to the narrow parameters contained within a “correct” answer, with any student who strays too far from the efferent truth as little more than a nuisance: a nuisance who will most likely get a C and move on. Opening learning to aesthetic responses, and broadening the scope of truth to accommodate a more diverse set of
students, shifts teachers’ perspectives, and in turn transforms an annoyance into an honest extension of a student’s beliefs.

Moreover, service learning proves an effective bridge between normally isolated departments, many times fostering a sense of community lacking in one’s own. An unnamed new assistant professor, frustrated to the point of leaving with “isolation and hostility within her [also unnamed] department,” found solace among her service-learning colleagues:

By the end of my first year I was considering that I should look for something else and I was pretty depressed. I mean, the department had so many political problems. And then I went to this [service-learning] workshop where people from other disciplines were there and it was so nice to transcend those departmental problems and to see people work inter-disciplinary, collaborating, all taking about how we can teach better…. And that three-day workshop really helped me to stay, because I was ready to go. (34)

Often we limit students’ psychological health to the margins, or the last page of the syllabus; frequently, academic communities take the isolation and petty politics and competition faculty daily faces as givens, with little sympathy for those who sink rather than swim. More often than not this isn’t the case – our English department, while not without its share of drama, overwhelmingly fosters a warm intradepartmental community. And while the many classes I have taken over my undergraduate and graduate career have cross-pollinated English with the likes of Arts and History, we rarely stray from the humanities, and often view Business or Hard Science counterparts as unfamiliar others, which is a shame and a limiting belief. Each differing college across any campus, while not necessarily working with similar subject matter, can find shared ground pedagogically and socially.

I recently reflected on a powerful experience, which, unbeknownst at the time, epitomizes the sense of agency and ownership service-learning fosters. I think back to 1994, fifth grade, Edwards Elementary School, where our motto read, “Valuing our differences”;

Edwards
was a working-class town at the time and half the students were sons and daughters of either ski
bums or construction workers and contractors — white and second-generation Mexican split
down the middle. We didn’t so much as value our differences than failed to see them. We were
just kids. Woody Jones, Teig Olson, and I had been in the same class since third grade and now
ruled as kings of the jungle-gym, the oldest class and the school leaders. Of course, we were
eleven, prepubescent, and our parents still cut our pancakes and washed our clothes; however,
we never noticed our naivety, largely because of Amy Miliser, Millie was the coolest early-
thirties rock star of a teacher any eleven year old could hope for. She treated us more like adults
than any teacher had at that point. Hell, we practically called her by her first name — she was
surely no “Mrs.” This was the early-nineties and, at least to me, it seemed environmentalism was
the new ethos. For fundraisers, we didn’t sell wrapping paper; we went door to door hawking
conservation-focused tee-shirts that either had a bar code super-imposed on a zebra reading “Out
of stock,” or a jungle scene, flush with monkeys, snakes, and lizards, pleading whoever saw it to
“Save the Rainforest.” When Millie announced that the school had a big new recycling program
and that we were going to run it, half the class almost passed out from excitement. We had
nominations followed by elections, and I found myself, along with Mac Garnsey, Brynn Abbot,
Woody Jones, and Teig Olsen on the Edwards Elementary Recycling Committee. The jingle we
wrote still echoes in my mind: “R-E-C-Y-C-L-E the EES recycling committee are we!” Sneaky
and cunning, Millie tricked us into spending our lunches sorting through bins of cans, cardboard,
and construction paper, but we felt valued and loved every minute. We didn’t have the words for
it at the time, but we were effecting change in our little worlds.

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4 The school now centers its curriculum on an immersive bilingual curriculum and has parents from nearby districts petitioning for enrollment.
A key component to bolster service-learning is what Sarah Ash and Patti Clayton call “articulated learning,” which includes “rigorous reflection” of service-learning experiences, and guides students to a comprehensive understanding of both their experiences and the vicarious deeper learning, which is perhaps unfeasible for fifth graders, but perfectly applies to undergraduate students. Ash and Clayton “have found that structuring reflection mechanisms to include three general phases results in a rigorous reflection framework that maximizes learning and helps refine reflective skills”; the three phases are, “1) Description (objectively) of and experience. 2) Analysis in accordance with relevant categories of learning. [And,] 3) Articulation of learning outcomes” (140). During such analysis, students consider their academic as well as personal and civic reflections:

When engaged in academic analysis, students examine their experiences in light of specific course concepts, exploring similarities and difference between theory and practice. In analysis from the personal perspective, students consider their feelings, assumptions, strengths, weaknesses, traits, skills, and sense of identity as they are surface and sometimes challenged by service-learning experiences. And when examining their service-learning related activities from the civic perspective, students explore decisions made and actions taken in light of consequences for the common good, consider alternative approaches and interpretations, identify elements of power and privilege, and analyze options for short-term versus long-term and sustainable change agency. (141-142)

The goal is to foster well-rounded students, and elevate our lessons – which too frequently seek one-dimensional answers – into curricula that focuses on our students multifaceted natures, and in doing so, broadening to whom English Literature is still relevant, and increasing its relevance to those who might initially be resistant. And this is all well and good, but rather useless without a system to efficiently structure reflections which encourage such warm-and-fuzzy yet abstract ideas.

Ash and Clayton outline an eight-step “Overview of the Process of Articulating Learning as Applied to Service-Learning” (141):
Overview of the Process of Articulating Learning as Applied to Service-Learning

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<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong> Describe service-related experience(s).</td>
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<td><strong>2.</strong> Analyze experience(s) successively from the perspective of each category of service-learning learning objective.</td>
<td>Personal, Civic, Academic</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3.</strong> Identify the core of an important learning in each category.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4.</strong> Articulate learning by turning this core idea into a well-developed statement of learning – an articulated learning (AL) – using:</td>
<td>the four guiding questions that structure AL as an outline, the program-wide service-learning learning objectives to provide guidance/direction in the development of the learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5.</strong> Apply standards of critical thinking to the draft ALs through:</td>
<td>Students’ self-assessment, and/or Reflection leader feedback, and/or Instructor feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6.</strong> Finalize the ALs, aiming to fulfill all learning objectives in each category and meet standards of critical thinking.</td>
<td>[Note: doing the latter well is generally required for doing the former well.]</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7.</strong> Undertake new experience(s).</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. <strong>Continue reflection process outlined here.</strong></td>
<td>• Including reflection on the experience of enacting the goals/testing the conclusions reached in the previous ALs, when this has been done, and articulating additional complexity of learning accordingly.</td>
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<td>• Including, then feasible, taking action on the goal set/testing the conclusions reached in the ALs.</td>
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Such codified reflection demands well-rounded and empathetic student analysis. Efferent responses tend to address the academic core at the expense of other perspectives. Like a boulder in front of so many pebbles, overreliance on academic outcomes often blocks the smaller yet equally important components of any given experience. In isolation, small pebbles won’t match the heft or weight of a large boulder, yet combined or studied tangentially, they allow us to better understand its component parts. What good is academic knowledge in isolation? What is the effect of classroom-based learning when we don’t apply its outcomes to the larger community we inhabit?

Efferent learning, however, is not without its faults, and we largely depend on it with good reason: Rooted in theory, efferent learning ensures in students the ability to create a critical distance between them and the text, albeit in an rather uniform fashion. Ash and Clayton’s approach to articulated service learning, while encouraging aesthetic reflections, asks students to frame reflections critically. Feedback from group leaders and instructors helps create a two-way loop in which students progressively hone their ability to transform aesthetic reflections into critical responses.
And yet, on a campus as large as ours, depending on service learning can be at times unrealistic; I cannot imagine sending a 100-plus person lecture to aid in a classroom with any tangible benefits for those involved, not to mention doing so many times over a semester. Fortunately, we can apply the tenets of service learning to close-reading literature; novels offer endless examples to be taken as academic, personal, and civic laboratories, and students can effectively apply the same “rigorous reflection” to literature at each level. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how we can borrow service-learning oriented reflection and extend it into the classroom by applying Ash and Clayton’s schema of rigorous reflection-rooted articulated learning to a close-reading. Students need not be in the field, per se, to use and benefit from service-learning outcomes.
Chapter Three: Revitalizing Campus Community through Service Learning

Service learning, by removing students from the often sterile and static classroom and exposing them to the messier outside world, better allows students to thrive. The words in any given text generally remain unchanged from term to term, and as a result, over the same period, many a professor’s lesson plans might stay similarly untouched. The students who receive the syllabus and read the text, however, change, and are dynamic individuals for whom a one-size-fits-all approach may not work. Extending lessons beyond the classroom and into the community requires thinking as dynamic as our students, and while many students might initially “fail” in the field, service learning offers students the opportunity to “fall forward,” to learn from their mistakes and integrate such lessons to ensure better success the next time. Martin Bickman’s and Steve Lamos’s 2015 Spring Course – “Writing About Literature” – offered its graduate students (myself included) a pedagogy rooted in service learning, as we worked with an undergraduate course of more than fifty students who, with each week, offered new and unexpected challenges, which while initially frustrating, allowed us to develop more meaningful lesson plans from the bottom up, largely based on our aesthetic reactions to in-class experiences.

In the Spring of 2015 Martin Bickman and his partner from the Program of Writing and Rhetoric, Steven Lamos, co-taught a course, which, while often rooted in efferent learning – so far as college freshmen need to know acceptable ways to analyze texts – more frequently relied on the aesthetic experiences of our undergraduate students, the graduate students, and of Dr. Bickman and Dr. Lamos. The course was divided into two spaces: 1) the “lab” or undergraduate class which met each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at nine in the morning, and in which
undergraduate students broke into small groups and paired with a team of two graduate students, who acted as teachers; and, 2) the seminar, in which the graduate students followed Dr. Bickman and Dr. Lamos to a fourth-floor conference room in the Norlin Library to discuss the “lab,” including lively debates over what succeeded and what fell flat. Marty has taught his particular breed of this course countless times, yet the addition of a writing and rhetoric component repeatedly disrupted any lesson plan he and Steve had in mind. This is especially true of the course’s seminar portion, in which Steve’s claim that the syllabus was not “hard and fast” became an almost daily occurrence. Of the almost 20 readings Dr. Bickman’s and Dr. Lamos’s syllabus assigned to us graduate students I recall discussing no more than five: not because they were not relevant, rather because we simply did not have enough time to address both the unexpected pitfalls of the previous lab and the articles we were assigned. At the time I wasn’t familiar with the divide between efferent and aesthetic learning, yet in hindsight Marty’s and Steve’s pedagogy seminar unwittingly reversed the academy’s general reliance on the efferent over the aesthetic. The very structure of the course – with graduate students finding their ways as teachers in the lab portion, and reflecting on their experiences in the seminar – lent itself to aesthetic learning, and I imagine each of Marty’s previous lab/seminar pedagogy classes established the pedagogical practices from which we benefitted.

The first day of class brought a significant hurdle as our opening lesson plan – which asked the students to discuss how they came to reading, first in small groups, then together as a class – fell flat, particularly when we reconvened as one larger unit. While it certainly wasn’t droll – students were at one another’s throats almost immediately – the discussion did create some uncomfortable moments. It didn’t take long for what we hoped would be an introductory discussion on perhaps our students’ favorite childhood books to devolve into a heated and at
times nasty argument between two students. I’m not sure I have seen anything like it: The classroom was T-shaped, which effectively separated the class into two groups, in which many members of each could not see their counterparts. The two students in question were seated in opposite areas, with their backs to each other; they could hear each other’s argument, but could glean nothing from nonverbal cues. One student complained of what she saw as an increasingly segregated public education system, wherein students from marginalized backgrounds – racial minorities and those in impoverished communities – don’t see the same benefits or quality of education as their whiter and richer counterparts. Another student took offense to this, and blamed students who he believed would not “pick themselves up by their bootstrap” to rise from their situation. That neither student could see the other led to less genial criticism and more personal attacks, as one student was female and the other male; I witnessed a friend of the “bootstrap” student mouth the word “bitch” while the other responded, albeit a bit tersely, to his argument. I saw Marty’s vision of stronger communities through praxis up in flames and turning to ash, and the day’s following seminar began in similar disarray: “What was that?!” one fellow graduate student commented, still in shock from the previous hour. Most poo pooed the bootstrap mentality evinced by one student and reflected on what they saw as micro-aggressions against his fellow student. In the seminar we were able to codify our initial aesthetic experience into critical dialogue, and often had to do so outside of assigned readings. Steve and Marty framed the seminar around readings pertinent to the class, and while we often found each relevant to a particular in-class experience, our experiences rarely aligned with the weeks’ readings. More often than not, we simply did not have the time to address both.

The course, while still unpredictable, ran more smoothly as the weeks progressed, and as we graduate students developed both a running narrative of the course and effective practices to
address its many facets. More time with the same teaching partner helped, as did more time with the same group of undergraduates; by the course’s second month, when we switched partners and recalibrated the undergraduate groups, we had our bearings and were more eager and better able to guide our students’ aesthetic reactions to critical responses, which would eventually form a midterm paper. While the course began rooted in our professor’s interests – close reading an early scene in *Moby Dick*, as well as Emily Dickenson poems – we were given complete freedom to design a unit of our choosing, wherein we and four-to-five students would meet in separate classrooms across campus, with an occasional drop in by either Steve or Marty. Based on our seminar discussions and readings, and our teaching experiences, we were given almost-complete control over our units, which by-and-large fostered an aesthetic stance in our students. One group taught hip-hop theory using a Kendrick Lamar album as the central text, another studied a video-game. Very few of our units even had efferent knowledge on which to rely.

My teaching partner, Katie Woods, and I centered our unit around comedy. In hindsight, very few subjects reject efferent fact as frequently and blithely as comedy; humor is deeply personal and there exists no set definition of what is or isn’t funny – moreover what is often the most provocative and most deeply funny usually borders on, and disrupts, societal expectations of right and wrong. Although assigned readings provided basic theory on humor – ideas such as “time plus tragedy equals comedy,” and a section on vulgar jokes – individual performances, first by established comedians such as Richard Pryor, Tig Notaro, and Mike Birbiglia, then by the students themselves – dominated our class periods. And while we could fit certain jokes with certain theory, we were powerless in determining what our students laughed at.

Our comedy unit’s first major assignment was a short four-to-five page essay, in which they applied our group’s comedy-theory readings to a performance of their choice. In short, each
student picked their favorite performance and used their initial aesthetic reaction – why they thought the performance was funny – as the basis for their critically-removed argument. By centering the prompt on something in which our students had genuine interest we encouraged unique and genuinely interesting writing. One student loosely applied the notion of “time plus tragedy equals comedy” to Richard Pryor’s *Live on the Sunset Strip*, and nimbly codified her aesthetic reaction:

In *Live On The Sunset Strip*, Richard Pryor makes light of his 1980s free-basing accident, from which he was permanently scarred. The subject matter is inherently un-comedic, behind Pryor’s delivery is a communicable sadness that we, the audience, must politely ignore in order to function within the comedic process. It’s this delivery, however, that allows the act to function as comedy; Pryor’s use of personification, intonation, obscenity, pause and tone transfigure the malady of addiction into something humorous and accessible to the audience. In result, the performance is tragic and emotionally charged, uncomfortable and, at times, transgressive.

The way Pryor introduces what is now coined “Burned Up,” is considerably important in the way it establishes tone, mood, and an arrested vulnerability with its audience. It demands exposure to a subject that is not only taboo and illegal, but emotionally sloppy and deeply affective. Of course, we too want to “go along with the joke,” which makes the mixture of pain and humor all the more confusing in Pryor’s introduction:

I gotta talk about what happened to me, on free-basing. Free-basing, I free-based about eight months straight. My bitch left me, I went crazy. But I fell in love with this pipe. This pipe controlled my very being. This motherfucker say: Don’t answer the phone. We have smoking to do. All the pipe is talking about: Now come on, don’t put me down anywhere I might fall, ’cause it’s two in the morning and hard to get one of me.

Pryor personifies ‘the pipe’ as a relentless third-party, an unceasing tempter who delegates his life and justifies its presence. From this, a character is formed of the pipe, which is notably conveyed by the physical shift in voice Pryor uses to ‘speak’ for the pipe. By doing so, Pryor distances himself from blame or responsibility and, in some ways, victimizes himself through this dissociative technique. It isn’t so much sneaky or deceitful, as it is deeply conflictual and confusing to a conventional audience, one that expects harmless laughs at the expense of others, not the comedian. True, Richard Pryor isn’t the first to use self-deprecation as comedic material, but he is doing something unique in *Live On The
“Sunset Strip.” Pryor transcends self-mockery and guts out the real, sentimental hurt he experienced, and transfigures it before us into something we, the audience, don’t feel super comfortable about, but can laugh with nonetheless. As Jay Sankey reminds us in *Zen and the Art of Stand-Up Comedy*, “if there’s no corpse, there’s usually no joke” (Sankey 29). Pryor’s a dead-man who walked the walk; a living corpse and earnest act.

The writer uses the aesthetic as an entry point to her theoretical discussion, and connects her initial feelings – “uncomfortable” and “confusing” – with taboo and addiction to develop a critical discussion on how Pryor’s use of self-deprecation turns tragedy into comedy and Pryor’s “living corpse” into an “earnest act.” It is one thing to tell a student that Richard Pryor’s comedy is transgressive, and, if our prompt merely asked students to prove just that, I imagine they would offer satisfactory, if shallow, responses. The writer, by blending her aesthetic experience and unique worldview with the unit’s readings, develops a thoughtful critical response, which speaks to both the cannon and where she is in her life. And while creating knowledge – say writing an essay or article – is a good way to learn, actively reconstructing new applications of established knowledge might be more effective. The writer’s subsequent stand-up performance cemented her understanding as she mimicked Pryor’s self-deprecating style, skewering taboo commonplace at CU’s – beer bongs, frat boys, and pot smoking to name a few – to create something truly transgressive from the bottom up.

The unit’s central individual project was a ten-minute stand-up performance, with a two-page analysis of where students drew their humor and what particular theories they injected into their performances. We put them on the spot and made them perform a short stand-up set; those were the only parameters. One student was particularly struck by Richard Pryor and emulated his delivery. Another modeled her performance on Tig Notaro, delivering deadpan zingers on the frustrations of a college-aged woman. Both more than delivered. Another was so lost in his performance he went on for nearly a half hour. The student who emulated Tig Notaro had Katie,
Sheahan 40

Dr. Bickman, and me in stitches with her intuitive sense of timing and well-constructed set that finished on a “call back,” a technique we studied days earlier. Each set was funny, and while some were better constructed than others, no student was wrong. Some told jokes that went over Katie’s and my heads, while others’ stories held half the class’s rapt attention while the other half feigned interest. Even if the jokes were bad – and many were – each was thought-through and revealed something of value in each student. Getting up in front of semi-strangers to do anything is a daunting task. Delivering a standup set at nine in the morning is exponentially more so. The nature of the assignment bred empathy – seeing a student tell a joke to crickets is excruciating, and witnessing a normally quiet student deliver a tightly-constructed ten-minute set is exhilarating; moreover, the quality of their sets, while of tertiary importance, mattered less than their reflections. Why do you think a joke landed or failed to? From what theory did you draw? What did you admire in your classmates’ work? Each question returned the student to an aesthetic space, to their visceral experience while performing, to their experience as an audience member, or as a college student doing their best to be as funny and provocative as Richard Pryor.

Our students decided to make their group presentation an extension of their individual performances, and roast the class, particularly the graduate students and professors; it was the culmination of the semester and their chance to piece together their favorite theories and comedians into a performance that demanded commitment, teamwork, and practical knowledge of the texts they read, the standups they watched, and the reflective knowledge gained from their previous performance and subsequent reflection. While I’d like to say it went off without a hitch, we faced some last minute uncertainty, which proved to be a blessing in disguise. During the previous class period the students briefly outlined the gist of the performance and assigned one another roles: one would be Marty Bickman, our fearless leader whose Boston accent left him
unable to pronounce his own name; another was cast as Steve Lamos, our often handout-dependent writing expert; and one student planned to dress up as a rather popular graduate student-teacher, and sit next to and ape him. Our final class arrived, and the students eagerly swapped notes, making sure they hadn’t forgotten any detail. They had one problem: our Marty, who would kick everything off, and set the tone for the performance, was absent. Eyes darted from student to student, and I could almost feel the group’s palpable excitement shift to panic before one student, who to be frank, had half-assed much of the unit, without hesitation, spoke up: “I’ll be Mah-ty Bickman.” Prior to this performance, and despite our emphasis on aesthetic learning, this student had been more of a source of frustration than pride – sporadic attendance, and apparent indifference defined him, at least in my eyes, as a lackluster student. To me, he was wrong more than he was right, and I used that to limit my perception of him. Throughout the unit, he may not have been the most demonstrably involved student, but that April morning he was Dr. Bickman, or at least a damn good caricature of him, demonstrating that despite his too-cool-for-school demeanor, he had been paying attention, and had taken something meaningful away from our time together. I don’t know if I have ever laughed as hard as I did that morning – the class certainly was in stitches – but I am certain that such an outcome would have been impossible had Katie and I depended on efferent learning, on one type of humor, and not invited our students to share what they found funny based on their interpretations of the readings.

Beyond fostering aesthetically-driven student responses, constant reflection drove, and was at the core of, Marty’s and Steve’s course. An early journal prompt, which Marty designed, first asked students to artistically reimagine the *Moby Dick* scene in which Ishmael enters the Spouter-Inn, and then to translate their drawing into writing and reflect on the process, before finally returning to Melville’s now defamiliarized depiction of the Spouter-Inn:
Your first task is to try to replicate this painting on a separate sheet of paper — you can use any visual medium you want — pens, colored pencils, crayons, fingerpaints, oil, etc. As you come into the classroom, we’ll tape these up, creating a gallery of interpretations or “readings” of these three paragraphs.

Then use your words to write on your experiences trying to turn Ishmael’s prose into something visual. What difficulties, if any, did you run into? Why do you think so much time is spent on describing a painting in a room to which you never return in the course of the novel? [This runs against Ibsen’s advice that if you have pistols hanging on the wall in the first scene of a play, they should go off by the end.] What might the purpose of this scene near the beginning of the novel be — can you extrapolate on what might follow it?

Now go back and focus on all aspects of Ishmael’s style — the rhythm of his sentences, his syntax, his diction [note small, function words like “but,” as well as lexical signs like “chaos”] to talk about Ishmael’s mind and personality. Don’t try to fish out biographical facts — there are few enough in the text about him either before or after this scene — but say what you can about how his experience of being in the world is conveyed through the textures and turns of his language. What questions and other comments does this journal entry raise in your own minds?

From just this passage, what can you say about your guesses as to the reading experience of the rest of the book? What should you be sensitized to, what should you look out for? If the book is a quest, what is Ishmael questing for? What is the author questing for and what are you the reader seeking? What indications in this passage can you see that whatever else this book is about, it is also about the process of reading itself?

By twice defamiliarizing Melville’s text, Marty’s prompt created a pedagogic space in which efferent currency had little use and aesthetic responses had no limit. Additionally, it asks students to revisit, and reflect on, their learning process. We give students and teachers a powerful tool when we ask students to identify and reflect on their struggles with an assignment, while also asking that they reflect on the assignment’s purpose: It takes learning out of the ether and personalizes it, while emboldening students by inviting their input. Marty’s prompt also asked students to revisit the now defamiliarized text to see how the exercise and subsequent reflection altered their initial reading. With no clear correct answer, students formed their arguments from
the ground up, relying on little more than their initial aesthetic experience – partially created by the texts sounds and syntax – and they began to build worlds from the word up.

The students’ final assignment asked them to reflect on their experience during the course and, based on their reflection, argue for what grade they thought they deserved. After reflecting on attendance and tardiness, one question asks the students, “How would you evaluate your own effort and commitment to this course?” (Bickman). One student offered a strikingly honest response:

I put significant effort into this course. It probably wasn’t my best-effort, but I don’t think my (generally) poor work ethic would allow me to put my ‘best’ effort into any one course while having to divert my attention towards other things. Although this is ‘Freshman’ Writing Seminar, and I am a Creative-Writing major Sophomore, I am only enrolled in two English related courses this semester. I am definitely most committed to these two courses; I have an extremely difficult time dedicating myself to my non-English courses and often neglect them. So, this class was important to me, and I tried to reflect that in my work.

The next question asked the students, given their attendance record and level effort, how they would grade themselves, to which the same student responded:

I would give myself an A, but I also know my own intentions, which weren’t always reflected the way I wanted them to be. I put a lot of effort into this class, consistently did the homework, wrote essays that I think challenged me as a writer. At the same time, I recognize I can come off as somewhat jaded; I’m not, though. Towards the end of the semester, I allowed a lot of personal illness to interfere with my work and mostly my attendance. I’m actually very passionate about writing and academia, education has always been one of the most stable institutions in my life and is something that I would always like to be involved in.

I really hate writing these things, so I looked back at the first evaluation I wrote for Marty’s class, my freshman year. In it, I argued (confidently) that I deserve an A. I probably didn’t deserve an A, my attendance was twice as bad as it was this semester. I didn’t put much effort into the actual writing—“I don’t really have much of an interest in Literary Theory,” I wrote, “At all.” A lot has changed since then, I’d no longer say I don’t have an interest in theory, and I no longer want to argue for an A, or any grade really. This semester my attitude towards higher-education fluctuated drastically; I considered taking a year off, transferring, and even dropping out. Ultimately, none of these plans will likely
reach fruition, and I’ve come to appreciate what is here, even if it may be poorly-advertised.

Most students, I imagine, would be likely to argue for an “A”; however, the way in which Marty crafted his prompt makes disingenuous responses uncommon, as the students need to “show their work” to assess their work. This student remains honest throughout her response, and largely forms her argument by reflecting on a previous course she took with Marty. My takeaway is that the reflective and aesthetic process and service-learning to which Marty introduced many of us graduate students transferred to many undergraduate students. Additionally, this student’s reflection points to the sometimes hollow nature of grades, and highlights how much we ignore when we distill any given student into a letter. We would have lost so many windows into our students’ inner machinations if Marty and Steve were to give letter grades without offering students a space for such reflection.

Our pedagogy course fostered in the graduate students a validation of our aesthetic teaching experiences, allowing us to use them to form the base of our critical reflections and lesson plans. Marty and Steve bolstered such aesthetic learning by requiring that each graduate student keep a running “Teaching Journal” to reflect on her experience in the undergraduate lab. While there were no set criteria, my journal entries followed a familiar pattern: What worked? What didn’t? How did students react to any given lesson? How did each success and failure feel? What can I do better the next time? Most responses answered most of the above questions and while not exactly fitting Ash’s and Clay’s model for Articulated Learning, I see my journal as an example of rigorous reflection which informed my pedagogy. Our collective and messy common class, I have little doubt, would have been unable to tackle any of the many speed bumps in any meaningful way if it wasn’t centered around reflection. I’ll take it a step further: without Marty’s and Steve’s shared habit of openly and actively reflecting on the previous undergraduate lab
shattered the notion of an efferent “right” pedagogy, and signaled that most solutions to messy problems, in the real world, don’t come from a canon, but from within.
Chapter Four: Teaching Enlightenment Literature Aesthetically

The sort of community established in Bickman’s and Lamos’s service learning lab and seminar, unfortunately, more often proves to be the exception than the rule. Too many courses, by their very design, inherently preclude both aesthetic responses and the community they invite. The university classroom now resembles a hospital waiting room: sterile, static, and suspiciously neat – students wait to get their hands dirty, but instead only find the equivalent of outdated magazines waiting for them. Such tidiness prepares students for a tidy and predictable world, but little else. The untidiness – both in our lab and our seminar – added something essential to the course, and demanded the intellectual agility an efferent stance neglects. What real-world benefits are offered when we coddle students with all-too-tidy classrooms, when we insist they color inside the lines? Might a bit more messiness better prepare students, both professionally and socially? The most vibrant communities I have been fortunate to witness are messy: The more dense and varied any social network, I argue, the messier and more vital it will be. Lively communities, to be sure, are built on shared beliefs; they thrive, however, by shambolically integrating the strange and the unknown. Those which don’t, which shirk at the new and cling to the old, may survive via bonding capital, but only in the short term; fixed in their beliefs, they will not grow, and will eventually become either extinct or irrelevant.

Today we see too many communities in peril, due to increasingly fractured politics, pitting liberal urbanites against rural conservatives. At the root of such dysfunction, perhaps, is a struggle between the past, the future, and how we regard the societal change we feel at the present. We live in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, in which many view old distinctions of self-identification as outmoded, and in which others see traditional models of self-identification as something stable to hold onto in an unfamiliar world. “Liberal” and
“conservative” become four-letter words depending on the color of your state. Liberals pride themselves in compassion and see perpetual progress as a means to ensure universal empathy, conservatives in personal accountability, and because they root themselves in traditional values, are often resistant to change. The gap between each perspective, while significant, doesn’t merit the all-too-common confirmation bias many of us hold, in which we too-often interpret attacks against our politics as attacks on our very core. Perhaps if we turn our gaze to the Enlightenment, an age which mirrors our own, one consumed with questions of our very nature and the legitimacy of divinely ordained authority – even of the Church – we can learn more truths about our current age, in which 2017 offers many parallels and a few surprising inverses between eras of similar flux.

The central features of the Enlightenment overlap with many of our era’s own: a more diverse and unfamiliar world, featuring people of faiths, creeds, and colors different than what many community’s hegemonies found familiar. Moreover, the term “enlightenment” is defined generally as “the process of spreading certain kinds of knowledge, understanding, and attitudes. […] The name of the movement is its own key metaphor: light spreading and driving out the darkness of ignorance, superstition, and fanaticism” (Fleming 10). For many Enlightenment thinkers, such “ignorance, superstition, and fanaticism” was rooted in what they saw as irrational and outdated institutions – the Church and the Crown for example – which favored a small minority and relegated the remaining population to subservience. Darwin’s notion that humans were *among* and did not hold dominion *over* animals was a direct affront to the source of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authorities. Perhaps our current age of increasing dissemination of “certain kinds of knowledge, understanding, and attitudes” incites similar feelings in many Americans: We as a country are now but one part – albeit a significant one – of
a larger global system of interconnected networks, rather than a super power above and isolated from the world outside our borders. While still the hegemonic world power, the United States has seen its international agency wane, in the sense that we are increasingly unable to dictate the behaviors and actions of other, often culturally different, nations, whether through military force or diplomatic couth. Rising immigration from non-European countries threatens America’s often assumed Anglo-Saxon and Christian homogeneity with shades of brown, calls to prayer, and foreign dialects.

The age from which Enlightenment Europeans emerged has many names – the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, the Medieval era – and is largely seen as a “bleak millennium of brutality, disease, ignorance, and superstition,” none of which seems particularly appealing, yet if it is all one knows, such features most likely provide comfort and a stable world-view on which one could depend, if not empirically question. Perhaps the introduction of Enlightenment ideals – rooted in reason rather than superstition – left many with a deep sense of loss, akin to mourning one’s parents. Reason suggests the very basis of the institutions which structure one’s world view – Kings, Queens, Bishops, and Lords, and other markers of divinely-ordained authority – is no more than a house of cards, wherein the “truths” they offer are sometimes daily contradicted. To Kant, and in this sense, Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere aude!* “Have courage to use your own understanding!” – that is the motto of the Enlightenment. (11)

Leaving home for the first time can be daunting, yet generally only initially so; new experiences which question old assumptions can be painful, yet having the courage to question and rethink time-held assumptions can snowball, as newly formed and even rationally verified assumptions
build a new world-view from within. This is what John Fleming means when he cites “the audacity of knowledge”: It can tear down and rebuild entire worlds.

Like eighteenth century thinkers such as Voltaire, Addison, Hogarth, and Defoe, we in the Academy must find the intellectual courage to trust our students’ abilities to reimagine literary worlds from the ground up, through active aesthetic reflection. Yet, isn’t that the same thing enlightened thinkers demanded from the superstitious, liberals from conservatives, conservatives from liberals? Maybe it is best to provide, but not depend on, an efferent context to introduce the many ways a given text has been interpreted. John V. Fleming offers a parallel to aesthetic (enlightened) and efferent (given) knowledge, when he describes humanity’s contradictory nature: “Human reason has this peculiar fate, that in one species of its knowledge is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, is not able to answer” (12-13). Fleming frames Kant’s argument as follows: We ask questions we cannot possibly answer:

[Kant] is talking about the mystery of life, the God question, the soul question, the questions of origins of earth and the origins of the species, man among the animals, the truth or the illusion of the freedom of will, the conundrums of time and space. Reason cannot ignore these questions, yet it cannot answer them either. The implication is that if such questions were to be answered, it would require something more than reason to answer them. The old world had found that something more in “revelation.” In the period of the Enlightenment, revelation became a highly contested category. There were many who, though they could not accept their usual and conventional form the usual and conventional claims, were unable to dispense altogether with “transcendence.” (13)

To many, a world viewed through reason alone is an empty and lonely place. Faith in the unknown often fills this hole by offering a rationality-proof comfort – while we cannot prove the existence of a higher power, we cannot disprove it either. Aesthetic learning is often most effective when it produces contrarian arguments, when it offers an alternative to a time-held assumption. The hidden beauty of canonical knowledge is that its existence allows competing
canons to arise; we cannot disprove received knowledge if we aren’t aware of it. Offering students a tertiary outline of canonical arguments as mere perspectives and not truths allows them to process each claim and judge its merits from their perspective, their world-view.

Returning to today’s classroom, which has more in common with the enlightenment than one might initially think, what might a course designed to better balance bonding and bridging capital look like? What tangible benefits might such a course offer? How can we best structure a course that manifests “Sepere aude!”? My experience as Dr. Catherine Labio’s teaching assistant for her course on Georgian England offered me a glimpse of how to guide students to more aesthetic responses while staying within broad efferent parameters. The prompts for students’ weekly online responses – which represented a bevy of potential facets students might find interesting – encouraged students to produce meaningful and thoughtful writing at regular intervals. While teaching Clarissa – an intimidating text and one which the likes of Sparknotes and Shmoop offer ready-made efferent responses – Dr. Labio paired varied and open-ended prompts with a pre-reading guide which helped ensure more varied aesthetic responses:

General Pre-Reading Guidelines:

Pay attention to and, if appropriate, flag references (implicit or explicit) to:

1. Anything you don’t understand (I suggest adding questions marks in the margins and come with a list of questions to lectures and recitations)

2. The social status of the various protagonists (see social pyramid handout, which is also included below)

3. The values of the different characters

4. References to marriage (what are its stakes, what makes a good marriage, why do people marry, and so on....)

5. The various locations where the action takes places (consider not only various geographical places, but also the interiors of homes).
6. The evolution of Clarissa’s feelings towards Lovelace and of her judgment of his character.

7. The evolution of Lovelace’s feelings towards Clarissa and his judgment of her character.

8. The pros and cons of writing an epistolary novel, i.e., a novel in letters, rather than write a narrative from the perspective of a single narrator.

9. Different expectations of behavior for men and women (of the same class; of different classes).

10. The layout of Clarissa's home and garden. What takes place in what rooms?

11. References to letters and writing.
   a. Why do characters write?
   b. Where?
   c. How do letters circulate?
   d. Who reads them?
   e. Why does Clarissa enjoy writing?
   f. How well do the various protagonists write? What does their writing style say about them?

12. References to clothes.

Such parameters, more than serving to guide students to more thoughtful writing, can grant teachers a better internal “bullshit detector.” Every week, after I had finished the reading required to properly teach three sections of 25 undergraduate students, I would visit websites like Sparknotes and Shmoop to ascertain what the week’s “bullshit” responses might look like: those rooted in major scenes with facsimile responses, nearly identical to Sparknotes’ cookie-cutter analysis. One student, who sat in the back corner of the class, almost-daily offered such efferent responses. Most students, however, turned in writing which synthesized the many pre-reading parameters: how certain characters’ values and perspectives either overlapped or contradicted theirs, and how such personal insight better informed their understanding of the nineteenth century, while making the at times burdensome Clarissa personally relevant. Dr. Labio’s reading
Sheahan also asked students to pair the novel’s human traits which mirrored their world – personal morality, competing and often incompatible gender expectations, social hierarchy, and evolving social values – with Clarissa’s larger materiality and machinations, ensuring more than varied and original writing: responses rooted in the eighteenth-century, yet – in a Miltonian sense – inwardly informed by students’ parallel aesthetic experiences.

Another step taken by Dr. Labio when designing her course was to craft essay prompts which encouraged aesthetic thought, and for which color-by-numbers responses would almost certainly fall short. The two prompts which best accomplished this asked students to put two texts – and their distinct forms – in critical dialogue with each other, and to create an artistic work on which to ground their larger critical argument:

This is a two-part assignment, with a creative writing component.

a) Offer an epistolary narrative version, in the style found in Clarissa, of a print or series of prints by Hogarth. (No less than 1000 words.)

b) Provide discussion (in essay form) of what this exercise highlights about Richardson’s novel. Focus on its epistolary nature, questions of social status, and/or another key feature we have discussed in lecture and recitation meetings. (No less than 1100 words)

This is a two-part assignment, with a visual art component (primarily for art majors – student with other majors should ask for permission).

a) Offer a visual adaptation, in the style of a work by William Hogarth, Joseph Highmore’s illustrations of Clarissa, or Thomas Gainsborough’s Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, of a moment, scene, or small cluster of scenes from Richardson’s novel.

b) Provide discussion (in essay form) of what this exercise highlights about Richardson’s novel. Focus on its settings and questions of social status, and/or another key feature we have discussed in lecture and recitation meetings. (No less than 1100 words)
To be sure, Dr. Labio developed such creative prompts, in part, to stave off cheating; yet, in doing so she guided both her students and her grateful teaching assistant towards aesthetic learning, rather than mere “schooling.”

Let’s compare some of the vibrant and varied writing Dr. Labio encouraged, versus efferent responses students might write when emotionally detached from the text, often solely relying on Sparknotes and Shmoop. The best papers discussed a range of ideas: One student drafted an epistolary narrative which offered a feminist reading on the eighteenth century’s shifting rights to power and wealth; another argued how the hollowness of the era’s nobility’s “straight-laced” morality dangerously manifests itself in society’s lowest classes; another argued that gender-based inequality makes true virtue impossible. Such informed responses resonate in ways surface-level and efferently-informed responses cannot. Sparknotes-inspired readings, while accurate, produce nothing new in their surface-level and well-worn interpretations: “Clarissa succumbs to Lovelace because she has little agency as an unmarried woman”; “Clarissa is a feminist ideal, and her devotion to eighteenth-century virtues tell her that death is better than marriage to a rake”; or “Lovelace remains unhappy because he doesn’t allow Clarissa to reform him.” Such responses are technically correct, yet do little more than skim the surface, and reveal nothing to, or about, the student who writes them. Compare such sterile responses to one elicited by Dr. Labio’s aesthetically-driven prompts. The following example contains the student’s initial epistolary narrative, based on Hogarth’s *Marriage a la Mode* and her subsequent analysis:

My dear friend, I have most solemn news. My Father, against my will and contrary to my wishes, has promised me in Marriage to the son of Lord Squanderfield! I suspect this coupling has been arranged not because of our love

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5 To be fair to my students, only the positive examples are real; the efferent alternatives I craft, while not actual student work, might feel familiar to many a university instructor.
for one another, the young Mr. Squanderfield and I – for I love him not; indeed, he is the most effete and vain man I have ever met – but because of my father’s fortune and Lord S’s title. Today, without warning, Father brought me to his house in order to make the arrangements. Lord S is severely afflicted with the gout, and limped most horridly; but Father is pleased with our match, as his family is descended from William Duke of Normandy. Though I have told him repeatedly God looks unfavorably upon love born of selfishness, he refuses to listen, and has in fact grown very angry with me. Forgive me, but I rather suspect that Lord S has not agreed to our match because of any virtue of mine, but because of my family’s fortune. I heard from the talk that he is in dire need of money, partly in order to finish a large mansion.

Mr. Squanderfield I found dull and entirely self-centered. He spent the entire time I sat beside him on the couch looking at himself in the mirror nearby, as if entranced by the image within, a modern Narcissus. Would that he had perished, and I, his Echo, been free to become but a voice! But alas, it was not to be. Councilor Silvertongue was there as well, and he whispered many words of comfort to me, but I fear to no avail. Father is not to be persuaded. I am, within the week, to be married to a man I abhor.

Pray for me, my dear friend, that I will retain my virtue even in the face of my father’s sin and my husband’s vice!

[…]

Reading Clarissa led not only to guidance regarding spiritual matters, but social matters as well, especially questions of social class and marriage. In translating Hogarth’s prints to epistolary narrative, this same effect is conveyed. In 18th century Britain, art for its own sake was not valued – instead, as in these examples, it was to teach a social, moral, or political good, coinciding with the views of the artist or author. In what is Hogarth’s most famous series of prints, Marriage-a-la-Mode, he satirizes two families who use the moral good of marriage for their own personal (specifically, monetary and political) gain and meet a tragic end, critiquing through the six highly detailed prints the problematic elements of the morally-deficient upper class aristocracy and those in the middle class who wished to mirror their actions.

The writer demonstrates a deep knowledge of both the form and content of Clarissa and Marriage a la Mode, and by putting each in conversation with the other, elicits original insights to both. By depicting Hogarth’s pictorial narrative in the epistolary, she muddies the waters of what is efferently right or wrong for either novel; in other words, by aesthetically marrying the two works, she makes efferent responses isolated to either obsolete. Moreover, reimagining
Hogarth in the epistolary demands empathy from the student – as she gives words and thoughts to Hogarth’s two-dimensional illustratations – and such empathy led the writer to view her characters’ moral dilemmas through her contemporary lens; her analysis is still rooted in the eighteenth century but is aesthetically informed by her current reality, a balancing act at which efferent responses inherently and consistently fail. The writer’s analysis of her epistolary narrative conveys a critical depth frequently absent when we funnel students’ writing into an efferent right/wrong binary. Empathetically-driven, her response is so multifaceted that one would need more than ten fingers to point out what’s “right” and what’s “wrong.” Even if teachers were to disagree with this writer’s claims, they cannot deny their logical foundation; her aesthetic narrative, in effect, “shows her work.”

Students who responded to the more traditional prompts benefited from similarly open-ended questions; also beneficial was that Dr. Labio’s prompts gently rooted student curiosity in the canonical knowledge established by generations of prior scholars. Asking students to effect in their writing broad and pliably applicable motifs and engage them with specific and unique texts produced equally provocative results. The following prompt, while more conventional, rewards aesthetic thinking, and in my case, better revealed the inner workings of an otherwise quiet student:

Using Clarissa as the centerpiece or primary focus of your argument, but drawing on works by Hogarth, Swift, and/or Haywood as well as secondary sources, discuss the coexistence of various forms of violence and politeness in the eighteenth century.

Limited solely by three authors and the competing notions of “violence” and “politeness,” students were restricted only by what they personally found relevant and what curiosities drove them. University students, particularly women, often find themselves exposed to and sometimes consumed by questions of “violence” and “politeness” – albeit under different labels. Many of
one week’s responses discussing *Clarissa*’s antagonist – the Rake, Lovelace – invoked the same word to describe him, and in doing so introduced me to a new obscenity: “fuckboy.” My initial lesson plan evaporated as I asked myself, “What in the heck is a ‘fuckboy’?” The following recitation I turned the question to the class, who delighted in their loathe-filled responses. Hands shot up, and after listening to three female students and one male, I agreed: Lovelace is a “fuckboy”; like a few of their male counterparts, he masquerades as a gentleman, on the surface effecting couth and compassion to lure women to his bed, only to discard them the next day. Terms like “walk of shame” and “douche bag” became meaningfully applicable to *Clarissa* and, without any effort of my own, the conversation eventually steered its way back to the text, incorporating its characters as place-holders to what happened last Thursday night.

One student’s paper returned me to our class’s discussion, and while it shared the same thematic undertone, it was clear that the writer had critically refined its rough edges and transformed what was at times little more than ranting (in the classroom discussion), into a complex and provocative argument that bordered the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries. The writer frames her discussion of politeness around Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Elizabeth Haywood’s *The City Jilt*:

*Clarissa*’s epistolary format expresses a passive approach to characterization in contrast to *The City Jilt*’s active narration. The handful of letters in *The City Jilt* are mostly confrontational – instructions, pleas, arguments – as opposed to the verbose soul-searching in *Clarissa*’s correspondence. Haywood is more concerned with what her characters do. Certainly, *The City Jilt* has passages describing characters’ emotional states, and *Clarissa* has plot developments here and there, but about as much happens in the 34 pages of *The City Jilt* as in the 1,524 pages of *Clarissa*. The manner in which each story is told manifests the authors’ differing takes on life. In the vast psychological world of *Clarissa*, finding one’s place in society is an internal, contemplative process. The characters’ virtues or lack thereof are distinguished through their own words, suggesting to the reader not only how one should behave, but also how one should think. Lovelace is a villain as much for his attitudes as his actions – he sees others as pawns to be manipulated in achieving his ends, and only uses politeness as a
social tactic when it benefits him. For someone claiming to value liberty, he has a hard time taking no for an answer. By contrast, Clarissa’s heroism is rooted in her sincere desire to do the right thing. Her naïveté leads to some blunders, but her principles are unwavering, evidenced in the ample detail with which she considers her duties from every possible angle. In *The City Jilt*, omniscient narrations places the emphasis on action rather than intention. The prose summarizes Glicera’s motivations matter-of-factly; her decisions speak for themselves. Each novel’s distinct style expresses their differing priorities: *Clarissa* explores and emotional reconciliation with conflicting expectations, and *The City Jilt* concerns itself with material outcomes.

[...]

Both [Clarissa and Glicera] take a perverse pleasure in breaking hearts; both concoct elaborate schemes to string along suitors they have no intention of marrying. Where Clarissa’s friend and confidante Miss Howe eventually advises her to give in and marry Lovelace, Glicera’s friend Laphelia helps her scam Grubgard, taking on a role similar to Lovelace’s friend Belford. Glicera and Lovelace each employ similar strategies of ever-shifting conditional promises to gain benefits from their targets while avoiding real commitment. Glicera, however, is the hero of her story, and Lovelace the villain of his. Like Richardson, Haywood explicitly defines her audience as female. [...] In the face of unethical treatment by men *Clarissa* offers a spiritual victory where material justice would be impossible without compromising virtue. *The City Jilt*, instead, offers a path of retaliations, using men’s own tactics against them. Lovelace’s behavior is unethical because it is unnecessary; with the freedom and wealth his title affords him, courtship is only a matter of entertainment to him. Glicera uses it as a survival tactic. Like Clarissa, she finds herself cut off from the security afforded her by the men in her life. She loses her wealth, her reputation, her virginity, and her unborn child; rather than ending there, she turns the unfair rules of the game to her advantage. Lovelace preys on teenage girls for his sexual amusement; Glicera exploits older men for money. In a world where women are almost always forced to rely on men for support, she manages to get it on her own turns. By abandoning standards of integrity, she is able to secure her revenge and a place in the world.

Two things stand out two me: 1) Millennials deserve more credit than we give them; and 2) aesthetically-rooted responses reveal students’ inner machinations. While certainly not turning to *Clarissa* or *The City Jilt* as moralizing texts, the writer grounds her reading of each in her aesthetic perspective, and delivers an empowering and personally relevant reading. Her argument
perfectly applies to *Clarissa* in its time and place, but also provides insight to the student’s worldview. In that sense, Clarissa’s negotiations with Lovelace aren’t all that different from a female college student navigating social scenes sometimes dominated by drugs, alcohol, as well as over-amorous and disingenuous men, wherein the line between “intentions” and “actions” becomes precariously blurry. Is it better to play by a set of unfair patriarchic rules and lose, or to bend the rules to one’s benefit and inflict similar damage on males for whom gender usually empowers? What parallels does considering the motivations Clarissa’s and Glicera’s era provide a twenty-first-century student? Do women today face the unfair binary of “integrity” and identity? *Clarissa* and *The City Jilt* act as laboratories in which students can safely test their internal senses of morality in the face of less black-and-white scenarios. In doing so, students actively discover their role in, and the larger machinations of, their surrounding community.

Each era overlaps in some way with our contemporary, and can bring to light subject matter personally relevant to both our students and our community. We best serve both when we invite students to tell their own stories, to think critically about how the text speaks to them. An aesthetic stance grounds texts in their era, yet encourages a student’s worldview to inform her argument.
Conclusion

“Students who have 'had their sensibilities refined' by arts education, should be able to see more, 'aesthetically speaking', than their peers. They will develop 'the ability, for example to notice the patterns of sunlight on a wall, or the countenance of a homeless person pushing an overloaded shopping cart down the street. As examples of the benefits to be acquired from the study of arts, these seem unfortunate. Seeing a homeless person merely as an aesthetic affect, comparable to sunlight on a wall, illustrates the desensitizing influence of aestheticism, in that it reduces a fellow human being, with needs comparable to one's own, to an object of artistic contemplation. If this is what arts education achieves, it seems a good argument for discontinuing it.’”

-Eliot Eisner

Partially driving my discussion is the desire for the Arts to unite communities, not drive a wedge between them. Put simply, I believe we look to the arts to learn about ourselves and to reaffirm what we value; in turn, what we value offers common ground between us and those with whom we might not see eye-to-eye. More than refining aesthetic appreciation, an education in the arts ought to pull back the sometimes opaque veil of difference, which blinds so many of us, and illuminate where we can agree – while it is probably unrealistic and perhaps unhealthy to hope the arts ensure “that the earth’s resources are evenly distributed, and that people do not perish in ignorance and want,” we might expect more from the arts than just a beautiful medium, “a machine for producing painted canvas, symphony orchestras and ballet dancers” (107).

When we teach literature via an aesthetic stance, we find a happy medium between mere aesthetic refinement and a pious army of do-gooders. Each text students encounter becomes a “laboratory” in which they can compare competing worldviews while further developing their own. When we read, we often project ourselves onto a protagonist and central character, and vicariously live through their narrative. Different than their efferent cousins, which unwittingly lead students to cherry-pick literature for major scenes and “key” information, aesthetic
approaches encourage students to immerse themselves in the text, to lose themselves in its pages, and perhaps emerge with a newfound perspective. And, while efferent stances may streamline both lesson plans and student reading habits – in which right/wrong binaries direct student attention to, say A, B, and C, while ignoring D-through-Z – such efficiency perhaps doesn’t align with the Arts.

When discussing the impact of teaching the Arts, Elliot Eisner describes a similar pedagogy, which favors efficiency over thoughtfulness, a strategy both seemingly pervasive in, and counterintuitive to, our field. The University, particularly the large public university, depends on efficiency and would be undone without it. Processing thousands of students and guiding each to a degree requires systems, a somewhat uniform and agreed-upon curriculum, and as such, at least administratively, it makes sense to give each student a numerical ID that will verify wherever their name will not. However, the same guidelines which ensure better administration rarely benefit the classroom. Canonical responses make teaching easier because they make it more efficient, but they aren’t particularly fun and frequently fail to lead to more a more meaningful pedagogy:

The arts [...] have little room on their agenda for efficiency, at least as a high-level value. Efficiency is largely a virtue for the tasks we don’t like to do; few of us ever like to eat a great meal efficiently, or to participate in a wonderful conversation efficiently, or indeed make love efficiently. A school system designed with an overriding commitment to efficiency may produce outcomes that have little enduring quality. Children, like the rest of us, seldom voluntarily pursue activities for which they receive little or no satisfaction. Experiencing the aesthetic in the context of intellectual and artistic work is a source of pleasure that predicts best what students are likely to do when they can do whatever they would like to do. (xiii)

Consider the example from the introduction: A man drinks poison and scans the bottle’s label, frantically searching for the antidote. Because his life depends on finding the right information, this occasion demands an efficient response. However, this analogy breaks down when we
extend it to literature, as it colors art as the poison, and canonically-driven answers as its antidote. Moreover, literature is not a Big Mac to devour and wash down with 32 ounce Coca-Cola; our approach ought to hold up the Arts as something worth savoring, our instruction an aperitif to whet our student’s appetites.

Reflecting on my experience at the Kampala Diplomatic School, I too often tried to force-feed information to my students in the most efficient way possible, and in doing so, overvalued my voice and my perspective while shortchanging those of my students. If given another shot today, I would talk less and listen more. Too often I forced my students to assume efferent stances, projecting my often-incompatible Western aesthetic on students, many of whom haven’t visited America, let alone left the continent. I didn’t appreciate the multitude of student-backgrounds I encountered, and rather than relying on a student-centered pedagogy flexible to each’s background, I force fed them sometimes alien notions of “what” and “how,” without appreciating their “why.” I argue that we do the same when we introduce students to centuries-old texts assuming they will immediately reinforce perspectives which took us so long to develop, which is not to say we should entirely discard what we see as essential to any text, but allow that our students might shine a new light on what they see as equally vital.

As valuable as listening to what students say, we must also embrace what they do not. I like Marty’s belief that teacher’s ought to “embrace silence” in the classroom. It is excruciating when a teacher ask a classroom a question and is met with blank faces and silence, and after a second-or-two most will interject with their beliefs, and this may alleviate tension, but doesn’t serve our students. As awkward as we find stretches of silence, students frequently find them more intense, their minds racing, terrified that their teacher will call on them, and more often than not, will think of something to say. It is in such silences that the best thinking occurs,
wherein students are pressed to come up with something from within. Silence often occurs when students don’t know what the “right” answer is – when teachers end the silence, and model a “correct” response they reinforce the right/wrong binary; conversely, when we allow students the extra moment, and validate their responses, no matter how far-fetched, we reward aesthetic thinking and encourage student voices. Too often I failed to provide such a space for my students, and was never comfortable with silence. I took it personally – either I failed to prepare them, or thought they failed me – when I could have listened. Instead I reacted harshly each time, either giving a terse answer and moving on to the next point, or soliloquizing on their laziness, neither of which hit the root of the problem, and more than likely exacerbated it. In one case I had a student turn in a Wikipedia page in lieu of an essay. I relied on the hard-and-fast plagiarism rules instilled in me by the more than two decades I’ve steeped in American pedagogy, and, from my high horse, castigated my student as lazy and deceitful. What I should have done, rather than default to judging, was to listen with an open mind, his understanding of the assignment to determine where our common expectations broke down. If I had an open mind, a smaller ego, and just listened, I might have learned that it was his first research paper, and that he was a very proud yet shy student who didn’t feel comfortable admitting as much, and in his mind, copying and pasting a Wikipedia article represented an avenue to do the work without embarrassing himself. I didn’t listen and ended up embarrassing my student in front of his peers and his parents, and in retrospect embarrassing myself.

My time teaching at the University of Colorado – both as a teaching assistant and as a consultant at the on-campus writing center – has allowed me to recalibrate my pedagogy and incorporate a more aesthetically-centered stance. Dr. Bickman’s and Dr. Lamos’s seminar demonstrated how marrying aesthetic stances with reflection-based service learning expands a
lesson’s import beyond the classroom walls, and demands students construct arguments from within. Even if it is, at times, impractical to shuttle 100-plus students to a middle school, we can apply the best of service-learning to encourage thoughtful and personal, reflection-driven writing from our students.

Perhaps the most relevant question to my discussion is rhetorical: Who cares if you are right? It seems that too often we encourage being correct over being cooperative. Universities reward students for producing the “right” kind of knowledge, and while we don’t necessarily punish those whose work breaks binaries, we don’t go out of their way to reward them either. Today’s University is often structured to rewards those who “flunk at sandbox,” largely because the nature in which we design our courses has remained stale, which is not to say there hasn’t been progress – there just has not been enough of it (Damrosch 10). Efferent stances fit fields such as Math and Science, in which testable and quantifiable data is necessary to come to one overriding conclusion. Yet, how is this beneficial to literature? What value does limiting humanity’s scope carry in a field that encapsulates the countless everything which makes us tick? Outside the University, binaries have failed us socially and politically, as many in our country see one “correct” way to live and dismiss anything with a whiff of incompatibility as “un-American.” We cannot expect students to become rational citizens if they allow paradigms to dictate their interactions, instead of the more intuitive alternative of building worldviews based on rationally-processed experiences – so why do we ask them to do this in Arts classrooms? A Literature degree’s value will perhaps never be more tangible than what our Business or Hard Science counterparts can offer, but that is not to say our role in the Academy and in our larger society is, or should be, diminished. Antithetically, what we offer has never been more necessary; the way in which we teach the Arts, however, keeps us in obscurity. By integrating
service learning, and a more aesthetic pedagogy, we will be able to emerge from the shadows, and foster in students tools acutely relevant today. Now, more than ever, the ability to bridge across cultures, respectfully disagree, and beyond all, maintain a warm curiosity prove necessary tools to navigate, and hopefully unite, a shrinking yet fractured world.
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