

SPRINTING TOWARDS FOUR-YEAR STATUS:
PROGRESS AND POTENTIAL PITFALLS

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Editor's Note: We asked Robert Bird and Dan Pearce to report on their work in a curriculum committee.

A few years ago, Ricks College invited Richard Paul, an outspoken proponent of critical thinking, to present a faculty workshop on the elements of thought and the standards of reasoning. During this workshop, Paul demonstrated that, although everyone thinks, “much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or downright prejudiced.” To improve shoddy thinking, Paul recommended that we adopt a rigorous intellectual standard. For example, when confronted with a complex problem, we should raise significant questions, gather and assess relevant information, think and debate with an open mind, and communicate effectively with others to solve it.

As we confront the complex problem of transforming Ricks into a four-year institution, we should assess our adherence to this intellectual standard. In this transformation process, are we raising questions, gathering information, considering opposing viewpoints, and offering reasons and explanations for our decisions? Adhering to this standard might ensure that BYU-Idaho will be a well-conceived institution that benefits our students, our church, and our society.

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Our intention in this paper is to use the critical thinking standard above to assess our department's work in creating a four-year major. Recognizing that the program is still a work in process, our broad assessment is this: the proposed four-year program has the general support of our department's faculty (including ourselves). We think the proposed program, though somewhat unoriginal, is sound, thorough, and rigorous. At the same time, our evaluation of the process used to arrive at that program is mixed. On the one hand, initial committee work was intellectually challenging and invigorating as we tried to envision what literary studies at BYU-Idaho would be like. We think the committee work strengthened our sense of collegiality and enthusiasm for the future. On the other hand, the initial speed of the process has raised some concerns. It seems to us that the initial rush to four-year status was antithetical to creativity and innovation in the curriculum, and unfortunately it led to circumventing preferable democratic processes. This lack of full faculty participation and of debate undermines, to a small degree, support for proposed programs.

To illustrate our evaluation, this paper has two functions: first, to describe the process in which we have been engaged, in constructing a blueprint for our program; and second, to exercise some critical thinking on the process of program building and what it has wrought so far in our department.

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PHASE I

The process began when our department chair assigned each English department member to serve on a small committee, designated to develop a plan for a specific area in a new four-year program. For example, we served on a committee concerned with the “literary studies emphasis,” which was to be proposed along with other emphases in the major (English education, professional writing, and creative writing). Our task was to provide an overview of our emphasis, identify objectives and outcomes, and list sample courses.

The questions that our committee raised were probably typical of those asked by departments across the campus: how would the traditional content of the discipline be covered in our proposed major; how much training should students receive in each aspect given the limited amount of credit hours available; and, finally, how seriously are we supposed to take calls for innovation and creativity in developing a cutting-edge curriculum for BYU-Idaho?

To answer these questions, we gathered information from and drew upon past experience with other institutions in our region. We determined that a typical English major includes training in some twelve periods of British and American literary history, in the kinds or genres of literature, in literary theory, in the literature of other cultures, in the history and grammar of the English language, and in major literary authors. In our modest proposal, we realized that it would be difficult to offer courses in each literary period as is done at major universities, so we combined two periods into each course. This move eliminated pure survey courses and replaced them with courses in which the characteristics of two literary periods could be contrasted.

Our committee then debated the necessity of training in other traditional and nontraditional areas of the discipline from which students might benefit, such as World Mythology, Studies in Writing and Reading Processes, and the History of the English Language. We wondered whether all English majors should be required to complete these courses or just those with a particularly relevant emphasis; some faculty questioned the usefulness of these courses: faculty disagreed about whether a course in

World Mythology should be a survey of various myths or a course on myth theory; Studies in Writing and Reading Processes was a course not usually offered to undergraduates at other universities, and the content of that course remained unclear; and finally, although all of us on the committee had studied the history and structure of the English language, we thought that the course may be more appropriate for graduate school than for an undergraduate major.

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In the end, the committee decided to turn World Mythology into an interdisciplinary course called Myth and Literature, to offer Studies in Writing and Reading Processes as a requirement for English majors with an education or writing emphasis but not as a requirement for all majors, and to completely eliminate the course in History of the English Language.

Our committee attempted to answer administrative calls to be innovative by recommending interdisciplinary courses. These courses encourage the crossing of traditional disciplinary boundaries; however, some questioned whether these offerings would require an impractical faculty load and credit commitment. These were our committee's recommendations (see Appendix 1).

PHASE II

Two weeks later, our department chair asked each committee to write a catalog description for recommended courses and also identify specific objectives, assignments, and outcomes. An example of what our committee submitted is Stephen George's description of a class on Religious and Ethical Literature (see Appendix 2). These descriptions were to be used for the department proposal as well as for catalog course entries.

PHASE III

In phase III of our department's proposal process, the chairs of the various committees in the department were to meet and discuss recommendations. At this point, our process encountered two obstacles: first, deadlines from administrators for our proposal made it practically impossible to engage in another level of debate; and second, some of the recommendations from committees seemed to be too diverse to reconcile. Therefore, the department chair compiled what he thought were the strongest suggestions from the committees and presented a proposed major to the entire department (see Appendix 3).

ASSESSMENT OF THE PROCESS

Our chair effectively planned the department's committee work, and it functioned well. Within committees, significant questions were raised about tradition and innovation, and good debate ensued concerning course offerings. However, faculty might have been better prepared for these meetings and communicated their results more clearly.

Since the committee work was cut short, our department held an informal meeting. In this meeting, some debate occurred about certain courses and recommendations, but changes in the department's major were minimal, more so than if chairs of the various committees had met as the department chair had planned initially (compare Appendix 1 and Appendix 3). Two specific changes affected our committee's proposal: the elimination of a cultural studies section, though some of its courses were grouped under the section called Genre and World Literature, and the subsuming of the interdisciplinary courses into a variable topic course called Genre Studies, a course that might not have the same vision. Although our department did not incorporate all suggestions, it did integrate some innovations. At this stage, however, our department's latest proposal, though still in the draft stage, is conservative.

CONCLUSION

In the end, only each one of us can assess our individual contribution to the transformation of Ricks College. We might ask ourselves if we have raised significant questions, done our research, considered alternatives, and clearly and frequently communicated our ideas, expectations, and responses? We encourage faculty members and administrators to be more engaged in

- research into programs offered at other universities, assessing their strengths and weaknesses,
- debate about the advantages and disadvantages of traditional academic and innovative offerings, and
- communication about time lines and expectations for and responses to proposals.

Since the transition from Ricks College to BYU-Idaho is a work in process, all of us are learning as we go. The best indicator of the success of this transformation may be our willingness to discuss, assess, and improve the process along the way. If we do so, we will be living according to another intellectual standard, expressed by Walter Lippmann: "What matters is not the utterance of opinions. What matters is the confrontation of opinions in debate." ∞

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WORKS CITED

- Paul, Richard. *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking*. Foundation for Critical Thinking, 1999.
- Lippmann, Walter. "The Indispensable Opposition." *The Atlantic Monthly* 1939.

APPENDIX I

ENGLISH MAJOR— LITERARY STUDIES EMPHASIS

Overview

Students—through close reading and focused research of literary and cultural texts—develop critical thinking, writing, and rhetorical skills to prepare for professional careers and graduate school.

Objectives

Students will learn

- periods and canons of British, American, and world literatures
- conventions, genres, and styles of literature
- historical, philosophical, and cultural contexts for literary texts.
- fundamental concepts, questions, and approaches within literary theory and history

Outcomes

Having completed Literary Studies, students will be able to

- use textual evidence to support ideas about literature
- recognize the relationship between formal literary elements and themes
- apply different critical approaches
- locate and evaluate critical analyses of literary texts
- integrate interdisciplinary thought into literary interpretations.

Courses

Since the Literary Studies emphasis builds upon the English major core, the committee's suggestions for literary studies are contingent upon the following proposed core.

English Major Core Requirements

Introductory Courses: 9 credits

Eng 251: Fundamentals of Literary Studies

Eng 252: Literary Research and Writing

Eng 325: Grammar and Usage

Literature Survey: 9 credits

(choose from both British and American)

Eng 371: British Literature: Medieval and Renaissance

Eng 373: British Literature: Neo-Classical and Romantic

Eng 375: British Literature: Victorian and Modern

Eng 361: American Literature: Colonial and Romantic

Eng 363: American Literature: Realist and Modern

Cultural Studies: 3 credits

Eng 354: World Literature

Eng 358: Ethnic Literature

Eng 368: Literature of the Latter-day Saints
Eng 355: Young Adult and Children's Literature

Interdisciplinary Studies: 3 credits

Eng 400: Rhetorical Theory: Studies in Writing and Reading
Eng 401: Literature and Myth
Eng 402: Literature and Science
Eng 403: Religious and Ethical Literature

Author and Genre Studies: 3 credits

Eng 384R: Major Authors
Eng 395R: Genre Studies

Senior Seminar: 3 credits

Literary Studies Emphasis (12 credits)

Eng 440: Studies in Literary Theory
Additional literary survey course: 3 credits
English electives (any 300 or 400 course): 6 credits*

**Note: Three of these elective credits must be a Major Authors course, if it was not already completed as part of the core requirements.*

APPENDIX 2

ENGLISH 403—RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL LITERATURE

English 403 emphasizes the interdisciplinary connections between literature and religious/ethical studies. It surveys literature written from certain religious and ethical perspectives and provides a theoretical framework from which to evaluate such literature.

COURSE GOALS

- 1) Provide exposure to a range of religious and ethical literature.
- 2) Provide a background in ethical theory and religious thought.
- 3) Increase appreciation of literature's ability to dramatize ethical and religious ideas.

COURSE SKILLS/OBJECTIVES

- 1) Analysis, evaluation, and appreciation of the ethical/religious element in literature.
- 2) Expression of ideas in analytical and argumentative writing.

COURSE OUTCOMES

- 1) Improved critical thinking and interpretive skills.
- 2) Improved writing skills.
- 3) Increased knowledge and appreciation of the moral content of literature.

SUGGESTED TEXTBOOKS

The Moral of the Story: An Introduction to Ethics
Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life.

APPENDIX 3

ENGLISH MAJOR CORE AND EMPHASES

English Major Core—30 credits

Prerequisites—9 credits

Eng 251: Fundamentals of Literary Interpretation
Eng 314: Advanced Critical Writing and Research
Eng 325: Theory and Practice of Language—Grammar and Usage

Literature Survey—9 credits

(Choose three to include both areas)

Eng 331: British Literature—Medieval and Renaissance
Eng 332: British Literature—Neo-Classical and Romantic
Eng 333: British Literature—Victorian and Modern
Eng 334: American Literature—Colonial and Romantic
Eng 335: American Literature—Realistic and Modern

Studies in Genre/World Literature—3 credits

Eng 350R: Genre Studies
Eng 351: Fiction
Eng 352: Poetry
Eng 353: Drama
Eng 354: Essay
Eng 355: Children's Literature
Eng 356: Young Adult Literature
Eng 361: Sacred Literature
Eng 362: World Literature
Eng 363R: Ethnic Literature

Author Studies—3 credits

Eng 370R: Major Authors
Eng 371R: Contemporary Authors
Eng 372R: Regional Authors
Eng 373: Shakespeare

Rhetorical and Literacy Theory—3 Credits

Eng 450: Studies in Writing and Reading Processes

Senior Seminar—3 credits

Eng 495: Senior Writing/Critical Thinking Seminar

Literary Studies Emphasis (12 credits)

Eng 440: Studies in Literary Theory
Eng 442: World Mythology
Three credits Literature Survey
(additional to required nine credits)
Three English credits elective