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2 Nov 2014

Rationale/reflection memo, 181 course

I propose to teach my ENG 181, Writing about Literature, on the topic of hoaxes in literature and culture. Because hoaxes populate the space between truth and fiction, using them as course materials will, I hope, lead my students to reflect on the role of literature and fabrication—to think about authenticity, embellishment, narrative and authority, and how literature can be a playful interaction with the world. And because hoaxes are by definition attempts to convince a particular audience of something, the subject matter will also give students ample opportunity to identify and analyze rhetorical situations, and to consider the efficacy or non-efficacy of these attempts. Hoaxes are also particularly good sites for considering historical context and cultural values, and how those elements are incorporated into a text. The “literary” texts I’m choosing widely vary, and often are not traditionally literary—part of my hope is that I can ask students to think about “texts” more broadly, and to think about how the fictional appears in the supposedly non-fictional, and how the non-fictional appears in fiction.

As I revised my syllabus for this portfolio, I’ve done away with the “units” that originally structured it. Instead, I tried to organize my reading and writing assignments into a thoughtful and progressive sequence: I begin with the most obvious examples of hoaxes—Barnum’s “humbugs”—and then developing the idea of hoax as a spectacle intended to sell tickets, papers, books, or films by looking at the freak show, press hoaxes, and the supernatural. Throughout this section, I’m asking my students to think carefully about the texts (broadly construed) and contexts of different types of hoaxes. We will think and write a lot about how authority is established in the hoax—who do we believe, and why? The supernatural readings transition us to two weeks on pseudoscience, where we will think about how even something as seemingly objective as science can be interwoven with fiction. We will look, next, to memoirs, which are fabricated with weird consistency. We will begin to think about the politics and ethics of hoaxes in this section, and will move from straightforward fabrications, like Irving’s hoax memoir of Howard Hughes, and will move toward more complicated examples of “genuine” autobiographies that are full of lies—in the case of Lauren Slater’s *Lying*, explicitly and proudly so. We will continue to examine the role of the lie in crafting identity by looking at Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. Our last readings will be short examples of times that authors attempted to pass off their work as that of another. My hope is that these readings will be quick and fun, and will transition us into the last few weeks of the semester, which are occupied with writing and revision. I’m still sussing out how I’ll fit writing guidebooks into the sequence—my inclination is to say that *The Little Seagull Handbook* will mostly be an “on-call” reference that I will direct people to for particular issues that crop up in their writing. I need to spend some time with Gardner’s *Reading and Writing About Literature*: *A Portable Guide,* and actually might ditch it altogether. My primary concern at this point is how the reading and writing fit together. Through the first half of the semester, I feel pretty good about how the two work together, but as the semester continues, working on the final project starts to supplant blog posts, and the writing stops being about the reading—and I’m not sure if this will work or not. I’m wondering if I should cut a few weeks of the readings out in order to focus on writing, or if I should cut a larger assignment so that I can continue to have blog posts that tie to the readings, or whether it’s just fine to have discussions about the readings in class that aren’t particularly related to that week’s project.

I’ve also revised my assignment sequence for this portfolio. Originally, I relied heavily on John Bean’s “Designing and Sequencing Assignments to Teach Undergraduate Research” to put together a scaffolded sequence building to a pretty traditional literary analysis and research paper. I kept a lot of this scaffold, but swapped out a few of the assignments. Instead of doing a short close-reading paper, I’m asking students for a Wikipedia-style entry on a hoax. I’m hoping, mostly, to get them writing in a space where they can imagine an audience—students will be writing about sources the other students haven’t read, so hopefully that will help them think through the kinds of summary and context that are important while also working towards articulating what makes a particular source interesting and unique. Next, instead of a “mini-guided-research-paper,” I’ll have the students do a multimedia project, which will correspond with our week on the supernatural, and thus on doctored photographs. At this point, we will also have listened to several episodes of Radiolab. So, I’ll have the students reflecting on how people in different genres work to prove their legitimacy, and will ask them to apply these principles to their own project. The assignment sheet I’ve drawn up is for this assignment and has more information on the mechanics. Currently I’m leaving the door open for either podcasting or textual production accompanied by images, and am having a hard time deciding whether or not to limit it to one or the other.

The rest of the semester will look more traditional. Around mid-term, I’ll ask for a short prospectus for the final paper, and a few weeks later will ask for a research narrative that includes summaries of and engagement with secondary source material. I’ll also ask for a bibliography. Leading up to this point, I will be giving blog assignments that work to develop skills like close reading, posing interesting research questions, summarizing secondary sources, summarizing debates in source materials, finding applicable sources, analyzing rhetorical situations, applying theoretical frameworks to texts, and citation. Although these will begin to fall off as they work towards final projects, I’ll be assigning reflective elements alongside each step of the process. The paper will be due as a draft for group conferences, and then a revised version will be due the penultimate week of class. During finals week, I will ask for a portfolio (the website), including revisions of the final paper, a selection of their five favorite entries in the Archive of Hoaxes we created earlier in the semester, their multimedia project, and a selection of the strongest blog posts, all to be accompanied by a reflective essay in which the student discusses the revision process, the development of writing over the course of the semester (and how it fit with the course outcomes), and suggests what revisions could be made with more time. By using peer-review and group conferences throughout the semester, and by asking for short, informal reflective pieces on the revision and writing process, I hope that, by the end of the semester, my students are able not only to present strengthened writing, but to articulate how that strengthening has occurred, and can continue to occur in other classes.