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Cognition In The Classroom [Introduction to Special Issue]

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Introduction

From Theory and Criticism to Practice: Cognition in the Classroom

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Although “interdisciplinarity” has been a watchword of the many fields arising from poststructuralism, critical approaches influenced by such luminaries as Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault have been in one respect wholeheartedly conventional. Postcolonial theory, feminist theory, and even ecocriticism, for instance, have been loath to abandon the two-cultures assumption, that is, the belief—sometimes tacit, sometimes directly stated—that the sciences and the humanities inhabit incommensurate knowledge domains employing distinct methods and motivated by different epistemological goals. Thus, the predominant trends in critical theory for forty years have largely rejected the notion that the function and meaning of literature might be illuminated by the hard and soft sciences.

In spite of this seemingly constitutional bias against the application of science to literature, a countermovement has kept pace with the traditional attitude that seeks to cordon the humanities off from a present-day psychology. The twin movements of cognitive and evolutionary approaches to literature have demonstrated how findings in the study of human mind and behavior explain many features of literary works, such as the function of narrative and metaphor in textual processing; the capacity to understand characters’ motivations and intentions; the relevance of contemporaneous psychology to work of distant eras; and the correlation

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between evolved predispositions and literary themes, genres, and forms. Although initiated as separate fields in the 1980s and 1990s, cognitive and evolutionary approaches have continued both to unify and to diversify in the past decade.

The strength and increasing range of cognitive criticism and theory is an encouraging sign. However, the fundamental test of any subdiscipline rests on classroom success—for if the ideas and their application cannot be taught, then they fail to flow into the pragmatic stream of knowledge production, instead festering in some brackish byway. Bringing cognitive approaches into the classroom is an invigorating challenge, since scholars in this area draw not on a single model but on a wealth of theory from cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary social science. To one extent or another, then, pedagogical practices must be revised, altered, and adjusted to suit the interdisciplinary content of a particular course and new learning strategies. The purpose of this issue is to present the course designs of faculty across a range of literary specializations and cognitive approaches, with the hope that these examples will inspire our colleagues to new forms of research and teaching.

The issue offers ten articles divided into three sections. There is, certainly, more than significant overlap among the article groupings but, on the whole, the groupings provide a guide to relative emphases. All the articles in Section 1, "The Evolutionary Challenge," make some direct use of evolutionary psychology. The operations of mind and their manifestation in literature is the principle focus of Section 2, "Puzzling the Mind," and a particular emphasis on the impact on pedagogy itself is central to the articles in Section 3, "Pedagogy Re-cognized."

"The Evolutionary Challenge," then, highlights the value of an evolutionary framework for understanding literature. Each of the contributors in this section draws to one degree or another on evolutionary psychology to structure and organize the content of his or her course.

Now, the term "evolutionary psychology" admits of two different uses: in a broad sense, it refers to all study of the mind beginning with the premise that humans are evolved organisms. In a much narrower sense, however, the term refers to the view that the mind is composed largely of mechanisms that evolved to solve specific adaptive problems in the Upper Pleistocene, presumably the major period of human evolution. (Often referred to as Santa Barbara, Swiss Army Knife, or High Church EP, this approach to evolved mind is represented by the work of Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, and Steven Pinker, among others.) Whereas I suspect that all contributors

to this issue acknowledge EP in the broad sense, only a handful here have applied Santa Barbara EP to classroom practice.

In "Jane's Brains: Austen and Cognitive Theory," William Nelles combines evolutionary and cognitive psychology to have students assess the accuracy of theory and to strive for interpretive legitimacy. After using evolutionary theory to challenge reigning attitudes, he aligns research on theory of mind with Austen's texts, highlighting the process of other minds in action at the core of Austen's novels. Even more centrally than Nelles, Michelle Scalise Sugiyama is concerned with the cross-disciplinary legitimacy of theoretical concepts grounded in Santa Barbara EP. Her course, outlined in "Teaching Consilience: A Course Design Template," draws on a wealth of sources in evolutionary psychology to uncover the correlation between central themes in children's literature and evolved priorities.

How successful are such courses? Teaching the conflicts over evolutionary social science's application to literature and preparing students to address them down the road forms the heart of "(R)Evolutionary Teaching: Evolutionary Psychology in the Literature Classroom." In this article coauthored by a professor, Kathryn Duncan, and her one-time student, Cecilia Bolich, the former discusses the pitfalls of teaching evolutionary theory in a small, religiously oriented university and the latter, while acknowledging—even championing—her greatly expanded theoretical perspective as a result of the course, underscores the ongoing difficulty of adopting a Darwinian approach as a graduate student.

If the mind is its own place, shaping how and what we know, it is a complicated one at that. The startling complexity of the mind's operations both represented in literature and active in textual processing is thrown into relief by cognitive psychology. The first two articles in Section 2, "Puzzling the Mind," demonstrate the value of bringing theory of mind (ToM) into the classroom. ToM—the view that humans have beliefs, intentions, and desires and that they become aware of and try to decipher the beliefs, intentions, and desires of others in a reliably developing fashion—reveals the functions of speech and gesture often so meticulously recounted in literature. Clint Machann's "Teaching *Middlemarch* with a Focus on Theory of Mind" provides a soon-to-be-implemented course unit that applies ToM to George Eliot's novel. Introducing upper-level undergraduates to the concept early in the semester through lecture and selected readings in key cognitive literary theorists, Machann homes in on the cognitive concepts as the course turns to *Middlemarch*, using the psychological theory to enhance the centrality of nonverbal communication. Drawing from the same research

base, Lisa Zunshine describes a special seminar in cognitive narratology for advanced-level students conducted at Aarhus University. She focuses particularly on the value of ToM as a collaborative learning tool. Zunshine selected Edith Wharton's "Xingu," a story about which she had reservations, for this seminar. After Zunshine set the stage with readings and lectures in ToM and social cognition, the seminar group collaboratively located the source of sociocognitive complexity in the story. Furthermore, an exercise asking the students to write the story's "missing" scenes provided additional insights about the choices Wharton made and their relation to ToM. Like Nelles's article, then, which provides a bridge between EP and ToM, Machann's and Zunshine's show how literature is embedded in the complex operation of human social mind.

What our knowledge of the mind—or, more precisely, our presumed knowledge of the mind—reveals to us about aesthetic objects is certainly various, and articles by Isabel Jaén and Frederick Aldama suggest how this variety can reinvigorate a second-language as well as a first-language literature classroom. Adopting the method of cognitive historicism, which places literary works in the context of contemporaneous psychology, Jaén describes a semester-long Spanish-language course in *Don Quixote* that intersperses readings of the primary text with the psychological theory of Cervantes's day. Jaén contends that through this methodology students achieve a more cohesive understanding of the text, and she furthermore emphasizes how a process-centered pedagogy strengthens the class's contextual understanding of the work. Frederick Aldama chooses his text from the other end of the spectrum, generically and historically speaking. Demonstrating the value of numerous scientific and narrative theories to the interpretation of flash fiction, Aldama highlights how an extremely short text has myriad cognitive dimensions. Such a brief primary text is an excellent teaching tool, one that enables students to arrive at connections themselves and is amenable to instruction at various levels.

Whereas almost all the contributors to this issue indicate that their pedagogical strategies were altered by the logic of interdisciplinary teaching, those authors fitting into the issue's last group, "Pedagogy Re-cognized," especially focus on the transformation of teaching practices as a result of cognitive approaches. Literary scholars assume that theory is primarily appropriate to the upper-level classroom, but Merja Polvinen, in "Engaged Reading as Mental Work," points out that an emphasis on textual details on one hand and continuity between reading and human thought and feeling on the other provides a balance for students between analytical rigor and personal engagement. Combining cognitive narratology with science fiction and fantasy, Polvinen brings to the fore the concept of literature as engaged mental work, wherein texts provide dynamic patterns for readers to act out. In "Cognitive Phenology: An Evolving Approach to the Challenges of Teaching Environmental Literature," Colin Irvine relates how cognitive theory has informed his approach to an environmental literature class. By placing readings in the theory alongside the primary works and unorthodox environmental challenges that encourage student sensitivity to technology dependence and engagement with the nonhuman natural world, Irvine stimulates self-reflection, prodding students to analyze the growth of their knowledge over the progress of the course.

If Polvinen's and Irvine's articles both point to a paradoxical result of interdisciplinarity—that, though intellectually challenging, it affirms the human connection with literature while allowing for greater analytical distance—the final entry in the issue, recounting the restructuring of a specific course unit, centers on a shift in course content. In "Where Readers Meet *The Road*: On a Class Project Integrating Personality with the Evolutionary Study of Literature," David Michelson describes a class project that assesses, on the basis of personality, the likelihood that a specific reader will enjoy the novel. After training his students in the five-factor model of personality, Michelson assigns each an unidentified classmate and asks the students to explain the self-reports of students based on their profiles, which are given to them in individual packets. This last article, then, shows how empirical research can offer a new element in literary study.

When I began thinking about proposing this issue, I did not have any notion about the number and range of contributions I might expect. Even though many of us have been conducting cognitive and evolutionary research for quite some time, the opportunity to design interdisciplinary courses, given the strained circumstances under which the humanities now labor, is not always available. The range of ideas and applications presented here, along with the thoughtful refiguring of pedagogy that necessarily attends it, shows that recent psychology has entered the stream of knowledge to which the literature classroom contributes. Since these fields may one day tell us why humans create art, the shift to a broader, more interdisciplinary curriculum in literary studies should be welcomed and cultivated, for through these initiatives, the arts and humanities may well reassert their relevance in the academy.

NOTE

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