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Creating Knowledge: The Literary Dictionary Assignment

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Abstract: A literary dictionary assignment provides honors students with an understanding of the ways knowledge shifts and changes over time as well as an opportunity to create knowledge rather than just recall correct answers.

Keywords: teaching methods; literary terms; etymology; Graff, Gerald, 1937– ; Fairmont State University (WV)–Honors Program

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For honors students, reciting the correct definitions of key terms—regardless of discipline—is generally simple. Where they struggle is understanding the ways such definitions may shift over time, shedding or accruing meanings with changes in usage, context, and critical perspective. To allow students to engage with such changes and to continue a tradition of “teaching the conflicts,” I have students create a dictionary of literary terms over the course of the semester. Though Gerald Graff argued for more complex issues, his larger point is worth recalling, namely that knowledge is not a fixed, immutable thing transferred from professor to student and then recited by the student to the professor in an endless loop. Honors students, many of whom struggle under the weight of perfectionism, need especially to understand language as fluid and malleable rather than as fixed and invariable.

The assignment itself is relatively simple and can be expanded or contracted depending on the needs of the class. In its current iteration, students sign up for a literary term from a list I provide at the beginning of the semester. Each student must then find three separate definitions of their chosen term. I require them to use a dictionary of literary terms from the university library

so that they learn the term's traditional definition. Next, they must consult the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, which allows them to survey the term's etymology and usage history. Finally, they must consult a freely accessible online dictionary or encyclopedia (Wikipedia is acceptable) to provide them with an overview of the popular understanding of the term.

Once they have collected three definitions, they must come up with their own definition of the term based on these definitions, class discussions, and their own prior knowledge. They must also provide two examples of the term from two different literary texts, most often from our class readings, but they may also choose examples from other texts. They compile this information in a brief essay and submit it for my review, after which they present their findings to the class. Finally, they upload their definition and examples into a class Google document. This document serves not only as a class resource but also as a living document to which we can return and amend definitions and add examples, as necessary.

In addition to the Google document, refreshed for each subsequent class, class discussions after presentation and instructor feedback are necessary to bring students into thoughtful conversations. Students are keen to understand which terms seem to remain relatively stable and which have shifted. One term that can lead to interesting discussions is *alliteration*. For example, Wikipedia defines *alliteration* as “the conspicuous repetition of identical initial consonant sounds in successive or closely associated syllables within a group of words” (par 1), whereas both the *OED Online* and *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* omit the requirement that these consonants be initial sounds, though the latter notes that this is “usually” the case (par 1). A discussion of why this definition has shifted can lead fruitfully to other areas of interest in the honors English classroom, such as the debate over prescriptivism versus descriptivism.

However, this assignment is not limited to the English literature classroom. I have adapted it for my introductory composition classes as a way of teaching logical fallacies, and it would be particularly fruitful in the health sciences classroom, where terminology shifts with new discoveries and changing social mores. For instance, students might report on the changes in terminology affecting patients with intellectual disabilities, leading to discussions of ethics in health care. The assignment can be extended to other domains as well, such as legal studies, gender studies, and computer science. The basic outlines of the assignment are endlessly flexible; it could be converted to a group project, altered to expand or delete the written component,

or modified to allow students to find and evaluate their own research sources, a skill in which even our best honors students often need more practice. The assignment could also be expanded to have students research neologisms or current slang, and students could create their own words.

The primary benefit of this assignment is introducing students to the ways knowledge can shift and change over time, between cultures, and by experts and novices alike. Such shifts occur especially in language, which is not governed by a set of inflexible laws but only by the limits of imagination. This assignment thus allows honors students to move beyond the rigidity of recalling the right answer and toward the adventure of creating knowledge.

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