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Special Issue:

Teaching Nineteenth-Century Literature and Gender in the Twenty-First-Century Classroom

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**Bridging the Divide:
Teaching Nineteenth-Century Literature and Gender in
the Twenty-First-Century Classroom**

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<1> In the 2001 inaugural issue of *Pedagogy*, George Levine argues that “English studies is a nation divided” as he laments the professional and institutional forces that sever “our work as teachers [from] our work as scholars” (6). In order to repair this rift, Levine suggests that “writing about teaching must become as central to professional life as writing about Renaissance poetry, Derrida, Hegel, or popular culture” (17). Levine’s advice seems to have been well heeded, and in the fifteen years following publication of his essay, the scholarship of teaching and learning has flourished—a trend perhaps most obviously signaled by *Pedagogy*’s prominence in the field. Nonetheless, much of Levine’s critique sadly still applies to higher education today. In a passage that could be describing the academic culture of 2016, Levine notes that “Big stars get big fees to come and lecture. Part-timers get small fees and no health benefits for hundreds of hours of teaching and grading papers” (16). And, even as tenure-track research jobs have become ever more elusive, graduate student training in pedagogy remains distressingly limited.⁽¹⁾ It seems that the cultural shift that Levine argued for, one in which “practitioners would rather publish in [*College English*] than [*Critical Inquiry*]” (15), has not yet happened.

<2> In many ways then, English studies remains a “nation divided.” Overshadowed by the scholarship dedicated to literary analysis, the “serious literature about the teaching of literature”—especially when it comes to period-specific literature—needs expansion (Levine, “Foreword” xi). This is not to suggest, however, that nineteenth-century scholars have unilaterally neglected to write about teaching or pedagogy. Indeed, lively discussions on such topics can be found throughout our field. For instance, the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, *The Victorian Review*, *Victorian Studies*, and the *Victorians Institute Journal* have published pedagogy-focused articles and issues, while monographs and edited volumes

such as Sheridan Blau's *The Literature Workshop*, Elaine Showalter's *Teaching Literature*, and Tanya Agathocleous and Ann Dean's *Teaching Literature* have all discussed how to teach specific nineteenth-century texts. Still, discussions of pedagogical approaches to teaching Romantic and Victorian literature remain relatively rare. By focusing exclusively on such approaches, this issue foregrounds an overlooked subject and provides nineteenth-century teacher-scholars with essays specifically geared towards their specialized interests.

<3> Even rarer than discussions of pedagogical approaches to teaching nineteenth-century literature are discussions of pedagogical approaches to teaching nineteenth-century gender studies.⁽²⁾ Though some sustained pedagogical discussions of nineteenth-century literature and gender do exist, they tend to focus on strategies for teaching specific women writers (Barrett Browning, Brontë, Rossetti, and so on).⁽³⁾ While such analyses are certainly useful, they point to only one possible way in which our work and our courses consider Romantic and Victorian constructions of gender. To some extent, the relative elision of gender from nineteenth-century-focused pedagogical scholarship is surprising. From Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's classic *Madwoman in the Attic* to Nancy Armstrong's landmark *Desire and Domestic Fiction* to Caroline Levine's reevaluation of formalist techniques in *Forms*, considerations of gender, even if only obliquely, enter into many (if not most) critical discussions of nineteenth-century literature. Our issue, thus, provides a much needed pedagogical corollary to what is a major theoretical focus of the field. The essays in this issue consider a myriad of topics—ranging from masculine representations of the feminine to global feminist dynamics to the gendered implications of syllabus construction—in order to showcase the conceptual range that gender studies broadly conceived can inspire in our teaching. By providing “a serious literature about the teaching of literature” that centers on nineteenth-century gender studies, this issue not only widens the possibilities of what can be considered legitimate academic scholarship in our field but also demonstrates that such scholarship can be finely focused and theoretically informed.

<4> The act of teaching, thus, inherently negotiates and renegotiates, considers and reconsiders not only critical theories of gender but also theories of time, place, identity, and textuality. To provide just one example, teaching prompts temporal theorization. Though on the one hand, with its reliance on schedules, calendars, and institutional rhythms, teaching can enforce what Elizabeth Freeman describes as “chromonormativity”—the regimented organization of linear time (3); on the other hand, teaching necessarily produces productive temporal dislocations. When students and faculty are absorbed in analyzing the Romantic and Victorian periods, temporal thresholds get crossed: twenty-first-century necessities of pace overrun nineteenth-century notions of seriality; twenty-first-century geopolitics illuminate the goals and consequence of the nineteenth-century imperial endeavor; twenty-first-century gender constructions replace and sometimes replicate nineteenth-century gender ideals; nineteenth-century formal concerns often clash with twenty-first-century aesthetics. Teaching—even teaching that remains informed by either strictly historicist or by strictly formalist approaches—creates dissonance that can “gum up the works of . . . normative structures” (Freeman 173). We linger on this point not because we consider temporality to be a concept that is only theorized in the classroom nor because we believe that the classroom theorizes temporality more keenly than it does other concepts. Rather, we focus on temporality as representative of the ways in which the classroom encourages us to engage with

some of the most abstract theoretical concepts of our field. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks famously suggests that “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (12). To this we would like to add that the classroom remains the most dynamic space of critical negotiation in the academy.

<5> In seeking to bridge the divide between scholarship and teaching, the essays in this issue not only widen the possibilities of what can be considered compelling scholarship on the nineteenth century but also suggest that humanities-based pedagogies can enhance the scholarship of teaching and learning. In most current scholarship, claims around the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches such as “active learning,” “collaborative learning,” “cooperative learning,” and “high impact practices” are typically grounded in empirical methodologies.⁽⁴⁾ In this age of assessment, the demand for “evidence-based” teaching or “data-driven” curriculum design reveals a bias in favor of experimental research that follows the scientific method. While we do not want to discount those methods of knowledge-making, we do want to enhance the sometimes methodologically restrictive scholarship of teaching and learning to include humanities-based epistemologies. Each discipline desires to create knowledge, but how they create validated knowledge is shaped by differing, though at times overlapping, assumptions, values, and beliefs. In contrast to many scientific epistemologies, humanities-based epistemologies lead us to learn more about humans’ subjective experiences with aesthetics, ethics, morality, imagination, other people, and ourselves. Humanities-based epistemologies show us the ways in which all experience and knowledge are always “contextual and relational, and therefore also historical and even personal” (Franke 448).

<6> To illustrate this point, and in keeping with our journal’s historical scope, we offer an analogy in the form of a nineteenth-century scientific controversy. The platypus first arrived in England in 1799 thanks to John Hunter, who shipped a specimen back from Australia in a cask of spirits (Moyal 4-5). Later that same year, zoologist George Shaw published the first scientific description of the platypus in *The Naturalist’s Miscellany* declaring that the animal’s “extraordinary” body with “the perfect resemblance of the beak of a Duck engrafted on the head of a quadruped...naturally excites the idea of some deceptive preparation by artificial means” (237). Originally discredited as a hoax, this paradoxical creature that defied existing taxonomies with its blend of mammalian, reptilian, and aquatic characteristics was the center of heated scientific debate for more than a century. Ann Moyal recounts how these debates put into question the Linnaean system of biological classification, the dominant system for organizing the natural world. The leading and competing European and British naturalists of the nineteenth century, including Georges Cuvier, Richard Owen, and Charles Darwin, used the platypus to support their narratives about a range of scientific dispositions, such as creationism, evolution, and natural selection. Thus, when existing scientific taxonomies and methodologies failed, narrative—a humanities-based methodology—propelled the conversations forward. In turn, these narratives created avenues for new and further scientific research. While scientific disciplines seek replicability and consensus-building, humanities-based disciplines produce new knowledge through paradoxes and multiplicities: the humanities not only fill the spaces between empirically-derived data points but also trouble and transform how we interpret that data.

<7> As the curious case of the platypus shows, taken all together, the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences can bring a richer, more nuanced understanding to the topic at hand. Along these lines, and because the scientific method has dominated the scholarship of teaching and learning in recent years, we purposely do not include the types of empirical assessments represented through tables, graphs, and charts that borrow from scientific disciplines. While such quantitative and qualitative tools can certainly offer compelling insights to inform teaching theory and practice, so too can humanities-based methods. Through methods such as narrative, analysis, reflection, preservation, artistic creation, and interpretation, humanities scholars invite their students to become practitioners of their disciplinary epistemologies. To that end, the four articles included in this issue demonstrate what the scholarship of teaching and learning looks like when employing humanities-based methodologies in the pursuit of knowledge. These teacher-scholars embrace teaching as experiential learning and model how teachers and students can learn by doing. Thinking about teaching, as these essays so ably show, prompts reexamination not only of pedagogies but also of the texts and theoretical stances that define contemporary Romantic and Victorian studies. Whether exploring distant reading in light of syllabus construction, cross-historical gender formations, literary canonicity in the digital age, or global feminisms, these essays showcase the inseparability of academic work from teaching practice.

<8> In the opening essay, “Form, Gender, Pedagogy: Shaping and Engaging the Period Survey,” Ryan Fong interrogates the ubiquitous survey course in light of Franco Moretti’s “descriptors of the ‘shapes, relations, [and] structures’ that are most typically used to organize literary history” (par. 5). Fong examines two popular ways instructors structure survey courses—the historical arc and the thematically organized “spokes on a wheel”—to theorize how the uses and limitations of each form inevitably teach students about nineteenth-century studies as a discipline. Fong specifically challenges fellow nineteenth-century and gender studies scholars to examine current teaching practices to identify the ways that the survey course might unwittingly undermine or reinforce both the field’s challenges and contributions to conceptualizing boundaries, borders, and binaries. Fong encourages those who teach survey courses to make transparent to students the forms that structure their learning experiences along with the forms that shape the nineteenth-century landscape, especially as they pertain to gender and sexuality. In so doing, students engage critically with nineteenth-century and gender studies, enabling the transformation of themselves as learners and of the field more largely.

<9> As Fong examines the formal conventions of course syllabi, he implicitly grapples with the institutional and disciplinary tensions that put pressure on instructors as they organize courses. In the issue’s following essay, “Practicing Canon-Formation in the Digital Classroom,” Livia Arndal Woods makes these institutional and disciplinary tensions explicit as she calls attention to the “canon wars” that often rock our discipline. Arndal Woods points to the ways that feminist scholars in particular have contributed to the “undoing and doing” of the literary canon and gender by questioning existing boundaries and remapping the terrain. Arndal Woods suggests that the digital humanities offer a pedagogical “in” for opening up the canon in the undergraduate classroom. She demonstrates how undergraduate students can be brought into disciplinary knowledge and heritage making by creating and expanding upon digital records of noncanonical texts. Arndal Woods targets Wikipedia, a canon in

its own right of collected and categorized knowledge, and shows how its open access structure creates the ideal opportunity for helping undergraduate students experience the work of humanities scholars.

<10> In the third essay, “Out of the Pasts: Teaching Sensation Fiction Through the Lens of Film Noir,” Nora Gilbert calls our attention to yet another fundamental form that shapes how we teach and research nineteenth-century and gender studies: genre. She uses as a case study a literature and gender course she designed titled “Women Behaving Badly: Victorian Sensation Fiction and Hollywood Film Noir” to have students think critically “about the ways in which expectations and conventions can be seen to construct and superintend” both genre and gender (par. 4). Gilbert models how the divide between scholarship and teaching that Fong and Arndal Woods so aptly call attention to can be bridged. By creating a dialectic course structure that alternates between examples of sensation fiction and film noir, she and her students can explore, grapple with, and, ultimately, make meaning of the concept of female transgression as it exists within both genres and the corresponding social processes informing those genres—a conversation she notes has yet to appear in the published record.

<11> In the final essay of this issue, “Liberating the Classroom: The Artistic Teaching of Gender in Nineteenth-Century Literature Courses at An-Najah National University,” Mohammed Hamdan shares his experiences as a male instructor at a Palestinian university teaching nineteenth-century and gender studies to a class of all female Muslim students. His pedagogical goal is to facilitate his students’ liberation as critical thinkers by linking “the feminine self, fictional female characters, and the real world outside” (par. 1). Through a framework of global feminism, Hamdan calls attention to the very real risk of having students engage critically with ideas about gender that are in conflict with their familial, religious, and social traditions. But, situating discussions of gender within nineteenth-century fiction creates an opportunity for students to directly and indirectly debate and make sense of potential social injustices as they pertain to literary characters as well as to themselves. To achieve a classroom space that encourages all students to engage in critical thinking and knowledge making, Hamdan uses a pedagogical approach that he characterizes as “artistic.” Explicitly engaging humanities-based methodologies, Hamdan creates a learning experience rooted in critical thinking and academic expression—a learning experience that ultimately inspires liberation.

<12> Overall, our issue moves in various arcs—from the domestic to the international, from the theoretical to the practical, from the canonical to the noncanonical—inviting nimble readings of and between essays. In other words, these essays create meaning not only in and of themselves but also in their silent relation to one another. No matter how blatant or subtle, however, meaning is not just generated by content: it is generated by process. With this in mind, we want to close this introduction by taking the slightly unusual step of describing our editorial process. Inspired by the exciting possibilities that occur at the nexus of scholarship and pedagogy, we included undergraduates in the entire process of editing this issue. Involving students, we felt, would not only benefit them by providing a valuable learning experience but also benefit the issue itself. By ensuring that the student perspective was included within the very organizational fabric of the issue, we acknowledge the multidirectionality of the educational process. After all, as Showalter points out, teaching relies on much more than instructor intentionality; successful course design relies on acknowledging that students are key players in a course’s success (35-37).

<13> With respect to the multidirectional nature of education, during the spring semester of 2016, we worked together to provide students with a truly cooperative experience: one that was cross-institutional, cross-departmental, and, ultimately, peer-driven. Lara Karpenko taught an English class at Carroll University that served as the editorial staging ground of this special issue, while Lauri Dietz provided outside expertise, support, and copy-editors.⁽⁵⁾ In the paragraphs that follow, Lara Karpenko describes her experience in designing and leading a class that focused heavily on peer education:

I designed the course—solely dedicated to producing this particular issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*—with two goals: first, to produce a high quality issue focused on pedagogy and nineteenth-century gender studies and, second, to involve students at every stage of the production process. Though I have long been invested in peer-led pedagogies, teaching this class felt like a leap of faith and I initially worried that perhaps my two goals would conflict. Happily, my initial (slight) worries were completely unfounded. The process of teaching synergized with the process of editing in such a way that not only were the course goals achieved but superseded.

In order to facilitate an experience that was at once structured enough to ensure our editorial goals were met yet open enough to encourage student engagement, I appointed an Undergraduate Managing Editor (UME). On the first day of class, I announced that an interested student could serve as the UME—a role that would require considerable leadership. Interested students applied; the remaining students, along with Lauri and I, interviewed the prospective UMEs and voted as to who should receive the position. Ultimately, the class “hired” sophomore Linda Braus. Though Braus’s duties were wide-ranging and describing her extensive duties would go beyond the scope of this paper, I wish to take a moment to describe one of her key responsibilities: the process we observed with article submissions. For each article that was submitted, Braus removed all identifying information and distributed the article to the class. She and I would then meet before class to discuss the submission extensively, and, that evening, she would lead class discussion as they cooperatively evaluated the submission. While I frequently participated in discussion, after the third week of class, I was never central to the discussion. Instead, students looked to Braus and to one another in order to develop responses to the essays that were sensitive, perceptive, and mature.⁽⁶⁾

I describe some of Braus’s responsibilities in detail to emphasize how crucial the UME was to the success of the course and to the production of the issue. Woven into almost every aspect of course leadership, the UME provided a necessary bridge between the students and the instructor/outside expert. Of course, a great deal of this is due to Braus’s outstanding work in her UME role. Responsible, introspective, and sincerely motivated by a desire to produce an excellent issue, Braus quite simply could not have provided a stronger example of peer leadership. But beyond Braus’s individual excellence, the UME as a figure helped emphasize student ownership of the issue and helped transform the students into a community of invested editors.

In many ways, a unique aspect of the course is that it produced a specific, discrete product—a product that, courtesy of the journal’s open access format, exists for public consumption. Certainly, as we have asserted throughout this introduction, I am confident that this issue showcases innovative academic work; ultimately, however, the issue’s quality will be left for readers to judge. What the reader cannot see, however, is the almost palpable excitement with which students approached the course and the profound sense of community that the format of the course engendered. Though this course was taught from 6:00-7:50 PM at night, students regularly stayed behind well after class was over to discuss the issue and the articles, and share further ideas with one another. When I was ill and had to miss a day, students met anyway to continue the business of the course.

Never in my decade plus of teaching have I seen students so engaged that they elected to meet and work without the instructor. The student enthusiasm for the course enlivened every class session and helped make this class a true pleasure to teach. Nearly every day resulted in a transformative learning experience for me as a teacher and (hopefully) for the students, indicating the power of cooperative learning.

<14> To some extent, this course was a happy accident: the results of the right project coming in at the right time with the right mix of students. Admittedly, students cannot and should not always assume this great of a leadership role over class. Still, we write this introduction partly to advocate that instructors locate moments in which peer educators can be incorporated into the daily operations of an undergraduate class and as burgeoning members of our disciplines. We have previously argued in [“The 21st Century Digital Student”](#) that instructors and institutions should promote undergraduate research opportunities in the humanities; in this current project, we expand that argument to make the case for including authentic undergraduate experiences with research, writing, and publishing in the humanities. By making the diverse work found within humanities disciplines more transparent, we demonstrate the value and place of the humanities in higher education and, in so doing, help create the next generation of humanities teachers and scholars. Based on our experiences working on this journal with this impressive group of students, we are optimistic that the future of the humanities is vibrant and dynamic.

<15> Given this, and before this issue proceeds to our four featured articles, our next selection, “The Other Side of the Desk,” describes the student experience of editing this issue and of taking the course. Written by the majority of the Undergraduate Editorial Assistants (fifteen authors in all!) the essay emphasizes just how deeply students can think about pedagogical matters if given the opportunity.⁽⁷⁾ We began this introduction by reiterating Levine’s critique of the divide that exists between the work we do as teachers and the work we do as scholars. We end with a description of the collaborative process that made this issue possible. By bookending the introduction in this way, we suggest that cooperative education can help repair the rift that so falsely divides the professional life of the teacher-scholar. Involving undergraduate students as active partners in the classroom not only incentivizes students to participate more vigorously in their own education but also turns the classroom into a humanities research laboratory—one rich with opportunities to theorize and retheorize the moments that render nineteenth-century gender studies still so vital in the twenty-first century.

Endnotes

(1)For instance, Colander and Zhuo point out that many graduate students, particularly those from “lower-ranked programs,” tend to find positions “at schools where the primary focus is on undergraduate teaching . . .” (142). In regards to the lack of graduate training in pedagogy, please see Ball, Gleason, and Peterson (110).[\(^\)](#)

(2)To give just a partial list, please see the following: Helena Michie, “Teaching Archives”; Paul Fyfe, “How to Not Read a Victorian Novel”; Johanna M. Smith, “Teaching Canonically”; and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, “Teaching Victorian Illustrated Poetry: Hands-on Material Culture.” Of particular note, please see Jennifer Phegley’s excellent special issue of the *Victorians Institute Journal*: “Teaching Victorian Literature in the Twenty-First Century.” We should note here that the similarities in our titles is purely accidental. Further, while Phegley’s issue is technologically focused and does not consider gender in any particular depth, our issue considers a range of experiences particular to twenty-first century teaching and concentrates explicitly on gender studies.[\(^\)](#)

(3)For instance, see Sue Lonoff, “Bronte Scholarship: Retrieval, Criticism, Pedagogy”; Melissa Schaub, “The Margins of the Dramatic Monologue: Teaching Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’”; and the Jeanne Moskal and Shannon R. Wooden edited collection, *Teaching British Women Writers 1750-1900*.[\(^\)](#)

(4)Please see Millis on “active learning,” Barkley, Cross, and Major on “collaborative learning,” Millis and Collett on “cooperative learning,” and Kuh on “high impact practices.”[\(^\)](#)

(5)We would also like to extend much thanks and appreciation to the staff members at DePaul’s University Center for Writing-based Learning for their invaluable help with the late-stages of copy-editing: Amanda Hannah, Darian Hogens, Hannah Lee, Rachel Pomeroy, and Hana Yoo.[\(^\)](#)

(6)I should also note here that in order to respect standard editorial procedure, and in order to allow students space for contemplative honesty, all students—with the exception of the UME—served as blind reviewers. Only Linda, Lauri, and I knew the identity of the authors pre-acceptance. Further, while all students submitted extensive essay reviews and while Braus would condense those reviews into an Executive Summary, only Lauri and I were privy to any editorial communications with authors. Finally, though we were certainly influenced by the student reviews—and editors should be influenced by their reviewers—Lauri and I were solely responsible for writing all final evaluations and for communicating the final decisions to the authors.[\(^\)](#)

(7)Though there were sixteen students in the class, one student was unable to participate in writing the introduction.[\(^\)](#)

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