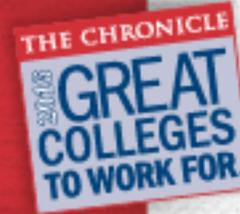


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Feeding English Majors in the 21st Century

A new course teaches undergraduates in the humanities how to market themselves for the new economic normal



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By Helene Meyers | JANUARY 25, 2016

What if, rather than offer platitudes about the value of the liberal arts to students who are justifiably anxious about their economic future, we actually taught them to market themselves and their degrees with integrity?

What if, alongside teaching our disciplines, we taught students to identify and articulate the usefulness of their educational choices?

Those questions led me to offer a new course this past fall called "Novel English Majors." I developed it because I want to make sure that my students can literally feed themselves and their loved ones without starving their souls.

The idea was to analyze the representation of literary types in contemporary fiction and learn how the skills associated with that analysis can lead to fulfilling and economically viable lives for nonfictional English majors — i.e., my students. Throughout the semester, they demonstrated not only their hunger for, but also their creative uses of, such an education. The experiment has become my modest proposal for how we can recast the crisis in the humanities as an opportunity to show the real-world value of non-STEM disciplines.

I know the phrase "real-world value" is anathema to many humanities professors. After

all, once we start talking about real-world value, aren't we conceding that education is primarily vocational training? And accepting that students are really a particular species of consumer, and that English (or philosophy or history) really can't be expected to compete on the open market with, say, business or computer science or engineering?

Perhaps. But I prefer to think that we are being responsible teachers who understand that education and vocation, students and consumers, English and engineering need not be mutually exclusive. We should be preparing students to cherish — rather than regret — their seemingly impractical choice of a college major.

We all want students not only to learn an academic discipline but also to make it their own.

My own sense of responsibility on this front has been growing over the past decade, in part because of a stagnant and profoundly competitive economy.

In the past, I could be assured that even my slacker students — who were often quite smart and engaged, though a bit absent-minded (like too many of their professors) — would land on their feet and be gainfully employed. However, over the past decade or so, I watched some of my very best students spend their last semester writing brilliant essays and then have to take dead-end jobs and

live with their parents because they couldn't afford rent of their own.

Our least economically privileged students are most at risk. Their safety net is minimal to nonexistent, and many of them face loan debt soon after graduation. Unless we start acknowledging that many students and their parents literally cannot afford to oppose education as vocation, we will see the humanities become an exclusive province of economic elites. While encouraging our students to be intellectual and academic explorers, we also need to instruct them on how to think about their postgraduate lives — and sooner rather than later.

All of which led to "Novel English Majors." The learning goals for the course include the decidedly unsexy "connecting the skills and mindsets of literary analysis to diverse career paths."

We began the semester with David Lodge's *Nice Work*, a novel in which a feminist English professor shadows a captain of industry and both find their stereotypes of the other upended. Some savvy students noted that in fiction and reality, factories and universities alike consider the bottom line extensively, despite their different vocabularies for such concerns. (Lodge has much fun with administrative memos in his novel.)

Later in the semester, students had to organize their own shadow schemes — by first spending time with someone in a field or job they were interested in, and then writing up the experience and presenting it in class. Grant writers, archivists, translators, food bloggers, bookmobile librarians, stockbrokers, and restaurant managers generously provided their time and professional stories to students, who not only learned about jobs that many never knew existed, but also worked through their fear of cold-calling and cold-emailing strangers. Students also learned not to take research skills for granted, as their shadowees noticed and were favorably impressed by high levels of pre-meeting preparation.

Not taking skills for granted became a mantra for the course, spurred in part by Katharine Brooks's guide, *You Majored in What? Mapping Your Path From Chaos to Career*. Former English majors gave talks — through class visits or via Skype — on their careers, which helped associate the major with a narrative of professional plenitude rather than scarcity.

We had real-world examples in class, too. The director of a local nonprofit health foundation talked about the challenges of getting social-service agencies to collaborate, and credited her literary training with teaching her to locate seemingly "disparate, unrelated stories within a larger story."

Late in the semester, students collectively mapped their experiences from their major and came up with an impressive list of skills. It included the usual suspects — writing and research

— as well as the ability to connect the small with the big picture, to manage a project and meet deadlines, to both listen and speak, and to create and innovate. When I asked students what surprised them most about the list, one of them excitedly blurted out, "These are all marketable skills." We all want students not only to learn an academic discipline but also to make it their own. That happened in novel ways during the course of the semester.

Students also recognized the need to develop digital skills in order to succeed in the 21st century. A class visit from a digital humanist caused more than a few students to admit their own technophobia, derived in part from their fear that the digital world will replace the printed words that they hold dear. In the discussion that ensued, one student said she had come to realize that — just as film adaptations can complement rather than supersede their literary predecessors — digital skills can coexist with other forms of

We can continue to offer professorial platitude, or we can update the curriculum.

literacy.

An assigned [article](#) from Forbes, "That 'Useless' Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech's Hottest Ticket," drove home the point that if students have learned to connect diverse texts and traditions, they very likely have developed the skills needed to be liaisons between software creators and end users. In short, the course bridged a particular form of the digital divide for some English majors.

Those of us who profess culturally beleaguered subjects are rightly concerned about the educational zeitgeist. The real or imagined perception that students (and parents and administrators) are voting against the humanities with their feet and their tuition dollars is galvanizing us.

Yet it seems to me that our first outreach needs to be to those students who are voting for us with their feet. They are following their passions and their instincts, but they are also buffeted by the culture, by their parents, and by their peers. Even as they resist a STEM-centered party line, they cannot help internalizing the worry expressed by a character in Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* that English majors "were pursuing university degrees doing something no different from what they had done in first grade: reading stories. English was what people who didn't know what to major in majored in."

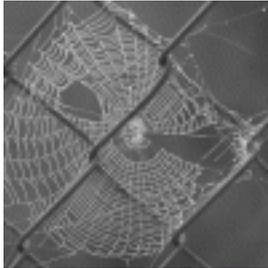
We as faculty can continue to outsource our students' futures to other offices on the campus. We can continue to offer professorial platitudes, which arguably function as a contemporary version of "let them eat cake," about the value of the liberal arts. Or we can update the curriculum to include specific narratives to help prepare humanities majors for the new economic normal.

As I had hoped, "Novel English Majors" enriched students' notions about the possible lives open to them. As a result, some relinquished the idea of graduate school in English as an attractive default option. To be sure, Rachel Kadish's *Tolstoy Lied*, a novel that depicts a bitter tenure battle and an emotionally vulnerable graduate student caught in the academic crossfire, played its part in that outcome.

However, tales from alumni who earned a master's and then decided that the Ph.D. would be their road not taken, were also powerful narratives for these undergraduates to hear. Since I am a graduate adviser who has increasingly become the voice of doom, I was relieved to be able to provide an undergraduate version of the alt-ac narrative. And the fact that so many alumni expressed how helpful this course would have been to them made me wish that I had seen the need for it earlier in my career.

Helene Meyers is a professor of English and holds an endowed chair at Southwestern University, in Texas.

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aloofbooks · 7 days ago

Pretty rational article.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



profgjay · 7 days ago

Any chance you could post the syllabus?

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woodsn → profgjay · 6 days ago

I would really appreciate this as well. I developed and teach Career Development in Psychology the same reasons. It has become my most professionally satisfying course.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



pwstauffer · 7 days ago

We have to take care of the bills, don't we? ...My dream leaving high school was to be a professor at a teaching English. I had enough dull professors in undergrad school, though, that I wanted to do better. I bachelor's and completed secondary school certification--the forge of the public schools built my teach Vocation? Sure, nothing disreputable about it. Noble? maybe not as much...I spent 11 years teaching school students, but was still making less than \$30k and needed to take care of my family, one a disab Parleyed my master's in English lit into a technical writing job (yup, another vocation) that paid \$10k mc with no previous tech writing experience. Hammered out gov't records at NASA for 15 years. Noble? na both, because of the master's, taught as an adjunct for local community college--dream partially achiev vocations don't last--layoffs in aerospace resulted in less need for my kind of work. The college, howev couple openings, so I applied and they hired me. Substantial pay cut, but better than unemployment. Th

working to illustrate is that the intellectual skills I got from my English lit focus of study at my state unive ones I could use to take care of my people, whether in teaching those skills to others or in applying ther teaching work. The Noble part is in doing the best one can with what one has, not in the number of initia name or the list of publications...or the selectivity of one's institution...

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Athos → pwstauffer · 6 days ago

I went a similar route. Some technical writing gigs paid well. I don't know how much of an oppor these days since much of it is outsourced.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



ddownsarnold · 7 days ago

From an English major who didn't do the Ph.D. and has always found satisfying work -- Bless you!!!

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Kirsten Hansen · 7 days ago

I wasn't an English major (a minor though) but my degree was in Religious Studies. I did a MA and ther PhD but chose not to finish. Then I had to find a job. This is exactly the sort of thing that is needed all also makes sense of all the skills students are learning in any class, especially if they take it as an elec discovered, with help from a friend, that I had all sorts of skills that would be useful in all sorts of jobs or out how to talk about them as skills.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sandy Brown Jensen · 6 days ago

Retiring now, I always said if a magic mirror had shown me that my love of literature and writing would years of adjunct teaching of Composition 101, I would have run screaming back into science...or just al else. I paid dearly for my inability to look down the corridor of time to the current pathetic condition of the

teaching profession. Your class should have been required for all English majors from 1972 onward. Give your important innovation!

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

mzmaccalarian · 6 days ago

English major, MA in English, then a second master's and now working in IT. Still use the English-degree

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

OliveBranch91 · 6 days ago

Personally, I felt like this article resonated with me on all levels. Having completed my postgraduate degree in Literature in the UK four months ago, I still struggle to find and apply to suitable jobs. First, because I don't quite know how to begin and go about this search effectively, and second, because I don't have enough experience with the application process, and receiving feedback just never happens. During my course, I felt like we were prepared to go on to do a PhD, but as I never felt attracted to this option, there was not enough support for those who wanted to pursue a career outside of academia. Even though career fairs were organized, these were centered on STM and Economics, again, I felt a bit let down. Courses like yours sound like a useful and practical way to help graduates like me!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Bluebird · 6 days ago

Wished one of my professors had thought of a course like this when I was an undergrad English major in the '80's! I cherish my diploma, but when the first and only job offer I got immediately after graduation was as a service representative for a building supply company, I was supremely disappointed! I wanted to work as a writer but at the time there was nothing available where I lived and relocating was out of the question as liberal arts majors were not even offered any kind of internship opportunities back then. Even though I knew I was marketable, I encountered a lot of "tough sells" in many of the interviews that followed. One interviewer told me why I wasn't working in my "field." He assumed that I went to college to become an English Teacher

think about the value of a liberal arts degree and the dangers of making assumptions... then.)

Anyway, this is a fantastic and valuable approach to helping students see how their English degree can help them in society.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Lissette Lopez Szwydky-Davis · 6 days ago

Excellent! Great to see this! I am teaching professionalization courses for English majors too. I taught a graduate version during Fall 2015 covering academic, alt-ac, and post-academic careers. I am now teaching one that is designed specifically for undergraduates called "Liberal Arts at Work" although I might change that down in the future to just "Humanities at Work." Brooks's book is great, and I supplement that one with other career guides. I'm also incorporating modules and a professional development certificate from our career center (University of Arkansas) into the course. The students really need this training, and they appreciate it especially coming from faculty in their majors. It's great to see others teaching similar courses. I had not thought of incorporating fiction into the course, but may try that in future iterations. Overall, it's wonderful to see how important this type of work is. It's empowering and fulfilling for me as well and has become just as much of my professional identity as my main area of specialization (19c British literature and culture).

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Drew M. Loewe · 6 days ago

Welcome to where "rhetcomp" has been for decades in terms of mentoring and professionalization.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

wspwsp · 6 days ago

I was an English major at Yale with highest university and departmental honors. My undergraduate thesis was turned into a book published by Yale Press. After medical school I started a medical practice which evolved into one of the largest multi-office practices in my specialty in the country. I became interested in investing, first for my

estate investor and manager, running several commercial office buildings. I have led several relatively c nonprofits.

All of the above, from student days to the present, depended upon only two skills, both learned as an E analysis and persuasive communication, especially written. I am serious when I tell people that if you c analyze a poem, novel or play you can analyze anything. I include both mathematical/financial analysis philosophical/interpersonal analysis. This is particularly true today, when there is often more than one a question. I cannot even begin to express the gratitude I feel for receiving the education In "English litera really was the theory of everything and the foundation for virtually everything I have had to do.

Best of all apt quotes fall from the sky all the time connecting the every day to the universal.

Thank you, English courses.

And thank you, Helene Meyers, your novel course is exactly what is needed today.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **sleepycat** · 6 days ago

As someone that has a master's (in social science) and is taking a year off and will be pursuing PhD, I r this course during any point in my education, despite my pigheadedness about developing my academ I hope my future academic home will have some course/seminar/workshop like this, just in case I decid am destined for other things.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **Elizabeth Ramsay** → sleepycat · 5 days ago

I'm in the same position and I find any type of alt-ac talks a great help while also hoping never to

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Penguin Manifesto · 6 days ago

I have a student in one of my classes right now who told me that he is a Computer Engineering major, passion is Philosophy. I smiled and told him to never let that passion go--that that passion would make one day. Humanities fields create leaders--period.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Candis Best · 6 days ago

Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Lindsey Saxby · 5 days ago

This is such a valuable service you are offering, with a seemingly interesting array of assignments. I work in these services and am seeing these sorts of programs becoming more and more popular in our field; however, it is not common for English faculty to get involved in these sorts of discussions. I think you'll serve as an inspiration.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



jrlupton · 3 days ago

Thoughtful and inventive! Thank you.

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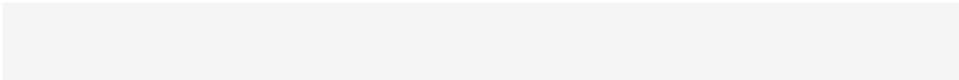
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