

2012-2013 Seminar Participants

"Using Editorial Theory and Practice to Teach Poetry"

Prof. Matthew Borushko

I am applying to the Teaching and Learning Strategies Seminar in order to explore the possible benefits of bringing editorial theory and practice into the classroom as a means to the effective teaching of poetry, both as a component of traditional, historically-grounded literature courses as well as, potentially, the center of its own course. By "editorial theory and practice," I mean, at its most basic, asking my students to think - and then to act - as if they were scholarly editors. Asking this of students allows them to confront a number of crucial interpretive and practical issues - some of which they have not encountered before - from an entirely unfamiliar, yet professionally grounded, perspective, thus refreshing and enlivening a task that students often feel can become rote, i.e., reading yet another poem. In short, I wish to explore the possibilities that reside in using editorial theory and practice in order to create experiential learning opportunities for students in the humanities.

Having brought editorial issues both to class discussions and to localized assignments in the past, I have begun to see great potential in this approach. In my field, British literature spanning 1780-1840, textual instability is common. By "textual instability" I mean that even for some of the age's most famous poems, such as Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," editors still disagree over which stanzas, lines, words, and punctuation marks belong in the text that readers should encounter: in the case of Keats's poem, the issue is the quotation marks at the end, and whether they should encapsulate the entirety of the final two lines or only the famously cryptic statement, "Beauty is truth - truth beauty," in the poem's penultimate line. Two versions of the poem exist, each with its own compelling but competing claims to authority and legitimacy. In presenting these textual issues to my classes, I have found students to react with disbelief, and then with disorientation, to the fact that we can't be sure where to put those quotation marks, for their location has significant consequences for any understanding of the poem's content. As a result, I have invited students to join this ongoing scholarly conversation by asking them to engage the arguments for both versions, assess them, and eventually suggest in their paper where they believe the quotation marks belong, why, and what the consequences are for their interpretation. I have offered this paper topic as an option in "The Romantic Age," "Nineteenth-Century British Poetry," and "Keats and Shelley," with positive results, in both the students' performance on the assignment and in feedback on the eye-opening effects of the project, as well as on the hands-on, practical, experiential nature of their work on it.

This assignment on Keats's poem is just one example of how students can begin to think like scholarly editors. It forces them to ask critical questions about what exactly constitutes a text and who or what possesses authority over the text that appears in, for example, the anthology I asked them to buy for class; and then to make judgments based on the criteria they determine to be significant. Sound argumentation, including the necessity of engaging counterarguments, is built into this project, as

students must defend their editorial decisions in the context of a lively, ongoing, real-world scholarly debate.

I envision expanding such assignments, and in fact asking students to produce their own scholarly editions of individual poems or collections of poems, tasks which require students not only to annotate texts (i.e., to research and write paratextual apparatuses such as prefaces, introductions, footnotes, and endnotes), but to make decisions about the material presentation of their editions. In English 359 a few years ago, I assigned a final project where students, working in small teams, designed an anthology of nineteenth-century poetry: they had to consult several anthologies, report on them, and then determine how they'd organize their own selection of poems, whether by author, by date, or by topic - and explain their choices in an "editors introduction" to their anthology. The students' response to this project was overwhelmingly positive, and it begun my thinking on the possibilities of doing more with these kinds of issues in the classroom.

After surveying the literature on using editorial theory and practice in the classroom (if indeed there is any), I would then reach out, via list-servs, to colleagues in my field to ask about experiences they might have had teaching poetry through editing. I would also plan to collect a bibliography of readings in editorial theory and practice that would be accessible and appropriate for undergraduates encountering this field for the first time. Lastly, I wish to explore the possibilities of incorporating a digital component into a course on editing, an exciting prospect in that students could actually see their work published. Their editions would then be accessible to all kinds of scholars, students, and readers, many of whom turn immediately to the Internet when they need to find a text of a poem.

While the immediate benefit of this project would be for the students, majors and non-majors alike, who elect to take a course where editorial theory and practice enriches and enlivens the study of poetry, there would also be a benefit to the English course offerings, in that a course on editing would be a new and exciting opportunity for students achieve the key departmental and "Gen Ed" learning outcomes that center on critical thinking and writing, and on historical inquiry. It would also bring experiential learning to the English course offerings.

In addition to sharing my research with department colleagues, I could contact chairs of other departments to inquire if there was interest in having a conversation on the benefits of asking students to think like scholarly editors in particular contexts or for particular assignments. In many fields the task of scholarly annotation is worth assigning students. I would also offer to share my thoughts during my CTL fellowship on the Romantic Circles Pedagogies Blog, "Teaching Romanticism."