

How to Teach English Literature through the Independent Seminar Class in the Doctoral Program

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This paper discusses the independent seminar as one of the appropriate courses, in particular, for the students who study English literature in the doctoral program. Those who take the Ph.D. program in English literature are considered as future scholars or teachers. In taking the coursework, they not only delve into the knowledge of literature, but also begin to establish broader and deeper senses of research ability. The independent seminar class helps them build such senses through the way in which they experience to the development of the syllabus by themselves. Furthermore, in contrast to a regular class, in which a group of students learn in a classroom, the independent seminar gives each student intensive interactions with his/her professor through the out-of-classroom circumstances, since the seminar is based upon one-on-one study between the student and the professor.

[teaching literature/independent seminar]

I. INTRODUCTION

Korean colleges have provided various types of coursework for students who take the graduate level of the English Literature program. One of the rudimentary facets that the colleges should consider in establishing with such coursework is the development of educational approaches through which the students can research and study mostly by themselves, deserved to attain the graduate level of students. In other words, in taking the graduate courses, students begin to explore and learn how to successfully continue and complete their study.

The independent seminar is a course which provides graduate students with abundant opportunities of research and study. Above all, the students themselves basically elaborate the whole research and reading schedules of one semester. The position of their teacher becomes more of a guide who helps them revise their schedules by advising them to polish their original ideas with experienced and specialized scholarship. Moreover, since the seminar is conducted based on one-on-one conference between professor and student, each student generates his/her own plan which is different from the other students. Although Sawyer (2001) described the independent seminar as a “method of working together,” this type of class is addressed based upon an authentic student-centered teaching approach.

In taking this course, each student needs to read texts, do research, and write articles to prepare for a single class through which the student and the professor discuss certain issues for approximately an hour. In short, the independent seminar is a very intensive course. The issues are already syllabi zed to be discussed when the student initiates and builds his or her independent seminar plan. Thus, as he or she has already programmed the course, the student is presupposed to prepare for each class. Thus, the student can improve his or her research and study techniques while exploring related resources and examining topics discussed in such materials. Thus, in considering these whole aspects, I will examine how the seminar course can be relevantly employed as a course in the doctoral program in colleges.

II. PRACTICAL EMPLOYMENT OF THE INDEPENDENT SEMINAR

As briefly discussed in the preceding passages, the independent seminar can be relevantly employed as a student-centered course for the Ph.D. program of English literature. In this section, I will examine how the seminar can be formulated and instructed through the interactions between the student and the professor. Teaching and learning are a process of a productive co-construction which takes place through the communicative response between them. Katz and Hartnett (1976) noted that graduate students perceive their interactions with professors as the most crucial experiences for them. There always exists a certain level of educational expectations that these two characters have from/for each other when they locate each other in the positions of learner and instructor. Only when these expectations are fulfilled with through responsible and answerable contact, will co-construction be completed.

The independent seminar is one of the most appropriate methods to suffice for the expectations between the two core elements of the literature teaching, the student and the professor. The expectations are basically described and represented through the syllabus which the student devises upon the basis of the advice of the teacher, who can encourage him / her to analyze the goal and objectives, to select texts, and constitute a specific schedule.

Basically, since the seminar course is very intensive and established by the student, it is relevant that the student plans to take this course during the last semester of his or her coursework period. In almost completing the courses, the learner will need to develop a detailed plan to take the comprehensive examinations, write the dissertation proposal, and ultimately write a doctoral dissertation. Taking an independent seminar during the last semester accommodates many benefits. Most of all, the seminar makes it possible for the learner to prepare the comprehensive examinations, and even further the dissertation writing. It is a practical course according to the fact that the student can save time and energy since he or she can begin to develop research skills before finishing all the coursework. A model of the syllabus for the independent seminar is as follows:

EN 797 Independent Seminar
Professor: Dr. Penn McCoy
Elizabeth Carnegie
May 7, 2002

Project Title: Women in the Nineteenth and the Early Twentieth Century American Novels

Objectives

Through this independent seminar, I will explore American novels written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and depict certain particular types of womanhood which these novels re/present as significant icons of American woman identity during these periods. Also, through this seminar, I will work to improve my ability to closely read literary texts and produce quality journal articles which are the response papers from these readings.

Main texts

- Anderson, Sherwood. Winesburg, Ohio. 1919. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- Cather, Willa. My Antonia. 1918. New York: NAL, 1994.
- Chesnutt, Charles W. The House Behind the Cedars. 1900. Intro. Donald B. Gibson. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1993.
- Chopin, Kate. The Awakening. 1899. New York: Bantam, 1985.
- Cooper, James Fenimore. The Last of the Mohicans. 1826. New York: NAL, 2000.
- Crane, Stephen. The Red Badge of Courage. 1895. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999.
- Fern, Fanny. Ruth Hall. 1855. New York: Viking Penguin, 1997.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. Herland. 1915. New York: NAL, 1992.
- Harper, Francis E.W. Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted. 1892.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The Scarlet Letter. 1850. New York: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Jewett, Sarah Orne. The Country of the Pointed Firs. 1896. Intro. Anita Shreve. New York: NAL, 1996.
- Larsen, Nella. Passing. 1929. Intro. Thadious Davis. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- Norris, Frank. McTeague: A Story of San Francisco. 1897. New York: Penguin, 1994.
- Melville, Herman. Moby Dick: Or, The Whale. 1851. New York: NAL, 2001.
- Phelps, Elizabeth Stuart. The Silent Partner. 1871. New York: Feminist, 1990.
- Sedgwick, Catharine M. Hope Leslie: or, Early Times in the Massachusetts. 1827. New York: Penguin, 1998.
- Stoddard, Elizabeth D. The Morgesons. 1862. New York: Viking Penguin, 1997.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. Uncle Tom's Cabin. 1852. Intro. William Mackey. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1995.
- Twain, Mark. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. 1885. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1994.
- Warner, Susan. The Wide, Wide World. 1850. Afterword. Jane Tompkins. New York: Feminist, 1986.
- Wharton, Edith. The House of Mirth. 1905. New York: NAL, 2001.

Secondary Sources

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- Ammons, Elizabeth, and Annette White Parks, eds. Tricksterism in Turn of the Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective. Hanover: UP of New England, 1994.
- Bryant, Jerry H. Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997.
- Elliott, Emory, and Cathy N. Davidson, eds. Columbia History of the American Novel. New York : Columbia UP, 1991.
- Emmanuel, Nelson S., ed. African American Authors, 1745-1945: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook. Westport: Greenwood, 2000.
- Kinney, James. Amalgamation! Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel. Westport: Greenwood, 1985.
- Leckie, Barbara. Culture and Adultery: the Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857-1914. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999.
- Elbert, Monika M., ed. Separate Spheres No More: Gender Convergence in American Literature, 1830-1930. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2000.
- Singh, Amritjit, and Schmidt Peter, eds. Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000.

Study Plan

1st week. August 26-31

Texts:

Cooper, James Fenimore. The Last of the Mohicans. 1826.

Sedgwick, Catharine M. Hope Leslie: or, Early Times in the Massachusetts. 1827.

2nd week. September 1-7

Texts:

Warner, Susan. The Wide, Wide World. 1850.

Journal one for the first week

3rd week. 8~14

Texts: Melville, Herman. Moby Dick: Or, The Whale. 1851.

Journal two for the second week

4th week. 15~21

Texts:

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The Scarlet Letter. 1850.

Fern, Fanny. Ruth Hall. 1855.

Journal three for the third week

5th week. 22~28

Texts:

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. Uncle Tom's Cabin. 1852.

Journal four for the fourth week

6th week. 29~October 5

Texts:

Twain, Mark. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. 1885.

Journal five for the fifth week

7th week. October 6~12

Texts:

Stoddard, Elizabeth D. The Morgesons. 1862.

Phelps, Elizabeth Stuart. The Silent Partner. 1871.

Journal six for the sixth week

8th week. 13~19

Texts:

Harper, Francis E.W. Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted. 1892.

Chesnutt, Charles W. The House Behind the Cedars. 1900.

Journal seven for the seventh week

9th week. 20~26

Texts:

Crane, Stephen. The Red Badge of Courage. 1895.

Norris, Frank. McTeague: A Story of San Francisco. 1897.

Journal eight for the eighth week

10th week. 27~November 2

Texts:

Jewett, Sarah Orne. The Country of the Pointed Firs. 1896.

Chopin, Kate. The Awakening. 1899.

Journal nine for the ninth week

11th week. 3~9

Text:

Wharton, Edith. The House of Mirth. 1905.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. Herland. 1915.

Journal ten for the tenth week

12th week. 10~16

Text:

Cather, Willa. My Antonia. 1918.

Anderson, Sherwood. Winesburg, Ohio. 1919.

Journal eleven for the eleventh week

13th week. 17~23

Text:

Larson, Nella. Passing. 1929.

Journal twelve for the twelfth week

14th week. 24~30 Thanksgiving Break

15th week.

The week to go back to the precedent works, figure out some critical ideas and discuss them to get more specific directions which are relevant to the topic of this course.

Evaluation

Journals for each week.

Beginning in the third week, once a week, I will produce a journal as a response paper -- 2~3 pages -- in which I will try to specify the idea of the text(s) from the previous week. At the end of the seminar, I will have written 12 response papers.

A: 100~90%

B: 89~80%

C: 79~70%

F: 69~below%

The author of this syllabus, Elizabeth Carnegie (2002), clarifies the goals and the objectives that she would like to develop through this seminar class. After all, her final aims are to read the texts she describes in this syllabus, keep journals to generate ideas of nineteenth and early twentieth-century American novels, and, in so doing, prepare the comprehensive examinations. Ehrich and Hansford (2000) asserted that the relationship between the teacher and the student is the most important factor in the independent seminar. Boreen et. al. (2000) said that a protégé and mentor relationship happens between the student and the teacher through frequent interactions. When the student chooses her teacher who will advise reading and writing, and discuss critical issues through the seminar class, she considers the professor's specialized areas. Also, the teacher would usually become a member of the proposal and dissertation committee. Thus, she needs to anticipate all of these sequences which she will experience until completing the dissertation process.

Wenger (1998) explicated that the independent seminar or the mentoring study forms "communities of practice." In other words, the learning occurs through contextual backgrounds in communities between students and teachers. Developing this syllabus, the student discusses with her teacher how and what to choose, in regards to the textbooks and how to adjust the schedule. Actually, these are all the outcomes which are produced by negotiable interactions between the student and the teacher. In other words, the teacher and student frequently interact until they get the final syllabus. The methods of interactions can only be varied, such as meetings, emailing, using the mailbox, and telephoning. Many professors, who conducted students through the seminar, have described it as critical to have interactive relationships. Astin (1977), emphasized that a communicative relation between the teacher and the student makes it possible to significantly upgrade the student's learning motivation. From the initial moment that the student begins to generate ideas of the seminar through the final moment that she receives a grade, the seminar class can only be conducted by relevant interactions between the student and teacher.

Gaff and Gaff (1984) showed that the attributes of the interaction between the teacher and student can be evaluated through the amount of time dedicated to contact between them. In her syllabus, Elizabeth Carnegie (2002) reads a couple of books each week, and write a response paper. Then, she brings the paper to the

meeting with her professor. Since the length of the paper is about three to five pages, the teacher can briefly read it. After this, the student presents ideas that she develops in the paper to the teacher. This is the initial moment in which they begin to discuss the issues for the week. Including the discussion, the whole process would last for forty to fifty minutes. Since the seminar is conducted one-on-one, the interactions between the teacher and the student are numerously making the class intensive. A sample of Elizabeth's response is as follows:

Journal 5

EN 797 Independent Seminar

Professor: Dr. Penn McCoy

Elizabeth Carnegie

Oct, 17, 2002

The child characters in Uncle Tom's Cabin possess some significant positions. They can be classified into two groups: the slave children and white children. Depending on which group the children belong, to their positions are different. In this paper, we will try to discuss the children characters who belong to the slave group.

The slave children characters can also be classified into groups depending on who their parents are, as follows: Mose, Pete and Polly who are the children of Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe; Harry who is the boy of Harris and Eliza; Topsy and Dodo who don't have any clue as to the identity of their parents; Eliza who is the mother of Harris and the child of Cassy. Thus, the children groups can be split into two general groups: the children having parent(s) and the children not having parent(s). In effect, depending on whether a single child has his/her parent(s) or not, the physical and psychological circumstances surrounding the child work very differently from those of the other children in the novel. Such differences influence how the child attains his/her own position and identity.

However, when we give our special attention to Topsy, we can discover that the circumstances around her can possibly make her vulnerable and insecure, particularly if she does not draw a good person's attentions. Entirely contrasting to the three children of Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe, and the single child of Harry and Eliza who experience peaceful and routine daily lives under their parents' protection, Topsy has no knowledge of the date and place of her birth, or of the

people (or her parents) who might have brought her to the present place. Moreover, she demonstrates her mischievous behaviors by stealing some others' jewelry. Ironically she seems unable to perceive whether it is right or wrong. Instead, she normally takes her refuge behind Mr. St. Clare's chair when she is criticized.

However, through her inability to remember her origin and through such mischievous behavior, we can infer that Topsy had been mistreated before she settled in Mr. St. Clare's house. For instance, she is still very young, but she has already experienced being taken away, probably from her parents, and sold to others at a very early age. In addition, her later confession to the people around her in the house precisely reveals her self-denial -- "Nobody likes a nigger"(269) --, which indicates her hard and sorrowful past as a young female negro.

Moreover, her position hints of a single possibility that all the other slave children must face: that they, too, can be situated like Topsy. Through the entire text, it is only in the beginning when Uncle Tom's children seem to truly lead happy lives. Since their father is sold to Haley very early in the text and doesn't return until he dies in Simon Legree's place, they lose the opportunity to play with their father early in life, and although they are all freed in the end, their lives have not been without sorrow.

A more significant instance of Topsy's possible future can be seen through the coincidental but dramatic reunion between Cassy and Eliza. Like Topsy, Eliza is sold to someone in her very early age and she never remembers her mother. This might be the main reason she chooses to become a fugitive to stop another separation from her son, Harry. Although being chased by Haley and two slave hunters, later when she escapes, and is reunited with Cassy, the two eventually recognize that they are mother and daughter, and pray to God and thank Him. It is not impossible that similar events could be in store for Topsy as well.

Up to now, we have explored the slave children's positions in Uncle Tom's Cabin, focusing on Topsy. As mentioned previously, since their positions are insecure, any slave child potentially can be situated like Topsy. Probably, the dramatic incidence between Eliza and Cassy can be a possible extension which could happen in Topsy's future. But, Topsy at present seems to be luckier than in the past, since now, at least, some people have provided their sincere attentions and cares to her. This represents that the children's

situations and happiness are dependent upon the society and personalities of the people surrounding them.

This journal is the fifth response paper that the student writes after she reads Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) in the fifth week. She brings this to Dr. Penn McCoy, who is her professor for the seminar class, in the sixth week. Her reading and discussion have a one-week difference. In other words, since only after she reads novels can she develop ideas to write the response paper, her reading always takes place in advance. In this response paper, the student develops an idea of the way in which the audience of Uncle Tom's Cabin considers the social and cultural positions of slave children in the novel. In particular, she focuses on a child Topsy and views her as a character of the multiple consciousness based on racial, gender, class, and child problems. In short, Topsy is a black, female, slave, orphan, child who has been socially and culturally marginalized even among the marginalized people such as an adult black slave, an adult woman, and a working class man. In depicting these facets, the student reveals her assumption of Stowe's ultimate reasons for portraying such an extreme character in the novel and the goal to which Stowe tried to move the audiences' minds, which were mostly white middle class during nineteenth-century American society. In doing so, through this seminar class, the student has tried to find three or four major issues that will penetrate the contents of all the texts she chooses for the class. Obviously, she will utilize the issues to develop questions for the comprehensive examinations. Furthermore, in keeping the journals, the student receives opportunities to polish her academic writing skills, which should be widely beneficial for the written section of the comprehensive examinations. As Rafik-Galea (2004) described that writing is not only an expression of thoughts but also the finalized product of the process to generate thoughts, the student's ultimate goal is to textualize his or her critical minds of literary texts.

III. CONCLUSION

Up to now, I have introduced and examined the positive facets of the independent seminar. Since it is an intensive course, the seminar class is more relevant for doctoral students of English literature. As Feiman-Nemser (1998) explicated, the independent seminar is an "educative mentoring" through which the doctoral student can "get inside" of the relevant academic territory. In taking the class, the student experiences frequent interactions with his or her teacher

through reading, writing, researching, and discussion. However, the student needs to spend a lot of time preparing each class, otherwise, the learner and the teacher can rarely expect any productive results. The more student-orientated the seminar class is, the more responsibility it is required by the student. Thus, as described in the preceding passages, it is recommended for the student to take the seminar almost at the end of his or her coursework period, leaving only a couple of classes to be taken. Furthermore, since the seminar is conducted only between a single student and teacher, the teacher cannot have many students like any other regular classes during the semester. The maximum number of students might be about 5, if the teacher teaches other regular classes. Nevertheless, because the independent seminar provides many academic benefits to doctoral students, Korean colleges could open a similar type of class for them.

Although I have not analyzed it specifically in this article, there are possibilities for the teacher and student to have the independent seminar based on multimedia technologies. Jiang and Ting (2001) reported that the advancement of telecommunications with “method and technologies,” can provide a wider horizon for the independent seminar. Seo (2002) explicated that in particular, the learning through the internet makes it available for the teacher and the student to exchange tremendous amounts of information with each other. Jiang and Meskill (2000) also described that the independent seminar can be more effective in developing learning environments when the teacher and student frequently interact online, where they could make various educational theories such as cognitive apprenticeship, social collaborative learning, and situated learning. As Kram (1985) asserted, as long as there is closeness and intimacy between the student and teacher, the independent seminar online can be appropriate.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Language: English

Applicable Levels: College

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