

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 12.2 (SUMMER 2016)

Special Issue:

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

Guest Edited by Lara Karpenko and Lauri Dietz

Undergraduate Managing Editor, Linda Braus

The Other Side of the Desk:

The Undergraduate Perspective of Editing an Academic Journal

By [Linda Braus](#), [Sondra Erwin](#), [Mary Kolberg](#), [Michelle Orr](#), [Jaclyn Wilcox](#), and [Annie Zinnen](#)

With [Heather Berg](#), [Tayler Bowser](#), [Samantha Dittmer](#), [Davis Endries](#), [Melissa George](#), [Jamie Pomis](#), [Amanda Shryock](#), [Eric Van Driska](#), and [Madelyn Wegner](#)

<1> Sixteen voices, ten majors, two professors, and one learning community. Advertised as an upper-level English elective for the spring of 2016, “Special Topics in English: Editing an Academic Journal” did not fulfill a major requirement; instead, we chose to take this class based solely upon our individual interests and ambitions. Perhaps because of this, our class evolved into a cohesive learning community with the dedication necessary to produce this special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*. Throughout this course, cooperative learning proved to be fundamental to our success, allowing us to overcome challenges as a class and publish a professional body of work with the help of Drs. Karpenko and Dietz. In order to produce this issue, we relied upon each other’s insights and areas of expertise. Here, we will share our experiences in this class, specifically emphasizing the two main events that most influenced us as a learning community: the selection of our Undergraduate Managing Editor (UME), Linda Braus, and the process of choosing acceptance criteria for the submitted manuscripts. Moving from a local to a global perspective to emphasize the growth we made as students and peer leaders, we discuss the advantages and challenges of working in a cooperative learning community and provide direct student feedback to paint a clear picture of the inner workings of the course. Ultimately, we believe this course was innovative, creative, and worth replicating. We were given many unique opportunities as undergraduate students, and we believe that similar courses would benefit undergraduate students at other universities.

<2> To start, Braus will share her own exceptional experience in being selected as the UME, an event which initiated the creation of our learning community:

I walked into “Special Topics in English: Editing an Academic Journal” expecting a unique class. However, at the time, I did not understand how exceptional the class would be. Applications were opened up to the class for someone to become the UME and facilitate many of the major decisions and processes as we prepared to edit a pedagogy-focused issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*. With a small amount of apprehension, I applied with my résumé and cover letter. A week later, I had the surreal experience of the entire class and Drs. Dietz and Karpenko interviewing me. Since becoming the UME, I have corresponded with the authors of the articles, as well as Drs. Dietz and Karpenko, led the class in discussions on the articles, and formed executive summaries of my classmates’ essay evaluations. When I started the class I knew how to navigate journal articles; through this class, I have gained understanding of what a journal article needs to be effective and what goes into the process of getting it there. Writing this introduction with my classmates has afforded me just a taste of how difficult “getting there” is. Yet, it is through the triumphs and challenges of being a student and facilitator in our cooperative class that my teamwork and leadership skills have grown immensely.

As Braus suggests, this class was unlike any other we had taken. We did not read classic literature of the Western canon. We did not generate individual content or take exams. We produced a tangible product available in the “real world.” We took into account our prospective audience and contemplated how our actions in this course would ultimately affect people beyond our classroom. Though our final product is available across the globe, the process began in the classroom: on the other side of the desk. This essay will illustrate how cooperative learning bridged the gap from sixteen individuals to one learning community and enabled us to produce an issue of a scholarly journal from start to finish.

<3> As we began the UME selection process, we each posed individual concerns and questions but soon melded into a highly inquisitive and critical team. Braus led our class in article discussions while Dr. Karpenko listened and observed, allowing groups and individuals to evaluate and develop their own arguments. This successful collaborative process draws from the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whose social constructivist teaching methodology emphasized collaboration and social interaction (Powell and Kalina 243). His work on cooperative, student-to-student learning demonstrates that focused social interaction results in deeper understanding and better internalization of knowledge (Powell and Kalina 244). The variety of students’ ages and backgrounds further contributed to the success of this class, as students consistently offered fresh insight whenever progress stalled. For example, when we began outlining this essay, student Jackie Wilcox, an education minor, provided the class with pedagogical articles to assist in making our argument. This process of cooperative learning began with our collective UME interview and continued throughout the semester as we shifted between individual reflection and group discussion.

<4> After we chose our UME, we began the process of forming evaluative criteria for article submissions—another foundational task that would guide the majority of our work for the semester. Indeed, the criteria-formation discussion exemplifies the meaningful work we completed as we moved from individual opinions to strong, group-forged arguments. Over the course of a single class session, we transitioned from an individualistic to a cooperative class structure. As individuals, we were tasked with generating our own sets of ten submission evaluation criteria. These lists prevented the possibility of

changing our ideas and opinions when selecting criteria as a whole class, which psychologist Bryan K. Saville cautions against when using team-based learning:

The key is that the teams report their answers at the same time, which ensures they do not change their decision as they hear other teams' explanations. The simultaneous reporting of decisions often leads to a productive whole-class discussion, because not all teams make the same decision. (Saville, Lawrence, and Jakobsen 62)

Although Saville addresses teams and not individuals, his advice remains pertinent because the pre-class work produced a set of diverse lists that we then had to synthesize into new lists of ten criteria once we moved into our initial criteria-selection groups. We then combined into larger groups to condense our criteria further in two discussion groups, and doing so presented many opportunities for the "productive whole-class discussion" Saville advocates (62). In this process, our focus shifted from simply aggregating results to validating and defending each student's own set of criteria, resulting in a deeply successful class discussion that produced our final list of selection criteria. As a result, the final merging of these points proved to be less difficult than forming the half-class lists as our two teams had mostly hashed out the more controversial criteria by the time we were ready to compile our final list.

<5> The contentious half-class portion of our discussion quickly redirected our mindsets to more holistic thinking, forcing us to interrogate our perceptions of studenthood. Through meaningful engagement, we successfully formed our criteria and realized that we had committed ourselves to a more interactive, cooperative experience than most upper-level English courses. As Katherine Powell, Ed.D., points out, a successful component of the constructivist teaching environment provides "means for students to experience real world or meaningful practices" (248), and the criteria-formation discussion emblemizes the movement of our class from academic assignments to professional work. During the process of forming our criteria, it became evident that our class had entered a much wider sphere of education where we would be interacting with a variety of professionals. In order to continue our discussion, it became necessary to expand our thinking outward to encompass the impact our class would wield on a global scale: our selection criteria would affect not only ourselves but also others outside of the classroom. This course, therefore, resulted in more than a grade on our transcripts—it directly influenced our professional careers. Our work within this course equipped us with a deeper awareness of the impact students can have on their pedagogical plane as we transitioned from receptacles of knowledge to gatekeepers of knowledge production. Just as Powell advocates inserting "real world" experiences into the classroom to more fully involve students in learning, this class provided us with the opportunity to function as co-workers and colleagues, thereby imparting important, applicable skills.

<6> To provide a clear image of the inner workings of the course, we sought feedback from our peers regarding their perceptions of the success of the class. As the class was mostly led by students, their input mattered in order to understand how groups came together to create a collaborative classroom. When asked about the effectiveness of the small group to large group transition that took place in some class meetings, Heather Berg responded, "Learning to effectively communicate ideas and opinions in small groups and then sharing those concise, well thought-out ideas with the class resembles a work

space.” The groups that we worked in, therefore, provided a tangible experience that can be measured beyond the classroom. Berg also added that working as a large group “taught us to be patient when reiterating ideas or listening to opinions that opposed our own.” During the full class discussions about article submissions, many students wanted to share their opinions, causing some to speak over others without arriving at a consensus. Dr. Karpenko and Braus often reminded us to stay on track with our discussion, pointing out when we kept failing to advance the discussion by returning to the same trivial concerns. By the end of the semester, all of us had learned what points to bring up (or not bring up) in order to facilitate useful discussion. We acquired a better understanding of how to collaborate, compromise, and communicate.

<7> While working together in small groups helped us solidify our ideas, working in multiple small groups with conflicting deadlines occasionally hindered the class’s effectiveness. Annie Zinnen commented that “In some cases, it was a little scary to have to put so much trust in each other. We all had to cooperate and work together for this class to succeed, and sometimes a few wheels rolled off the track, so to speak.” As mentioned before, the students chose their initial criteria selection groups and quickly adapted to each other’s ways of thinking and communicating. We stayed with these criteria groups through the essay selection process and did not switch until well after midterms. Around the end of March, Dr. Karpenko assigned separate groups for writing this paper as well as for copyediting. Another student, Amanda Shryock, described the effect of the group switches: “I didn’t care so much for changing groups because I found myself getting confused about which group we were supposed to be working with and what was due for each group....” Even though small groups overlapped and occasionally caused confusion, we experienced a wide range of opinions on different tasks and worked with varying perspectives. As our ideas changed, we developed new conclusions about our work that helped us improve the quality of this special issue.

<8> In the responses to whole-class work, fellow classmates maintained that interacting with one another to determine final decisions simultaneously became the course’s greatest challenge and advantage. For example, some tasks turned into meticulous and, at times, frustrating processes, such as forming the outline for this paper. When the class worked together to write this paper, we used the same process as the criteria-selection in order to specify which points we wanted to include here. In this case, we could not reach a full class agreement until the end of the class period, at which point we all needed to work cooperatively to reach a final decision. In regards to fifteen students writing this paper, student Eric Van Driska said, “Unlike a regular class, in which Dr. Karpenko would probably have each student write a student intro, our class had to blend different voices into a cohesive whole....”(1) We needed extensive patience and a considerable amount of time to bridge the gap between individual voices to select our final criteria and outline for this paper but, in the end, we produced a better product.

<9> Just as this class moved from a local perspective with the UME selection to a more global perspective with criteria formation, we wish to end by emphasizing how we, as students, have also made this transition. While we acknowledge that this type of opportunity may not be easily replicable at other universities, we strongly believe undergraduate students can benefit greatly from courses geared toward professional development. Throughout the semester, we worked diligently to produce a special

journal issue in a cooperative learning environment, which proved to be the largest influence in accomplishing our tasks together. While it proved a daunting endeavor to include fifteen voices in this paper, we succeeded largely due to the community we built within the classroom. Although it was an obstacle at first to amalgamate fifteen voices into a cohesive whole, we found that the diverse personalities and backgrounds ultimately aided us in our classroom community. Because the course took place at a private, comprehensive university, the small class size and individuality of students greatly encouraged us to interact with each other. We were able to grow not only as a class but also as individuals. When we began the class, our mindset was local and revolved around the class and our grades; however, as the class progressed, we transitioned into a more global mindset of thinking primarily about this special issue and its international impact.

<10> As we have experienced such a unique opportunity firsthand, we would like to conclude with two pieces of friendly advice to other undergraduates who may take a course like ours in the future. First, the students who are submission readers have a duty to refrain from judging or dismissing any submissions based on the density of the subject. The intended audience for these works, in our case, proved to be professors and teaching staff. When difficulties in understanding submissions arose, we used the knowledge provided by Drs. Karpenko and Dietz to clarify and adjust our opinions regarding the submissions accordingly. Second, and more importantly, students need to remain committed to the class and its goal(s) throughout the entire course. The success of this special issue relied on our commitment to each other and the class itself. By adhering to these objectives, we achieved growth as individuals and acquired a remarkable skill set.

<11> Ultimately, this class's focus on cooperative learning allowed us to unite the thoughts and ideas of sixteen individuals. Our interdependence aided us in understanding, developing, and producing many useful ideas as well as in exemplifying our decision-making processes of appointing a UME and choosing our submission selection criteria. The collaborative nature of this course set it apart from other college classes we have taken. The class presented an exceptional challenge that required immense growth from us students and taught us valuable lessons about communication and cooperation, which are applicable in the "real world" beyond the classroom. While the class offered a rare opportunity for undergraduate students, we hope this kind of cooperative learning will expand to more than just special topics classes at small universities and wholeheartedly request that undergraduate students be allowed more opportunities like ours. The skills we learned have equipped each student in this class to be a leader in the future, both inside and outside the classroom.

Endnotes

(1) While sixteen students were in this class, one member was unable to participate in writing the student introduction. ([^](#))

Works Cited

Powell, Katherine C., and Cody J. Kalina. "Cognitive and Social Constructivism: Developing Tools for an Effective Classroom." *Education* 130.2 (2009): 241-250. *Education Research Complete*. Web. 17 Mar. 2016.

Saville, Bryan K., Natalie Kerr Lawrence, and Krisztina V. Jakobsen. "Creating Learning Communities in the Classroom." *New Directions for Teaching & Learning* 2012.132 (2012): 57-69. *Education Research Complete*. Web. 16 Mar. 2016.