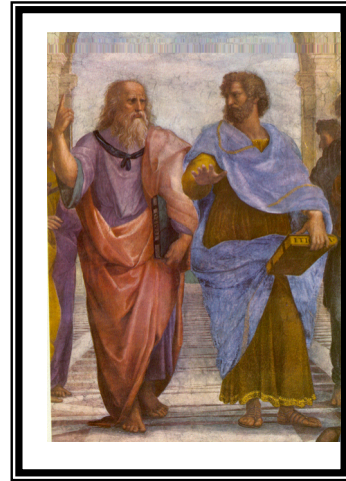


## Studying English as a Pathway to Advanced Literacy – a Broadside

**Preamble:** Our last department meeting developed a valuable discussion upon this year's teaching experiments. I would like to offer some general after thoughts upon our discussion, by way of advancing the thesis that *our department should not go down the path of teaching extra-large classes (60-70 person lectures with no TA and only a grader who may not even attend lecture) or large or super-large lectures (200-400) with no TA sections.*

**The highest quality teaching unfolds within a social matrix.** Since the time of Socrates and Plato, learning has unfolded within conversation, where teachers get to know their students, where there can be the give and take of question and answer, where students are invited to speak upon assigned reading, and where teachers give detailed feedback on student writing. Our students crave and value this kind of teaching and they show their enthusiasm for our faculty's way of doing this in their written evaluations of our performance. Although this kind of teaching is labor-intensive, it is crucial to teaching advanced forms of literacy that our students need and our society still values. (Ask a corporate leader what he wants from college graduates and many will say they want excellence in 'reading and writing, analysis and synthesis.') This advanced, socially embedded teaching also may foster the kind of idealization, imitation, and transference ("I want to be like her or him") that lies at the center of the most powerful teaching. Because of the way very large classes degrade the social matrix that supports our teaching, because of the way sectionless lectures can throw students into a setting where *they are known to no one*, such teaching will degrade both the quality and pleasure of our teaching.



**We are diluting our graduate student learning-by-teaching experience.** One of the strongest components of our graduate program comes from the experience of being a TA in a large lecture. Grad students learn new material from the professor's way of presenting an area of knowledge; professor visits to grad student sections enables them to offer advice on grad student teaching; above all, by having their own class to teach, grad students learn what it means to take responsibility for what their students learn, to help students write critical essays, to respond to the pedagogical and personal needs of students. Many of our undergraduates express their profound gratitude to their TAs in their evaluations. It is a part of our program we should strengthen rather than weaken.

**We are making a strategic mistake in our university wide struggle for faculty and graduate FTE.** It is entirely possible our struggle for FTE will be hurt rather than helped by an institutionalization of these new course formats. "Look, the budget crisis has taught the English department how to increase efficiency and student 'through-put,' even while they have made do with fewer faculty and grad student FTE."

**We are showing how classroom learning can be replaced by "on-line learning."** At a historical moment when high quality public education is being questioned as an expense, at a moment when our university is seriously considering drawing resources from classroom teaching to create a "cyber-UC", our department should not degrade the high quality of our classroom pedagogy. With teaching going on-line, some might ask why UC should have more than one lecturer on Shakespeare. UC's President will have answered his question, "What are we going to do about the (salary costs of the) English Department?"

## Studying English as a Pathway to Advanced Literacy – a Broadside

**The constituents of advanced literacy: our pedagogical goals.** English pedagogy is both broad but narrow. It is broad because it takes in the whole sweep of writing in English, from the early Middle-ages to the present; and, by reading literature, one uses “the best that has been thought and said” (Arnold) to think about issues or ideas as wide-ranging as all of culture: love, fidelity, power, personal and national identity, law, ecology, psychology, and so on. However, the historical and topical range of English courses does not explain the kernel of our pedagogical goals: we teach advanced literacy. Our students are taught to analyze speech and writing so as to discern what it means, understand the resources of language that have produced that meaning, so that they can translate that meaning into their own words in both speech and writing. In other words, the successful English student will achieve the quickness, insight and fluency of the best speakers and writers of English.

**Why we teach literacy by studying great literature written in English.** After all, don't disciplines from History and Political Science to Science concern themselves with teaching students how to read and write, analyze an argument and put one together? Don't many departments of the university read literature as part of their study of society, gender, communication, economy and global culture? Yes, but then again, no. It is the special province of English department to attend to the formal character of writing in English. In our classes, students learn how an elegant economy of meaning has been developed through metaphors (“the clouds of my dignity” {Lear}), similes (“swift as meditation or the thoughts of love” {Hamlet}), elegant conceits (“our two souls are... are two so / as stiff twin compasses are two...” {Donne}), the pungent irony of parallelism and antitheses (“To err is human, to forgive divine” {Pope}), and the beguiling power of image and meter: “the eternal sunshine of the spotless mind” {Pope}. Through the study of plot—in both the drama and the novel—our students learn about the implications of how one arranges parts into a synthetic whole. The point here is not to repeat what middle school English teachers do: require students to memorize a list of tropes, or adhere to rigid templates for composition. Instead, it is our goal to teach students to internalize a critical eye for how meaning emerges from language, and, to develop the habit of looking at one's own writing with the same attention and analytical precision with which one analyzes a literary text. When this succeeds, an English student can begin to deploy the powerful language algorithms developed over the past 1,000 years of writing in English.

**Desired outcomes: achieving advanced literacy requires the repeated practice of a quartet of interdependent activities—reading, listening, speaking and writing.** Let us follow the English student through the phases of the typical English assignment. Through reading, the English student goes beyond the bare comprehension of the meaning, learning to read with sensitivity to the tone, the style, and the rhetorical design of a text. The text is then brought to life in the aural environment of the classroom, where a student hears literature read and enters a conversational exchange about its meaning. The student should now be ready to gather the threads of meaning, which have been opened to analysis by reading and discussion, into his or her own synthesis in a written paper or exam. Because it is intrinsically difficult, achieving advanced literacy requires the repeated movement through the English classroom's rich multi-media ecology of reading, listening, speaking and writing. Only in this way does literacy become embedded in the cognitive bias, literary habit and ready skill-set of the English student. The advanced literacy that is achieved by the English student should not be reduced to an instrument for “composition.” For the successful student of English, advanced literacy is a means and an end, a practice and a goal. Advanced literacy is the basic operating system, if you will, of every effort to analyze, synthesize, and communicate.