

## Story Lab: A White Paper for the Academic Futures Committee

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October 2017

### SYNOPSIS

The future of liberal arts education lies in the study and production of stories. It has always been the case that people who cannot tell their own story will have their story told for them, often by others who do not value their independence or freedom or autonomy. This is likely to become even more true in the no-sleep, politically divided, media-saturated future that is already upon us. Besides, who has not had to respond to the following in a job interview: "I see on your resume that you did X. Tell me the story of how you came to do it?"

If we want our students to control their future, we must equip them to tell clear and compelling stories.

I propose a set of first year courses called "Story Labs." The catalog description:

### **XXXX: YYYY--STORY LAB**

***In this limited-enrollment, co-taught, interdisciplinary course, first year students study a few typical examples of stories of a particular kind (medium, genre, period, region, language, etc.) and work together toward creating an example of their own.***

### ARGUMENT

A story is a sequence of causally linked events that shows the transformation of a person, situation, or thing. A story has a beginning, middle, and end: a person, situation, or thing is shown in a form (F1); something occurs that causes changes in F1; driven by various additional forces, a new form (F2) is achieved. Trans-formation: the transitioning of a person, situation, or thing from one form (F1) to another (F2).

Stories help people make sense of an overwhelming and confusing world. Children love stories, and they love to be told the same ones over and over again. Why? As a parent, it appears to me that children are reassured by stories and their ritualized re-telling. It's not just the bedtime hot cocoa. Stories reassure because they tell the child that the world is "intelligible" where that means one event leads logically (causally) to another.

*DAD: Time for bed.*

*CHILD: Will you read me a story?*

*DAD: You're old enough to read a story to yourself.*

*CHILD: Reading a story is hard.*

*DAD: Reading a story is hard but important. It teaches you to sequence things, from left to right, from subject to predicate, from cause to effect. Reading a story teaches you to focus. Look at the dust on your lampshade. Watch what happens when I clap my hands over it. See how the dust motes fly up and around? See how the light catches them as they fall? Tiny little stars falling to your carpet. We could tell the story of one. Go on, you start. Name a mote.*

*CHILD: Dot.*

*DAD: Dot the Mote was peacefully sleeping on a lampshade, when . . . (HE claps his hands). What?*

*CHILD: A bad wind came and caught her up, and she flew into the air . . .*

*DAD: Where she danced in the light, and . . .*

*CHILD: Got to meet other motes . . .*

*DAD: That she never would have met if not for that bad wind, and then . . .*

*CHILD: Dot fell to earth . . .*

*DAD: In the company of friends, and now she sleeps on the carpet, her head resting on a little gray pillow.*

*CHILD: That's a dust bunny.*

*DAD: How long has it been since you vacuumed?*

The story of Dot the dust mote is very basic, so basic that it might seem less like a story than a science experiment. That's pretty cool, isn't it? Scientists investigate transformations, right? Chemists are interested in precipitation, and physicists study balls in motion, and biologists talk about mitosis. Ah, I see: transformation. The principle of transformation connects the sciences and humanities!

Stories are structures that people (of either scientific or humanist bent) use to link one event to another in an intelligible (causal) way. Let's pursue. So, scientists teach about processes of change in their laboratories and humanists teach about processes of change . . . where?

*In our classrooms.*

*Describe one.*

*I'll describe two. First, there's the seminar room where students sit with a professor around a big wood table.*

*Can you move the table?*

*Are you kidding? I think they built the walls around it!*

*So that classroom is designed to facilitate conversation among participants.*

*That's what they mean by "seminar."*

*What's the other kind of classroom?*

*Lecture: a podium down front and students sitting in fixed desks on three sides.*

*So that kind of classroom is designed to communicate information by hearing and seeing.*

*I suppose so.*

*So, you teach in rooms that facilitate conversation and the communication of information by visual and auditory means.*

*That sounds about right.*

*Do you teach in any classrooms with a big open space, where students can move around their bodies?*

*No.*

*So, if you are a kinesthetic learner, someone who needs to move your body to learn a thing, you are kind of screwed by the architecture of a typical humanities classroom.*

*I never thought about it like that but, yes, you might be right.*

*Do they at least equip the classrooms with rolling tables, so you can move them? Group them together, push them to the side, line them up for lecture?*

*Not where I teach. I hear some of the RAPs have classrooms like that.*

*Good to know. So, again, if scientists teach about processes of change in their laboratories, where do humanists teach about processes of change?*

*In our classrooms.*

*What do you do there?*

*We assign students readings or viewings and talk to them about the assignments.*

*When the students read or view, are they being trained to look for transformations?*

*Meaning?*

*The change of a person, situation, or thing from one form to another.*

*Absolutely. We talk a lot about historical transformations. Political transformations. Social transformations.*

*How about narrative transformations? The way an author structures a story so as to set up a situation, arouse the reader's interest in the characters, and trigger an action.*

*They learn that in high school.*

*They should have but, in my experience, they have not. Many undergraduate students have trouble seeing transformations. Part of it is the material: we assign texts written by committee, that amount to nothing more than lists of facts with no way for students to know what to focus on.*

*I agree.*

*Or we assign long dense texts that are just plain hard to get through and grasp.*

*Should we not?*

*Of course, we should but let's introduce some basic analytical skills first. Don't you think students should be able to answer a simple question like, "Where does the beginning of that story end?"*

*Hmm.*

*Basic stuff. Beginning, Middle, and End. Aristotle.*

*Aristotle? Are you kidding?*

*What's wrong with Aristotle?*

*He thought females were deformed males.*

*Okay, how about David Ball?<sup>1</sup>*

*Who is David Ball?*

*Okay, how about Vladimir Propp,<sup>2</sup> or the Russian Formalists, or narratologists? Tzvetan Todorov!<sup>3</sup>*

*Who is . . . whatever that was?*

*My point is that we can get at beginning-middle-and-end in many different ways. But we should start there. We should help first-year college students understand a) that the principle of transformation connects the sciences and humanities; and b) train them to look for transformations when reading stories. They need to get good at identifying causal sequences that transition a person or situation from one form (F1) to another form (F2)!*

*F2, to you too, pal!*

I like to write dialogue. I am a theatre professor who has studied and taught dramatic literature for decades but has learned more about it in the last few years by attempting to write it. Two points follow from this self-observation.

First, stories can be told through different media, in accordance with various disciplinary rules. I am a Theatre professor but there are Dance professors and Art professors and English professors and Film professors and Germanic and Slavic Language and Literature professors, not to mention History professors like Fred Anderson or Sociology professors like Janet Jacobs. These people know how to tell a clear and compelling story in one or more media, according to one or another set of disciplinary rules.

Second, an excellent way to learn about a thing is to try to make one. Restart the dialogue above:

*Where do humanists teach about processes of change?*

*In our classrooms.*

*What do you do there?*

*We assign students readings or viewings and talk to them about the assignments.*

*Is that all?*

*We make them write papers.*

*Is that all?*

*We meet with them during office hours.*

*Is that all?*

*What more can there be?*

*There can be actual doing, actual making. A great way to learn about a thing is to make one. A great way to learn about a story is to make a story.*

*But I teach a class about the realistic novel to first year students. How can thirty-five first year students make a realistic novel?*

*Thirty-five is too many. Nineteen at most.*

*Even so: how do nineteen first year students make a realistic novel?*

*It doesn't have to be good, it just has to be an attempt.*

*How could they even attempt it?*

*Give them creative writing assignments. Then have them share their work and see if they can start to piece together a story.*

*But I am not a creative writing teacher.*

*So?*

*So, I have never taught a class that includes the creative writing of students!  
 Give it a try. Teach beyond what you know! Join in the students' journey of discovery!  
 And what if we all get lost? I could lose my job!  
 You don't have tenure.  
 No.  
 So, you can't risk an experiment.  
 That's right.  
 And people with tenure typically don't experiment.  
 Why would they? They got where they are doing their thing, so it makes sense for them to keep  
 doing their thing.  
 You can see why experiments are hard to come by in a university.  
 Let's change that.  
 How?  
 Mix things up.  
 How?  
 I never taught a class that includes the creative writing of students, and can't risk trying it alone,  
 so . . . I need a creative writing teacher as partner.  
 You mean, add the arts to the humanities?  
 Imagine a class that I co-teach with a person trained to help students write stories. My job  
 is to help the students understand the conventions of the realistic novel—it is typically  
 set in such and such places, with such and such characters, that experience such and  
 such pressures, as exemplified by such and such examples—then my partner guides  
 them through the process of creating original work in line with those conventions.  
 I like it!  
 Call it:*

#### **XXXX: YYYY--STORY LAB**

***In this limited-enrollment, co-taught, interdisciplinary course, first year students study a few typical examples of stories of a particular kind (medium, genre, period, region, language, etc.) and work together toward creating an example of their own.***

#### **OBJECTIONS**

Some might object that a story can be other than a sequence of causally linked events that show the transformation of a person, situation, or thing. I won't contest the point but do think that transformation should be important theme and practice in the course proposed, for two reasons:

First, first-year students themselves are in a process of transformation, from high school to college. Moreover, as psychologist Jeffrey Arnett argues, persons today between the ages of 18-25 are "emerging adults" experiencing "a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course" (469).<sup>4</sup> It would be good to help students understand that they are emerging adults in need/search/midst of transformation from one state to another.

This last statement suggests another possible "laboratory"-type social science/humanities course:

**AAAA: BBBB—RITE OF PASSAGE LAB**

***In this limited-enrollment "Diversity: Global Perspectives" course, first year students study a few typical examples of rites of passage (drawn from a variety of world cultures) and work together toward creating a meaningful rite of passage of their own.***

A second reason to focus on the theme and practice of transformation is that our social/political world is transforming. Whether you are liberal or conservative, a member of the NRA or the Green Party, it is impossible to deny that big transformations are ripening/occurring in the United States of America and, it seems, across the globe. People will need to identify the beginning and end states of the transformations taking place in order to attract others to their view of them. Conservatives lament "The loss of traditional order!" Progressives celebrate "The gaining of new rights!" Where you stand depends on where you start: is the past a thing to repeat or escape?

PRECEDENTS

The "Story Lab" idea is not new. Indeed, arguably, it is merely a re-packaging of the "Performance of Literature" courses taught successfully on this campus for so many years by the Margaret Lee Potts, Associate Professor of Theatre *emerita*.

Moreover, Story Labs are currently being undertaken in the Department of Theatre & Dance in the form of THTR 1019: Script Lab, as taught by Assistant Professor of Theatre Kevin Rich and, Fall 2017, by me.

Finally, this "Story Lab" proposal is strongly related to "Inside the Greenhouse," an innovative, successful, interdisciplinary collaboration among Associate Professor Rebecca Safran (EBIO), Associate Professor Beth Osnes (THDN), and Assistant Professor Max Boykoff (CIRES). This collaboration began as an interdisciplinary undergraduate course funded by a grant from Gordon Gamm and has evolved to become a climate-change focused performance production group. Its most recent production, *Shine*, is the subject of a recently published book by Professor Osnes: *Performance for Resilience: Engaging Youth on Energy and Climate through Music, Movement, and Theatre* (Springer, 2017).

THANKS

Finally, thank you Academic Futures Committee for inviting input from faculty members. It was fun to write this white paper. I hope that you enjoyed reading it and that it contributes in a positive way to your—our--ongoing work.

## FOOTNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> David Ball, *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1983).
- <sup>2</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (University of Texas Press, 1968).
- <sup>3</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge UP, 1990). I draw the language of "transformation" from Todorov's essay "The Two Principles of Narrative," one narrative principle being succession and the other narrative principle being transformation. I love the man's work but, for the life of me, cannot pronounce his name (right or wrong) the same way twice in a row.
- <sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties," *American Psychologist* 55.5 (May 2000): 469-80.