5-2013

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Recommended Citation

Webb, Allen; VanFosson, Jason; De Oliveira, Becky; Ehst, E. Suzanne; Taing, Vanni; Klukowski, Megan; and Muñoz, Lisa (2013) "#Occupy Literature!: Lasting Lessons of the Occupy Movement," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 28: Iss. 2, Article 13.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1962>

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PRACTICE

#Occupy Literature!

Lasting Lessons of the Occupy Movement

ALLEN WEBB AND JASON VANFOSSON

WITH BECKY DE OLIVEIRA, E. SUZANNE EHST, VANNI TAING, MEGAN KLUKOWSKI, AND LISA MUÑOZ

An international wave of creative protest against social and economic inequality, the Occupy Movement began to receive media attention with the occupation of New York City's Zuccotti Park in September of 2011. In under a month, Occupy protests had taken place or were ongoing in over 95 cities across 82 countries, and over 600 communities in the United States. While by February of 2012 most Occupy protest encampments had been evicted, the movement captured the public imagination and brought crucial issues of democratic social change to the forefront of world attention. This article was written in the early months of 2012, while the movement was still very much in the public eye, to describe the collaborative experiments of a group of Michigan (and one Northern Indiana) English teachers to draw on the Occupy Movement.

On November 10, 2011, in what was called “the nerdiest protest ever,” 27 Occupy Wall Street supporters performed a marathon reading of Herman Melville’s 1853 short story, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.” This classic details the working life of Bartleby, a Wall Street copyist who responds “I would prefer not to” to every request his boss makes. When Bartleby “prefers not to” leave the office, he in effect “occupies” it, and his employer ends up relocating the entire company.

In the spirit of Bartleby’s creative protest, and the Occupy concern with increasing inequality and democratic dialogue, we have “occupied” our classrooms, textbooks, and instruction by “preferring not to” continue business as usual. Even if the Occupy Movement is no longer at the center of the news spotlight, we believe that the movement continues to have relevant and profound applications for teaching.

As English teachers, we recognize that literature emerges from social struggle and can help our students inquire into injustice. Too often, the vital human and political questions that literature raises are sapped by standardized, formalist,

and so-called “skill-based” approaches. Instead, we want our students asking questions of the kind raised by the Occupy Movement—questions about economic inequality, racism, sexism, homophobia, colonialism, and environmental sustainability.

As teachers, we ask: Are creative and progressive approaches to fostering democracy emerging from our teaching? Is the experience of working class Americans a focus of our curriculum? Does the literature we teach reflect the 99 percent or the 1 percent? Are Hispanic American, Asian American, African American, Native American, and Third World perspectives made central?

While the unethical actions of Wall Street traders spurred the Occupy Movement, the for-profit corporations selling standardized curriculum, textbooks, tests, and software fuel our motivation to “Occupy literature.” Teachers may not all be able to camp out at Pearson Publishing, or in the parking lot of ACT or K12 Inc., but we can reject their profiteering from public education. We do not have to remain silent or powerless; we have agreed not to accept less for our students than the transformative and empowering learning they deserve.

Take note: the Common Core Standards currently adopted in most states do not require any specific curriculum or literary works. These standards do call for research and persuasive writing arising out of deeply engaging curriculum. The standards also call for the integration of “seminal documents of American history” in to the English curriculum. We believe literature study meshes well with meaningful historical texts, works like Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience,” King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and, of course, the Declaration of Independence—our nation’s founding document—which calls for “the people to alter or abolish” any form of government that fails to protect their unalienable rights.

Occupying High School English

High school English teachers can draw on both the philosophy and the methods of the Occupy Movement. The suggestions that follow are provided by secondary teachers who have found places in their classrooms for the critical ideology and the radically democratic power structures modeled by the movement.

Discussing with the Occupy Stack: The Occupy Movement was committed to fostering democratic discussion and ensuring all voices, especially those in the minority, were heard. Facilitators record the name of each person who wishes to speak, following the order in which they raise their hands. They call this list “the stack.” When it is someone’s turn on the stack, they speak and are heard in an orderly fashion. This process seemed so logical, so orderly, and so simple, Megan Klukowski, a high school English teacher in Olivet, Michigan, had to try it in her high school classroom.

It is important that participants can see and hear each other, so Megan changed her desks from rows facing front to a circle. Then, drawing on the concept of the stack, a student would volunteer to begin the discussion. As that student was speaking, other students raise their hands and Megan would write down their names in order on a piece of paper under a document camera. With their name on the list, students were able focus on what their peer was saying, knowing their turn would come. The next person on the stack would automatically, without the teacher’s prompting, begin to speak. Using this Occupy procedure students were directly responding to ideas of their peers rather than just the teacher, enriching the interactive quality of the discussion.

As a facilitator, Megan also wanted to bring in the perspectives of the students who were not volunteering. By occasionally writing their name on the stack and making eye-contact for further confirmation, she prompted her students to gather thoughts and prepare to participate without being suddenly put on the spot. The stack allowed every student to be part of the conversation.

Raising Critical Questions: We believe an “occupy course” should invite students as well as teachers to question mass marketed textbooks and traditional curricula. What happens when we join our students in asking “When am I going to use this?” or “Why do I have to know this?” Our courses and texts create opportunities to investigate academic purpose and curricular authority. In an occupy course we must ask ourselves and our students: “Where is the authority?” In the traditional classroom, the institution assigns

authority to the curriculum and the teacher. How can we help students author their own learning?

Current events invite students into this question of curricular authority—Arizona’s ban on ethnic studies, Texas’s 2010 revision of the history curriculum, and California’s mandate to include LGBT history in the curriculum do not pertain merely to students and teachers in those states. Class discussion of these events opens up profound questions about who decides what is worth knowing.

Reading with the Occupy Lens: Lisa Munoz, for example, is a high school English teacher in Elkhart, Indiana, a city hit hard by recession. Nonetheless, she reports that her high school students are largely unfamiliar with the Occupy Movement. To address this problem, Lisa and her students developed the “Occupy lens” for reading and interpreting literature in light of issues of social inequality.

One example of how this lens works can be illustrated by the way Lisa’s twelfth-grade class analyzed the poem “Mushrooms” by Sylvia Plath. Once they started using the Occupy lens, students quickly took what might otherwise be read as a nature poem and instead saw the mushrooms rising up in protest (“nobody sees us, /stops us”) during a revolution. While Occupying literature clearly calls for changing the canon, and we have also found that even well-established works can be interpreted from an Occupy perspective.

Occupying College Literature

In teaching a basic introduction to literature course, Jason Vonfosson, a graduate student at Western Michigan University, drew on Deborah Appleman’s (2009) approach of directly teaching literary theory in order to further develop his students’ use of the Occupy lens. Jason believes that feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, post-colonial theory, ecocriticism, and Marxist theory fit within an Occupy approach and that organizing his literature class around these theories provided a context to reinterpret literary classics and question or challenge the authority of the text, author, and canon.

Jason also specifically chose texts he thought would resonate with Occupy themes. His students read Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and discussed the ways the text appeared to support Occupy Wall Street. Their discussion led them to raise questions about Bartleby’s approach to social change. Notably, his passivity to the point of his own death does nothing to change the fundamental systems and institutions that create inequality.

Reading *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk, however, had a different effect. Jason reports that his students approached the novel with enthusiasm and confidence because many had already seen the popular film. At first some students were disturbed by the emphasis on violence and terrorism. Yet, as they connected the work to the Occupy Movement the conversation changed, and students began to examine inequalities of social class that underlie much of the violence. One student contrasted the violent acts of the proletariat in the text with the non-violent civil disobedience of Occupy Wall Street protesters. Students debated whether or not non-violence would ever allow the 99 percent to challenge the 1 percent in an effective way.

Furthermore, students began to notice what was *not* in the text. Several pointed out, for example, that no women participate in the terrorist acts that are meant to erase the debt of the nation and restore financial equality. In class discussion, one female character, Marla emerged as a prototype of the Occupy Wall Street protester. Marla, after all, passively resists authority in every way conceivable. Likewise, students began to wonder about Project Mayhem, the terrorist organization attempting to erase the debt ledger. Jason found that bringing the issues and terms of the Occupy Movement to the text helped his students engage in deep analysis, both of the text and of the social order.

As their discussion of the reading began to question texts and authority, Jason wanted to encourage his students to use their insights and the approach of the Occupy Movement to inspire their writing as well. For the final assignment, he asked students to write their own literary manifestos. The manifesto was an important genre in the Occupy Movement. Rather than composing a researched literary argument—the standard paper—students proclaimed the ways in which they approach, read, and intervene with texts through historical, cultural, and identity lenses. Jason encouraged students to write in the genre of the manifesto, in order, as he puts it, “to have students reclaim the authoritative *I* that academic writing often attempts to suppress.”

He believes that by encouraging the *I* in the paper, students developed a stronger sense of self and authority. In a student conference about the manifesto, one student explained how he was never allowed to use *I* in an English paper and how doing so gave him confidence to ask tough questions and make bold assertions. While simple, the use of the manifesto genre typified much of what is advocated by the Occupy protestors.

For other students, writing manifestos the issue of the use of the pronoun *I* was not as significant as the whole approach of the assignment. The genre of the manifesto allowed students to assert their own perspectives uninfluenced by teachers and authority figures. They made assertive decisions about which texts to write about, and which theories served their purposes. They proclaimed their own questions and set forward their views in newly empowered ways that gave them new ways to name their subjectivity as a reader, writer, and citizen. One student reported:

This assignment was the first that allowed me to challenge a text, focus it under my own lens of perception, and to adjust the scope to see the full potential of the material. Just as a kaleidoscope can reflect and expand an image, this abstract and somewhat violent rebirth to my understanding of deep critical reading has blossomed into the most rewarding educational experience of my life . . . This assignment has taught me to read a text as a fully human piece of work and to challenge the authority that tries to define that humanity.

The manifesto assignment included a case study of students’ newly informed approaches to reading. The text they chose ranged from the classics, such as Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, to popular non-fiction narratives, such as Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*. Another student reflecting on the experience of writing the manifesto explained:

The manifesto took a lot of honest hard thinking, but the product was that I will never again simply read that text, nor any other . . . Certain themes, social/personal/sexual/political/racial statements, and other nuances now pop out at me . . .

Jason believes that the heightened literary awareness and the manifesto project does not stop when the final grade has been assigned. He reports that, “The student who discusses the “violent rebirth” above has stopped me several times in the hall to tell me how “messed up” the gender and sexuality is in a text she is reading or how current professors assume the speaker of the poems are male and the object of the poem female with no textual evidence—to which she dutifully challenged with her new-found sense of agency.”

Other Occupy-Themed Literature Courses

Occupy themes and approaches easily extend to literary works frequently taught at every level. For example, in secondary schools themes of class inequality found in Dickens

or *The Outsiders*, the exploitation of immigrants in Sinclair's *The Jungle*, the organization of workers in Steinbeck, and the recognition and struggle against an authoritarian state in Orwell, *The Giver*, or the *Hunger Games* trilogy are all ideal entry points for an Occupy analysis and approach that extends beyond specific literary works to broader issues in the world.

Lisa, Megan, and Jason's courses are just a few examples of experimental English classes focused on Occupy themes. As part of an English education graduate seminar focused on the Occupy Movement (see AllenWebb.net/occupy), each seminar member contributed to this essay and developed courses focused on Occupy themes—themes still relevant even if the Occupy movement itself has faded from center stage. We offer brief descriptions to suggest possibilities:

We are the 99 Percent: An introductory literature course that explicitly explores connections between the Occupy Movement and literature study. Where and how does literature address the inequalities of the 99 percent and the 1 percent? What can previous authors who wrote against societal norms and the elite in their time period reveal about our current moment in history? How does the presentation of literature in standardized textbooks support or destabilize the 99 percent and 1 percent divide? How might the Occupy lens be used to (re)interpret literature of the 1 percent?

Caste System: While most of us tend to think of the caste system as an outdated and barbaric hangover from pre-independence India, caste systems of a variety of kinds exist all over the world, even in so-called free, enlightened and democratic countries such as the United States. This course uses a variety of texts and films to explore the ways in which often unacknowledged caste systems divide our societies and determine the courses of our lives—whether we find ourselves in the 1 percent or the 99 percent. It also invites students to think of the ways in which they are both placed in castes and place others within these confines.

The Politics of Food: A literature and writing course that investigates—through novels, short stories, poems, non-fiction texts, articles, and films—the politics of food production. How people feed themselves and how food is produced and distributed reveal deep levels of inequality as well as critical issues of sustainability. In many agricultural countries, masses face hunger. Yet in other nations citizens are dying of obesity-related illnesses. Food issues include the corporate control of seeds, land, and production, factory farming versus organic, fast food versus slow food, supermarkets versus co-ops and farmers' markets, junk food versus nutritional dense food, migrant workers and unionization.

Narrating Terror: This course invites students to study multiple genres and perspectives from literature from the last decade to wrestle with questions such as "Where should we begin the 9/11 narrative?" "How has popular rhetoric shaped our understanding of *war* and the *enemy*?" and "Who deserves the label of *terrorist*?" A class wiki includes a page where students upload news, poetry, short stories, and other media to advance the class's understanding of war culture, war rhetoric, peace movements, Afghanistan's and Iraq's history and present, and the lives of U.S. soldiers

Questioning Media: In this class, students examine appeals, bias, argumentation (informational text), film techniques (big screen media), how social media shapes perception (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc.), and how questions of authorial intent, ownership, and the capitalist marketplace impact society (news broadcasting and advertisements).

"Hungry" for Change: *The Hunger Games* has our students reading, but are they getting the message? This course draws on the popular Suzanne Collins trilogy and other utopian and dystopian works, including Plato's "Myth of the Cave" and Orwell's *1984* to help students learn more about their duties as a citizens in democratic and not-so-democratic societies.

Writing this article taught us about the Occupy emphasis on collaboration. We wrote and edited using Google docs, often all seven of us in the same room. As we simultaneously drafted, chopped, and reworked portions of the text, we asked each other questions and tried to gain consensus before moving forward with proposed alterations. We learned to respond to constructive criticism with grace and developed the understanding that the efforts of other members of the group strengthen our individual contributions. We hope for the same for our students as we help them occupy literature.

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