

Aleksondra Hultquist  
Teaching Statement

I find an incredible balance in being both an academic and a teacher; when my energy and creativity in one area are fatigued, I can always depend on the other to invigorate me, and the overlap between the two enable me to find professional equilibrium. Whether I am teaching composition or literature, I train students in the skills that seasoned scholars take for granted—close reading, historical contextualization, textual analysis. Taking an idea from a text and transforming it into a well-reasoned interpretive argument is a daunting task for any undergraduate; however, providing them with the basic analytical reading skills anchors them. We spent a great deal of time in early classes reading slowly, defining words, discussing ideas, learning how to mark up a page, and learning how to freewrite based on those markings. Once these skills are established, students can be reminded of these analytical steps, and can negotiate texts on their own, even if they are tired or uninterested in the material—and even in classes other than those offered through the English department. Repeating these ideas in the classroom has the added benefit of aiding me when I get lost as a scholar; I often give myself the same advice I give my students: do a close reading and then go prewrite.

Beyond analysis, however, I find it to be very important that students experience the “emotional truth” of a text. I often teach texts from the British Early Modern era, but such texts can seem alienated from the post-modern world in which my students live. I try to create assignments and lesson plans that offer a vision of that world to students, not only historically and textually, but also emotionally. Sometimes this requires clips from films that have accurately caught the feel of the world of the original text; for instance, Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* can provide a visceral starting point for what “civil blood makes civil hands unclean” can mean. Luhrman’s representation of the Capulet/Montague feud as a modern-day gang war, of a city overrun with druglords and firearms, provides students with a modern metaphor to the danger and unrest that straight historical background cannot necessarily provide (especially if students anticipate pumpkin pants, tights, and swords). Sometimes such clips can provide the “feel” of the era; the recent film *The Libertine*, starring Johnny Depp as John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, has a striking 360-degree shot that pans the Restoration theater, complete with the audience in full light, whores and rakes “busy” in the pit, actors getting booed and shouted at, and the interruption of the play as the king enters and seats himself. While I can lecture about what the Restoration theater experience was like, often it is only through showing such clips that as an instructor, I can evoke the emotional truth of a text.

However, I always center my classes around the text itself, and often repeat the idea that the knowledge the text provides is paramount. I base one of my favorite assignments on primary research, especially when studying the Early Modern period, which has many specific oddities when it comes to texts, such as various printing configurations and inconsistent spelling and printing practices. There are also many alien cultural practices from this era that students have a hard time understanding and this research can be quite enlightening to the text. Students are required to browse through primary material (either in a rare book room or on an online database such as ECCO, the Eighteenth-Century Collection Online) and choose an early modern document that enhances their reading of one of the books on the syllabus. In recent classes, my students have unearthed the floor plan to Newgate and used it to highlight the terror that Moll Flanders feels when she is incarcerated. They have found a genuine pirate code and analyzed it, removing piracy from Disney’s faddish Hollywood version. This technique also allows students to examine a text the way that a professional academic might, examining the un-sanitized, un-footnoted, editions (with all those crazy “fs” instead of “ss”), giving them insight to how a scholar chooses which information to pursue or emphasize. In this assignment the students also

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gain the raw experience of putting the early skill sets of close reading and analysis to use. They might address, for instance, how an engraving next to an original poem changes the meaning of it, or how the hanging announcements contextualizes a moral story in a periodical. I think that such an approach is so valuable, that I have recently proposed two courses that focus on the ways in which book history can affect literary meaning, the first in which undergraduate non-major experience a rare book room and online archival resources, and the second which examines Eighteenth-Century British Literature through rare book archives.

Another teaching technique I use is derived from my previous career as a New York actor and design assistant. When teaching Shakespeare or drama I have the students bring the text to life by having them act out a scene, imagine the setting, and consider the multi-dimensional aspects of theater. When students ask questions like, “Why does he say that?” I often have them answer the questions themselves by staging the scene. If there are two interpretations, we play it in both ways, decide which best follows the text and our idea of the play, and consider which version might keep audiences coming back night after night. We consider the non-textual aspects of theatre; “Exit Ariel” has several possibilities in a theatrical production: perhaps the sprite runs across water, or perhaps he disappears into a nearby flower, rock or tree (rarely does he walk off stage left). I encourage students to visualize and analyze possibilities of movement, sound, lighting, and costuming, and to consider how a play is the result of practical issues as well as aesthetic goals. While such techniques are especially useful for plays, I find that they can be tweaked to help students understand poetry and prose as well. Requiring students to read poetry aloud, or memorize a sonnet makes them focus intently on the meaning of the words themselves and how those word imply movement and environment. Imagining the multi-dimensional aspects of the printing trade can help them to understand how Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” for instance, was taken seriously by contemporary readers. Such deliberations not only remove the text from a “musty” context and bring the texts into contemporary understanding, but also highlight the importance of the practical world and its influences on literature.

I have been teaching long enough that I am able to bring my professional academic experience to influence my students’ lives after they leave my classroom. My once confused freshman rhetoric students are now applying to graduate schools and I have been able to support and guide them in their endeavors. While I have performed the expected tasks of writing letters of recommendation and offering comments on personal statements, I have also discussed with deans how to shape my letters to the specific expectations of various professions. This year I received a letter from a law school informing me that my recommendation helped a student gain admittance to a program that had several strong candidates. I look forward to continuing to advise undergraduates and learning how to mentor and help shape the academic endeavors of graduate students.

I take pleasure in the complementary nature of my teaching and scholarly lives. My own teachers, mentors, and advisors have greatly shaped my subject and method of study and I look forward to passing such lessons along.